

The Virtue of Uncertainty

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KEY
ISSUES

The older I get the less sure I am of many things. Parenting teens, for example, proves to be much harder than my husband or I ever expected and I find myself having to constantly re-think many of my assumptions about parenting. Our local church is beginning to struggle financially and this has prompted me to re-think some of my assumptions about local church ministry. My short term mission trip in 2004 to Kenya challenged my thinking about mission and the way we spread the good news of the gospel to other cultures. Teaching a course in globalization at Atlantic Baptist University last fall forced me to consider the implications of the privileged position that Canadians have in a global economy.

It occurs to me that I (and perhaps many of you) have been brought up in a church culture that encourages us to be very certain about things. Doubts are discouraged as a threat to faith, or at least as evidence that our faith is not what it ought to be. We may not understand why Christians think the way they do about specific issues or practices, but we are encouraged to stand firm and even to proclaim our faith publicly and with great confidence.

As we spend our time with others who are similarly “certain” of their faith, our beliefs become entrenched with little regard for their accuracy. I suspect this is why many Christians in our churches are reluctant to engage in any kind of dialogue with those who hold different views on faith. This is a critical problem in the context of post-modern Canadian society if we take seriously Jesus’ command to teach others to obey the things he has taught us.

Have you noticed that your children and grandchildren are frustratingly skeptical of the things you have so readily accepted by faith? Is it possible that, like me, you

have envied them their ability to ask tough questions and to expect deeper answers? Or, perhaps you pity them that their faith is not as strong as yours.

I suspect that all of us want our children and grandchildren to “come to faith”. We look for evidence that our influence is bearing fruit in their lives. But will we recognize their faith when we see it? What if it looks or feels very different from ours? Might we miss it altogether? I’ve often said that we ought not to pray that our children will have a faith just like ours. I pray that my kids will have a faith that is deeper and wider and more authentic than mine – that they will know God intimately and be free to live their faith in the context of that knowledge, even if I don’t fully understand it.

To this end, I am beginning to recognize the virtue of uncertainty. If our church culture in Canada is to become relevant and vibrant, we must embrace uncertainty. I am not suggesting that we should live in perpetual uncertainty about our faith. Heaven forbid! Rather, that we should be careful about some of our certainties, because they may confine us to boxes that, ultimately, are not truly biblical. God ought not to be confined and constrained by our biases and baggage, no matter how comfortable they are for us.

Several months ago I had a conversation with Rick Tobias of Yonge Street Mission in Toronto (the website is <http://www.ysm.on.ca/index.html>). Rick is the president and CEO of Yonge Street Mission, an incredible ministry to the economically, socially and spiritually poor in downtown Toronto. In the course of our conversation, Rick said something which I’ve been ruminating on ever since. I don’t remember his exact words, but his point was that red letter editions of Scripture have encouraged us to focus on what Jesus said and as a

consequence, have served to downplay what Jesus did. I wonder, have I fallen into this trap? Is my view of Jesus somehow skewed by looking at his words and failing to hold onto his actions with the same intensity? Do I have the courage to bracket my certainties and really allow God’s Spirit to teach me and guide me in pursuit of truth? Do you? How strong is our faith, really?

As of January 1, 2006, I’ve been working with Marilyn Smith in developing an Advocacy and Public Engagement department for Canadian Baptist Ministries. We’ll be looking at the nitty gritty real life issues that impact people nationally and globally – things like child poverty in Canada, water and food security, the plight of refugees, the impact of HIV/AIDS and other diseases on individuals and their societies, economic exploitation of developing and under-developed countries by multinational corporations, etc. As we look at these issues, we will be looking at them through the lens of a faith which is not certain of everything but is certain of one thing: that God is good and He expects us to share His love.

I’m excited by what lies ahead. I expect that Marilyn and I will be learning things which may challenge many of our cherished ideas about God, the church and obedience. Our research is bound to disturb our comfort zones and force us to evaluate our faith and practice in a new light. It is our privilege, as we learn (and un-learn!) to share the journey with you. Please pray for us as God calls us to this task.

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