

# Where Do My Beliefs Come From and How Do I Know They're Legitimate?



Session 1



*Galatians 1:11-17*

## Session Objective






Our beliefs are shaped by our families and friends as well as influences such 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. This session introduces participants to the process of discernment, giving them tools to help in the ongoing struggle to grow in faith.

## 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)

## Session Overview

 Enter	Earliest Memory
 Engage	Option A: Resting with the Question
	Option B: Video Clip—"Mr. Deity and the Skeptic"
 Explore	The Source of Paul's Beliefs
 Express	Option A: Act It Out
	Option B: Banner—Christ in Our Hearts
	Option C: Film Clip— <i>The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring</i>
 Exit	An Offering of Learning



Enhancements

Family Connections  
Congregational  
Connections



For instructions to download Web Resources and the coffeehouse version, see page 1.

## Spiritual Reflection for Leaders

Think about your teenage years. How would you summarize your beliefs (or lack thereof) in those days? What sorts of questions do you remember asking about the legitimacy of your beliefs? Read Galatians 1:11–17 several times and use the following questions for reflection:

- How are your life experiences like or unlike what Paul describes?
- In what ways can you identify with Paul’s description of his “earlier life”? With his post-revelation life?
- How do you feel about Paul’s strong rejection of any human influence over his faith and his ministry? How, if at all, is your faith and ministry different in this regard?

Spend a few moments now in prayer for the participants of your church as they wrestle with the many challenges of life and faith.



## Understanding the Scripture

The apostle Paul, one of the most important 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 into Galatians to become aware that Paul was quite angry about something. The burning issue is 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 originally Jews, that in order 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” (Galatians 1:7), and launches into a spirited defense of his teaching. In so doing, he first establishes his credentials as an apostle—that is, one who has had direct interaction with Christ: “I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel that was proclaimed by me is not of human origin; for I did not receive it from a human source, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ” (Galatians 1:11–12).

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” (Galatians 1:16). 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.)



## Understanding the Faith Statement

The Westminster Confession of Faith arose out of the chaos and violence of the English Reformation in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Delivered to the English Parliament in 1647, the Westminster Confession was the sole confessional document for Presbyterianism in the United States until 1967, when it was incorporated into the *Book of Confessions*, part of the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

The faith statement for this session, which is taken from the Westminster Confession, affirms for all Christians the truth that Paul proclaims in Galatians 1:15: faith is a product of God’s grace that results from “the work of the Spirit of Christ” in the heart (even when it comes not in a blinding flash of light but through the less dramatic means of “the ministry of the Word,” “the administration of the sacraments,” and “prayer”).



## Teaching Today’s Question

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 important to help participants see that although most of us don’t experience direct revelations of Christ, we do have some things in common even with Paul. Like Paul, we are “set apart” and “called . . . through [God’s] grace” (Galatians 1:15). Moreover, Christ is revealed to us in more ways than we might think: through Scripture, through prayer, in community with other believers, and even (gasp!) in church.



## Enter

### Earliest Memory

- Index cards, pens

Give each participant an index card and pen. Have participants record their earliest memory. Collect, shuffle, and redistribute the cards so that no one has his or her own card. Give participants an opportunity to read the memories on their cards and have the group figure out who the 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.



## Engage

### Option A: Resting with the Question

Lead the participants in a conversation that engages the question for this session: "Where do my beliefs come from and how do I know they're legitimate?"

Encourage participants to ask and discuss their own questions that relate to this question or use the following questions to guide the discussion:



- 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 biggest 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?

Pray the opening prayer.

### 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.*

### Option B: Video Clip—“Mr. Deity and the Skeptic”

- Webcast of “Mr. Deity and the Skeptic” (available as a download on iTunes or by searching YouTube for “Mr. Deity and the Skeptic”), video-playing equipment

Explain that, in “Mr. Deity and the Skeptic,” God (Mr. Deity), Jesus (Jesse), and the Holy Spirit (Larry) hear the after-life appeal of an agnostic/skeptic, Michael Shermer, who is seeking to avoid judgment and condemnation. In their conversation, the Trinity and the skeptic discuss belief: where it comes from, how it changes as people grow and have various life experiences, and how it affects the way we live our lives.

