

INNER CORE BELIEF FORMATION, SPIRITUAL PRACTICES, AND THE WILLING-DOING GAP



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Abstract. Jesus taught we always live out what is in our heart. Our life is primarily directed by the deeply submerged core beliefs, which may often be very different from what we say we value or believe. One key component of inner formation is changing our core beliefs, with God's grace, and thus reducing the willing-doing gap. In the article, after identifying the problem, and highlighting Jesus' focus on inner or heart formation, a basic overview of the concept of a belief is presented. Then ten principles or features about core beliefs and formation are proposed and clarified, followed by some implications for practice.

In the evangelical church's ministry of formation, it seems the attention given primarily to awareness of Bible data and eliciting willing decisions of commitment to grow (along with the ever-present pressure toward external conformity to certain standards) continues to prolong the *willing-doing gap*¹ among believers. I suggest that, among other important factors, greater attention to core belief formation can help us all grow more toward Christlikeness. In a recent interview responding to a comment about this gap, Dallas Willard explains,

I'll put it in these terms, [Christians] know about these things [Christian teaching] but they do not believe them. They profess to believe them because they are expected to, but profession of belief doesn't carry the action. Only real belief carries actions, and we are in a context where we have millions and millions of people who are professing

¹ I use the more descriptive phrase "willing-doing gap" to represent a key component of the "sanctification gap," a term apparently coined by Richard Lovelace to describe the lack of any clear and consistent doctrine of sanctification held by evangelicals, resulting from an overemphasis on the debates about conversion during the nineteenth century. (*Theology Today*, 29:4, Jan 1973: 363–369; basically reprinted in his *Dynamics of Spiritual Life: An Evangelical Theology of Renewal*, Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1979, Chapter 7: 229–270).

Christians that do not believe what they profess because they've been taught the important thing is to profess it whether you believe it or not, and [that] God would like that. But it doesn't seize their lives, and so we have a very severe problem with this gap that you're [the interviewer] talking about.²

Each of us might be aware of moments when we do not do what we want to do. For example, at the beginning of each year, a typical American tradition involves making New Year's resolutions to turn over a new leaf. It is a perfect time to identify habits or conditions that block us from a better lifestyle. Yet even with the best of intentions our follow-through often lacks the staying power needed and we give up and return to our past routines. Sadly, after so many failed attempts to improve our habits with so little gain, some may conclude that it is not possible to change. There is a significant gap between what we want to do and what we actually do. Personally, I want to have a healthy body so I try to avoid adding too many extra pounds to carry around. But I love pizza and overeat whenever I have it, and feel the heaviness later on both in body (pounds) and soul (guilt). Or, I want to be a more gracious Christian and husband, but am sometimes very ungracious to my wife when my controlling tendencies take over and I want to defend my turf at all costs.

We feel we should be doing better but cannot, so frustration and guilt increase. What may come to mind is the Apostle Paul's famous words, "I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do . . . For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing" (Rom 7:15, 18–19).³

In the article, I offer some preliminary reflections on the topic of core belief formation. After highlighting Jesus' focus on inner or heart forma-

² www.halftime.org (accessed July 13, 2009), Bob Buford interviews Dallas Willard. For a brief overview of broad themes in Willard's writings see my book review of *Renovation of the Heart* in the *Christian Education Journal*, 3 (1 NS 3), Fall 2004, 158–164.

³ (TNIV used except where noted.) This famous Romans 7 passage identifies the willing-doing gap, but it is debated among evangelical scholars to whom this passage applies: is it describing the gap of believers or of persons prior to conversion, particularly Israelites under the Law? Some NT scholars (with whom I agree) understand Paul's argument in Romans 7 as rendering 7:14–25 irrelevant to the topic of the believer's sinful propensity and sanctification (see Douglas Moo, *The Epistles to the Romans* NICNT, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996, 442–451 for a discussion of the various issues involved pro and con, and his reasons for a similar interpretation). J. I. Packer views Romans 7 as specifically addressing matters of sanctification (see appendix on the passage in *Keep In Step With The Spirit*, Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, 1984), yet fellow Reformed theologian Anthony Hoekema does not (see appendix for chapter 2, note 25 for A. Hoekema, "The Reformed Perspective," in *Five Views on Sanctification*, ed. Stanley Gundry [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987], 243).

tion, I provide a basic overview of the concept of a belief from philosophy, and then propose ten principles or features about core beliefs and formation. I close with some implications for practice. Although the discussion focuses on the more *cognitive* aspects of core beliefs, I am not saying that formation of our inner life is *only* a cognitive matter. There are other key aspects of formation, such as feelings, attitudes, desires, and bodily habits. Yet there is an essential cognitive component to our inner life formation to bear in mind for our own journey and in planning and teaching as formation leaders.

A second purpose of the article is to offer an example of interdisciplinary engagement, though limited, in which philosophy (specifically epistemology) proposes details that seem compatible with and clarify further a matter in theology (specifically Jesus' teachings regarding inner formation).⁴

A final note relates to the potential for readers to engage with certain aspects of the core belief formation process being proposed while reading the article. "How does my belief about the core belief formation process relate with what is being presented?" The self-referential nature of this particular topic may offer readers an opportunity to reflect on how one responds to new ideas or ones already under consideration but not yet embraced. That is, in working through this dense material readers can attend to the ebb and flow of core beliefs being challenged or affirmed, weighing factors as to their fit with reality, involving modes of questioning, disagreeing, agreeing, etc.

