The Assurance of Faith

Nicholas Wolterstorff

Follow this and additional works at: https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy

Recommended Citation
DOI: 10.5840/faithphil19907438
Available at: https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol7/iss4/2

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers by an authorized editor of ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange.
THE ASSURANCE OF FAITH

Nicholas Wolterstorff

In this paper I discuss an issue concerning how faith ought to be held. Traditionally there have been those who contended that faith should be held with full certainty, with great firmness. John Calvin is an example. John Locke offered both epistemological and pragmatic considerations in favor of the view that faith should be held with distinctly less than maximal firmness. He proposed a Principle of Proportionality. I assess the tenability of Locke's proposal—while also suggesting that Calvin's position is different from what on first reading it would appear to be. It is not straightforwardly in conflict with Locke's position.

The Hebrew and Christian scriptures praise and enjoin what they (in English translations) call faith. That has led persons in the communities which take these scriptures as authoritative to call and struggle for faith. It has led theologians and philosophers to inquire into the nature of faith, and to offer suggestions as to how faith ought to be held, or can best be held.

Proposals as to the nature of faith, and suggestions as to the proper or best manner of holding it, have focused for the most part on four issues:

(1) Of what genus is faith a species? Is it a species of believing propositions on sayso? Is it a species of loyalty to some person or cause? Is it a species of trusting someone? Is it a species of believing what someone has promised? Is it a species of 'concern'? Is it a species of knowledge? if so, of what sort: agnition (recognition, acknowledgement), cognitio, or what?

(2) What is the intentional content of faith? If faith is believing propositions on sayso, whose sayso and which propositions? If faith is a species of loyalty, loyalty to whom and concerning what? And so forth.

(3) What, if anything, entitles a person to have faith? Why is faith not unwise, or irresponsible? Or is it one or the other of these?

(4) What is the proper way of holding faith? If faith is 'concern,' must it be 'ultimate' to be faith? Or should it be 'ultimate' even if it can be faith without being 'ultimate'? If faith is trust, ought it to be unquestioning and unwavering; or would it be better if it were? And so forth.

The question I wish to discuss falls under this fourth heading. There are those who have argued—I have John Locke and his associates especially in mind—that Christians ought to hold their faith with a firmness distinctly less than that, say, with which most of us assent to the proposition that 2x3=6.
Others have apparently denied this. Of these, some have apparently not just rejected Locke's normative suggestion but suggested an alternative; viz., that faith ought to be held with maximal firmness. It is this dispute which I wish to enter. I shall do so by bringing part of the philosophical tradition, in the person of John Locke, into dialogue with part of the theological tradition, in the person of John Calvin. I choose Locke because I know of no one who has more articulately presented the case for tempered firmness than he did; I choose Calvin because I know of no theologian who has discussed the issue with more theological acumen and human sensitivity.

I

The question, "What is the nature of (Christian) faith?" is, in my judgment, ill-formed. Both in the Scriptures and in the Christian tradition this single word "faith" is used to pick out a number of somewhat different phenomena. Each of those has its own 'nature.' There is no 'nature' of all together. If the discussion which follows is not to be "void for vagueness" we shall have to make a selection.

How shall we do that? I suggest that there is no better way of doing it than to be guided by that passage of Scripture which treats of faith at greatest length and most directly; viz., the well-known eleventh chapter of Hebrews. The writer opens the chapter with a crisp definition of faith and then proceeds to offer a series of brief narratives concerning heroes of faith, these narratives interspersed with amplifications on the opening definition. In the following two chapters he goes on to discuss the sorts of actions which faith calls forth, how one is to understand and endure the sufferings which faith so regularly causes, and the role of Jesus in faith. Allowing this classical discussion of faith to guide us in our choice will save us from idiosyncrasy; an additional advantage, as it turns out, is that the phenomenon which the writer of Hebrews calls faith is also that on which Calvin had his eye when he discussed faith.