*Mr. Deity, a humorous and somewhat irreverent video interpretation of God’s daily task of managing the universe, is an online webcast series. Before viewing the video, make the group aware of Mr. Deity’s irreverence and encourage them to receive “Mr. Deity and the Skeptic” as a humorous tool for examining their own beliefs.*

Watch the video together and explore the following questions:



- What positive lessons does this video teach about belief? What incorrect ideas does it put forward?
- When Jesse questions Michael’s work, Michael replies that he had his doubts about Jesus’ miracles and identity as the Son of God, but appreciated some of Jesus’ teachings. What is your reaction to this perspective?
- In the video, we learn that Michael began to lose his faith when he was in graduate school. Is formal education a help or hindrance to belief?
- How has your faith changed since you were a child? How has your faith *not* changed since you were a child?
- Do you ever have doubts about whether your beliefs are legitimate or “correct”? If so, what sorts of doubts have you had?

Pray the opening prayer.



## Explore

### The Source of Paul’s Beliefs

- Bibles, copies of “Session 1 Faith Statement” (Web Resource 1a), paper, pens

Introduce the apostle Paul using the following information:

- Paul (originally called “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, which marks Paul’s attempt to define the Christian movement’s mission and identity in the face of some controversial church practices.

Make sure each participant has a Bible. Form groups of two or three and give each group a sheet of paper and a pen. Have groups read Galatians 1:11–17. Then, have each group write one or two sentences summarizing these verses. When all are finished, give each group an opportunity to read their summaries to the rest of the participants. Explore the following questions:



- What role does Paul’s conversion play in what he believes?
- From where does Paul claim his beliefs came?
- Why might it have been important to Paul 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?
- In what ways do you resonate (or not resonate) with the source of Paul’s beliefs?

Distribute copies of “Session 1 Faith Statement” (Web Resource 1a). Read the faith statement together quoted from the Westminster Confession of Faith and the paraphrased version of this quotation. Explore the following questions:



- 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?



## Express

### Option A: Act It Out



Digital camera or camcorder (*optional*)

In groups of three or four, have participants work together to create and present a skit that responds to the question: Where do my beliefs come from and how do I know they’re legitimate? Challenge the participants to use any insights gained from Explore in their skits. If possible, record the skits and upload them to your congregation’s website. When all of the skits have been presented, discuss:



- In what ways were the responses to the question similar? In what ways were they different?
- How does your response to this question affect how you live your life?

### Option B: Banner—Christ in Our Hearts

- Newsprint and marker; a 24" x 30" piece of felt for every 2–3 participants; scissors; craft glue; banner-making materials such as sheets of felt of different colors, fabric paints, and ribbon

Write *faith . . . the work of the Spirit of Christ in our hearts* at the top of a sheet of newsprint. Then, lead the group in brainstorming a list of symbols and images that could represent the posted phrase. Form groups of two or three. Have each group create a banner that brings to life the posted phrase using the materials provided.

This activity can be simplified by having groups use newsprint and markers to create posters instead of creating banners.

When all are finished, give each group an opportunity to present their banners to the rest of the participants. If possible, display the banners in your church building for all to enjoy.

### Option C: Film Clip—*The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring*

- Bibles, *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* (2001, PG-13) and movie-viewing equipment

Before the session, preview the following clip from *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring*: 29:20–34:34. This is in chapter 8, when the wise wizard Gandalf confirms his suspicions concerning Frodo's inherited ring, setting Frodo's quest inexorably in motion.

Explain that the film, *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* (part one of J. R. R. Tolkien's epic novel *The Lord of the Rings*), begins the story of Frodo Baggins's quest to destroy the "one ring," the tool with which the evil Sauron plans to take over Middle Earth. The ring has come to Frodo by accident—left to him by his uncle Bilbo, who in turn had found it during earlier adventures.

Watch the clip together and explore the following questions:



- How does Gandalf confirm that Frodo's ring is indeed the "one ring"?
- How is the realization that dawns upon Frodo in the film clip like the one that Paul describes in Galatians 1:15–16?
- One of the aims of this session is to explore the question of how we know that our beliefs are legitimate. How do Frodo and Paul know that their callings are true?



## Exit

### An Offering of Learning

- Index cards, pens, small basket

Give each participant an index card and pen. Have each person write down one thing that he or she learned or thought about differently during the session. When all are finished, gather the group in a circle around the small basket. Give each participant an opportunity to read his or her card out loud before placing the card in the basket.

Pray the closing prayer.

