

Thursday Theology: Why I Detest the Expression “People of Faith”

Co-Missioners,

Today’s piece comes from your editor, who freely admits that he’s having some fun with a serious rant. Enjoy where you can. Grimace where you must.

*Peace and Joy,
The Crossing Community*

Why I Detest the Expression “People of Faith”

By Jerome Burce



I blame Rex Stout for the tic of verbal snobbery that serves with so much else to advertise my status as a sinner. Stout was the first writer to hook me on a paperback series. That was in my late teens or early twenties. The books that grabbed me feature one Nero Wolfe, a crime solver, as eccentrically brilliant as Sherlock Holmes or Hercule Poirot though more interesting than either, as I continue to think. Wolfe operates in a three-story Manhattan brownstone that he never leaves except in exigency. He has three full-time employees, a cook, a gardener, and a personal assistant with a photographic memory who does the investigative leg work and reports to the boss verbatim when the daily schedule, scrupulously followed, finds Wolfe at a magnificent wooden desk in an exquisite office lined with floor-to-ceiling bookshelves, a beer in one hand, a tome in the other. Wolfe loves to eat, read and raise orchids in more or less that order. He hates to work unless he has to. He has a particular passion for words chosen well and rightly used. Channeling his creator, the mid-twentieth century Stout, he thunders imperiously whenever a grammatical ignoramus assaults

his ears by using “contact” as a verb. He would thunder at me for starting the last sentence with “channeling.” In our current century, I think of Nero Wolfe whenever I hear someone talk of this or that “impacting” something else. Come on, people. “Impact” is a noun. Always was, always ought to be. Those who utter otherwise should be sent to language jail for a week on bread and water, as Wolfe would sputter. Infected though I am by the man’s spirit, I don’t sputter; I merely flinch. Then I quickly pride myself on being a Wolfe-worthy speaker as the rest of you are not, and the sinner shows through.

As it happens, there are certain habits of expression now current in American church circles that cause the sinner aforesaid to pop his head up faster than the groundhog on an especially frigid [Candlemas](#) morning in Punxsutawney, PA.

Here’s one from the small “e” evangelical side of things, Pastor Jack to Pastor Bob: “How many people did you worship last Sunday?” Really? How can one fail on hearing that to make the instant move from flinch to scream, the mouth flooded with a pool of biting snark? “Thou shalt worship the Lordthy God, and Him only shalt thou serve.” Since when did the Bible-thumpers turn into idolaters, thumbing their Canaanite noses at the clear and vivid Word?

Then there’s this, long rampant in the waning mainline: “people of faith.” This grates on me even more than the other. It does so to such a degree that I can’t help but grab for the sinner’s standard fig leaf, asserting that there’s more righteousness than sin in this particular beef. Snobbery has nothing to with it, I want to say. At issue is basic honesty, to say nothing of clarity, and to say still less of that all-inclusive respect for the neighbor that the mainline vaunts as its nigh-exclusive virtue.

The One who sits in the heavens laughs them to scorn, of course. As usual.



Somewhere in the operational bowels of the Oxford English Dictionary there has got to be a minion, doubtless brilliant, who could tell us when “people of faith” first surfaced in print and finger the miscreant responsible for it. I’d like to douse

that person with a bucket of Wolfe-ish indignation.

I know, of course—or rather, I think I know—what the phrase means to accomplish. It posits a subset of human beings who are distinguished from other human beings by their willingness, first, to imagine a reality beyond the grasp of mathematical reasoning or scientific measurement, and, second, to credit its existence so well as to act on it. “We believe in ‘The Transcendent,’” as one might say. That’s what binds these folks together in contrast to those other folks, the grubby earthbound secularists who want nothing to do with such notions and are blunt about saying so. To the former the label gets fixed—people of faith. With that the problems start. Here are a few.

First, of what possible use is a term so broad? Accounts of transcendent reality are legion. They range from tales told of sorcerers and ghosts to the tomes of Thomas Aquinas. Some are monotheistic, others polytheistic, and still others un-theistic, as one finds among those “people of faith” who cluster under the

sub-umbrella called Buddhism. Among these accounts are ones that stand in deliberative opposition to other accounts and seek to displace or overthrow them. See, for example, the first chapter of Genesis, rightly read as an “au contraire” retort to the creation myths of Mesopotamia. About the only thing they have in common is the lip-curved scorn of Richard Dawkins and his ilk. Meanwhile Genesis 1 engenders divisions of its own these days, between one set of Jews or Christians that takes it literally and another set that doesn't. I can say nothing about how our Jewish counterparts might handle this. We Christians do it abysmally, directing our own streams of caustic scorn at those of the opposing viewpoint, who strike us first and foremost as either heretics or buffoons—not “people of faith,” that is, but people of bad faith. So much again for a purported commonality among disparate groups of the god-crowd.