JESUS' TEACHING ABOUT THE HEART OF THE MATTER

Jesus teaches that we need to give closer attention to our inner life—it is an "inside-out" type of formation. "Good people bring good things out of the good stored up [treasured] in their heart, and the evil people bring evil things out of the evil stored up [treasured] in their heart. For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks" (Lk 6:45, Mt 12:35). John Nolland comments, "Jesus' location of goodness in love of enemy and nonjudgment is a call to true inner goodness of the heart, of which one's concrete acts of goodness will be the natural fruit. He cuts through the hypocrisy, shallowness, and self-deceit of every paraded goodness of externality."⁵ I suggest that core beliefs (to be explained later) are one key component of Jesus' reference to what we treasure in our heart.

⁴ This is one aspect of integration articulated in J. P. Moreland's multi-factored model of integration. See J. P. Moreland and William Lane Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 350–352.

⁵ John Nolland, *Luke 1–9:20. Word Biblical Commentary*, Vol. 35A (Dallas, TX: Word, 1989) 309.

Again, in the midst of harsh words to the Pharisees, Jesus makes the same point: “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. Blind Pharisee! *First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean*” (Matt 23:25–26, emphasis added). Michael Wilkins explains, “The heart is the source of all thoughts, motives, and actions. The greed and self-indulgence of the Pharisees and teachers of the law, especially their lust for public religious acclaim, are inner motivations that impact external behavior. In order to bring about true purity, their hearts need purifying.”⁶ Our actions flow from what is on the inside. If we do not focus on the source of our behaviors, we will keep battling our external words and actions—and our willing-doing gap will not change much. Jesus desires that we forgive others “from the heart” (Matt 18:35), not just mouth nice words because that is what everyone expects.

Consider similar teachings by Jesus:

“For from within, out of your hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and defile you” (Mk 7:21–23).

“For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Lk 12:34, Mt 6:21).

[Jesus] said to [the Pharisees], “You are the ones who justify yourselves in the eyes of others, but God knows your hearts. What people highly value is detestable in God’s sight” (Lk 16:15; cf 1 Sam 16:7; see also the contrast made in Lk 18:14).

“But go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice’” (Matt 9:13; 12:7; reference to Hosea 6:6).

“Make a tree good and its fruit will be good, or make a tree bad and its fruit will be bad, for a tree is recognized by its fruit” (Matt 12:33).

“These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me” (Matt 15:8).

“In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness” (Matt 23:28).

Michael McClymond notes,

A purely outward or behavioral change was never enough for Jesus. His teaching again and again returns to the idea that people must change at their deepest level, or rather be changed, for them to live in a fashion that is pleasing to God. Jesus often spoke of ‘hearts’ as soft or hard, good or bad, pure or impure. . . . Rather than actions making the

⁶ Michael Wilkins, *Matthew: The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004), 754.

person good or bad, Jesus taught the reverse, that the actions of a person flowed from the ‘heart’ or essential character.⁷

Throughout the Old Testament the term “heart” (Heb. *lēb*) represents the self, including thoughts, feelings, and the will (e.g., Ps 22:26; 1 Kgs 3:12; Ex 36:2); the word can even be interchangeable with “soul” (Heb. *nephesh*, e.g., Josh. 22:5, 1 Sam. 2:35).⁸ The New Testament mostly follows this usage for “heart” (Gk, *kardia*, e.g., Lk 21:34, Acts 14:17, 2 Cor 5:12) and it is also occasionally used in parallel with “mind” (Gk, *nous*, e.g., 2 Cor 3:14–15).⁹ Thus, heart will signify particularly the changeable aspects of our inner life, the source of our character.

Deep spiritual formation insists that we attend to the core of our self—the heart—and yield to God’s good work within. Jesus teaches that the Holy Spirit is the divine agent who facilitates this formation process from within us. “‘Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, *streams of living water will flow from within him.*’ By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive” (Jn 7:38–39, italics added). In bridging the willing-doing gap our focus must include “heart” work, attending to our internal movements. Jesus’ promise is that, as he lived a life pleasing to God focusing on inner heart formation over external religious conformity, so can we.

WHAT ABOUT CORE BELIEFS?

According to Richard Swinburne, beliefs are basically our “map or view of the world, what [we] hold to be true about it.”¹⁰ Whatever we believe is reality to us. Willard clarifies that our beliefs may have no necessary connection to truth or evidence (as the concept of knowledge would) and that “in its basic nature belief is a matter of *tendencies to act*. . . . To believe something involves a readiness to act, in appropriate circumstances, as if what we believed were so.”¹¹ Furthermore, according to J.P. Moreland,

⁷ Michael McClymond, *Familiar Stranger: An Introduction to Jesus as Nazareth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 99.

⁸ T. Sorg, “Heart,” in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, Vol. 2, ed. Colin Brown (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1976), 181.

⁹ Sorg, “Heart,” 182.

¹⁰ Swinburne, *The Evolution of the Soul*, rev ed., (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997), 122. I am relying on Swinburne’s model of character and the structure of the soul. “A person’s character is her system of desires and beliefs.” *Providence and the Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998), 91. His model is developed primarily in his *The Evolution of the Soul* (esp. Ch 7 and 14), although his assumption of the evolutionary genesis of the soul is problematic for me.

¹¹ Dallas Willard, *Knowing Christ Today: Why We Can Trust Spiritual Knowledge* (NY: HarperOne, 2009), 16.

“A belief’s impact on behavior is a function of three of the belief’s traits: it’s content, strength, and centrality.”¹² Besides content, a factor that is obvious, strength is the degree of being convinced of or certain of the truth of the content. To minimally believe something would mean passing a tipping point over 50%. A belief’s strength could grow to “beyond reasonable doubt” eventually to “complete certainty.” The third trait, centrality of a belief, relates to the belief’s importance in relation to all beliefs held, to one’s worldview. The flavor of ice cream you like is probably less central than a belief about telling the truth or treating a person with dignity. Furthermore, since beliefs also involve a tendency to act, central beliefs will likely be those that are acted out more consistently in our lifestyle. Thus, within our worldview, beliefs can change in at least three ways: 1) new beliefs can be acquired after reaching the tipping point past 50%, 2) existing beliefs (whether more central or less central) can grow in strength—from lesser to greater certainty—or can diminish and be given up after going below the tipping point, and 3) existing beliefs can become more or less central as to importance within one’s view of reality.

