

WHEN IS A BELIEF SIMPLY A PREFERENCE?

The United States Supreme Court classifies all religious beliefs as either preferences or convictions. According to the court, only *convictions* are given the full protection of the First Amendment.

When is a belief a preference? A belief is a preference when, under certain circumstances, that belief can be changed. A belief may be strong and intense and still be a preference. The five circumstances noted by the court that most often cause one to change his or her beliefs are: peer pressure, family pressure, litigation pressure, jail pressure, and death pressure.

Peer pressure: when the disapproval of others causes one to bend his or her beliefs, these beliefs are simply preferences.

Family pressure: It is often pressure from within a family - from a spouse, parent, or child - that will cause one to lessen his or her beliefs. The court holds that, if family pressure causes one to change, that belief is merely a preference.

Litigation pressure: When one faces an intimidating legal battle, one often reevaluates his or her beliefs. If a lawsuit changes your beliefs, they are preferences.

Jail pressure: Would you be willing to suffer a jail sentence for your belief? If not, your belief is just a preference.

Death pressure: The ultimate test of your belief is whether you would be willing to die for it - like many Christian martyrs have done throughout history. Would you be willing to die for your belief? If not, your belief is not a conviction but only a preference.

When is a belief a conviction?

Convictions are self-determined. The court holds that, if you need other people to stand with you, your belief is not a conviction. A conviction must be self-determined, not influenced by what others do or by what others ask of you.

Convictions are non-negotiable. If you are willing to even discuss the option of dishonoring your belief, your belief is not a conviction but only a preference.

Convictions are victorious. Victory is standing for what you believe is right, regardless of the cost. The court holds that, if you need earthly victory to remain true to what you believe, you do not have a conviction.

Convictions are lifestyles. The court holds that, if one holds true to his or her beliefs, those beliefs will evidence themselves in a life that is consistent with those beliefs. Convictions must control a person's life.

--Dr. David Gibbs

