

WHY DO YOU BELIEVE WHAT YOU BELIEVE?

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INTRODUCTION

In the Greek New Testament, the word for “belief” and the word for “faith” is the same word (πίστις/pistis). To say that you believe something, a piece of information, a philosophy, a religious doctrine (to give some examples), is to say that you have faith that the information etc. is accurate and correct. It is to regard something as true. It is to place your trust in the truthfulness of it. In the context of foundational religious belief, it might be something for which you are prepared to die or not—depending on how much value you place on the belief. While this might seem to be rather extreme in our society, it is an everyday occurrence in many parts of the world.

I am not just talking about those who are persecuted for their Christian faith. Muslims and members of other religious beliefs also die for their faith daily, both through persecution and through believing that willfully going to their death for their faith (e.g. strapping explosives to their body and detonating them in a crowd) is an act of faith. We would argue, of course, that the latter go to their deaths for the *wrong* beliefs. Nevertheless, it is *their* belief and something for which *they* are willing to die. How willing would *we* be if the situation were reversed?

There are many instances in life where belief in one thing or another is not really all that important. For instance, to believe that one football team is superior to another might be the catalyst for some lively debate in a pub (or during morning tea after worship); it would, nevertheless, hardly create a ripple in the fabric of the universe if that belief were ultimately found to be in error. I am sure that you can think of many instances like this where belief in something is of fairly trivial importance.

In a religious context, however, as in other important areas of life, that which you believe *does* matter—and it matters a lot. Just how much it matters depends on the relative importance of the various aspects of one’s religious belief. In the Christian faith, for example, what would you regard as more important, the belief that the earth was created in six literal days, as we know them today or the virgin birth of Jesus Christ? Are they equal or do you apply some sort of sliding scale of importance? Which of these would you regard as more important; the extent of the flood in the time of Noah or the atonement of our sins by Jesus’ death on the cross? As you study the Scriptures, you will come across many examples of things that you might believe in but would be reluctant to die for. There are, however, other things for which you might be prepared to die. It is to these, I now wish to turn.

What are the foundational beliefs of the Christian faith? What are those things that for us are non-negotiable? What do *I* believe? What, in fact does the *church* believe?

Before we get to that, however, something else needs to be addressed. That is, *how* do we believe? How do we know that what we believe is the truth? Is belief in something, more than personal opinion? If so, then what are the defining parameters of our belief? And who gets to decide them? How do we decide what we ought to believe as opposed to that which ought to be regarded as heresy? (Note: The word “heresy” literally means “personal opinion”.) If we can agree that *what* we believe, matters, then we have to come to some conclusion as to how we decide *what* to believe. If, on the other hand our belief

is just a matter of our opinion on the subject, based on our own particular set of criteria, which basically leads us to believing only what we want to believe, then all bets are off, so to speak. Belief in something becomes relative and is, therefore, meaningless. Are you still with me?

EXPERIENCE AND WITNESS IN THE PROCESS OF BELIEF

The process of believing something comes to us in a number of ways. Two of these ways are personal experience and trusting the witness of another:

1. Personal Experience. If as a child your mother tells you that the cooktop on the stove is hot, you may choose to believe her or not to believe her. It's your choice, free and simple. Placing your hand on the stove, however, will remove all doubt about the veracity of your mother's warning. I know, because that's how I found out for sure that a cooktop that glows a pretty shade of orange is not something to be messed with. This is true for many things we believe, most particularly tangible things—things we can touch (pardon the pun), hear, or experience in some other tangible, practical and measurable way.

Experience, however is not always a failsafe way of defining truth. My particular Christian experience, for example, may be different from yours. That does not mean that I ought to believe that everyone should experience his or her Christian faith in the same manner as I do. There is room here for diversity because our emotions and feelings that are at work in this situation are not as tangible as things such as touch or a proven scientific formula.

2. Trusting the witness of another. To use the above example, the fact that it was your mother telling you that the stove was hot might have been enough for you to reject putting your hand on it. If not, it would certainly be an incentive the next time you were told something was dangerous. I have never, to my knowledge, played in the middle of a busy road. I believed my parents when they told me it was dangerous. I learned to trust the word of my parents in such matters by my experience of their faithfulness in telling me the truth in other areas.

Either fortunately or unfortunately, depending on your perspective, we tend to be trustworthy people. When the ABC on the 7.00 pm news tells us about an event that has happened, we tend to believe it. The ABC is, after all, the fount of all knowledge, news-wise, isn't it? (ahem) Likewise there are plenty of people ready to part with their money on shady investment deals, convinced by smooth talking salesmen that they are going to get a high return on their investment. Trusting the witness of another, then, must be tempered with an experience of faithfulness over a period of time. Our trust in what someone else tells us is not always a good idea. We have to decide who to trust and who not to trust.