Faith, says the writer, is the hypostasis of things hoped for, the elenchos of things not seen. In older translations, hypostasis and elenchos were translated, literally and straightforwardly, as "substance" and "evidence" respectively. In the newer RSV the translation runs, "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." It must be granted that "hypostasis" and "elenchos" are used eccentrically here; "assurance" and "conviction," however, seem less than satisfactory translations. But since nothing in my discussion will hang on what precisely is meant by "hypostasis" and "elenchos" here, and since I have no better suggestion of my own to make, I will adopt the RSV translation.

Having given his definition of "faith," to which he adds immediately that "by it the men [and women] of old received divine approval," the writer of Hebrews proceeds to cite examples. His first example falls under the heading
of conviction of things not seen but not under that of assurance of things hoped for: “By faith we understand that the world was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was made out of things which do not appear.” All the examples which follow, however, are examples of both. I think we must conclude that paradigmatic examples of faith are specimens not only of conviction of things not seen but of assurance of things hoped for.

Paradigmatic examples of faith are thus oriented not toward eternity but toward what happens. More specifically, they are oriented toward the future. More specifically yet, they are the conviction that something good will come about, not something bad. Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, not of things indifferent, let alone of things dreaded. The conviction of Californians that a serious earthquake will occur there sometime in the near future is not an example of faith. Faith has to do with the conviction that history has a certain pattern, a certain "grain," to it. It has to do with the conviction that what happens will overall prove good for one, and for others as well.

Is Christian (and Jewish) faith then simply optimism? Suppose that because of one’s supposed discovery of certain laws of nature and society one is optimistic about one’s own destiny and that of human beings in general. Would that be faith? Was Karl Marx a man of faith? No. As the writer proceeds, he begins to speak repeatedly of promises, of God’s promises. “By faith [Abraham] sojourned in the land of promise.” “By faith Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered him faithful who had promised.” “By faith, Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was ready to offer up his own son.” “These all died in faith, not having received what was promised....” “And all these, though well attested by their faith, did not receive what was promised....”

In faith, that which one hopes for is that which God promised. One hopes for it because one trusts God’s promises. Indeed, one couldn’t trust God’s promise without hoping for what is promised. We can say, I think, that as the writer of Hebrews understands it, Christian faith, in its paradigmatic form, is a species of believing or trusting someone’s promises, specifically, God’s promises. God’s promises to bless, to save.

“Aren’t you leaping to unwarranted conclusions?” someone might object. Granted that trusting God’s promises is central in the discussion of faith offered by the writer of Hebrews. How do you know that the writer would not, if the question were put to him, insist that faith is actually the more general phenomenon of trusting God? Trusting God’s promises—i.e., trusting God with respect to God’s promises—is indeed faith. But so too is trusting God with respect to God’s warnings. And trusting God with respect to what God reveals about himself. This last comes close to the traditional medieval concept of faith, according to which faith was understood as the appropriate
human counterpart to God's revelation: Faith is believing propositions on God's sayso. Perhaps both that, and what Hebrews focuses on, should be thought of as special types of the more general phenomenon of trusting God, this more general phenomenon being faith.

Perhaps so. All the main points to be made in what follows could be made in terms of that more general concept. I shall, however, follow the emphasis of the writer of Hebrews in the examples he gives of faith, if not indeed in his very understanding of faith, by taking faith to be trusting God's promises to bless and save. I do so in part to counteract what seems to me the persistent tendency in the Christian tradition to allow this phenomenon of trusting God's promises to recede from attention in discussions on faith, replaced by almost exclusive attention on trusting God with respect to what God says about himself. When that happens, the 'heroism' of the heroes of faith is no longer understood. Faith is a little child putting its hand in the hand of the parent, trusting the parent's promise.

Faith, understood as trusting God's promises to bless, presupposes believing that God has promised to bless and believing that God has (or will at the appropriate time have) the power and the will to carry out what God has promised. (Perhaps the reason the writer of Hebrews cites, as his first example of faith, belief in creation by the word of God, is that he wishes to remind the reader of God's power.) Thus for the secularist, and for the adherents of many religions other than Judaism and Christianity, faith is not even an option. Faith is not some universally human phenomenon. It cannot occur outside a certain framework of conviction. And for most human beings, that framework of conviction is absent. Naturally there can and will be other things in their lives which would, in English, be called "faith."

