Don’t Believe Like the Demons Believe!

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One of our pastors shares a favorite story: a young man in Sweden, while trying to get rid of the watermark on his trial software so he could use it illegally, did some online research that led him to a YouTube film clip from our church (Watermark Community Church) making the case for waiting to have sex before marriage. The twenty–something had never heard of such a thing, and while it sounded crazy to him, he continued to watch more clips, which intrigued him further, and he did more research that led him to the conclusion, “Wait a minute, there’s something really different about these people.”

So he called the pastor. From Sweden. “Hey man, I don’t know your God, never heard of your Jesus, but I want to know Him. I’ve been tracking with you guys online, watched a ton of sermons, and I want to know that God.” J.P. led him to the Lord, and he trusted Christ over the phone in Swedish.

He called again some time later. “Hey, we always go out and get drunk, and I’m having a hard time doing that all of a sudden. Yeah, we always pride ourselves on taking some girl home that we don’t know, and all of a sudden that doesn’t feel right to me. What’s wrong with me? This isn’t any fun anymore. Something happened!”

That’s what lifechange looks like. That’s the kind of transformation that happens when someone puts their trust in Jesus Christ and surrenders their heart and their life to a new kind of supernatural God–life. The New Testament talks about two kinds of life–the merely physical, and the supernatural, eternal, abundant life Jesus said He came to

bring us (John 10:10). This eternal life invades our merely physical life.

I've been engaging in an email conversation with a dear man who is wondering why he hasn't experienced any lifechange stories like the new Swedish Christian. When I asked his understanding of what it means to be a Christian, he indicated he had prayed a prayer that Christians had told him to pray. But nothing had happened, nothing had changed. In decades. When I asked him who he thinks Jesus is, he said whoever Christians told him He was. He's now considering that all this time, he hasn't been a Christian after all, and I think he's right.

His dilemma illustrates a heartbreaking truth: there are a lot of people who think they are Christians because they have prayed a prayer or they mentally assent to some spiritual truths. But then they don't see anything different in their lives, because they have been offered a false gospel of "say this prayer" or "believe these things" and they think they've got their going–to–heaven ticket punched. But they continue to live the same way, simply adding Jesus to their mental cubbyholes, ready to call on Him at the moment of death.

The people who saw radical changes in their lives in the New Testament were those who opened themselves to being invaded by Jesus Christ's startlingly different, supernaturally powerful eternal life. As the true gospel spread, fueled by God's Spirit manifested through Jesus' lifechange in these people, the world was changed forever. I love how Dallas Willard writes:

> *So, C.S. Lewis writes, our faith is not a matter of our hearing what Christ said long ago and "trying to carry it out." Rather, "The real Son of God is at your side. He is beginning to turn you into the same kind of thing as Himself. He is beginning, so to speak, to 'inject' His kind of life and thought, His Zoe [life], into you; beginning to turn the*

> *tin soldier into a live man. The part of you that does not like it is the part that is still tin." (The Divine Conspiracy, San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1998, p. 20)*

Why do so many people not experience the kind of lifechange of our Swedish friend? I respectfully (and, to be honest, somewhat fearfully) submit that their belief is that of demons. They believe the same thing the demons subscribe to, but it's not a saving, life–changing kind of faith. Biblical faith is about trusting our entire self into Jesus' hands, not merely nodding in intellectual assent or saying the words of a prayer. James 2:19 says, "You believe that God is one; well and good. *Even the demons believe that*–and tremble with fear" (emphasis mine).

"I believe in God." *So do the demons.*

"I believe Jesus is God's Son." *So do the demons.*

"I believe Jesus died on the cross for the sins of the world." *So do the demons.*

"I believe Jesus rose from the dead." *So do the demons.*

What the demons *don't* do is repent, turning 180 degrees from going their own way to surrender to Jesus, receive His love, and follow Him in obedience. They *don't* entrust themselves into Jesus' care. They *don't* receive Jesus into the core of their being (John 1:12), as a response to Jesus drawing them into the core of His heart.

But we can. We must.

Biblical Christianity is about *relationship*. The Father, Son and Spirit invite us into Their circle of mutual love and affection, glory and grace. Jesus made it possible for us to be reconciled to God by taking our sin, that horrible barrier to relationship with His Father, out of the way at the cross. Biblical Christianity–being "injected" with eternal life–is SO

not about mere intellectual assent or praying a prayer. It's about surrendering to an amazing love and an amazing relationship.

Make sure your faith is about trust, and surrender, and joining the circle of God's family. Make sure your faith is so much more than what the demons believe!

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Does It Matter What We Believe?

Does *what* we believe matter, or just *that* we believe? A study recently released by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, suggests that most religious people in America think *what* they believe isn't so important.{1}

According to the report, eighty-three percent of people identifying themselves with mainline Protestant churches believe that many religions can lead to eternal life. That might not come as a surprise to those who are familiar with the changes in mainline churches over the last century.

