

# Are Your Beliefs Preferences Or Convictions?

by John W. Ritenbaugh

*Forerunner*, "Personal," November 1993

Before becoming the sixteenth president of the United States, Abraham Lincoln, whose integrity is legendary, made a speech against the advice of friends. Largely because of that speech, he lost the 1858 election to the Senate. But he said, "If it is decreed that I go down because of this speech, then let me go down linked to the truth."

We all admire men and women of conviction. We have an innate and inescapable awareness that we should stand for some things no matter what they cost. To cover our own inner poverty, though, we often scornfully laugh at those who risk much for the sake of a cause or their integrity.

But conviction is essential to faithful living, character building, sanctification, loyalty, integrity and faithfulness to God. Whether we compromise and sin is directly tied to the strength of our convictions. We often think that strength of conviction comes to the fore only when everything is on the line, perhaps even when our eternal salvation is at stake. But in thinking like this, we make a serious mistake. Strength of conviction in the day-by-day things is the very exercise that determines whether we will have the convictions necessary when all may truly be on the line.

In both the United States and the world, certain events are bringing Christians and Christianity more intensely under the magnifying glass of official government scrutiny. As this scrutiny intensifies, we may have our convictions severely tested—as others have already had—in certain areas of religious belief. That time may not be far off.

I recently heard a tape of a lecture given by David Gibbs, an attorney who specializes in representing religious parents who have been sued, usually by the state, county or city school board, for neglecting their children's

education and social development. The cause of these suits has usually been that the parents are home-schooling their children or have put them into a Christian school.

The lecture consisted of instruction regarding what these parents could expect in the way of cross-examination by an attorney or judge should they be taken to court. They need this vital instruction because the U.S. Supreme Court has ruled that a person's religious *convictions are protected* by the First Amendment of the Constitution, but one's religious *preferences are not*

## U.S. Legal Guidelines

Fortunately, the Supreme Court did not leave the courts without guidelines to determine whether a person has a religious preference or conviction. In fact, the Court spelled them out clearly. We urgently need to evaluate ourselves against these guidelines.

These definitions were forced when an Amish farmer, because it was against his religious convictions, refused to send his children to Wisconsin public schools. Wisconsin sued him twice. Both times he lost, facing jail and the possible loss of his children to a state-assigned foster home. Appealing to the U.S. Supreme Court as his last resort, he was told that the First Amendment protected his religious convictions and that he did not have to send his children to public schools.

In this 1972 decision, the Court established the guidelines against which similar and subsequent cases would be judged. Before giving those guidelines, the Court laid down two principles regarding persons who claim to hold religious beliefs. True biblical principles, they are helpful in understanding whether one is really convicted.

First, the Court stated that "one cannot hold a belief unless one can somehow describe that belief." I Peter 3:15 says, "But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts, and always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear." Though the Court does not ask for eloquent, highly organized and systematized testimony such as a teacher should give, it will not accept hunches, feelings

or "it-seems-to-me" testimony either. The Court wants a witness to show thoughtful consideration of his beliefs.

Secondly, but more important, the Court requires that one show knowledge of his beliefs. The court maintains that beliefs must be *individually* and *personally* held. In John 8:32-44 Jesus confronted opponents who clearly had not internalized the beliefs they claimed to hold. "They answered and said to Him, 'Abraham is our father.' Jesus said to them, 'If you were Abraham's children you would do the works of Abraham. But now you seek to kill Me, a Man who has told you the truth which I heard from God. Abraham did not do this'" (verses 39-40).

The Court views such people as hiding behind a title. Christ's opponents said, "I am a son of Abraham." Today, one would say, "I am a Christian. The church says this and the church says that." The Court says, "Fine, now tell us what that means to you."

In both Romans 14:10 and II Corinthians 5:10, Paul writes, "We must all stand [appear] before the judgment seat of Christ." Ezekiel 14:14 adds that righteousness is not transferable from one to another. Though the church will be resurrected and changed all at once at the seventh trumpet, each member is individually judged by God. The conviction, conversion, righteousness, etc., must be in each individual. Following through with this principle, the Supreme Court requires that one's beliefs be personally held. It is a valid guideline.

From those two general guidelines, the Court then established that no matter who we are (prince or pauper), what our religion is (Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, etc.), what our belief structure is or what our individual beliefs are, beliefs fall into one of two categories. Beliefs are either convictions or preferences.

These terms must be defined further because in U.S. courts only *convictions* are protected by the Constitution. It may be surprising how the Supreme Court defines a preference.

