How Your Social Setting Shapes Your Mind
By David Feddes

Believing is not always something we can control directly. I can't just decide whether or not to believe something. If I see it to be true, I can't help believing it. If it strikes me as not true, then I cannot force myself to believe it. Believing is not something we can do on command. Believing is something that just happens to us.

Or is it? Not quite. There's more to it than that. Even though believing is not just something you can make yourself do, there are certain things that shape your mind and make you either more likely to believe something or less likely to believe it. And your choices in relation to these mind-shapers can affect what you find believable or not believable. Our likelihood of believing something depends not just on the idea itself but on how our mind has been shaped. There may be some things that we ought to believe, that really are true and important, but that strike us as false because our minds have been misshaped in such a way that we can't see their truthfulness. However, if we could understand some of the things that shape our minds, and if we could make some changes in relation to these mind-shapers, we might be on the way toward being able to believe what we ought to believe and get a more accurate grasp of reality.

So let's think about some things that shape the mind. Three are of special importance. First, your social setting: Whom do you fit (or fight) with? Second, your actions: What is your pattern of behavior. Third, your heart: What moves your inner self. In this article, we're going to look at how your social setting shapes your mind: In other articles, we'll talk about how your actions shape your mind and how your heart shapes your mind.

Influencing Each Other

Your surroundings and the people you're with have a profound influence on the way you think. Little girls will play with certain kinds of dolls because their friends do. They see their friends doing it, so they want the same kind of doll. When little girls grow to be teens, they believe that some things are in style and other things are out of style. How do they determine that? By what other people are doing. Very few create a style on their own. Their belief about what is stylish and what looks good on them is shaped by the society they're part of and by the circle of friends they hang out with. If you're a boy or girl going to a school and you have the wrong brand of clothing or the wrong kind of shoes, it may be a serious problem. People will think there's something wrong with you if you don't fit in style-wise.

Our social setting influences more than just our sense of style. The Bible says that the people around us, those we fit in with, have a huge impact on our thinking and our direction in life: "Whoever walks with the wise becomes wise, but the companion of fools will suffer harm" (Proverbs 13:20). When you hang out with wise people, you're likely to become wiser. When your best friends are idiots, you're more likely to become idiotic. You grow in wisdom in a certain crowd; your intelligence shrinks in a different crowd. If you hang out with foolish people, you are likely to believe foolish things.

Not only do others have an impact on you; you have an impact on others. "One who is righteous is a guide to his neighbor, but the way of the wicked leads them astray" (Proverbs 12:26). I could give many more examples from the book of Proverbs, but these are enough to show the impact of companionship and how strongly we influence each other's beliefs and choices.

Parental Influence

　　Various people in our social setting shape the way we think. Our first and often most powerful mind-shapers are the members of our family, especially our parents. The book of Proverbs repeatedly speaks of good parental influence. Here are a few samples: "Hear, my son your father's instruction, and forsake not your mother's teaching" (1:8). "My son, keep your father's commandment, and forsake not your mother's teaching" (6:20). "The father of the righteous will greatly rejoice; he who fathers a wise son will be glad in him. Let your father and mother be glad; let her who bore you rejoice" (23:24-25). That's part of how your social setting shapes you. You figure out that your parents are pleased by certain things and upset by other things. You want them to be pleased with you, so you do things they like you to do.

　　Good parents, their example, and their teaching powerfully influence what their children believe and why they believe it. Sometimes it's treated as irrational to believe something just because you learned it from your parents. But God gave us parents for a reason. Many of the important things we learn in life come to us through our mom and dad. When a father calls his family together each day and reads God's Word with them, it has a huge impact on the children and on his wife and on himself. God meant it to be this way. God says, "Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up" (Deuteronomy 6:7). God designed the family to be a social setting for parents to shape the beliefs and behavior of children. If we grow up in a godly family with godly parents teaching us God's ways and his truth, we're much more likely to believe those things than if we grew up in a family that is actively hostile to the Christian faith.

