

The Case for Faith—Can Faith Survive in an Age of Doubt?

Introduction

A. The title assigned says at least three things:

We live in an age of doubt

There is a belief crisis in our age

The very survival of faith/belief may be in jeopardy.

B. To understand some of what is happening in our world today with regard to faith, we must understand the concept of syncretism—intermingling belief systems. Syncretism is not a new problem, it was a problem in the OT again and again. We are experiencing syncretism all around us today.

C. We are experiencing a belief crisis in our world. Ours is a dangerous world, at least insofar as beliefs are concerns. But such crises have occurred in times past. Eph. 4:13-14, my translation, no longer children, tossed by various teachings so that we are changing our minds constantly about what we believe, because some are cunningly affirming other ideas and beliefs and cleverly disguising those ideas with lies that sound like the truth.

D. This belief crisis is also a values crisis, and in its ultimate expression, brings wrong choices and wrong lifestyles.

I. Why Do Beliefs Matter?

A. Beliefs or principles are the foundation of a person's entire life.

B. Values grow out of the beliefs we hold.

C. Our behaviors or ethics grow out of our values.

II. What is the Problem?

A. The problem is not simply that there are conflicting belief systems so that one can demonstrate which is true. That may have been the case in times past, but the problem is different now. We are faced with the intermingling of truth and non-truth. Illus: the DaVinci Code.

B. The problem of distorted beliefs. We are in an era of half-truths, and twisted belief systems, at times beliefs that fit into no system of belief other than personal subjectivism.

1. Distorted beliefs. This is especially obvious in distorted beliefs about God. Teens: 80%, God created universe; 84%, personally involved in people's lives; 63%, Muslims, Buddhists, Jews, and Christians pray to same God only with different name. 87% believe Jesus was a real person, 78% affirm the virgin birth, yet 46% believe Jesus committed sins, and 51% say he did not rise from the dead, that is, they deny the resurrection.

2. Redefinitions of beliefs. Truth is being redefined according to cultural settings.

3. Personalization of beliefs. People are putting together their own personal belief system based on what works for them, somewhat like a cafeteria or smorgasbord. They are seeking a "tailor made" faith, another evidence of the individualism of our society.

4. Relative beliefs. Truth is relative, the denial of any objective truth system, whether seen or unseen, recognized or unrecognized.

5. Filtered belief systems. The filter used is that all truth is subjectively and personally determined. This leads to a distorted belief concerning truth. [What does this verse mean? Well, what this verse means for me..." A very subtle shift, "to me..." Many are not looking to the biblical text for truth and thus for faith, but are looking within themselves. This is a denial of absolute, objective moral truth. Thus many teachers in our classrooms are becoming group facilitators more than teachers of scriptural truth.

C. This brings us to another word/concept we must try to understand: postmodernism. These descriptions of how beliefs are being altered represent a philosophy that permeates our culture in the US. It is a cultural worldview or mindset that is usually known as postmodernism. Postmodernism is very difficult to describe because it has largely developed negatively, that is, but what it is not. It is not modernism. It succeeded modernism, it comes after modernism. Modernism focused on science and reason while rejecting superstition, emotion, religion, and the occult. Modernism repudiates any appeal to reality or truth.

D. Postmodernism reflects the world of doubt we are describing:

- No objective truth.
- Rather than discovering truth in a narrative or ideology that integrates the world, postmodernism rejects any overarching explanation of truth.
- Truth is created by a specific culture or community.
- Individuals are the product of their cultures.
- All thinking is “social construct.”
- Objective truth claims unfavorably judge the values, beliefs, lifestyles, and truth claims of others, and represent efforts toward cultural domination.

E. We have seen the challenge of distorted beliefs which lead to distorted values.

These result in well-meaning, but distorted desires. Rather than asking what the Bible says, we seek to understand how the Scripture speaks to a certain situation. [Illus: FG, Bible study or topical study.]

F. Finally results a distorted belief about reality. This is clearly seen in the pragmatism of our society. You can tell whether something is right by whether it works in your life. Formerly, we thought, you can know that God’s truth will work in your life.

G. Sadly, many adult Christians do not possess a biblical worldview which affirms, it’s right it will work. Many adults have bought in to the alternative—if it works it is right.

III. What is the solution?

A. The solution is in a single word--conviction. It may be that time is running out, but there is hope, if...we return to focus on what we believe and why we believe it.