***A preference is a very strong belief*** . We can hold one with very great intensity and strength. How strong? Strong enough that we will go into full-

time service of that belief. For example, one can be a minister of the gospel, a missionary or Bible study teacher in a religious school and still be operating on a preference, not a conviction.

According to the Supreme Court, a preference can be held so strongly that one will give all of his wealth to support it. A preference can be so intense a person will energetically proselytize others by going house-to-house, handing out tracts on street corners or broadcasting on radio or television—and he will still be operating only on a preference. Sounds like I Corinthians 13:1-3, does it not?

Though a preference may be a very strongly held belief, according to the Supreme Court, *it is a belief that one will change under certain circumstances*. Through long experience judging cases, the Court has learned that certain pressures, if brought to bear, will motivate people to change their beliefs. These people do not have a conviction but a preference and are not protected by the Constitution.

Evaluate yourself against these pressures:

### **Peer Pressure**

Teens tend to be idealistic, and this is good. They often resolve to be serious, "hit the books" and spurn the drugs, sex, smoking, drinking and "hanging out" that they have seen others doing. But if the "right" fellow or girl appears, or if the teen is recognized by the "right" clique, his desire to be accepted by them pressures him to adjust his ideals to conform to them. His ideals or convictions are merely preferences.

A minister may search the Bible for truth and find something interesting that he believes and resolves to do and teach. When he tells his fellow ministers about what he has found, they may say to him, "I don't say you're wrong in this, but don't you think you should tone it down a bit? Make it less offensive, and then maybe we can cooperate with you and work on some of your objectives."

At first he may strongly defend his belief, but little by little, as he sees the reaction of his peers, he may begin to bend. He believes it and resolves to do it, but if he changes, his belief is a preference.

If the Word of God tells us to change something, we must change it! But we must *be very careful* about things previously proved from God's Word, believed, put into practice and then changed when some form of pressure is brought to bear!

### **Family Pressure**

This is perhaps the strongest pressure. When Jesus advises His disciples about counting the cost of commitment to Him, every person He mentions is a family member. "If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple" (Luke 14:26).

Usually no one can motivate you like a deeply loved mate. A husband may resolve to commit himself to a strong belief, but on telling his wife, she replies, "Please don't, honey. Do you realize what this will do to us and our family?" His resolve begins to melt because he knows he will feel responsible if, because of his belief, he inflicts discomfort or pain on an innocent bystander.

### **Fear of Lawsuits**

Living in perhaps the most litigious society ever on the face of the earth, we are aware of the expense and hassle of going to court, even for the innocent. We may say, "I'm all for this, but I'm not going to get sued over it! You can't ask me to be sued—that's going too far! The news media will make me out to be a villain. They'll publicly hang me! At the very least I'll lose my hard-earned reputation, maybe my job and all my property because of attorney and court costs." This daunting pressure causes many to change their beliefs.

### **Jail**

You may have never really been in a jail, but they are not pleasant places. Most prisoners want to get out as quickly as they can. In fact, some will risk life and limb to escape, knowing they will probably be unsuccessful. If they do make it out, they will most likely be apprehended and returned to "serve" even longer sentences. Jail is very damaging to a person's liberty and reputation.

Most people who go to jails never get past the visitor's area. I have been into the deepest bowels of several maximum security prisons to visit violent inmates on death row. They are horrible places.

In contemplating what it would be like to be in prison, remember that virtually every move an inmate makes is programmed by his captors. You would be isolated from your dearest family members and friends. You are told when to get up, when to eat, when to exercise, when you can read, watch TV, bathe or shower, and occasionally even when you can talk, go to the bathroom or sleep.

Additionally, the people around you have made a living of not playing by the rules. You would be stuck on their turf. Some are quite violent. It is a crazy, frightening environment for one accustomed to the comforts and control of home.

Would you really be willing to go to jail for your faith? Even when no one seems to understand why you would do such a thing? Would the pressure of facing jail make you change your beliefs? If so, your beliefs are preferences.

Maybe some of you men are saying to yourself, "Yes, I'd go to jail." But would you be willing to stand by and watch your wife go to jail? Some have faced that. Would you then pressure her to change her mind?

Do your beliefs mean so much to you that both you and your wife would go to jail, knowing your children would be taken by the state and raised by foster parents you do not even know?

