

“Belong, Believe, Bless”: Our Pursuit of Good Faith

Text: Acts 17 (selected)

1.28.18



Reflection Questions for Personal Use or in a Group Context... (please consider the teaching notes prior to consideration of the reflection questions)

“What do you think it means to say that you ‘know’ something? What do you make of the uses of the word ‘know’ in the following statements?”

“I know that $4 \times 4 = 16$.”

“I know my name.”

“I know a bargain when I see one.”

“I know that George Washington was a president of the United States.”

“I know God exists.”

“In which cases does the word ‘know’ mean complete certainty? Are there different meanings of the word ‘know’ being expressed?”

“Consider the word ‘believe’ in these statements:”

“I believe the son is going to shine today” (for those of you who live outside of the Pacific NW)

“I believe I can be successful.”

“I believe it’s safe to swim in that river.”

“I believe in God.”

“How do the words ‘know’ and ‘believe’ relate? How might knowledge and faith relate?”

“What are some of the ways that you would say you have experienced God? How do you know? What are some of the doubts about faith that continue to plague you?”

“What questions are you asking? What answers are you finding? What persuaded you to trust it as ‘truth’?”

“Are the conclusions you have reached reasonable? Do the beliefs that you embrace about God and life make sense? Historically, have other people reached the same conclusions? Do you want to be associated with them?”

“Has it offered stability during episodes of adversity in your life? Has it proven powerful enough to prevent you from abandoning it for another option?”

“Are you confident enough in Jesus that you might hope to persuade others to trust him, as well?”

Teaching Notes...

In life, it's never really an issue of believing or not believing (faith or no faith), but of good belief versus bad belief.

I trust that we can all acknowledge that there aren't really (2) life-approaches: 1) those who live by logic and reason (the “informed” and “learned”), and 2) others (more naïve and gullible) who live by faith.

We are all believing something and due to our finiteness and fallibility, that *something* can never be proven, only trusted. Consent.

We mustn't confuse sincerity with good belief. You can hold to certain beliefs with unflinching conviction, and still be deceived. If you are mistaken about what is true, we say that you don't have a *“firm grip on reality”*. Delusional. If you are delusional, you have effectively eliminated any possibility of living truthfully. The results can be devastating (e.g. the rich fool, in Luke 12: *“... man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions”*).

And, we can't even say that it's simply enough to “know” truth. Socrates believed that, *“If we only know the good, we will do it.”* That philosophy underestimates the human capacity to look squarely at truth and choose to believe something else.

What we believe matters. Beliefs orient our lives and give direction to our wills.

To believe God takes faith. To experience the wonder and beauty of all that surrounds you and confidently declare that there is no coherence nor cohesion--- nothing which makes sense of it all--- there is no God... that takes faith, as well.

I'm operating under the assumption that we are all on a quest for good faith, and that your pursuit is not:

- 1) an act of desperation where you are ready to believe anything, as long as it brings some relief (just makes the pain stop).
- 2) neither is your pursuit purely theoretical.

I'm also assuming that your pursuit is somehow connected to the *"more than"* which you suspect lies on the other side of your rapid job advancement, your relatively satisfying relationships, your unrelenting confidence in Bitcoin, and your new I-Phone X (ten).

You are invited to belong with us and be treated with dignity and respect which is due you as an image-bearer, but we will persistently and unashamedly purport certain beliefs and values which are decidedly Christ-centered and which we believe confront us with reality and establish meaningful grounds for action. We will continue to encourage your movement toward the "center"... Christ.

Without a *good-faith-community* to which we might belong while we are forming our Christian beliefs, our faith lacks a compelling witness.

Without a *good-faith-community* that helps center and immerse us in the Christian Story, our belonging lacks integrity and is unsustainable.

First of all, know that if it's dependent upon absolute certainty, unencumbered by doubt, and always manageable... it's not faith!

The Greek word for 'faith' (*pistis: to be persuaded to trust something*) occurs in (24) of the (27) books of the New Testament. Like most of the biblical terms we encounter (e.g. righteousness, forgiveness, grace), it's better described than defined.

It is applied to the four guys who lowered their paralyzed friend through the roof. Paul calls it, *"faith working itself out in love"* (Galatians 5:6). In Luke 7, Jesus *" marvels "* at the faith demonstrated by the one who believes that Jesus can simply "call in" his miracle.

