

The church is always talking about “faith.”
What is “faith,” really?

In the next chapter, the author of Hebrews will write, Faith is the essence of things hoped for, the proof of things not seen.

Put very simply, faith is trust (Guthrie, 323).

Christian faith is trust in and obedience to the gracious God made known in Jesus Christ (Migliore, 2).

Is faith static – once you’ve ‘got it,’ you’re done? No.

Faith dares to ask questions.

Faith keeps on seeking and asking.

Faith is an ever-changing relationship with the living God.

Dogmatism, in contrast with faith, reaches a point where inquiry stops and simple belief begins.

But the faithful are not immune to doubt. The faithful believe in a sovereign and good God, but they acknowledge a world where evil often triumphs.

In fact, the faithful may be more perplexed than the unfaithful about what is happening in their lived reality.

They believe in a living Lord, but often experience God’s absence rather than presence.

The Reformed understanding of faith is that it comes from God, through the workings of the Holy Spirit.

Faith is not mere acceptance of biblical truth or theological doctrine.

Faith is not merely believing in every word of the Bible.

Rather, faith is believing in the God we come to know by reading the Bible, according to Calvin.

It is confidence in God.

Christian faith is not a conviction that *faith* saves us, but rather confidence in the living, knowing *God* who saves us.

This kind of faith is a personal relationship with a living God whose trustworthiness has been proved through the life, death, and resurrection of Christ.

Calvin puts it this way:

“Faith is a firm and certain knowledge of God’s benevolence toward us, founded upon the truth of the freely given promise in Christ, both revealed to our minds and sealed upon our hearts through the Holy Spirit.”

We can no more simply make a decision to trust God than we can by sheer willpower decide to trust another human being (Guthrie, 324).

When we receive the gift of faith, we can be confident that God will guide us and protect us, and relieve us of the burden of fumbling through life without guidance.

St. Augustine wrote:

“You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.”

Recently, a restless seeker, George Scialabba, published an essay entitled *The Endlessly Examined Life*, meaning the endlessly psycho-analyzed life.

It is a personal confession of Scialabba’s 40-year struggle with severe depression.

As described by religion-writer Damon Linker this week, Scialabba has tried every kind of therapy the medical profession provides.

The only relief he ever felt was when he came to faith.

As a teenager, he sought the counsel of a Catholic priest.

Right away, his symptoms subsided.

Aided by deepening immersion in church, he felt at last that all of life’s opportunities were open to him.

Fully embraced in that way, Catholicism can become a proxy for personal decision-making.

There are those creeds and timeless liturgy, not to mention the authoritative doctrines endorsed by the Pope.

For a person who craves an answer to “How should I live?” the Catholic church provides a rather comprehensive support system.

Upon graduating from Harvard, however, Scialabba lost all belief in Catholicism.

He became restless and tangled in a confusion from which he never has recovered.

Like many people, he has concluded that a life free of dogma and doctrine, fed only by science and reason, is a better alternative to organized religion.

Today, there are many people who believe in God, but can live without church.

Maybe they still read the Bible; but they can live without preachers.

Depending on which survey you read, as many as 30% of our nation’s young people are spiritual truth-seekers.

When asked to declare a religious preference, they check None of the Above.

The “None-of-the-Aboves” may believe in a Higher Power, but not in affiliating with a church.

The catch-phrase is ‘Spiritual, But Not Religious.’

It includes a worldview that is open to and inclusive of many faiths.

SBNRs prefer to explore the mysteries of life without the baggage of doctrine or religion.

Let’s admit it: institutional religion can be messy; at times, even hypocritical.

But the church is and always has been the very pulse of Christianity.

Our lesson from Hebrews opens with a warning against the mere ritual of religion.

“Every priest stands day after day, offering again and again the same sacrifices” (v. 11).

As the writer of Hebrews would probably concede, to be churched in a world of spiritual searching is increasingly to be the odd one out.

To be Christian is to find spiritual truth in blood, flesh, and water, elements we will recall in a little while during Reaffirmation of Baptism.

And to be Christian means participating in a community of faith.

“Let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some” (vv. 24-25).

By meeting in person, we can ‘provoke’ one another to love and good works, which are the proper fruits of our baptisms.

Yes, provoke, as in stir up, aggravate, irritate, inflame, make an argument with one another.

Church is not a place where we make nice with one another.

It is where we confess that we have not been so nice.

Church is a community of folks whose consciences have been examined and cleansed by God.

Church folks are confident of God’s forgiveness and eagerly encourage each other in life’s trials.

Such a community brims with joy and certainty — two of the things Mr. Scialabba has searched for his whole life.

In such a community, we are free to hold our heads up without shame or fear, even as we confess our sins or ask deep questions of our faith.

Such confidence can characterize every aspect of our lives, from our relationship with God to relationships with one another inside and outside our faith community.

Why, then, do some people leave the Christian community?

For some church-leavers, it’s hypocrisy they see.

They meet Christians who are self-righteous, who catalog others’ errors and misjudgments, who censure and rebuke.

Other reasons for abandoning church can be traced to unresolved conflict, resentment at being judged, inward isolation, or a sense of playing a role.

God only knows.

Why stay with a church?

Christian community is the starting place of faith and faith is the starting point for Christian community.

In loving community, we approach the very presence of God,

“behind the curtain” as the author of Hebrews puts it.

Faith is a way of seeing all things in relation to God – a way of receiving life, offering life, loving life, and living life as a gift from God.

Remember, God alone is the source of our faith.

Christ has run the race ahead of us and opened the path to faith, hopefulness, and love.

“Let us hold fast to that confession of our hope” (v. 23).

Faith is always personal, but it is never private. Being privately spiritual but not religious, one doesn’t have to submit to the reign of God.

The essential mark of the Christian life is self-giving, other-regarding love – what the New Testament calls *agape*.

Agape cannot be discovered on one’s own, but only in community.

There is nothing consistently challenging about having deep thoughts all by oneself.

What is challenging is having deep thoughts in a faith community, where people might call you on stuff or even disagree with you.

As Peter Gomes has written:

In selfless love and mutual forgiveness, community members encourage one another to live out their baptismal potentials.

Gomes adds, mutual encouragement strengthens both the believer and the believing community.

We cannot encourage ourselves.

Even in this self-help culture of ours, we cannot yet summon that much willpower.

CONCLUSION

It is our spiritual obligation
to encourage one another, in confidence
that Jesus himself has blazed the path.

Faith is an affirmation that God means well,
that God is reliable and trustworthy.

God really does care.

Not through abstract contemplation,
or by great literature, or great movies,
or even by great prayer,
are we Provoked to Love.

But in the struggle to relate to one another
as brothers and sisters in Christ
are we Provoked to Love.

We who find ourselves
in the liminal time between Christ's coming
and Christ's coming again,
we together can speed the coming
of God's reign on earth.

Let's prod ourselves to dance
in the already-but-not-yet glory
of God's kingdom.

Amen.