For this article, our focus is on *core* beliefs, beliefs that are *strongly* held (say, 75% or 80% or more) and very *central* in importance within our worldview as indicated by being acted on fairly consistently in our lifestyle. Also, the following discussion on core belief formation draws implications from a concept in epistemology called “indirect doxastic voluntarism.”¹³ Although we can influence the forming and changing of our core beliefs over time, we cannot do that in an instant, by mere decision. The concept will be explained and illustrated later in the article.

Furthermore, will power alone was never meant to carry the weight of right living. It is too limited to defeat the various temptations we face and to change the sinful habits and compulsions we have developed over a lifetime.¹⁴ Will power is also too weak to bring about positive change—we cannot will joy, peace, kindness. We can will certain actions, but not character traits. Rather, as Jesus taught, our mode of life is primarily directed by our inner life or heart. Thus, we need to grasp the importance of one particular aspect of inner formation of the heart, changing our core beliefs, our deep worldview perspective—a key feature of our character that in turn affects

¹² J. P. Moreland, *Love Your God with All Your Mind: The Role of Reason in the Life of the Soul* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1997), 73.

¹³ Indirect doxastic voluntarism is “the idea that one’s beliefs result from a process of deliberation in which one exercises freedom at various points along the way, in what one will or will not consider, how one will look at the issue, etc.” as opposed to direct doxastic voluntarism in which “at any moment one can directly choose to believe or not to believe a given item” which usually is not the case. Moreland and Craig, *Foundations*, 277; see also Paul K. Moser. *Knowledge and Evidence*. Cambridge Studies in Philosophy. Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1989, 210–211.

¹⁴ The philosophical literature identifies weakness of will (*akrasia*) as one hindrance to moral action.

our whole life in how we live. Inner formation of our core beliefs is a mysterious and complex process so we can only attempt some explanation in the following ten principles. I invite others, especially philosophers interested in formation, to clarify these matters further.

PRINCIPLE #1: WILL POWER, CORE BELIEFS, AND LIFESTYLE

*Our life is not primarily directed by our will power, but by our core beliefs, or to use Willard's expression, our governing idea systems.*¹⁵ But even these terms may be confusing. Talk of “beliefs” and “ideas” may seem it is primarily about what we know, about what we think, but that is *not* the case. The matter goes much deeper, so the qualifying term “core” represents not just any of our beliefs, but core beliefs at the depths of our character that are the ones that are very stable. Our core beliefs include our settled perspectives or worldview on reality, as we have come to know it. Bottom line, we live out of what our core beliefs are.

For example, in our country you do not want to drive normally on the left side of the road except when it is safe to pass a car on a two-lane highway. Otherwise in the left lane you will eventually have a head-on crash with a car going the opposite direction. All American drivers have developed a core belief that it is not healthy to drive in the left lane. Imagine driving a car on a two-lane highway and suddenly your car starts veering over the dividing line into oncoming traffic. Perhaps you hit an oil slick or there is a sheet of ice on the road. Immediately your actions indicate how badly you do not want to be going over that line—a core belief about driving safely is being violated—and you do everything in your power to avert that. But if you lived in England and drove a car there, driving safely in the *left* lane would be part of your core beliefs.

Many years ago at our house, we were having a large gathering during the day and I noticed that the air conditioning came on. It was not that warm in the house, but my first reaction, the moment I heard the air conditioning starting up, was to get up and turn it off. Gladly I stopped myself in my tracks and began to muse about why I felt such an urgency—such a conditioned response like a rat in a maze—to turn off the air conditioning when I heard the sound of the unit coming on? I realized how stingy I was, that money concerns were too highly valued in my core beliefs. I decided to be more generous to our guests that day and let the unit run. I had received similar feedback from our daughter Ruth, during some intense discussions, that my first response to a new idea was “it costs too much.” Facing this kind of feedback was hard, but it began a journey of inviting God’s gracious work in my heart so that it is much easier now to be more generous.

¹⁵ Dallas Willard, *Renovation*, 96–99.

Consider another situation. A person living on the third floor of an apartment building would not normally jump off the balcony to the sidewalk below. Respecting the law of gravity would be a core belief, along with preserving one's life. (Note how it is possible to have core beliefs that greatly influence our lives about which we hardly ever think.) But if a dangerous fire was threatening us and our only escape in this third floor apartment was out over the balcony, we might be willing to risk the jump, especially if there was a chance to land in a bush nearby that could cushion our fall. We can see that in some situations our core beliefs may clash and one belief may get more allegiance than another—in this case self-preservation over respecting the law of gravity.

If we want to know what our core beliefs are, we note how we act in a variety of situations. In most cases our actions exactly match our core beliefs. As the proverb phrases it, "Actions speak louder than words." God designed humans so that our lives are primarily directed by our core beliefs.

