

On faith and failure

By [Ryan Dueck](#)

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A few weeks ago, I was part of a conversation with a group of seniors where we reflected upon the question, “Have you ever seen or personally experienced the failure of faith?” A loaded question, if ever there was one. What does it even *mean* for faith to fail? We may have had some difficulties answering that question, but we certainly found no shortage of things to talk about! We talked about the experience of the absence of God, about the perceived inadequacy of faith in the face of imminent death, about faith’s failure to overcome fear and doubt, about faith’s inability to meet this or that intellectual challenge, about the slow drift away from the convictions of one’s childhood. It was a fascinating, if at times dispiriting conversation.

Then, on the other end of life’s spectrum, I had another recent conversation with a person in the (in)famous 18-30 demographic—a segment of the population that is, according to research, exiting the church in droves. I heard about a restrictive and stifling view of God, about difficulties with the exclusivity of Christianity, about preferring a more tolerant view of the world, about how despite admiring (a selection of) Jesus’ teachings, the whole package simply wasn’t working anymore. Too judgmental, too hypocritical, too inconvenient, too narrow, too _____. For this person, faith had failed. Or, at least, faith of a certain *kind* had failed.

These two conversations provoke all kinds of questions, of course. Questions like: What do you mean by “faith?” How do you understand the term? What do you expect faith to do or be? What do you suppose it ought to “accomplish?” How would you know if it had “worked” or was “working?” Is faith static or dynamic in nature? Is there room for the expression of doubt, confusion, anger, etc within the context of faith?

In both conversations, the implication seemed to be that faith was a “something” that we possessed that was meant to *do* certain things in the world. It was a body of knowledge or doctrines, supplemented perhaps with a few rituals and recommended behaviours that were supposed to do any or all of the following: explain the origins

and nature of the world, provide moral guidance and instruction, answer the “big” questions of life, make the experience of suffering and the approach of death more bearable, and provide inspiration and hope. In short, “faith” seemed to be conceived as a kind of explanation of the world that stands or falls based on how well it “performs” in the arena of individual experience.

Part of this is natural and, indeed, could hardly be otherwise. Who *else’s* experience should faith be evaluated against, if not our own? And isn’t part of the deal with faith supposed to be that it, well, *helps* us cope with the vicissitudes of life on this planet? If faith wasn’t at least somewhat *useful* why would anyone bother with it? It would be a strange thing indeed if someone were to persist in a view *of* and a way of *being in* the world that provided precisely zero confirmation of its suitability to meet life’s questions and challenges along the way.

And yet... I also think that individual experience, *on its own*, is a fleeting and unreliable barometer by which to measure the performance of faith. I can speak only of my own experience, of course, but I know that my feelings can be up and down within a single hour when it comes to faith, never mind over the course of a lifetime. Sometimes my faith feels strong and engaged and vigorous, other times it feels weak and ineffectual. Sometimes, the cognitive content of the Christian faith seems to be a source of life and healing and strength, while other times it seems like a straightjacket. It all depends which day (or time of the day) you ask me. My experience is all over the map—hardly the plumb line by which to evaluate something as big as “faith.”

I also know that it’s much easier to label the Christian faith a “failure”—to call it judgmental and intolerant and restrictive—when we are engaged in behaviours that we are pretty sure are wrong or at least questionable, but which we would love to justify. Far easier to judge and dismiss something like “faith” than *ourselves*, after all! Far easier to elevate our own experience and make it the arbiter of all things than to change our behaviour. Far easier to write off faith as a failure than to persevere through the valley, to inquire as to how God might be speaking through silence and pain and difficult questions. Far easier, in our distracted, impatient, technological age, to look for a quicker fix than a life of patient and persistent following after Jesus.

I do not doubt that faith can fail us at times. I also think that we can and regularly do fail faith.

It's interesting to think about the "failure of faith" with Easter Sunday still squarely in the rearview mirror. If ever faith seemed to fail, it would have been on those dark hours between Friday and Sunday. And if ever faith would have seemed to be vindicated it would have been when that tomb was discovered to be empty—when life triumphed over death. Yet we know that the *experience* of faith since that first Easter has been one of neither unbroken and unqualified victory or failure. The experience of faith is still, it seems to me, characterized by ups and downs as it has always been.

What a relief, then, that the cross and empty tomb speaks of the faith and the faithfulness of Christ that is stronger, more durable, reliable, and sure than anything we can conjure up in our short time on this planet. What a relief that regardless when our faith fails or seems to fail, Christ's does not.

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