

SCIENCE AND THE BIBLE

EVIDENCE-BASED
CHRISTIAN BELIEF

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Evidence

TYPES OF EVIDENCE

 EVIDENCE is that which is ground for belief. That which is evident can be seen, or is clear to the mind, or is obvious. Probably the most common idea of evidence is in a case at law, and is the basis for a judgment of innocence, guilt, or not proven. A judge or jury is called upon to decide the nature of an act and its cause, and often to decide the intent of the accused. It may not be the sort of evidence that forms the basis for a religious belief, nor are religious beliefs determined by the equivalent of a judge or jury.

The bases for religious belief relate to an inquiring person, seeking answers to questions such as “Who or what made me?” and “For what purpose?” The evidence considered will start from personal experience, deeply influenced by religious beliefs of family and friends. The evidence of the Bible often takes on a central role and its accounts of historical and other events become important features. The main difference from contemporary evidence is the inability to cross-question the sources. This is also the case in considering evidence of other historical events, with documents from a variety of dates and in different languages. Commentaries on the Bible, and discussions of beliefs, will also provide bases for Christian belief.

An important distinction needs to be recognized between oral testimony given by a particular person, together with documents written by individuals or groups of people, and technologically discovered scientific evidence. The experience that lies behind scientific evidence is nearly always available to all suitably qualified people. It too is communicated by oral testimony and documents but appeal can be made

by the interested person to the phenomena originally observed. There are, however, some unique or very rare events in nature.

Questions about the universe and its formation are part of the search for religious beliefs, and are increasingly being answered by scientific studies. The nature of a Creator God is clearly revealed, in part, by studies of his Creation. In the last six hundred years tremendous discoveries about the nature of the solar system, the basic laws of physics, the evolution of the physical universe, and the evolution of human beings have been made.

Evidence in science relates mostly to observations and experiments that can be repeated anywhere, at any time, but these usually require considerable expertise and sometimes require expensive equipment. Apparatus is designed to extend the powers of direct human observation. Optical microscopes are well-known instruments, but nowadays for some research it is necessary to supplement them with electron microscopes that are able to show individual molecules. Optical telescopes are supplemented by radio-telescopes, with large arrays of aerials for the highest resolution of stellar objects at extreme distances. Microphones for hearing, chemical apparatus for smell and taste, and pressure-sensitive devices for touch also extend the powers of observation of our five senses. An important characteristic of much modern equipment is the automatic recording of the evidence, relatively free from immediate human interpretation, but requiring subsequent careful evaluation.

One aspect of scientific observations that needs to be brought out into the open is the possibility of being mistaken in what is thought to have been seen or heard. This is such a common experience that, once it is identified as something to be aware of, there is usually little difficulty in devising means to avoid or minimize its dangers, at least in serious science. If you know what you are looking for you are more likely to find it, and if you see something that appears to be “new” it needs further study before it is accepted as important or rejected as spurious.

At a deeper level of physics research, there are particles such as neutrinos that are exceptionally difficult to detect and identify; they can

travel from pole to pole of the earth 100,000 million times with only a 50 percent chance of hitting something. The entities known as quarks cannot be observed one by one, but only when bound together in twos or threes. At this point some people ask, "Are such particles real?" This is a particularly relevant question when the particles are hypothetical, some of which are referred to as "virtual" particles, which are vital for the success of new theories. Some critics, both within and outside science, sometimes make much of this and similar questions, which invites the other question, "What is reality?" but I shall not consider such matters in this book.

In a court of law, evidence is submitted by witnesses under oath, who are then open to cross-examination by opposing lawyers. This can be a very demanding experience. By means of penetrating questions, implied distrust, and suggestions of reasonable but untrue alternatives, the task of a jury to determine the "facts" of the case can be made either easier or more difficult, and either way the verdict can be false. Hearsay evidence, statements made out of court by someone not present to testify under oath, is generally excluded in Anglo-American cases, although there are exceptions. One reason for this exclusion is the lack of opportunity to cross-examine the absent person. There are clearly differences between this legal approach to reliable evidence and attempts to establish the reliability of the sort of evidence usually encountered in studies of historical events, and in the reported events and sayings of the Bible and other sacred texts.

Oral evidence usually involves individual experiences of that person and, in contradistinction to scientific evidence, no other person can expect or claim to have the same identical experience. It may be very similar, and be expressed in similar words, but this achieves little of the universality and repeatability of experiences in science. Again, documents available as evidence have been written by one or more individuals and have been influenced by the writer's interpretations, and his or her need to select words to convey that evidence, quite apart from errors in transcription. Ancient documents, such as those used to attempt to establish an agreed text for the books of the New Testament, are often available in several versions with alternative readings,

and with omitted or added verses. The evaluation of such evidence is a significant part of biblical scholarship.

