

*A Faith of Your Own*

Naming What You Really Believe

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**WJK** WESTMINSTER  
JOHN KNOX PRESS  
LOUISVILLE • KENTUCKY

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## *Introduction*

I was leading a Bible study in a local congregation and our focus was on a passage of Scripture that presented a particular view of Jesus Christ. A layperson tentatively raised a hand and said, “I am troubled by this image of Jesus . . . [long pause, and then, tentatively] . . . Do I have to believe it?” Without intentionally thinking through my response, I reported that the New Testament itself contains multiple interpretations of Jesus, and the history of the church produced even more. I summarized several prominent pictures, and briefly indicated my own stance and why I hold it. The person who had raised the question leading to this discussion again put up a hand. “I’ve never heard this kind of explanation before. I didn’t know it was possible to believe these other ways. . . . [Another pause] . . . Now I have to figure out what *I* really believe.”

### THE PURPOSE: TO HELP YOU NAME A FAITH OF YOUR OWN

When leading this Bible study, I stumbled into a way of helping laypeople come to greater clarity about what they *really* can believe. Using a similar approach over several years in many local congregations, I have found that people often identify their own deepest convictions when exposed to multiple ways of understanding God, Christ, the Holy Spirit, and other key elements of Christian faith. This book takes that approach for people who want to name a faith of their own in dialogue with multiple possibilities.

Few Christians arrive at a set of beliefs that they can then set in stone for the rest of their lives. What we believe evolves in response to insights into the Bible, to questions, to changes in life circumstances, or to things that happen in the larger world. A faith is a living thing. Nevertheless, Christians often find it helpful to identify what they can most fully believe at a given moment. Such moments of recognition can both

empower the present and lead us toward the future. Such a moment can also be a milestone from which to gauge further developments.

Most books of this kind seek to persuade readers that one particular interpretation of Christian faith is the best one. By contrast, this volume surveys possibilities for belief without trying to insist that one particular viewpoint is the true one. Of course, my proclivities are evident, but I try to present all perspectives clearly and respectfully. Readers have to choose what notions (here or elsewhere) make the most sense to them.

## THE CONTENTS OF THIS BOOK

This book is divided into nine chapters, each focusing on a topic central to Christian faith.<sup>1</sup> Chapter 1 deals with the background issue of the resources we use when developing a faith. Subsequent chapters focus on specific core elements: God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, the Trinity, God's ultimate purposes, what the church is to be and do, evil, and Christianity and other religions. This list is not comprehensive but it does cover basic issues.

Each chapter follows a similar format. The first section sets out leading ways the topic is understood in the Bible. The second section identifies important ways the church has interpreted the topic in our history since the Bible. The third section lifts up contemporary perspectives. The reader can then make a judgment as to which viewpoints seem more and which less persuasive. The chapters end with questions for reflection that can be used by individuals or small groups.

I try to write in everyday English. Occasionally, I introduce and explain a word from the rarefied language of academic discourse.<sup>2</sup> This book does not contain a lot of scholarly apparatus such as footnotes and quotations as I have drawn mainly on ideas that are commonplace in Christian circles.

## WHAT IS AT STAKE?

Why is it important to be clear about what we believe (and what we do not)? Because what we believe determines not only how we see God, ourselves, others, and the world, but also what we expect from God and from ourselves and from the world. What we believe determines how

we pray and how we act. When I pray, for instance, what can I count on God to do? Moreover, what we believe shapes the kind of world for which we work. When we lie dying, what we believe determines how we approach what comes next.

We tend to become like the things that we believe. Indeed, we often embody what we believe. If we believe in a large, loving, compassionate, generous God, then we become large, loving, compassionate, and generous people. If we believe in a small, rigid, legalistic God, then we tend to become small, rigid, and legalistic.

By the end of this book, I hope you will be able to articulate your own deepest convictions. With a clear set of convictions in hand, you can compare and contrast your faith with that of others. You can develop a sense of where you connect with others, and where you differ from them. You can get a sense of what is compelling about your faith, and where you continue to have questions. But a faith is not something you put in a box and tape shut. As already noted, a faith is a living set of relationships and ideas that sometimes change in response to new circumstances.

## MORE THAN CREATING A FAITH IN YOUR OWN IMAGE

A friend with whom I discussed this book pointed to a possible unintended consequence. “It sounds as if you are setting up a cafeteria line of beliefs so that people can go through and pick up a faith they like. People can just create faith in their own images.” I reply in three ways.

