

Feature Article: JAF4333

## FAITH PATH HELPING FRIENDS FIND THEIR WAY TO CHRIST

by Mark Mittelburg

This article first appeared in *Christian Research Journal*, volume 33, number 03 (2010). For further information or to subscribe to the *Christian Research Journal* go to: <http://www.equip.org>

---

### SYNOPSIS

There are at least six approaches people use in determining what they choose to believe:

- 1. The RELATIVISTIC FAITH PATH:** Truth is *what you make it*. But relativism doesn't work in any other area, so why trust it in the spiritual realm?
- 2. The TRADITIONAL FAITH PATH:** Truth is *what you've always been taught*. What you were taught might be right—if your parents happened to be right. But you won't know until you test your traditions.
- 3. The AUTHORITARIAN FAITH PATH:** Truth is *what you've been told to believe*. Everyone has authorities in their lives, but before we keep submitting to them, we should examine their credentials and their message.
- 4. The INTUITIVE FAITH PATH:** Truth is *what you feel in your heart*. The heart can be a source of insights, but it can also lead us down blind alleys.
- 5. The MYSTICAL FAITH PATH:** Truth is *what you think God told you*. God can still speak. But not everything that seems to be from God really is.
- 6. The EVIDENTIAL FAITH PATH:** Truth is *what logic and evidence point to*. God gave us these two faculties for discovering what's true. We need to help our friends employ these to discover spiritual truth, and ultimately to meet God through Jesus Christ.

It is important to understand how our friends come to their beliefs so we may better communicate the truth that God really is who He says He is and that His Word can be trusted.

---

### EVERYONE HAS FAITH IN SOMETHING

Buddhists believe that enlightenment can be found through the eightfold path. Muslims follow the five pillars of Islam. Christians live their lives trusting that Jesus is the unique Son of God who died for their sins. We're all convinced that what we believe is correct, and we stake our futures on it. But it's faith just the same; none of us has absolute proof.

This might surprise you, but atheists live by faith, too. They operate in the belief that there is no creator, no higher moral law, no divine judgment, and no afterlife. They can't prove any of these things. In fact, most people in the world believe that denying them goes against the evidence as well as human experience, and therefore requires even higher levels of trust.

So everybody lives by some kind of faith—that is, *beliefs and actions that are based on something they consider trustworthy, even though they can't fully prove it to be true*—and usually their beliefs run pretty deep. Therefore, if we're going to be effective in reaching them, we'll need to do more than tell them what we believe or try to badger them into changing their minds. Rather, it's important to first understand why our friends believe what they do—how they arrived at those beliefs. Then we'll be in a better position to speak to them in ways they can understand, and to point them toward the many reasons they should consider putting their trust in Christ.

Have you tried talking to friends about your faith, but felt like you were speaking a foreign language? Maybe you were! Perhaps the appeal you made didn't appeal to them because they value and put their trust in different factors than you do.

For example, many Christians speak out of their experience. "I asked Jesus into my life," they say, "and He filled me with such peace and joy." But their friend isn't motivated by testimonies. He wants *reasons* to believe something is true. Or we may face the opposite situation. Perhaps we've read great books like *Reasonable Faith*, *Scaling the Secular City*, or *The Case for Christ*, and we try to convey a mountain of logic and evidence to a friend, but she's not interested. "You can go on about all of that academic stuff, but I already know what I believe because my heart tells me what's true."

If we don't find out what criteria our friends are relying on and somehow address those, then we really might be, in effect, speaking a foreign language to them. The apostle Paul modeled the importance of knowing our audience so we can more effectively relate our faith to them. To Jewish people he deliberately communicated as a Jew "to win the Jews." To "those under the law I became like one under the law...to those not having the law I became like one not having the law" and "to the weak I became weak, to win the weak." Paul concludes by explaining, "I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel" (1 Cor. 9:20–23<sup>1</sup>).

In this article we're going to explore six primary ways people decide what to believe—what I call the *six faith paths*.<sup>2</sup> These are different approaches they use to reach what they consider to be trustworthy spiritual beliefs. Once we understand these approaches and identify which of them our friends currently are on, we'll be better prepared to point those friends toward a biblical faith.

