

On Being Honestly & Sincerely Wrong

by Bill Crews

In October of 1997 an Associated Press article out of Tampa, Florida told a tragic tale. An 88-year-old man traveled from his home near Los Angeles, California to Tampa, Florida to claim the \$12,000,000 he was convinced he had won from one of those promoters of magazine subscriptions (PUBLISHERS CLEARING HOUSE). The large print had his very name in it: “_____ **HAS WON IT ALL AND WILL DEFINITELY RECEIVE \$12 MILLION CASH GUARANTEED!**” But the small printed added: “If you have and return the top winning entry...” And, of course, everyone across America who received one of those “sweepstakes” mailings also had his very own name on it with the very same words. Every single one was told that he had won millions **if**—. The poor old man honestly, sincerely and fully believed he had won, and his faith led him to travel thousands of miles to claim his prize. But he was honestly and sincerely wrong. His envelope did not contain “the top winning entry.” His faith was without substance. He had won nothing. (Postscript: The same 88-year-old man did it again! Thursday, January 29th, the following year) he made another plane trip to Tampa to claim a prize he had not won, still honest, still sincere and still wrong.

In the Bible, Jacob honestly and sincerely believed that his adolescent son, Joseph (he was about 17 at the time, Gen. 37:2ff), was dead, slain by some wild animal. After all, Joseph’s older brothers presented Joseph’s coat of many colors, torn and bloody, to their father and a deceptive tale to go along with it. Some twenty or more years would go by before Jacob would learn that Joseph was not dead and what really happened to him (Gen. 41:46–46:34).

Obviously we can be honest and sincere in believing something that is false, and all of our honesty and sincerity will not turn that which is false into that which is true. Our faith, in that case, is misplaced; the evidence that produces it is insufficient. However, many think that all of these things are so, **except in religious matters**. Somehow, when it comes to things religious, these truths do not apply. Being honest and sincere is seen as more important than being right. Being honestly and sincerely satisfied with what you believe are regarded as more important than being certain that what you believe is the truth. Reader friend, does the Bible teach that what you believe and practice are not important? that if you are honestly wrong, God will overlook it? that being honest is more important than being right?

Proverbs 14:12 and 16:25 both say: “*There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death.*” Moses had warned the Israelites against “*every man doing whatsoever is right in his own eyes*” (Deuteronomy 12:8); yet, in the days of the judges that is exactly what they did do (Judges 17:6 and 21:25), and it got them into trouble. Through Isaiah God warned, “*... not doing your own ways, nor finding your own pleasure, nor speaking your own words,*” (Isaiah 58:13). Said Jeremiah, “*O Jehovah, I know that the way of man is not in himself; it is not in man that walks to direct his steps*” (Jeremiah 10:23). That he might depend upon and look to God for instruction and guidance, man is told, “*For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts*” (Isaiah 55:9).

Naaman, the captain of host of the Syrian army, came into Israel hoping to be miraculously healed of his leprosy. As he approached the house of the prophet Elisha, he was thinking (how honestly and sincerely I don’t know), “*He will surely come out to me and stand and call on the name of Jehovah his God, and wave his hand over the place, and recover the leper*” (2 Kings 5:11). When instead Elisha sent his servant out to meet the great man and to tell him to go to the Jordan river and dip seven times with the promise that he would then be healed, Naaman was angry, protested this requirement, and went away in a rage. But not until he humbled himself and did as he was told was he healed.

Saul of Tarsus, with zeal for God (Acts 22:3), with a clear conscience (Acts 23:1), believing that Jesus was an imposter and that His followers were deluded apostates, threw himself into the task of stamping out the movement by seeking out, arresting, imprisoning and executing the disciples of Jesus (Acts 8:1, 3; 9:1-2; 22:4-5; 22:19-20; 26:9-11). How mistaken he was and how wrong he was, but he was honestly and sincerely mistaken and wrong. That is why, when he was shown that he was wrong, that without any hesitation he was convicted of his sins, believed in Jesus, repented of his sins, acknowledged the Lordship and deity of Jesus, was baptized in obedience to Christ, and zealously and sincerely gave the rest of his life in humble service to Him. He had been honestly and sincerely wrong, but when convinced of the fact, he chose to stop being wrong rather than to stop being honest.

Kind reader, can a person be honestly and sincerely wrong in his religious faith and practice? Can he think that he was saved when he was not? Can he think that he has been a Christian when he has not? Can he think that he has the hope of eternal life when he does not? If he can, and surely he can, what should he do when he realizes it? Rest assured that he will either cease to be wrong, by changing, or cease to be honest by refusing to change. The Bible tells us to “*prove all things*” (1 Thessalonians 5:21). The Bible tells us to make our “*calling and election sure*” (2 Peter 1:10-11).

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