



The Formation of Belief

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This workshop addresses the function of the will both in the formation of a belief and the critical review (audit) of one's network of beliefs (one's world view). It will focus on the nature of beliefs, how they form and their relationship to truth, the notion of persuasion, and how beliefs might be dislodged from one's current network of beliefs or be added to that network. All of this is aimed at a better understanding of what is involved in Christian witnessing and apologetics, with examples from the Bible.

Introduction

Everybody has beliefs of one kind or another – beliefs regarding who we are, where we came from, where we are going, what is important, and many other matters. We are not sure where we got some of our beliefs, but we know we believe this or that. On the other hand, some of our beliefs were beliefs formed over a period of time by examining the evidence and drawing inferences. Often we meet people who have beliefs that differ from our own. If it is important, we may discuss or debate the differences or if it is not important we may just pass it by. Today, however, we are concerned with beliefs we have about issues that are important to us. Undoubtedly the most important beliefs we have are associated with Christianity. In order to understand how we came to have these beliefs, we will look at how beliefs in general, and Christian beliefs in particular, form. We will also consider the nature of beliefs and how beliefs are formed or dismissed, noting the importance of information and the function of persuasion. All of this will be discussed in light of the work of apologetics.

Concerning Beliefs in General

We need to address certain concerns that apply to beliefs in general. First, it seems instructive to point out that some notions we have that we call beliefs, should more properly be called opinions. For example, for most of us the statement, “I believe a man walked on the moon” is not a belief, but only an opinion. What we are saying is that it is believable that such occurred and, furthermore, it makes little difference to our personal daily lives. We may have only a little information or a lot, but the nature of the information is such that what we do is form an opinion about it, but not a belief in the strictest sense of the word. Such mental dispositions, however, are not the subject of our discussion.

What is discussed here [under the term 'beliefs'] are *mental notions that are required for or deemed necessary for life choices*. While we may not agree on which beliefs belong in this category, we will agree that such a category exists. To further clarify the discussion, we must understand that not all beliefs are intentional.

We are all born into this world with the developing ability to make sense of our world. Some of the beliefs we have are just there. Before we can express ourselves as children, it is known that some beliefs are already forming. For example, a child will have certain beliefs about his parents' trustworthiness long before he can express that belief. Then as the child gets older, he is able to think about his world and begin to develop some beliefs that build on or maybe contradict the beliefs he held earlier as a child. During this stage of auditing beliefs the person begins an intentional process of examining the evidence and facts surrounding him and drawing inferences which form belief claims.

Part of our belief building process involves adopted beliefs. These are the beliefs we adopt from those we think are trustworthy and knowledgeable. As children, many of our beliefs are adopted beliefs. Normally, these may be challenged as children get older (this process may begin as early as 9 or 10 years of age). As they gain more information, that information and/or experience may seem to contradict what we believed earlier. Maybe we believed that our

parents always told us the truth and then found out that they lied. Or maybe we received new beliefs from someone outside the family that contradicted the adopted beliefs from our parents. At that point we must do one of three things. First, we can reject what we have learned earlier (here we see that an earlier belief is overridden by a later belief) and accept the new belief. Second, we can simply ignore the new information. Third, we can try to make the new information somehow fit with our present network of beliefs.

Suppose that the choice is to dismiss a prior belief in order to form a new belief. A person might dismiss a belief for several reasons. Possibly some person of authority espouses a different belief and thus we accept a new belief on the basis of this authority. It could be that some other evidence comes to his attention that requires forming a new belief. Possibly the person thinks that there is no longer warrant to draw the inferences drawn earlier from the evidence. Generally speaking, it is always possible that an earlier belief was constructed either on poor evidence or on misinformation, making it wise to dismiss it.

For whatever reason, we do notice that at least some of our beliefs change throughout the course of our life time. The fact that we do change beliefs, sometimes over a period of time and sometimes in a relatively short period of time, raises some important questions about the formation and dismissal of beliefs. This is important for each individual, but it is also instructive for those who desire to persuade others to dismiss non-Christian beliefs and form Christian beliefs.

