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## What does it Mean to Believe?

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Each month the "Cross-Examination" column presents a summary statement of a Reformed and Reconstructionist conviction in theology or ethics, and then offers brief answers to common questions, objections or confusions which people have about that belief. Send issues or questions you would like addressed by Dr. Bahnsen to the editor.

### Examination

**Question:** What does it mean "to believe" or have "faith"? Some writers make it sound like faith goes beyond assenting to the truth and involves personal trust. Other writers react against that idea and make believing sound completely intellectualistic. How should we as Christians view "believing" the Bible or having "faith" in Jesus?

**Answer:** To help us through the many conceptual tangles that are possible when it comes to the nature of faith (belief, believing), let me begin first by offering a philosophical analysis - somewhat dry and technical, but still prerequisite to clarity. Then secondly we can turn to examine the Biblical use of the terms for believing or faith. Finally we can note some practical applications to our theology and apologetics.

### Analysis of the Concept

We should begin by noticing the fact that, in the most general sense of the word, there are many, many different kinds of belief, sources of belief, and consequences of belief. Notice these nuances:

- Sometimes we speak of a mental event as a belief, while other times thinking of belief as a disposition to act in certain ways.
- Beliefs are held with differing *degrees* of confidence (cf. suspicions, opinions, convictions).

- Some beliefs are spontaneous, but others are derived by mental investigation and inference. Some beliefs are subject to voluntary control, while not all seem to be so.
- Some beliefs are given personal *avowal*; some are held without much reflection at all.
- Some beliefs have numerous or important consequences, whereas others are relatively insignificant.
- Some beliefs are *normative* for us, some are even incorrigible, and yet some are maintained only by concentrated effort.
- Some beliefs are *irrational* or are held inconsistently, etc.

In all of the above cases we are still dealing with what is legitimately called "to believe," "to have a belief," or "have faith." Attempting to take this diversity into account, we may offer a generic characterization of belief (believing-that) as a positive cognitive attitude toward a proposition, an action-guiding mental state on which a person relies (whether intermittently or continuously) in his theoretical inferences or practical actions and plans.

Let me try to explain briefly the different aspects of this technical characterization. The mental states or cognitive attitudes which we call a person's "beliefs" are distinguished from each other by the *propositions* which are their intended objects.

Belief is, in distinction from merely entertaining a thought or hypothesis, a positive attitude toward a proposition, meaning that one relies upon it - whether self-consciously (as in assent) or not - in *guiding his actions*.

And those actions can be mental (e.g., drawing an inference from certain propositions), or verbal (e.g., asserting something to be the case), or bodily (e.g., purchasing the item you believe to be the best buy). The actions consequent upon a belief are not always of all three kinds, though; people have been known to outwardly behave in terms of a belief which is too painful to verbally assert. Indeed, even what people verbally assert to be their beliefs is subject to deception and error (e.g., your friends may recognize, in light of your social behavior, the hollowness of your avowal of racial equality even when you do not suspect yourself of insincerity).

It should be further noted that a belief need not always be manifesting itself: the mental state can often be quiescent, and even its active mode may be merely periodic (depending upon the person's changing circumstances and other attitudes or desires). However, the mental state's causal capacity to affect mental, verbal and bodily activity is not dependent upon some outside stimulus (as a behaviorist might suggest), but can be exercised at will by the person who believes the proposition in question.

## The Biblical Use of "Believes" or "Faith"

The various aspects of the preceding conception of belief are reflected in the Biblical witness about the nature of believing, belief or faith. I would encourage you to look up the various citations which are given for each aspect of the conception of belief which has been given.

Belief is a positive attitude ("assurance...conviction" in Hebrews 11:1; cf. James 1:6) toward propositions which have been heard or read (Romans 10:14; cf. John 5:24; Acts 24:14; I Corinthians 1:21; 1 Thessalonians 2:13; 2 Thessalonians 2:13).

Belief is treated as a dateable event (e.g., Romans 13:11; 1 Thessalonians 2:13) as well as a state of mind (e.g., Romans 15:13; Colossians 1:23; 1 Timothy 1:5, 13). That state of mind may be temporary (Luke 8:13; Hebrews 10:35, 38-39) or enduring. This depends upon whether the faith comes from God and is grounded in Him (e.g., Ephesians 2:8-9; 1 Corinthians 2:5; 1 Thessalonians 2:13; 2 Thessalonians 2:13; 2 Timothy 1:12; 1 Peter 1:4-5, 9) or not.