　　Parental influence can be helpful, but it can also be harmful. There is such a thing as bad parental influence. The Bible clearly says, "Honor your father and your mother" (Exodus 20:12). In settings where mom and dad are good, pay very close attention and learn from them. But the Bible is equally clear in warning against false beliefs and bad behavior that may come through parental influence and the blunders of previous generations. "Do not walk in the statutes of your fathers, nor keep their rules, nor defile yourselves with their idols" (Ezekiel 20:18). If you grew up in a family that followed false religion, the best thing you can do is to reject that bad influence of your parents. God says, "Do not be like your fathers… they did not hear or pay attention to me" (Zechariah 1:4). Stephen, the first Christian martyr, warned people, "You always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you" (Acts 7:51). Even though parents usually have a powerful influence on children, that doesn't mean mom and dad are automatically right. Sometimes people need to be rescued from their upbringing. The apostle Peter wrote, "You were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers" (1 Peter 1:8).

　　At any rate, whether the impact is good or bad, there's no denying that family is a huge element of how your social setting shapes your mind. Even if one parent is not around, that parent's absence can have a shaping impact. We need to be aware of how parents, grandparents, brothers, sisters, and other family members affect our beliefs (for good or ill), and we must also be alert to the impact we are having on the beliefs of our relatives.

Spousal Influence

　　Another aspect of family influence, of course, is the person you marry. Your spouse has a huge impact on the way you think. After a while, your beliefs can change because of your spouse's influence. Proverbs speaks of the influence of a great wife as well as the downside of a wife who's not so great.

An excellent wife who can find?
She is far more precious than jewels.
The heart of her husband trusts in her,
and he will have no lack of gain…
Her husband is known in the gates
when he sits among the elders of the land…
She opens her mouth with wisdom,
and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue. (Proverbs 31:10-11,23,26)

There's an old story about a woman who had a boyfriend in school, but she didn't marry him. Instead, she ended up marrying a different guy from her school. Years later they attended a class reunion. By this time, the woman's husband had become a wealthy senator, a very important man. The other man, her former boyfriend in school, had not amounted to much. After meeting that man at the reunion, the woman's husband said to her, "Aren't you glad you married me? I turned out to be a senator." She said, "If I had married him, he would have been the senator!"

That's just a story, but in Proverbs 31 we see an excellent wife whose husband is known in the gates and sits among the elders of the land. He's an important man, but a big reason he's that kind of man is that he has such an excellent wife. She opens her mouth with wisdom. She helps her husband to believe many wise and important things. She doesn't do this through nagging; Proverbs warns against nagging. But she has wisdom in her mouth and in her life, and it rubs off on her husband.

A man is going to be shaped by his wife, and a wife by her husband. That's why choosing a spouse is such an important decision. In choosing a spouse, you might be choosing a whole new way of thinking, a whole new worldview. Someone else's thoughts are going to rub off on you. Choose wisely because there is such a thing as a bad spousal influence. Proverbs says, "An excellent wife is the crown of her husband, but she who brings shame is like rottenness in his bones" (12:4). "It is better to live in a desert land than with a quarrelsome and fretful woman" (21:19). Proverbs warns not just about a negative wife but about a woman who isn't your wife and is trying to get you. "Why should you be intoxicated, my son, with a forbidden woman and embrace the bosom of an adulteress"(5:20)? "He who commits adultery lacks sense; he who does it destroys himself" (6:32).

Your spouse or lover can have a negative influence on your belief. All too often, a person who thinks her or she is a believer in Jesus partners with someone of the opposite sex who is not a believer and eventually loses belief. When your faith is not very strong—if you have any at all—and you marry somebody who is indifferent or hostile to the faith, it can have a devastating influence on what you believe. It's not that you are introduced to new evidence or persuaded by logical arguments; it's just being with an unbeliever constantly until the unbelief rubs off on you.

Keep in mind, you're not just a thinking machine, with beliefs based purely on evidence and logic. You are a human being, and the human beings you live with will shape your beliefs. You don't suddenly wake up one day and *decide* to believe something. You simply find yourself believing it because of the family you grew up in, or because of the person whom you married.