In the act of reading documents, in order to establish what the reader considers to be reliable evidence, another layer of individual interpretation enters, in some cases including the difficulties of translations. A great deal of collaborative research may be necessary to reach conclusions that are received and believed by a majority, if indeed such a majority is achievable. This is perhaps nowhere more obvious than in the approach to the Bible and other hallowed writings that are held to be of great importance. The Muslim belief in the need to study Arabic in order to read an agreed text of the Qur'an is easy to appreciate.

The statement "that which is evident can be seen or is clear to the mind" illustrates the need to distinguish between literal and metaphorical interpretations. "Seen" literally means "observed by the eye" but it is also used in relation to the appreciation both of immediate evidence, from whatever source, and conclusions drawn from that evidence, seeing with the mind or the heart. This is a guide and a warning in the evaluation of all sorts of evidence. The use of words that can be taken literally, ambiguously, or metaphorically is common in both theological and scientific statements and can lead to serious disagreements. Evaluation of the meaning of such statements is part of the demanding work of theologians, and spills over into the experience of believers in general. A sensitive appreciation of the richness of metaphor can resolve many of the problems associated with key Christian beliefs.

Scientific documents containing theoretical data and developments have the advantage of including much mathematical material that is almost entirely unambiguous, and most of it is readily understandable by qualified people in all languages. Even so, there remain individual interpretations. Experts do of course sometimes disagree, and further research is needed.

ABSENCE OF EVIDENCE IS NOT EVIDENCE OF ABSENCE

In many situations it is desirable to have more evidence to assist our judgments and consequent decisions. This is particularly so in cases at

law where the required decision is “Guilty” or “Not guilty.” The usefulness of an alternative result, “Not proven,” as in Scottish law, is then obvious. Sometimes provisional decisions need to be revised when extra evidence, supportive or conflicting, is presented. For those previously declared “Not guilty” it is only recently that this has been considered desirable and legal, although, in the United Kingdom, the Court of Appeal has always been used when circumstances change.

Although it could be said that insufficiency of evidence is endemic in science, it has less serious consequences. Final decisions do not feature in science in the way that they do in cases at law. Scientists are forever seeking new evidence, whether to falsify an earlier conclusion or to reinforce earlier observations by repetition or by providing greater accuracy.

Many instances occur in the Bible where we wish there were further evidence. We select one from the Old Testament and one from the New. The clearest example is provided by archaeological studies in Egypt and Palestine relating to David and Solomon. Only in Israel are there references to the name David in archaeological material, and the interpretations of both of the only two items found have been challenged. One, discovered in 1993 at Tel Dan, appears to read “king of Israel” and “king of the house of David,” possibly dating from one hundred years after the time of David. Another inscription is provided by the famous Moabite stone, in the Louvre, with a cast in the British Museum. It was erected by the Moabite king Mesha about 840 B.C.E. (before the Common Era), and was discovered in 1868, but not authoritatively translated until 1994. This stone was broken into over fifty pieces by Bedouin who distrusted negotiators offering to buy it. Some thirty-eight pieces were subsequently tracked down and a tattered paper “squeeze” or “cast,” made before the stone was broken, assisted the reassembly and translation. The phrase “house of David” is achieved by inserting the initial “D” of David in a damaged word but there has been disagreement among the archaeologists and Hebrew scholars. The Moabite stone is important as the earliest evidence of the worship of Yahweh. It also provides confirmation of some of the details of historical events in 2 Kings 3:1–7.

The name Solomon has not yet been discovered outside the Bible, in spite of his international claims to fame. His building of the Temple in Jerusalem, (1 Kings 6–7, 2 Chronicles 3–4), an archaeological site that cannot at present be investigated further, and his marriage to a pharaoh's daughter (of unknown name) are absent from the archaeological evidence. There are many contemporary written records from neighboring countries, but not a single reference to the name Solomon.

In both instances the answer may well be that the two kings were known in archaeological records under different names. We note that the name given to Solomon by the Lord through the prophet Nathan was Jedidiah = “Beloved of the Lord” (2 Sam. 12:25). This is known to be a title or royal coronation name, Daduya. The name for David in the el-Amarna tablets, dated 1020–1000 B.C.E., is Tadia, which is the Hurrian (northern Mesopotamian) title or royal/coronation name given to Elhanan (= David) when he became king in 1011 B.C.E. Later it was Hebraized as Dadua and became the biblical David. It is, of course, possible for new archaeological studies to uncover both well-known names Solomon and David.

Some of the stories about David have found convincing archaeological evidence for their trustworthiness but without the actual name David. Excavations in the 1950s led to the discovery of the pool of Gibeon, in unlikely terrain, the place where David conferred with Abner (2 Sam. 2:13), before defeating him in battle. The pool is remarkable—a stone water-shaft cut into bedrock, twelve meters diameter, eleven meters deep. Nearby jar handles, fifty-six of them, were found with the name “Vineyard of Gibeon,” dated to about four hundred years after David.

