

# OpenTheo

## Why Does It Matter Which Higher Power Someone Believes In?

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### #STRask - Stand to Reason

Questions about what to say to a Christian who doesn't think it matters which higher power a person believes in, how to help friends see they're attending an unhelpful or heretical church, whether it's wrong to wish a dead loved one happy birthday, and when to leave a parachurch organization over theological differences.

- \* What should I say to a "lukewarm" Christian who says people need to believe in a higher power "even if it's Buddha or something"?
- \* How do I help a Christian friend see that the church she's attending is actually hindering her rather than helping?
- \* What would be a tactical approach to helping friends and family members realize they're attending a church of a false teacher/heretic?
- \* Are Christians crossing a line into talking to the dead when they wish a happy heavenly birthday to their dead loved ones?
- \* How do I know when it's time to leave a parachurch organization with which I disagree theologically?

### Transcript

Welcome to the hashtag SDR-esque podcast. I'm Amy Hall, and Greg Cocles here with me. We're here to answer the questions you send in on Twitter or through our website, and we always love hearing from you.

Alright, Greg, let's start with a question from Gino. How do I best explain the importance of being firm and what the Bible actually teaches, and speaking real truth to lukewarm Christian who states things like, you know, that you're going to be able to believe in a higher power. Like, they need to believe in a higher power, even if it's Buddha or something.

Well, I guess my question is, is Buddha capable of helping them? This is an alcoholics anonymous kind of question, because that's the, I suspect, because that's the motif there. If you want to escape your alcoholism, you have to acknowledge that you're powerless, and you need the help of a higher power. I think it used to be you need the help of God, but they kind of generalized it a little bit to the higher power.

But they weren't going to tell you what the higher power was, because they didn't want to get sectarian with their religion. The religious appeal, the religious solution. So they say, first we admit we're powerless, then we have to gain help from the higher power.

Okay, well that can only take place if the higher power can help them. If their higher power is Buddha, and Buddha, according to Buddhism, doesn't even exist anymore, you know, he got extinguished, then how is Buddha going to help them? He's not going to help them. Well, that's okay as long as they believe in someone else helping them, that will help them to get out of their alcoholism.

But that's a reversal of what they first admitted. I can't do it myself, because now what they're doing is I can't do it myself as long as I trick myself into believing that some non-existent force is going to help me. And that's the kind of confusing element with the alcoholics anonymous.

Yes, you're helpless. I mean, you can make this claim and you need God to help you. But that's because God is there to help you.

And you appeal to God, then God is going to help you through this process. But in this case, any old God ain't going to do. It's got to be the real God.

It can't be an imaginary God. If not, you're back to self-help by tricking yourself that there's a higher power that's helping you. It's a placebo.

Yeah, I think what I think you're right, great, because I think what's going on with somebody who says something like this is they don't really believe anything is true. Either they don't really believe anything is true, and it's all just, this is what makes me feel good. Or they believe in some sort of, there's some kind of force out there and everybody ends up with him in some way.

So if this is somebody who's saying he's a Christian, I think that the, I think what you're saying is perfect, Greg, that what can a false higher power do for you who doesn't exist? The whole point of being a Christian is that Jesus died for our sins. So I think what this person might need to hear is, do you, do you understand that we're actually saying this happened? That there actually is someone named Jesus and he was in history and he died on the cross for our sins to take away our guilt. And no one else can do that or no one else has done it, no other imaginary higher power, or even a real other higher power has done that if there were one.

So I think there's a problem here with understanding the claim that's being made about Christianity. So that might be the place to start there. Okay, now I have a pair of questions.

They're very similar, but slightly different. So you can address them both at the same time, Greg. Okay, two birds with one stone.

So the first one is from Marty. How do I help a Christian friend who I know loves the Lord and wants to live according to his word see that the church he is attending is actually hindering her with what they teach, not helping. And then I think that one is comes more from a direction of the church just is not teaching well.

Okay, and they may be saying some things that are off. But then the second question comes from US Olympian, Johnny Quinn, and he says, what would be a tactical approach to helping friends and family members realize they're attending a church of a false teacher heretic. So it's two levels of how do you help them to see that the church they're going to is not a good one.

Well, what Johnny asked for was a tactical approach. I get in and that could apply in both circumstances. I guess I'm when I heard the first question from Marty, it seemed to me what occurred to me is why can't you just say to your friend the church you're going to is not helping you.

It's hurting you. And here are the reasons. If it's a friend, you have that kind of relationship where you can talk about these things and it seems appropriate to be able to point out particulars that are problematic in that community, that church community.

Now, of course, if you wanted to use a tactical question and this might be applied in both Marty's and Johnny's circumstances is what is it that's important about a church. Why do we go to church? See what they say. Hopefully you'll say so that we can be taught, encouraged in the truth, be part of a community of truth and other disciples of Christ and that kind of thing.

