

Borrowed faith

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Woven deeply into the fabric of Protestant Christianity is the idea that faith is something you must own or possess if it is to be real. American frontier religion in the 18th and 19th centuries, with its emphasis on dramatic conversion experiences, helps to explain the origins of this idea, as does, I think, contemporary consumer capitalism. Ownership—a nice house, a new car, a stellar reputation—is what we spend our days working for as we strive to possess something that will give us comfort or pleasure, security or status.

And so Christian faith is routinely commodified along the lines of “got milk?” Do you possess an authentic, serviceable faith that will give you what you need when you need it?

The bald utilitarianism of this view is troubling enough (and worthy of its own reflection/discussion/blog post), but I’ve been more interested lately in a counter claim that shouldn’t be as odd and unfamiliar as it seems to be: that Christian faith—the lived complex of belief and practice, disposition and character, orientation and outlook—is less about something we possess within ourselves and more about something we borrow from others, something we take up (or “put on” as the Apostle Paul puts it).

I’ve found this to be true in my own experience. In times of crisis, faith has generally not been a stockpiled possession, ready and waiting to be summoned into service. I didn’t (don’t) have the necessary reserves to draw on (to keep with the market metaphor); in fact, I need to borrow great sums from others

in order to weather the storm. (Along these lines, Rodney Clapp [writes](#) about letting others do our praying for us when our troubles are too intense or when the words won't come).

This seems like cheating if you've been playing by rules that assume Christianity is a game of continual self-improvement for individual achievers. But there's enormous relief in refusing to play a game you can't win. The imagery that St. Paul returns to again and again is that of "putting on Christ" or "clothing ourselves" in compassion, kindness, and love. The interesting question, then, is not so much "are you a person of faith?" but "what are you wearing?" Have you borrowed the right clothes, so to speak? Have you stopped kidding yourself that you can pull off the life of faithful discipleship by your own cleverness or willpower?

Christian faith is always mediated, and always modeled by those who, through seasons of struggle, gracefully share some of their hard-won wisdom with the rest of us—having received it themselves from friends and mentors in the faith who themselves . . . well, you get the idea.

We are, all of us, shameless beggars and borrowers of a faith that is never fully possessed because it isn't a manageable commodity, a prize, a moral achievement. We glimpse it in the well-lived lives of others. We try it on ourselves, sometimes having to grow into garments too big and awkward for us. And we trust that in time we will learn to hand this faith down—to be shamelessly and happily borrowed from.

This is the messiness and mystery of lived discipleship: the faith we confess sometimes falls from our own lips and sometimes is confessed by others on our behalf. We lend and borrow, give and receive, circulating a gift that can only be shared, never fully and finally owned.

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