But what would you say if you knew that fifty-seven percent of people identifying themselves as evangelicals believe that many religions can lead to eternal life? Fifty-seven percent! That means the majority of evangelicals are what we call "religious pluralists." Are you surprised? To add to our embarrassment, Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses have stronger convictions about their beliefs being the true ones than do

evangelicals.

Some findings in the survey were real head-shakers. For example, thirteen percent of evangelicals surveyed believe God is an impersonal force. It might be a little reassuring to learn that evangelicals don't have a corner on the "confused beliefs" market. Six percent of atheists surveyed believe in a personal God, and twelve percent believe in heaven! What are we to make of this?

Whatever it might mean precisely, it at least means that specific beliefs are the property of the believer, not of the religion itself. Fidelity to the beliefs of particular religions (or irreligion, in the case of atheism) means much less today than in the past. I can associate myself with a given group, but I retain the right to decide for myself what I should believe.

It's understandable, in a sense, why people think this way, including evangelicals. This pluralistic mentality infuses our social consciousness. We aren't to exclude people of other races or the other gender from all the multitudinous areas of society. Businesses are forbidden to discriminate on the basis of "race, color, national origin, religion, or sex."{2} I'm not arguing against any of this. I'm simply pointing to our social mentality which requires (or aims at) the leveling out of differences. The refusal to extend special status is applied to religious beliefs as well. But this doesn't mean we simply tolerate people of different beliefs; now we're supposed to affirm their beliefs!

In addition to this pluralist mentality there is the serious problem for evangelicals of the reduction of doctrinal teaching in churches. David Wells lamented this loss in his 1993 book, *No Place for Truth, or, Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* He was spurred on to write the book after having a student in his seminary class on theology ask him how he could justify spending so much money on a class

that “was so irrelevant to his desire to minister to people in the Church.”{3}

One problem some people have with a strong concern for doctrine is that it tends to divide Christians. In so far as we *do* segregate ourselves from other Christians over non-essential beliefs we are in error. Unity is very important. But nowhere in Scripture are we taught that unity is to be preserved regardless, at the expense of truth. After exhorting the Ephesians to be unified in the bond of peace, Paul lists what we are to be unified around: one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all (4:3-6). We aren’t to be united around the conviction that when it comes to religion, to each his or her own.

Another reason for a reluctance to insist on doctrinal integrity is the postmodern mentality about truth. This issue is being played out now in discussions about what is called the “emerging church.” The desire to correct an overzealous modernism in its confident claims of truth is showing itself in *some* Christians who align themselves with this movement in a diminishing of the importance of doctrinal commitments. The attempt to avoid both absolutism and relativism has them walking a tightrope which too easily swings toward a pluralist mentality.

What does it mean to give up on the importance of specific doctrinal beliefs? First, and very obviously, we have abandoned biblical Christianity. In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul states specific beliefs that are essential: “that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures” (verses 3-5). Jesus made the bold and definitely non-politically correct claim that he was the *only* way to God (John 14:6). Paul says that salvation comes to those who confess with their mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in their heart that God raised him from the dead (Romans 10:9). Throughout both Old and New Testaments, we are

presented with claim after claim presented as being true.

Second, we must hold fast to the historic teachings of biblical Christianity if we are to have anything to offer the world. One of the most significant results of liberal watering down of Christian distinctives is that, over time, attendance in mainline churches dwindled; they had nothing to offer that was different from what people could get outside the church.

Wells notes that "the great sin of Fundamentalism is to compromise; the great sin in evangelicalism is to be narrow." Whereas evangelicals once strongly opposed doctrinal decline in liberalism, now, Wells says, "evangelicals, no less than the Liberals before them whom they have always berated, have now abandoned doctrine in favor of 'life'."{4} We're doing well in the arena of social relief; we're doing very poorly in training our people in basic Christian beliefs *as beliefs that are true for all people for all time.*

Wells notes these consequences of the loss of doctrinal conviction. First is simply the loss of conviction. What do we stand for? You've heard it before: A person [or church] that stands for nothing will fall for anything. Second is the loss of what might be accomplished when spurred on by a theological vision. Is being nice and doing good the substance of our marching orders? Third is the loss of any really meaningful sense of what "evangelical" means. Fourth is the loss of unity with the spinning off of individual interests.

If Christianity doesn't have *the* truth about how one might obtain eternal life, it has nothing more to offer than religious experience (whatever that might be for a given individual). It has lost all its substance. Since it *claims* to be the only way to God, what has been aptly said many times bears repeating: either it is true *for* all, or it is not true *at* all.

Notes

1. U.S. Religious Landscape Survey: Religious Beliefs and Practices: Diverse and Politically Relevant, June 2008; religions.pewforum.org
2. The U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, www.eeoc.gov/facts/qanda.html.
3. David Wells, *No Place for Truth, or, Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 4.
4. Ibid., 129, 131.

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