First, the Bible itself does something similar by letting different theological viewpoints sit alongside one another, implicitly putting the reader in the position of having to identify the perspectives that make more and less sense. Indeed, the different thinkers in the Bible sometimes critique one another.

Second, statements of doctrine, theology, or faith are always matters of interpretation. This book encourages laypeople to recognize possibilities, to compare and contrast them, and to select the one(s) that are most promising.

Third, this book seeks to raise the process of naming a faith to a conscious, self-aware level and to recognize what we gain and what we lose by making different choices. These pages encourage a broad range of our conversation partners so that we are not limited to talking with ourselves. Conversation with the Bible, with Christian tradition, and

with interpreters in our own world can enrich the conversation so that what we believe is more than rote reflection of the Bible, tradition, or our present values and behaviors.

### AWARENESS THAT IS HARD TO NAME: FEELING AND INTUITION

This book urges you to name—as specifically as possible—your deepest religious convictions. It pushes you toward perception at the conscious level, but it cannot address awareness at the levels of intuition and feeling. On the one hand, there are dimensions of life that are deeper than our conscious verbal awareness. As a friend of mine entitled a book, we have knowledge that is *Too Deep for Words*.<sup>3</sup>

On the other hand, my impression is that many people use the realm of feeling as an excuse to quit thinking before they have really tried to work through an issue. In Bible study classes, for example, people often get to the edge of a difficult issue and say, “Oh, that idea is a mystery. We cannot understand it.” Not long ago, I asked a student why that student believed a certain thing, and the student said, “I know that I know that I know.” This student had a feeling, and that was the end of the discussion. But the student had the capability of thinking much more deeply about the subject, and I tried to push the student toward deeper theological water. There are moments in life when intuition and feeling are not enough. We need to know what we believe and why we believe that way. In a similar way, this little book tries to help you say more clearly what you believe and why you believe it.

## *Resources for Developing a Faith*

Before jumping into the content of what we believe, a prior matter comes to the surface: How do we develop a faith? What are the sources of what we believe? How do we work with those sources to articulate a faith that is compelling?

My colleague Helene Russell uses the expression “embedded faith” or “embedded theology” to speak of the beliefs that most people take for granted. As you begin reading this book, you have some ideas about God, Christ, the Holy Spirit, the church, and the world. Some of these ideas may have come from the Bible and the teaching of the church, while others may have come from places as diverse as a media preacher, local religious customs, or conversation at a coffee klatch. Ideas from such sources become embedded in your mind and heart.

The agenda of this chapter is to identify the sources that people in the world of the Bible and in the church have most often used to clarify what they believe. You will probably recognize some ideas from your embedded theology, but you may also discover some resources you had not considered or may get a fresh angle of vision on some resources you have known and used.

## SOURCES OF RELIGIOUS INSIGHT IN THE WORLD OF THE BIBLE

The church has often said that the Bible is our most important source of religious insight. Less often noticed is the fact that within the world of the Bible, people drew on different resources for understanding God and life. Three are particularly important: direct communication from God, wisdom, and tradition.

### Direct Communication from God

The Bible pictures God (or representatives from God) communicating directly with people. This scenario occurs in both the Old and New Testaments. Such a picture first occurs in the Bible in Genesis 3:8–19, when God spoke with Eve and Adam in the Garden of Eden much as one person speaks with another, to confront them with the fact that, by eating the forbidden fruit, they had violated God's one prohibition. Biblical authors indicate that the word of God came to particular people such as Jonah, Micah, and Zechariah (Jonah 1:1; Mic. 1:1; Zech. 1:1). At the baptism God spoke directly from heaven: "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased" (Matt. 3:17).

The Bible also portrays God communicating directly with people through dreams and visions. For example, at the age of seventeen, Joseph dreamed of his future relationship with his siblings (Gen. 37:4–11). In the book of Acts, Cornelius and Peter have a double vision. The Gentile Cornelius is told to send for Peter. The next day, Peter received a vision of a large sheet containing both clean and unclean creatures and the command, "Get up, Peter; kill and eat" (Acts 10:1–16).

The biblical writers sometimes portray the Holy Spirit communicating directly with people. The Old Testament speaks of the Spirit "coming upon" people and directing them (e.g., Judg. 3:10; 2 Chr. 15:1). The Spirit anointed both the words and actions of Isaiah and Jesus (Isa. 61:1; Luke 4:18–19). The Spirit spoke through tongues at Corinth (1 Cor. 14:1–5) and gave the book of Revelation to the prophet John (Rev. 1:10; 4:2).