PRINCIPLE #2: CORE BELIEFS VS. PROFESSED BELIEFS

Our core beliefs are not necessarily what we "profess" or say we believe. We need to make a distinction between what we say our core beliefs are and what we actually *do*. Consider Peter's brave statement at the Last Supper of his dying loyalty to Jesus (Lk 22:31–33) and comparing it with his three-time denial of Jesus in the high priest's courtyard (Lk 22:54–62). We can say one thing, and do something totally opposite. In some cases our *professed* beliefs have little relation to our *core* beliefs—which determine how we actually live. Note this analogy: we have a perception of ourselves—an idealized image without faults—that is in contrast with reality (we do have blind spots and faults hidden to us but may be obvious to others). Likewise, our perception of our beliefs (i.e., professed beliefs, what we say we believe) may be in partial contrast with our actual core beliefs (which also may be hidden from us but may be obvious to others by our words and actions).

A colleague shares this story about a philosophy and ethics class he took while attending a state university for his undergraduate degree. One of his classmates was an articulate and pleasant student. They had long discussions about ethical principles, integrity, and a good work ethic, all which she valued highly and for which she could offer good arguments. As final exam day was approaching the professor gave the class a list of questions for which the students should be prepared to answer, but only one question would be selected on exam day. Also students were required to bring their own "blue book" (assembled sheets of lined paper with a blue cover) in which to write their final exam. Exam day came and he shares how students were furiously writing responses in their blue book, trying to avoid hand cramps.

When he was almost done, my colleague looked up at the clock to check the time and he happened to notice this peculiar action. His classmate slipped the blue book she was using that day into her bag and drew out a different blue book. She got up, turned in this “bagged” blue book on the professor’s desk and left the classroom. Apparently she had prepared a blue book answer for each of the questions on the list to make possible a blue book substitution for the selected question on exam day. Cheating to get a top grade in an ethics class was more important to this student than practicing the ethical principles she could affirm and give good reasons to follow. Talk is cheap. Our professed beliefs do not always match our actual core beliefs.

PRINCIPLE #3: TRUE AND FALSE CORE BELIEFS

Our core beliefs are made up of two sets of beliefs: a) true settled core beliefs and b) false settled, core beliefs. For example, Jesus’ disciples had a false core belief that Jesus could never rise from the dead, and it manifested itself in their reaction to the women’s report. Early that morning, the women walked to the tomb to do some additional anointing of Jesus’ body. They found an empty tomb instead. An angel announced Jesus was alive and to report this to the disciples. But notice how their report was received. The women “returned from the [empty] tomb and reported all these things to the eleven and to all the rest. . . . But these words appeared to [the disciples] as nonsense, and they would not believe them” (Lk 24: 9, 11). That Jesus was alive was beyond belief for the disciples—not possible—even though they had witnessed such miracles before (rising of Jairus’ daughter, of a widow’s son being carried during a funeral procession, and of Lazarus). Furthermore, on a few occasions Jesus had predicted that he would die and rise on the third day. Nonetheless, the disciples could not fathom Jesus being alive.

We observe a similar false belief or lack of belief in Thomas. Easter Sunday evening Jesus appeared to his disciples when they were gathered together, but Thomas was absent. The next time they met Thomas, “the [ten] other disciples were saying to [Thomas], ‘We have seen the Lord!’ But [Thomas] said to them, ‘Unless I see in His hands the imprint of the nails, and put my finger into the place of the nails, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe’” (Jn 20:25). So we have a mixed bag of core beliefs within each of us, some true and some false, as evident in the ethics student’s substitution of blue books on exam day. And it is the false core beliefs that get us into trouble, since they do not correspond to reality, but rather to some illusion in our mind that we believe is true. As a child I used to believe it would never rain on Sunday, since I deduced “Sunday” meant “sunny day.” Imagine my disappointment—and brief crisis of faith in God—the first day it rained on Sunday. Perceived views of reality—false

core beliefs—should give way to reality (but sadly this is not always the case).

PRINCIPLE #4: ROLE OF REALITY ENCOUNTERS

Encountering truth/reality is the key means to facilitate embracing new true beliefs, affirming current true beliefs, and correcting false core beliefs, if we are responsive. Noted above was the disciples' lack of response to the women's report that Jesus was raised from the dead. How was it that the disciples eventually were convinced that Jesus was alive? They began the day in disbelief, but by the end of the day they were ready to persuade Thomas that Jesus was alive. The disciples were confronted with the truth they could not easily explain away. Consider the evidence for Jesus' resurrection they had prior to seeing Jesus for themselves: the women's report in the morning, Peter and John's visit to the empty tomb, and the report of the two on the Emmaus road who had walked and talked with Jesus. Finally that evening Jesus himself appeared. Jesus took a further step and ate some food to prove he was not some spirit but Jesus whom they knew (Lk 24:42–43). Since our core beliefs are fairly settled and stable, they do not change very easily, especially those more central to our worldview. To clarify, some core beliefs may be more readily changeable to the degree an empirical experience can affect them. More theoretical core beliefs—more removed from experience—are less easily modified. As was noted, this is not solely a cognitive process, yet one key component is being persuaded of the evidence from reality within our inner life, which requires some processing—it is not instantaneous.

At times learning the truth may be troubling since we have to admit we were wrong. In addition, our arrogance may urge us to resist the truth and delay or even forestall the learning process.¹⁶ For example, to return to the matter of Jesus' resurrection, close companions with whom Thomas lived and had ministered together over a period of three years with Jesus could not persuade him of the truth. Imagine Thomas' embarrassment when Jesus invited him to do what Thomas had demanded a week earlier, to touch Jesus' hands and side (Jn 20:27). Usually learning the truth involves great joy, occasionally it can be very humbling too.

