# Four Bases of the Christian Faith **[1]**

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I came across this illustration the other day. It was given to me by the pastor of the student church which I attended while at Stellenbosch. I rather like it, so I have decided to put it up here, for what it might be worth.

alt: foundations_of_faith.svg

[2]Four Bases of the Christian Faith [2]

The illustration depicts the four foundations on which a Christian bases his or her beliefs:

- The Bible
- Experience
- Tradition
- Reason

At each corner one or more groups are listed. These groups are characterised by the fact that they base their faith *primarily* on the base listed in the nearest quadrant. Evangelicals, therefore, place their beliefs first and foremost on what is in the Bible. Charismatics base their beliefs on some (perceived) experience with the Holy Spirit. In Roman Catholicism, tradition plays a very big role and often trumps the rest. For liberal Christians, reasoning—often from a worldly and/or humanistic point-of-view—is what forms the basis of their belief.

While these groups *lean* towards one of the four bases, all Christians, to some greater or lesser degree, build their faith on all four. They are not mutually exclusive. Charismatics will read and teach from the Bible, as do the Roman Catholics and liberals1. Similarly, evangelicals employ reason. I know of evangelicals who believe in intelligent design2, rather than young earth creationism3, for example. The difference between evangelicals and liberals, however, is that liberals will often reject parts of the Bible outright based on reason (such as the creation story), while the evangelical will accept it as-is because it is part of the God-breathed Word, regardless whether he or she believes it to be an allegory or not. Another area where reason is employed is in apologetics; indeed, the whole point of apologetics is to provide evidence for faith! All believing Christians will also profess to having had some experience with the Holy Spirit. This experience might not be as "spectacular" as talking in tongues or otherwise behaving in a manner which outwardly appears very strange, but that is not to say that it is any less real for that person. Finally, most Christians adhere to some sort of tradition4. Tradition can refer to teachings or rituals or the like. So it might refer to communion, or the pomp of a high church service or even just singing a hymn in a house church.

Most Christians will agree that all of these bases are necessary *to some degree*. The groups disagree, however, on what those degrees are. In the context of this illustration, I consider myself an evangelical. I believe that making anything other than the Bible the main foundation for your faith is a dangerous thing to do. If you primarily adhere to tradition, are you then not in danger of doing what the Pharisees did when Jesus denounced their hypocrisy? Even before the time of Jesus, the Israelites diligently kept all the commandments of the Torah, but all without faith. It was God who commanded sacrifice and Temple service from them, but their faithlessness led God to say through Malachi:

> "I wish that one of you would close the temple doors, so that you no longer would light useless fires on my altar. I am not pleased with you," says the LORD who rules over all, "and I will no longer accept an offering from you." — Malachi 1:10 (NET)

If one primarily relies on experience, one might be misled by emotions—rather than a true experience of the Holy Spirit—which can easily happen. Human beings are emotional creatures and can often be led by their emotions. Worse still, perhaps, is that this is an area where false teachers can move in and wreak havoc among the faithful by touting some fake experiential ministry. Lastly, people who rely on reason to the point where they reject scripture (and possibly also experience and tradition) will soon find that they have no basis to justify their faith. They become hollow shells and even agnostic or atheistic.

But what merit does the Bible have above these other three bases? Well, the Bible is what makes Christianity *unique*. The evangelical believes that it is the Word of God, inerrant in its original translation, and sufficient (i.e. cannot and will not be surpassed or contradicted by further revelation). Other religions also have traditions or claims of experience or perhaps even reason. Some also have their own religious writings. But the Bible *defines* Christianity. It tells of the nature of God, of humanity's struggle with sin and the grand plan which God designed to release people from their sins. This plan did not remain a pie-in-the-sky romanticism, but has been fulfilled in the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus, who is God embodied in human form, was born, lived a life of temptation, rose above the temptation to remain faithful to His Father God and then suffered, died, was buried and then resurrected, all in accordance with God's salvation plan. Throughout the Bible runs this consistent thread.

In summary, every Christian bases his or her faith on four foundations: the Bible, experience, tradition and reason. All four are necessary, to some degree. Christians disagree, however, on where the emphasis should lie. This has led to a plethora or groups of people who call themselves Christians. I have made a very brief case why the Christian should build his or her faith primarily on the Bible and what it teaches. If you consider yourself a Christian and the Bible is not the primary foundation that you build on, then what is the reason for that? If there is anything that you place above the Bible, whether tradition or reason or experience (perhaps some "new revelation"), then what do you make of it in light of John 1, where the apostle John calls Jesus "the Word"? Was he not referring to the Old Testament which spoke of Jesus and which had its ultimate fulfilment in Jesus? And was He not also speaking of what the words which Jesus Himself spoke, which were recorded in the New Testament and testified by the New Testament writers as witnesses of His earthly life and ministry? Christianity is all about Jesus (the Christ!) and we learn about Him as He speaks to us *through His Word*.

[3]
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- 1. Many evangelicals will, however, not agree with how all of these groups use the Bible.
- 2. Intelligent design is the theory that the earth and universe is indeed billions of years old and that God used the Big Bang and evolution to create the earth and all life on it.
- 3. Young earth creationists believe that the universe is only as old as the Bible says if interpreted literally. Using the genealogies in the Old Testament, the age of the universe is placed at around 7000 years.
- 4. See, however, my recent post on the emerging church [5].

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