Today's reader may think that the ancient community unquestioningly accepted all such things. First John, however, cautions, "Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world"



(1 John 4:1). The community should not simply accept such messages, but should test the degree to which they seem authentic.

### **Awareness That Arises from Reflection on Experience (Wisdom)**

In the Bible, the wisdom tradition is centered in the books of Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes. The materials assume that God planted clues to the divine purpose in nature and in life experience. God implanted the wisdom needed to know God's character and designs. We can discover the divine purposes by reflecting upon nature or upon experience.<sup>1</sup> Proverbs admonishes, "Go to the ant, you lazybones; consider its ways, and be wise" (Prov. 6:6). The industry of the ant is a model for the human being.

Parents were to teach wisdom at home, and sages (wisdom teachers) taught wisdom in schools. For example, the writer of Proverb exhorts, "Hear, my child, your father's instruction, and do not reject your mother's teaching" (Prov. 1:8). "The teaching of the wise is a fountain of life" (Prov. 13:14).

Some wisdom writings evaluate traditional teaching according to real life experience and conclude that the tradition is mistaken. The book of Deuteronomy, for instance, teaches that the obedient are blessed and the disobedient are cursed. The book of Job charges that this way of thinking is oversimplified. When the book of Job begins, Job is blameless, but through no disobedience on his part, Job's life collapses. One point of the book is that in real life experience, we observe that the obedient sometimes suffer for reasons not of their own making. Experience calls a conventional theological affirmation into question.

### **Discerning God's Purposes through Dialogue with Traditions**

People in the world of the Bible most often turned to sacred traditions to help name God's presence and purposes. They did not have the complete Bible as we know it, but communities in those days often regarded particular traditions as reliable guides.<sup>2</sup> For example, before the exile, the people of Israel had come to regard the stories of Sarah and Abraham and their children, the narrative of the exodus and the making the covenant at Sinai and the entry into the promised land as pivotal traditions.

Later generations drew on these traditions to make theological sense of their situations. Isaiah, for instance, interpreted the return from the exile as a second exodus (Isa. 43:14–21). When faced with a group in Corinth who did not believe in a future resurrection or final judgment, Paul cited one of the oldest traditions about Jesus as the basis for pleading with the Corinthians to recognize that they too can be raised if they live faithfully and ethically in the present (1 Cor. 15:3–4). As we see in Matthew 5:17–20, the Law and the Prophets were widely regarded as authoritative in Jewish life.

A key point, however, is that the biblical communities did not just apply traditions from one generation to the next but interpreted the traditions. Jeremiah and the leaders of the temple, for instance, had competing interpretations of the covenant (Jer. 7:1–8:3; 26:1–6). At the time of Jesus, rabbi (teacher) Hillel said the grounds for divorce were liberal, whereas rabbi Shammai said that divorce was permissible only because of sexual infidelity. Mark portrays Jesus forbidding divorce altogether (Mark 10:1–12).

In the biblical period, interpreters sometimes differed with the tradition. Matthew adapts Mark's teaching on divorce to allow divorce on the grounds of unchastity (Matt. 5:27–30). Prior to Ezekiel, a common teaching was "The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge," meaning that the curse upon one generation for violating the covenant would be passed to subsequent generations. Ezekiel, however, concluded that that proverb "shall no longer be used in the land of Israel." Instead, "It is only the person who sins that shall die" (Ezek. 18:1–4). Within the world of the Bible itself, then, tradition was not a fixed deposit, but was a starting point for communities in each generation to converse regarding how they should understand God's purposes in their moment.

## SOURCES OF RELIGIOUS INSIGHT IN THE HISTORY OF THE CHURCH

From the time of the Bible to the Enlightenment in the late 1700s and early 1800s, the church turned for religious insight to the traditions of the church, the Bible, philosophy, general experience, and direct communication.

## Church Traditions

I begin with traditions rather than the Bible because many Christians functionally regard tradition as more authoritative than the Bible. Even if they do not say so directly, many people read the Bible through their traditions. I speak in the plural, “traditions,” to emphasize that the church has always been a community of multiple (and sometimes differing) voices.

The largest single voice in the Western church is represented by the tradition extending from the Apostles’ Affirmation (or Creed) (second century CE) to the Nicene Affirmation (325 and 381 CE) and the Chalcedonian formulation (451 CE). Councils of the church thus set out what they thought congregations must believe concerning God, Christ, the Spirit, the church, and other elements of Christian life.