May it be that trusting God's promises to bless just is believing the propositions that God has promised to bless, and that God has (or will have) the power and will to implement the promise? I think not. One might believe that someone has promised to do something, and that the person has (or will have) the power and will to do what he promised, without in any way placing one's confidence in those promises. They might be, or be treated as, irrelevant to oneself. Trusting God's promises includes such placing of confidence. It is my impression that there is no set of propositions such that trusting God's promise is identical with believing those propositions. But we must move on; it would distract us from our main purpose to probe further into the nature of the general phenomenon of trusting someone's promise to do $X$, or even into the specific phenomenon of trusting God's promise to bring about shalom, well-being, flourishing.\footnote{1}

John Calvin, in his discussion of faith, insisted repeatedly that Christian faith is the conviction that God is good to one based on one's trust in God's promise to one. Now though one could in principle believe that God is good
to one without basing that conviction on one's acceptance of God's promises, one could scarcely trust God's promise to bring one some good without being convinced that God is good to one (in at least that respect). Accordingly, I think we will be entirely faithful to Calvin's thought if we describe him as holding that Christian faith (in its paradigmatic form) is trusting the promises of God toward one. Let me quote some of the relevant passages: "In understanding faith it is not merely a question of knowing that God exists, but also—and this especially—of knowing what is his will toward us" [Institutes III, ii, 6].² This we discern by listening to God's Word. Thus there "is a permanent relationship between faith and the Word" [ibid.]. Faith is "a knowledge of God's will toward us, perceived from his Word" [ibid.].

But since man's heart is not aroused to faith at every word of God, we must find out...what, strictly speaking, faith looks to in the Word. God's word to Adam was, 'You shall surely die.' God's word to Cain was, 'The blood of your brother cries out to me from the earth'. But these words are so far from being capable of establishing faith that they can of themselves do nothing but shake it.... Where our conscience sees only indignation and vengeance, how can it fail to tremble and to be afraid? or to shun the God whom it dreads? Yet faith ought to seek God, not to shun him.

It is plain, then, that we do not yet have a full definition of faith, inasmuch as merely to know something of God's will is not to be accounted faith. But what if we were to substitute his benevolence or his mercy in place of his will...? Thus, surely, we shall more closely approach the nature of faith; for it is after we have learned that our salvation rests with God that we are attracted to seek him....we need the promise of grace, which can testify to us that the Father is merciful...[III, ii, 7]. [So] we shall possess a right definition of faith if we call it a firm and certain knowledge of God's benevolence toward us, founded upon the truth of the freely given promise in Christ...[ibid.].

[We] make the freely given promise of God the foundation of faith because upon it faith properly rests. Faith is certain that God is true in all things whether he command or forbid, whether he promise or threaten; and it also obediently receives his commandments, observes his prohibitions, heeds his threats. Nevertheless, faith properly begins with the promise, rests in it, and ends in it. For in God faith seeks life...[III, ii, 29].

John Locke's account of faith was different, more traditional. Faith, says Locke, is believing what God has revealed, provided one believes it on the ground that it has been revealed by God and provided one believes that, in turn, on the credit of someone who claims that it was revealed to him (or someone else) by God. Faith is thus a unique species of believing something on sayso, of believing something on authority. In Locke's own words, "Faith is the assent to any proposition, not made out by the deductions of Reason; but upon the credit of the proposer, as coming from God in some extraordinary way of communication" [Essay IV, xviii, 2].³
Clearly what Locke singles out as faith is different from what Calvin and the writer of *Hebrews* single out. Accordingly, when Calvin and Locke speak about the manner in which a person should hold to faith, they are not speaking about the same thing and disagreeing, or apparently disagreeing, only about the proper manner of holding it. They are speaking about different things, different ways of being. Locke is speaking about believing propositions, on the credit of some proposer, as coming from God. Calvin is speaking about trusting God’s promises. Nonetheless there can be no doubt that what Locke says about the way we should hold to faith, as he understands faith, he would also say, *mutatis mutandis*, about holding to faith as Calvin understands it. Perhaps Locke would adapt his thesis to Calvin’s understanding of faith by arguing that trusting some promise of God to do something presupposes believing the proposition that God has promised that, and the proposition that God has the power and retains the will to carry it out; and then contending that one or both of those propositions ought to be believed with less than maximal confidence.

