

# LEARNING HOW TO BELIEVE

By Paul Penno Jr.

December 11, 2010

There are two main holidays, well three, that are observed by many Christian people who don't realize that they are encrusted with paganism that goes all the way back to ancient Roman times. One of them is Sunday observance. As its name signifies, it is the ancient day of the week dedicated to the worship of the sun. Jesus observed the seventh-day Sabbath, as did all of His apostles. Another is the day that many think they observe in honor of Christ's resurrection, forgetting that baptism is the way the Lord commanded us to honor His resurrection. And then there is the day usually celebrated as the birthday of Jesus in Bethlehem. But simple, common reason shows how impossible it would be for Jesus to have been born in late December, because shepherds were camping out in the fields with their flocks—impossible in Bethlehem's cold, rainy December weather.

But what difference does it make? One reason is that worship mixed with paganism is in vain, for Jesus said, "In vain they do worship Me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men" (Mt 12:9). But another reason is that invariably when we mix pagan customs with Christianity, we end up losing "the truth of the gospel" (Gal 2:5), and as soon as we lose "the truth of the gospel," we lose the salvation that only the gospel can bring (Rom 1:16).

For example, take the doctrine of purgatory: it's the pagan doctrine of *karma* which has been brought into the Christian church: you pay for your sins, and that means you can indulge your lust all you want to and still go to heaven simply by paying for those sins by staying a little longer in purgatory. It's like buying a new car with no payments due until 2011. So, enjoy your lust. No problem, you can pay later. That's false doctrine, and it's deadly!

The real problem with paganism (and all things pagan) is that false doctrine inevitably draws us away from Jesus the true Saviour. Paganism is the devil's substitute for the genuine plan of salvation. This December, take time to read the pure, original Bible story of the birth of Jesus in Matthew and Luke; and soak up the Good News that is there.

The story of the birth in Bethlehem is told in another Bible passage that is seldom quoted at Christmas time. It's Revelation 12:1-5. Here the one who gives "birth" to Jesus is (as a metaphor) seen to be the church: "And she [the Jewish church] being with child cried, travailing in birth, and pained to be delivered. . . And she [the church] brought forth a man child [the Greek says, a male] who was to rule all nations with a rod of iron." Yes, it's the Christmas story, for this passage also tells of Herod's attempt to kill the Baby Jesus in Bethlehem: "The dragon stood before the woman which was ready to give birth, for to devour her child as soon as it was born." What a fate for a Baby! As soon as it is born, someone wants to kill it!

Thus from His birth, Jesus was hated murderously by His enemies. All through His 33 years of life on this planet, He met rejection. Even as a child in Nazareth He endured it; and of course you know how the world's hatred finally blossomed into His murder on the cross. The world actually cast Him out!

Even today, the world hates Jesus, even though many play Xmas carols in the malls and on the radio. Jesus says to us frankly, "If the world hate you, ye know that it hated Me before it hated you" (Jn. 15:18). And John tells us, "Marvel not, my brethren, if the world hate you" (1 Jn. 3:13). And just before He died, Jesus told His disciples, "Ye shall be hated of all nations for My name's sake" (Mt. 24:9). We may try ever so hard to solve this problem, but that bed-rock truth remains: there is no communion between light and darkness.

That same story in Rev 12 goes on to tell of the dragon trying to destroy Christ's remnant church. And Jesus knows the conflict His followers always get involved in, so He gives them Good News: "These things have I spoken unto you that in Me ye might have peace. In the world ye shall have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world" (Jn. 16:33). Through faith in Him you will also overcome the world!

Some people say that if you've never gone bungee-jumping you've missed real fun. Or if you've never been to Disneyland, you're deprived. But let me ask a sobering question: Have you ever experienced repentance before God? If your answer is No, then you truly have missed out on

something that is wonderful, refreshing, and encouraging! Repentance is not breast-beating, wearing hair-shirts, self-flagellation, paying penance, doing Rosaries, going on painful pilgrimages, or giving heavy donations to the church. It's deeper than all that.