PERSONAL AND UNIVERSAL TRUTH

When it comes to our Christian faith, the "truths" we believe have been influenced by many things—the experiences of our upbringing, our experiences of the church, the books we have read, the preaching and teaching to which we have been exposed, the influences of other people and our own (intangible, i.e. unprovable) ecstatic religious experiences (i.e. personal revelation). These experiences influence us both positively

and negatively. As you can appreciate, many, if not all of these things that have influenced our Christian understanding are quite subjective. That is, they run the risk of bringing us to a ‘truth’ that is only *our* ‘truth’ and not necessarily a universal ‘truth’.

How, then do we get from *our* truth to a *universal* truth? How do we bring *our* truth in line with the *concrete* truth of the Christian faith? *What* do we believe? *Why* do we believe it?

It’s easy to point to the Scriptures and say I believe what it says. I am sure that we all do. The question, however, is whose interpretation of the Scriptures do we believe? Are we able to simply read the Scriptures for ourselves and make our own interpretation of what it means or is there some other criteria that helps us in our interpretation? Obviously, if one has some background in biblical language, history and culture, biblical interpretation becomes more rational and scientific. Not everyone, however, has the opportunity to gain in-depth knowledge of these things—and in some circles even these things can be “liberally” understood. For example, most of what we might regard as “liberal” theology is very academic and at the risk of sounding biased, it is also often very wrong. It is wrong because liberal foundations and preconceptions of the nature of God, Jesus Christ and the gospel are basically flawed (in my academic and professional opinion)—but that’s a story for another time.

THE EXPERIENCE AND WITNESS OF THE EARLY CHURCH

If I refer back to the process by that which we believe, then our Christian belief needs to be tempered by two things; experience and trusting the witness of others (i.e. the witness of others we trust).

1. Experience: As noted earlier, personal religious experience can be very subjective. Presuming for a moment that one’s religious experience is authentic (it isn’t necessarily the case), no two people’s religious experience is exactly the same. There may be elements of similarity, but personal religious experience is just that—personal. It is tailored for the individual. Just like a professionally tailored dress will only properly fit the person it was tailored for, so our religious experience is “our” religious experience and no one else’s and hence, very subjective when opened to debate.

Whose experience, then, do we trust? Certainly, we cannot trust our own experience (not for foundational belief and universal truth, anyway, although you may wish to debate this). As Christians, looking for an authentic faith, we look to the experience of the church—or more explicitly we look at the experience of those in the early church—those who formed the foundation of faith and practice of the church—that is, the apostles and those who came after them. It is *their* experience of faith, interpreting for us the teachings of Christ, which give us the foundation of our belief. This brings us to trusting the witness of the early church.

2. Trusting the witness of others: The witness of the early church is recorded for us in the pages of the New Testament—the primary authority of our Christian faith. This witness, however, does not stop there. When the New Testament canon was finally formed (over a period of centuries), those making the decision as to what should be included and what should not be included, decided that because of the vast number of documents available to them, the New Testament canon should only include first

generation documents that had been deemed by the church (through ecumenical councils) as authentic and valuable for teaching and instruction in Christian faith and practice.

Many of the later documents, written by disciples of the apostles and their disciples, are still available to read if you know where to find them. While not classified as “Scripture” they are still extremely valuable for spiritual instruction. Part of their value lies in the window they provide for us into the ongoing life of the church through its formative years, both in the formation of doctrine and in the church’s practice of life and worship. Their interpretation of the gospel writings, especially the teaching of Jesus, also gives us valuable insight when we turn to our own interpretation of the Scriptures.

All this is to say that when we interpret the Scriptures and formulate doctrine; that is, when we determine what we, as Christians, will believe, we do not do so in a vacuum, with only our own opinions to guide us. To do so is to bring to our interpretation, all the baggage of our own subjective experience and learning. Rather, what we need to try to do is look beyond *our* experience to the experience and witness of the early church and those who have faithfully preserved that witness. Our experience, hopefully, will confirm it. Christ’s teaching and the truth of the gospel found in the New Testament, interpreted through the lens of the early church is the witness of those we trust. We trust them because of their record of faith. It is unfortunate that throughout much of western Christianity, the Scriptures are very often only interpreted through the lens of modern academic thought, which unfortunately, in some instances leaves something to be desired—and perhaps even leads to outright heresy.