Gang Mentality

Family isn't the only kind of influence. Our friends and companions influence our thinking, whether in a group of good buddies or in a street gang. Gangs aren't something new. Young toughs running together and beating up on other people get their sense of belonging from their fellow hoodlums. Already three thousand years ago, Proverbs warned against gangs: "My son, if

sinners entice you, do not consent. If they say, 'Come with us… throw in your lot among us…' my son, do not walk in the way with them" (Proverbs 1:10-15)

Bad companions can get you to do bad things, and they can sway you to think wrong things. "Leave the presence of a fool, for there you do not meet words of knowledge" (Proverbs 14:7). Don't hang out with somebody whom you know is going to have a bad influence on your beliefs. And don't hang out with people who will have a bad influence on your behavior. "Be not among drunkards" (Proverbs 23:20), or you are likely to become a drunkard yourself.

In our time, the power of companionship goes far beyond family, friendship, and even the world of gangs and drinking buddies. Technology keeps us more connected to friends and peers than ever before. The impact of companions has always been significant, but today the ability to connect with other people is greater than it's ever been. Not only do you connect when you're with them, but you can be in your own room at home and still connect with lots of people. With computers, smartphones, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and other social media, kids are constantly connected with other kids. Even when they're at home, they're not really at home: they're with their friends electronically. When they're on the road with a few friends, they may be texting other friends. There are more ways of interconnecting than ever before. I'm not saying that these things are bad in and of themselves. I'm just saying that new technology has made the power of companionship stronger than ever in shaping the way we think and what we believe.

Plausibility Structures

Peter Berger, a leading authority in sociology, talks about plausibility structures. What is a plausibility structure? *A system of meaning makes sense and becomes plausible within a particular social setting. A group's relational ties, institutions, and traditions socialize newer members so that some things seem self-evident and other things seem silly.*

When you're in the plausibility structure of a particular social group, some things seem self-evident. They seem so obvious that you don't question them or even give them much thought. Other things seem downright silly; they seem so ridiculous that you dismiss them without a second thought. For instance, if you grow up in a certain group of people and someone in your group gets sick, one of the first things they will do is to try to figure out who put the evil eye on that sick person and made them sick. To those in the group, it's obvious that if someone is sick, someone must have put the evil eye on them. However, if you come from a different social group, you might say, "Who in the world came up with such silliness? Evil eye? What garbage! We know people get sick because of germs and bugs and biology, not because somebody looked at them in a certain way or tried to put a curse on them." If you're part of a particular group and its plausibility structure, casting the evil eye is just an obvious truth that explains a lot. But if you're part of a different group, the evil eye is complete nonsense. Many of our beliefs make sense to us because of our plausibility structure: our social setting makes some things seem obvious and other things seem ridiculous.

School is a major institution in the plausibility structure of Europe and North America and other societies. Although many schools were founded in order to teach Christian truth, government-run schools today have been structured not to teach Christianity as the truth. If Christianity is mentioned at all, it is portrayed as just one religious opinion among other religious opinions. Darwin's theory of evolution is taught as truth, while the Christian doctrine of creation is taught as religious opinion. This is structured into the way government schools now operate. We need to understand that this plausibility structure is shaping the way we think.

Along with school, *books* are part of the overall plausibility structure, along with other media that kids take in. The textbooks that we read in school as well as the books that we read for enjoyment are tools that transmit the assumptions of our particular society.

Government is a major part of modern societies. It's a big part of the plausibility structure. Government encourages some beliefs and discourages others. It is the government that directs the schools to teach Christianity as mere opinion and many non-Christian ideas as fact. The expanding role of government, together with the principle of separation of church and state, means that government has taken over more and more areas of life, while people of faith and their beliefs have been forced into a smaller and smaller corner.