## **The Pressure of Death**

This final test is obvious, yet some have learned through experience that there is a fate worse than death. When a person's resolve over a belief fails, his guilt can be crushing. Luke 22:34, 59-62 shows Peter in such a circumstance:

Then He said, "I tell you, Peter, the rooster will not crow this day before you will deny three times that you know Me." . . . Then after about an hour had passed, another confidently affirmed, saying, "Surely this fellow also was with Him, for he is a Galilean." But Peter said, "Man, I do not know what you are saying!" And immediately, while he was still speaking, the rooster crowed. And the Lord turned and looked at Peter. And Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how He had said to him, "Before the rooster crows, you will deny Me three times." Then Peter went out and wept bitterly.

### **Beliefs Really Yours?**

Do you see the common factor in these? ***What does your belief mean to YOU?*** What are you willing to sacrifice in exercising your belief? If you feel you should do something but have the right not to do it, it is merely a preference, according to the Supreme Court's test. Therefore, your belief is not protected by the Constitution.

The Court says that a conviction is *a belief you will not change*. Why? What creates a conviction? The Court's answer: ***A man must believe that his God requires it of him*** .

A belief that is ***God-ordered*** is a conviction. It is not merely a matter of resolve or dedication, but a matter of believing with all our heart that God requires it of us. The Court says that if we hold our beliefs as God-ordered, we will withstand all the above tests.

The Court says more: A conviction is not something we discover, but something we purpose. It is not something we just happen to run across, but something that is part of the very fiber of our personality.

This means that a person is not made by a crisis, but that a crisis exposes a person for what he is. The Court says our convictions will be purposed as a part of our *way of life*, beliefs that we are determined to perform and fulfill.

### **Daniel's Three Friends**

The story of Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-Nego in Daniel 3 is helpful at this point, but the prelude to this crisis in Daniel 1:7-8 reveals why they could do what they did.

To them the chief of the eunuchs gave names: he gave Daniel the name of Belteshazzar; to Hananiah, Shadrach; to Mishael, Meshach; and to Azariah, Abed-Nego. But Daniel purposed in his heart that he would not defile himself with the portion of the king's delicacies, nor with the wine which he drank; therefore he requested of the chief of the eunuchs that he might not defile himself.

Though the resistance began with Daniel, verse 12 shows all four young men were involved, united in purposing to be careful in obedience to God.

Now read Daniel 3:16-18:

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego answered and said to the king, "O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter. If that is the case, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and He will deliver us from your hand, O king. But if not, let it be known to you, O king, that we do not serve your gods, nor will we worship the gold image which you have set up."

The three young men flatly, but politely, refused to obey the king. Where were the other Hebrews that Nebuchadnezzar had brought back to Babylon? The Bible implies that they were kissing the dirt, complying with the king's edict.



The Court has ruled that *if you require other people to stand with you before you stand, your beliefs are preferences*. In effect, the Court asks, "What do other people have to do with what God requires of you?" It is a rephrasing of "If God is for us who can be against us?" (Romans 8:31). If what we believe is *God-ordered*, then who can turn it aside? It is a valid test.

These three men did not require others to stand with them. They told the king that giving them another chance would change nothing—their answer would be the same. Their beliefs were nonnegotiable. Why are convictions nonnegotiable? Negotiating what God has ordered is saying that He is not supreme, that someone or something is greater than He.

Also, Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-Nego told the king that whether or not they came out of the furnace alive changed nothing. Their belief stood firm. The Supreme Court says, "If one must be assured of victory before he stands, then his beliefs are preferences."

If we must be assured of victory before standing, we are not living by faith! With God it is far less important that we appear to win than that we stand for what is right. If we stand for truth, *we already have the victory*, though the world may see us as losing.

Christ at His trial and crucifixion stood for truth, and they took His life! To all the world He appeared a fool and a loser. But He won! The resurrection was His vindication—and our resurrection will be our vindication.

## **Truth in Lifestyle**

All these tests are guidelines for judges and lawyers to pursue in a court of law. But everyone knows that on the witness stand, after swearing or affirming to tell the truth, not everybody is honest, and though not lying outright, many bend the truth.

So the Supreme Court was left with solving the dilemma of discovering how could it determine whether a person was telling the truth about his convictions. The answer was actually very simple. Though a person may be

an artful liar on the witness stand, *the truth can always be found in his lifestyle.*

Put another way, the court says, "What is on the inside of a man will show on the outside." They agree with Jesus:

But those things which proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and they defile a man. For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies. These are the things which defile a man. (Matthew 15: 18-20)

The Court says, "You have no right to say you have a conviction unless we can somehow see you live that conviction with some consistency." Again, this agrees with Scripture:

But someone will say, "You have faith, and I have works." Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. . . . For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also. (James 2:18, 26)

Testimony of beliefs without the works to prove them is invalid.

