

The virtue of faith

One Sunday morning not long ago we sang Herbert Booth's great song, "I bring to Thee my heart to fill" (SASB 489). After the meeting, my close friend Gary said, "The best line in the whole songbook is that line, 'and where I cannot see I'll trust!'"

It got me thinking. Surely Gary's right about the theological importance of faith. There can't be anything more important for human beings to know than that our relationship with God is grounded in God's grace received by us in faith. In this world where God's face is often invisible, it is that faith that carries us forward.

But Gary's comment also got me thinking about the place of faith in human relationships. Faith is a theological virtue; is it an ethical virtue too?

I think so, but first let's pause to note that not everybody agrees.

Late in the 19th century W.K. Clifford wrote an influential essay that he titled "The Ethics of Belief." Enlightenment rationalists before him had argued that intellectual belief ought to be proportioned to the evidence. Clifford went one further and argued that action ought to be proportioned to the evidence too. Suppose, he said, that a shipowner bought a rusty hulk, crammed it full with would-be emigrants, and sent it to sea, saying that he had tremendous faith that it would make it to their new homeland. When the ship sank and people drowned, we wouldn't praise the shipowner as a great man of faith, but as an

inhuman profiteer. Clifford concluded that in human affairs there is a moral obligation not to act on faith but strictly according to the degree that the evidence warrants.

For most of the 20th century that was the attitude of many society leaders—controlled experiments would lead us forward. And when we got proof (as surely we would), faith would be unnecessary. “And where I cannot see I’ll hesitate” could have been the motto.

Late in the 20th century, however (some pin it down to the Gen-Xers), this got turned on its head. The attitude was that proof was never going to come and so faith was untenable. So many had promised for so long that the solution to physical and social problems was possible if only we could refine our science a bit more, but the world wasn’t getting better. So people gave up on progress and decided nobody was to be trusted. The refrain became “and since I cannot see...whatever.”

But we cannot live this way. It’s an exaggeration to say that September 11th put an end to the age of cynicism, but it dealt it a blow. 9/11 made us realize just how much our life is built on trusting each other. And it made us realize that America will crumble if the response to September 11th is paranoid suspicion. Human community simply cannot exist without faith.

At the same time, the sort of faith we need is not gullibility which is “blown here and there by every wind of teaching” (Ephesians 4:14). Faith that is ethically right goes beyond proof, but it **is** rooted in reality.

That is the struggle for the military man we’ll call Al. Al recently told me he thinks a military officer who could become his commander is committing adultery, and that makes

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Al anxious. If the officer can't be faithful to his marriage covenant, Al doubts he'll be faithful to his military command. If battle comes (as well it might these days), can a cheating officer be trusted to defend his country and his men? he asked. How would you respond to Al? "The man's marriage is none of your business," or "You're right to want an officer who has shown he can be trusted"?

For faith to be a good thing it needs to be faith in someone who is actually trustworthy. One way a person can show he deserves another's trust is by showing that he can keep his promises. Another way, oddly enough, is by fessing up when he fails. That at any rate seems to be the lesson from certain studies of error in medicine. A dentist friend of mine says the standard line from medical insurance companies has been, "don't admit guilt or we won't cover you." Now, however, those insurance companies are discovering that physicians are **less** likely to be sued if they admit it when they make a mistake! Why? Because, ironically, it shows they can be trusted. Those who deny and cover up their mistakes signal that they are too arrogant or too self-interested. When we put our health in the hands of physicians, we don't need perfection but transparency and genuine caring.

We can't live without taking risks, without having faith in others; and we aren't worthy of others' faith if we don't show we care for them more than for ourselves. Not only in our relationship with God but in our relationships with each other too, "the just shall live by faith."

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