

drulogion

thursday theological thoughts

WEDNESDAY, JULY 05, 2006

"Believing That" and "Believing In"

After Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, some believe in him, while others went back to report to the Jewish leaders who were plotting to kill Jesus. This news prompts a discussion of whether they should get rid of Lazarus too (see John 11). This twofold response to the miraculous sign of Jesus' power over death struck me: the divide was not between those who believed that Jesus raised him and those who do not. The dividing line is those who believed in Jesus because of the sign, and those who sought to destroy him because of the sign. In both cases, the respondents believed *that* the miraculous event took place. The issue at hand was whether or not to believe *in* the miracle worker himself.

Belief in our world often takes the form of a debate over believing that certain things happened. But the signs in John's gospel make it clear that these things happen so that we might believe in the one who is sent from the father. They are signs, pointing us to him. So just believing *that* these things happened is not enough. We must also believe *in* the one to whom they point.

In his autobiography *Surprised by Joy*, C. S. Lewis shares a story about Old Knock, his rationalistic agnostic tutor, who one day flippantly noted about the resurrection that "it might have happened once." This passing remark about the possibility of resurrection got Lewis asking some serious questions about Christian beliefs, yet it was clear that for Old Knock the obstacle was not believing *that* Jesus was raised from the dead. What was missing was the next step: believing *in* the risen Lord Jesus.

Of course, we cannot make the opposite mistake whereby we try to believe in without believing that. This is a common liberal protestant habit of mind: affirming the spiritual significance of the symbols of faith while crossing one's fingers concerning the historical substance of those beliefs. Such attempts to have our cake and eat it too are destined to fail because a castle of faith cannot be built on sand. Our faith must have a genuine object for it to be genuine faith.

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But the warning bell I wish to ring this week concerns our tendency to exert a disproportionate amount of energy on matters of "believing that" while neglecting the problem of "believing in." We are deceived if we think that one more argument or one more piece of evidence will make all the difference to turn people's eyes to Jesus. We should not ignore arguments or evidence, but our foremost concern should be to draw people to a faith *in* this man from Nazareth.

Any thoughts?

Have you ever encountered someone who believed that without believing in?

Have you ever encountered someone who believed in without believing that?

How do we keep these aspects of believe in proper order and balance?

Labels: [Christian Life](#), [Gospel of John](#)

posted by JohnLDrury @ 11:38 AM

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2 Comments:

At [9:47 AM, July 07, 2006](#), [phillip a. shaw](#) said...

john,

i recall a profound conversation with a harvard grad. student. she certainly didn't 'believe that', and strangely she didn't 'believe in' either. Yet, she was captivated that someone like Paul could lead such a religious movement. She said she tried to 'believe in' but didn't really get a response, adding 'I guess I didn't pray to Jesus, whoops...'. So instead, she told me all about how she teaches Hebrew to kids at the Reformed Jewish Synagogue on Tuesdays. The conversation then shifted to the social dynamics of religion, and the question of original sin. We both smiled and said goodbye.

I am very non-committal on this whole posting thing.

At [6:56 PM, July 11, 2006](#), [Ken Schenck](#) said...

Completely missing the point of your post, my mind immediately went to debates over Pauline expressions of *pistis*. The "believe that" expression is in Romans 10:9--"If you confess Jesus is Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." But of course confessing someone as Lord probably has a tad bit of "believing in" too, wouldn't you say.

Without mentioning other unmentionable debates, I do currently think that faith for Paul was more theocentric than christocentric. We put our faith in what God has done through Jesus Christ. We

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have faith/believe [our way] *into* Jesus Christ, meaning we trust in what God has done through Christ resulting in our incorporation "in Christ."

I agree with you that none of this language is solely cognitive. It is all existential, I would say.

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