II

Faith, Calvin insists, is “a firm and certain knowledge of God’s benevolence toward us” [III, ii, 7], “a sure persuasion” of it [III, ii, 12], “a sure confidence in divine benevolence and salvation” [III, ii, 15]. Calvin explains his insistence thus: “We add the words ‘sure’ and ‘firm’ in order to express a more solid constancy of persuasion. For, as faith is not content with a doubtful and changeable opinion, so is it not content with an obscure and confused conception but requires full and fixed certainty, such as men are wont to have from things experienced and proved” [III, ii, 15]. In short, “we teach,” says Calvin, “that faith ought to be certain and assured...” [III, ii, 17].

One of Locke’s reasons for arguing that faith ought to be held with less than maximal firmness was consequentialist. He and his associates were convinced that only if believers did not hold their faith with maximal firmness was there any hope for toleration in a society characterized by religious diversity. But that was not Locke’s only reason; nor, it would appear, the one to which he himself gave most weight. Locke’s insistence that Christian believers should not hold their faith with maximal firmness was a straightforward consequence of his general epistemology—coupled, of course, with his understanding of faith. I wish, in some detail, to consider Locke’s epistemological argument; that done, to look briefly at his appeal to social consequences.

The focus of Locke’s concern in the latter part of Book IV of his *Essay* was on what might be called *regulative*, as distinguished from *analytic*, epistemology. That is to say, Locke was concerned to offer, in Descartes’ phrase,
“rules for the direction of the mind,” or in his own phrase, rules for “the conduct of the understanding.” Fundamental to Locke’s regulative epistemology was the distinction between belief and firmness of belief. Locke thought that one could hold the same belief with differing degrees of firmness—and different beliefs with the same degree of firmness.

What did Locke have in mind by firmness of belief? In recent years there has been much talk about levels of confidence in propositions—with betting situations often proposed as tests of such. Might Locke, by “firmness of belief,” have meant levels of confidence?

I think not. In any case, one would hope not; for the two notions are distinct in an important way. One cannot believe $p$ with a certain firmness without believing $p$; one can, though, have a certain level of confidence in $p$ without believing $p$. If one believes $p$ very firmly one will not, except through inadvertence, believe not-$p$ at all. One will, though, have a certain level of confidence in not-$p$—namely, a low level. So too, while fully aware of $p$, one might believe neither $p$ nor not-$p$; in that situation one will, though, have a certain level of confidence in both. Thus the array of a person’s degrees of firmness of belief will not satisfy the Pascalian calculus of probabilities. It’s not true, in general, that the firmness with which one believes $p$ varies inversely with the firmness with which one believes not-$p$. Whether the phenomenon of levels of confidence satisfies or should satisfy the Pascalian calculus remains, from what we have said, an open question.

It is worth remarking that having a certain level of confidence in $p$ is also not to be equated with being more or less certain of $p$, nor with finding $p$ more or less credible (belief-worthy). One might find both $p$ and not-$p$ low in credibility, as one might be very uncertain of both of them. Thus it’s not the case that as the credibility or certainty of $p$ goes up, that of not-$p$ goes down (and vice versa). The complementational principle for negation neither holds nor could hold for either of these phenomena.

The thought naturally comes to mind that to believe $p$ with such-and-such firmness is just to have such-and-such a level of confidence in $p$ and to believe $p$. There is no evidence that Locke himself actually thought of firmness of belief like this; nonetheless, I judge that he would have been happy to embrace this way of thinking if it had been put to him. I myself judge that the notion of firmness of belief is ambiguous as between this notion, of believing with a certain level of confidence, and another notion. Later, when we return to Calvin I shall call attention to that other notion and thus disambiguate the notion of firmness of belief. In the meanwhile, let us construe firmness along the line suggested.

