

The following post is for anyone interested. You interested? Join the blog. You get five posts a week, each and every week of the year, on all sorts of intriguing topics connected with the New Testament and Early Christianity.

QUESTION:

What do you have to lose by having faith and believing that Christ was born supernaturally as a result of a virgin birth to Mary, that Christ performed miracles, that Christ died by crucifixion and came back to life from the dead, and that Christ went back into heaven in a supernatural ascension into heaven? I don't see any downside.

RESPONSE:

I get this kind of question on occasion. Usually when someone asks it they tie it to "Pascal's Wager." In case you're not familiar with it, Blaise Pascal (1623-1662 CE), mathematician that he was, thought in terms of percentages and odds. And he applied it in a famous way to the question of belief - in an age when lots of intellectuals in Europe, and people they influenced, were having doubts about religious belief and becoming atheists.

In a kind of cost-benefits analysis, Pascal reasoned that if someone remained a believer, then if it turned out in the end they were wrong, it would have zero negative effects. BUT, if they decided to become an atheist and they were wrong, that could have massive, eternal, and exquisitely painful effects. And so, the only reasonable thing to do was to continue to believe. There is a lot that can be gained and nothing to lose; and the alternative is to have nothing to gain and everything to lose. No brainer, right?

And so this person's question to me: there's no downside! So why not continue to believe in the traditional Christian doctrines about Christ?

Let me say at the outset that that I'm not at all offended by the question and understand the concern behind it, even if, as I'll try to show, it's not actually very thoughtful. But still, it's a question I myself used to ask of people back when I was a conservative evangelical who believed that only those with the proper beliefs would be given an eternal reward, and everyone else was doomed for the fire pits of hell. For someone with that kind of view, it makes no sense for someone to risk it. Why not believe? What's to lose?

But I have two responses that seem to me to be insurmountable. I'll give them by doing what you are never supposed to do, answering a question with a question (or in this case, two questions):

The first question I would ask this person is: Are *you* able to believe something that you honestly do not think is true?

The question itself raises a much bigger issue: what does it mean to believe? Does anyone really and genuinely think that authentic faith means mouthing certain words that you don't actually subscribe to in order to be let off the hook? Would God be convinced by that? Wouldn't he, uh, see through it? I assume so. So what good would it do for me to say that I

believe something I don't actually believe?

And how can I force myself to think something is true when I don't think it is? Belief isn't mouthing words or lying to get off the hook.

The second question I would ask is, for me, the real zinger: Can it really be a simple case of either/or? Either you believe or not? In other words, is it really a case that if you choose to believe and you're right, you may be saved, but if you're wrong you will be damned? Doesn't that assume there are only two options: believe in Christ for salvation or don't and be damned?

That may have made sense for Pascal, who lived in a world where, for all practical purposes, there were TWO options. But what about our own world? We don't have two options. We have scads of them. And it is literally impossible to take them all.

That is to say: If you want to make sure you cover your bases when it comes to salvation: WHICH religion do you follow? Suppose you decide, OK, I'll take Pascal's wager and decide (somehow) to believe in Christ? What if, it turns out, Christ is NOT the right option? Or even, say, the only/best option?

In concrete terms: what if you decide to believe in Christ and then it turns out the Muslims are right? You could be damned forever for choosing the wrong option. So how do you cover the Islamic option as well as the Christianity one? And ... well ... there are lots of religions to choose from.

Even within Christianity: I know some Christians who have an entire detailed list of what you have to believe to be saved. And I know other Christians who have a *different* list. It is impossible to believe both at once, since they are at odds with one another. On a most simple level, I know different Christians who believe that if you do not belong to *their* denomination, you will be damned; and even Christians who say that you have to be baptized in *their particular church* to be saved. So what'cha gonna do?

On this logic, do you become Mormon to cover your bases? And Catholic? And Southern Baptist? And a Jehovah's Witness? And an Independent-Bible-Believing-Hell-Fire-and-Brimstone Fundamentalist? And ?

Really, when people come up with simple questions, I sometimes wonder what they are thinking. Are they thinking? At all? Do they really think there are two choices in the world, and you might as well play it safe?



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