



WHAT IS the relationship between our internal beliefs or attitudes, and our external actions? People generally assume that beliefs and attitudes determine actions, so if it is desirable to change the way people act, their hearts and minds had better be changed. This assumption lies behind most of our teaching, preaching, counseling, and child rearing. But if social psychology has taught us anything during the last 20 years it is that the reverse is equally true: we are as likely to act ourselves into a way of thinking as to think ourselves into a line of actions.

Let's take a peek at this action-attitude research, see how it squares with the biblical understanding of faith and action, and then consider practical implications for church life and Christian nurture.

Action and Attitude

Social psychologists agree that attitudes and actions have a reciprocal relationship, each feeding on the other. In fact, the effect of our attitudes upon our actions seems not as great as most people suppose. People's expressed attitudes toward the church, for example, are only moderately related to their church attendance on any given Sunday. This is because any particular action, such as going or not going to church on June 1 is the product of many influences, not just one's attitude toward the church. It is therefore not surprising that attempts to change people's behavior by changing their attitudes often produce only modest results. Smoking, television watching, and driving practices are examples of habits not much affected by persuasive appeals.

Although attitudes determine behavior less than commonly supposed, the complementary proposition—that behavior determines attitude—turns out to be far more true than most people suppose. Individuals are as likely to believe in what they have stood up for as to stand up for what they believe. Many streams of evidence converge to establish this principle. Consider two:

The foot-in-the-door. A number of experiments indi-

Faith and Action: A Seamless Tapestry

DAVID G. MYERS

Believing sometimes results from first doing.

cate that if you want people to do a big favor for you, get them to do a small favor first. In the best-known demonstration of this, Jonathan Freedman and Scott Fraser wanted California housewives to place a large, ugly "Drive Carefully" sign on their front lawns. Tests showed that they were more likely to do this if they were first approached on behalf of a smaller favor of signing a safe-driving petition.

In this situation, as in countless other experiments demonstrating the effect of action on attitude, the behavior (signing the petition) was a *chosen, public* act. Time and again social psychologists have found that when people bind themselves to a public behavior and perceive this as their own doing, they come to believe more strongly in their action. Also, the effect on the housewives' attitudes was evident in their subsequent willingness to commit themselves to an even more substantial action, demonstrating the reciprocal influence of action and attitude.

Sometimes action and attitude feed one another in a spiraling escalation. In well-known experiments of social psychology, Stanley Milgram induced adult males to deliver supposedly traumatizing electric shocks to an innocent victim in an adjacent room. People were commanded to deliver the shock (said to be punishment for wrong answers on a learning task) in gradually ascending steps from 15 to 450 volts. The "shocking" result—that 65 percent of the participants complied right up to 450 volts even while the supposed victim screamed his protests—seems partly due to an effective use of the foot-in-the door principle.

The "teacher's" first act was innocuous (15 volts) and the next act (30 volts) was not noticeably more severe. By the time the supposed victim first indicated mild discomfort the teacher had already bound himself to the situation on several occasions and the next act was, again, not noticeably more severe. External behavior and internal disposition can amplify one another, especially when social pressures induce actions that are increasingly extreme. And so it is that ordinary people can become unwitting agents of evil.

Effects of moral and immoral acts. All this suggests

the more general possibility that acting in violation of one's moral standards may set in motion a process of self-justification that leads ultimately to sincere belief in the act. Experiments bear this out. People induced to give witness to something about which they have doubts will generally begin to believe their "little lies," assuming they felt some sense of choice in the matter. Saying is believing. Likewise, harming an innocent victim—by muttering a cutting comment or delivering shocks—typically leads aggressors to derogate their victims, especially if the aggressors are coaxed rather than coerced into doing so. Times of war provide the most tragic real-life parallels to these laboratory feelings: here, too, immoral acts corrode the moral sensitivity of the actors.

Happily, the principle cuts in the other direction as well. Moral action has positive effects on the actor. Experiments demonstrate that when children are induced to resist temptation, they tend to internalize their conscientious behavior, especially if the deterrent is mild enough to leave them with a sense of choice. Moreover, children who are actively engaged in enforcing rules or in teaching moral norms to younger children subsequently follow the moral code better than children who are not given the opportunity to be teachers or enforcers. Generalizing the principle, it would seem that one antidote for the corrupting effects of evil action is repentant action. Evil acts shape the self, but moral acts do so as well.

