

# Do You Believe in Jesus? (And What Does that Mean?)

Hespeler, September 8, 2024 © Scott McAndless – Baptism

Isaiah 35:4-7a, Psalm 146, [James 2:1-17](#), Mark 7:24-37

**W**e have all been greatly blessed and privileged today to take part in a very significant event. A young woman has made the choice to declare her faith in Jesus and willingness to be part of his church, a commitment that has been sealed by her baptism. I am continually amazed at how we as a church are given the opportunity to be a part of some of the most meaningful moments in an individual's or a family's life.

## A Question

And I would like to take this opportunity to reflect for a bit on the confession of faith that has been made and what it means. I asked this question of Danielle today: *"Do you turn to Jesus Christ, accepting him as Lord and Saviour, trusting in his grace and love?"* All of you, if you have become a member of this or any congregation have been asked that question or a question very much like it. You are a member of Christ's Church because of how you answered. But I would like to reflect for a little while on what that question means when it is asked of you in a church.

If someone on the street were to ask you, "Do you believe in Jesus?" what might they mean by that? If a random person asks you that, they are usually enquiring about the things you may believe *about* Jesus. They may be asking, "Do you believe that Jesus really existed?" Or, "Do you believe that he was born of a virgin?" Or that he rose from the dead, or maybe they are asking if you believe that Jesus is, in any sense, God.

## Believe About Jesus

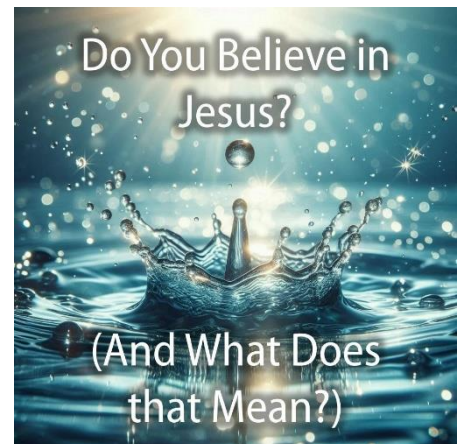
But when I ask that question before a baptism, am I asking you what you believe *about* Jesus? No, I am not. That is not to suggest for a moment that you shouldn't seek, by studying and growing, to believe correct things about Jesus. Of course we should do that, but that is not the kind of belief that I am asking that question about.

There are, in fact, all kinds of people who believe all kinds of things about Jesus. They often believe these things passionately whether they are correct beliefs or not.

I have met people who believe that Jesus travelled to India in his youth, that he was white, that he was a supporter of supply-side economics and that he thought that the poor ought to pull themselves up by their own bootstraps. These things are all demonstrably false (or at least have no good evidence to support them) but people believe them.

## What You Believe Matters

What you believe about Jesus – true or false – matters, of course. I hope we promote the right beliefs about Jesus.



But what you believe about him is not fundamentally what makes you a part of his church. The Letter of James, which we read from this morning says this about correct belief: **“You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder.”** (James 2:19) Faith has to mean something more than just believing a bunch of correct things.

And I hope that this is something that can give you some comfort. I have met many Christians over the years who get hung up on the whole question of believing the right things. “I have a really hard time believing in a virgin birth,” one might say, “does that mean that I can’t be a Christian?” Or another might say, “I just can’t get my logical mind to come to terms with that whole notion of the Trinity.” (To which I respond, by the way, “Welcome to the club!”) “Does that mean I can’t be a Christian?”

## Don’t be Anxious

Do your best to study and believe the right things about Jesus, but do not have any anxiety about getting something wrong or incomplete. God, who knows and holds all of the deepest truths of the universe, whose knowledge of all things vastly outstrips what any human knowledge will ever achieve, cannot look at any of us and fail to see that we all believe things that aren’t quite true. Why would God judge us for that? And so maybe it is past time for us to stop judging one another over differences in belief!

## Free of All Doubt?

Another thing that that question, “Do you believe in Jesus?” might mean if someone asked it of you on the street has to do with doubt. For many people, believing in Jesus, in God or in anything to do with the church means that you never, not even for a moment, struggle with any doubt.

Indeed, I have often heard people boast of that – that they never feel even a moment’s doubt when it comes to believing even some of the wildest things in the Bible.

“Do you ever wonder if perhaps, when the Bible says that the world was created in six days, that the entire face of the earth was covered by Noah’s flood or that Jonah survived after being swallowed by a big fish that maybe, just maybe, it might mean something other than that those things literally happened exactly like that?” you might ask them. And they respond by saying, “Yes, I never doubted any of that for even a moment! The Bible said it, I believe it, that settles it.

I don’t personally see such a complete lack of doubt to be a sign of strong faith. It might be a sign of a lack of curiosity or perhaps even of critical thinking, but it is more blind acceptance of whatever you’ve been told than it is faith.

