

Having faith in God is better than being certain about God

We don't need arguments from the pulpit. We need living water.

by [M. Craig Barnes](#) in the [July 18, 2018](#) issue



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This spring I gave a lecture on “The Temptation to Be Less Than Human.” My main point was that our humanity is restored in Jesus Christ. The Gospels depict this beautifully in his baptism, when he identifies with us and heaven proclaims him as God’s beloved. Jesus doesn’t receive this designation until his public identification with humanity—meaning that we too are the beloved of God. I then described how Jesus’ three temptations following his baptism reveal the ways the devil entices us to doubt our identity as the beloved and thus become less than human. So far, so good.

Jesus’ second temptation is to jump from the top of the temple so the angels would swoop down to catch him. I said this was a temptation to be certain of God’s love. I could sense that people were getting uneasy. Then I went on to claim that “nothing is more dangerous to our souls than trying to be certain we’re loved by God.” At that

point I lost my audience.

When we got to the time for questions after the lecture, there was a line of people at the microphone. They were all very kind, but they were troubled by my claim that seeking certainty of the love of God is one of the great temptations of life.

A week later, while leading a seminar of pastors, I again made reference to living by faith and not certainty. And I found the same resistance. One pastor even pounded his fist on the table as he asserted, “I am absolutely certain of our faith.” I made the mistake of trying to argue that it’s logically impossible to be certain about faith. What I should have said is that having faith in God is far better than being certain about God. Faith can take us to holy realms certainty can never reach.

For centuries Christians have gathered to stand and confess the Nicene Creed, which begins with the words, “We believe.” It’s significant that it doesn’t begin with, “I’m certain that . . .” We’ve never been certain. Too much is at stake for that.

The yearning for certainty goes as far back as Thomas’s need to put his hands in the risen savior’s wounds. But today’s positivism may be an anxious reaction to the ground that’s always shifting beneath our families, the church, politics, social morality, and our sense of security. We’re looking to be certain about something—about the ground of our being, at least.

One of the ironies of church history is that those most threatened by the Enlightenment’s caution about the limits of rationality for finding God began to adopt Enlightenment intellectual categories in a quest for theological certainty. Attempting to preserve the old faith, they developed new theologies of infallibility and inerrancy the church had never heard of before. But most of the 18th-century philosophers weren’t interested in getting rid of religion. They just wanted us to call it faith.

That was a gift, because it helps to keep the categories of certainty and faith distinct. When I drive my car over a bridge I want to be certain the engineers who built it weren’t thinking about faith but mathematics. However, when I come to church for worship I’m hoping there won’t be an engineer in the pulpit. If the preacher turns out to be an apologist for God, the Bible, or even why I should be a better person, my parched soul keeps interrupting, “Great argument. But do you have any living water?”

All healthy relationships are bound together by faith. Those who are married strive each day to help each other maintain faith in their marital vows. Even our friendships work based on the faith that if something happens in the middle of the night, the friend will rush to the emergency room. Love renews our humanity precisely because it comes as a grace—but the best way to destroy love is to make someone prove it. Or to make it certain, or necessary.

When I was seminary student, I took a class from Bruce Metzger on the book of Revelation. One day while he was lecturing on the ultimate victory of Jesus Christ, he looked up from his notes and said, “I hope that when you leave here and become pastors, you will get on your knees every morning and thank God that you are not necessary.” I remember this aside better than anything else Metzger taught us. It really stuck in my craw. For the first five years of my pastoral ministry, I maintained an argument in my mind with his counsel: *Surely we’re all necessary. The harvest is plentiful, and the laborers are few.*

When I returned to seminary for an alumni reunion, I found my old professor walking across the quad. I asked him if he remembered making that statement about thanking God we’re not necessary. I was hoping he would maybe take it back. But he smiled and said, “Oh yes, you’re not necessary.” Then he gave me the second sentence I wished he had added five years earlier: “You’re too important to be necessary; you are cherished by God.”

Why would we settle for being necessary and certain, when we could be loved? It wasn’t necessary or certain that God would love us sinners, or be gracious to us. The blessing is that this was heaven’s choice.

And faith? That’s a way of saying, “I love you too.” Blessedly, for reasons heaven only knows, God keeps choosing to have faith in our faith.

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