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Is Certainty the Same as Faith?

Abstract

"If we allow each other to operate on a greater continuum of certainty and uncertainty within the body of Christ, and don't associate those poles with faith and doubt, debate and disagreement can perhaps be a more edifying experience."

Posting about respectful debate among believers from *In All Things* - an online hub committed to the claim that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has implications for the entire world.

<http://inallthings.org/is-certainty-the-same-as-faith/>

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Comments

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Is Certainty the Same as Faith?

 inallthings.org/is-certainty-the-same-as-faith/

Howard Schaap

I remember the feeling, I think, because it felt like someone was unnecessarily trying to close a door on the world.

I was in catechism and I was in my teens, perhaps even 18, ready to take on the world beyond the church I had attended for most of my life. The minister, a kindly, soft-spoken yet still authoritative man in his late fifties, was carefully explaining to me that God didn't work in miracles anymore. I had disagreed, mildly at first, but now my dander was up and I was trying to turn it into a debate. I relied on a kind of logic: if we believed in scripture and if we believed in God and if God is unchanging then he could still work in miracles, even if I hadn't seen one. He also relied on logic, backed by one school of theological reasoning to which I knew there were alternatives but which he wouldn't consider. This seemed unfair to me. Back then, I read his unwillingness to cede my point as a kind of arrogance, and as I headed off to college, I was bound and determined to find those alternatives.

Today, I might simply say that what made me mad was how certain the minister was that he was right.

I've been in a number of discussions among Christians lately that have the issue of certainty at their core. The formula goes like this: some issue or conflict arises—for example, gender—about which people differ; the arguers travel down a path that leads to the basic foundations for why each holds the position they do; eventually, one side points to a verse or some other bedrock and says, "This is how we know what's right," and the other side says, "That's not as solid as you say it is." That's when the real argument begins because so much seems at stake: Are we standing on solid ground? Or is the ground shifting beneath us? This divide on certainty is a serious one that continues to fracture the Body of Christ, and it isn't going away anytime soon.

Part of our problem with certainty—and with its opposite, uncertainty—may be the way we roughly parallel them with faith and doubt. Even scripture seems to encourage this. "Faith," we are told in Hebrews, "is being *certain* of what we do not see." Thus, it appears that as we become less certain, we stray farther into doubt. On the other hand, the need to be certain can itself also be a kind of doubt. The obvious example here is Thomas, whose demand for certainty has led to his infamous nickname, Doubting Thomas. Meanwhile, there is a kind of faith that admits it's uncertain. "Faith slips –," writes Emily Dickinson, "and laughs, and rallies – /Blushes, if any see – / Plucks at a twig of Evidence – /And asks a Vane, the way."

My point is this: If we allow each other to operate on a greater continuum of certainty and uncertainty within the body of Christ, and don't associate those poles with faith and doubt, debate and disagreement can perhaps be a more edifying experience.

Here's an example from the classroom. Just last week I was talking with students about the oral tradition of many Native American cultures. The oral tradition is a body of stories passed down through generations whose essential character comes from the fact that they are told orally, flexing somewhat with each new storyteller's personality and generation's needs. These stories embody worldview truths for the tribe. "Imagine if scripture were passed down this way," I said to the students and almost immediately read on their faces that this was exactly what they *couldn't* imagine. The fact that scripture is perfect, preserved scrupulously by human effort over the centuries, not to mention divine inspiration and preservation, is a key foundational truth for many students. It's where at least some of their certainty is grounded.

Of course, even in how I've framed it above, there are two different pieces to this certainty. One of them—the divine inspiration and preservation of scripture—is supernatural. In this belief, Christianity is not alone. Sacred texts are often sacred because of the action of the divine, and at least some of the oral tradition relies on supernatural power

for its authority. In fact, we might say that because it's not written down, it depends *more* on supernatural power to guide it through the generations.

I suspect that the other aspect of student certainty about scripture may actually be the stronger one: that the preservation of scripture is verifiable as we study the history of the text. Now, we've entered the arena of science, or at least of evidence and proof. It may be this difference—that the printed text of scripture is verifiably true, while there is no certainty in the oral tradition—more than the divine inspiration piece, that my students balked at.

I pushed them a little. Too high of a degree of certainty can often translate to arrogance or close a door on the world. Then again, I only pushed some. To feel the ground shift beneath you too much is also dangerous. Famously, the way to drive lab rats crazy is to constantly change things on them.

However, this brings me back to my main point. I wonder if we could avoid some conflict in the church if we thought of our disputes as more about a continuum of certainty: some of us carry a high degree of certainty, others of us a low degree, and each end of the spectrum needs the other. Those whose faith is "certain" need to have that certainty tested to make sure it's not like Thomas' faith; those without certainty need the example of those who feel more grounded. If we are willing to expand our continuum of certainty, could we debate better and worship together better?