## Trust in Jesus

So what is the question, “*Do you turn to Jesus Christ, accepting him as Lord and Saviour, trusting in his grace and love?*” really asking? It is not asking about intellectual belief or about a lack of doubt. It is simply asking about your willingness to trust in Jesus. The faith that Jesus is looking for from all believers is simply that. Jesus wants to know, “Are you willing to trust me?”

## An Old Chair

Allow me to put it in terms that I think we can all relate to. Imagine that I had a chair here. And let's say that this chair is really old. It has survived two world wars. The varnish is chipped and faded. It probably spent many years sitting in Sunday School classes where people carved their initials into the seat. If you dared to run your fingers underneath the seat, you would likely find many well chewed pieces of gum.

In short, the chair doesn't look great. But it does have four solid looking feet extending to the floor, even if one seems a bit shorter than the others and it might wobble a bit. The back appears to be firmly attached to the seat which doesn't have any holes in it. So, I ask you one simple question: do you have faith in this chair?

## Do you Have Faith in the Chair?

Now, if you were to answer my question by giving me a detailed description of the composition, manufacture and the history of this chair, would that prove to me that you have faith in this chair? Of course not. It would only indicate that you know a number of things about it.

If you were to provide me with a scientific study that proved to me that such a chair of such an age would collapse only 0.00001% of the times that somebody sat on it, I might be impressed with the thoroughness of your investigations, but I would not conclude that you had faith in this chair.

Most of all, if you insisted that you believed in this chair with all of your heart and that you had no doubt whatsoever that it could adequately support the weight of a human being, but you absolutely refused to sit on it anyway, I would have no real reason to conclude that you had faith in this chair.

## Trusting the Chair

But if, on the other hand, somebody walked up here without knowing any of the history or construction of this chair, had no understanding of the engineering that makes chairs stable or the load-bearing ratings of such furniture, could they have faith in this chair? Could they have faith even if they were plagued with all kinds of doubts about whether a chair could support someone such as them? Yes, they could.

And I would immediately know they did if, without hesitation, they just sat in it. Faith is what happens when you take what you know and believe, and you are actually willing to do something with it.

You see, that is what Jesus requires of you – not intellectual assent, not correct understanding or belief as important as those things may be. He doesn't mind if you have doubts. All he needs to know is if you will trust him.

## The Letter of James

The great reformer, Martin Luther, kind of famously didn't much like the Letter of James that we read from this morning. He called it an epistle of straw and probably would have been happier if it wasn't part of the New Testament at all. The reason why Luther didn't much like this letter was because he insisted, and rightly so, that salvation is based only on grace through faith.

In other words, God will save us in whatever ways we need to be saved, but we cannot gain that salvation by doing good things or by earning it in any way whatsoever. The only way to gain it is to receive it as a gift by faith.

The problem that Luther and many others have with the Letter of James is that it goes on and on about the things that we do and the importance of doing the right things. That might certainly leave the unwary reader with the impression that James is teaching that we can earn favour with God by doing the right things.

## Faith and Works

Now, it is true that the Letter of James seems to be in conversation with the teachings of the Apostle Paul regarding salvation. He does seem to take exception with some of the ways that people have interpreted Paul's teaching about the importance of faith. But I ultimately do not think that James and Paul are disagreeing with each other.

James writes, **“What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but does not have works? Surely that faith cannot save, can it?”** But he is not really disagreeing with Paul by saying that. He is not saying that faith doesn't save, he is just insisting that his readers remember what faith truly is. So long as you remember that the kind of faith that God is looking for is trust – the kind of trust that allows you to sit on a chair whether or not you have seen all of the engineering reports on its manufacture.

In other words, if you have faith in Jesus, if you really trust him, then you will not just stand around proclaiming that you believe. You will actually take that trust and act according to it.

## Faith Without Works is Dead

James sums it all up by saying, **“So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.”** Standing around and saying that you believe – even if you believe all the right things – is not what God is looking for. God is looking for trust, and trust naturally leads to action.

What James is absolutely not saying is that you can earn your way into God's good graces by doing good deeds. He is saying that, if you truly learn to place your faith in Jesus – the kind of faith that saves – it is going to change the way that you see everything.

As you live by forming the habit of placing your trust in Jesus, you will come to see how he is always there for you. And as you come to see as a result that God loves you just as you are, forgiving you when you need forgiving and liberating you when you need liberation, the kinds of actions that will naturally result are actions that demonstrate love and acceptance for the weak and the forgotten, the poor and the oppressed. That is where faith in Jesus will naturally lead us if we allow it to prompt us forward.

So, you see that that question, *“Do you turn to Jesus Christ, accepting him as Lord and Saviour, trusting in his grace and love?”* is a question that contains so much. I would ask us all to consider yet again how we answer that question and how it has transformed our approach to the ways that we live.