Now, I know this can sound a bit academic—and most of our friends won't use the word—but the issue we're dealing with here is *epistemology*. That's the branch of philosophy that studies knowledge and beliefs—or, as my late friend and mentor Bob Passantino used to put it, "how you know you know." Lots of thick, dusty textbooks have been written about this subject, and the debates go back centuries—including the classic conflicts between the continental rationalists such as René Descartes (of "*I think, therefore I am*" fame) and the British empiricists, especially David Hume.<sup>3</sup> But, as we'll see, these issues are relevant for today and important to consider as we seek to be effective witnesses for Christ. \

## THE SIX FAITH PATHS

### 1. The RELATIVISTIC FAITH PATH:

*Truth is what you make it.*

The first of the six approaches people take to choosing their faith is the *relativistic faith path*. People in this view choose what to believe by deciding what they *want* to believe—and then thinking that somehow mystically, magically, reality conforms to those beliefs. It's like they've got a private timeshare on truth. That's why people who take this approach often say things like, "I've got my truth; you've got yours—let's just get along."

I'm all for getting along—as Christians we need to be strong advocates of tolerance, in that we support people's right to choose their own beliefs. But that doesn't mean everybody is right. Tolerance

and truth are two entirely different issues. I'll support the rights of groups to say, for example, that Jesus was actually an exalted mushroom (people really do teach that)—but that doesn't mean I have to agree with them. An important aspect of tolerance is the freedom to disagree and debate about spiritual ideas—and not pretend that everyone's beliefs are equally valid.

How can we reach out to our relativistic friends? Don't just start throwing evidence for Christianity at them—they'll just dismiss it as "your truth." Instead, address their whole approach to truth. How? One way is by showing them that relativism doesn't work in any other area of life—so why trust it in the spiritual realm?

You could suggest, for example, that they go to Hollywood to try driving on Highway 101—as a relativist. Specifically, they should decide that the sign by the road that says "101" is, for them, the speed limit. Then if they happen to meet a California highway patrolman they can simply explain, "My truth is that my speed limit is 101, so you should just let me be."

How do you think *that* will work out for them? Probably not so well. With incredulity the officer will reply, "Look, you can play word games with your friends, but when you're out here on the highway there's no 'your truth/my truth'—just *real truth*. And the real truth is that the speed limit is 65, and you're going to pay a hefty fine!"

Or maybe your friends are in college—perhaps taking classes from relativistic professors. So next time they take a final exam encourage them to put down *their own* answers—their truth—instead of the answers their professors taught them, and see what happens.

Needless to say, relativistic test taking won't work out much better than relativistic highway driving—or relativistic dieting, relativistic dating, or relativistic anything. *The truth is that in real life we need to discover and deal with...the real truth!* It's not what we want things to be or think they ought to be. Truth is *what really is*. Therefore our job—if we're interested in survival—is to discover what really is, and adjust our lives accordingly.

Imagining or wishing things were different has no effect on how things really are. That's true in the physical world, but also in the spiritual world. If atheists are really right and there is no God, then our studying about God, praying to God, and worshiping God will not cause Him to suddenly appear—*poof!* On the other hand, if we're right and there really is a God, then the denials and denunciations of the atheists are not going to get rid of Him.

The real question is this: *What reasons are there to believe or not believe in God?* Relativism can't answer that question; it can only lead one to choose a belief and to act as if it were really true. That's a roll of dice I don't want to take with my life—and one we should try to convince our friends that they don't want to take with their lives, either. Instead, we need to urge them to find a more reliable faith path, one that will lead them to a trustworthy faith based on real facts. I'd especially recommend the sixth path, which we'll discuss below.

## 2. The TRADITIONAL FAITH PATH:

*Truth is what you've always been taught.*

The second approach is the *traditional faith path*. This accepts beliefs as hand-me-downs. Your friend on this path might not even think about what he believes or why—he simply accepts what his parents and others taught as he was growing up. This person says, "My grandparents were Hindus, my parents were Hindus, and I'm a Hindu—and always will be one."

So what can we say to someone with this mindset? We can ask how they know their grandparents and parents were right, because they could have been wrong—mine could have been; yours could have been. Clearly someone's parents were wrong—since they don't all agree with each other. So how do we find out whose parents, and whose belief systems, are correct? Not by blindly clinging to traditions.

