

• **Isn't Faith Inherently Irrational?**

- *The following answer is taken from Greg Boyd's post, "Isn't Faith Inherently Irrational?" at reknew.org.*

- Many people seem to assume that faith is giving credence to things that don't make much sense and for which there is little or no evidence. Take the doctrine of the Incarnation, for example. This is the traditional Christian teaching that Jesus is "fully God and fully human." Now, to many people, this belief doesn't make much sense. How can a single person be both God and human? What's worse, many people assume that there's no compelling evidence to support this nonsensical belief. It's a "religious" belief, so how could there be evidence for it? They assume that Christianity asks us to simply have faith in this bizarre teaching because the Bible or the Church tells us to! And this, people rightly judge, is irrational.

• **The Need to Think Critically**

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- I would hope we could all agree that believing something that makes no sense and for which there is little or no evidence is indeed irrational. So is believing something just because some religious book or church told you to. This way of deciding beliefs leaves the content of what you believe completely up to chance (or fate, or providence – depending on what you happen to believe).
 - You see, unless you're willing to *think critically* about what you believe – grounding your faith in reason and evidence – then what you end up believing will be decided by things like where you happen to be born, what "holy book" you happen to be raised under, what religious institution you happen to have been taught to adhere to, what impressive, charismatic personality you happen to encounter, etc... Unless you're willing to critically scrutinize your beliefs, you'll end up believing whatever circumstances and chance destine you to believe. Without the use of reason, whether you end up believing "the truth" or end up drinking a poisonous drink in some mindless cult is just a matter of luck!
 - So, I hope we can all agree that it's irrational – and dangerous – to decide what to believe in this haphazard way. Of course, no one can deny that factors like where we're born, how we're raised, what events happen to us and what people we happen to encounter all influence what we end up believing. We're obviously not "pure brains" that think in a rationalistic vacuum. Yet, unless we're willing to resign ourselves to complete fatalism, we must accept that using our reason can and should make a difference in what we believe. And it's this usage, amidst the various chance circumstances of our life, that decides the extent to which our faith is rational or irrational.
 - So, we have to use our brains in deciding what we believe. But does this rule out having faith? My answer is, *not at all*.

• **Faith and Covenantal Trust**

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- Though the view that faith is inherently irrational is quite widespread today, it's not even close to the view of faith espoused in the Bible. The authors of the Bible continually encourage people to use their minds and often appeal to evidence to back up their truth claims. In fact, as widespread as the notion is today, the idea that faith is inherently irrational is a fairly recent novelty. It arose during what's called "the Enlightenment period" (17th and

18th centuries). Under the impact of science, a worldview arose that viewed faith and reason, and thus religion and science, as mutually exclusive.

- This post-Enlightenment view of faith is very different from the biblical view, as I said above. The biblical concept of faith is related to the concept of covenant. Biblically speaking, you have faith when you trust someone to fulfill their covenantal promises toward you. Now, trusting someone always requires that you go beyond evidence. But it doesn't mean that you have to trust someone *in the absence of evidence*, and certainly doesn't mean that you have to trust them *in contradiction to evidence*.
- For example, I trust my (adorable) wife Shelley to honour her marriage vows to me. This is the biblical concept of faith. My faith in Shelley takes me beyond all available evidence, for no one could prove that Shelley will honour her marriage vows. But this doesn't mean that I'm trusting her *without* evidence, — as though she were a total stranger. And it certainly doesn't mean I'm trusting her *against* all available evidence. Both before our marriage and throughout our (wonderful) twenty-seven years of marriage, Shelley has given me a wealth of evidence that she is trustworthy. It's very rational for me to trust her with my life. (Truth be told, I'd be an idiot not to trust her.)
- While many today divorce "religious faith" from the kind of "faith" we have toward spouses and friends, from a biblical perspective they are one and the same. To "have faith" is to simply trust God to be the loving and just God he promises to be. To have faith in the Bible is to trust the people who wrote it and the God who inspired it to truthfully communicate what its meant to communicate. This faith — like the faith I have toward my wife — always takes you beyond the evidence, but no more so than (say) the faith you have toward your spouse, a friend, or a book written by someone whose authority you trust.
- Someone might at this point complain that, while they have evidence that warrants trusting their spouse, a friend, or the author of a certain book, there is no evidence that warrants believing in the Incarnation, or any of the other things Christians typically believe in. To this I would simply respond by asking the reader to study a little more. You may not yet know evidence that (at least to the thinking of many) warrants embracing the Christian faith – just as I didn't know the things that would eventually warrant trusting my (incredible) wife in a marriage covenant. But, I assure you, the evidence is there. (See *Further Resources* and *Recommended Reading* below).