Okay. So how important is it for church like that? Here's your second question to actually be teaching what the Bible teaches. See what they say.

Oh, I would like to think they would say it's really important. That's the whole point. Okay.

Well, here's the concern I have. This is the next step. So whether Marty to his friend, the concern I have is there are things that I see that don't seem to be sound and that are interfering with your personal growth and I care about that.

And here they are and then have a conversation about those specific things. In the second case with Johnny, it's much more egregious. You'd want to take the first few

steps tactically with the questions to lay the foundation.

Then the question is going to be, okay, is my, well, not the question, but what Johnny would say is the same as with Marty. My concern is that there are things in this church that are a real problem, what they're teaching because they're not teaching what Christianity has taught for 2000 years. Okay.

So that's the point where he's going to get some pushback probably because people who are going to a church who is either severely heterodox, that means they're teaching bad things, but not necessarily completely off the reservation or heretical. They are taking exception with the deity of Christ or the Trinity or the blood atonement or the authority of God's word, et cetera, et cetera. And actually you could not hold in inerrancy and still be a Christian.

So that's not strictly speaking a heresy. But that leads to all kinds of other troubles. If one doesn't have a high view of scripture, then you're going to have to deal with those particulars.

And that's probably going to be a tougher fight because you have people, it seems like Marty's circumstance is easier than Johnny's because Marty's just saying, you know, this church is not the best church to serve. You're needs for these reasons. They're smaller problems.

Ironically, it strikes me that it's going to be more difficult for Johnny to deal with a circumstance where the church has much bigger problems because if his family members, whoever are going to this church with really big problems, they're committed to that community in spite of the big problems and don't even see him. And so it's going to be, I think, more difficult to disabuse them of their loyalty to that church and these false ideas that they think are good or fine or just appropriate. But the thing to soften the blow a little bit for Johnny is to say this church is not teaching what Christianity has taught for 2000 years.

Now, this may be a word faith church. Okay. I'm just guessing.

I don't know. And people get attached to these environments because the rah rah, you know, positive thinking kind of mood. And this is a health, wealth and prosperity kind of environment.

And that has a very peculiar capability to draw people in and hang on to them. And here's my quick critique of that approach. And it's actually very simple.

Hebrews, the book of Hebrews was written to suffering Christians. The book of 1 Peter was written to suffering Christians. The book of 1 Thessalonians was written to suffering Christians.

Book of 2 Thessalonians was written to suffering Christians. The Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and 2 Timothy at least were written by Paul when he was in prison. Okay.

Get the picture. Where are they getting health, wealth and prosperity when we look at the themes of the New Testament and what New Testament believers experienced. All right.

So that's just a quick sketch to help people see. Wow. If that's true, what you said, Coco, these people are missing the boat entirely, which is true.

They are missing the boat entirely. And that's a question that I would ask the people who are involved in that kind of movement. If what your teachers are teaching is right and it's biblical, why is this the thing we find in the Bible? Okay.

Why does Paul himself say, I left on a siferous or someone like sick in my lead us? He was sick and I left him there sick. Wait. Paul left him sick.

Paul says himself that I was with you in Galatia, I think, because I stayed behind because of physical malady. I was sick there. So you get these kind of statements that so counter this health, wealth and prosperity notion.

What happens is people are cherry picking and then they're twisting and distorting scripture to fit this foreign, absolutely foreign theology. Now that might not be what Johnny Quinn is facing, but I'm just saying, whatever it is, this is where if it's genuinely, you know, off the reservation stuff, which I definitely think the health, wealth and prosperity is, then it's going to be, you're going to have to be more cagey and shrewd to help people see that. And I think pointing out these themes in scripture or just looking at whatever it is, not consisted with the historical teaching of the church.

That's your ally in making this point, not just proof texting stuff. The church has never taught this. How did these guys just figure this one out? That's the truth about the homosexuality issue, you know.

Oh, well, the church has it wrong for thousands of years. They all had it wrong. Everybody had it wrong, but us.

Now we see things in the culture back then that we understand now better than they understood. That strikes me as a bit much. One thing you could ask is if your church was not teaching what the Bible says, would you want to know? There you go.

And then you can just find out, do they care about what the Bible says or do they just want to be in their church? That will give you an idea of where you need to start. And then if they do want to know, then now they've given you permission to look into it. But in the first instance, I would say there are different situations that could be going on here.

Sometimes in a church where it's not helpful, maybe you can see there's a trajectory that your friend can't see. So maybe you're starting to see little compromises and you're seeing where they're going and the other person cannot see where they're going. Or maybe they're just teaching moralism and just nothing but moral instruction and nothing about the gospel, nothing about God.