The Nature of a Belief

A belief is a mental concept we have regarding some aspect of reality. It is our expression of what we think is true. Later we will consider the matter of having a network of beliefs which is what is often expressed as a world view, but for now we will focus on what constitutes a belief. Even though everybody has beliefs ranging over a wide variety of matters, many of us have never spent much time considering how we form a belief or what really constitutes a belief. The importance, however, must not be lost on us. After all, as Christians we are not only responsible for our own

beliefs, but we are actively engaged in trying to persuade others to accept the same belief claims we hold.

Whereas beliefs change, we know that beliefs are relative to our personal view of the world. Although reality exists in an objective form, our beliefs are our mental concepts of how we perceive that reality. A belief about reality is not reality itself. Furthermore, a belief is something that results from inferences drawn from the evidence / facts. That means a belief is person-related and is only true to the degree that it properly expresses the way things really are. Evidence / facts are not self-interpreting. Two people can examine the same evidence and draw different inferences from the evidence, leading to differing claims. This reveals to us that our initial network of beliefs is what is often determining the inferences we draw from the evidence. For example, several people observed the empty tomb of Jesus, but made different claims concerning the facts. Or consider the matter of the Cross Event. It is possible for people to have the right facts but draw incorrect inferences from those facts. Fortunately, the interpretation is sure, because the proper interpretation (inference drawn) is given to us in the Bible. Paul says that, "*Christ died for our sins*" (1 Corinthians 15:3). The fact is, "*Christ died,*" and the interpretation is, "*for our sins,*" and the belief claim is that Christ is the savior of the world.

Furthermore, many beliefs tend to be culture sensitive, that is, they come from the information we received from our environment. People experiencing different aspects of the world, may very well have different beliefs about the world. This is often seen when people from different cultures begin to compare beliefs. Later we will think about how to adjudicate when this happens, but for now it is only necessary to see how this helps inform us on the nature of beliefs.

How are Beliefs Formed and / or Dismissed?

I will argue that a person cannot **directly or immediately** will himself to a state of belief concerning any claim. This is an important part of the discussion related to beliefs and will lead to a better understanding of beliefs, particularly within the area of apologetics. Before we get into this discussion, however, I want to say that I am fully

aware of the ongoing discussion regarding precisely what the will is and how it functions within the mental complex [1] of mankind. That is an interesting and important discussion, but I am not here to answer that question in particular. It is not necessary for us to understand the intricate functional relationships between the will and the rest of the mental complex in order to see its relationship to belief. The task here is to consider the relationship of the will to belief formation. We begin with the position that it is impossible that one can, by the power of the will, **immediately or directly**, will oneself to a state of belief. That is to say, I cannot choose to believe this or that directly. There are always other factors exerting influence on the mental complex.

Furthermore, I want to be clear that at this point I am only speaking about a belief that forms in an intentional way. I am not referring, let's say, to the fact that I believe my senses are reliable. I am referring to intentional belief claims that express something about a piece of reality under consideration. For example, I believe the universe was created by God. A belief claim is what results from observing evidence / data that in some way presents a compelling or non-compelling influence on our mental complex which disposes us to draw inferences. From that, we make certain belief claims about the evidence / facts. In this sense, the belief claim expresses what I think is true. Such beliefs are not formed by the immediate or direct act of my will.

To help understand the implications of affirming that a person cannot **directly or immediately** will himself to a state of belief let us consider the phenomenon of desire. Let's say that you get out of bed in the morning and, furthermore, let us say that it is your custom to read the Bible every morning. However, on this particular morning, you get out of bed but you have no **desire** to read your Bible. So, the question is, "*Can you immediately or directly will yourself to have a desire?*" I think there is little debate on this point. You can, however, will, or let me say choose, to read the Bible. That is obviously different than willing a **desire** to read your Bible. What does seem possible (and often is the case) is that when you will (choose) to read your Bible a desire may develop as a result of reading your Bible. In that case, we might say that the will is a mediate or indirect cause in the formation of a belief, but not

the direct cause.

It is also true that often desires develop without any motion of the will – they just appear. If they are of the wrong type, as Christians, we are commanded to choose not to follow the desire. What we cannot do is to will the desire away by direct or immediate act of the will. The same is true with a belief. Sometimes beliefs just appear, so to speak, as part of our network of beliefs. We cannot make them go away just by willing them away. And we cannot make them appear just because we want them. They are not at our command.