The Bible talks about it over 100 times. Far from being a sad experience, it's joyous, like the gateway to heaven, like being healed after sickness, like recovering from a painful accident, or like coming out of prison after long incarceration. It's getting back on the right road after you've lost your way in a distressing detour.

The very first sermon Jesus preached after His baptism in the River Jordan was a call, "The kingdom of God is at hand: repent, and believe the gospel" (Mk. 1:15). Thus the first sin we need to repent of is not believing the gospel. Repenting only of outward acts of sin is like papering over a widening crack in the wall—it's superficial. The sin that underlies all sins is what the Bible calls the sin of unbelief.

In that first sermon, Jesus calls upon us to get at the root of our problem, discover the reason why we've lost the main road. The outward acts of sin, the addictions, the bad habits that drag us down, all are fruit borne by unbelief that lies deep in our hearts. But God is so kind to us that He will convict us of that sin and will give us the precious gift of repentance. It's a step towards eternal life, but we can't self-start ourselves.

We are all born with a dead battery and need jumper-cables from Jesus. The apostle Peter

pleaded with those who had crucified Jesus, You “slew [Him] and hanged [Him] on a tree, Him hath God exalted . . . to be a . . . a Saviour, to give repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins” (Acts 5:30, 31). Don’t refuse the “gift”! Seeing at last how we had a part in crucifying Him is precious truth that is a shaft of clear bright sunshine pouring into one’s dark jail cell, yes, light from Heaven.

Let us think of what it was that clinched Judas in his final decision to betray the Son of God; and what it was that saved Peter from repeating Judas’s final sin of suicide: (1) At the memorable scene of Mary Magdalene’s washing Jesus’s feet with her tears (Mk. 14:1-9), Judas chose to scorn and ridicule her act (Jn. 12:4). Perhaps he did not know that she was unconsciously demonstrating that same *agape* of Christ in (a) her unselfish motive in doing it, (b) her great sacrifice in spending a year’s wages on that “very precious perfume.” (c) Her wild extravagance in “wasting” it (get this: the love of Christ is *wildly* extravagant!! That’s its very nature). For all this, Judas chose only contempt.

(2) Thus he was re-enacting in his heart the same reaction that Lucifer had for it when in heaven he made his final choice to reject the very idea of *agape*. No self to be crucified, for him! He would introduce a new idea into God’s universe-exalt self! It’s “I, I, I, I, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God,” etc. (see Ez. 28:13-19). (3) Now Judas has also despised that same *agape* which “the Holy Spirit [has] shed abroad in [Mary’s] heart” (see Rom 5:5).

(4) The end of his choice? Hopeless despair and suicide.

(5) But note: Jesus did *not* condemn Judas!

(6) Could Christ have forgiven Judas if he had asked for it? Yes! So, what was his root problem? (a) He didn’t *believe* “the truth of the gospel” that “the Lord hath laid on [Christ] the iniquity of us all,” including his own sin of betraying Him (Isa. 53:6). (b) He didn’t believe that Christ was dying his second death, “the wages of [his] sin” (Rom. 6:23; Heb. 2:9). (c) He didn’t believe that the Father refused to “impute” his sin unto him (Judas), but “imputed” it instead unto Jesus (2 Cor. 5:19). (d) He didn’t believe that Jesus was “the Saviour of the world,” “the Saviour of all men” (Jn. 4:42; 1 Tim. 4:10). (e) He refused to believe that Jesus was his Saviour! (f) The sin of Judas therefore was the dark sin of unbelief of the Good News of the gospel! (g) Thus he made a final choice to ally himself forever on the side of ex-Lucifer, Satan! (If you have sinned grievously, don’t do that)!

Yes, “Sometimes it causes me to tremble”! Every time I choose to exalt self, instead of taking up my cross to follow the Lamb, I am in deep trouble! Well, Peter almost followed Judas into suicide; tomorrow let’s look at the Good News difference.