Truth encounters can occur in a variety of ways. As we study and meditate on Scripture we encounter an accurate view of reality as no other source of knowledge can offer (Ps 1:1–6). As we experience the trials of life, we are given opportunities to face reality—about ourselves, about others, about the givens of our circumstances, about God—to surface false core be-

¹⁶ Hindrances to learning truth could be sources from any of these broad categories: a) the individual, b) our community, c) our culture, and d) the devil, an agent of evil working within the first three categories.

liefs. Other ways include reading books, hearing sermons and teaching, receiving personal feedback from friends and trusted others (e.g., when Jesus rebuked Peter for not having God's perspective, Matt 16:23), observing the actions of role models and others, watching a documentary or good movie, and when in cross-cultural contexts. God can use a variety of means to jolt us so we can hear truth at deep levels.

PRINCIPLE #5: LIMITATION OF PLAUSIBILITY STRUCTURES

Our plausibility structures—what we consider to be plausible or possible—can limit our search for truth since we will not expend much effort considering or exploring ideas we do not regard as possibly true. We may also make a distinction between 1) ideas we have not yet embraced, having not yet reached the tipping point, and 2) ideas we think are outlandish and impossible, although there may be overlap in some cases. For example ideas that seem possible to us but we do not really believe them yet (category #1), might include that some UFOs exist, some near death experiences are true accounts, more answers to prayer are possible, there might be worlds with people outside of our galaxy. On the other hand ideas we would not give any thought to, they are so implausible or impossible to us (category #2) might include that the earth is flat, humans can fly by flapping their arms, praying over a person who just died to be raised to life again—these ideas might be outside of our plausibility structures. Yet since we do not now know everything there is to know, it is likely there are true ideas out there that we now consider impossible, outside of our plausibility structures.

Note also that our false core beliefs can hinder us from learning the truth by bracketing off whole areas of ideas we now consider to be beyond belief. Consider Peter's limiting cultural worldview belief: the good news was for Jewish people only, and not for Gentiles. We understand today that Jesus' commission in Acts 1:8 was a mandate to share the good news to all peoples: "in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). But in their Jewish-centric cultural mindset, Peter and the apostles could not conceive of Jesus meaning to include Gentiles. They thought Jesus meant to reach the Jews throughout the world. For the first six years following Jesus' resurrection, it was exclusively a Jewish church (with some Samaritans, Acts 8), no Gentiles welcome (except perhaps as Jewish converts), until Acts 10, so from c.33–c.39 AD.¹⁷

God then moved in Peter's life to undergo an important paradigm shift over a two-day period: that Gentiles are welcome into God's family by believing in Jesus. Acts 10 describes Peter's encounter with the vision of the sheet and his subsequent visit at Cornelius's house (a Gentile home). You

¹⁷ Dates are from Paul Barnett, *Jesus and the Rise of Early Christianity: A History of New Testament Times* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1999).

would think when Peter the evangelist saw a group of unbelievers gathered there he would have immediately shared the good news about Jesus. Instead he asked why they had sent for him, since he had never set foot in a Gentile house before (Acts 10:28–29). After a few moments, the truth finally dawned on Peter and his core belief was being dislodged, “I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts those from every nation who fear him and do what is right” (Acts 10:34–35). God was welcoming both Jew and Gentile into God’s family. But word got back to the Jewish congregation in Jerusalem and they were not very happy about Peter’s blessing these Gentiles—they still had the old false belief. After Peter explained what happened, his own paradigm shift and the evidence of God’s blessing these Gentiles, the Jerusalem church eventually became receptive: “When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, ‘So then, God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life’” (Acts 11:18).

Thus our false, settled core beliefs can actually become a barrier for us from receiving more truth and hindering the potential correction of our false core beliefs. Thomas could not imagine that Jesus was alive. Peter could not imagine that Gentiles could become Christians. The town of Nazareth could not grasp that Jesus, who had plied his woodworking and masonry skills among them, was anything more than “the carpenter” (Mk 6:3). This limiting belief held them back from receiving Jesus’ healing ministry among them: “And he was amazed at their lack of faith” (Mk 6:6). For various reasons we may also tenaciously hold on to false core beliefs as Thomas and the Nazareth folk did.

So either false core beliefs or ideas we regard as impossible can become a barrier to us to gain more freedom by living in more truth. Changing core beliefs involves a process of being open to explore new ideas, pondering the evidence, and connecting new ideas to see how they fit with other ideas we know, especially within a Christian worldview (yet realizing that each of us have false core beliefs as part of our Christian worldview). The conscious evaluating of evidence is an important component—all the while we have doubts, we have concerns, we are puzzled. And God continues to work with us to help us respond to truth. Consider an example from my own journey. I used to think God could not communicate to me personally and directly. But over a period of time I became convinced that the Bible does teach this. Now I am more aware when God does this and can welcome this personal communication and have actually written about it to persuade others!¹⁸

¹⁸ For more on God’s personal communication to us, see my *Wasting Time with God: A Christian Spirituality of Friendship with God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001), Ch 6, and J. P. Moreland and Klaus Issler, *In Search of a Confident Faith: Overcoming Barriers to Trusting in God*, (InterVarsity, 2008), Ch 6.

PRINCIPLE #6: CORE BELIEFS NOT AFFECTED BY IMMEDIATE DECISIONS

Our core beliefs cannot instantly be changed by a mere decision or a heartfelt commitment of our will, at any time we want to. Do not misunderstand, core beliefs can change, but not just by deciding to believe something differently than we currently do. Core beliefs are much more stable and not affected by our whims. For example, even if someone offered you \$50,000 to do so, you could not believe that president John F. Kennedy never existed, or that you have a different job than you do (e.g., I am a NASA astronaut), or that you live somewhere else than where you do. *True* core beliefs are based on actual reality, not illusion or perceived reality as false core beliefs are.

God's mysterious working in our lives is a key part of this formation process. Also, our relationships and our community (and their core beliefs) have an important part to play. So if we add into this mix God's role and our community's (and culture's) role, and we remind ourselves about the nature of core beliefs—that these are fairly stable and settled—we can recognize that we cannot change them by ourselves, instantly, by just deciding to. It is more complex.