The word “heresy” literally means “personal opinion”. Therefore, if we take the strictest etymological understanding of the word, what *I* believe (subjectively) is always going to be heresy. That is, of course, unless what *I* believe corresponds with what the *church* believes. When this happens, it is no longer personal opinion but an “amen” to that which the church has already deemed to be true by experience, witness and revelation.

THE BELIEF OF THE CHURCH

So, what *does* the church believe in regard to the foundational truths of the Christian faith? In our congregation we say it at least every time we share in Holy Communion. I am talking here about the Nicene Creed. By the time the 4th century came around it became imperative that the church formulate one uniform and official creed for the church. The rise of heretical teachings and movements made this necessary. The Nicene Creed was formulated during the First and Second Ecumenical Councils of the church in the 4th century AD.

Anthony Coniaris in his book about the Nicene Creed, titled, *Orthodoxy: A Creed for Today*, states, “The fact that the creed was written by the church assembled in Ecumenical Council demonstrates that the Creed is not one man’s opinion...The Nicene Creed is the whole church articulating and expressing its faith.” (Coniaris, 16)

Below is the Nicene Creed as we have it today in *Uniting in Worship*:

We believe in one God,
the Father, the Almighty,
maker of heaven and earth,
of all that is, seen and unseen.

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,
the only Son of God,
eternally begotten of the Father,
God from God, Light from Light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made,
of one Being with the Father;
through him all things were made.

For us and for our salvation
he came down from heaven,
was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary
and became truly human.

For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;
he suffered death and was buried.
On the third day he rose again
in accordance with the Scriptures;
he ascended into heaven
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
He will come again in glory
to judge the living and the dead,
and his kingdom will have no end.

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life,
who proceeds from the Father,
who with the Father and the Son
is worshipped and glorified,
who has spoken through the prophets.
We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church.
We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.
We look for the resurrection of the dead,
and the life of the world to come. Amen.

The statements that begin with “We believe” were originally written as, “I believe”. The “I”, however, was always understood as meaning “We” in the sense that what “I believe” is the same as what “We believe”—“We” being the church. Therefore, when we state the Nicene Creed (using I or We) we do not simply affirm what *I* believe as an individual or what *we* believe as a congregation or denomination but what *we* believe as the church in all its fullness. It is not our personal opinion but the belief of the church. When we say the Nicene Creed we affirm what the church believes. If what you believe is aligned with what the church believes, that’s great. However, when some aspect of our personal belief is different to what the church believes, we stand outside the faith and practice of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church.

Now, as mentioned earlier, there is much room for diversity of experience and even of non-important issues of doctrine. There is, however no room for diversity in the fundamentals of the faith such as it is recorded in the Nicene Creed. So, if someone were to ask you what you believe (such as regarding the virgin birth, or whether Christ really died on the cross, to take two examples) our response ought to be primarily about what the church believes, not about what *you*, the individual, believes. What *you*, the individual believes is largely irrelevant. We also need to use this approach when dealing with difficult issues within the church (e.g. homosexuality, same sex marriage and even other issues that are not directly addressed in the Scriptures).

What *we* personally believe doesn't really matter. "This is what the church believes and teaches, therefore it is what *I* believe and teach." This is why it's important to know what the church believes. It's far more important than what *you* believe because *you* are not the final authority, the church is.

Grace and peace.

SOME QUESTIONS TO THINK ABOUT

1. What is your regular process for interpreting the Scriptures for your own personal Bible study?
2. How has your faith experience influenced your beliefs?
3. How do you see changing sociological norms influence your or the church's understanding or interpretation of Scripture?

RESOURCES:

Albrect, K., *Practical Intelligence: The Art and Science of Common Sense*, (San Francisco: Jossey-Boss, 2007)

Coniaris, A.M., *Orthodoxy: A Creed for Today*, (Minneapolis: Light and Life Publishing Co., 1972)

Author's note: The subject of hermeneutics, the art and science of biblical interpretation, has always been a favourite topic of mine. This essay arises out of a deep desire to help people not only understand the gospel and believe it but to develop the tools to intelligently read, study and understand the Scriptures. Much of what I perceive people believing today, in regard to their faith, is what one of my seminary lecturers termed "folk religion". "Folk religion" refers to those Christian beliefs that are often passed on from one spiritual generation to the next, with little attempt to address historical tradition, differences in culture and the use of other authentic hermeneutical methods for interpreting the Scriptures. Christians can easily get into a "blinkered" understanding of faith and belief, which leave them spiritually poor and often unreasonably dogmatic on certain issues of faith and biblical understanding.