Might it be a mistake, though, to think of believing a proposition as one thing, and having a level of confidence in a proposition as another thing? Might it be that believing $p$ just is having a level of confidence in $p$ above a
certain threshold? Does our customary trichotomy of believing/withholding/disbelieving simply pick out broad gamuts on the continuum of levels of confidence? Is talk about levels of confidence to be seen as the invitation to pick out narrower gamuts—or even, points—on the same continuum?

I rather doubt it; since it appears to me that one might have the same level of confidence in two different propositions while believing one and not believing the other. But I shall discuss the issues without presupposing an answer. It’s worth noting, however, that even if belief is identical with levels of confidence above a certain threshold, a regulative epistemology of degrees of confidence does not automatically constitute a regulative epistemology of belief. For the regulative epistemology of degrees of confidence might tell us only that degrees of confidence are to be matched with degrees of something else; and from that we might not be able to infer how much of this something else, in absolute terms, is necessary for one to be entitled to a degree of confidence which is a case of belief—even if we knew where the line demarcating belief from non-belief fell.

Parenthetically, did Locke hold the assimilationist thesis, that believing \( p \) consists of having a level of confidence in \( p \) above a certain threshold? I think not. At least he speaks as if he did not. For example, he sometimes speaks as if he believed that though belief just flows over us in certain situations, in those same situations we can, presumably by act of will, regulate the firmness of our belief—regulate the level of confidence in the proposition believed. He says, for example, that “the grounds of probability...as they are the foundations on which our assent is built; so are they also the measure whereby its several degrees are, or ought to be regulated” [IV, xvi, 1]. But if Locke held the assimilationist thesis, this would be a most surprising thing to say: that one’s ability to regulate the degree of confidence one has in some proposition has this limitation on it—one cannot regulate it across the belief threshold, only within the space which lies on either side of the threshold. In any case, the central regulative rule of Locke’s epistemology is a rule for the regulation of degrees of confidence and not a rule for the regulation of belief. The rule is this: One ought never, for any proposition, to adopt a level of confidence in it which is not proportioned to its probability on one’s total evidence for it.

Four comments must be made about this principle of proportionality, two explanatory and two qualifying. First, there will, of course, be propositions toward which one adopts no level of confidence whatsoever; in particular, propositions of which one has never so much as thought. Of these, there may be some toward which one ought to adopt some level of confidence. But if so, the principle of proportionality has nothing to say about that.

Second, to understand Locke’s intent we must take note of an ambiguity in the notion of proportioning levels of confidence to probability on evidence.
One might mean by this that if the probability of \( p \) on one's total evidence is greater than the probability of \( q \) on one's total evidence, then one's level of confidence in \( p \) is to be greater than one's level of confidence in \( q \). Such a principle would not tell one how much confidence to place in either \( p \) or \( q \). Of course, if the probability of \( o \) on total evidence is even higher than is that of \( p \), then, if the principle is to be satisfied, one's level of confidence in \( p \) must not be maximal; similarly, if some proposition has even less going for it than \( q \) does, then, if the principle is to be satisfied, one's level of confidence in \( q \) must not be minimal. But I see no apriori reason for thinking that, whatever be one's level of confidence in \( p \), it might not have been slightly higher or slightly lower while yet the totality of one's levels of confidence satisfy the principle. The case will turn on whether there are no more discriminable degrees of probability on evidence than there are discriminable levels of confidence. The other way of understanding the notion of proportionality is this: One might assume that between levels of confidence and certain degrees of probability on evidence there is an inherent aptness (fittingness, rightness, propriety); and one might hold that one's task is to see to it that one's level of confidence in some proposition fits its probability on total evidence.

I know of no passage in which Locke distinguishes these interpretations and chooses between them. Nonetheless a good deal of what he says suggests quite clearly that it is the latter interpretation that he has in mind. Accordingly, that is how I shall interpret the principle. (Either way, the principle is for the regulating of degrees of confidence and not for the regulating of degrees of belief. It is totally silent on when it is permitted for one to believe \( p \); alternatively, it is totally silent on when the 'fit' degree of confidence is above the belief threshold.)