The capture of Jerusalem by David (2 Sam. 5:6–8) in 1005 B.C.E. was via a water-shaft. In 1876 a tunnel was discovered which agreed with the biblical descriptions. In 1961 it was shown to have led inside the city from outside the city walls. Unfortunately, not a single sherd of pottery from the time of David has been discovered near the shaft. There is a gap from the Canaanites in the eighteenth century B.C.E. to Israelites in the eighth century B.C.E. Very few eleventh-century potsherds occur elsewhere.

It has been suggested that the Old Testament history has been exaggerated, or in places invented, to bolster national claims or establish an historical basis for the Jewish religion. It can but be repeated, time and again, "Absence of evidence is not evidence of absence."

Our New Testament example of lack of sufficient evidence concerns the Massacre of the Innocents by Herod, and the flight into Egypt. The murder of the innocents who were less than two years old in and around Bethlehem (Matt. 2:16) seems most improbable as it is not mentioned in other histories, including that of Josephus, who was well aware of Herod's cruelty. The flight into Egypt then comes into question being linked to a theological need, "This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, 'Out of Egypt have I called my son'" (Matt. 2:15 and Hosea 11:1), but again there is no supporting evidence.

FACTS

On many occasions reference will be made to the evidence of science or the accepted evidence of science. There will be numerous well-known examples, such as "the earth is spherical and not flat" and "the earth goes round the sun." I shall use the evidence of science with particular reference to what is accepted by the large majority of scientists, often referred to as "scientific facts." It is worth dwelling for a while on this widespread acceptance of most of what is discovered by science, for it is remarkable that the evidence of science is accepted by nearly all people of every race, religion, political persuasion, language, and whatever kind of distinction one might be led to name. There is no other human activity that leads to such universal agreement.

Some critics of science say you cannot rely on the observations and theories of scientists because they are forever making new observations and theories that contradict or augment the earlier ones. Another word ought perhaps to be added to evidence of science, not just accepted but presently accepted evidence of science. This highlights the danger of believing that presently accepted evidence from science has some absolute and everlasting identity and value. Scientists certainly do not

claim such value for their evidence. On the other hand, there are many scientific “facts” that are most unlikely to be changed. The law of gravity propounded by Isaac Newton has never been disproved in innumerable carefully measured events that are commonly encountered, but it is now known that Einstein’s theory of relativity is more precise in certain circumstances such as those involving exceptionally high velocities or energies.

The relevance of this becomes clear when we consider what we are going to do with such evidence, especially in relation to beliefs, and to Christian belief in particular. There is nothing to be ashamed of in admitting that science progresses, nor should it inhibit the use of the accepted evidence of science in pursuing our beliefs. Any judge, human or divine, would expect us to use the best evidence available, and to be prepared to reassess our deductions, including our Christian beliefs, in the light of improved evidence. Again, if scientists indicate that their evidence is so unconfirmed that it is unwise to use it to form the basis for our Christian beliefs, then we have a duty to be extra careful in our use of that evidence.

There is a very real sense in which it can be said that science does not prove anything, although it does provide relevant evidence. Repeated observations in a variety of situations that always lead to the same result certainly increase confidence but they do not prove it to be correct in all circumstances. One single new observation, perhaps in slightly different circumstances, can disprove the generally accepted result. This is reflected in the common belief that a proper scientific theory must always be able to be disproved on the basis of its empirical predictions. This disproof can be achieved by new conflicting observations or by mathematical or logical reasoning.

Some scientific results are liable to be dismissed with the comment, “Of course that is only theoretical!” The word “only” suggests that it is a purely theoretical conjecture, but that is very rarely the case. Analyses of relevant observations sometimes lead to theoretical arguments for the existence of, for example, a new kind of nuclear particle. In many important cases these theoretical proposals have led to the par-

article's discovery in carefully designed experiments. One present-day example is the Higgs particle, which is suggested as the explanation for the masses of particles and has not yet been definitively observed. It is misleading to use the term "theoretical" as if it is less important than direct evidence. Theories that have been exhaustively tested by both experiment and mathematical reasoning, and found to be of value, and especially those that have no competing alternative theories, are surely of great significance. Indeed it is the success of these well-established theories that lends conviction to the use of this theoretical evidence in the shaping of our beliefs.

At this point it is worth recognizing that although scientists have belief in their established theories, they do not cease to try to design experiments to test or disprove some of those theories, knowing that they might have good cause to revise their scientific beliefs in the light of new evidence.

TRUTH

Notice that I have not yet used the word "tru th." Ill-considered use of this word leads to many unnecessary arguments. As a first step in the introduction of tru th I would plead for the use of at least one adjective, such as scientific tru th, or historical tru th, or religious tru th, or tru th decided by a jury. And the same would be to our benefit if corresponding adjectives were also used in relation to evidence—scientific, historical, religious, or legal evidence. I have already indicated that it is clear that present scientific tru th is likely to be modified as science gathers more evidence. The same is true of most other kinds of tru th, excepting perhaps those claimed to be "absolute" tru ths that many people find so difficult to accept and to understand when they are given as part of descriptions of religious tru th. There is never enough evidence to be totally confident in declaring a tru th as "absolute." Such beliefs spring from special study, which is unlikely to be generally available to, or appreciated by, most people. That is not to deny that many people believe in what they would describe as absolute tru ths without being clear as to the

evidence for those absolute beliefs. The question then is “What would they accept as sufficient evidence to cause them to change their beliefs?”

