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of Latter Day Saints
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DOES BY BELIEF MATTER?

TEXT: ...Ponder the paths of thy feet, and let all thy ways be established

SCRIPTURE READING: Jeremiah 6:16 and Proverbs 4:11-18

Thus saith the Lord; stand ye in the ways and see, and ask for the old paths, where is the good way, and walk therein, and ye shall find rest for your souls. Enter not into the path of the wicked, and go not in the way of evil men. Avoid it; pass not by it; turn from it; and pass away. The way of the wicked is as darkness; They know not at what they stumble. But the path of the just is as the shining light, that shineth more and more unto the perfect day. Ponder the path of thy feet, and let all thy ways be established.

Less than a hundred years ago, a group of scientific experts met in the United States, and handed down an opinion -- an expression of their sincere belief. Man, they said, would never fly, for it was a demonstrable fact in Nature that no bird which weighed over thirty pounds could sustain itself in flight. They therefore gave it as their studied, expert, and correct opinion that man would never fly. A few years later the Wright brothers invented the first airplane, and on August 26, 1952, a jet bomber made the round trip across the Atlantic ocean and back in a total elapsed flying time of eight hours, two minutes. Human belief and opinion, though sincere, studied, and expert, had to yield to facts. Man could fly.

Years ago a friend of mine told me the story of a young man who believed quite sincerely that God had a special work for him to do. He reasoned that if God wanted him to do this work, he would protect him and spare his life until it was finished. With this sincere belief firmly in mind he entered into a place of very great danger refusing to take the very obvious precautions suggested by his fellow workmen for his safety. A few minutes later he was dead - a martyr to sincere but erroneous belief.

One of the popular beliefs of our day is that it doesn't make any difference what you believe, so long as you are sincere - that a more or less perfunctory acceptance of Christ as your Savior will save you, regardless of your attitude towards such inconsequential things as doctrines and creeds. We have gotten tired of arguing about creeds and doctrine - tired of bickering and disunity among those who call themselves Christians.

There are some beliefs that don't matter. If I believe that we should have corn for supper, and my wife believes in beans, we probably compromise, and have corn one night and beans the next, or vice versa. Both are good foods, The choice between them is inconsequential, compared to the peace and unity of our home.

There are also times when compromise and abandonment of individual belief is wise and necessary in the interests of unity. As an American, it is my belief that automobiles should be driven on the right hand side of the street. But if I go to a portion of the world where it is the unanimous belief that automobiles should be driven on the left side of the street, I would be very foolish and stubborn indeed not to be willing to sacrifice my belief for the sake of unity. It is not a life and death matter whether I drive to the right or to the left - but unity in such a procedure may very well be a matter of life and death.

There are times when belief matters very much - when it is much more important to be right than to be popular - when correctness is more to be desired than unity - yes, when such correctness is absolutely essential to continued existence. You may get only one chance with the gun you believe isn't loaded, the wire you think isn't charged with high voltage electricity, the match over the gas well you believe to be empty. The pathways of history are littered with the wreckage of men and nations and civilizations who thought that it was unimportant whether they believed in the laws of God or not, so long as they were powerful and popular and accepted by their neighbors. The laws of God's kingdom -- and of God's universe -- are inexorable, inescapable, unchangeable. Sincere belief cannot save. Expert opinion cannot save. It is well to be tolerant of the opinions and beliefs of others, and to recognize their sincerity. It is well to wish for and work for Christian unity. But it is better to remember that the only safe unity is a unity based on truth -- that one man who believes and acts upon truth is mightier than hundreds of millions who believe and act upon error.

Jesus and the apostles taught certain doctrines. They were truthful, saving doctrines, based on the unchangeable laws of God; for Jesus said, "My doctrine is not mine, but his that sent me." Again, he said that if any man heard his words and believed them not, he should be judged by those words in the last day. "For I have not spoken of myself, but the Father which sent me, he gave unto me a commandment what I should say, and what I should speak." He promised, "If any man will do his will (that is, my Father's will) he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God, or whether I speak of myself." To test a doctrine, try it out in action -- in doing -- in experience, and let the results prove what kind of doctrine it is.

