
Believing Opinions

It has been said that when people stop believing in God, they don't believe nothing; they believe anything. The origin of this statement is uncertain, but it goes back several centuries when it appeared in this way: "When people stop believing in God, they believe in ghosts." Those who said this (and this statement appears several times in print), thought of ghosts as being the figment of a person's imagination. To put it another way, those who stop believing in God will make up things in which they can put their faith.

The same can be said of sound biblical knowledge. When people lose their understanding of biblical teaching, they don't believe in nothing; they believe anything. We do not doubt that this is true. Those, even Christians, who abandon the teachings of Scripture tend to adopt all sorts of odd beliefs that they are absolutely certain are true but have little biblical basis. For example, there are those who would hold Jesus in very high regard (which is good), but they have neglected the parts of Scripture which teach us that Jesus did not come to this earth to be a good example to us, but he came to die on the cross for our sins. Or, failing to read Scripture, they begin to imagine God as being a grandfatherly sort of person who is not too concerned about sin. When we stop understanding Scripture, we don't believe nothing, we believe anything.

In some polls, the pollsters ask the question: do you believe that the (name a public figure) took a bribe? They then publish the poll saying that 72% of people believe that the public official is guilty, and, for some reason, that makes him guilty. Nearly all of those who were polled do not have all the facts, and there is no way that they can make a judgement call about what may or may not have happened. Public opinion does not change reality.

And, yet, that is often what happens with our understanding of God. I have attended Bible studies where the leader went around the table and asked each person what he/she thought a particular verse meant. The answers varied significantly, and, at the end of the day, the verse seemed to mean just about whatever someone wanted it to mean. People start believing anything when they seem incapable of reading Scripture as it is meant to be read. My opinion (or your opinion) doesn't determine the meaning of a verse in the Bible. Instead, we need to determine what the verse does mean, and we must sometimes struggle to discover that meaning together. We don't arrive at our conclusions by having each person state their opinion but, rather, by using involved study of God's Word using good biblical study methods.

I took a course in seminary in which we sought to determine what the Bible was truly saying. Each week the professor would assign a passage of Scripture, and we were asked to spend the week studying that verse. We had to take into account the biblical context and the historical context. We had to think about the meanings of the words. We had to think about the flow of the passage and what were the parts that were emphasized. We were encouraged to read commentaries that were written by scholars who had spent years reflecting on one or two books of the Bible and who were authorities on what had been said about a passage over the years and around the world. After spending several hours studying a passage, we would gather together and we would be asked to write on the board, in one sentence, what the main

point of the passage was. We would then spend the rest of the hour talking about how our studies had moved us to our conclusions. Usually, by the end of the hour, we had nuanced the statements that we had each given (they were usually quite close) and we would write out a simple sentence stating the main point of the passage. We did this because it is meant to be the first step in preparing a sermon, for if we cannot state the main point of the passage, the main point of the sermon may well be incorrect.

At the end of the course, I felt much better equipped to understand the Bible as it is meant to be understood, and I felt less inclined to simply offer my opinion on what I thought it might be saying. I try to do this in my sermons, discovering the main point of a passage before I start writing my sermon. I know that I sometimes miss the point, but I am hopeful that most times the theme of the sermon is the same as that of the text which we read in church.

A few weeks ago I was asked to evaluate a sermon of a candidate for ministry presented for his examination for ordination. I was uncomfortable with the sermon, but I could not put my finger on the problem until he began to talk about the steps he had taken to prepare the sermon. The more he talked, the more I realized that he had not taken the time to discover the main point of the text, and, as a result, he had produced a sermon, though not biblically unsound, had little correspondence to the main point of the sermon. He was solid enough theologically that he did not lead us astray, but his sermon was not rooted in the text. It was something he wanted to talk about and while he did not stray from teachings of Scripture, Scripture was not guiding his message. It boiled down to his opinion, in a sense, and the result was very little different from what we accuse liberals of doing.

Here in the West, we are increasingly being led to believe that someone's opinion about something makes it true. We must recognize this problem and come to understand that what makes something true is that it is true. When it comes to what we believe, what we believe does not make it true. What makes what we believe true is that what we believe is true. We learn truth through God's revealed Word, and we understand truth by discovering what that Word says. If we decide to that which is true, we won't believe in nothing; we will believe anything.

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