The Court says, "We want to see your faith in action." If the Bible requires something, it is God-ordered. If it is God-ordered, it should be a conviction. If it is a conviction and God-ordered, not to do it would be a sin, disobedience to God. Before we state that what we believe is a conviction, we must be prepared to say that its opposite is a sin.

Deuteronomy 6:6-9 is a clear command from God to give our children a Christian education. Are we prepared to say that not to do so is sin? After all, God orders it. How are we doing it? What have we provided for our children's Christian education? How much time are we spending doing it? If we have children, we can be sure these questions will be asked.

If we say we are against unrighteous themes in movies and TV (adultery, fornication, murder, pornography and obscenity made to seem attractive, justified, right and good), or that we believe good and righteous themes

should not be debased, then we can be sure the next question will be, "Do you own a TV set?" Yes, we answer. "How much did it cost?" Several hundred dollars. "Where do you keep the TV?" In the living room. "Why there, where it is available to the whole family? How much time do you watch it each day? Have you ever heard obscenity on your TV? Have you ever seen sin exalted? Why do you invite into your home these things you claim are contrary to your beliefs?" A sharp attorney will ask such pointed questions, and our lifestyle could condemn us unless it matches our beliefs.

The Court will concentrate on *looking for whether we live our beliefs*. We must live up to what we say we believe. The Court will not demand that we be perfect, but that we consistently show by our lifestyle that we are living by what we believe.

### **Daniel's Example**

What will a man give for his integrity? To what extent is compromise ever justified? Does it ever pay to trim our sails to the prevailing winds of society, family, employer or government? Or have we dedicated our lives to the Eternal without fear of immediate consequences?

Daniel 6 is a wonderful example and lesson of uncompromising dedication for all time. Daniel believed certain things were true. Because of his convictions, he conducted himself in this exemplary way.

Daniel was forced to disobey an edict of Darius, king of Persia, which put the king above God. This occurs in type quite often. Arrogant governments, ignorant employers and concerned family members frequently try to usurp the place of God. In this episode we see an element that differs from the trial of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego.

Now when Daniel knew that the writing was signed, he went home. And in his upper room, with his windows open toward Jerusalem, he knelt down on his knees three times that day, and prayed and gave thanks before his God, as was his custom since early days.  
(verse 10)

Daniel was living his beliefs as a way of life—"as was his custom"! When the crisis arose, he was prepared. His conviction about what to do was strong and clear, and he went on unhesitatingly.

The Bible clearly states the origin of conviction about God: "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; a good understanding have all those who do His commandments. His praise endures forever" (Psalm 111:10).

Conviction does not come because we are suddenly struck with inspiration, but it is the product of a process that involves a growing relationship with God. From beginning to end, the Scriptures are clear regarding the faith of its heroes. They grew in faith as they came to know God, sometimes over long expanses of time as God worked with them, bringing them to maturity and preparing them for His use.

The book of Hebrews is a powerful exhortation to a group of people who neglected their relationship with God. At one time, because they were living their beliefs, they were filled with zeal and had shared struggles and persecutions with others. But they had fallen far from that high pinnacle. They were no longer living by what they believed. Paul writes:

For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the first principles of the oracles of God; and you have come to need milk and not solid food. . . . But solid food belongs to those who are of full age, that is, those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil. (Hebrews 5:12, 14)

He laments their lack of knowledge. What kind of knowledge? Knowledge gained by research or argument may be sheer vanity. The Bible always looks upon it as less important to God than experiential knowledge—knowledge of Him gained as the result of knowing Him, living life with Him as the central figure. Such knowledge cannot come out of a book.

It is the same in the natural world. We may know someone through the reporting of certain things about him. But we do not really know him until we live with him. When we do that, we are convicted of certain things about him.

People whose judgment about honesty is foggy are not practicing (exercising) honesty. Those who cannot distinguish between kindness and selfishness, fidelity and adultery, purity and sensuality, have their judgment distorted by bad practice.

The quality of discernment regarding good and evil can be understood by comparing the skilled eye of an artist or the trained ear of a musician with that of someone who just likes art or music. The trained person's eye or ear is discerning. Thus, it is capable of judgment and conviction in a way the person who merely "likes" or "prefers" something cannot.

If we desire to have convictions that will stand the test of what is coming, we must exercise our senses daily by yielding to God and coming to know Him in the arena of life. Then we can be deeply convicted about what He expects and what our choices should be to please and glorify Him.

"Now the just shall live by faith; but if anyone draws back, My soul has no pleasure in him." But we are not of those who draw back to perdition, but of those who believe to the saving of the soul.  
(Hebrews 10:38-39)