These few examples illustrate why the "attitudes follow behavior" principle has become an accepted fact in contemporary social psychology. Since the phenomenon is more clearly established than its explanation, social psychologists have therefore been busy playing detective, trying to track down clues that would reveal *why* action affects attitude. One explanation suggests that we are motivated to justify our actions as a way of relieving the discomfort we feel when our behavior differs noticeably from our prior attitude. An alternative explanation is that when our attitudes are weak or ambiguous, we observe our actions and then infer what attitudes we must have, given how we have

*Proper Christian living
demands participation.*

acted; what we say and do can sometimes be quite self-revealing.

Neither view necessarily implies that the effect of action is a mindless or irrational process. Our thinking is stimulated by our action. The reasons we develop to explain our actions can be real and intellectually defensible. A student wrote me, "It wasn't until I tried to verbalize my beliefs that I really understood them."

Regardless of what explanation is best, we can find a practical moral for us all: each time we act, we amplify the idea behind what we have done. If we want to change ourselves in some important way, we had better not depend exclusively on introspection and intellectual insight. Sometimes we need to get up and act—to begin writing that paper, to make those phone calls, to go see that person—even if we do not feel like acting. If Moses, Jonah, and other biblical characters had waited until they felt like doing what God was calling them to do, their missions would never have been accomplished. (Indeed, if not acted upon, ideas often begin to fade until recharged by new action.) Fortunately, we often discover that once we have written the first paragraph or made the first call our commitment and enthusiasm for what we are doing begins to take hold of us and drive us forward under its own momentum.

Action and Faith

The social-psychological evidence that action and attitude generate one another in an endless chain—like chicken and egg—affirms and enlivens the biblical understanding of action and faith. Depending on where we break into this spiraling chain, we will see how faith can be a source of action or how it can be a consequence of action. Both perspectives are correct, since action and faith, like action and attitude, feed one another.

Christian thinking has usually emphasized faith as the source of action, just as conventional wisdom has insisted that our attitudes determine our behavior. Faith, we believe, is the beginning rather than the end of religious development. For example, the experience of being "called" demonstrates how faith can precede action in the lives of the faithful. Elijah is overwhelmed by the Holy as he huddles in a cave. Paul is touched by the Almighty on the Damascus Road. Ezekiel, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Amos are likewise invaded by the Word, which then explodes in their active response to the call. In each case, an encounter with God provoked a new state of consciousness, which was then acted upon.

This dynamic potential of faith is already a central tenet of evangelical thought. For the sake of balance, we should also appreciate the complementary proposition: Faith is a consequence of action. Throughout the Old and New Testaments we are told that full knowledge of God comes through actively *doing* the Word; faith is nurtured by obedient action.

What contribution does action make to religious

knowledge and faith? Reinhold Niebuhr and others have called attention to the contrasting assumptions of biblical thought and of the Platonic thought that permeates Western culture today. Plato presumed that we come to know truth by reason and quiet reflection. This view, translated into Christian terms, equates faith with cerebral activity—orthodox doctrinal propositions, for example.

The contrasting biblical view assumes that reality is also known through obedient commitment. O. A. Piper has written in the *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*: "This feature, more than any other, brings out the wide gulf which separates the Hebraic from the Greek view of knowledge. In the latter, knowledge itself is purely theoretical . . . whereas in the Old Testament the person who does not act in accordance with what God has done or plans to do has but a fragmentary knowledge. . . ."

For example, the Hebrew word for *know* is generally used as a verb—something you do. To know love, we must not only know about love, we must act lovingly. Likewise, to *hear* the word of God means not only to listen but also to obey. We read in the New Testament that by loving action one knows God, for, "He who does what is true comes to the light." Jesus declared that whoever would do the will of God would know God, that he would come and dwell within those who heed what he said, and that we would find ourselves, not by passive contemplation alone, but by losing ourselves as we take up the Cross. The wise man—the one who built his house on rock—differed from the foolish man in that he acted upon his word. Merely saying "Lord, Lord" does not qualify one as a disciple; discipleship means doing the will of the Father. Over and again, the Bible teaches that the gospel power can only be known by living it.

The theological understanding of faith is built upon this biblical view of knowledge. Faith grows as we act on what little faith we have. Just as experimental subjects become more deeply committed to something for which they have suffered and witnessed, so also do we grow in faith as we act it out. Faith "is born of obedience," said John Calvin. "The proof of Christianity really consists in 'following,'" declared Søren Kierkegaard. Karl Barth agreed: "Only the doer of the word is its real hearer."

