

What Does it Mean to Believe?

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A few weeks ago, I wrote about redefining faith. I wrote that many people today define faith as a matter of “believing a certain set of doctrines”, which makes faith a propositional understanding. I suggested that a better way to understand faith is to see it as a relationship in which we live faithfully with God and with those around us.

This week let’s consider the word “believe,” which is equally central in the Christian tradition. Many churches say a creed regularly in worship, which begins “I believe ...”: “I believe in God ... I believe in Jesus Christ ... I believe in the Holy Spirit.” Believing is an important part of our faith.

But what does it mean to believe? Like “faith”, many people today have a propositional understanding of believing—to believe means to give mental assent to a certain set of beliefs, or a series of propositions. This is shown very clearly in the publication of the “Five Fundamentals” early in the 20th century. It came during a controversy between fundamentalists and modernists. This document essentially said that to be a true Christian, you had to believe 1) that the Bible is the inerrant Word of God; 2) that Jesus was born of a Virgin and was truly God; 3) that Jesus died because of us; 4) that Jesus rose bodily after his death to heaven; and 5) that Jesus’ miracles were an historical reality.

In this understanding, “to believe” becomes a litmus test. Believe these things and you’re a true Christian. If you don’t, then (as one website puts it) “those who disagree with any of the above doctrines are not Christians at all. Rather, they are true heretics.” By that test, I fail.

However, this isn’t the Bible’s understanding of what it means to believe, or to have faith. Belief as mental assent is actually quite a new meaning in human history. Faith is not a head trip. It is about so much more than giving mental assent to a set of statements.

In her book “The Case for God”, Karen Armstrong offers a helpful overview of how the word “believe” is used in the New Testament and in the later tradition of the Church.

In the Greek language of the New Testament, we find the noun “pistis” or the verb “pisteuo,” which means “trust, loyalty, commitment, engagement”. Jesus wasn’t asking anyone to give mental assent to something. He was asking people to make a commitment. He invited people to walk in the way he was walking. Jesus wanted disciples who got involved, who would be engaged in his mission—to feed the hungry, set the oppressed free, clothe the naked, care for the “least of these my brothers”. He invited people to trust God deeply and radically. He called people to follow, to spread the good news of God’s love to everyone, even the prostitutes and tax collectors and losers. He called people to live with compassion and radical freedom. In short, Jesus invited his followers to do something, to live in a certain way.

About 400 years later, St. Jerome translated the New Testament into Latin. He translated the noun “pistis” as “fides” which means “loyalty”; he translated the verb “pisteuo” as “credo”, which means “I give my heart”.

1200 years later, when the Bible was translated into English, the King James Version of the Bible translated these words as “belief” and “believe.”. But in the English of the 17th century, to believe meant what the original Greek words mean— “to trust in God” or “to be loyal”. It had to do with walking in the way of Jesus. It meant “I give my heart to...”; “I commit myself loyally to ...”; “I give my allegiance to ...”

Then about 300 years ago, when the scientific method became the dominant way of viewing the world, scientists and philosophers began to use the word believe in a different way. It was no

longer a matter of commitment and following. To believe now meant to give “intellectual assent”.

300 years may seem like a long time, but in the grand sweep of history it really isn't. For 1700 years, “to believe” meant to make a commitment to living with God's compassion. Suddenly, in a moment, our understanding of scripture was changed ... because the meaning of an English word changed.

Marcus Borg points to the same reality when he writes, “Most simply, ‘to believe’ meant ‘to love.’ Indeed, the English words ‘believe’ and ‘belove’ are related. What we believe is what we belove. Faith is about believing God. To believe in God is to belove God. Faith [and believing] is about believing God and all that God beloves. Faith is the way of the heart.”

In other words, when Jesus calls us to believe, he invites us to give our hearts to the one whom we trust. Let us be quite clear. When we claim to be followers of Jesus, we don't merely give mental assent to a series of propositions. The heart of faith is to give our heart to God. We make a commitment to walk in the way of Jesus. We renew our loyalty daily so that we live compassionately and justly. We renew our love affair with God, and with God's world and all its creatures.

To believe involves taking a journey to the heart of our faith, which is a journey towards our deepest and best selves.

I believe. I give my heart. I renew my loyalty. That's the work, and the gift, of faith.

Not a head trip, but a renewal of the heart.

Imagine if the Creed read this way: “I belove God, the Creator ... I belove Jesus Christ, God's beloved Son ... I belove holy Spirit.” What a difference that would make in the life of the Church and in the lives of those who follow Jesus.