#### **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.*



## Enhancements

Other Ways to Connect with the Session

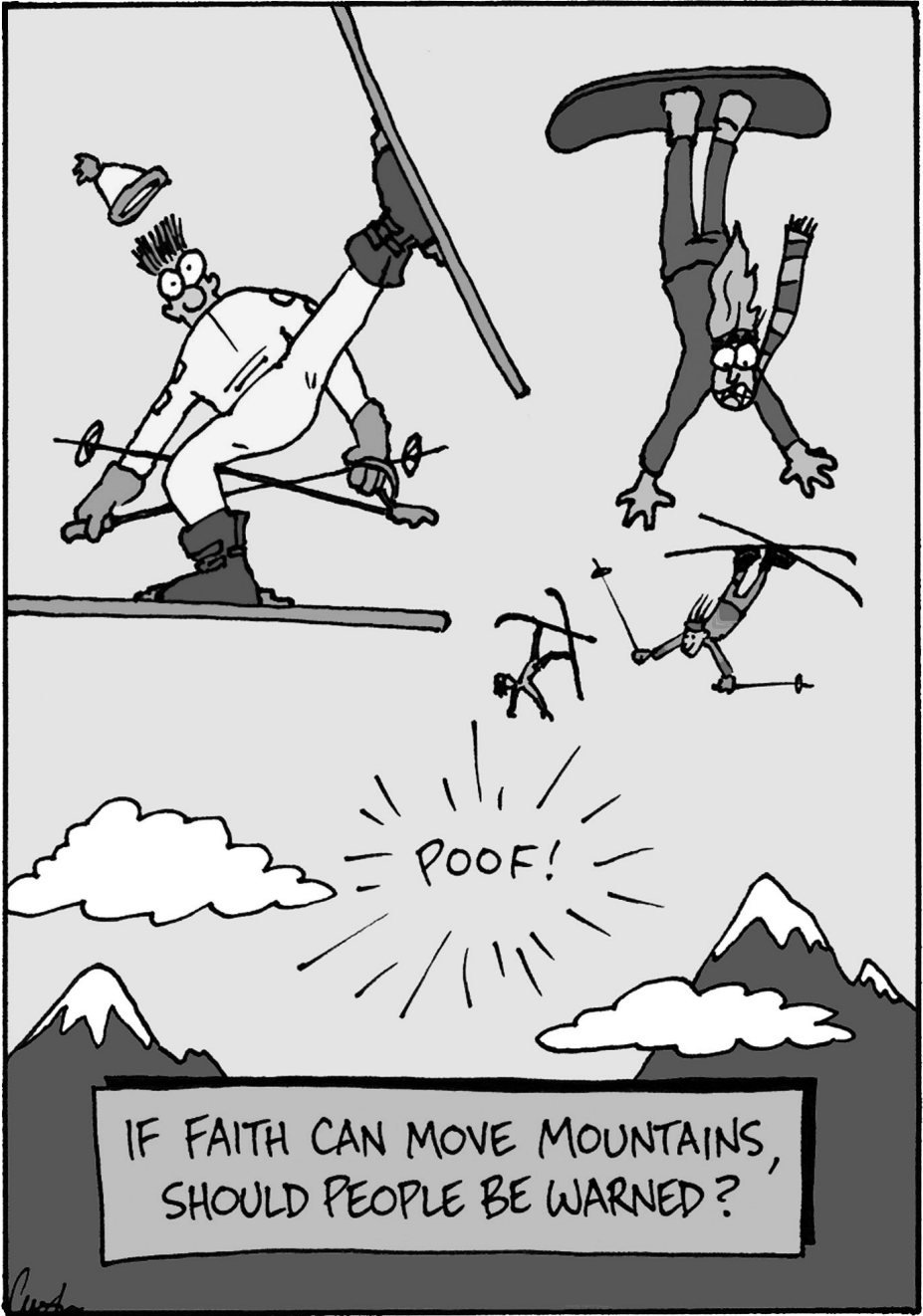
### **Family Connections**

"Family Connections" (Web Resource) has a set of discussion questions for each of the four sessions in this course that families can talk about after each session. Provide each family with a copy of this resource.

### **Congregational Connections**

Have participants create a video of various members of your church family responding to the question: Where do my beliefs come from and how do I know they're legitimate? Be sure that the video reflects people of different 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.





IF FAITH CAN MOVE MOUNTAINS,  
SHOULD PEOPLE BE WARNED?