And now for the qualifications. Locke was not of the view that we do hold, nor of the view that we ought to hold, all our beliefs on evidence—i.e., on the basis of other beliefs of ours. Some of our believings are immediate, non-inferential. And to some of those we are entitled. But if I am entitled to believe some proposition immediately, I am not obligated to proportion the firmness of my belief to its probability on any evidence whatsoever. Thus the principle is to be interpreted as having this prefatory qualification: With the exception of those propositions which one is entitled to believe immediately...

Secondly, suppose one's total evidence is very poor, but that the proposition in question is highly probable on that evidence. The principle as it stands instructs one to believe the proposition with great firmness. But that seems thoroughly implausible. Locke himself never discusses the matter. But it seems obvious that we have to attach this qualification: provided one's total evidence is satisfactory. One can think of one's total evidence for a proposi-
tion as being *satisfactory* in case it entitles one to adopt a certain level of confidence in it. Of course, even when one's evidence for \( p \) is extremely poor, one might still be entitled to adopt some definite level of confidence in \( p \)—namely, a level in the region of .5. But in such a case it's not the *evidence* which confers the entitlement.

What level of confidence ought one to place in propositions for which one does not have satisfactory evidence? Here various answers are possible. One might say that the notion of a right or wrong level of confidence does not apply in such cases. Or one might say, implausibly, that to all such propositions one ought to adopt the minimal level of confidence; or, almost as implausibly, a .5 level of confidence. The most plausible answer would seem to be that one is entitled to whatever level of confidence one happens to have in the proposition.

Whatever one's answer, it would be plausible to suppose that in some cases there is another and prior obligation—namely, the obligation to *acquire* satisfactory evidence. Locke himself was clearly of the view, however, that by no means is there always such a prior obligation. Acquiring satisfactory evidence typically takes time and energy; and sometimes spending the time and energy would require one to neglect other, more weighty, obligations. It may be added that responsibly assessing the probability of a proposition on satisfactory evidence may also take time and energy which one ought to devote to carrying out more weighty obligations. Thus the Principle of Proportionality should be seen as specifying a *prima facie*, not an *ultima facie*, obligation.

The qualification just made obviously constitutes an escape hatch for the religious believer: If one's total evidence for one's faith is not satisfactory, then the Principle of Proportionality does not apply; or if it is satisfactory, but responsible weighing of probability on that evidence would take one away from more weighty obligations, then the application of the Principle to the case is superseded. Locke was of the view, however, that religious convictions are so important that no obligations could be so weighty as to prohibit one from taking the time, at least on "the sabbath," to acquire satisfactory evidence and to responsibly weigh probability on that evidence. It is far from obvious that this is true. Thus there may be a good many religious beliefs of a good many people for which the principle's application is superseded or to which it does not apply—even when its inapplicability does not represent a violation of prior responsibility to acquire satisfactory evidence. But I shall here not press the point.

To show that the Principle of Proportionality holds for faith, Locke must also show that no one is entitled to hold faith immediately. To simplify my exposition of this part of Locke's argument, let me now neglect the complications introduced by the fact that epistemic obligations do not always su-
persede all other obligations. Locke was of the view that one is entitled to accept some proposition immediately only if the acceptance accompanies, or is evoked by, one's 'seeing' the proposition to be true or remembering that one has done so. He was further of the view that 'seeing' or remembering 'seeing' some propositions to be true constitutes knowledge. Knowledge is not a species of belief. Locke himself explains belief as taking some proposition to be true without 'seeing' or remembering 'seeing' it to be true. But suppose we regiment our terminology a bit (more) and define “acceptance” as taking some proposition to be true whether or not one ‘sees’ or remembers ‘seeing’ it to be true. Then believing, as Locke understands it, is a species of acceptance; and Locke was of the view that if we ‘see’ or remember ‘seeing’ some proposition to be true, we will also accept it. (The ‘seeing’ or remembering ‘seeing’ are not to be identified with the accepting.) Locke assumed that the firmness of acceptance which accompanies ‘seeing’ or remembering ‘seeing’ cannot be, or need not be, regulated. At least he never speaks about the need to regulate it. And he assumed that the level of confidence is always so high that one is certain of the proposition. Furthermore, though he held that we place a higher degree of confidence in some of the things of which we are certain than in others, he held that the maximal degree of confidence one can place in a proposition is that which we do place in those necessary truths which are self-evident for us and in those contingent propositions which are incorrigible reports of our own states of mind—and in the proposition that we ourselves exist.