PRINCIPLE #7: CORE BELIEFS AFFECTED BY LONG-TERM INTENTIONAL SEEKING

Our core beliefs can be changed indirectly over time, with God's grace, as we intentionally engage our minds, our affections (along with our body) in sustained projects of inquiry, learning, discussion, meditation on truth, spiritual practices, within a like-minded community. In some sense, God requires our participation in the formation process. Core beliefs or governing idea systems are the kind of things that are very settled and firm. So the change process will take some time, just like turning a huge aircraft carrier at sea from moving in one direction to go in the opposite direction.

That changing core beliefs is a process over time has been illustrated from the cases already mentioned. Although early resurrection Sunday morning the disciples did not believe Jesus was alive, by the end of the day they did. It seems as though their core beliefs were changed in a day, but let me suggest that they were aware at some level within the prior year of contributing factors (three people had already been raised from the dead), but the tipping point had not yet been reached. Initially, Jesus' appearance did nothing for them except scare them, so strong was their core belief against Jesus' resurrection, "They were startled and frightened, thinking they saw a ghost. [Jesus] said to them, 'Why are you troubled, and why do doubts rise in your minds?'" (Lk 24:37–38, NASV). When Jesus ate the piece of fish, they could not deny the fact that he was alive in "flesh and bones." Thomas

took a little longer, since he did not have the undeniable fact of Jesus' physical sense as the others' had. Yet, Matthew reports on the occasion when Jesus gave the Great Commission some time later, "When [the disciples] saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted" (Mt 28:17). Carson notes, "Jesus' resurrection did not instantly transform men of little faith and faltering understanding into spiritual giants."¹⁹

For Peter it was a two-day process of weighing the evidence to welcome Gentiles as genuine believers. These factors would seem undeniable to Peter: the perplexing vision of the sheet, a distinct warning from the Holy Spirit to "accompany [the three men] without misgivings, for I have sent them Myself" (Acts 10:20, NASV), and then the evidence of the Spirit on the Gentiles, as Peter shared later with the Jerusalem church: "So if God gave them the same gift as he gave us, who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could oppose God?" (Acts 11: 17).

We may also consider here the Apostle Paul's experience regarding his encounter with Jesus on the Damascus road—from fanatic Pharisee jailing Christians to bold evangelist for Jesus three days later. Along with the appearance of the Lord, Saul (later Paul) could not deny his continuing blindness: "For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything" (Acts 9:9, c. 34 AD). I suspect this "Ph.D. seminary professor" did not sleep much during his imposed three-day formation retreat. With ideas racing around his mind as Saul attempted to connect the dots of texts in the Hebrew Scriptures from his current views to understand Jesus as Lord. Upon gaining his eyesight he became a rabid evangelist. "Yet Saul grew more and more powerful and baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Christ" (Acts 9:22, Gal 1:23). But it was many years later before Barnabas invited Paul to join him as a teacher in the new Gentile church in Antioch (Acts 11:19–26, c. 39 AD). Perhaps the intervening years permitted Paul a time for his core beliefs to become more settled in the Gospel for his role as the early Church's chief theologian and missionary.

PRINCIPLE #8: CORE BELIEFS PASSIVELY FORMED

Our core beliefs can be acquired even without our conscious mental engagement. In a sense, it is largely a *passive* process, over time responding to the facts of reality (or to perceived reality leading to false beliefs). God designed human beings to be truth-seekers and to be truth-embracers. But our fallenness distorts that built-in "truth capacity" and urges us to retain false core beliefs, sometimes tenaciously. We cannot create brute reality—it

¹⁹ D. A. Carson. "Matthew." In *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed., Frank G. Gaebelin, Vol. 8, Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1984, 594. Commentators are divided regarding if "some" refers only to the 11 disciples, or also to the larger group of disciples (Acts 1:14–15). Regardless, it reveals that even though the followers could now see Jesus physically, some still had doubts.

is already there—to be discovered and labeled (e.g., a poodle dog, oak tree, color of red) although humans can create “socially constructed” realities (e.g., money, credit cards, college degrees).²⁰ Since core beliefs can be learned without conscious supervision or engagement it is possible for babies and children to acquire core beliefs, even before they can clearly speak their mother tongue.²¹

PRINCIPLE #9: MOSTLY CLUELESS ABOUT CORE BELIEFS

We are unaware of most of our core beliefs (including false, settled core beliefs). Many of our core beliefs were formed during childhood, mostly without our awareness. As we approach adolescence and young adulthood we may not be fully aware of all the core beliefs that have been formed in our character. Imagine an iceberg, in which most of the ice is below the water, with only a small portion visible. Similarly, most of our core beliefs are below the surface of our consciousness. By noticing our actions and reactions along with the help of feedback from trusted others, we can discern many of our core beliefs.

PRINCIPLE #10: RESPONSIBLE FOR CORE BELIEFS

We are responsible for our core beliefs (both true and false). This final point may seem surprising following the other points that emphasize how passively core beliefs are formed. Yet in light of principle #7 we do have a role in the formation process and thus we are held accountable before God for our core beliefs. As adults we daily confirm our core beliefs by continuing to live in light of them. Since we always have the capacity to change our core beliefs indirectly, it behooves us to be diligently engaged in the truth-seeking process, encountering truth wherever it may be leading us. We wish to welcome more truth into our core beliefs, so we can embrace new core beliefs, affirm existing true core beliefs, and become aware of false core beliefs so they can be eventually corrected.

