

Simple Sundays

What Do I Believe?



What Do I Believe?

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Where Do My Beliefs Come From and How Do I Know They're Legitimate? *Galatians 1:11-17*

Main Idea

Our beliefs are shaped by our families and friends as well as media, culture, education, where we live, and so on. We trust that the Holy Spirit is at work in all of these forces, but there's still a lot of sifting, questioning, and testing to be done. Introduce participants to the process of discernment, giving them tools to help in the ongoing struggle to grow in faith.

You Will Need

Bibles, index cards, pens

Faith Statement

The grace of faith, whereby the elect are enabled to believe to the saving of their souls, is the work of the Spirit of Christ in their hearts; and is ordinarily wrought by the ministry of the Word: by which also, and by the administration of the sacraments, and prayer, it is increased and strengthened.

—Westminster Confession of Faith (6.078)

Background

The apostle Paul, one of the most influential figures in the early history of the Christian church, was an energetic and well-traveled missionary in the middle of the first century A.D. Among the many Christian communities he established in the lands surrounding the Mediterranean Sea was a network of congregations in Galatia, now part of Turkey.

Paul wrote his letter to the Galatians in response to a crisis. You need not read very far to become aware that Paul was quite angry about something. The burning issue was that after Paul left Galatia to continue his missionary work in other places, some new missionaries moved in and began teaching the Galatians that what they had learned from Paul was incomplete.

These missionaries, like Paul, were Jews who had embraced Jesus Christ as Messiah. Unlike Paul, however, they taught the Galatians, who were not formerly Jews, that to be accepted by God, they must observe Jewish law—including strict dietary requirements and circumcision for men. These other missionaries (whose identities remain unknown) considered Paul's gospel to be inadequate. Paul, in their view, had no right to relax the requirements of Jewish law.

Paul doesn't take these charges lying down. He lashes out at the agitators, claiming that they "want to pervert the gospel of Christ" (1:7), and launches into a spirited defense of his teaching. In so doing, he first establishes his credentials as an apostle (vv. 11-12).

Paul goes on to share some autobiographical details before returning to his main point: God had set him apart before he was born and called him through direct revelation of Christ to "proclaim [Christ] among the Gentiles" (v. 16). Over and over, Paul hammers home the point that his calling to faith and ministry came not from human sources but directly from God in Christ. Or, to put it in the context of the questions for this session, Paul's beliefs come from God, and that's how he knows they're legitimate! (And we have more in common with Paul than we might think.)

You and Your Youth

A young person's first reaction to Paul's account of his own coming to faith may well be something like this: Sure, if Jesus would appear to me in person, I'd be confident in my faith, too! As you explore this Scripture passage together, it will be essential to help participants see that although most of us don't experience direct revelations of Christ, we do have some things in common with Paul. Like Paul, we are "set . . . apart" and "called . . . through [God's] grace" (v. 15). Moreover, Christ is revealed to us in more ways: through Scripture, through prayer, in community with other believers, and even (gasp!) in church.



Enter

Learn names, encourage interaction, and laugh together as the session begins.

Earliest Memory

Index cards, pens

Give each participant an index card and a pen. Have the participants write their earliest memory. Collect, shuffle, and redistribute the cards so that no one has his or her own card. Invite the youth to read the memories on their cards and have the group figure out whom each memory belongs to. Then, reflect on how each memory demonstrates a character trait that can still be recognized in that person.

Explain to the group that each person's experiences contribute to his or her identity. Discuss:

- What are your earliest memories or thoughts relating specifically to faith and God?
- How has your faith changed since you were a child? How has your faith not changed since you were a child?
- Who or what has been the most noteworthy influence (positive or negative) on your faith and beliefs?
- Do you ever have doubts about whether your beliefs are legitimate or "correct"? If so, what sorts of doubts have you had?

Opening Prayer

Gracious God, thank you for gathering us together in this place, a safe place where we can share ourselves and delve into the mysteries of a life lived for you. Thank you for the gift of faith and for giving us the freedom to believe in you. As we explore what it means to believe, guide us ever more deeply into the trusting relationship that you desire with each of us. Amen.



Explore

Study the Bible

Bibles

Introduce the apostle Paul using the following information:

- Paul (also known as Saul) was a Jewish man who persecuted Christians (see Acts 7:58—8:3).
- While on the road to Damascus, he had a dramatic conversion experience, which led him to

become a significant leader in the early Christian church (see Acts 9:1–19a).

- The book of Galatians is a letter written by Paul to the followers of Jesus Christ in Galatia. The book marks Paul's attempt to define the Christian movement's mission and identity in the face of some controversial church practices.

Read Galatians 1:11–17. Have each person write one or two sentences summarizing these verses in the space below.

When all are finished, give each person an opportunity to read their summaries to the rest of the participants. Discuss:

- Why might Paul have felt it was necessary that his beliefs came directly from God?
- Why might it have been important for Paul to tell the Christians in Galatia that his beliefs came directly from God?

Ask a volunteer to read the faith statement (Westminster Confession of Faith, 6.078). Discuss:

- In what ways does the faith statement connect with Paul's claims and experience? In what ways does it differ?
- Would Paul approve of the faith statement? Why or why not?
- What guidance does this faith statement provide for clarifying, testing, and strengthening our beliefs?

Hear the Call

Bibles

Tell the group that "callings" come in many forms. Whether one actually hears the Lord's voice or receives a calling through a feeling or interaction with other people, all can be valid forms of a call.

In the space below, direct the youth to write in the left column the names of five or more people who are significant in their lives, such as parents, or a sibling, coach, neighbor, teacher, or pastor. In the center

column, direct them to write phrases those individuals say to them about trust or belief, such as "Trust me," "I believe in you," or "God loves you." Now ask them to imagine the tone of voice these people use when they say those words. Tell the youth to think of God and what God might say using that tone of voice. Have them write it in the third column.

People	Phrases	God

Invite teens to do vocal impressions in the appropriate voices, using the callings from the second and third columns. Discuss:

- Which voices "grabbed" you?
- When someone calls out to you, are you more in tune with the tone of voice or with the content of the message? Why?
- In imagining voices for God, which ones seemed silly? Ominous? Frightening? Mystical?
- When God calls you to do or believe something, what "tone of voice" would you prefer? What tone would most motivate you to do what God wants?
- How might the Lord call to you or communicate with you?



Express

These discussions are an opportunity to apply the Scripture to our lives. If you do not relate to these situations, change them to make them relevant to your own life.

Youth Issue

You've heard the word *calling* concerning one's life work or vocation, but during confirmation, you learned that it is not limited to one's life work. The use of the word *calling* to describe an aspect of your faith makes you wonder whether you should have all of your beliefs decided once and for all. Some of your Christian friends seem to have everything about God figured out, but not you.

You schedule a visit with your pastor and ask, "How will I know who God is and what to believe?" Your pastor wrinkles her nose and says, "Sometimes faith is like deciding whether to go right or left. God may be calling you to go left, but how do you know? What do you do?"

How do you respond?

Action Steps

Using their smartphones, have participants create a video of various members of your church family responding to this question: "Where do my beliefs come from and how do I know they're legitimate?" Be sure that the video reflects people of diverse backgrounds and ages. Show the video at an upcoming all-church event or worship service. If possible, upload the video to your congregation's website.



Exit

Closing Prayer

Thank you, Holy One, for the opportunity to explore our faith and the source of our beliefs together. Thank you for this group of believers and thank you for the richness of our conversations. Go with us as we seek to be your hands and feet in the world, being a living example of what it means to believe. Amen.