Mathematical truth is sometimes considered to be “absolute,” “necessary,” or “infallible,” but care needs to be exercised in the analysis of the meaning of such claims. We say $2 + 3$ equals 5 and believe it to be absolutely true, and in a sense it is “analytically true,” but only because that is what we mean by 5 . The concepts 2 , 3 , and 5 are made up of units considered to be equal in every way, although no examples of such units are to be found in our world of experience. The theorem of Pythagoras, with the square on the hypotenuse of a right-angled triangle being equal to the sum of the squares on the other two sides, depends on the assumption that the triangle is on a “flat” surface. It is therefore true, but a special case, and does not apply to spherical geometry with a triangle on the surface of a sphere, or to other “non-Euclidean” geometries. The use of “infinities” of one kind or another, including the “infinitesimals” of differential and integral calculus, leads to deeply fascinating philosophical problems. Such usage has been important in the development of scientific theories that appear to interpret many scientific observations. There seems to be an intriguing connection between the abstract ideas of mathematics and the observed patterns of the physical sciences.

One other use of the word “truth” is of interest—in the phrase “self-evident truth.” The best-known example of this is in the American Declaration of Independence, July 4, 1776:


We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.

The original draft by Thomas Jefferson read,

We hold these truths to be sacred and undeniable; that all men are created equal and independent, that from that equal creation they derive rights inherent and inalienable, among which are the preservation of life, and liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

The wordings suggest strongly that these truths are based on religious beliefs. For Cardinal Newman, in his *History of My Religious Opinions to the Year 1833*, there were “two and two only supreme and luminously self-evident beings, myself and my Creator.” These usages come close to Plato’s belief that all our “ideas” are innate including necessary truths. Descartes considered the idea of God to be innate. Others denied the existence of innate ideas.

TYPES OF BELIEF

 HUMAN BELIEFS over the ages have developed from folk beliefs to the wide variety of philosophical, religious and scientific beliefs of today. Folk beliefs included superstitions, witchcraft, ghosts and mythological creatures, divination, omens, magic, and second sight. They have been studied since the middle of the seventeenth century and, although many are discredited, a few people still find them convincing. Some beliefs based on philosophical analyses of traditional ideas of the nature of the universe and the nature of humans are documented from over four thousand years ago.

The beliefs of humans in all areas of their experience, such as art, music, science, and, in particular, religion, need to be considered. It is not always appreciated that science is based on three beliefs that are also held by religious people. The first is that the universe is sufficiently ordered and stable to make science possible. The second is that people are able, with care, to make reliable observations. The third is that people with sufficient training are able to understand, and hence to propose, theories that allow assessment of the interrelation and significance of such scientific observations.

People who have religious beliefs would probably express these three basic human beliefs somewhat differently. First, the universe is created by a God characterized by Order. Second, God invites us to study his universe, including what it is to be human, with a sense of right and wrong, and he both inspires scientists in their work and reveals religious truths to those who seek. The third belief is closely common to the two fields and emphasizes that all religious beliefs involve understanding and require ideally a sufficient level of educa-

tion and training to allow the appreciation of the reasons that led to existing doctrines, the formulation of new or revised doctrines, and the recognition of the significance of any proposed revisions.

A prime question is “Should we be prepared to revise our beliefs in all areas of our experience in the light of new knowledge and understanding?” My answer is a resounding “Yes!” Thereby science, the arts and religion are each part of human development, of which there is incontrovertible evidence in history. This includes the evidence of the Old Testament for the shaping of the idea of God by the Jews, and the evidence of the New Testament in the shaping of the Early Church. Even in science the recognition of a significantly new truth usually takes some time to become widely accepted. Einstein developed his theory of special relativity in 1905, the same year in which he explained the photoelectric effect, the emission of electrons from metals by light of a suitable wavelength or color. His powerful theory of general relativity came ten years later. He was awarded the Nobel Prize in Physics in 1921 “for services to the theory of physics, and especially for his discovery of the laws of the photoelectric effect,” “independently of such value as may be ultimately attached to his theories of relativity and gravity, if these are confirmed.” The first generally accepted confirmation of the general theory was made in 1919, and the observation was repeated in 1922, by measuring, during an eclipse of the sun, the bending of a beam of light from a star by a massive object, the sun.

The efforts of those inclined to disagree with newly or long-accepted theories are of real value, for people are driven to suggest yet more observations or experiments to test the new ideas, and people on both sides of the argument are encouraged to attempt to express their beliefs in the controversial theories in a manner that is persuasive for those who can enter into a reasoned preference. There is no “authoritative body” in science that claims to be able to decide whether or not a theory is “correct.” With respect to doctrines in religion it is not uncommon to find claims that a particular doctrine is “correct,” or orthodox, with implicit or explicit denial of the value of other doctrines.

