

WHAT IS FAITH?

FAITH, DENIAL AND WISHPFUL THINKING

Faith is a word whose meaning has totally changed in recent years. One significant reason for this is that one meaning of the word is slipping out of common usage ('I have faith in you', 'to act in good faith'), and is increasingly limited to describe religious faith. Another reason is the powerful intellectual propaganda that has lead people to believe that the Christian worldview is naïve, outdated and without a sound intellectual basis.

The result is that faith has come to be understood as either a term for religious beliefs, or, on a personal level, how to believe in something you want to believe in despite the absence of supporting evidence. In contemporary culture, faith has come to mean denial plus wishful thinking. Given this and the pitiful portrayal of Christians in popular culture, it's no wonder people don't generally give questions of faith much thought. Why bother with something that's as utterly implausible as it is dull?

FAITH AND TRUST

Traditionally faith meant trust. Faith was not something you simply professed; it would be something on which you acted. Faith was a verb, so it would not be faith simply to say that you believed I was a safe driver, faith meant you got into the car and entrusted your life to me as I drove you around town. Given this traditional understanding of faith as active trust, faith is not something limited to a shrinking minority of naïve, old fashioned, religious people. Faith is makes everyday life possible.

Everyone has faith. The choices we make are underpinned by a worldview, a set of beliefs and assumptions about life and the world. Those beliefs may be consistent or inconsistent, carefully thought through or subconsciously picked up from our environment, but regardless of how much we've reflected on what we believe, those beliefs direct how we live. Our actions reveal where our faith lies. The question is not whether we have faith; the question is in what do we choose to put our faith?

BAD FAITH AND BLIND FAITH

Our faith is only as good as the reliability of the thing we're trusting. An illustration: Two people need to travel overseas. One is terrified of flying and so finds the company with the best safety record, well maintained aircraft and experienced pilots. The other is very confident about flying and books the cheapest flight they can find, regardless of safety. The first person hates the trip but arrives safely. The second is very relaxed but the plane crashes. The amount of faith they had affected how they felt about the journey, but the more important question was the trustworthiness of the plane and pilot.

Given that faith is only as good as the reliability of those people and things we choose to trust, then we have a responsibility to be wise about who we trust. We either have to weigh evidence and make a judgement about things, or we default to exercising blind faith. When it comes to the big questions of life, the latter is the approach taken by much of contemporary culture. The assumption that there are no reasonable grounds for believing in God, but plenty for not believing, goes unquestioned.

INTELLECT, EXPERIENCE AND WILL

Our convictions are the product of our intellect, our experience and our will. Some things we believe as a result of careful thought, other things we believe as a result of things we've experienced. However, it's our will that chooses what we think about and what we are open to experience. As our convictions are subject to our will, our beliefs are deeply influenced by our choices and thereby our habits and ultimately our character.

The person who thinks that the existence of God is absurd is unlikely to be open to experiencing God. The person who has had a very negative experience of organised religion is unlikely to want to think sympathetically about God. However, a person who has a positive experience of a faith community is much more likely to engage intellectually with spiritual questions and a person who hears something sensible and reasoned about God is more likely to be open to the possibility of experiencing God.

GROWING FAITH

Faith is not a binary thing, something you have or do not have. Faith can be strengthened or weakened over time. Blind faith is the result of a 'leap in the dark', but not many people would view that as a good thing. Wise faith is the product of reflection and experience. The evidence must be carefully and sympathetically considered and appropriately tested. However, this is contingent on a willingness to sympathetically approach the subject in the first place.

When considering ultimate questions of life, one thing to remember is that we don't start from a neutral position. We all have an existing collection of beliefs, some of which we're aware of and others of which are subconscious assumptions. When we examine a worldview, the question is not whether or not it can be proved, which is always impossible when it comes to ultimate questions. The question is whether the case for this worldview is more or less credible than for my current worldview?

CONCLUSION

Until recently, faith meant active trust. Trust is only as good as the person or thing being trusted. To exercise faith wisely requires us to weigh the evidence intellectually and experientially in order to act appropriately. As we do this, our trust in the thing we are weighing will either grow or be undone.