The Biblical Heritage Center's

DISCOVERING THE BIBLE

Viewing the ancient messages of our Bibles in their cultural & historical context; and understanding the development of our biblical heritages.

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The Teachings of Jesus or Beliefs about Jesus?

By Jim Myers

Which was most important to Jesus – "his teachings" or "beliefs about him"? Today, which do you think is most important to Christians – "beliefs about Jesus" or "what Jesus taught"? How many people think it will be what they believe that will determine their fate after death? But what did Jesus have to say about that subject? In order to find out we must turn to our only sources for what the historical Jesus taught – the Gospels. However, you should be aware of the conditions in the world in which they were written -- before you attempt to understand what they say.

As long as Jesus was alive and personally leading his movement there was harmony and stability among its members. But, only a few decades after Jesus was executed by the Romans things had become very different. In the last issue I discussed the confusion that existed even before three of the four New Testament Gospels had been written. Do you remember the man named Theophilus? He was concerned that what he had been taught about Jesus may not have been accurate and he wanted to make sure it was correct. So, he asked Luke to investigate the matter for him. But, the confusion that Theophilus experienced was not a new situation; three decades earlier Paul reveals that it already existed then.

> But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned! As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned! (Galatians 1:8-9)

The gospel that appears to be causing the problem for Paul was the gospel that the apostle Peter had been teaching the Galatians. This means that by the middle of the first century there were at least two very different gospels already in circulation; and the Christian communities were in conflict over them. Fifty years later there were more gospels and epistles in circulation, which made the situation even more confusing. Luke's introduction to the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts makes this problem very clear.

> Forasmuch as many have taken in hand to set forth in order a declaration of those things which are most surely believed among us, even as they delivered them unto us, which from the beginning were eyewitnesses, and ministers of the word. It seemed good to me also, having had perfect understanding of all things from the very first, to write unto you in order, most excellent Theophilus, that you might know the certainty of those things, wherein you have been instructed. (Luke 1:1-4)

Luke was a disciple of Saul of Tarsus, aka "Paul." He traveled from synagogue to synagogue to interview the synagogue leaders "who were from the beginning eyewitnesses, and ministers of the word" mentioned above. Luke's investigation didn't resolve the issue, because other gospels would be written after his, and two would be included later in the New Testament. They were written about two decades after Luke. The first was the Gospel of Matthew, which was then followed by the Gospel of John. They were written by authors who were from different sects of Christianity, but it is my conclusion that **both wanted to make sure the central message of Jesus was preserved for future generations**. The fact that the authors held very different beliefs about a number of other things, including who Jesus was, is apparent. That is what makes the points they agreed on so important for Christians and Jews to understand today.

I will turn to the Gospel of Matthew first and read a very familiar passage, which you may be able to recite from memory. But, please slow down and let the words soak in, so you will be able to consider the implications of what Jesus was teaching his followers – and why. The underlines are added for emphasis.

> When the Son of Man shall come in his glory, and all the holy angels with him, then shall he sit upon the throne of his glory, and before him shall be gathered all nations. And he shall separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides *his* sheep from the goats. And he shall set the sheep on his right hand, but the goats on the left.
>
> Then shall the King say unto them on his right hand, "Come, you blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry, and you gave me food. I was thirsty, and you gave me drink. I was a stranger, and you took me in; naked, and you clothed me. I was sick, and you visited me. I was in prison, and you came unto me." Then shall the righteous answer him, saying, "Lord, when did we see you hungry and fed *you*? or thirsty, and gave drink? When did we see you a stranger, and take you in? or naked, and clothed *you*? Or when saw we you sick, or in prison, and came unto you?" And the King shall answer and say unto them, "Amen! I say unto you, Inasmuch as you have done unto one of the least of these my brethren, you have done unto me."

> Then shall he say also unto those on the left hand, "Depart from me, you cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry, and you gave me no food. I was thirsty, and you gave me no drink. I was a stranger, and you did not take me in; naked, and you clothed me not; sick, and in prison, and you did not visit me." Then shall they also answer him, saying, "Lord, when did we see you hungry, or thirsty, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and did not minister unto you?" Then shall he answer them, saying, "Amen! I say unto you, inasmuch as you did not to one of the least of these, you did not to me." And these shall go away into everlasting punishment; but the righteous into life eternal. (Matthew 25: 31-46)

The apocalyptic coming of the Son of Man and the final judgment of mankind were very popular subjects during the final centuries of the Second Temple Period, which ended when the Romans destroyed the Temple at Jerusalem in 70 CE. Such beliefs are found in a number of books which were not included in the Jewish or Christian Bibles, but have survived independently. One, First Enoch, clearly contains ideas that we just read in the Gospel of Matthew, which means that they were important to Jesus.

