



“There is no well-defined boundary between honesty and dishonesty. The frontiers of one blend with the outside limits of the other, and he who attempts to tread this dangerous ground may be sometimes in one domain and sometimes in the other.”

—O. Henry

Being Honest with Our Doubts

By Willard “Buzz” Stevens

The blurred frontiers between truthfulness and deceitfulness began to emerge early on for me . . . right about the time I met with the conference Board of Ordained Ministry for my Deacon’s orders. There was the matter of accepting unreservedly the notion of the Virgin Birth, and other doctrines, such as the overwhelming concept of the Holy Trinity. I was not asked about these matters specifically but I assumed I was supposed to buy it all.

My heart was in overdrive when those subjects surfaced in an interview with thirty scary, somber-looking Board members in black suits who sat clustered together some distance from me. That image remained etched in my mind for four long decades. I thought to myself in that moment before the Board, “You can preach it ’til you believe it fully, Stevens. Go ahead and give the impression you’re okay with all the dogma.” I passed!

And I preached it until the day I retired. But the wrestling remained, and I never blew my cover.

I had an active prayer life throughout my ministry, and it became even more earnest with the demands of being a district superintendent. After retiring, I bumped into several pensioned clergy and elderly lay people from my former churches who claimed they no longer believed in prayer, and many who were questioning whether there was a heaven. I do not recall those concerns coming at me so forcefully during my active ministry years or perhaps I was in “domain denial.”

The questioning of prayer caught me off guard because I have remained faithful to a daily regimen. A seventy-year-old, highly dedicated layperson who seldom missed a church service or his evening prayers throughout his entire life confessed to me recently, “I’ve just given up on prayer!”

“Why?” I asked, mostly out of selfish curiosity.

“My mother, as you know,” he revealed with misty eyes, “had Alzheimer’s disease for eight years. In her last few years, her condition began to affect my father’s health, so I prayed to God every

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night that she would die. I never missed a night, Pastor. She lived two more years before expiring and now I firmly believe she managed to cause my father to give up on his own life. He died soon after. Then the tsunami and Hurricane Katrina hit and I became convinced there is no God out there concerned enough in human life to make a difference!”

The committed member did not give up on attending church but he did abandon any notion of a prayer life.

His ordeal brought to my mind the end days of my mother. She contracted breast cancer at the age of thirty-nine when I was seventeen. I had no church background, but I prayed every night that she would live until she died seven months later.

It occurred to me years after entering ministry that I came into the church needing to deal with my anger toward God. I never dealt with my deepest feelings toward prayer during my tenure and I still carry some residual anger toward a silent God. I had passed on my belief, or disbelief, in the certainty of prayer for fifty-five years. I offered up those pastoral prayers in worship every Sunday and giving the impression most, if not all, prayers would be answered. It was not until I retired that I allowed myself to think about church members who might have eventually given up and quit attending worship over disillusionment with their own unanswered prayers.

Heaven only knows how honest I was about questions regarding afterlife hopes. Rather than finding ways to honor those attending worship who did not believe in a heaven, throughout my ministry I just continued to lift up prayers for those who were true believers in the promise of the Pearly Gates.

The lonely times for me in ministry had to do with believing I was the only preacher who was not certain about every facet of church dogma and its rituals. Suppressing my doubts had to have affected my mental health and welfare over the years, and perhaps the well-being of a number of believers and nonbelievers seated in those pews who chose not to reveal their uncertainties because I had not demonstrated that the church was a safe place to do so.

If I had it to do over again would I stand more courageously at the frontiers where honesty and dishonesty intersect?

I don't know. But I believe I would risk doing the following on occasion:

Before a pastoral prayer, I would say, “Many of you believe wholeheartedly in prayer, but there are some in these pews who may have given up on it after praying for months or years for the sake of loved ones to no avail. Either way, please know you're in the right house.”

Before an Easter message I might announce “Some of you believe in physical resurrection, others a spiritual resurrection, but there may be some present who do not believe in an afterlife at all. Whatever you believe, please know you're in the right house.”

John Cobb, Professor Emeritus at Claremont School of Theology, claims that part of the reason Mainline Protestant institutions are rapidly declining has to do with clergy and lay people not being open and honest about their disbeliefs. We are uncomfortable with doubt, so we hide it from one another and the church

loses its authenticity and its healing power. We gain nothing by feigning total confidence. As Voltaire said to Frederick the Great in the eighteenth century: “Doubt is not a pleasant state of mind, but certainty is absurd.”

While serving my last church, I visited a widowed 84-year-old church member who was admitted to an intensive care unit for a rapid heart condition. I asked her if she had experienced any major problems just prior to being hospitalized. Mildred uttered softly, “Well, Pastor, my dog died a few days ago and I dread stepping through my front door and not being met by him. My husband, as you know, passed away two years ago.” She was silent for a time and then with misty eyes she mumbled, “I think God may no longer be in control and I've never been so scared in my life.”

I asked if she might say more about that but she was unable to respond. Initially I figured the tears had to do with the grief over her husband and pet but my hunch was she may have been weeping over the fact she had just stopped believing in

an omnipotent God. Her theology, or lack of it, may have put her in ICU. If she had held throughout her entire life to an image of an invincible, commanding, transcendent Godhead and suddenly that assurance vanished, her fear in her dying days might have had to do with facing a disappointed and possibly angry Creator.

How many of our congregants gradually and quietly stop believing in an all-powerful

Architect? They may remain silent in church until their last breath because they fear their pew partners and pastors believe firmly and unwaveringly an all-powerful God and would not understand. They fear condemnation and exclusion if they are honest with their doubts, and so they sit in the pew (or don't), spiritually isolated from other sometimes-believers with whom they might have shared and grown.

Rather than letting years of fear and uncertainty send our laity into the Intensive Care Unit, we need to form small Intensive Theological Units in our churches to allow parishioners to be able to discuss and reveal their deepest fears and pain. All congregants need to be permitted to confess all parts of their faith openly and boldly. For some it will be their confusion regarding shifting theological parameters and for others their convictions that an omnipotent God is still out there, caring for them. Whatever their ratio of questions to answers, everyone—including the pastor—can bring their doubts into the light and begin to live an honest faith together. □

Suppressing my doubts may have affected the well-being of those in the pews who chose not to reveal their uncertainties because I had not demonstrated that the church was a safe place to do so.



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