How does government affect what you believe? Not always by forcing particular beliefs upon you. After all, it's very hard to believe things just on command. But even when it's not forcing beliefs on citizens directly, government can indirectly shape beliefs by institutionalizing certain things. For instance, when government first passes a new law or makes a new court ruling, it may be very controversial at the time. There may be lots of debate and disagreement. Some people believe it's a good idea; others believe it's a horrible idea. However, when the government decides the issue and forces the new way of doing things, it's usually just a few decades until that's just the way things are and almost everybody takes it for granted.

For example, most people in Western societies take it for granted that government schools are the proper place for their children to be taught and socialized. It's taken for granted now, but it was not always that way. When the idea first came along, government-controlled education was controversial, but now it's just taken for granted.

Nowadays, it's taken for granted in Europe that government should provide and pay for health care. That was once a very controversial idea. For a long time, health care was not provided or funded by government. Now it's taken for granted. In the United States, government-run health care is currently a controversial idea, but once it has been institutionalized for a while and a generation passes, it will probably seem obvious to nearly everyone that government belongs in the business of healthcare.

There have been governments that made the Christian faith illegal. Throughout the centuries, many Christians have been killed by government orders. Still today there are countries where it's illegal to have a Bible, where you would be killed if you converted to Christianity. In a society where anti-Christian belief is institutionalized by government, many citizens think it is self-evident that Christianity is false and that their own nation's ideology is true. There are still some people in those societies who believe in Jesus as Savior, but not because it seems the normal, natural thing for everybody in the society to believe. Government has a powerful role in the overall plausibility structure of society.

Perhaps even more powerful than government in our thinking is *media*: movies, film, TV. Plausibility is shaped by what captures our imagination, the stories we get from artists and storytellers. Movies and TV programs convey the thoughts and values of a society, and they help to shape that society for better or worse. If we watch movie after movie in which the lead characters all believe and behave the same way, we gradually absorb the notion that beautiful people all do this and think this way. If we watch TV shows in which unmarried lovers constantly go to bed with each other, we absorb the notion that sex outside marriage is a normal, healthy activity, and that anyone who thinks otherwise is ridiculous.

When it comes to the way religion is perceived, media can have a powerful impact. For instance, during the early days of radio in the 1900s, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), a government entity, controlled broadcasting in Britain and ruled that certain kinds of

religion could not be on the air. Religious teachings that were controversial or hard-hitting were banned from radio. Strong warnings about hell or about serious theological errors seldom made it onto the airwaves. Most religion that made it onto the BBC was timid and safe. There were some exceptions and excellent programs as well, but the overall approach to religion made it seem that only certain kinds of religion were worth considering. This did not involve evidence; it was just the way things were done, a part of the social setting that was taken for granted. You wouldn't even hear the voice of certain kinds of faith on British radio or TV.

Schools, books, government, and media have a profound influence on the way we think. They are elements of our social setting, institutionalized ways that our society transmits its assumptions to people.

Which World Do You Belong In?

Ask yourself, "What shapes my beliefs? Why do I think the way I do? Why do I accept some things as self-evident and certain? Why do I reject other things as ridiculous?" Much depends on what world you belong in. The Bible says, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God" (Romans 12:2). When the Bible talks about "this world," it's not just talking about planet earth. We all live on earth, and it's okay to be on earth and to enjoy things God created on this earth. When Scripture talks about "the world," it's talking about a system, a social context that is opposed to God. If you're immersed in the plausibility structure of a world that ignores God, you need to stop conforming. You need to stop going along with it mindlessly.

The Bible warns repeatedly against the world. "Do not love the world or anything in the world" (1 John 2:15). "They are from the world; therefore they speak from the world, and the world listens to them. We are from God. Whoever knows God listens to us" (1 John 4:5-6). In this verse, "we" and "us" refers to the apostles of Jesus Christ. Much depends on what world you belong in. In one social setting, "we" is the world and whatever the world around us is telling us. But there's another social setting where "we" is the Christian community, the apostles and those who believe the truth of Jesus Christ. If you're from one kind of world, you speak one way and you believe one way. But if you're from another social world, the world of God's people, you speak and believe a very different way.