> And there shall stand up in that day all the kings and the mighty, and the exalted and those who hold the earth, and they shall see and recognize how He sits on the throne of His glory, and righteousness is judged before him, and no lying word is spoken before him. Then shall pain come upon them as on a woman in travail, and she has pain in bringing forth when her child enters the mouth of the womb, and she has pain in bringing forth. And one portion of them shall look on the other, and they shall be terrified, and they shall be downcast of countenance, and pain shall seize them, when they see that Son of Man sitting on the throne of his glory. (First Enoch 62:3-5)

Now let's take another look at Matthew's account and see what criteria determined which group a person would be placed in.

Action	***Sheep***	***Goats***
Gave food to hungry.	YES	NO
Gave drink to thirsty.	YES	NO
Took in a stranger.	YES	NO
Clothed the naked.	YES	NO
Visited the sick.	YES	NO
Visited the imprisoned.	YES	NO
Eternal Life	YES	NO
Eternal Punishment	NO	YES

The "sheep" are called the "righteous" and Jesus said they were the ones that would "inherit the kingdom prepared for them from the foundation of the world." From Jesus' perspective this was the focal point of God's plan from the beginning. Jesus' goal was to teach the "kingdom message," so as many people as possible would be included in God's kingdom when the Day of Judgment came. He wanted to save them from eternal punishment by teaching them what to do.

What determined the eternal destinies of the members of mankind? **It was what they did – their works!** I bet that set off a bunch of **BS** alarms (**B**elief **S**ystem). Someone is probably thinking – We aren't saved by works! *Don't tell me about it, Jesus was the one that said it*. **The real question is – who told you that works don't count?** *If the people in the verses from Matthew 25 hadn't done what they did – regardless of what they believed -- where would they have gone?* Their faith, beliefs or divine grace wasn't part of the equation. Check out Matthew 25 in your New Testament. *I bet it says the same thing!*

The last Gospel to be written was the Gospel of John. His message contains many verses that have been used to support a number of 4th century Christian doctrines. One verse that almost everyone knows is:

> For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. (John 3:16)

At first glance it looks like John disagrees with Matthew about how one obtains everlasting life, because he says that "believing in Jesus" determines whether he perishes or receives everlasting life. Contemporary readers view the word "believe" as a completely mental or internal process. The basic meaning of the word "believe" from dictionary.com is:

> "To have confidence in the truth, the existence, or the reliability of something, although without absolute proof that one is right in doing so."

Did the author of the Gospel of John mean that "whosoever has confidence in the truth or the existence of Jesus, without absolute proof" would receive everlasting life? *Did he mean that a "believer" was a person that mentally accepted as truth that Jesus was born of virgin, was part of the Trinity and died for the original sin of mankind?* Were these the criteria that determined who would perish and who would receive everlasting life, according to John?

As you probably know, the best way to deal with people who quote verses out of context to prove that their favorite doctrines are true is to read a chapter or two before and after the verses they quote. In this case, if we just keep reading we will discover that John 5:21-29 defines what "believe" meant to John (the underlines are added for emphasis):

> For as the Father raises up the dead, and quickens; even so the Son quickens whom he will. For the Father judges no man, but has committed all judgment unto the Son; that all should honor the Son, even as they honor the Father. He that honors not the Son honors not the Father which has sent him. Amen! Amen!
>
> I say unto you, "He that hears my word, and believes on him that sent me, has everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life. Amen! Amen!"
>
> I say unto you, "The hour is coming, and now is, when the dead shall hear the voice of the **Son of God**; and they that hear shall live. For as the Father has life in himself; so has he given to the Son to have life in himself; and has given him authority to execute judgment also, because **he is the Son of Man**. Marvel not at this; for the hour is coming, in which all that are in the graves shall hear his voice, and shall come forth; **they that have done good**, **unto the resurrection of life**; and **they that have done evil**, **unto the resurrection of damnation**."

