



# Briefing

July 1997 (Vol.2 No.4)

## *Faith as Believing and Acting*

**Adam Hood**

Two stereotypical Christians are the activist and the thinker, Martha and Mary. The activist is always doing 'Christian things' but does not have much time left for reflection. The thinker reflects, meditates, seeks precision in her doctrine of the atonement, but does not spend too much time at the coal face. Like any stereotypes these two point to actual tendencies. Christians do find it difficult to hold belief and practice together. It is sometimes easier to give up the struggle and to be content as a thinker or a doer. But a person's faith is seen in their confession of Christ and conformity to his teaching and example, and both belief and practice are essential to a well-rounded Christian life. As the success of a football team depends on the coordination of each player with the others, so faith flourishes in the partnership of belief and action.

Since clear thinking is the basis of progress in the Christian faith, we need to think clearly about our attitudes to belief and action. What is belief? What is action? How are they related? This essay is an introductory discussion of these questions. I will suggest that belief is the affirmation of Christian truths and that action is the intentional changing of the physical world. Further, action and belief interact in three ways: beliefs initiate actions; actions throw light on what is believed; actions can give plausibility to beliefs.

### *'BELIEF AND ACTION'*

In the past, it was commonly thought that a belief was a mental event in which a person was conscious of affirming certain propositions. What is true in this view is that sometimes we are consciously aware of our beliefs. When we are telling someone what we believe, we are clearly aware of our beliefs. On the other hand, the 'mental event' approach cannot be an adequate account of what we mean by 'belief', for, if it were taken as such, it would imply that we only believe when we are conscious of thinking about our beliefs. This is clearly false of many of our beliefs. Commonly our beliefs last over time. Sometimes we are aware of our beliefs; at other times they are held tacitly. In view of this, a fuller account of 'belief is that 'to believe' is to be ready to agree that certain things are true.<sup>1</sup> If Tom believes in God, then we may take it that, when the need arises, he will agree that 'God exists'. Moreover, Tom's belief is that 'God exists' is a true statement.

Believing in this sense is, therefore, clearly not acting. When we say that a person acts, we do not normally mean that he is ready to agree that certain things are true. 'Action' is more naturally understood as the intentional bringing about of a change in the physical world.<sup>2</sup> Believing that a ball is for kicking is not what we ordinarily mean by an action. Neither is forming the intention to kick a ball an action, in the usual sense. Kicking a ball is an action. Moreover, 'kicking a ball' is an action, if it is intentional. If a person moves a ball without intending to do so, she has not acted; an accident has occurred.

The Whitefield Institute, Frewin Court, Oxford, OX 1 3HZ.

Tel: 0 1 865 202 838 Fax: 0 1865 247 198 E-mail: whitefieldinst @ cix.compulink.co.uk.

It is only too easy to blur the meaning of 'belief' and 'action'. Some, for instance, have suggested that Christian belief is no more or less than being moved to act lovingly.<sup>3</sup> The upshot of this is that even atheists can be Christian believers, since their actions show that, deep down, they believe in God! The strength of this approach is that it recognises that God is involved in all that is good, true and loving. Its fundamental error, however, is that it allows 'belief' to be swallowed up by 'action'. No effective distinction is made between the two. The words 'belief' and 'action' lose their proper meaning.

### *I BELIEVE THEREFORE I ACT*

As C.S. Lewis says, a Christian is someone who believes the teachings of the apostles, not a person who acts in certain ways.<sup>4</sup> But what is meant when a Christian says that they believe? Philosophers have talked of two types of belief: 'believing that' and 'believing in'. If I accept that there is a planet called Mars, I show that I 'believe that' Mars exists. If, however, I say that I, as a Christian, 'believe in' Jesus, I mean something more. To 'believe in' Jesus is not only to believe that Jesus existed and that he died on a cross, though it must involve this. To 'believe in' Jesus is to be ready to agree that one ought to trust him for salvation and be obedient to his commands. The difference between the two forms of belief is that 'believing in' involves the recognition of an obligation to act in a certain way.

Being a Christian involves 'believing in' Jesus. This is the key to understanding how believing and acting are related in the Christian life. If I 'believe in' Jesus, then I believe that it is God's will that I trust and obey Christ. There is, then, in the Christian life an intimate connection between believing and acting. The things that Christians believe propel them towards acting in a certain way. As the Cambridge theologian John Oman might have put it, Christian belief involves an insight into the activities of God which leads to the consecration of oneself to God's loving purposes as seen in Christ.

It is, as we have seen, comparatively easy to state the general relationship between belief and practice in the Christian life. It is, however, far more difficult to relate our beliefs and our actions in the actual circumstances of our lives. There are at least three difficulties in applying our faith to our practice. The first is that of clearly stating what we believe. The second

difficulty is that of knowing what practical implications our beliefs may have. Thirdly, there is the difficulty of knowing which actions will bring about the ends which we desire. The complications of applying our faith to action may be illustrated with reference to the problem of carbon dioxide emissions. The recent meeting of world leaders at the U.N. headquarters, Earth Summit 2, discussed the question of carbon dioxide emissions generated by automobiles. Since there is a clear link between the incidence of carbon dioxide emission and global warming, this is a problem of great significance. The discussions ended with a disagreement between the European Union and the United States. Broadly speaking, the European Union was keen to fix targets for the reduction of carbon dioxide emitted by cars, whilst the United States, among other countries, was unwilling for this.