- **Everybody Has Faith!**

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- There's one more thing that should be said about faith. Many people today seem to think that either a person has faith or they don't. Either you're a "believer" or you're not. I think this is a very muddled way of thinking. The truth is, *everybody has faith*. We trust things we can't prove all the time.
 - Several months ago I had an interesting conversation with a bright young man I'll call Dwayne. Dwayne proudly identified himself as a person who "refuses to lean on the crutches of faith" and who is "completely committed to believing only what can be proven by reason and the five senses." Dwayne confidently assured me he had no faith whatsoever.
 - So I asked Dwayne when was the last time he'd flown on a plane. When he told me he'd flown just several weeks earlier, I asked him if he'd first "proven by reason and the five senses" that the plane was safe. Had he given all the pilots a sobriety test, checked every mechanical aspect of the plane to ensure the mechanics had done a good job, double-checked all the baggage as well as the passengers to make sure no weapons or bombs had gotten by

the screeners, etc.? Of course, Dwayne had done none of these things, which allowed me to humbly point out that, as a matter of fact, Dwayne had exercised faith. He had gone beyond what "reason and the five senses" could prove and had placed his trust in the airline he was flying (along with the pilots, the mechanics, the baggage screeners, and so on).

- This wasn't meant to be a slam on Dwayne, for flight statistics being what they are, it's very reasonable to trust airlines to provide us with safe flights. But it was meant to suggest that people like Dwayne who claim to have no faith are unintentionally kidding themselves. We all live by faith. We have to act on the basis of things we cannot prove.
- Things are no different when we consider so-called "religious" claims (as though these claims were essentially different from other sorts of truth claims – which they really are not). Whatever you believe, you are exercising faith.
- Consider the resurrection, for example. Many people will assume that a person either chooses to have faith that Jesus rose from the dead, as the Gospel authors claim, or that they will choose "not to have faith." But this isn't the most accurate way of posing the dilemma. A more accurate way is to say that either a person will have faith that Jesus rose from the dead, as the Gospel authors claim, or they will have faith that he did not rise from the dead. You see, the second conclusion is just as much an article of faith as is the first. No one can prove with certainty that the Gospel records are reporting accurate history, but neither can anyone prove with certainty that the Gospel records are legendary or fabrications. So whatever you conclude, you're going to base your life -- and perhaps your life to come, if the Bible knows what it's talking about — on something you cannot strictly prove. That is faith.
- Of course, to say that you can't prove a certain belief is not to say that you can't have evidence and other compelling reasons for your belief. And this brings us back full circle on this question we're wrestling with. Whether you believe Jesus rose from the dead or that he didn't rise from the dead, you're letting your faith be determined by sheer chance except to the degree that you think critically about what you believe and why you believe it.
- So, is faith inherently irrational? The answer is, *not if you think about it.*

- **Further Resources**

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- *Is (Christian) Faith Delusional?* by Ravi Zacharias
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z_9Cb9e8Hrk&list=PL093CFE20E161505D

- See Prof. William Lane Craig speak on "Reasons to Believe We Have a Reasonable Faith":
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xn5B0J9t2tQ>

- **Recommended Reading**

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- *Letters From a Skeptic* by Greg Boyd
Lord or Legend? by Greg Boyd & Paul Eddy
Reasonable Faith by William Lane Craig
Intellectuals Don't Need God and Other Modern Myths by Alister McGrath
Proper Confidence: Faith, Doubt and Certainty in Christian Discipleship by Lesslie Newbigin
The Gospel in a Pluralist Society by Lesslie Newbigin