So you can try and explain, if it's a trajectory issue, you can try and point to other people that have gone that direction. You can try and connect the dots for them. Again, you have to know if they want that or if they're more interested in being in the church.

But one thing I think is helpful in either case. A lot of times people are in churches because they've never known anything different. They've never seen what a church that is worshiping God and spirit and a truth who love God and are focused on the truth about him and are teaching about the gospel and who God is and not just instructions for life.

They've never experienced that. So sometimes all you need to do is take them with you. If your church has a retreat, take them with you.

Ask if they want to go with you. If they think you're all in the same team, they might be willing to do it. Sometimes you just have to taste it to realize that you have been eating bad junk food for a long time.

Yeah, yeah. Good point. Okay, let's go to a question from Carmen.

Hi, Greg and Amy. I see more and more Christians wishing happy heavenly birthdays, etc. to their dead loved ones.

Could this be crossing a line into talking to the dead? Should we not even go there? What are your thoughts? I've never heard of that before. Is this Carmen? Did you say? Carmen. Carmen, I've never heard of that before.

Happily. So they celebrate the death date of their Christian loved ones because that was the date they went to heaven. Or it could be their birthday in heaven.

So they're just saying happy birthday to them on their birthday in heaven. Oh, I see. Okay.

So after I die, people on June 10th will say happy birthday, Greg. Yeah, happy heavenly birthdays. Well, in one sense, it's a little bit silly.

Hope you have a happy birthday. I'm having a morally perfect existence. I am utterly blissful every day.

So that's a little bit superfluous this wish. Okay. I'm not sure the point.

Maybe it gives some psychological, psychological boost of some sort to the person who's

doing it. If they think they're actually talking to a dead person or something like that, I mean, that's a little bit strange. And to do so formally would be a violation of Old Testament law.

It's called necromancy. This is why praying to saints is wrong. We are calling on the dead to do us a favor.

Okay. This is prohibited in scripture. And it doesn't matter if Roman Catholics are completely genuine or sincere about this.

It's still the wrong thing. And so that's different. This, there's a difference between a formal heresy and an informal material heresy, a formal and material.

Some people have, if you look strictly at their thinking behavior, you say that's heretical. But they don't realize it's heretical. They're doing it kind of innocently and they're not really holding to the heretical view, like using an illustration of the Trinity like H<sub>2</sub>O can be gas or solid or liquid.

You know, well, that's really an illustration out of the Trinity, but a heretical notion called modalism, but they're not heresy, heretics. They believe in the Trinity. They just chose the wrong thing.

So this could be an innocent thing where people are just saying, Hey, happy birthday, you know, Uncle Joe or whatever, I would never do it. And it's just, and I, if somebody asked me, should I do this, is that okay and say, no, I'd think it'd be better if you didn't, but I would make a big fuss about it if somebody did. Yeah, I really doubt they think they're actually saying happy birthday.

What I'm picturing is maybe somebody posting something on Facebook saying happy birthday, mom or something. I think it's more of a way of kind of celebrating with the or remembering them with other people. I don't know that anyone actually thinks they're saying it to them.

Maybe they are. I don't know, but I agree. I suspect it's not.

Well, maybe they're thinking the great cloud of witnesses of Roman of Hebrews 12. They're all looking down and mom's up there and you're like, Hey, why are we longing to look happy birthday, mom? No, I'm not happy. It didn't get a cake this time, you know, kind of crazy.

So in any event, yeah, it strikes me as somewhat inconsequential. But if you have a choice, I wouldn't do it. I would make a fuss about it with somebody else.

Most I saw other things that were problematic, genuinely problematic, but, you know, I wouldn't do it. All right. Let's squeeze one more question in here.

This one comes from anonymous. I work abroad full time for a parachurch organization and I do not agree theologically with the direction the organization is moving. When do you know it's time to leave? Well, that's not easy to determine.

If I were in a church that I saw was going in a bad direction and it just seemed inevitable, the leadership is making decisions that are not good and they don't seem to be open to looking at things differently and they're on a trajectory that's not good. I'd get out immediately, okay? You know, Andy Stanley had a conference just recently, you know, and it was very revealing about Andy Stanley's actual theology, even though he makes comments to the contrary. His actual theology is demonstrated really clearly.

I would leave that church instantaneously. So, there's just one popular example and I know he has a big church and a lot of people know of Andy Stanley and, you know, his dad was a good man and he's now gone and Andy has given good sermons, but this trajectory that he's clearly on and even the fact that he seems to be trying to cover his tracks a little bit with a smoke and mirrors game that's being played. That's even more of a concern to me.