When men live in faith, their belief intermittently comes to expression whenever a relevant occasion requires (e.g., Abraham and Moses in Hebrews 11:8-9, 17, 23-28; cf. James 1:2-3); yet there is another sense in which their faith is continuously operative in life (e.g., 1 Timothy 6:12; 2 Timothy 4:7; Hebrews 4:1-11; 10:38-39).

Belief carries different degrees of confidence (e.g., Mark 9:24; Luke 17:5; Romans 4:19-21). It expresses itself in one's mental inferences (e.g., Hebrews 11:3; Romans 4:20-21), in one's verbal remarks (e.g., Romans 10:9-10; 2 Corinthians 4:13), and in one's practical behavior (e.g., James 2:14-20; Hebrews 11:4ff.; cf. Luke 8:15; 1 Thessalonians 2:3; 1 Timothy 4:10). Finally, there is a sense in which belief is not simply a passive response to external stimuli, but is exercised at will - since it is morally enjoined upon men, both at its inception (e.g., Mark 1:15; John 20:27; Acts 16:31) and in its continuing operation (e.g., I John 3:23; Ephesians 6:16; Colossians 1:23; 2:7; cf. 2 Timothy 3:14).

## Some Observations and Applications

There is no separate vocabulary in the New Testament Greek for "belief" over against "faith"; both English terms are expressed with *pisteuo* (the verb) and *pistis* (the noun). However, the Biblical witness, just like modern English, utilizes not only the expression "to believe that" (some *proposition* is true), but also the expression "to believe in" or "to believe on" (the reliability, integrity or authenticity of some *person*). The latter expressions are often intensive in the Greek: to believe "into" or "upon" a person. These different uses of "to believe" can be readily illustrated. The person who approaches God must "believe *that* He exists" (Heb. 11:6); to be saved he must "believe that God raised [Christ] from the dead" (Romans 10:9). Justification is the blessing of those who "believe *upon*" the One who raised Jesus (Romans 4:24); no one believing "on Him" will be put to shame (10:11). Speaking of himself, Jesus said everyone who believes "*in* Him" will have eternal life (John 3:15) - which is the same as believing "into Him" according to the very next verse. It would be a mistake to think that when the Bible speaks of trusting somebody - believing "in" (or "upon") him - that this mental act/state can be separated from believing propositions about that person or uttered by him (cf. "believe that..."). To have faith *in* Christ, for instance, entails believing *that* what Christ claimed about Himself was true, that God historically raised Him from the dead, etc.

However, it is possible to believe a set of true propositions about God, and even to respond to those propositions in a very overt way - thus genuinely to "believe" them - and yet *not* have the response of "trust" or saving "faith." As James reminds us: "the demons also believe and shudder." The non-Christian knows, and thus believes, the truth about God, but suppresses it in unrighteousness (Romans 1:18-20); he responds by not glorifying or thanking God, but becoming intellectually foolish, morally darkened, and idolatrous (vv. 21-23). Thus faith (generically speaking) - believing certain propositions - and saving faith should not be considered identical. The response which is associated with true, living, or saving faith is that of obedient works (James 2:17), peace with God (Romans 5:1), hope (v. 5; cf. Heb. 11:1), rejoicing (v. 11), etc.

One final application can be made of the observations and distinctions made in the previous discussion, taking into account now the factor of what people avow or verbally declare about their beliefs. Profession with one's lips is the natural reflex of believing certain propositions and/or trusting someone within your heart. For instance: "with the heart a man believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation" (Romans 10:10). However, what a person professes is not an *infallible* indicator of his beliefs or his heart-attitude. It is possible to honor God with one's lips and yet have a heart which is far from Him (Matthew 15:7-9, where Jesus quotes Isaiah 29:13). One can profess religion and "say" he "has faith," and yet be self-deceived (James 1:22-27; 2:14-26). And as noted earlier, "unbelievers" who profess not to believe in God or to believe that God has a certain character nevertheless are "believers" who suppress the truth which they know in their heart of hearts - having "*unsaving* faith" (believing but responding with disobedience and refusal to profess the truth).