It appears that what is true of desires is also true of beliefs – they are not at our command. So, what is it that brings me to a state of belief? I cannot just decide to have the belief that God exists. That is, you might look at me and say, "*You must believe that God exists.*" So, I say to myself, "*Okay, I believe.*" Most people would say that that is ridiculous and they would be right. Repeating the belief claim of another does not translate into a belief claim for that person. It is like the child who is told to apologize to his brother whom he has just whacked over the head with a board. The child may say he is sorry, but have no belief regarding sorrow over the event.

A belief is an expression of what one thinks about some piece of reality, justified and motivated by some evidence or reason. This is why it is called a belief and not a statement. Furthermore, a belief influences, to varying degrees, how a person interacts with or understands this world. We all know too well that we can live in a sort of 'cognitive dissonance' where we believe one thing but do the opposite of the belief. So, I say beliefs do influence how we live in this world, but there is not a one-to-one correspondence.

It is true that I can simply will to act a certain way, to move in a certain direction, but a belief is something quite different – it is more than simply some direct act of the will. A belief is something that happens to us as information that we think to be credible exerts some influence on our mental complex, causing us to think in a certain way. Once this happens, our mental disposition now includes what we call a belief. It is a case where a person's mental complex is convinced (I think persuaded is a better word) about the nature of

some part of the reality of which he is a part and of which he has some knowledge. This belief, once formed, becomes part of the belief system that is used in the future to interpret (or shape inferences on) other evidence / facts, until or unless it is dismissed for some reason. Once we have more than one belief, it can be said that we now have a network of beliefs (commonly referred to as a world view) which in turn may play a large part in the formation or dismissal of other beliefs.

From Whence Come Beliefs?

At the outset I want to say that it is my position that nothing can be done effectively in the Christian sense apart from the work of the Holy Spirit. This includes the work of people coming to belief in God in general or Jesus Christ in particular. That is, the process of belief formation regarding Jesus Christ follows the normal belief formation path, but is aided by the Holy Spirit. What follows in this section assumes the necessity of the work of the Spirit when speaking about people coming to true belief in God and His Christ. The Bible is clear that Gospel information is the power of God unto salvation to everyone who believes (Romans 1:16). So, in the discussion here, that is a given and must be remembered throughout the discussion.

Information

Beliefs require information, as beliefs are always about something or someone. It is impossible to have a belief about nothing. Whereas we engage our world at different levels and in different ways, a belief is the result of a process of our total mental complex. So, it is a product, not of the will alone, but of all that is involved in the mental process of gaining, assessing, and judging data presented to our conscious being. Therefore, without some information there can be no intentional belief. If the information is incorrect, then the subsequent belief will be incorrect. It is true that we make judgments about the evidence – either it is accurate or not accurate. In fact, before drawing any inferences, we make judgments about the evidence / fact itself. But simply judging the information accurate or inaccurate (or any other judgment for that matter) is not a belief itself, although it may entail beliefs.

Belief Correction

A person may disallow information on at least two grounds. The first is that he simply rejects the (apparent) **facts** of the information itself. This would be an act of the will or a matter of judgment. Maybe a person hears the circumstances by which the **facts** were gathered and thinks that the facts are not legitimate. Or maybe he does not trust the agent who gathered the facts. At any rate one can think of a number of reasons why a person might simply reject the facts so that the facts are not permitted access into our mental process. If this happens there is no information presented to the mental complex for belief formation. In this way, the will performs an information screening process which at times is good and at times it is bad. We must all be critical consumers of information, but sometimes our worldview (prior beliefs) dismisses legitimate information just because it does not seem right to us – it has no relevancy to us.

Second, it is possible that a person accepts the **facts** but rejects the **interpretation** of the facts. In this case, it may be that the person has an **a priori** belief that says that the interpretation of the evidence is simply not possible. For example, someone presents us with the information about the empty tomb and then claims that it was emptied by God. Since we already might hold that there is no God, we then would simply reject the interpretation of the data based upon our **a priori** network of beliefs. In sharing the Gospel, one will encounter both of these scenarios. Some people reject the facts of Jesus because they say it is only religious information and not historic fact. Or, those with a naturalistic world view reject the Christian interpretation of the facts, such as the empty tomb. They do so because they have an **a priori** commitment that does not allow for a resurrection. So, whether it is rejection of the facts or the interpretation of the facts, what hinders the formation of a new belief is the presence of misbeliefs or counter beliefs. In either case it is necessary to find some common ground by which one can present information that will be allowed into the thinking process to begin the work of belief change or world view change in that person.