REASON

The understanding of theories and doctrines, and the assessment of their significance, involve reasoning. It is in the field of reason that most disagreement arises. At one extreme are those religious believers who would dispense with observation, and deny the value of reason, and would claim that their beliefs were received and recorded in the Bible as direct revelations from God, even including the actual words needed to communicate these revelations to other people. At the other extreme are those who believe that reasoning is all important, and they would not recognize significant personal religious experience, or even some scientific results. Between these two extremes are those, by far the large majority, who respect observations, whether common to other observers or claimed as purely personal, and they exercise reason and inference in the formulation of theories or doctrines that they share with others.

Perhaps the most basic of religious beliefs is that the universe must have been created, and God is the creator. This is unlikely to have been a primeval belief. Natural events were first believed to be influenced by “spirits,” and it was some time before multiple gods were succeeded by a single God. There are, however, people with the same scientific and other evidence who are prepared to believe that creation is purely a matter of chance and needs no creator. No amount of pure reason can be confidently expected to change one belief into the other, or the other into the one, positive to negative or negative to positive.

The existence of God cannot be proved, and “absolute” scientific truth cannot be proved. But there is a difference: progress in science is generally believed to be an approach toward “absolute” scientific truth, but progress in Christian belief has to start from a belief in the existence of God, and the progress is in knowledge and understanding based on “theories” of what God is like, what humans are like, and the relationship that occurs.

FAITH

Most Christians will talk about their faith, and some would equate this with their beliefs. But beliefs are not the whole of faith, and need to be related to other aspects of faith, in particular trust and hope, and their outcome in love for God and love of neighbor. It helps some people to think of belief as associated with the mind, trust with the heart, in the nonphysical sense of that word, and hope with the soul, which is most simply thought of as that which survives physical death and for many people has some difficult-to-define association with the present life. (See chapter 12, “Person-Material, Mental, Spiritual.”) Beliefs can be based on evidence but may also be based on an accepted authority, or claim to be directly revealed. Trust, which is inseparable from love and linked to providence, implies that God can influence people or events, with or without contradiction of the order in the universe found by scientists. Hope implies not only belief in a temporal future but also the belief that there is some kind of life after death. Trust and hope, in terms of life after death, are not like scientific beliefs, but relate to individuals, usually in the context of community, and their experience of a relationship with their God.

It is fascinating and challenging to consider how new theories, and also new religious doctrines, are formulated. Small changes from existing theories or doctrines cause less surprise than those large shifts in concepts or relationships so familiar in science, and in the history of religion. The role of analogy finds a place here. If waves can act like particles, as found for light, ought not particles to act like waves? This was found to be the case for electrons, first thought of as particles but then found to have wave-like properties. In the development of religious beliefs Christians find the sacrificial killing of a lamb, believed to lead to forgiveness of sins, to have its divine analogy in the understanding that the killing of Jesus, “the Lamb of God” (John 1:29, Rev. 5:6 *et passim*), led to deliverance for those who believe.

The willingness of scientists to change their theories in the face of new evidence or new reasoning contrasts with the practice of most

theologians, at least in years gone by, to cling to existing beliefs. It is not easy for new experiences, or a new way of looking at well-known experiences, to give rise to readily acceptable new religious doctrines. The testing of new doctrines, by living through relevant experiences, is rarely part of the recommended activity of believers. Bold are those who are prepared to try, knowing that more than one generation of thought is likely to be required.

A common but not universal test of religious orthodoxy is to see how a belief relates to the earliest known beliefs of the Church, and more particularly to texts and traditions in the Bible. Agreement is rarely widespread in searching for the earliest beliefs, and corresponding texts in the Bible, but the criteria are very influential. There is no such parallel in science, in fact quite the opposite. The latest set of accepted observations and correlating and explaining theories are the contemporary criteria.

CHRISTIAN BELIEF

The “Christian Belief” in our title invites an explanation of what it includes. The phrase “Christian belief” covers three meanings: first, the beliefs that Christians are expected to believe, a filling out of the creeds with related material, and second, beliefs claimed by individual Christians to be directly revealed to them by God. The third meaning of beliefs includes those that some Christians hold that are not a recognizable part of specifically Christian beliefs, but stem from evidence that may have religious implications. An example is the belief that the earth is only six thousand years old, as deduced from the ages of people given in Genesis.