There are several difficult questions which will face the Christian who is trying to decide what to do about carbon dioxide emissions. She must establish which Biblical teachings are relevant to this issue and be clear as to what those mean. Thus, for instance, she will require a firm grasp of the Biblical doctrine of creation. Then the links between Biblical teachings and the problem of carbon dioxide emission will have to be teased out. This will not be easy! If the Bible's message is to be correctly applied, then it will be necessary rigorously to give attention to the different dimensions of the problem of car emissions. The fact that governments disagree over this issue indicates that there are a number of factors which have to be taken into account. It is not only a question of global warming, but also of employment, political feasibility and the life-enhancing qualities of car ownership and use. Finally, once the Christian has decided how her faith applies to this problem, there is still the question of what to do to bring about her desired end. Should she write to her M.P., join 'Greenpeace', organise discussions in her local church, or what? This question, in itself, is one which she will find a surprising degree of difficulty in answering. If she is to pursue her ends effectively, then she must give careful attention to her own talents and the possibilities of her situation.

### *A COMMON ERROR*

There is a common view that the actions of Christians tell us something about the truth of their beliefs. It is often suggested that the

'unchristian' actions of Christians disprove their beliefs. This assertion is, I suggest, clearly unsound. Truth is a quality of propositions. A set of propositions is said to be true when they adequately describe an aspect of reality. The actions of Christians do not, in and of themselves, tell us anything about the truth or falsity of the propositions which they hold. A Christian is someone who believes in certain things. A 'good Christian' is someone who acts in terms of what he believes. There are various explanations as to why a Christian may not be a 'good Christian'. It is, for instance, possible to believe in Christ without being aware of the practical implications of one's belief. Such a person is unclear about what acting as a Christian means! Perhaps the practical ramifications of being a Christian have never been explained to them. Perhaps the ambiguities of the situation they find themselves in make it very difficult to identify what the Christian course of action might be. Again, whilst Christians may know what the practical implications of their beliefs are, they may be quite unwilling to act Christianly. The remnants of the sinful self are still active in the Christian! 'Bad Christians' are not distinguished by their beliefs but by their refusal or inability to put these beliefs into practice.

### ***BY THEIR FRUITS SHALL YOU KNOW THEM***

A person's actions can illuminate what beliefs they hold most dear. If a person professes love for their fellow Christians and yet habitually refuses to give practical help to them, then we accuse such a person of hypocrisy. This person's actions show that, whilst he may believe in the need to love other Christian, yet he believes more intensely in looking after 'number one'. Actions throw light on the beliefs which we cherish most of all. Actions enable us to understand how our beliefs are ordered. This fact is of great significance for the Christian. Our beliefs will spill out into our actions. What do our actions reveal about the beliefs to which we are most committed?

The scrutiny of our beliefs is important, because we are unaware of so many of our beliefs. We pick up many of our beliefs from our parents, our peers, the mass media and a whole host of other influential sources. Many, perhaps most, of the beliefs which we

hold are not consciously chosen, they edge their way into our minds. Even many of our religious beliefs may be given rather than chosen. This means that, as Christians, it is imperative to scrutinise our beliefs in the light of the Gospel. The 16th Century Reformer John Calvin said that repentance is a way of life. Repentance means turning around. The Christian is called to turn from their old way of life to the way of Christ. In part, repentance means casting a critical eye on the system of beliefs which shape our actions. By studying our typical patterns of behaviour, we can identify beliefs that we never knew we had and appreciate which beliefs have the upper hand. Jesus calls for a radical renewal of our lives. Mapping out what we really believe is an essential part of such a renewal. Moreover, this holds true for churches as well as for individuals. Churches are organisations which act out of certain common beliefs. They, like individuals, need to be critically aware of their beliefs. It has been said, with a degree of truth, that some of our most fundamental beliefs are revealed in our use of money. Judged in this light, we may be struck by how little our actions are shaped by our Christian beliefs. This is a measure of the challenge that we face.

### ***ACTIONS SPEAK LOUDER***

The well-known sociologist Peter Berger argues that our beliefs are sustained by plausibility structures. By this Berger means that, typically, a person can only hold a belief over time where that belief is affirmed by a social group. Berger's argument is that our beliefs become implausible and brittle, if we do not find an echo of them in others. There may well be truth in Berger's Claim. But, in adapting Berger's work, it can also be suggested that the plausibility of Christian belief depends on its being seen to be true in practice. Thus, the Christian Claim that the Church is the 'New Israel' is only plausible if local churches exemplify reconciling love. If a local church is marked by factionalism, petty-mindedness, selfishness and even hatred, then the plausibility of the Christian doctrine of the Church will be undermined. Christian beliefs generate certain expectations regarding how Christians ought to behave. The common perception, a correct one, is that Christians ought to live differently and well. If, however, the behaviour of Christians conflicts with expectations, then this reflects