"...it is impossible to please God without faith. Anyone who wants to come to him must believe that God exists and that he rewards those who sincerely seek him". Hebrews 11:6

It appears that in order to find out if there is a God, I have to act as if he is already there, seemingly hidden within the collage of misunderstandings and misrepresentations.

In the text, Paul doesn't begin by dismissing their beliefs, but offers to join them in their journey. He creates space for those at varying places in their search. He encounters people with decidedly opposing framing-stories and who believed that the gods weren't apt to respond to our "friend request" and who were mostly indifferent to what was happening here on earth.

Epicureans, who believed, along with Janet Jackson, in the *"pleasure principle"*: pleasure is the chief goal of life, with the greatest pleasure being the absence of pain and suffering.

Stoics: emphasized human self-sufficiency, logic, and duty. We made up the gods in order to satisfy ourselves.

Good faith is always about a story to be entered and lived, not just a point to be made.

The story of God found in the Bible is meant to challenge the prevailing stories being told. Paul doesn't begin with their 'sin' or their 'need of a savior' (Messiah). That would be futile. Instead, he tells a story that traces all of their deep-heart longings back to God.

“Who is God?” He's the unique Creator-God. All that IS can be traced back to him. He is the origin. He is not defined by his creation but is identified with them. We didn't create him, he created us! He is not, contrary to popular philosophy, distanced, but is closer than we thought. He is both recognizable and hidden [Psalm 14:2; Proverbs 8:17; Isaiah 55:6-7; Jeremiah 29:13; Psalm 145:18; Jeremiah 23:23].

“Who are we?” We are the thoughtful and intentional expression of a good, Creator-God. We are not the result of some cosmic feud or bizarre sexual encounter between the gods. We are the dependent ones whose perpetual need dignifies us.

“Where are we?” We are in a world perfectly suited for our presence. A world meant to function in certain ways and for certain purposes, all of which God identified as, “good” (beneficial). God didn't create us to meet his needs, but that he might satisfy ours. An environment of “dependence” and “inter-dependence” which doesn't weaken us but dignifies us!

“What does he want?” For us to reach back. For us to discover who we are and why we are in him. He wants us to want him! To seek him, which will require “*going beyond the mind that we have*” (repentance).

“What is wrong?” Suspicion. Deception. Ignorance. We were willing to call into question the goodness and good intentions of God. Our suspicion leveraged all of our fears and insecurities and convinced us that we had to take matters into our own hands.

“What can be done?” God has personally taken responsibility for all that had gone wrong. He had, as Isaiah said, “*shouldered the pain and our sorrows*” (53). God must act to restore order; to set things right. Jesus was God with us in unique and beautiful and mysterious ways. Jesus died with, for, and because of us, but God has actually raised him back to life in order to validate him and our willingness to believe.

Now, Paul asserts that all of creation will be judged (assessed) according to their posture toward this one, Jesus. John says that this one, Jesus, came into the world to rescue it, not to condemn it, and that the real judgment is ‘self-imposed’: we refuse to believe (John 3:17-18).

Good faith...

... is Christ-centered and biblically oriented (It is God's word, in that it reveals his dreams, his intentions, his desires, even though it has been wrongly used and poorly interpreted).

... **asks/invites questions and avoids simplistic and pad answers.** It realizes that doubting faith is not the same as doubting God. It simply realizes the limitations of our understanding. Doubt can often lead to 'better faith'.

... **values reason but loves a good mystery.** Jesus never demanded that people believe in him, without providing them some reason to believe.

"Don't believe me unless I carry out my Father's work. But if I do his work, believe in the evidence of the miraculous works I have done, even if you don't believe me". John 10

"Anyone who chooses to do the will of God will find out whether my teaching comes from God or whether I speak on my own". John 7:17

... **realizes that this God-initiated restlessness can only be satisfied by obedience.** Sometimes we demonstrate our faith, not by our elaborate explanations and carefully crafted theology, but by our simple trust and obedience despite them.

... **is a communal venture.** It requires a group of people with whom I might journey (unfamiliar territory: following the truck on the pass. I need someone with you who's been on this particular stretch of road before) 2 Kings 6, *"The LORD opened the young man's eyes, ..."*

... **is "communicable"** (transmittable; catching). It's futile to continue to bemoan the conditions of the culture if we do not possess (and are not able to portray) a more viable option. A better way of life.