Who are the "believers" that will be resurrected unto life instead of damnation? The answer is very clear – "**the ones that had done good**." The authors of Matthew and John are in complete agreement on the role that a person's works play in determining his or her eternal destiny. **Jesus taught that membership in the Kingdom of God was dependent on their good works**.

If these two of the Gospels clearly state Jesus' position about what will take place on the Day of Judgment, **why do so many Christian's today believe something that directly contradict what Jesus taught?** *Where do they come up with beliefs that are in direct opposition to the teachings of the very person they claim will save them?* A verse that I heard in church almost every Sunday provides a good clue.

> For by grace are you saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: *it is* the gift of God; not of works, lest any man should boast. (Ephesians 2:8-9)

The verses that have destroyed the teachings of Jesus for generations of Christians are also found in the New Testament. Many come from that "other gospel," the one that Paul wrote. However, Paul doesn't get all of the blame. The fact that Martin Luther used many of Paul's writings in his theological war with the Roman Catholic Church to support his position hasn't helped. They were included in Luther's new religion and passed on to the hundreds of Protestant churches that would come from it. However, when Luther argued against the validity of works, he wasn't talking about "good works;" he was against the "religious works" (rituals and practices) that were required by the Roman Catholic Church. This meaning was replaced by "works in general" by later Protestants.

The position of the Roman Catholic Church was that only Christians in "good standing" would be saved. In order to stay "in good standing" one had to participate in the rituals and practices established by the Church, which could only be administered by the authorized agents of the Church. Once Luther was excommunicated, he not only was kicked out of his church home; he also lost his salvation. Obviously, this was no small problem for an ex-priest who clearly understood the implications of being separated from the "authorized rituals and practices" of the Church. **Luther was forced to find a new way to be "saved" that didn't require the blessing of the Roman Catholic Church**.

For a number of years prior to his confrontation with the pope he had been teaching college courses on the writings of Paul. It was to those sources that he turned, and from which **he supported his new way of salvation**. He declared that salvation was based on a divine act of grace available to anyone without the need of the Roman Catholic Church or its clergy. His new church was free to create its own practices and rituals without being concerned about the status of their salvation. **Over 1,500 years had passed since Jesus taught his disciples, and no Christian sect had ever taught the beliefs that Luther told his followers was "the will of God." Ponder the last sentence for a few seconds and fully grasp its implications!**

In a very short period of time new churches sprung up all over Europe, which adopted and further modified Luther's theology. A major doctrine of Luther was that each believer was a priest and was personally led by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit now revealed the true meanings of the Scriptures to every believer. **A problem quickly arose when what the Holy Spirit was supposed to have revealed to different people was clearly contradictory. The schisms that came from those opposing revelations accelerated the growth in the number of Protestant Churches tremendously. Even Luther was challenged by Protestants who declared that his revelations were wrong!**

The way to prepare for the final judgment changed again -- from being a member of the Roman Catholic Church to doing a simple Protestant ritual, primarily reciting an approved prayer, i.e., the "Sinner's Prayer." By the time of the American Civil War the ritual of simply walking down the isle during the invitation and repeating a prayer in order to become a Christian was introduced by a preacher. At first many Protestant churches declared the practice as heretical, because it allowed sinners to become Christians and members of a church without proving that they had truly repented. But, when churches adopting it began to quickly grow; many reversed their former position.

Have you ever really thought about the doctrine that declares that one's eternal destiny is soley determined by what one believes? Who would come up with something like that? History makes it clear that when people change their beliefs they also change who they support with their time and

money. What was the most important to Jesus – people or what they believed? Let's see what he said:

> Then one of them, *which was* a lawyer, asked *him a question*, tempting him, and saying, "Master, which *is* the great commandment in the law?" Jesus said unto him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second *is* like unto it, `You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets." (KJV Matthew 22:35-40)

Dr. David Flusser comments of the meaning of this in his book The Sage From Galilee. The underlines are added to point out important ideas.