Two motivations may propel us onward toward becoming life-long learners: the fact that we all still hold false, settled core beliefs, and that fact that there are unknown truths to us beyond our plausibility structures that yet need to be discovered and embraced. If truth can make us more free

²⁰ The distinction between brute reality and socially constructed reality is from John Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality* (New York: Free Press, 1995). I thank Peggy Burke for bringing this reference to my attention.

²¹ Some psychologists theorize that many of our core beliefs are formed in our early childhood and that these beliefs in particular are difficult to dislodge (e.g. I am loved when I am good).

(Jn 8:32) and if core beliefs always direct our lives (both true and false ones), then our lives will experience greater flourishing than we currently do as we embrace a greater set of true core beliefs than we currently hold. And allow these beliefs to become more deeply internalized.

An additional motivation applies to all teachers and those who offer guidance to others (spiritual directors, pastors, counselors, ministry leaders, mentors, seminary professors, parents, etc). We teach out of our current, limited storehouses of core beliefs and, in effect, can short-change our charges if we do not continue to be persistent seekers of truth. Jesus' harsh warning to the educational gate-keepers of his day have often gripped me in application as a teacher: "Woe to you experts in the law, because you have taken away the key to knowledge. You yourselves have not entered, and you have hindered those who were entering" (Lk 11:52, Mt 12:13). Although we could patiently wait for the trials of life to push us along on this aspect of our formation, we have the opportunity to be intentional in exploring new arenas to search for truth we have not yet embraced, recognizing that the learning process may be thoroughly uncomfortable and anxiety producing.²² Table A lists the ten principles.

²² Friend and colleague J. P. Moreland and I have been on a journey to learn about the Spirit's power for living and ministry. For example see J. P. Moreland, *The Kingdom Triangle: Recover the Christian mind, Renovate the Soul, Restore the Spirit's Power* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007) and Moreland and Issler, *In Search of a Confident Faith*.

Table A: Core Belief Factors and Inner Heart Formation

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- [#1] Our life is not primarily directed by our will power, but by our core beliefs.
 - [#2] Our core beliefs are not necessarily what we "profess" or say we believe.
 - [#3] Our core beliefs are made up of two sets of beliefs: a) true, settled, core beliefs and b) false, settled, core beliefs.
 - [#4] Encountering truth/reality is the key means to facilitate embracing new true beliefs, affirming current true beliefs, and correcting false core beliefs, if we are responsive.
 - [#5] Our plausibility structures—what we consider to be plausible or possible—can limit our search for truth since we will not expend much effort considering or exploring ideas we do not regard as possibly true.
 - [#6] Our core beliefs cannot instantly be changed by a mere decision or a heartfelt commitment of our will, at any time we want to.
 - [#7] Our core beliefs can be changed indirectly over time, with God's grace, as we intentionally engage our minds, our affections (along with our body) in sustained projects of inquiry, learning, discussion, meditation on truth, and spiritual practices.
 - [#8] Our core beliefs can be acquired even without our conscious mental engagement.
 - [#9] We are unaware of most of our core beliefs (including false, settled core beliefs).
 - [#10] We are responsible for our core beliefs (both true and false).
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KEEPING THE GAP IN PLACE

Unfortunately Christian leaders can reinforce the willing-doing gap in three particular ways. A call to commitment is often presented to believers as if all one must do to bring about a new pattern of Jesus-like living is to walk the aisle (at a local church or camp) and to make a decision. Such altar calls, without offering or indicating the need for continuing, intentional engagement in formation practices does not accomplish the desired effect and adds on more guilt and doubt when no change takes place.

Another way that we may reinforce the gap is by an over-emphasis on cognitively knowing the Bible *without* helping to nurture Christians' inner formation into actually believing the Bible. Since talk is easy, one can glibly profess many Bible facts and articulate sound theology without having the respective core beliefs represented by the facts and theology. God desires we become Bible *believers*, not just Bible *knowers*. Living in the truth is the goal, not just professing it.

Finally, when Christian leaders give too much focus about external actions and too little about inner attitudes, we major on the minors. In light of our discussion on core beliefs, we can better appreciate why, in Jesus' teaching, inner formation is more important than just focusing on outward actions. The formation project involves: "First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean" (Matt 23:25). Jesus himself did not worry much about the complaints against his external actions—of breaking the Sabbath, his lifestyle of perceived "gluttony and drunkenness," or his association with "impure" people. He focused primarily on his relationship with the Father and a heart of dependence in doing what pleased the Father.

SOME IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

With this background it may be more clear how spiritual practices have their role. "A discipline is any activity within our power that we engage in to enable us to do what we cannot do by direct effort."²³ We cannot change core beliefs directly partly due to how settled core beliefs are but also because we are not the only ones involved in the process. God has an essential role in our individual transformation process, along with our community (and culture). Yet with personal intentionality and persistence, core beliefs can be changed. As Richard Foster notes, "Indirection affirms that spiritual formation does not occur by direct human effort, but through a relational process whereby we receive from God the power or ability to do what we cannot do by our own effort. We do not produce the outcome. That is God's business."²⁴ Cloud and Townsend illustrate this point by advising, "The

²³ Dallas Willard, *Divine Conspiracy*, 353.

²⁴ Richard Foster with Kathryn Helmers, *Life With God: Reading the Bible for Spiritual Formation* (NY: HarperOne, 2008), 155.

alcoholic who tries to stop drinking by using willpower and commitment is wasting his time. He's much better off using that willpower to take himself to the next support meeting."²⁵

To encourage change in our lifestyle, it usually requires some kind of "paradigm" shift—a refocusing of our perspectives and priorities. Yet to bring these ideas into our lifestyle we must also engage in various "practice" shifts—where we try out or experiment with new ways of living.²⁶ The task is to place ourselves in accommodating circumstances so that over time, as we welcome God's grace in our journey, our core beliefs can change and become more aligned with God's reality.