You need to recognize the reality of plausibility structures and the differences between them. A system of meaning makes sense and becomes plausible within a particular social setting. A group's relational ties, institutions, and traditions socialize newer members so that some things seem self-evident and other things seem silly. Your plausibility structure is the social setting that shapes your belief. So you really do need to ask, "What world forms my worldview? What is my social setting, and what's happening in it? How are my beliefs being shaped by the social setting of my family and friends, and by my wider social world with its institutions of government, school, and media?"

Church as Plausibility Structure

The Christian community is the plausibility structure for the gospel. It's the social setting where biblical belief makes sense. Christian belief draws support from Christian family, Christian church, Christian fellowship and community. Outside that social setting, the gospel often makes less and less sense, because you're in the company of people whose assumptions are at odds with the gospel.

In 1 Corinthians 15, the apostle Paul writes a tremendous chapter about the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Paul writes because some people are doubting or denying that resurrection happens, that Jesus was raised or that anybody else will be raised. These people are denying bodily resurrection. In the middle of his resurrection discussion, Paul quotes a common proverb from his time: "Do not be deceived: 'Bad company ruins good morals'" (1 Cor.15:33). Paul is saying that a major reason those people find it hard to believe in resurrection is that they've been spending too much time in bad company, hanging out with unbelievers.

We must not underestimate the importance of good company, of a social setting where people believe what is true and do what is right. Consider the case of Europe. Far fewer people believe Christian truths than 150 years ago. What happened? Did people discover lots of new evidence against Christianity, or suddenly notice a lack of evidence for Christianity? No, many people did not think it through at all. I did much of my doctoral research on what happened in European belief and behavior for the last 150 years. Here's what happened. In the late 1800s and early 1900s, most people in Europe kept on believing some basic Christian teachings, but more and more of them stopped going to church, and they stopped reading the Bible as a family. Did they stop churchgoing and family devotions because they had stopped believing Christian ideas? No, they simply stopped, even though they still had some beliefs. They had a common motto: "You can be a good Christian without going to church." Gradually the failure to be involved with God's people at church and the loss of daily family devotions took its toll. No longer were they reading the Bible together and praying together and praising God together. Eventually, in the wake of giving up that social support for praising the Lord and honoring him and believing in Jesus, belief went into decline. For a while, one generation said it still believed some basic Christian teachings. Then the next generation, without involvement in church or Bible reading at home, believed less. Belief kept declining as the years passed and as the generations neglected Christian fellowship in church and home. 150 years ago, 60% of people in Britain attended church. Today less than 8% attend church, and many of them are old. And the level of belief in Christian teaching has plummeted. Let me emphasize again: for the most part, people did not first stop believing and then stop attending church. Rather, it was the reverse: they first stopped attending and then stopped believing. When people do not spend time in the company of God's people, they believe less and less what God teaches. Of course, there are some people who give up on church because they don't believe the truth that is taught there, but in far more cases, people first forsake the gathering of God's people and then they start losing the truth.

The church is the plausibility structure where the Bible makes the most sense. Those who abandon that social plausibility structure become more likely eventually to abandon belief. Lack of a Christian social setting leads to lack of Christian belief. That's why the Bible urges, "Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another" (Hebrews 10:23-24).

The church is a social setting where we encourage each other in faith. The Christian family is a mini-church, a social setting where we encourage each other in faith. God didn't design us to be individual believers on our own, discovering and holding onto all truth by ourselves. Your social setting is going to influence how you think and what you hold to be true, so you'd better choose your social setting well. Pay close attention to the family you grew up in and see whether they were in error. If you marry somebody, make sure you choose the right spouse. When you choose companions, make sure you stay involved in the plausibility structure of the gospel, that is, the church where you're with fellow believers, where you're praising God, where God's Holy

Spirit is helping you to build up each other's faith and confidence and knowledge of God. When you're in the home, read the Bible and spend time impressing God's truths on your children and talking about them constantly. These things cultivate the ability to believe.