> Jesus quoted this maxim when he said, "Whatever you wish that men should do to you, do so to them, for this is the law and the prophets" (Mat. 7:12). Among the Jews, even before the time of Jesus, it was regarded as the summation of the entire law. Hillel had said, "What is distasteful to yourself, do not do to your neighbor; that is the whole law, the rest is but deduction." <*b. Shabbat 31a*> The Jews of that time probably interpreted the precept as follows: God metes out to you in the same measure in which you mete out to your neighbor. The consequence is, "As a person makes request from the Lord for his own soul, in the same manner let him behave toward every living soul." [p. 59]
>
> Both Jesus and Hillel before him saw the Golden Rule as a summary of the Law of Moses. This becomes intelligible when we consider that the biblical saying, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Lev. 19:18), was esteemed by Jesus and by the Jews in general as a chief commandment of the law. An old Aramaic translation of this biblical precept runs like this, "Love your neighbor, for whatever displeases you, do not to him!" This periphrastic translation turns the phrase "as yourself" into the negative commandment included in it. You are not to treat your neighbor with hatred, because you would not like him to treat you in that way. Therefore, by means of Jewish parallels we are able to see how the Golden Rule (Mat. 7:12) and the commandment to love our neighbor (Mat. 22:39) are related within Jesus' teachings.
>
> There was yet another explanation of the phrase "as yourself" in the biblical commandment to love one's neighbor, so important in those days. In Hebrew the phrase can also mean "as though he were yourself." The commandment then reads, "Love your neighbor for he is like yourself." Sirach knew of this interpretation when he demanded that one forgive one's neighbor his trespasses, for it is a sin to withhold mercy from "a man like himself" (Sir. 28:3-5). Rabbi Hanina, who lived

approximately one generation after Jesus, explicitly taught that this commandment to love one's neighbor is "a saying upon which the whole world hangs, a mighty oath from Sinai. If you hate your neighbor whose deeds are wicked like your own, I, the Lord, will punish you as your judge; and if you love your neighbor whose **deeds are good** like your own, I, the Lord, will be faithful to you **and have mercy on you**." [p. 60]

What would happen if ministers in every Christian pulpit taught the "teachings of Jesus," instead of "beliefs about Jesus," as the way of salvation? There are over two billion Christians alive today. What would our world be like if one-third of the world's population made their top spiritual priority **doing good works that protected, preserved and enhanced the quality of life on the earth?**

Today there are many Americans experiencing very difficult times, because of the unbridled greed that created the current economic crisis. **Maybe it would be a good time to have an old-fashion revival and return to the teachings of Jesus – regardless of the beliefs about him**. I don't think that Jesus or his fellow Jews would object to it – *and lots of people would be helped*. ***BHC***

May Memorials

In Loving Memory

SIDNEY PERRY DOSH, JR.

October 18, 1938
May 17, 2006

May you dwell under His wings in complete SHALOM forever!

In Their Remembrance

May their memories inspire us to seek those qualities of mind and heart which they shared when we walked life's journey together. May we help to bring closer to fulfillment their highest ideals and noblest strivings.

May their memories deepen our loyalty to those things which we valued and shared -- faith, love, peace and devotion and our biblical heritage. As long as we live, they too will live; for they are now a part of us, as we remember them.

(Inspired from prayers in Yitzhor Reflections - The New Mahzor - The Prayer Book Press)

In Loving Memory

SIDNEY BERRY WARD, SR.

October 3, 1891
May 27, 1976

May you dwell under His wings in complete SHALOM forever!

Remembering those who came before us is a very important part of the Biblical Heritage Center's mission. It is our privilege to honor them by the BHC Memorial Garden and Memorials which are printed in this newsletter. The Memorial Garden is on the website at http://www.biblicalheritage.org. Please visit it the next time you are on the Internet and stop back by often. If you would like to add your loved one to this section, send the information to us. There is no charge, but donations are accepted. ***Remember those who have meant so much to you with a BHC Memorial***.

	BHC's Primary Mission ***Protect, preserve, and enhance the quality of life of mankind by raising the awareness of our biblical heritages by providing factual information about their origin and historical development throughout the centuries.***

Thank you for reading this newsletter.

Matters of belief & faith are important factors in the quality of life we lead, because they affect the religious, political and social environments in which we live. They influence how we relate to other people by creating the moral and value systems we hold. The Bible and the heritages linked to it are held by over 2,000,000,000 people today. It is extremely important that they have factual information about the critical components of the Belief Systems that influence many of their daily decisions and create the realities through which they view life.

One of our most important missions is to raise the awareness of the power biblical heritages play in Belief Systems by providing factual information so people are able to accurately understand the origins and historical development of the biblical heritages over the centuries. Incorrect information leads to bad and harmful decisions.

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