Present-day “churches” and denominations would agree on a large majority of elements of belief and these are fairly easy to discern. All would put some emphasis on the Bible as the basis for Christian belief. Some would accept that knowledge of Creation leads to beliefs about the Creator and the nature of human beings, and such knowledge is mostly derived from science. Many churches have identified creeds that are held to be applicable to the whole Church. There are also state-

ments of belief that relate to individual denominations, sometimes referred to as “Confessions,” for example the Lutheran Augsburg Confession (1530) and the Westminster Confession (1646) used by Presbyterians. All start from a belief in a Creator God, and they are convinced of the role of Jesus, the Christ and Messiah who is central to their Christian belief. That Christ is the incarnate Son of God, that he was crucified, and that he rose from the dead is common ground for which the evidence may be examined with confidence. Belief in the Holy Spirit completes the Trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, as emphasized in baptism.

The Apostles’ Creed begins “I believe in God.” In Latin this is “*Credo in Deum*,” and the use of the accusative case rather than the dative makes it mean “believing in” or “trusting” as distinct from “believing that.” Many today feel it is preferable to use a form found in recent baptismal statements, “I believe and trust in Him.” The original so-called Nicene Creed, which is in Greek, opens with “*písteuomen eis ena Theon*,” “We believe in One God,” again using the accusative. In both creeds there is, of course, the belief implicit that there is a God, and in the Nicene Creed it is more explicit, namely that there is (only) one God. But the emphasis is on trusting, not just “believing that . . .” The singular “I” relates to the baptism candidate. The plural “We” is more appropriate for congregational worship.

The Apostles’ Creed, first so-named at the synod of Milan in 390 C.E., was accepted at the Council of Nicea (325 C.E.). It was developed from the Baptismal Creed of the Roman Church in the first half of the second century, using earlier material. It was generally recognized at the Reformation, and as given in the *Catechism of The Book of Common Prayer* (final version 1662) declares;

I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth:

And in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord, Who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, Born of the Virgin Mary, Suffered under Pontius Pilate, Was crucified, dead and buried: He descended into hell; The third day he rose again from the dead; He ascended to heaven, And sitteth at the right hand

of God the Father Almighty; From thence he shall come to
judge the quick and the dead;

I believe in the Holy Ghost; the holy Catholick Church;
The Communion of Saints; The Forgiveness of sins; The
Resurrection of the body, And the life everlasting.

The Apostles' Creed in the recent Anglican *Book of Common Worship* (2000) is closely similar, with "creator" for "Maker," "Holy Spirit" for "Holy Ghost," "descended to the dead" for "descended into hell," and "living" for "quick."

The Nicene Creed was the first creed to be published by an Ecumenical Council (Nicea, 325 C.E.). The Council was convened by Constantine, the first Christian emperor, in order to sort out the christological disagreements that were disturbing the empire. It is a carefully revised version of the Creed of Caesarea, presented by Eusebius. After a lively debate, much influenced by Greek theological terminology (see p. 25), it was agreed that Jesus was "of the same substance" (*homoousios*) with God, or "one in being," rather than "of like substance" (*homoiousios*). The school of Alexandria tended to emphasize the divinity of Christ, considered to be of central importance for an understanding of salvation, and the school of Antioch gave emphasis to the humanity of Christ and his moral example. Arian beliefs, such as "There was a time when the Son was not," were carefully repudiated.

The second Ecumenical (or General) Council was held at Constantinople in 381, and its creed, known as the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed, has been accepted as authoritative in East and West alike, and is so even today. This creed, with the misnomer "Nicene," is given in the Holy Communion service of the *Book of Common Prayer*:

I believe in one God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven
and earth, And of all things visible and invisible:
And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God,
Begotten of his Father before all worlds, God of God, Light
of Light, Very God of very God, Begotten, not made, Being
of one substance with the Father, By whom all things were
made: Who for us men and for our salvation came down from

heaven, And was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary, And was made man, And was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate. He suffered and was buried, And the third day he rose again according to the Scriptures, And ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of the Father. And he shall come again with glory to judge both the quick and the dead: Whose kingdom shall have no end.

And I believe in the Holy Ghost, the Lord and giver of life, Who proceedeth from the Father and the Son, Who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified, Who spake by the Prophets. And I believe one Catholick and Apostolick Church. I acknowledge one Baptism for the remission of sins. And I look for the Resurrection of the dead, And the life of the world to come.

The Nicene Creed in the recent Anglican *Book of Common Worship* (2000) has “We” instead of “I,” following the authentic Greek text. It also has a number of changes from the wording in the Book of Common Prayer, “of all that is seen and unseen,” the “only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father,” “God from God,” “true God from true God” “of one being with the Father,” “incarnate from the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary,” and “is seated at the right hand of the Father,” “living” for “quick,” “Holy Spirit” for “Holy Ghost,” “one holy catholic and apostolic Church,” and “forgiveness” for “remission.” These changes appear small, but some of them have specific doctrinal significance.