Particular implications from our discussion can include the following. We can thank God for his wise design of human nature that the core beliefs of our character are fairly stable. It is good that we do not have to be re-trained every 15 minutes! Perhaps the stability of our true core beliefs is one key factor for what sustains our life without sin in heaven. With *patience*, we can extend grace to ourselves and to others, granting the permission to fail, for the willing-doing gap to be evident. It will take time for core beliefs to be adjusted and as we persist, we patiently wait for growth. And, we can persist in intentional practices regarding truth encounters.

I used to give much more attention to my words and behaviors—what I said and how I acted in my attempts to follow God's commands in the Bible. But in light of the insights above, I am giving myself more grace and taking a long-term view of formation. What is now more important is to attend to my reactions to discern what is going on inside. And, as I become aware, to be transparent with God and admit I need help and ask for his grace to grow my heart. In some cases, I may take on a related spiritual practice so both my soul and body are attending to this area of need. Let me share a key transforming experience from a decade ago that convinced me my core beliefs can be changed.

In the Sermon on the Mount the first vice Jesus targets is anger (Matt 5:21–26). Note Jesus' focus is not on the external action of murder, but the internal source of that action: anger, hostility and unreconciled relationships. Further, Jesus was not laying down a new law that we can never say "*raca*" or "fool." Jesus uses the word himself in his own teaching ("blind fools" Matt 23:17; "You fool!" on God's lips, Lk 12:20). The point is, does that spoken word "fool" come from an angry heart? That was my problem, in using "turkey" to label drivers who wove in and out on the freeway lanes, as I drove each day to Biola, where I am a seminary professor. At the time, I thought I was not really an angry person (now I am aware how clueless I was/am), but when Willard used the term "contempt," that hit home.

²⁵ Henry Cloud and John Townsend, *12 "Christian" Beliefs That Can Drive You Crazy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995), 59–60.

²⁶ The idea of a "practice" shift comes from Charles Kraft, *Christianity with Power* (Ann Arbor, MI: Vine, 1989), 79.

I was nudged to enter a season of working on my contempt for some free-way drivers and to develop a more peace-filled heart on the road.

In a nutshell, I recited some relevant verses and invited the Spirit to make me aware of my “mild road rage.” When I became aware—if I did—(at first, hours after the occasion) I would confess my sin and thank the Lord for his kind mercy and forgiveness, and invite his supernatural peace to wash over me (Phil 4:6–7). Over the months of this project, several days each week working through this process, the time between the spoken word of contempt and the awareness became shorter and shorter. Eventually I became aware *before* I would hurl “you turkey” (with contempt). Then “graduation day” came, about 12 months later, when a driver cut in front of me and nothing stirred in my heart except peace. In that moment—as I experienced such freedom and peace in my heart—I was stunned by the grace of God. Of course I still experience internal turbulence on the road, but hardly like before. This case has its limitations—it was an “individual” project, humanly speaking. My community could have helped it along, but at the time I probably was too embarrassed to share it with anyone. This milestone transforming even convinced me that my core beliefs can be changed over time.

Jesus taught we always live out what is in our heart, our character. Our life is run by the deeply submerged governing idea systems that are often very different from what we say we value or believe. Just relying on our will power to live a grace-filled and abundant Christ-like life is a recipe for frustration. To be spiritually formed deeply within our inner life involves our intentional participation—supervised and empowered by God the Holy Spirit who indwells each believer forever—in a core belief formation process: reinforcing and facilitating deeper internalization of true core beliefs, correcting false core beliefs, and acquiring new true core beliefs. Throughout our life we need to place ourselves in nurturing circumstances so that our false settled core beliefs can be changed to embrace more and more of actual reality, how God views reality.

Furthermore, it is not just a project of individual human effort, but supported and sustained within grace-filled loving relationships in community, for which I am now very grateful as a recovering loner. This kind of radical change takes place in the depths of our soul: modifying our core beliefs into alignment with reality as it really is, and modifying our core desires or dispositions toward those that are good and worthy of praise. The Spirit’s agenda is facilitating a growing intimacy with and dependence on our Trinitarian God, rooted in a deep objective and experiential union with Christ. The outflow of such changes within our heart is a life that will resemble how Jesus might live your life or my life, if he were you or me, living with our abilities and gifts, with our privileges and responsibilities, within the givens of our life circumstances.

The term used in the Gospels for the major radical change in our life is *metanoia*—a change of mind—usually translated in English as “repentance.” Beyond our initial conversion, we will undergo additional calls to

metanoia—or can we say “paradigm shifts”? May I paraphrase Jesus’ initial call in Matthew 4:17 and apply it to our formation journey: “Make further paradigm and practice shifts, for the kingdom of heaven is near”? I close with these words from Willard:

[T]o enable people to become disciples we must change whatever it is in their actual belief system that bars confidence in Jesus as Master of the Universe. . . . When we bring people to believe differently, they really do become different. . . . And the reason why clergy and others have to invest so much effort into getting people to *do* things is that they are working against actual beliefs of the people they are trying to lead. . . . What has to be done, instead of trying to drive people to do what we think they are supposed to, is to be honest about what we and others really believe. Then, by inquiry, teaching, example, prayer, and reliance upon the Spirit of God, we can work to change the [core] beliefs that are contrary to the way of Jesus.²⁷

²⁷ Dallas Willard, *Divine Conspiracy*, 307–308. This article is part of a book in process, tentatively entitled, *Spiritual Formation Jesus’ Way*. I appreciate the feedback from various reviewers, including the anonymous reviewers of this journal.

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