What we’re trying to tell people is that the Gospel is *very* good news. Tell them that Jesus said, “My yoke is easy, and My burden is light” (Mt. 11:28-30). Some don’t like to hear those words; they want to emphasize how hard it is to follow Jesus, how much you must give up, how much you must *do*, your

salvation depends on your knowing how difficult it is to be saved.

And I will agree—there is one *very* difficult thing about being saved: that is, *learning how to believe*. Jesus says in Jn. 3:17-19 that *not* believing will keep us out of heaven. Indeed! Serious!

And the truth is that all of us were born in an unbelieving state; believing is never transmitted genetically; unbelief is natural to us; unbelieving is far and above the most difficult thing humans have to learn to overcome. It is the addiction of all addictions, the most insidious, the most pervasive. “He that believeth not is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God” (vs. 18).

The distraught father in Mk. 9:17-24 shows us how deep the problem is rooted in our human nature. Jesus said to him, almost like tantalizing him, “All things are possible to him that believeth.” Then the poor man realized how awful his problem was, how every cell of his being was saturated with unbelief: he burst into tears and cried out in anguish, “Lord I believe; help thou mine unbelief.”

Now, there is good news in that story. The moment you realize that unbelief is your real problem, help is on the way. A wise writer said, “you can never perish” (DA 429) if from your heart you pray that man’s prayer. The people above all people whom Heaven rushes to help are those who realize the depths of their sin.

Unbelief is the most serious problem in the world church, the source of our lukewarmness, the reason for the delay in the coming of Jesus. We *must* learn

to believe how good the good news is; and the moment we say that, we remember that Christ will have a people who will overcome even as He overcame. He did not die in vain! He will see of the travail of His soul and will be satisfied (Isa. 53:11).

Two great “big ideas” permeate Paul’s Letter to the Romans. It’s a NT “epistle” that most of us shy away from. Deep, confusing, boring. Yet Luther hailed it as “the clearest gospel of all.” There is something in Romans that explodes like dynamite in human hearts when those two ideas are grasped, and great movements result like the Protestant Reformation.

Number one “big idea” hits us like Bad News. It dominates most of chapters 1, 2, and half of 3. Depressing reading. Paul details the horrible sins that are the nature of humanity, whether of pagan nations, or of God’s chosen people, the Jews. “All alike have sinned,” says 3:23 (NEB, it’s correct here). The “big idea” is inescapable: every human being by nature took part in the crucifixion of the Son of God. There’s no way that we can honestly “confess our sins” unless we confess that terrible sin of sins as being ours by right. Really, truly. And does that ever upset the “Laodicean” lukewarm churchgoers! Paul walks all over their toes with this “big idea.” Why, this humbles the pride of man in the dust! We are no better than anyone else! The sin of someone else would be our sin but for the grace of Christ. If God lets go of us, there is no telling where we would end up. Goodbye, self-importance. We must “pour contempt” on all our pride. “We” crucified the Prince of glory!

Number two “big idea” in Romans also upsets the saints. As the new Head of our human race, the Son of God asked His Father to forgive that unspeakably terrible sin—and He did. The same “all” who sinned have been forgiven, “justified freely by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 3:23, 24). He died the second death of those same “all men.” “Much more the grace of God, and the gift by grace . . . hath abounded” unto the same “all men.” Paul’s big idea explains the mystery why the Father treats those “all men” as though they had never sinned—His sunshine and rain comes on “all” alike! That’s what “justified by His grace” means! To despise that grace is the fatal age-old sin of unbelief.

The righteousness of Christ now can cleanse from the one greatest sin of all time. According to John’s profound statement in 3:14-19, it’s the sin of unbelief, not the mere passive ignorance of never knowing, but the active sin of disbelieving truth. “He that believeth not is condemned. . . .” That “not” discloses the darkest guilt of sin.