Continuing debate about some of the implications of the wording of creeds led to the fourth Ecumenical Council, the Council of Chalcedon (451 C.E.), with 630 bishops. The decisions of Nicea and Constantinople referring to the creed were confirmed. Since Chalcedon, the only significant change has been the insertion in the Western Church of the phrase “and the Son” (*filioque*) after “I believe in the Holy Ghost, the Lord and giver of life, Who proceedeth from the Father.” The main “proof text” is John 20:22, “he [i.e. the Son, Jesus] breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.’” The word *filioque* was added by the Council of Toledo in 589 C.E., was slowly adopted,

never ratified by a general council, and has been repudiated to this day by the Eastern Church mainly because it appears to compromise the Eastern belief in the primacy of the Father as the source of deity. (See p. 26.)

The phrase was agreed, in principle, not to be essential by the Anglican Lambeth Conference of 1978, and in the recent Anglican *Book of Common Worship* (2000, p. 140) an alternative text of the Nicene Creed is given with the omission of “and the Son.” It has been dropped from the revised Eucharist creed in the Canadian Alternative Services (1985, p. 189), but remains in the 1662 version in the same volume (p. 234). The Methodist Conference in 1990 “expressed its willingness to restore the Nicene Creed to the form agreed by East and West in 381 C.E., if and when, in the judgment of the Conference, there is sufficient ecumenical agreement to such a policy in the Western Church.”

THE HOLY SPIRIT

There is an essential place in the early Christian preaching for the Spirit of God, also called the Holy Ghost, or the Holy Spirit. Jesus was “anointed” by the Spirit, the disciples at Pentecost received the Holy Spirit, and for the first time Gentiles were seen to receive the same Spirit. This was not understood as the addition of a separate element to the person, but a fulfilling of the spiritual potential of the recipient. There was also a recognition that the members of the “Church” shared the same Spirit. The evidence for the action of the Spirit is, in one sense, known uniquely by the believer in question, but most Christians would claim that they are aware of the action of the Spirit in others, as well as in themselves. Paul’s account in 1 Corinthians 12 is used frequently for the encouragement of a variety of “spiritual gifts.” Arguments against belief in the activities of the Holy Spirit are generally ineffective, and they founder on such analogies as the claim that the critics are blind, whereas the believers have sight.

The phenomenon of speaking in tongues, frequent in the early Church, and having a modified revival in the late twentieth century, is very much part of group activity. Speaking in tongues, or *glossolalia*, is

reported, with two meanings: “All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability” (Acts 2:4), and “we hear, each of us, in our own native language” (Acts 2:8), as if one speaker was understood by people of a variety of languages. This latter meaning seems to lie behind Paul’s mention of one of the many gifts of the Spirit in 1 Cor. 12:4–11, including “various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues” (v. 10). In 1 Cor. 14:2–19 Paul expands on this topic with a critical emphasis, “for those who speak with a tongue do not speak to other people but to God, for nobody understands them” (v. 2), and finishes with a flourish (vv. 18, 19): “I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you; nevertheless, in church I would rather speak five words with my mind, in order to instruct others also, than ten thousand words in a tongue.” Interpreters are essential (vv. 20–33).

THE TRINITY

This characteristic belief of Christians finds a clear expression in the Apostles’ Creed, “I believe in God the Father . . . in Jesus Christ, His only Son, . . . and in the Holy Ghost,” and similarly in the Nicene Creed, “I believe in one God the Father . . . in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, . . . and in the Holy Ghost.” The threeness of divinity is found in a number of places in the New Testament, and the words that are found to be helpful in describing each of the three evolved over the first five centuries and became embedded in attempts to describe the relationships between the members of the Trinity. This is most evident in the Nicene Creed in such phrases as “(Jesus Christ) begotten of his Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, Very God of very God, Begotten not made, Being of one substance with the Father, By whom all things were made,” and “(the Holy Ghost) the Lord and giver of life, Who proceedeth from the Father and the Son, Who together with the Father and the Son is worshipped and glorified.”

It is not possible in the context of this book to provide the wealth of evidence, based on speculation, revelation, and subsequent reason-

ing, for those creedal beliefs. I shall list some of the New Testament passages that give evidence of the Trinitarian beliefs of the writers of the epistles. There is also the very explicit penultimate verse of Matthew (28:19), “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” Many scholars question the authenticity of this verse, but it does link back to Matthew 3 where the Son is baptized (v. 16), the Father speaks (a voice from heaven, 3:17), and the Spirit of God descends (3:16).

The grace in the closing verse of 2 Corinthians (13:13) is used even today, “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion [or fellowship] of the Holy Spirit be with all of you.” This is one of the earliest epistles, perhaps thirty years after the crucifixion, and has a supporting passage in 1:21–22, “It is God who establishes us with you in Christ and has anointed us, by putting his seal on us and giving us his Holy Spirit in our hearts, as a first installment.” Paul’s earlier letter to the Corinthians (12:4–6) reads, “Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit, and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone.” A similar trinity of divine beings (or “persons”) is recognized in Gal. 4:6, “God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts.”