You might encourage your friends to think of the last holiday they had with their wider family. Urge them to consider the people around the dinner table, especially the older ones, and to ask themselves: "Which of these relatives do I respect enough to entrust my eternity to?"—because that's

what they're doing when they unthinkingly perpetuate hand-me-down beliefs and traditions. I love my relatives and enjoy being around them, but there is not a single one of them I'm going to let do my thinking for me, or decide on my behalf and on behalf of my children what we're going to believe throughout future generations.

Instead of supporting a blind journey down the traditional faith path, the Bible tells us to "test everything. Hold on to the good. Avoid every kind of evil" (1 Thess. 5:21–22). And Jesus cautioned His listeners about the dangers of letting tradition stand in the way of obeying what God has said (Mark 7:5–13).

The traditional path is a natural way to begin as children. But at some point we need to grow up spiritually and think for ourselves, examine the reasons behind the traditions we've been taught, and seek truth with God's help until we're confident we are on the right path. Jesus promised that if people will ask, seek, and knock then they will find not just truth, but the God of truth Himself (Luke 11:9–13).

If you're a Christian who has been relying on your upbringing to carry you through life, let me urge you to reinforce your faith with sound reasons and evidence. Paul warned that we must "no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching" (Eph. 4:14). You'll never be mature or confident in your faith until you've studied it for yourself and know why you believe. Only then will you also be able, with conviction, "to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have" (1 Pet. 3:15).

### 3. The AUTHORITARIAN FAITH PATH:

*Truth is what you've been told to believe.*

Similar to the last approach, the *authoritarian faith path* is also passive, but this one can come with much more force. It says: *You WILL believe this!*

I saw this one day when I took a church group on a trip to a mosque. The imam, or teacher, had us all sit down so he could give us an overview of the tenets of Islam — and while he was at it he decided to teach us a few things about Christianity as well. He adamantly declared that "God is not divided; he does not have a son." I knew Muslims also deny that Jesus died on the cross, and therefore reject claims about His resurrection, too.

So I raised my hand and said, "I'm curious about something. Jesus' followers walked and talked with Him for several years. They also reported that He repeatedly claimed to be the Son of God, that they watched Him die on the cross, and that three days later they saw and talked and ate with Him after He was resurrected. They wrote down detailed accounts of what they heard and saw. These have been preserved in thousands of manuscript documents. Now, correct me if I'm wrong, but what Islam teaches us about Jesus seems to be based on the words of one man, Muhammad, who, six hundred years after the time of Christ, was sitting in a cave when, he claimed, an angel spoke to him and told him these things weren't so. What I'm curious about is whether you have any historical or logical reasons for why we should accept that viewpoint over and against the actual historical record?"

The imam glared at me and then declared, "*I choose to believe the prophet!*" — and the discussion was over. For him, the authority of his religion was all he needed. If he had deeper reasons backing up his faith, he chose not to share them.

It's interesting that the original meaning of the Arabic word "Islam" is "submission," and it seems fair to say that many Muslims accept their faith primarily through the influence and authority of their parents, teachers, government, or society. They are boldly told that Allah is the true God, the Qur'an is his revelation, Muhammad is his messenger, and that they need to submit to these claims.

This strong appeal to authority can be seen in a number of other religions and religious groups as well. What can we say to people who are on this faith path? First, we need to make it clear that we're not antiauthority — we all will be influenced and led by authorities in our lives. But we need to emphasize the importance of making sure we submit to the right authorities. How? Here are two areas to check out: the credentials of the authority and the credibility of their message.

First, the credentials. When my children get sick, I naturally want to take them to a doctor. But what kind of doctor should we go see? We could go to a medical doctor, or we can visit a witch doctor — both have "doctor" in their titles. Call me narrow-minded, but I have a strong preference for the one who

has the certificates on the wall. I want to know that my kids' doctor went to a great school that taught the best of medical practices, and that he or she showed up for class, got good grades, and graduated with the right degree.

Similarly, if I'm going to follow a religious authority, I want it to be one who passes all the tests of character, moral integrity, truth-telling, accurate teaching, and consistency. Jesus has all of these, plus the fulfillment of ancient prophecies, miracles done in the presence of eyewitnesses, and He rose from the dead. All of this gives me confidence that He is the one with the real credentials, and therefore worth following wholeheartedly.