Even churches that do not formally use these statements often regard the faith that they summarize as normative. Yet in every generation (including our own), leaders of the church need to explain and even defend these materials. These affirmations can be interpreted in multiple ways. Thus it is not enough simply to say, “I believe in the faith summarized in the Apostles’ Affirmation of Faith.” One must specify what it means to say, as in the Nicene Affirmation, “We believe in one God.” One must specify what it means to say, “I [We] believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ.” Some Christians take exception to elements of these affirmations.

Furthermore, most Christian movements have developed their own particular affirmations of faith, nearly always in line with tradition set in motion by the Apostles’ Affirmation of Faith. For example, many Roman Catholic parishes regard the Catechism of the Catholic Church (1994) as a summary of Catholic doctrine. Many Reformed churches regard the Westminster Shorter Catechism (1647) in much the same way. However, contemporary Presbyterians continue to interpret the meaning of this and other historic affirmations of the Reformed traditions. Some churches eschew official affirmations of faith but still have traditions that informally function as authoritative.

Readers of this book need to become aware of the historic traditions that lie behind their own church. To what degree do you draw on the official and unofficial aspects of your tradition in voicing your own faith?

## The Bible

The Bible is the one source to which virtually all Christians turn for insight into what to believe. The Bible contains stories that are fundamental to Christian identity and give the church much of its language. Many Christians want a faith anchored in the Bible. For example, perhaps the most important notion to my own faith is that God is love. I discovered this idea in the Bible. Church teaching helped me understand it more fully.

At key moments in the history of the church, the Bible has sparked renewal. For instance, Martin Luther's rediscovery of the doctrine of justification by grace alone began the Protestant Reformation.

However, using the Bible as a source was not (and is not) always as simple as it sounds. With the help of the image of a time line, we can see a complicating factor. The last of the Bible books were written about 110 CE. The traditions of the church continued to develop. The church often stood in its present and looked back to the Bible *through* the lens of church doctrine or some other concern. For example, many churches interpreted the Bible through the Apostles' and Nicene Affirmations of Faith. Instead of listening to the Bible in its own voice, people in the church sometimes read later church doctrine in the Affirmations into the Bible.

We can see this process in the histories of many churches. For example, the Roman Catholic Church has always drawn on the Bible as a guide, but has often regarded the doctrine of the church as the guide to reading the Bible. While Luther professed that the Bible alone should be the source of the church's faith, the Lutheran Church formulated the heart of its faith in the Heidelberg Catechism (1563), and today many Lutherans use that catechism as a window into the Bible. Even churches that do not subscribe to formal affirmations of faith (such as my own Christian Church [Disciples of Christ]) read the Bible through informal doctrinal ideas.

Moreover, in the history of the church, and today, Christians sometimes find certain parts of the Bible more appealing or instructive than others. For example, the prophets Isaiah and Micah declare that God will cause the peoples to "beat their swords into plowshares" (Isa. 2:4; Mic. 4:3). Joel, however, advises the nations to "beat your plowshares into swords" to serve as agents of God's judgment (Joel 3:10). The first saying is a staple of Christian consciousness. I do not ever remember

hearing the latter cited in a Christian assembly. Here the church prefers one part of the Bible to another.

## **Philosophy**

Philosophy is a source for understanding what the church believes, especially what the church believes about God. During the period of the Bible, Jewish and Christian writers made some use of Greek philosophical concepts, but the core of biblical ideas originated in Jewish thought. As the church moved into the Gentile sphere, the church's leaders increasingly drew on Greek philosophy, especially Plato and Aristotle, to help explain Christian faith. Indeed, some Christian writers essentially translated the Christian message into categories of Greek philosophy. For example, some Christians presented God as an Unmoved Mover along the lines of Aristotle's philosophy.

On the one hand, this development had the effect of helping people in Greek culture more readily understand and embrace Christian faith. On the other hand, interpreting Christian doctrine in Greek categories did change some core Christian ideas.

## **God Reveals God's Purposes in Nature (Natural Theology)**

Some Christians believed that the capacity to understand things of God lies naturally within the human mind and is present in nature, where the human mind can observe it. While this line of reasoning is similar to that of the wisdom tradition in the Bible, those who follow it often ground their perspective more philosophically than biblically. Its most famous proponent, Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274 CE), drew heavily on Aristotle to argue that human beings were born with the natural ability to understand important religious themes without special revelation, and that the human community can establish truth through reason. On the basis of reason, for example, people can deduce that God exists. A community can have confidence that its thoughts concerning God and the world are reliable when those ideas cohere with the Bible and the tradition of the church. But natural theology cannot provide the community with awareness of the nuances of Christian

doctrine and life. Natural theology, for instance, cannot alert human beings to the doctrine of the Trinity.

