

Now About the Risks Involved...

Edward H. Schroeder

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“Wow!” That’s what we said last summer when we saw that Frenchman on the tightrope between the two towers of the World Trade Center in New York. No parachute, no net, just 1,000 feet of nothing between him and the ground. That was really risky! I get vertigo just thinking about it. You’ll never catch me risking my life like that!

Really? Reflect for a moment.

Just how risky is the business of being a Christ-truster? We talk about the “venture of faith.” When you get down to brass tacks, Christian Faith is a daring venture – a high-risk profession. Pun intended.

“Profession” is to be thought of here first as a lifelong calling, a vocation, a ministry; and then secondly as something you profess, a statement made public in specific words and actions out in the open of real life experience for all to see: “come weal or woe, Christ is Lord. He’s the one I’m trusting.”

Profession: A Statement Made Public

So what’s the risk in “making public” my faith? Just what do I take a chance on losing? At the surface the risk of loss in this kind of Christian profession is

1. Secular friends who might well think I’m an oddball. I might lose their value and esteem. Worse than that,
2. When times get really tough the risk is – as someone once said – “and take they our life, goods, fame, child and

wife.” That ups the ante considerably.

3. In church-conflict circumstances it can get even worse than that. You risk the loss of the tie that binds, the good feeling we used to have when we were all one happy Christian family. And that ups the ante even more.

But in all of these possibilities and in others that your imagination can supply, there is a deeper risk yet that spooks around behind these risks. It is the risk of losing the divine approval. Suppose, just suppose, that when you were exercising your profession according to your Christian convictions, God were to respond: “This time you blew it! On this one you lose! I disapprove – not just of the action, but of the actor – YOU!”

Are there any resources in the Christian pantry to give us the courage to risk the divine disapproval – and to do so not anxiously, but faithfully? Indeed there are! Fact is, that is exactly what is on the center shelf of the Christian pantry. It’s not that the Christian faith has a special canister high up on the top shelf for those rare moments – once or twice in a lifetime – when risk arises. No, risk is at the very center. At the center of faith in Christ is the risk of God’s own disapproval, the risk of the total wipe-out.

Trusting Christ is by itself that high-risk venture. We take the big dare that God will not treat us as sinners, even though we know that there is evidence aplenty that we are sinners, look like sinners, act like sinners, think like sinners, talk like sinners. Whence the audacity? Thechutzpah? The impertinence? It is not that we Christians think we can “snow” God or pull a fast one, but that we trust Christ in the face of all this sinner-evidence (which is accurate) and take the daring risk that God’s own opinion about us is not; “Sons of perdition,” but rather: “These folks look like my beloved Son; with them I am well pleased.”

We would have to spell out the Good Friday/Easter history to get the solid groundings for such “reasonable” risk taking. If He hadn’t silenced the law of sin and death (God’s own law, mind you) in that weird and wondrous weekend, then our faith is in vain and our daring venture is a sure loser. We lose out on life itself. But when we trust Him as good news, we are entrusting our selves to God’s promising mercy. We are daring to risk that honest criticism is not God’s last word for us.

That really is a big risk, for we see the evidences all around us that God does continue to deal with sinners in terms of deadly criticism. It is not at all automatically obvious that “there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” Our individual daily lives are full of condemnation experiences, even as we dare to trust in the face of them that God has other intentions for us. If our trust is misplaced, the stakes are total loss.

Profession: A Lifelong Calling

Let’s take a look at the high-risk profession of Christian in the sense of the work we do in the world. Focus first on the vertigo-inducing word of St. Paul, “For freedom Christ has set us free.” Christ’s freedom is its own goal. Not freedom so that you can accomplish some further goal, but freedom as Christ’s own goal for you. Freedom means nothing holding you back – only Christ up front and the Spirit alongside. Freedom means there are no guardrails to insure that you don’t fall off. It is indeed like that tightrope – no security blanket, no parachute, no net, no training wheels, just the word of our Lord over and over again: “Fear not, just trust me.” (Mark 5:36)

All the work done by a Christian is work on the tightrope. And the risk involved is not simply the risk of “failure” – that it won’t come out the way I wanted it, or that it will do more harm than good. No, the risk is to trust that God will approve of me,

the doer, no matter which way it comes out – and that His approval will continue to be grounded where my hope says it is grounded. In the Litany we pray that God would take care of us both in time of prosperity and adversity. When things go well, when they come out “right,” my righteousness is still not grounded in the fact that the work was right, but that Christ calls over to me: “Right!” We may comprehend that more easily when we “work” something wrong – and then “naturally” flee to God from the face of our failures to hear from His Christ the “right-making” word of forgiveness. But the worker of success or of failure (prosperity or adversity) has no guardrail other than Christ’s supportive word.

All the work done by a Christian is work on the tightrope: the extraordinary works of daring that everyone can recognize – standing for the truth when un-love or injustice is being practiced – as well as the normal, ordinary works. The humdrum works are also daring ventures: get up in the morning, do my daily job, come home, eat supper, do something after supper, go to bed, get up again...This routine is also risk – the risk that God approves of this routine hum-drummer. That He says to me: In this job, in this action, in this no-big-deal, you are working as my beloved one; with you right here I am well pleased.

Christians get tempted to be “unrisky” in both the humdrum as well as the extraordinary, so we need to refocus on Christ in order to loosen up and be more risky. Risk failure? Of course. With Christ-trusting failures God is well pleased. Try a new method in personal life, or in my Christian work? Sure! If it wins or loses, you, the Christ-truster, have nothing to lose. Teach fellow Christians to be a bit more risky? I should say so! That is the very name of the freedom to which we have been set free.

The rubber band that pulls us back from taking risks is at root

the very law of God's criticism from which Christ has set us free. Check it out for yourself. What is the heftiest pull that keeps you from trying the untried? "Someone might criticize me. God Himself might finally say it is wrong. God Himself might finally say I am wrong. Therefore better not try it."

Notice what is going on here. Christ is being given one huge vote of no confidence! We are really voting that God's performance evaluation of us sinners is going to be His last word, and therefore we better make sure our slate is as clean as we can get it. And the scaredy-cat Christian is really saying: I have to make my work good and then I will be a "good" work-er.

But that stands the whole promise of God on its head. God's promise first approves the work-er and then any work he does as such an approved one is a "good" work. Says who? Says God! But you do have to run the risk of letting Christ trump the claims of criticism, as these claims are made upon you by both outsiders and your inside conscience.

The central proclamation from the heart of the Scriptures is that in Christ God does approve of us workers. Thus our work is good, by definition, when it is done by Christ-trusters. Any deed offered up in trust of God's promise gets His big thumbs up: "With that I am well pleased!"

Teetering on a tightrope somewhere? Cheer up. It's par for the course. "Fear not, only believe."