Recall, then, that something is an item of faith, on Locke's view, if one believes it on the ground that God has revealed it. Locke held that the hypothetical proposition, if God has revealed \( p \) then \( p \) is true, can be 'seen' to be true. He also held, though, that for no proposition \( p \) can one just 'see' that God has revealed \( p \). And he held that in general (unless more weighty non-epistemic considerations intrude) the only way to secure entitlement to believing some proposition and adopting some definite degree of confidence in it, apart from 'seeing' or remembering 'seeing' it to be true, is to believe it on satisfactory evidence. Further, his classical foundationalism led him to hold that a necessary condition of evidence being satisfactory is that it consist of propositions that one 'sees' or remembers having 'seen' to be true. The evidence in the case before us will have to be evidence concerning the credit of the proposer. But that evidence will never entail that God has revealed \( p \). The proposition that God has revealed \( p \) will always have a probability of less than 1.0 on satisfactory evidence. And from this Locke concluded that \( p \) itself will have a probability of less than 1.0 on total evidence.

Locke is mistaken about central points in this argument. I take one of Thomas Reid's signal contributions to western philosophy to have been his calling to our attention that we are all entitled to a multiplicity of immediate
beliefs which we do not ‘see’ or remember having ‘seen’ to be true: perceptual beliefs, believing what people tell us, etc. And I take the discussion of recent years concerning “Reformed epistemology” to have shown that persons are also sometimes entitled to immediate beliefs about God which they do not ‘see’ to be true. Perhaps, then, some of us are sometimes entitled to believe immediately that God has revealed so-and-so. In short, it is vastly more difficult to know when and where Locke’s Principle of Proportionality applies than he ever thought it was.

Fundamental though such issues are, however, I want on this occasion to set them off to the side and, without presupposing any particular position on what may be believed immediately and when and by whom, address Locke’s central claim, that unless one is entitled to believe $p$ immediately, one ought to proportion one’s level of confidence in $p$ to the probability of $p$ on one’s total evidence, provided that evidence is satisfactory. We believe propositions with more or less firmness, i.e., with higher or lower levels of confidence. Locke was persuaded that this feature of our mental life ought to be regulated. How? By reference, he said, to the probability of the proposition in question on one’s total relevant evidence, provided that is satisfactory. One’s level of confidence ought to fit the probability.

Is this rule of governance correct? We can begin by asking, Why did Locke think it was correct? Locke’s defense occurs in the following passage, a passage in which he blends together a defense of the thesis that levels of confidence ought to be governed, with a defense of his proposed rule for governance, namely, his Principle of Proportionality:

There are very few lovers of truth for truths sake.... How a man may know whether he be so in earnest is worth inquiry: and I think there is this one unerring mark of it, viz., the not entertaining any proposition with greater assurance than the proofs it is built upon will warrant. Whoever goes beyond this measure of assent, 'tis plain receives not truth in the love of it; loves not truth for truths sake, but for some other bye end. For the evidence that any proposition is true (except such as are self-evident), lying only in the proofs a man has of it, whatsoever degrees of assent he affords it beyond the degrees of that evidence, 'tis plain all that surplusage of assurance is owing to some other affection, and not to the love of truth: It being as impossible, that the love of truth should carry my assent above the evidence, that there is to me, that it is true, as that the love of truth should make me assent to any proposition, for the sake of that evidence, which it has not, that it is true: which is in effect to love it as a truth, because it is possible or probable that it may not be true [IV, xix, 1].

