

Confidence Men

Therefore, beloved, while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish; and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation. So also our beloved brother Paul wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, speaking of this as he does in all his letters. There are some things in them hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other scriptures. You therefore, beloved, since you are forewarned, beware that you are not carried away with the error of the lawless and lose your own stability. But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity. Amen. (2 Peter 3:14-18)

In 1995 a guy named McArthur Wheeler strolled into two Pittsburgh area banks, pulled out a gun, and walked away with all the cash he could carry. The very next day he was arrested. The reason for the quick turn around? Wheeler made no attempt to conceal his identity. No facemask. No panty hose. Nothing. Well, I say nothing... When they arrested him he just kept yelling, "But I used the juice! I used the juice!"

Two friends told Wheeler that if he covered his face in lemon juice the cameras would be unable to get him on film. Now, it's not that he didn't test his theory out. After spraying lemon juice over himself he tried to take his own picture with a Polaroid and failed. People surmise the lemon juice stung his eyes and caused him to take a picture of the wall or the ceiling. But based on this experiment, Wheeler believed he was as good as invisible. And indeed, the footage from the robberies showed him not only not trying to hide, but actually staring right into the cameras and smiling.

When Dave Dunning, a psychologist at Cornell read about this story, he chuckled like most of us do, but he also had a thought. It struck him that maybe what was going on was that Wheeler wasn't merely too stupid to be a bank robber, but that he was too stupid to KNOW he was too stupid to be a bank robber.

Believe it or not this actually sparked Dunning to several years of research, the result of which was several books and a major theory, known as the Dunning-Kruger effect which states that not only do we sometimes use strategies in life that don't work, but that when we are failing, most of the time we won't even be able to realize it- we'll think we are doing just fine.

The major study they conducted dealt with college students taking a grammar test. The test was fairly simple. You know how grammar is- you either know it or you don't. And the point wasn't how well the kids did on the test- but how confident they said they were while they were taking it. Now these are Cornell students- sharp kids. You would think not only would they do well, but if they weren't doing well they would know- they would know they were just guessing. But frighteningly, the kids who did the worst on the test

actually reported being the most confident about their answers. The kids who did the worst thought they were doing the best.

One of the take aways from Dunning is that most of the time, it's the confident ones, the ones that think they know everything- they're the ones you have to watch out for.

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Unfortunately for the church Second Peter is writing to- these are exactly the kind of folks that were turning up in droves.

Second Peter is an interesting book. Scholars tell us it's probably not written by the same people who gave us First Peter and that both books are WAY too well written to be produced by a fishermen turned religious nut- no offense to any fishermen or religious nuts out there. The best guess is that Second Peter is one of the last books to be written in the New Testament- written sometime in the early to mid second century, roughly 100 years after Jesus was walking around stirring up trouble.

And the community at this time- they were facing a tough challenge. For one thing it was hard to be part of the church at the time- to be part of the church in their day meant you couldn't be part of work guilds or participate in most large family gatherings, since all that involved the traditional Greek religion which the church frowned upon.

And even harder than this, it was becoming increasingly clear to people that Jesus really wasn't coming back anytime soon- even though that's what Scripture seemed to promise and what most people were believing.

Now, it's one thing to give up work connections and family picnics for a religion that makes sense, for a religion that's true. But for one that isn't even making that much sense anymore? I mean Jesus was supposed to have come back by now and he hadn't.

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But not to worry. Remember the confident ones? Seeing the problem and sensing an opportunity, these oh-so-confident preachers and teachers rise up to help out, to help the community make sense out of things. These confident men step in to offer a fantastic new theology that basically says that the faith doesn't have to be so hard. These preachers tell us faith isn't about the coming kingdom of God- no, it's just about our own personal faith. It's just about me and Jesus.

What they do is cherry pick passages out of Paul, texts about freedom and grace and they twist them into an easy message of cheap grace that doesn't ask anything of us, and allows us to have our faith over here in one corner of our lives, the spiritual corner, entirely disconnected with the rest of it. H.R. Niebuhr describes this kind of faith when he wrote: "A God without wrath bringing people without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross."

And these teachers seemed so certain. "Don't you worry," they tell the church of Second Peter. "We have it all figured out. Just trust us, and every little thing is going to be A-OK."

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Well, realizing his community is starting to fall for this message, the writer of Second Peter himself rises up saying it's just the opposite. He says it's just the opposite. He tells us faith isn't easy- it's hard. And it's supposed to be.

This is what the author of Second Peter is talking about when he brings up Paul here at the end of the letter. I have to admit I love this piece. This is one of the snarkiest moments in the Bible. He says, "Our beloved brother Paul wrote to you, according to the wisdom given to him." (This is koine Greek for, "bless his heart.") And then, with a little bit of frustration, Second Peter writes: "So he wrote with the wisdom he had (i.e. not that much) and there are some things in Paul's letters that hard to understand." Second Peter is saying there's stuff in Paul, there's stuff in the Bible that's just hard to understand- it's obscure. There's stuff about being a follower of Jesus that isn't easy. And you know what? This is how it is! Those confident teachers, Second Peter tells us they're confidence men, they try to tell us we can figure everything out and make it easier to be a person of faith and live in the world. And they do it by twisting Paul's words to make faith seem easier than it really is.

