

Belief Patterns #2 "Voice of Authority"

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Belief begins with the question: whom should I believe, and why?

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One of the boldest things any human being can say is: "I believe."

It is to say: "I have come to a certain conviction. I have listened, I have watched, I have thought about it. I now believe I know something I did not before. And it isn't so much that I have chosen to believe as that belief has been born in me by a reality greater than myself. I have a sense of certitude, and my next steps in life will be different for it."

But belief is not just about knowing; it is about trusting. It is not just about gathering and processing information, otherwise a computer could be a "believer" of sorts. When we believe we are the most human we ever are, because we are extending ourselves outside the shell of our individual selves, actively connecting with our Creator, anchoring ourselves in his unchangeable nature. Knowing and trusting a friend or a spouse projects us as people into a world larger than ourselves--how much more when we know and trust the God who made us and loves us with an irrepressible love.

But whom should we believe? And why? Which God? Which religion? Which doctrine? Let's take that question apart by looking at how we come to believe anybody. Any of us would hope to find the best medical authority available to us if we learned one day we had a malignant lump. When journalists interview experts on political and military issues, they go looking for recognized authorities in their respective fields. Architects and engineers are authorities whom we trust to build buildings that won't fall on us. Criminologists, pharmacologists, seismologists, and many others who have "-ologist" as the suffix of their titles are called upon to give authoritative analyses of critical issues.

In everyday life we rely on "authorities" who really know what they are talking about. And we consider them authorities when we are convinced that they understand the truth of their field of knowledge and they know what to do about it. Now many people in the modern world think authority has nothing to do with spiritual matters, that these things are personal and inherently subjective. Cults have authoritarian leaders, which is repugnant. Faith develops, but it is not summoned, it is thought. But historic biblical Christianity assumes an objective (and, at the same time, spiritual) truth shaped by a clear authoritative voice which is the direct voice of God. Is this controversial? Of course! It must be, because as soon as you say your spiritual life is based on a truth projected by an authoritative voice, you become responsible to respond to that truth.

I've been studying Jesus' "Sermon on the Mount" this week, a body of teaching which has had an arresting and compelling voice for 2,000 years. The gospel text says that "when Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law" (Matt.7:28-29). In the New Testament the word authority means power, jurisdiction, and the right to give orders. The gospel writers

make it clear that one of the outstanding features of Jesus' ministry was that he exercised this authority. People sensed that they were under the immediate influence of God. It was different. Clear, strong, unequivocal, simple, mysterious. Jesus' words struck at the heart. They both wounded and healed. His words stick in people's minds and keep circulating like a cyclone of truth. That's why almost everybody, including non-Christians and even proponents of other religions, show respect for the thunder and lightning of Jesus' teaching.

But showing respect is one thing, responding is another. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus talked about one man who built a house on a foundation resting on rock and another whose house rested uneasily on a bed of sand. The house-on-sand is the person who hears Jesus' words only, whereas the house-on-rock is the person who hears and who practices. Respect plus response. And it was right after this tale of two builders that Matthew tells us of the people's astonishment at his authority. The people were not saying: did you hear what this fellow is trying to assert? They were swept up in the power of the Word himself. His authority carried them, and it carries us still.

So then, when someone asks: why should I believe what Christianity teaches?, or: why should I believe the specific things taught about personal ethics, and life after death, and God's providence in history, and angels, and sin?, the answer he or she deserves is that Christians believe such things (which means knowing and trusting) because they believe they have heard an authoritative voice on the matters.

I remember being in a discussion once with someone about psychic knowledge, and she commented, "I could believe that." And I wondered, does she mean "I could believe that," so "I choose to believe that" (for whatever reason)? But, I wondered, isn't the question: "should I believe that?" That is the reason why we need authority. Sure, I could believe that once there was a land called Atlantis. (The sheer romanticism and mystery of it is titillating.) I could believe that intelligent beings from other galaxies are living in my community right now. (Perhaps that would explain some of the "interesting" people I have met.) I could believe that cancer is caused by cold winters because someone wrote a book asserting it once. But what should I believe?

Christians are well aware that Buddhists have their reasons for believing what they do, as do Hindus and Muslims and Rastafarians and Druids. But why believe Jesus? And why believe the Bible? Here are some of the reasons Christians would give for their submission to Christ as the one true authority in their lives:

1. Jesus of Nazareth invited and commanded us to believe in him, and we have found this call to be both compelling and satisfying. Everything he said has a ring of truth to it that is louder and clearer than any other voice we have ever heard. He shocked us all by claiming to have been with God the Father from the beginning of time and to be one with the Father and the Spirit. We accept that revelation, and that, in turn makes us realize just how authoritative are all his words and deeds. His claims of authority were backed up by his deeds of power which were shown in the miracles he performed and ultimately in his walking away from his own death chamber. This authority is further authenticated by the overwhelming power of his mercy and love which he showed to people who were outcasts and diseased and discouraged. His torturous death was called a willing act of grace. He gave up his life not just to be a martyr, but to be a savior who is able to release us from the guilt of our personal sin--past, present, and future.

2. Now the authority of Jesus Christ extends backward to the Old Testament (the "Law and the

Prophets") which Jesus endorsed by his frequent reference to its commands and prophecies. He also said that not the smallest letter or the smallest serif on a single letter would ever disappear from the word of God contained in the Law and the Prophets.

3. Looking forward, Jesus authorized the teaching that would come from his immediate followers. He said (especially in John 14-17) that the disciples would be inspired by the Holy Spirit to recall truth and explain truth for all future generations. This, Christians believe, points to the apostolic teaching which are preserved in the books of the New Testament.

So as we explore many themes in the weeks ahead, we begin with this premise: our beliefs should be convictions that are the considered response to a true voice of authority. This is the voice of Jesus Christ, who also authenticated the written revelation of the Old and New Testaments. Then that house gets built, one we can live in, one that has a foundation beneath it that rests on the bedrock of the reality of God.

BIBLICAL PASSAGES FOR CONSIDERATION:

On "authority": Matt. 7:24-29; 9:6-8; 21:23-24; 28:18; Jn. 10:18; Col. 2:10; 1 Thes. 4:2

On "foundations": 1 Cor. 3:11-12; Eph. 2:20; 1 Tim. 3:15; 6:19; 2 Tim. 2:19

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