And the credibility of the message? It needs to be based on facts, not fables. It needs to square with the real world, and not some make-believe place. (For example, when Jesus warns in John 16:33 that "in this world you will have trouble," it's a message that rings true, over and above the feel-good philosophers who say everything is beautiful, and evil is illusory.) It must also square with what we know to be true from God's Word—so when Muhammad and his followers tell you that Jesus was a prophet but not the Son of God, we know from Scripture that this message fails the test. If anything is clear in the historical record of the New Testament, it's that Jesus was the Son of God—and He demonstrated this through his life, teachings, insights, and miraculous powers.

#### 4. The INTUITIVE FAITH PATH:

*Truth is what you feel in your heart.*

The fourth approach is the *intuitive faith path*, exhibited in the person who says, "Why do I need evidence when I have Oprah? She and her spiritual teachers say we should look within ourselves and listen to our spirit. So that's how I figure out what to believe."

This one reminds me of the classic scene in *Star Wars* where Obi-Wan Kenobi is training his young apprentice, Luke Skywalker, how to use his light saber. Obi-Wan instructs Luke to stop using his senses. "Don't trust your eyes. Your eyes will deceive you," he said. Instead, he puts a hood over Luke's face so he can't see anything. Then he says, "Just feel the Force."

This all sounds so spiritual. But when you talk to your friends who think this way ask them if they've ever tried following their heart or trusting their feelings to guide them in making investments. They'd be broke in almost no time flat. Or ask them if they've attempted to drive to some side-street address in the heart of a major city based on instinct alone, without a road map. Sure, they might have gotten lucky and found their way on occasion, but usually they'll become frustrated and begin to realize that their senses—and road maps—were created for a reason.

God can and sometimes does give us an intuitive sense about things. We should pay attention to what our heart seems to be telling us or, as the saying goes, do occasional gut checks. But we, and our friends, need to be careful. The heart, according to the Bible, is deceitfully wicked and it can quickly lead us astray. Solomon, the wisest man who ever lived, warned us in Proverbs 14:12 (NLT), "There is a path before each person that seems right, but it ends in death."

Intuition is like a flashing yellow light in a dark intersection—it signals to pay attention, but it doesn't tell you everything you need to know. You still need to look both ways, figure out what the real situation is, and act accordingly. Spiritual intuition is similar to that. It might give some clues, but you still need to search for solid truth and reliable evidence in order to be confident you're really on the right track.

#### 5. The MYSTICAL FAITH PATH:

*Truth is what you think God told you.*

Friends who take this fifth approach, the *mystical faith path*, choose what they believe based on experiences they consider to be transcendent. They are therefore supremely confident in what they believe. "Why should I pay attention to you and your academic arguments," they wonder, "when I already know what God has shown me?"

I most commonly see this approach in Mormon people who testify that they know their beliefs are correct because they once prayed and asked God if the Book of Mormon was true—and they're convinced He showed them that it is. So for them, it's "case closed"—and they can't understand why



you're so hesitant to become a Mormon as well.

There's an old saying, "It's hard to argue with experience." While that's true, it's also dangerous to form beliefs on experience alone. So what should we say to our friends who are on the mystical faith path?

First, we shouldn't deny that God can speak today. He didn't lose His voice two thousand years ago! Jesus said in John 10:27, "My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me." So we should be open to God speaking, including in extraordinary ways, as we see Him doing occasionally in the pages of the Bible.

But we must also be careful. The Bible warns in 1 John 4:1, "Do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world." And 1 Thessalonians 5:19–22 cautions, "Do not put out the Spirit's fire; do not treat prophecies with contempt. Test everything. Hold on to the good. Avoid every kind of evil." So the message of Scripture is, first, be open to hearing God's voice, but, second, be careful about what you accept as being from God.

How can we test such things? By applying the pattern in the Bible, which is to test alleged new revelations against what we already know to be from God. For example, Paul warned in Galatians 1:8, "But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned!" In other words, don't automatically put stock in a message you receive through a mystical experience unless it passes the test and brings a message consistent with what you already know to be true from God's previous revelations in the Bible.

