

The gift of believing: Touching the words of God

by [Gordon Atkinson](#)

May 31, 2005

A few months ago I was allowed to view a page or two from the Gospel According to Matthew in the famous *Saint John's Bible*, which will be a priceless masterpiece when it is finished. The calligrapher is using ancient tools and techniques to produce a handwritten copy of the Bible, filling it with beautiful art that is reminiscent of ancient Bibles but with a modern flair. Even the pictures on their Web site will take your breath away.

The man in charge told me that I was looking at a facsimile of a reproduction, a document twice removed from the original. I can't imagine being allowed to touch the original. My hands would be shaking from the beauty and mystery of it.

There will be full-sized reproductions for sale, costing thousands of dollars. Most of these will probably end up in museums and institutions. Smaller versions, the facsimiles, will be offered to the general public. These will be about the size of a large atlas and will cost hundreds of dollars. Since I would gladly pay several hundred dollars for a chance to spend a day turning the pages of one of these facsimiles, the idea that I could own one seems too good to be true.

Gazing upon the thick, luxurious pages of the *Saint John's Bible* was a mystical experience that filled me with awe. The beauty of the calligraphy and art was overwhelming. I allowed the tips of my index and middle fingers to barely graze the surface as I pulled my hand down through the center of Matthew, chapter five. In a flash of understanding, I realized that I am but one among legions of the faithful who have passed this gospel down through the ages. I felt a physical sensation of joy pass through my body. It began with a tingling in my skin as a few hairs on my arms stood up and continued inward and upward until I had to close my eyes and take deep breaths.

In that moment I believed in God.

The ancient Greek of the New Testament uses the same word for *believe* and for *trust*, though English breaks the concept into a pair of more specific ideas. Belief is the more joyous of the two, the more mystical, the more childlike, and the one that is least in our control. A person believes in something or she does not. There's really not much you can do about it one way or the other.

Trust is the element that is more or less up to us. Trusting involves the will and the willingness to give oneself to the possibility that something wonderful might be true.

Trust comes as easily to me as belief comes to some of my friends. There is a wild element in my soul that longs to trust and to make myself vulnerable to a higher power. I want so badly for God to be real that I am willing to wager the wounds of disappointment against the possibility of God's existence. Trust is the gift that I am able to offer to God—trust in a spiritual path and a spiritual community. It is trust that calls me to bow my head with pilgrims across the ages and to submit myself to their ancient wisdom and timeless ways.

Believing, on the other hand, is something I cannot control. I cannot drive away the fleshly and agnostic presence that lives in the basement of my soul. It comes up the stairs every once in a while to rattle cupboards and slam doors like a philosophical poltergeist. The only thing I can do is cling to my cross and Bible, squeezing my eyes shut like a child while my lips move with whispered prayers and I wait for it to go back to its home down below.

I have no desire to claim doubt as some sort of virtue, a sign of depth or intelligence. I think of doubt not as something you have, but as something you have not. Doubt is an absence, just as cold is the absence of heat. Yet I am not ashamed of my doubts, for they are only an empty place wanting to be filled, a reminder that grace must be sufficient for me.

Sometimes I gaze with longing upon the people for whom belief is natural and easy. They seem to walk the earth in the very presence of the Divine, as certain of God's existence as of their own. I look at them like a puppy watching his master, my head cocked to one side and my tail thumping with pleasure.

God has never demanded constant belief from me, which would be cruel, like punishing a dyslexic child for reading slowly or scorning a clumsy boy for not being able to dribble a basketball. Instead God has accepted my trust and the giving of my life. And these two together might rightly be called faith.

But I have experienced moments of belief along the way, moments that were a delight to my soul. Moments like the one with the *Saint John's Bible*.

I think belief is a mysterious gift from God. It comes in moments when I see beauty and in moments when my guard is down. Belief cannot be bought. It cannot be owned. It cannot be scheduled. It can only be received and enjoyed. For reasons unknown to me, I am given just enough belief to sustain my barest need and to keep me searching and hoping for more.

Someday I might own one of the facsimiles of the *Saint John's Bible*. I might own the book, but I will never be able to own the gift of that moment when I felt the reality of God in my heart. That's a good thing for me to remember, because I might be tempted to make the *Saint John's Bible* into a graven image, a physical object meant to invoke and control the very presence of God. I might think that I could run my hands over it anytime I wished to recreate the mystery of belief.

No, the *Saint John's Bible*, for all its beauty, can never be more than a reminder of what it is like to touch the words of God and be touched by the living Word of God.

You can view the Bible at the [Saint John's Bible](#) Web site.