You might be wondering if there is some truth to the message of Jesus but you really can't make yourself believe that he is the Son of God who died and rose again. Well, even if you can't make yourself believe something that doesn't appear true to you, you can place yourself in a plausibility structure, a social setting of people who do believe. Hang around with some followers of Jesus for a while. Hang around godly church people and see what happens to your ability to believe. Real faith is ultimately going to be the work of God, but it often happens that a person who hangs around with God's people finds out that the Christian community has a way of behaving and a way of believing that does make sense of things, more sense than the beliefs of other social groups. In the right social setting, something that once seemed unbelievable may come to seem likely or even obvious.

Influencing Social Plausibility Structures

Once you understand how your social setting shapes your mind, how plausibility structures influence your ability to believe, then you can also focus on how you can better influence others. "Whoever walks with the wise becomes wise, but the companion of fools will suffer harm"(Proverbs 13:30) Be very aware of the impact of others on you but then also of your impact on others. "One who is righteous is a guide to his neighbor, but the way of the wicked leads them astray" (12:26). By attending church, you are encouraging others to believe. By leading your own family in Bible reading, you're encouraging them to believe. By getting involved in the wider structures of your society, you can make a difference.

If you become a public school teacher, you can influence a plausibility structure in a positive way for the Lord. If you get involved in the business world, the way you think and act can rub off on the way other people think and act. If you are active in social media, don't just mingle mindlessly. Think about how you can interact in a way that makes faith in Jesus more plausible to others. Don't just think about the books you can read that might have an impact on you. Think about books you might write! There are some people who have God-given gifts for writing.

C.S. Lewis was an author who understood something about the role of plausibility structures. Lewis knew the importance of bringing the gospel directly to people and explaining the truth of the gospel, but Lewis also knew the value of an indirect approach. He spoke of creating an atmosphere more favorable for people to hear the gospel. One kind of writing that was very popular in his time was science fiction. H.G. Wells and some atheists wrote science fiction, and Lewis said he would like to claim some of that territory for Christian truth. So he wrote some gripping science fiction stories: *Out of the Silent Planet*, *Perelandra* and *That Hideous Strength*. His Christian thinking saturated his science fiction. People who read those books are a little more likely to take Christianity seriously when they're finished.

Lewis also wrote *The Chronicles of Narnia.* Why did a middle-aged bachelor, a brilliant professor, write these children's stories? Because he thought many children would have a hard time believing Christianity if they found it boring. If Christian truth were presented in a different way, said Lewis, the story might steal past those watchful dragons that block children from faith. It might get a hold of their imagination and open their minds. For Lewis this was all part of influencing the plausibility structure of his society.

Lewis made his living as a scholar and professor. Here, too, he sought to influence his social setting in a Christian direction, even when he wasn't writing directly about theology and

apologetics. Lewis wrote scholarly books such as *The Discarded Image: An Introduction to Medieval and Renaissance Literature*. He wrote the *Oxford History of English Literature in the 16th Century*. In studying for that book, Lewis read every book from that century in the vast Oxford library. He did huge amounts of scholarly research. He didn't preach the gospel in such books, but he thought the way a Christian thinks, and he wrote the way a Christian writes.

Lewis suggested that Christians could do a lot of good by direct preaching and witnessing, but he said they could also do a lot of good by establishing magazines on various subjects and writing books and plays and being involved in the media in ways where a Christian message would come through not directly but in a more indirect manner. People's prejudices against Christianity might be undermined indirectly, and they might be more open to think in new ways.

Think about the social context you're in. Try to understand the dynamics of how it shapes your mind, and consider how you can influence the social setting for the better, so that the gospel becomes more believable for people in that setting. Look for ways to be an influencer in your marriage, your family, your circle of friends, your school, your work situation, your social media involvement, and perhaps in government, arts, and entertainment if you have the necessary abilities. Above all, stay connected with the people of God in a loving, Bible-believing church, encouraging each other so that the wise become even wiser.