In the history of the church—and today—some Christians resisted the idea of natural theology. They have claimed that the world (including the human mind) is so stained by sin that we can trust only sources of religious insight that God has revealed, the most reliable of which is the Bible, followed by orthodox Christian teaching.

Nevertheless, even those who reject natural theology in favor of revealed theology hold that one's beliefs must be internally consistent. A faith cannot contradict itself.

### **Direct Communication from God**

Some people in the history of the church, such as mystics, believed that they received direct revelations from God. Catherine of Siena (1347–80 CE), for example, went into the cloister, where she had a series of visions of hell and heaven that pointed to universal salvation. She believed that God told her to leave the monastery and take up a public ministry. Except for movements like the Society of Friends (Quakers) for whom direct communication is central, people in the history of the church largely regarded direct communication as unusual. In fact, some people did not recognize the validity of claims to direct communication from God.

## **SOURCES OF RELIGIOUS INSIGHT TODAY**

In the contemporary era, we continue to find the Bible, tradition, direct communication, and experience as partners in the search for an authentic faith, while adding the scientific worldview and popular religion.

### **The Bible**

Most people in the Christian movement these days believe that the Bible contains valuable perspectives on God and the religious life. But people have different understandings of the Bible and how to use it. Today's believers need to know where they stand, because the different perspectives call for using the Bible in different ways.

Some people (religious conservatives, sometimes known as fundamentalists and evangelicals) believe (a) that God inspired the Bible, (b) that all the contents of the Bible are internally consistent, and (c) that the contents of the Bible are universally valid in every time and place. Those who want to draw from the Bible need simply to understand what the Bible says and then to apply it to today.

Others (sometimes known as progressives) think that human beings wrote the biblical materials to interpret the divine presence and leading. They regard the Bible less as a single book and more as a library of different interpretations. They see the biblical authors as writing to their own particular moments in history. Consequently, when using the Bible, today's interpreter needs to sort through the elements in a biblical passage that may have lasting value and elements that were important in the ancient world but that are less so (or not so) today.

I have found that a lot of laypeople seek a viewpoint somewhere between these two poles. However, as a friend said, "This middle position is just too muddy." Most people incline more toward either the conservative or the progressive position.

In Bible study groups, I encounter people who do not have a clear idea of the nature of the Bible or how to use it. They have the feeling they should respect the Bible. They would like to think the Bible agrees with them on religious and ethical matters. They may know a few passages or verses or phrases, but they do not know how to bring those materials into dialogue with the church today.

Some people today disregard the Bible because they view it as hopelessly antiquated or as permeated with male superiority, slavery, tribalism, violence, and other abusive elements.

## Tradition

Some in the church continue to regard the orthodox Christian tradition represented by the Apostles' Affirmation of Faith as tightly defining what Christians must believe. People in this tradition claim this faith as their own.

Others regard the tradition represented by the Apostles' Affirmation as containing wisdom that needs to be updated in expression and (for some) even in theological content. Consequently, in the last forty years many churches that use affirmations of faith have brought out new

statements. For instance, in 1983, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) brought out "A Brief Statement of Faith."

Quite a few people in our time long for connection with historic expressions of Christian faith. Thus, we find interest in churches with historic liturgies and dress, walking the labyrinth, and following the Christian year (Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, Pentecost, Ordinary Time). A movement has arisen that urges Christians to cultivate historic Christian practices, believing that if we do things over and over, Christian practices will eventually become our intuitive way of life.

A growing number of people seek a version of Christian faith that is less interested in institutions and more focused on relationship, community, and mission. These groups sometimes give relatively little formal attention to the Apostles' Affirmation per se, but they tend to share its faith.

### **Direct Communication from God**

Many Christians in the contemporary era believe that God directly communicates in modes already discussed. Pentecostals, for instance, believe that they have a direct experience of the Holy Spirit, especially in tongues, in visions, and in messages that are as straightforward as an article in the newspaper. Pentecostal churches typically believe that God's contemporary messages are consistent with Scripture. Indeed, messages that go against the Bible may be declared inauthentic.