It's an indication that this guy is a bad actor. If you have a sense of that in your own team and generally these people are not teachable, they charted their course, especially in a big church, you're not going to change that, get out of there. Okay, so let me ask you because I kind of left off what the issue was, so I wanted to get a general answer first.

So his specific thing is that the organization that he works for, the president has written a book about listening prayer. So is this a level of differences in theology that you think would warrant leaving? So this is the place where he works. A paratroach or organization.

Yeah, so just let me say this and he probably knows this, but the rest of it, there is not a single verse in the Bible that says anything about listening prayer. You know, I had a discipleship group once, I don't think this is the one that you were in, but one of the things that we did is divided up the New Testament and read to our sections and isolated every single verse that made any reference to prayer whatsoever because we knew prayer was important and we wanted to get the kind of a full-orbed understanding of the teaching of the New Testament on prayer. In fact, we made an outline and that outlines on our website, New Testament on prayer, something like that.

And there is not a single verse that intimates in the slightest way that prayer entails listening. Okay, that is a complete human invention. Unless somebody is very careful to qualify, what we're doing is quote, unquote, listening to scripture when we pray, we're thinking about what scripture teaches, all different things we're praying in line with scripture, but that's not what people mean when they write books about listening prayer.



Okay, so the next question has to do with how thoroughly this point of view of the leader of the organization is influencing the day-to-day operation of the organization. Okay, and look, there are great people leading great organizations that hold this view and people who listen to stand to reason know that we think this is non-biblical and problematic. But it doesn't mean that the organization who practices this, and I'm thinking of one specifically right now, that I have tremendous admiration for the leadership and what they're doing and they are a praying organization, but they hold broadly to this theology.

And yet, so I don't think that theology disqualifies an organization from doing magnificent work. This is where an individual is just going to have to decide for themselves. I think it's heterodox.

It's not a true teaching, but yet God works in spite, in my view, in spite of that, and accomplishes in many cases, fabulous things with organizations that have that view, okay? I think putting everything you said together, Greg, I think the key is, do is the Bible their highest authority? So in the case of someone who's trying to move the theology in a different direction and kind of trying to get around the Bible and reinterpret things in order to move it in a different direction, he's now putting something else above the word of God in determining his theology. Maybe, yeah. And then, but in the other case, here's someone who I guarantee he thinks the Bible supports this.

He's not trying to create some other foundation for their organization. So as long as the Bible is the foundation, yeah, as long as the Bible is the foundation, you have room to, you have a standard that you can both appeal to. You kind of know the boundaries of where they're going to go and where they're going to take the organization, whereas with somebody who is stepped away from the Bible, you don't know where he's going to end up.

He's already out of the fold. It's hard to imagine somebody writing a book on this without abusing scripture in some way. I know that Bill Heibels wrote a book called Too Busy Not to Pray, and he's got a chapter on listening prayer.

And a lot of times it's just a kind of natural, naturalistic, maybe that's not the right word, but it's a non-biblical rationale. Prayer is conversation with God. Well, in one sense, that's true.

We can be conversational when we talk to God, and conversation is two-way, and that means we speak to God and then God speaks to us. Okay, so now they've equivocated in the word conversation and introduced a concept that is not biblical. The Bible doesn't teach that conversation with God is a two-way factor in the sense of listening.

And, of course, generally those books teach that we have to learn the capability of listening because God is trying to speak to us, but we have not learned the ability to hear Him, which raises another issue, God trying. There's no indication anywhere in the

Bible when God speaks to someone and that person didn't hear because God accomplished the end that He attempted. He doesn't try.

He does. Okay, so these are all theological concerns associated with His idea that may not take a big toll on the function of the organization or the other theology or someone's general perspective on Scripture, but my pattern that what I've seen frequently is that this hearing from God approach takes on a kind of a force and practical authority that ends up putting the Bible in the backseat much of the time. I know what God has told me and I'm doing blah, blah, blah, and so I'm just moving ahead on this kind of thing.

Then that's where it can be problematic. So it's just, I guess it depends on intensity and degree and how the Bible is being viewed by the leadership of the organization. I do want to underscore though, that there are lots of very good, productive, fruitful Christian people and Christian organizations who hold to this view.

This is YWAM, this is YWAM's view, top to bottom, okay? And they've done magnificent work and others have as well. So I don't think that having this theology means that one's organization or any individuals cannot be spiritually productive, they can be, but I do think that there are a lot of problems that come along with it because it's not a biblical teaching, though it's offered as a biblical teaching with verses oftentimes completely taken out of context to make the point. Well, Greg, we got to five questions.

That might be a record. Thank you so much for listening. You can send us your question on Twitter with the hashtag STRask or you can go through our website at STR.org, we look forward to hearing from you.

This is Amy Hall and Greg Cogle for Stand to Reason.