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And the truth? The truth is I think we're a lot like Second Peter's community and we're more like the lemon juice bandit than we'd like to admit. Maybe not so much as individuals- but as a people, as a nation. We are so impressed with what we've done and where we've been and what we think we know, it's like we have entirely forgotten just how much we don't know. In my lifetime I have watched our nation lose any sense of humility. I believe we've become so impressed with ourselves, with our technology, and with confident men and women that don't even realize how much we don't know. Today, on this 4th of July, we celebrate the founding of our country- this amazing, noble experiment, this country unlike any other on the face of the planet for all time, this shining city on a hill. But on this morning we aren't shining all that brightly, are we? No, our shining city is covered in muck and ooze, and it is our own doing. This very morning oil continues to spew in the gulf. This very morning we continue to experience the effects of the near collapse of our economy. And both of these crises stem from our own willingness to let the confident ones pat us on the head and tell us everything ok, when, of course, it never was.

Take the spill. After the spill occurred in the gulf, we decided to look into the emergency plans. It might have been a good idea to do that a little earlier, but better late than never, right? And what we now know is that the plans included how to deal with the many thousands of walruses that would likely be affected. Yes, Walruses. Walruses in the Gulf of Mexico. See, BP simply cobbled together a hodge podge of emergency plans from around the world to use in the gulf, none of which addressed a well going that deep. But we the people never even noticed. We've become so trusting of confident voices that we just go along with anything, as long as it's said with conviction.

And the financial collapse is the same. At the heart of our financial collapse were

thousands of home mortgages that were given to people who didn't have to show proof of income or assets, the so called NINA loans- no income no assets. And while most of you wouldn't give your money away to someone who couldn't assure you they'd pay it back, the real craziness was that the smartest, most confident people in the room, the raters like Standard and Poor's and Moody's, the raters told us these loans will be as good as any other. They conferred AAA status to these liar's loans, basically saying they are a sure bet. Well anyone with common sense NOW can see how wrong this is, but at the time we were so willing to believe these well dressed, good looking men and women, with these incredible degrees, who told us it was all really too complicated for us to understand. And so we did- none of us really knowing, or wanting to know, how much we didn't know.

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And now? Well everyone's very angry. Everyone is looking for someone to blame. And there is plenty to be mad at out there, but to me it's like we're all sitting around going, "But we used the juice! They said it would work!" I mean we can do this. We can be angry. We can find someone to blame for all of this if we want to- we can find one person or one company to pin it all on if we want to. We can believe it's all BP's fault, or all Obama's fault, or all the Republican's fault. We can do that. But I tell you, if we want to be faithful, and on this 4th of July I'm going to go out on a limb and say if we want to be patriotic in the best sense of that word, if we want to act like Americans- we won't.

If we want to be faithful, faithful not only to the Gospel, but also faithful to the men and women who gave birth to this amazing country- we will not waste time just being angry and dishing the dirt about who's to blame. Because we don't have time for that. We don't. I believe we as a people stand at a critical juncture. And what we will do if we want to steward a faith and country worth passing on to our grandchildren is we will take more responsibility for asking more questions and for the decisions we make. If something doesn't make sense to us, we won't let confident seeming people intimidate us- we will lift our voice and say, "You know, I'm not sure I get that- please you help me understand?" When we get our financial statements, we will actually open them and read them. And if we see a number that doesn't make sense- we will call. And we will admit that while BP may have been at fault, and I think they surely were, we will own that without us, without us relying so heavily on fossil fuels, there wouldn't be the need for 5,000 foot wells in the first place!

And yeah, it's not easy to think about how to change- but we follow one who at the cost of his own life proclaimed there is a better way, that there is always a better way, and who called the rest of us to take up our crosses, not our sofa cushions, to follow him. The life of faith, the life of a democracy- it's hard work. Why have we allowed ourselves to think it should be anything but?

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So yeah, life is hard, Second Peter says. Faith is hard. The scriptures are often dark and frustrating. And there's no twisting that out of them. But you know what? You know

what's good news? Second Peter says as hard as the challenges are before us- God's kingdom, this dream of a better way, this dream of a community where the lion's lay down with the lambs and the swords are beaten into plowshares and where none shall hurt or destroy on all God's holy mountain- this kingdom is still coming he says, and indeed it is already here breaking out in our midst in ways great and small. And he says while we are waiting may we strive to be at peace and to regard patience as a special kind of salvation.

On this 4th of July our nation, our city on a hill, has lost some of it's shine. It has. But it's not too late. This very day we can resolve to stop being angry and to push up our sleeves instead, and to recommit ourselves to following after Jesus who taught us to live and work for the day when God's kingdom comes, when God's will is done, and when the good, green earth beneath our feet lays before us all as Holy and humble and hallowed as heaven. Amen.