### **Experience**

Some Christians today continue the emphases of natural theology discussed in the previous chapter. Many Christians are inspired to think of God by the splendor or interrelatedness of nature. Echoing natural theology and wisdom, but going a step farther, some Christians believe they can apprehend God through experience. They surmise that since God is always present, we can become aware of God's presence and leading in any moment. Some such people believe that God speaks through contemporary leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr. Some people believe that by engaging in meditative practices, or by otherwise becoming open to God, the thoughts and feelings that come to them



are from God. I have an acquaintance, for instance, who, struggling with how to understand an ethical issue, lay down under a tree and attempted to become open to God. This person concluded that the feeling of peace that accompanied a certain perception must have indicated God's approval. Needless to say, the community that follows this way of thinking faces the question of criteria: What gives such a person the confidence that a feeling, or even a verbal statement that may come to mind, is from God?

### Scientific Worldview

The scientific worldview became widespread during and after the Enlightenment (beginning in the early eighteenth century). This view holds that a community can accept as true only things that can be verified by the senses. By means of such investigation, scientists identify laws by which the universe operates.<sup>3</sup> Of course, the Bible and traditional Christian doctrine contain stories and ideas that violate scientific laws.

The church today is divided regarding how to relate the Bible, tradition, and contemporary belief with the scientific worldview. Some argue that the Bible is inspired and, therefore, true. The events in the Bible thus took place according to God's supernatural intervention—the opening of the Red Sea during the exodus from Egypt, for instance, took place as reported.

Other Christians note that many stories in the Bible (and some affirmations of Christian tradition) violate the scientific worldview. They cannot be factually verified. Indeed, such texts reflect prescientific worldviews and are expressed in the language and imagery that were meaningful in their original contexts. While the surface level of a text or doctrine may not seem plausible according to the scientific worldview, the interpreter can often identify a deeper purpose of the text that does not depend on the scientific accuracy of the text. For example, while the exodus may not have taken place exactly as described, the text shows that God intends to liberate people from slavery.

In recent years, a Christian movement has argued that the church does not need to concern itself with the ways in which the Bible or beliefs do not satisfy scientific criteria. Indeed, to use scientific criteria to verify the Bible is to let a source outside the Christian house become the source of authority for those within the Christian community.

Instead, we should view the Bible as lifelike material that, similar to great novels, can guide us in life even if specific details cannot be factually verified. For example, the story of the exodus shows that God seeks to open the Red Seas that block our paths to freedom.

### Popular Religious Expressions

A lot of people pick up beliefs from popular religious expressions such as the ones that I mentioned at the beginning of the chapter—preachers in the media, local beliefs, or a coffee klatch. You may be driving down the highway and get hooked into a sermon being broadcast on the radio. People in your area may have latched onto a particular set of Bible verses that they pass around and around and around: these verses effectively become a Bible within the Bible. Your neighbor who comes over every day for coffee may bring along some religious ideas she picked up: the general body of religious platitudes that are passed from person to person in our culture. Less consciously you may encounter such things as bumper stickers, lapel pins, wall hangings, greeting cards, Aunt Jenny's constant refrain of "Prayer changes things," singing "God Bless America," or the prayer offered at high school commencement.

Sometimes we consciously embrace ideas in popular religious expression. Sometimes, however, they filter into our wells of religious perception apart from our conscious awareness.

Some of these ideas are consistent with the best religious thinking in the Bible and the tradition, and gleaned from natural theology and experience. But some of these ideas do not measure up to the fullness of Christian understanding. I think, for instance, of people who regard their nation as an idol, or who regard the purpose of Christian faith as motivating people to be good capitalists, or who believe that God wills for certain kinds of people to live in poverty. Consequently, we need to become aware of how we are influenced by popular religious expression so we can draw on it when appropriate but can still criticize it when necessary.

### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. As you begin this study, what are the leading ideas in your embedded faith?

2. Do you draw on the Bible as you think about your faith? Which attitudes toward the Bible in this chapter do you find most attractive? Why? Which attitudes do you find not so attractive?
3. Do you draw on tradition as you consider what you believe? Think especially about the Apostles' and Nicene Affirmations of Faith and your denomination's statements of faith. If so, what do you find compelling in this material? What do you find not so compelling?
4. Do you draw on the natural world, your own experience, and your ability to reason as you aim to articulate what you take most seriously in the realm of faith? If so, how do you make use of this material? In particular, what do you do when the tradition says one thing, but your experience seems to tell you something else?
5. How do you regard the scientific worldview relating to faith? If you take the scientific worldview into account, how do you do so?
6. Which resources do you find most authoritative? What makes them so?
7. How do you bring the Bible, tradition, experience, and the scientific worldview into dialogue with one another as you seek to name what you believe?