Jesus attached no small amount of importance to his doctrine. If sincerity of belief was all that mattered, he would have had no occasion to disagree with the Pharisees and Sadducees on matters of doctrine. They rejected his doctrine, and he having in mind the deceitfulness and error and hypocrisy of their doctrine warned, "Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees." The disciples understood his meaning -- that they should beware of the doctrines of the two leading sects of their day. Their doctrines were popular; they were sanctioned; they were powerful; they were no doubt sincerely believed, but they were wrong. Sincerity of belief could not make them right, nor could their sincere disbelief in the strange new doctrines taught by Jesus make his doctrines wrong.

The apostles continued to teach the doctrines which Jesus had taught, and those doctrines became known as their doctrines. For a time the church "continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers." But soon men began to change the doctrines of Christ to suit themselves, and the apostles found themselves fighting a losing battle to maintain the purity of doctrine which Jesus had given them in the beginning. Nearly all of the epistles written by Paul contain some reproof for false doctrine, or an exhortation to hold to sound doctrine. Seeing in the Hebrew saints a tendency to belittle doctrine, and to be careless about belief, Paul wrote to them, "Be not carried about with divers and strange doctrine: for it is a good thing that the heart be established with grace." To the Romans he wrote: "Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them." To Timothy, his spiritual son in the faith, Paul wrote, "Take heed to thyself and to thy doctrine." He warned that the time would come when men would not endure sound doctrine. Paul was evidently not one of those who thought that belief did not matter, so long as the believer was sincere.

John, too, thought that a man's belief matters. Almost the whole of his first epistle is an argument and a pleading against the doctrinal heresies of Gnosticism, which had arisen in the church only a few short years after Jesus' ascension. Peter and Jude found it necessary to cry out against these same heretical doctrines. In the Book of Revelation the Spirit of Christ expresses concern and revulsion for the

doctrines of Balaam and of the Nicolaitians, which were being taught in the church at Pergamos. If we need any more proof of the importance of doctrine to Jesus and the apostles, it may be found in these verses from the second epistle of John: After noting that "many deceivers are entered into the world," John continues: "Whosoever transgresseth, and abideth not in the doctrine of Christ, hath not God. He that abideth in the doctrine of Christ, he hath both the Father and the Son. If there come any unto you, and bring not this doctrine, receive him not into your house, neither bid him God-speed; For he that biddeth him God-speed is partaker of his evil deeds."

Not long after Jesus ascended, the time came when Paul's prophecy was fulfilled, when men would not endure sound doctrine, when they gave heed to seducing spirits and doctrines of men. In spite of the warnings and exhortations of the apostles, there came a falling away; there came perilous times in the church, when because of the church's alliance with the civil power it became dangerous to believe in the unpopular but true doctrines that Jesus had taught -- when men held a form of godliness, but denied the power thereof - when men were ever learning or inventing some new creed, but never coming to a knowledge of the truth.

Numerous great and good men made conscientious effort to bring reform to the Christian church, and to correct errors of doctrine. But all was confusion. Tradition was strong. There was no authoritative voice except the traditions of a corrupt and dead past. Men could not agree; they fought bitterly over doctrine; they drew up creed after creed; they anathematized all who could not or would not accept those creeds.

In the second decade of the nineteenth century, a young lad in his teens became concerned about doctrine. He felt the need of a church affiliation, but he could not make up his mind which of the several churches in his community taught correct doctrine. One night while attending a union revival service, he heard a sermon on the text, "If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, who giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not, and it shall be given him." He decided to put that promise to the test. He retired to the woods to pray, and in answer to his prayers he was permitted to see two personages in the shaft of light which descended on him. One of them, turning to the other, said, "This is my Beloved Son; hear ye him!" Then the young man put his question -- "Which church shall I join?" The answer came clearly, authoritatively, unequivocally: "Join none of them; for they teach for doctrines the commandments of men." Here again in Latter Days was the old emphasis on sound doctrine, coming from the Son of God himself. Here was the old emphatic condemnation of the sincere and well-meaning religious experts who had wet up systems of their own in the best way they knew how, but who in their human weakness had missed the mark.

That young lad was Joseph Smith. Through his prophetic ministry as he listened to the voice of God's beloved Son, he was instrumental in performing a great work towards the re-establishment of sound doctrine, contained in and taught by a sound church organization and a restored priesthood. It is of the doctrine that we purpose to tell you in following programs at this hour. It is that doctrine which we shall strive to teach each week as we renew the invitation given to Joseph Smith and to the apostles so many years ago on the mount of transfiguration: "This is my beloved Son; hear ye him."