It is possible to see how Jesus does this in His encounters with the unbeliever[2]. For example, in John 3, Nicodemus had some misbeliefs about how one made it into the Kingdom of God. Jesus challenges his misbeliefs about this matter. He

does so, not by direct confrontation, but by using something Nicodemus already accepted as a reality – the kingdom of God. Anything about the kingdom of God was permitted into his mental processes because it was important to him even if he had misbeliefs about how one entered the Kingdom of God. The same thing is seen in Luke's account of the rich young ruler who had a similar misbelief (Luke 18:18-23).

The point is that, in order for belief formation to take place, information must first be allowed into the belief 'factory' of the human mind. Often the Christian message is not permitted into the mental 'factory' because of a person's counter beliefs or misbeliefs – it is dismissed as irrelevant. In this case, the Christian must seek some common ground by which a meaningful discussion can begin. That means getting information into the thought 'factory' of the individual with whom we wish to share the Gospel. The task here is to effect a change in individual beliefs already held or in a network of beliefs (worldview) that is counter to the Christian worldview. This may need to be done before the Gospel is seen as relevant.

Belief Formation

It is easy to see that if a Christian is dealing with a person who has either misbeliefs or counter beliefs in relationship to Christianity, then the first task is belief correction. But the purpose of the Christian is not simply to bring about the dismissal of a misbelief or counter belief; it is to see people come to true belief in Jesus. This is what we call belief formation.

Belief formation, as indicated by the term 'formation', requires something from which a belief arises. This something is information or evidence – something on which or from which to construct a belief. The information can come in different ways. It can come by way of personal experience, through the senses, by rational thought process or by any combination of these. Furthermore, each person may require different levels of information or evidence. Moreover, not all mind complexes are oriented in exactly the same way. Some mind complexes are more oriented to a logical process while others are not. Some mind complexes tend to have more of an existential orientation. This does not make one right and the other wrong, it only means that it is important to

engage the mental complex of the individual to whom we are speaking according to his mental complex orientation and not how we would like it to be. Of course, we are speaking only of those mental complex orientations that reflect a normal / proper operation and of experiences that have some means of independent verification.

Given the above qualifications, it can be said that beliefs do not arise out of nothing (thin air) nor can the belief be constructed solely by the act of the will. Beliefs are like cakes, they require several ingredients, combined under several different processes (mixing, heating, kneading, etc). One can have a thought by itself or even a feeling, but a belief requires more than just one operation of the mind. First what is required is information. Given that the information is granted entrance to their mental 'factory' by the hearer, the product (the subsequent belief) will have no more truth value than the information from which it was constructed. For the Christian who is giving the information, it is extremely important that correct information be given.

It seems that Romans 10:14-17 supports this understanding of belief formation. Before a person can call on the Lord, he must believe that He is the proper savior. But before he can do that, he must hear information about Him which requires that someone tells / explains to him just who this Jesus is. In the end, Paul concludes, "*So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God*" (Romans 10:17). Without information about Jesus, it is impossible to have a belief about Jesus, and until there is a proper belief about Jesus, there can be no true belief in Jesus (calling). So, a proper belief formation about Jesus requires proper information about Jesus. But just having a true belief about Jesus is not sufficient for salvation – one must 'call' upon the Lord for salvation.

For proper belief formation to occur there must be accurate information that has compelling qualities and a proper function of the mental 'factory'. This does not guarantee a belief formation, but **without** these factors (to varying degrees), there can be no proper belief formation. There is a direct and important link between the compelling qualities of the information and belief. Compelling is not only bound up in the evidence / fact itself, it is also related to the condition of the mental

complex of the hearer. It is possible for the evidence itself to be very compelling to most people and still not be considered compelling by others. The compelling element is what can be called the persuasive aspect of information. Before looking at persuasion itself, it must be remembered that while the information must have a persuasive quality to it, the extent to which it persuades an individual to belief is determined in large degree by the process of the mental 'factory' of the individual. That is, the information given may be accurate, have a strong compelling quality and still fail to persuade the hearer. So, there is more to the Christian witnessing enterprise than simply giving an accurate message.