These passages all refer to the times after the Incarnation, but it is possible to identify three “personifications” of God in the Old Testament, namely Wisdom, the Word of God, and the Spirit of God. Wisdom is always female, pre-existent, as in Sir. (Ecclesiasticus) 24:9, “Before the ages, in the beginning, he created me, and for all the ages I shall not cease to be.” The Word of God is found in Ps. 119:89, “The Lord exists for ever, your word is firmly fixed in heaven,” and in Isa. 55:11, “my word shall accomplish that which I purpose.” The Spirit of God is promised to Israel on their return from exile, Ezek. 37:14, “I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live.” However, these three personifications do not correlate closely with the Trinity of the New Testament.

Tertullian (160–220), described as “the creator of ecclesiastical

Latinity,” introduced many hundreds of new Latin words to assist his thinking. He coined the word *Trinitas* (= Trinity), and used *Substantia* (= substance) to indicate the common unity among the members of the Trinity. Perhaps overconfidently, he used *Persona* (= Person) to translate the Greek word *hypostasis*. Literally *persona* means a “mask,” as used to be worn to show the role an actor is playing. Literally *hypostasis* means “substance.” The potential confusion caused by the apparent equation of person and substance was suffered by both the Greeks and the Romans. In 362, at the Council of Alexandria, under the influence of Athanasius, agreement was reached between West and East. The Greek *hypostasis* was equated with *persona*, and the Latin *substantia* was equated with the Greek *ousia*. The outcome was the phrase of Tertullian—*una Substantia, tres Personae*; one substance and three persons; one *substantia* or *ousia* and three *hypostases* or *personae*. This is still the accepted way of referring to the Trinity. At the same Council the divinity of the Holy Spirit was identified, a topic that had not been considered at Nicea.

For over one hundred years there were disagreements between Arians of various kinds who followed the belief of Arius (c. 250–336) that Jesus was more than a mere man but less than God. Conflicting quotations from the Bible did not really help; in John 10:30, “The Father and I are one,” and John 14:28, “the Father is greater than I.” The words of Jesus (John 8:42), “I came from God,” were countered by Paul’s assertion that all things were “from God” (1 Cor. 8:6, 2 Cor. 5:18). Arius was a popularizer, arguing that the Son was the first of God’s creatures. (Col. 1:15, “the firstborn of all creation”). He stirred up the people with slogans such as “Once was when he wasn’t,” “*ην ποτε οτε ουκ ην*” (pronounced “een potty hotty ook een”).

It is not very difficult to present some of the vocabulary, newly invented or adopted, for discussion of the Trinity. It is, on the other hand, not easy to understand exactly what the words mean. One of the first steps was to come to an agreement that the Father and the Son were “of the same substance” (*homoousios*) and not just “of like substance” (*homoiousios*). Neither of these two Greek words is found in the New Testament. In NRSV the word *ousia* is translated in Luke 15:12–13

as “property” (“substance” in RV) which can be shared and squandered, as by the Prodigal Son.

There remains, even today, a difference between the East and the West in their overall view of relationships in the Trinity. For the West, the Father “begets” the Son, and Father and Son together “breathe” the Holy Spirit. For the East, the Father “begets” the Son, and the Father “breathes” the Holy Spirit. These pictures lie behind the disagreement about the *filioque* (p. 21).

The Athanasian Creed or *Quicumque vult* (Whosoever will be saved . . .) was not referred to at Chalcedon in 451 C.E., although probably extant at that time, being first quoted in 542 C.E. It is a Latin hymn of Western origin and is much concerned to define the belief in the Trinity. It finds a place in the Anglican *Book of Common Prayer*, at Morning Prayer. The Athanasian Creed is one of the seven “Authorized Affirmations of Faith” for use in services of the *Book of Common Worship* (2001, p. 143) of the Anglican Church, and is in the form given in the *Book of Common Prayer*.

The year 362 is significant not only as the date of the Council of Alexandria, with its substantial agreement between East and West, but also as the year in which Julian (the Apostate) became emperor of Rome and declared himself a pagan. He attempted to restore worship to many gods, while declaring universal freedom for toleration of all religions. He even attempted to rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem but flames are said to have burst forth from the foundations and the work was abandoned. In 363 Julian died. His actions showed that beliefs of Christians could not be overcome by providing alternative beliefs, and the dependence of the Christian religion on the State was not essential.

The detailed reasonings leading to beliefs decided in the councils and the Reformation are many and wide-reaching. My emphasis is on evidence of events and personal and collective experiences, and their interpretation. Within the Church there is a wide and rich spectrum of beliefs and a seeker after the truth delivered by Jesus, and by the “Spirit of Truth,” needs to decide how far to go in searching. At one extreme are those who, without question, accept the formularies of a

given body of believers, and at the other extreme are those who wish to study each and every belief before choosing their own panoply of conviction and comfort. As human beings with free will, and a determination to worship the Lord our God with all our mind, as Jesus commanded (Matt. 22:37), and with all our heart and soul, Christians have a clear duty to respect all honest attempts of seekers, of whatever religion, wherever they are on their pilgrimage.