

Foreword

WHILE READING *AN UNCERTAIN CERTAINTY*, I WAS REMINDED OF an interesting conversation I had not so long ago with a PhD student who was writing a dissertation that was critical of some of the things I and others had written concerning the positive value of mystery, uncertainty, and doubt for Christian faith. As a good researcher, this individual wanted to make sure he was doing justice to the arguments he was criticizing and had therefore invited me to serve as the external reader for his dissertation. In one of our phone conversations the topic of certainty came up, and we discussed our differences on the matter. I spoke about walking by faith and not by sight and the inherent lack of certainty this implies as a basic posture for Christian life and leadership, while he stressed the importance of having total certainty in matters of belief and action in order to be a faithful witness to the good news and provide leadership and guidance for others. He concluded, “You can’t give your life to something and invite others to do the same unless you are absolutely certain about it.” I responded, “I have.”

It seems to me that this exchange reflects a paradoxical element of biblical Christian faith. On the one hand, would-be disciples of Jesus Christ are called upon to count the cost of following him and be willing to lay down their lives, after his example, for the sake of the world. This cost counting and commitment would appear to require a large measure of confidence in order to sustain the potential hardships associated with such a decision. On the other hand, in taking up this journey of faith we are often confronted with surprising twists and turns that lead to strange and unexpected places. This ancient paradox is observed in the epistle to the Hebrews (11:8), “By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he

would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going.”

In this volume, Graham Buxton wrestles with the challenges of this paradox for faith and life in the context of Christian ministry. In a series of well-crafted interactions with thinkers not only ancient and modern, but as diverse as Donald Rumsfeld and Ralph Waldo Emerson, he offers a portrait of Christian ministry that moves away from the narrow “either-or” mentality that is so common in much of the church. In its place Buxton proposes and illustrates a “both-and” posture that is reflective of the tensions and enigmas that are characteristic of the biblical witness to the mission of God and the journey of faith. This suggests an approach to Christian ministry and witness that is open-ended and generous without lapsing into the thin relativism of so much cultural discourse.

This both-and posture is important, not only because it is consistent with what we read in Scripture, but also because it serves as a reminder of the limitations of our own understanding. We all do theology and ministry from a specific context and social location that shapes the way we interpret the particularities of our calling. One of the dangers of the absolutism of an either-or approach to ministry is that it can serve to stamp the Bible and Christian faith in the image of a particular set of cultural assumptions and assume the normativity of that outlook. When this occurs, the voices and perspectives of those who do not participate in the presuppositions of the majority are marginalized or eclipsed, often under the guise of claims that they are not being faithful to Scripture. A both-and outlook makes us alert to the fact that we are only *a part* of the story of God’s ways in the world and that other people, different from ourselves, are participants in the mission of God and also have thoughts and ideas about God, Jesus, and the Bible. We can be liberated from the limitations of our own imaginations and perspectives when we learn to hear their voices.

Buxton believes that a faith lived and practiced with ambiguity, paradox, uncertainty, and mystery has the capacity to renew and revitalize ministers and ministries, liberating them from simplistic certainties that are inconsistent with the complexities and vicissitudes of the human experience as well as the witness of Scripture. I agree with him. In addition, this both-and faith is the best and most faithful witness to the God revealed in Jesus Christ, whose Spirit blows like the wind. As the great missionary theologian Lesslie Newbigin concludes, the confidence that is proper to a Christian “is not the confidence of one who claims possession

of demonstrable and indubitable knowledge. It is the confidence of one who had heard and answered the call that comes from God through whom and for whom all things are made: 'Follow me.'¹

In *An Uncertain Certainty*, Graham Buxton admirably captures this conviction in a compelling and entertaining fashion that has the potential to change the way we in the church think about ministry. May God grant us the courage to let go of the safety and security of absolute certainty and prepare us for the adventure of uncertain certainty, that of following Jesus into the world.

John R. Franke, DPhil
Executive Director and Professor of Missional Theology,
Yellowstone Theological Institute;
Professor of Religious Studies and Missiology,
Evangelische Theologische Faculteit, Leuven;
General Coordinator, The Gospel and Our Culture Network,
North America

1 Leslie Newbigin, *Proper Confidence: Faith, Doubt, and Certainty in Christian Discipleship*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995, 105.