Persuasion

I realize that there are some assumptions that all may not accept in this notion of persuasion. If one is persuaded that something is true, which previously he held to be false, this **brings** that person to a point of crisis in his life, That is, will he act on that of which he is persuaded, or will he resist acting on the persuasion? That is the great question. But I do think one can be persuaded, but resist that persuasion even though the preponderance of the evidence is undeniable. It is interesting that the Chinese characters for crisis are danger and opportunity. In the crisis created by Gospel information a man can go in two directions. The direction of his human inclination, which will mean danger, or the direction God has made plain in which there is opportunity – salvation.

The Agent of Persuasion

God the Holy Spirit is the prime agent of persuasion in spiritual matters (John 16:9-11). However, He often works through a sub-agent called man, as God has given redeemed man the responsibility of not only telling the Gospel in a disinterested fashion, but as a persuader. This can be seen in the early Church by words used to speak of the evangelistic work of the Christians. Such words as: **Dispute**: Acts 6:9,10; 19:8,9; **Reason**: Acts 18:4, 19; 24:25; **Persuade**: Acts 18:4; 19:26; 2 Corinthians 5:11; Galatians. 1:10; **Confute**: Titus 1:9, 10.

Instruments of Persuasion

It seems one can say that as a bare minimum, these are instruments of persuasion: Scripture,

Circumstances, Nature, Arguments and Examples. Of course, Scripture will always be involved and of the remaining it can be one of a combination of several.

The Work of Persuasion

This is also referred to as conviction. That is, one is moved to a position of belief formation or a conviction that a certain claim is true. We find people in all stages of that which they need to be persuaded. We have the Eunuch (Acts 8:29ff) who is an inquisitive seeker. He has proper information, but lacks a proper interpretation. In this case, he needs only to be persuaded that the prophet spoke of another (who is Jesus) and not himself. As that story unfolds the reality of belief formation is evident by his request to Phillip to be baptized. In the Philippian jailor (Acts 16:20-32) we see someone who is persuaded of his need, but lacks the information necessary to find salvation. On the other hand, there are the Philosophers (Acts 17:22-34) who are not looking for anything religious. They are happy with what they have. In this case, we have the non-seeker who needs to be convinced / persuaded that he is not prepared for either this life or the life to come. Here, one must be persuaded that he has a misbelief that needs to be dismissed in order to embrace new information. Here Paul shows how to find the common ground for the purpose of affecting a belief change in the hearer. So, the particular work of persuasion will vary from person to person, from situation to situation. But, in all cases proper information is required as well as presenting it in such a way that it has maximum persuasive power.

The Goal of Persuasion

The goal of persuasion is to see the person moved to a state of true belief regarding Christ. This means starting where they are and giving them information that is accurate in content and persuasive in force, that they might be moved to a state of true belief regarding Christ and salvation. But, remember, this is not the mere act of the will where I say to a person, you must believe on Jesus and they say, okay, I believe. That would not only be a sham, it would be very unfortunate. A person must be persuaded to a state of belief that Jesus is the Savior of the world, and if he is then persuaded to his own need of this Salvation, there will be a strong force of that belief to personally trust in Jesus. He now has moved to a

state of belief in Jesus.

Consider the apologies in the book of Acts:

Gentiles (Acts 14:14-17) God Creator – Man – Common Grace

Gentiles (Acts 17:20-31) God Creator – Repentance – Judgment – Jesus – Resurrection – Belief

Jews and Gentile Proselytes (Acts 13:16-39) God of Israel – History – David – Jesus – Resurrection – Belief

Jews (Acts 2) God of History / Prophecy – Jesus – Resurrection – Belief

Jews (Acts 3) God of Abraham – Jesus – Resurrection – Revelation – Repentance – Belief

Gentiles influenced by Judaism (Acts 10:34-43) God the Savior of all men – Jesus – Resurrection – Judgment – Belief