We must take yet one more step. We must deepen our beliefs to the level of CONVICTIONS. We must move beyond belief and trust, to a proactive level of CONVINCED and CONVICTED. We must reeducate ourselves in the foundations of the Christian faith. True Christianity will counter subjective beliefs, the loss of moral absolutes, and distorted perceptions. But true Christianity will also transform our lives and behaviors. This is because beliefs exist at the level of CONVICTIONS.

I challenge you tonight toward convictions. I want to understand that this is a biblical word/concept. We must move from beliefs to convictions. Conviction is a better synonym for faith than belief. [Illus: I believe in God. The statement may be merely an affirmation of a truth without power to change life. Jas. 1:19.]

B. Can faith survive in a world of doubt? Perhaps not, but convictions can. The importance of convictions.

1. Only when we understand that faith involves convictions. Faith that is mere belief, affirmation of intellectual assent, will not survive. We must move from belief to conviction.

2. We must do more than teach ourselves or others to believe the right things.

3. Believing is not enough. This is what I mean. The majority of church members have accepted or adopted Christianity not because they have judged it true and worthy of acceptance, but because of one of two reasons: (1) they have always been Christians and know little of other options, or (2) they judge it the best option encountered to date. The problem with #1 is that Christianity is inherited as a belief without conviction. The problem with #2 is that when another option surfaces, they will be gone. Merely believing is not enough. Not that believing is not important, but beliefs that are only intellectual assents or preferences are not enough.

4. Today's culture is more and more like that faced by first century Christians. Today's culture is intolerant of anyone who believes in absolute truth.

C. How do we develop convictions?

To have conviction is to be thoroughly convinced so that we are compelled to admit truth. Do you believe God exists or are you convicted?

Do you believe the Bible or are you convicted?

John 16:8, do we merely think sin is a problem or are we convicted?

The question can be multiplied concerning the nature of Jesus, his life, his resurrection, the gospel...

D. Examples of convictions.

1. The Bible is filled with the stories of people of conviction.

- Daniel was convicted. So were Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.
- Paul was a man of conviction.
- Some of the students at Columbine High School were people of conviction.
- 1 Pet. 3:15 does not make sense unless we develop conviction. Then and only then do we have hope and an explanation for the reason for our hope.

2. It is not so simple, however, to say that belief is focused in subjective truth and conviction in objective truth.

- The 911 terrorists were convicted. From their point of view, they were advancing a just and holy war against evil in the world. It is possible to have deep conviction and still be tragically wrong.
- The difference between belief and conviction is that convictions act. We have said that belief acts, and with a clear understanding of the depth of the biblical word, that is generally truth. But Jas 1:19 uses the same word and the devils do not act on their beliefs.
- Only conviction will suffice when we are faced with competing truth claims. Convictions result when evidence is examined, and then we commit ourselves to the truth. Thomas wanted to see evidence before he committed himself to Jesus (John 20).
- To connect conviction with evidence is not an affirmation that all doubt will be removed. I hold convictions about things for which I do not have personal evidence. Life is filled with circumstances that test faith, test credibility, and even create doubt.

3. Perhaps it is true that only he who has really doubted can really believe.

- An enigma is that faith and unfaith exist side by side in our hearts. Mark 9:22-24.
- 2 Tim. 1:12, Paul was convinced of what he believed, who he believed.
- John the Baptist, stalwart of the faith, declarer that the Messiah is coming, then Matt. 11:3, cf. John 1:29-33. And the answer in Matt. 11 is to remind John of the evidence. Examining evidence does not eliminate the need for faith, but conviction does not require a 100% certainty.
- J.P. Moreland, faith is "a trust in what we have reason to believe is true."

E. Convictions defined: being so thoroughly convinced that you act on your beliefs/convictions regardless of the consequences.

- Convictions will hold us firm and steady in a godless culture of doubt.
- Convictions are deepened faith concepts. Convictions, being convinced, are the source of victory. This is the key to overcoming.
- Convictions will lead us to a relational apologetic for the Christian faith, so that we live out our beliefs in relationship with others.
- Convictions about God and his truth unlock our origin—where did I come from?
- Convictions about Jesus unlock our true identity—who am I?
- Convictions about the resurrection provide us a sense of destiny—where am I going?
- Jude 15, at Jesus' coming, all will be convinced.

Conclusion

Incredible? Unbelievable? Mish Maoul. Arabic—unbelievable.

Believe it. But more, as Christians, may we find convictions that will move us forward in the greatest cause on earth.

Can faith survive in a world of doubt? Yes, if we understand Biblical faith. But if the church continues to mere intellectual assent without the depth of belief that brings conviction, we will not long survive.

Are you a convict? Have you been faced with the overwhelming truth and found no other alternative?