

Preface

I was born and raised in Southwestern Ohio, right along what many consider to be the northernmost edge of the Bible Belt. Like most people in the area, I was raised in a fairly religious household; my parents are devout Christians. Southern Baptists, to be exact. Church attendance every Sunday, if not a time or two during the week, was a foregone conclusion. Our family was active in church life; my father occasionally served on various committees, and I cannot remember a time when my mother did not teach Sunday School.

Looking back on this part of my childhood, several of my fondest memories are tied to faith and religion. I remember being a small boy, kicking off the uncomfortable loafers my parents made me wear to service, crawling up in the pew next to my mother, and dozing to sleep with my head on her lap. I also remember watching my father's head nod up and down during exceptionally long sermons and my mother lovingly pinching him to stay awake. On the car ride home, he would always defend himself, saying "I wasn't sleeping. I was resting my eyes." Or, my personal favorite: "My eyes were closed because I was praying to the Lord."

Other childhood memories include scrambling Sunday mornings to memorize the weekly Bible verse so as to not disappoint my Sunday School teacher, who, at times, was my own mother; gazing at my watch as it struck 12:30, praying to God that the pastor would let us out in time to catch the kickoff of the Sunday afternoon football game; and standing next to my father as he

belted hymns that ricocheted throughout the church in a baritone that still echoes in my mind.

But of all of these moments tied to faith that shaped my childhood, probably the most impressionable happened while at home. Although my family has been a member of our town's First Baptist Church since I was an infant, my father also followed the ministry of Fredrick K. C. Price, a now semi-retired Los Angeles-based televangelist whose weekly sermons reached an estimated 15 million homes each week.¹ Price's sermons were in many ways the soundtrack of my adolescence. Much of his ministry focused on achieving economic stability and prosperity through a faith-based lifestyle. This theme has a particular resonance with my father, whose personal life is heavily influenced by Christ's teachings and whose professional life involved teaching business and economics to college students.

Price is impressive in many ways.² His energy and passion radiate through the screen, and his commitment to social justice and improving the condition of urban America is unwavering. He has a way of preaching that is at once plainspoken yet pregnant with meaning and layers. Price is able to make the Bible's age-old teachings and stories directly relevant to the day-to-day experiences of contemporary Americans in a manner that does not simply ask "What would Jesus do?" but engages the nuances of modern life through a theological lens that many find inspiring. This explains, in part, why his ministry has become so influential both in the United States and abroad.

Initially, I didn't pay that much attention to Price's sermons. They were certainly entertaining. But they mostly existed as white noise in the background while eating dinner or doing chores around the house. Over time, however, Price's catchphrase—from 2 Corinthians 5:7, which he repeated verbatim at the end of every telecast—increasingly intrigued me over the years: "*For we walk by faith, not by sight.*"

Walking by faith rather than sight? This idea puzzled my adolescent mind. Price offers an interesting description of the passage: "It is not like seeing with your eyes. This scripture is talking about the difference between walking by the things of the Spirit of God, which operates by faith, and walking by what your five physical senses tell you. I like to paraphrase this verse like this: *We walk by the Word and not by our senses.*"³ Price's take is a fairly common interpretation that draws attention to the rather delicate relationship between faith and knowledge—what we believe and what we know—which is part of a much broader philosophical discussion beyond this book's scope. But what is worth

pointing out in this passage, from a theological perspective, is the superficiality of our sensory experiences—especially sight, which is often privileged as an impartial barometer of reality. What we see is often understood and experienced as a self-evident, obvious, and unmediated way to engage the world around us. Sight is privileged because of its seeming objectivity; colloquialisms such as “what you see is what you get” and “seeing is believing” highlight the commonsense that visual perception is an objective engagement with the world that is “real” and “tangible” outside of any subjective influences. Thus, our eyes are thought to merely witness what objectively exists; other cognitive processes then interpret these observations.

The sociological distinction between theory and data mirrors, in some ways, lay distinctions between faith and knowledge in that there are things that we believe to be true yet have no supporting evidence and things that we know to be true through observation. But, 2 Corinthians 5:7, as well as certain aspects of Christian theology, encourage a different approach to thinking about this relationship between faith and knowledge—one that does not juxtapose these concepts. David Lipe writes:

The Bible clearly teaches in different ways that faith and knowledge are not to be set in contradistinction. Faith and knowledge never are contrasted in the New Testament. Faith is contrasted with sight—not knowledge or reason. In Hebrews 11:1 we read: “Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.” Further, Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 5:7: “For we walk by faith, not by sight.” These verses make it clear that faith is set in contrast to “walking by sight.” Sight is a type of sense perception, and therefore a means of attaining knowledge. Thus, faith, instead of being contrasted with knowledge, is contrasted with a means of attaining knowledge. This does not mean faith and sight cannot function together. Jesus said: “Thomas, because thou hast seen me, thou hast believed” (John 20:29). Thomas’ faith was based on the evidence of his senses—namely, his sense of sight. Again, Jesus said to Thomas: “Blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed” (John 20:29). *This shows that there can be faith where there is no sight, but note that the verse does not say there can be faith where there is no knowledge.*⁴ [emphasis added]

Thinking about faith in contrast with sight rather than knowledge gives it substance while, at the same time, deprioritizes vision as a self-evident or objective way to understand reality. Another way to think about the verse

from 2 Corinthians is that we “walk” or navigate the world through the substance of our beliefs, not by ephemeral sensory perception. While there is certainly a relationship between what our senses perceive and our substantive thoughts, 2 Corinthians 5:7 suggests that our tendency to treat vision as a self-evident means of understanding the world might lead us to miss important yet unseen mechanisms that shape our core beliefs and orient our lives outside of immediate sensory perceptions. Indeed, this is the take-home message from Reverend Price’s weekly refrain of this verse: faith shapes our perception of the world—a socially driven orientation gained through fellowship with other believers that generates a shared lens through which to “see.” That is what makes the idea of walking by faith counterintuitive: that visual perception is not merely an individual sensory experience of “seeing” freestanding objective “things.” Rather, our seemingly objective engagements with the world around us are subordinate to a faith that orients our visual experience and, moreover, produces our ability to see certain things. *Seeing is not believing*. Rather, to believe, in a sense, is to see.