There is an instructive passage in Hebrews 6:18-20 where the phrase “fled for refuge to lay hold of the hope set before us” is found. As you may know, this is the same language in the Greek version of the Old Testament for fleeing to the cities of Refuge. It is an intensive form of the word to flee. It is used in Acts 14:6 of Paul and Barnabas who “fled” from Iconium when a violent attempt was made on their lives. This is the word used here by the Spirit of God to speak of the action of those who believe in Jesus. Their persuasion is evidenced by a fleeing to Christ. As in the cities of Refuge, first one must have information about the Cities of Refuge and their saving function. Then he must believe that he is in need of what the Cities of Refuge provide. And last, the person must be persuaded that unless he flees to a City of Refuge he will die. So it is in the matter of salvation. We see the same elements in salvation. The idea of fleeing is that one now has been moved to the point where believes he is at risk. This can be done through logical argument, that is, sometimes we can create a sense of crisis in the individual and sometimes it is life itself that creates this sense of crisis.

The cumulative force of life

Having said all this, there is one other matter that needs to be given some consideration. This is what I call the **cumulative force of life**. The state of the mental complex of an individual is not dependent only on the presentation of new information. The overall disposition of the mental complex (mental factory) is also influenced by external factors as well. One such factor is that of age. Peoples’ belief systems tend to be influenced by the **age factor**. For example, 18 year olds may not be influenced much at all by the thought of dying one day. Many young people have a sense of immortality – nothing can harm them and as a consequence they are often high risk takers. I must say, however, that I am not suggesting that there is anything absolute about this, I only use this by way of illustration. The point is that what does not seem important at one point in life may appear very important at another point in life. At certain points in life, the individual may sense they are not at risk and, therefore, are not moved to consider seriously after-death matters.

Differing personalities are another mind-influencing factor. That is, we all have different personalities that in some way show through in our witnessing encounters. Sometimes there is just an immediate barrier between two people that is strictly a personality issue. It is because of this that we are not always as effective with some people (or people group) as we are with others. This is the wonderful thing about the Body of Christ. We are all different, and therefore, working together we can reach a great variety of people. What may happen is that a particular person may not give you the time of day and you are not able to speak to him about the Lord, but then someone else comes along and there is an immediate “hitting it off” and the unbeliever listens to the other person, but not you.

Another factor is that of **events** (either personal or national). An individual may sense no need of anything spiritual because he thinks he has life under control. Then something happens and his normal life management skills or coping skills fail him. As a result, a sense of being vulnerable and at risk from which he cannot protect himself impresses him with a sense of crisis. This may lead to a rethinking of his beliefs about life and then be open to considering a different life paradigm – one that has a spiritual foundation.

Finally, but not necessarily comprehensively, **personal choices** are another factor that can have altering influence on the function of one's mental complex. For example, a person breaks all the social rules, so to speak. Then, in time his life becomes a mess and he realizes that he is out of control and needs help. At this point he may be open to listening to Gospel information which before he was not.

What this tells us as Christians is that, while the matter of making Christ known is something we do as a matter of our faithfulness to the Lord, the persuasive dimension is influenced by many factors. The sensitive Christian will be aware of this and be looking for opportunities to speak again simply because the cumulative force of life has altered the disposition of the mental complex of an individual

Conclusion

Understanding the formation of beliefs is important for those interested in persuading others of the truth value of Christian beliefs. Realizing that beliefs are not under one's direct command is crucial to effective presentation of the Gospel message. This is true both for the work of belief correction as well as belief formation. Information is crucial to belief formation, but until it is granted entrance into the mental complex it cannot lead to belief formation. Therefore, it is necessary not only to give correct information, it is necessary to present it in such a way that it might be persuasive to the individual to whom we are witnessing. Furthermore, we must be sensitive to the belief position of the person with whom we are sharing so that we share information in the most effective way possible to their particular mental complex. In all things we must pray and trust the Holy Spirit as the primary persuading agent in men coming to Christ.

References:

[1] By 'mental complex' I am referring to the total information-processing apparatus of the human's rational-emotional make up. Sometimes I refer to it as the 'mental factory'.

[2] The term 'unbeliever' or 'believer' is used to speak of one's personal relationship to Jesus

Christ, while the term 'atheist' points to one's position relative to the existence of God. It seems that, of all the encounters we see in the Gospels, Jesus never encounters an atheist, but he does encounter many who have misbeliefs about God and His Messiah.