Mormonism? Its message that there are many gods contradicts the clear monotheistic teachings of both the Old and New Testaments. So if your Mormon friends say God told them it's true, show them that according to the Bible they need to "test all things," and not to believe every spirit—even if it's an angel standing right in front of them—if it contradicts what God has already revealed.

## 6. The EVIDENTIAL FAITH PATH:

*Truth is what logic and evidence point to.*

The sixth approach, the *evidential faith path*, relies primarily on logic and evidence to show what should be believed. Even though logic and evidence can be ignored or misused, I believe these are two inescapable, God-given tools for determining what is true and trustworthy in the world around us.

First, logic. We can't think, evaluate ideas, or make decisions without it. Yes, some will claim that they don't trust logic—but they use logic to try to make their point. When people tell you they don't trust reason just ask them why—and they'll start giving you reasons against reason. Or sometimes they'll say that our use of logic is "Western," and therefore not accepted by the other half of the world that lives in the East. But as Indian-born apologist Ravi Zacharias says, "Even in India if you step out in front of a bus it will kill you!"

And need we argue for the importance of evidence, experienced through the five senses? All scientific research relies on it; it's the foundational tool of our justice system; it's what we use every day to figure out what is true.

Logic and evidence are inescapable—so we might as well employ them with excellence. More than that, the Bible—which is itself supported by reason and evidence—tells us to test truth claims using these tools, as I've been illustrating throughout this article. Jesus often pointed to the evidence to verify His claims, including fulfilled prophecies, miracles, His consistent character and sinless life, His role as the Messiah and His nature as the unique Son of God, and ultimately the supernatural exclamation point of His resurrection from the dead. He also warned us to examine the words and work of others who claim to be prophets, to see whether the evidence substantiates their claims.

Now, I'm not saying we can rely on our own intellects alone, or that humans have the capacity to figure out their way to God by themselves. God had to reveal Himself, and His Holy Spirit has to draw us to Him. Ultimately our faith and confidence needs to be in God and His wisdom—but logic and evidence help us and our friends in knowing which God to put our faith in and which book we can be confident is God's revelation.

Looking back over the other faith paths, it's also this mix of logic and evidence that helps us to evaluate the *relativistic faith path*, determining it is faulty because truth needs to square with what is real.

It provides the tools to test our *traditions* to determine which ones are worth holding onto, and to assess the credentials and messages of the *authorities* in our lives. It also helps us to size up our *intuitive* instincts, and to confirm or disconfirm our *mystical* encounters.

More than that, it helps us to assemble an ensemble of reasons for accepting the Christian faith, as I and many other apologists have done in our books and articles.<sup>4</sup> Studying these arguments will strengthen your own faith, and it will give you the confidence and compelling information you need to effectively communicate that faith to others—as we “become all things to all men...for the sake of the gospel.”

**Mark Mittelberg** is an international speaker and bestselling author of *Choosing Your Faith ... In a World of Spiritual Options* (Tyndale); *Faith Path: Helping Friends Find Their Way to Christ* (David C. Cook), and coauthor with Lee Strobel of *The Unexpected Adventure* (Zondervan) and with Bill Hybels of *Becoming a Contagious Christian* (Zondervan).

---

## NOTES

- 1 All Bible quotations are from the New International Version, except where otherwise noted.
- 2 I present these in detail in Mark Mittelberg with Foreword by Lee Strobel, *Choosing Your Faith: In a World of Spiritual Options* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale Publishing House, 2008), and in the complementary eight-week training course Mark Mittelberg, *Faith Path: Helping Friends Find Their Way to Christ* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2009).
- 3 For discussion of these topics and the philosophers who represented the various schools of thought, see Frederick Copleston, S. J., *A History of Philosophy*, especially volumes 4 and 5 (New York: Doubleday, 1994 [original copyrights: 1959–1960]).
- 4 See, for example, my sections on the twenty “Arrows of Truth” in chapters 9–11 of *Choosing Your Faith*, and in sessions 6–7 of the Faith Path study course. Also, every Christian should read classics such as Lee Strobel’s *The Case For Christ* (Zondervan, 1998), William Lane Craig’s updated *Reasonable Faith* (Crossway, 2008), and J. P. Moreland’s *Scaling the Secular City* (Baker, 1987).