C. S. Lewis captured this dynamic of faith in his *Chronicles of Narnia*. The great lion Aslan has returned to Narnia to redeem his captive creatures. Lucy, a young girl with a trusting, childlike faith in Aslan, catches a glimpse of him and eventually convinces the others to start walking toward where she sees him. As Lucy follows Aslan, she comes to see him more clearly. The others, skeptical and grumbling at first, follow despite their doubts. Only as they follow do they begin to see what was formerly invisible to them—first a fleeting hint of the lion, then his shadow, until finally, after

David G. Myers is professor of psychology at Hope College, Holland, Michigan. His most recent book is *The Inflated Self: Human Illusions and the Biblical Call to Hope* (Seabury, 1980).



many steps, they see him face to face. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer concluded in *The Cost of Discipleship*, "Only he who believes is obedient, and only he who is obedient believes. . . . You can only know and think about it by actually doing it."

Christians will surely want to understand and communicate their faith as rationally defensible. Yet when Jesus counseled that the kingdom of God belongs to those who come like a child, he reminded us that codified intellectual understanding need not precede faith. Jesus called people to follow him, not just to believe a creed. Peter dropped his nets, leaving all behind, and only much later did he verbalize his conviction with the declaration: "You are the Christ." Although we must remember that justification is the gift of God—Peter does not achieve his own conversion—the meaning of faith is nevertheless learned through obedient action.

Implications for Church Life

So far we have seen that the modern social psychological view of how action nurtures attitude is paralleled by the ancient biblical understanding of knowledge and faith. How might this consensus be usefully applied in church renewal and in the development of personal faith? Anyone who understands the principle is capable of brainstorming its application. Just remember: commitments to behavior that are public and personally chosen (rather than coerced) are especially likely to stimulate internal change. To illustrate, consider how we might apply this to the administration and leadership of the church, the planning of worship, and the nurturing of personal faith.

First, a top priority for churches must be to make their members active participants, not mere spectators. Many dynamic religious movements of today, ranging from sects like the Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, and the Unification Church, to charismatics and discipleship-centered communities, share as common denominator an insistence that all persons on board be members of the crew. That is easier said than done, but it does provide a criterion by which to evaluate procedures for admitting and maintaining members, and a principle to apply in implementing programs of parish life. As a local church makes decisions and administers its program it should constantly be asking: Will this activate our members and make priests of our believers? If research on persuasion is any indication, this will best be accomplished by direct, personal calls to active commitment, not merely by mass appeals and announcements.

In worship, also, people should be engaged as active participants, not as mere spectators of religious theater. Research indicates that passively received spoken words have surprisingly little impact on listeners, and that any resulting changes in attitude are less likely to

endure and influence subsequent behavior than when the same expressed attitude emerges from active experience. This points to the desirability of stimulating listeners to rehearse and act upon the spoken word, and of enabling the congregation to participate actively in the liturgical ritual. The public act of choosing to get out of one's seat and kneel publicly before the congregation in taking Communion is but one example. When people sing responses, write their own confessions, contribute prayer, read Scripture responsively, take notes on the sermon, utter exclamations, bring their offerings forward, pass the peace, or sit, stand, and kneel—acts that viewers of the electronic church do not perform—they are making the liturgy their own work.

The principle has its limits, of course. We can become so preoccupied with doing things that we no longer have time quietly to receive God's Word of grace and direction for our lives. Like the Pharisees, we can substitute our deeds for God's act, or think that any kind of action will do. To say that action nurtures growth in faith is not to tell the whole story of faith. But it does tell part of the story.

The action-attitude principle can also shape Christian education and Christian nurture. Since researchers have found that the attitudes we form by experience are most likely to affect our actions, we might consider new methods of developing faith. For example, few Christian families appreciate and reap the benefits of family worship. Old Testament family practices helped people actively remember the mighty acts of God. When today's Jewish family celebrates the Passover by eating special foods, reading prayers, and singing psalms, all of which symbolize their historical experience, they are helped to renew the roots of deep conviction and feeling. As Tevye exclaimed in *Fiddler on the Roof*, "Because of our traditions every one of us knows who he is and what God expects him to do. . . . Without our traditions our lives would be shaky as a fiddler on the roof." Among Christians, family celebrations frequently become more common during Advent. With a boost from the church, home-based activity could be extended to celebrate all the great themes of the church year.

Although church and family ritual may sometimes degenerate into a superficial religious exercise, few of us appreciate the extent to which the natural ritual of our own personal histories has shaped who we are. Many of the things we did without question in childhood have long since become an enduring part of our self-identities. Indeed, because we have internalized our own rituals, we find it difficult to recognize them as rituals, but easy to recognize other people's rituals.

We can illustrate this principle in many areas, but the overarching objective on which legitimate applications converge is this: we want to create opportunities for people to enact their convictions, thereby confirming and strengthening their Christian identity. □

Commitments to behavior that are public and personally chosen (rather than coerced) are especially likely to stimulate internal change.