The matter only gets worse when people try to put the term to work. From a column in the Eau Claire (Wisconsin) *Leader-Telegram* on November 17, 2017, two weeks after the mass slaughter at First Baptist Church, Sutherland Springs, Texas. “Across the nation, people of faith suddenly feel vulnerable. Churches have long been considered safe places, holy houses of refuge, immune from the violence and evil destruction of this world. But now we wonder, is nothing sacred anymore?”

A couple of things emerge from these sentences. First, the person who wrote it claims an identity as “a person of faith.” Second, he or she associates persons so identified with



“churches” and “holy houses of refuge.” One guesses safely that she or he would apply the latter designation also to synagogues, mosques, and temples, and even—might our writer be this broadminded?—to Jehovah’s Witness kingdom halls. Third, “people of faith” are, by contextual definition, those who cluster in such edifices, or so this writer implies. Again a problem: what of the countless human beings who claim to commune with God or the gods in solitude and avoid religious assemblies with the same loathing of clustered humanity that keeps me from shopping in malls? What for that matter of those whose convictions drive them to dance in unroofed forest glades by moonlight? What label might this writer apply to them? My cheek bulges from the tongue so firmly planted there as I spill these thoughts, but still, my point: whatever does this people-of-faith expression finally designate? Why the recent fascination with it?

I am hardly the first to grumble about this, of course. For another sharp complaint, see [“Just Who Are These ‘People of Faith’ Anyway?”](#), a two-year old essay by John G. Stackhouse, Jr. in *Christianity Today*. Stackhouse makes excellent points, a few sufficiently cogent to warn you away from ever using the phrase again, if indeed you’ve succumbed to the habit. But Stackhouse also misses the main point, the most cogent of them all. Here it is:

Religious people—devotees of the Transcendent if one pushes to the phrase’s farthest presumed limits—have neither right nor reason to claim the word “faith,” adjectivally unadorned, as either a distinguishing characteristic or an exclusive preserve. Until recently I had a friend and neighbor down the street who neither goes to church nor wants to go to church, or to mosque or synagogue either, and is altogether unwilling to entertain any notion of a divine dimension to reality. This man, a good and decent person of manifest integrity (as if I need to add that) is as much a person of faith as I am. Though to put this

more precisely, he's as much a person of multiple faiths as I am. Were he a scoundrel, this would still be true. Faith, strictly considered, is an expectation regarding the future. By a faith we share, he and I both expect the post office truck to roll down the street sometime tomorrow depositing items in our mailboxes. By faith we both plop down in car seats and turn the keys, expecting an engine to start. Then we steer our vehicles down a road we believe to be passable and head for a store we believe to be there to buy milk we believe to be potable and not poisonous for once. For both of us, every day entails a constant, unrelenting exercise of such quotidian faith, as one might put it. And at the end of the day I exercise a particular faith by praying, while he exercises another particular faith by not praying. My faith drives me to look past the end of life's day toward a meeting with my Lord Jesus Christ. His faith drives him to expect nothing of the sort; when he dies, he's dead, and that's that, or so he believes. This by no means disqualifies him for the honorific "person of faith," if honorific it is. In fact, the term is merely descriptive of the human creature. To say "people of faith" is like saying "people of breath" or "people of beating heart." As a phrase it is sound and fury, signifying nothing, to crib from Shakespeare. That's why I detest it. And I loathe it all the more when it's trotted out to distinguish my ilk from the ilk of my secular friend and neighbor. To suggest that he is not a "person of faith" demeans him. It is also a ludicrous falsehood.

Falsehoods, unlike the milk we dare to buy, are always poisonous. This one is having a deadly effect on the mission Christ so strangely entrusts to his boneheaded Church. It entices baptized people to downplay the remarkable gifts of their specific and peculiar faith. Suddenly they're loathe to speak of Easter-driven joy and hope and freedom with friends and neighbors who hang their hearts on other things. It's as if such

speaking is not only impolite, but improper—or even immoral. The devil claps his hands at this.

But this is another topic for another time.

Thursday Theology: that the benefits of Christ be put to use
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