

What Do You Believe, and Why? By Steven Harper

A 2011 poll by the Barna Group found “43% of Americans said it doesn’t matter what religious faith you follow because they all teach the same lessons,” and “Half of Americans (50%) believe that all people are eventually saved or accepted by God no matter what they do.” (www.barna.org) From these statistics [earlier polls found similar numbers], it is clear that many in this country do not actually comprehend the teachings of Jesus Christ and His apostles or, if they do, simply reject those Bible passages that speak of the necessity to obey the gospel for salvation, and even what one must believe to be saved.

While I could spend the rest of the space allotted here to talk about “those people,” I want to gain your focused attention and ask you, “What do you believe, and why?” Could you answer that question, and show me from Scripture the justification for your answer?

You see, it doesn’t matter what other people believe, and certainly not what “most people” believe; what matters is what you believe. And its importance is not simply in knowing what you believe, or finding some belief that makes you happy; the importance is in making sure that what you believe agrees with what God says you must believe. If you believe something simply because many of your friends believe it, or because it is what your family believes and practices, that does not guarantee that what you believe is what God wants you to believe; just because you believe something that the majority of people in your country of residence believes does not mean it is what God wants you to believe; just because you believe something that makes you happy, allows you to live as you wish, and seems to make you a better person doesn’t mean it is what God wants you to believe.

It seems that, somewhere along the line, we Americans have come to believe that the rights delineated for us in the Declaration of Independence — “Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness” — are God-given rights that allow us to pick and choose what we want to believe, as long as it makes us happy. What we have come to believe in this country is that even in religious matters, what makes us happy is what is ‘right’ and no one else can tell us we are ‘wrong.’ We have come to believe that “it doesn’t matter what you believe, as long as you’re sincere,” though that phrase is not found anywhere within God’s word, and the very idea makes absolutely no sense in the whole scheme of God’s plan for our salvation.

While you may suppose this kind of thinking is exclusive to those in the denominations, it is not. Far too many brethren nowadays seem to skip from church to church, looking for a congregation that “suits their needs” [i.e., allows them to live in sin, or teaches and practices what they believe, though not found in Scripture], and far too many brethren pass through churches looking for one that will entertain their children, provide opportunities for maximum socialization, or that will simply do all the teaching they, as parents, should be doing. I can count on one hand the number of times I have had visitors stop and ask me about what we teach and practice, while the number of those seeking the above-mentioned offerings is too numerous to recall.

When I was a lot younger, I remember hearing from older men and women about their discussions with their religious friends and neighbors, and hearing them talk about how they disagreed, but they at least respected the practice of going to the Bible for every question and answer. Back then, brethren were respectfully called “people of the Book” because they had their Bibles, knew their Bibles, and used their Bibles. I am afraid we are no longer a “people of the Book,” but a people of TV, the Internet, and text messaging. Nowadays, many brethren know more about how to find something on the Internet than they do a Bible passage that answers an important question; they know how to find a great deal where they can save money, easier than they can find the words that can save a soul; and they can type out a text message within seconds, but cannot find the most important message within the text of God’s word.

While we may all know that Romans 10:17 says, “faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God,” we must be honest with ourselves and ask if our faith actually came by hearing the word of God, or by hearing what someone else said we must believe. Many people simply follow what their parents follow, without question and without investigation of God’s word to see if it agrees with His will. Some people know some of the Bible, but not really enough to have been the cause for them believing what they believe. Far too many of us have some idea of who God is, some vague picture of who Jesus is, and a limited knowledge of the Bible, but what guides us is our idea of who God is, what we would like to think Jesus would say or do, and what we want to believe about salvation, hell, and heaven. Far too many of us believe what we want to believe and then selectively choose passages from the Bible that seems to verify our beliefs, without doing any serious, in-depth studies that might discover we are wrong.

And even should we happen to believe what God wants us to believe, why is it that we believe this? God defines faith as “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Heb. 11:1), so what God expects of us when we talk about having faith is a belief and conviction based on evidence we have heard or read in God’s word. If we believe something simply because someone said we should, or believe something simply because someone we respect highly said it, our belief does not match God’s definition of faith because it isn’t based on His word, and is not really based on evidence. True faith comes from hearing the word of God and being convinced it is true.

And faith must be much more than the belief in Jesus that leads us to repent of our past sins and be baptized into the body of Christ. Peter admonished the early disciples to add to their faith and then said, “For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. For whoever lacks these qualities is so nearsighted that he is blind, having forgotten that he was cleansed from his former sins. Therefore, brothers, be all the more diligent to make your calling and election sure, for if you practice these qualities you will never fall” (2Peter 1:5-10). The Bible teaches us that we must have faith to be saved, but it also teaches us that this same faith must motivate us to action, not just in obedience to the commands given in regards to our forgiveness, but also all the commands that speak of how we, as disciples should now live once we are in Christ. This is what Peter described as “all things that pertain to life and godliness” (2Peter 1:3).

So, what do you believe, and why do you believe it? If a die-hard atheist came to you and was sincerely looking for anything that might convince him that what you say you believe is true, what would you tell him that you believe? And if he asked why you believed it, what would you say? These kinds of questions will be asked of us at some point, and it is for this reason Peter said we must be always “prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you” (1Peter 3:15). The world is listening and they are awaiting a response that will convince them they need to change. What will you say?