But what is unbelief, this sin of disbelieving? It’s the sin committed by the most righteous people on earth, those to whom God’s Messiah was sent (the Savior of the world). They made the eternal Prince of glory become the slain “Lamb of God” by the people who slew Him. The cross of Christ extends its arms over the universe of God—the truth of eternity encapsulated in time at Calvary for us to “see.”

Unbelief is the sin of cherishing hard hearts that cannot be melted, of eyes that cannot shed tears of

repentance, of souls that “survey the wondrous cross” with callous disregard. It’s the sin of hearts unmoved by the love (*agape*) that “constrains” any believing heart to total consecration to the One who died our second death for us. It’s poisonous sin, the most subtle and deadly of all time.

Unbelief is the sin that infiltrates the great world church of Laodicea, the “seventh” and last of all time, the church that torments the resurrected Son of God to the point of acute nausea (Rev. 3:14-21). Each individual professed believer in Christ is a microcosm of the world church, no one holier than everybody else, all sharing a shared sin of unbelief, all desperately needing a shared repentance before God, all awaiting the long-promised Elijah who will proclaim a heart-reconciliation, the final atonement. Let’s not cap off history by crucifying the Lamb of God afresh. Let’s overcome where ancient Israel failed.

To “believe” in Christ is to let one’s little shriveled up selfish heart be “enlarged” and “quicken” (made alive) to at least begin to “comprehend” the “breadth, and length, and depth, and height” of the love of Christ which “passes knowledge” (Psalm 119:25, 32; Eph. 3:14-21).

It’s painful, not because the Lord wants to hurt us, but because we have been “brought forth in iniquity” (Psalm 51:5, “shapen” in it, KJV), and every cell of our souls is egocentric in its being. You sit with legs crossed, your leg “goes to sleep,” you lose consciousness in it, it feels as though it is not there; then when it begins to “awake” it tingles with painful feelings. When you’re being converted, you’re being

“born again” and it tingles with painful feelings; it’s always painful to be “born,” much nicer to stay snug and cozy in mother’s womb.

But your Creator and Savior says, No, come out into the world and face Reality; be what you are; share life with its Author. The new covenant gospel assures you that even though you have left the “womb,” you are still as secure in the battlefields of life as if you were still in the womb. The Lord assures you, “I will never leave you nor forsake you.’ So we may boldly say, ‘The Lord is my helper; I will not fear. What can man do to me?’” (Heb. 13:5, 6). So, now instead of cozying up in the “womb” you are living by faith. Exciting, but it’s living with Christ.

To refuse to be “born” is therefore the sin of unbelief.

God is not saying that you must *do* this or *do* that in order to be saved eternally; but He has to tell us, You *must* believe: “without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe [1] that He is and [2] that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him” (Heb. 11:6). Hard work, learning to believe? It will stretch every “muscle” of your soul, but it’s the beginning of eternal life.

Karim moved to America a couple decades ago. He worked at a restaurant and fell in love with one of the waitresses there, Susie. The two of them decided to get married.

She took him home to meet her mother, a life-long Christian. That’s right, this girl took her Muslim boyfriend home to meet her Christian mother, Edna. How do you think that went over?

At that moment, Edna was coming face to face with one of those creatures, an unbeliever. And she was faced with a decision. Would Karim be nothing more than a hopeless unbeliever to her or a person, in need of God’s grace?

In loving gentleness, here’s how she responded to their desire to get married: “I don’t think so! You two aren’t getting married. But Karim, I’d like for you to come to church with us.”

Karim reluctantly agreed. But all along, he thought: Christianity is a foolish religion. Why should someone else die for my sins? I don’t need that kind of charity. He said to himself, “These people are weak. They should have to pay for their own sins.”

But over time, Karim felt his defenses becoming weak. He said, “God’s Word was bigger than me.” Gradually, God’s Word was convicting Karim of his sins and pointing him to One who can take away the burden of sin.