

Unbelief

Followers of Christ are surrounded by unbelief: unbelieving neighbors, friends, co-workers and relatives, as well as the various and many expressions of unbelief in our culture. It's worthwhile therefore to reflect on this issue of unbelief, on its anatomy and physiology as well as how believers should respond to it.

Before moving on to our study, let's briefly think about what exactly "belief" is. Scripture uses great economy of words, which often exasperates us. But that also forces us to think deeply about the words that Scripture uses. "Belief" is not some vague awareness of God's existence. It's not a subjective hope that a supernatural, good, but invisible being exists. Nor is belief an epistemological presupposition, as philosophers might allege. Belief in God (that is, the God of the Bible) is primarily trusting God because He is trustworthy. Yet it's more, necessarily, because it's a relational word. So it's knowing God, fearing God, loving God, serving God, being loyal and committed to God, and obeying God. All these things are expressed by one biblical word, "belief." And unbelief is rejecting all of that. Belief creates a relationship with the Creator God. Unbelief doesn't want it.

Let's observe first of all that unbelief occupies church pews, even in our most staunchly evangelical churches. I suspect that's largely for at least these two reasons: (1) We deceive ourselves by thinking that to receive the Gospel is to believe facts about Jesus and facts about salvation. We believe biblical propositions, statements of truth, and we suppose that's all we're expected to do. But Paul said, "For me to live is Christ." That means Paul had a deeply intimate relationship with the Person of Jesus. And so must we! Salvation is not by believing certain facts, but by being in personal relationship with Jesus, the Jewish Messiah and King. Believing certain information is of course essential, but that's not the Gospel. Jesus is. Everything Jesus. No wonder professing Christians' lives aren't transformed; they're passive and indifferent because all they've taken into their souls is . . . lifeless facts. (2) We're self-righteous. We haven't really been gripped by the awareness of sin. We suppose we're basically good. We attend church services for a basketful of reasons, but not to give thanks to Christ for dying, rising and giving new life to us. That's because we don't think we really need the atoning sacrifice He made. He died for sinners, and we're not in that category and never were. We certainly don't need "new life" because the life we currently lead is already a good one. As far as God's demands, we meet them: we don't kill people nor steal from them, nor do we commit adultery. We thus suppose we keep the Ten Commandments, and that's good enough.

Unbelief outside the church is different. It's fundamentally due to pride. And deriving from pride are self-love as well as a sense of autonomy. In order to believe in God, we must humbly submit to His revelation of Himself and to His will for us. We must humbly acknowledge the truth of sin, of God's demands and judgments, and of His doing for us what only He can do. Humility is absolutely essential for belief. Pride powerfully opposes and prevents belief. Autonomy means we suppose we're little gods. So we don't need to believe in God. We're already God-like. Self-love is deadly; it prevents anyone from loving God, absolutely. Self-righteousness is an integral component of self-love. Whether subtle or overt, self-righteousness is found in almost all unbelievers.

Unbelief is then supported by the presuppositions, alternatives and ideas that we absorb from our culture, such as secularism and Darwinism, humanism and scientism, and a host of other idolatries that are on offer. Society adds immensely to our inherent anti-theistic proclivities. No one is an unbeliever because "science has proved God doesn't exist" or other such nonsense. Their adoption of evolution and/or naturalism is secondary; they didn't want to believe in God in the first place. And this: In today's world of educated people, to be an intellectual, that is, a college educated person, means to be anti-theistic. Intellectuals are not only proud and in love with themselves, they harbor a spirit of rebellion against . . . well, against everything that's not intellectual (as they define it). That mainly includes religion and belief in God's existence. To an intellectual, all religion is in the category of superstition and ignorance.

Unbelief is dehumanizing. What that means is, we aren't living as God made us to live, nor are we in our character what God created us to be. God is Spirit and created us as spirit as well so that we can relate to Him. The unbeliever is a walking, talking, breathing, thinking dead creature, regardless what great feats he may accomplish. Only as believers do we become truly human, as God created us to be. All humans necessarily believe something. Or someone. It's how God made us. We can't escape it. If we refuse to believe in God, we'll believe in some idol, or in some wicked supernatural being, or in some foolish ideology.

Unbelief doesn't only dishonor God. It is wickedness. In this cosmos, God is good and is the only source of good. God created us and put us into a world where we must choose good or evil. To believe in God is good and to do His will is good. Unbelievers may be nice people. They may do good things, even pursue exemplary lives. But refusing to believe in God is to choose evil, and that choice invariably results in doing evil. And they then suffer condemnation by a holy and just God. Unbelief is also irrational in the extreme. God made us to know Him, and so He revealed Himself in nature with sufficient clarity that we're without excuse. The pagan pre-Socratic Greek philosophers reasoned from existence that there's a Creator God. They didn't have Scripture, only what they could observe from the real world. They even (correctly) deduced what many of God's attributes are. Anyone could (and should) do what they did; we only know they did it because we found the writings they left. Unbelief is both wicked and foolish.

People are not unbelievers because of some bitter experience they had that prevents them from believing in a good God, the God of the Bible. I hear this all the time: "I can't believe in God because of what I've been through." It's simply a pathetic excuse for willful rebellion. Plenty of people have experienced horrors yet overcame them by believing in God. God allows into our lives all manner of adverse circumstances, even ghastly ones, in the expectation that we will acknowledge Him and love Him in spite of those circumstances we go through.

But there's another truth, a parallel truth that complicates this study of unbelief. It's this: Unbelief is more than the natural response of fallen humanity to God, and we need to understand this to fully grasp the severity of unbelief. God gave us a measure of free will to make spiritual/moral choices. And that means He therefore holds us accountable for those choices. Yet, in the primeval past, God decreed a sin nature as a judicial act because of prior willful refusal to obey Him. Unbelief is the necessary result of the sin nature that God in justice gave to humanity. Because of the noetic effect of sin, our minds cannot receive God's self-revelation nor can our wills respond. Our sin nature makes it impossible for us even to hear God, let alone respond with faith. **"God bound all men over to disobedience so that He may have mercy . . ."** (Romans 11:32). So by constituting humanity as sinful and under condemnation, we have a desperate need for mercy. We have an intense and compelling reason to be believers; we desperately need forgiveness of sins. Only those whom God chooses (our doctrine of election) however will be enabled to respond to His self-revelation. So God elects certain ones and inclines them to hear Him and to respond. Apart from God's sovereign election and work of love in our hearts and minds, unbelief is the necessary default state of humanity.

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Now. What should a believer in God do surrounded, as we are, by unbelief? First, he should not congratulate himself for being so smart or so spiritual or so good or so righteous that he believes in God. That's about as wrong as unbelief itself. Second, he should not be indifferent to unbelievers. That too is wrong, but way too easy to do. Let's stipulate that, except for Orthodox Jews, all believers in God today are followers of Jesus. A follower of Jesus is one who . . . follows Jesus! That means we seek to be like Him and do what He did and obey what He taught and commanded. So our attitude toward unbelievers should be that of Jesus, viz., love them and seek their salvation. In transcendent love, Jesus humbly, selflessly sacrificed Himself for unbelievers. So should we. He revealed God's character. So should we. Obeying God's will, He proclaimed truth and met needs. So should we. He showed kindness and love toward those who rejected Him, in the hope and desire that they would repent. So should we. Any other stance toward unbelief is evil.

I think that most of us never really get it. God's great cosmic purpose in creating is to rescue unbelievers to belief, from evil to good, from wrath to blessing. **"You meant it for evil, but God meant it for good"** (Genesis 50:20) succinctly states the purpose of all Scripture. In a world saturated with evil, God is on mission to redeem His beloved creatures and take them into *koinonia*, fellowship, with Himself. It's why we have a Bible! It's why Jesus came. If we're following Jesus, we need to align ourselves with and participate in God's great salvation purpose. God's elect are there; we must find them.

We have to respond to the world of unbelief. We cannot pretend that it doesn't exist, or that it doesn't affect us, or that it doesn't mean anything to us. It means a lot! God loves unbelievers. So God called us and put us as His servants here in this place and at this time for His great purpose of lovingly seeking to bless His fallen, unbelieving creatures. Only the gospel is able to do that, as empowered by the Holy Spirit. It's why Jesus came. It's what we, as followers of Jesus, are here to do. We need to be faithful.