I fail to see any cogency in this argument. Locke seems to take it as obvious that love of truth will lead one to try to bring it about that one’s level of confidence in a proposition fits the strength of the evidence for it. Accordingly, he remarks that any divergence from such fit must be due to a love of something other than truth. But what is it that Locke is here taking love of
truth to be? He doesn’t say. The only attractive way I know of for thinking of love of truth, and aversion to falsehood, is along the following lines: If one loves truth and is averse to falsehood with equal intensity, and has no other loves and aversions which inhibit or distort that love and aversion, then, for any proposition which comes within one’s ken, one will do what one can, given one’s other obligations, to bring it about that one believes it if and only if it is true. If, per adventure, one should succeed in that endeavor, then one’s love of truth and aversion to falsehood would have been requited. But notice that it would have been requited no matter how much or how little confidence one places in what one believes. Thus, understanding love of truth along these lines gives no support at all to Locke’s principle.

But if one believes some proposition with a level of confidence higher than what fits its probability on one’s evidence, wouldn’t that have the consequence that one would tend to disregard whatever negative evidence might be forthcoming in the future? And that would certainly impair satisfying one’s love of truth, would it not? Why would it be thought that that is true? Probably Bertrand Russell at one time believed very firmly that there is a set of all sets. But that didn’t impede him from treating the paradoxes he discovered as strong evidence against the proposition.

Let us then turn our attention in the opposite direction: Is there anything to be said against the Principle of Proportionality? Notice, in the first place, that though a given proposition may be equally probable on two different bodies of satisfactory evidence, one of those bodies of evidence may be considerably better than the other. What should be thought of as the determinant of better here? Surely one candidate is reliability: One body of evidence for a proposition is better than another body of evidence for that proposition in case it is a more reliable indicator of its truth or falsehood. When reliability is thought of as determining the quality of evidence, then satisfactory evidence, as we explained it, can be thought of as that sort of evidence which is minimally reliable for conferring epistemic entitlement. But whatever be settled on as the determinant of quality, surely if levels of confidence are to be determined by evidence at all, they should be determined by quality of evidence as well as probability on evidence. If two bodies of evidence are both entirely in favor of All S is P—nothing negative turns up in either—but the one is more reliable than the other, then surely the more reliable entitles the person to a higher level of confidence. Or, to take one of Hume’s examples, if two bodies of evidence both point to the conclusion that, on average, 19 out of every 20 ships which sail from this harbor return, but the one body of evidence is considerably more ample than the other, then surely it entitles one to a higher level of confidence in the proposition that, on average, 19 out of every 20 ships which sail from this harbor return. Suppose then that we introduce the notion of the strength of evidence for a
proposition, and think of it as determined by some sort of function from the quality of the evidence and the probability of the proposition on the evidence. Then if levels of confidence ought to be so regulated as to fit gradations of some feature of evidence, it is much more plausible to suppose the feature is strength of evidence than either probability on evidence or quality of evidence by itself.

But even with this significant modification, the principle remains thoroughly implausible. For notice that levels of confidence are to be regulated by an entirely objective feature of evidence. We are to regulate our level of confidence in \( p \) by reference to what is in fact the strength of one's total evidence for \( p \). But now suppose that though the strength of evidence for \( p \) is high, I believe, after as careful a reflection as you wish to demand, that it is weak. I believe that its quality is low, perhaps because I believe it is unrepresentative, the negative evidence which there is not yet having turned up; or I believe that the proposition's probability on this evidence is rather low. Alternatively, suppose that I don't have any beliefs on one or the other of these matters; I feel totally incapable of appraising the quality of the evidence or I am baffled by how probable the proposition is on this evidence.

The principle entails that in such situations I am entitled to place a high level of confidence in the proposition. But surely that is mistaken. If there is obligation in the region here at all, I should give to \( p \) a middling level of confidence, probably withholding belief. The same holds, mutatis mutandis, if the evidence is weak but I believe, on careful and responsible reflection, that it is strong.

The point is that the principle treats our beliefs about the strength of evidence for some proposition as having nothing to do with our proper level of confidence in the proposition. That is no more true here than it is in general. The obligations of medical practitioners are to be determined in the light of what they believe and should believe about the causes and cures of diseases, not in the light simply of the objective causes and cures. When in the course of constructing regulative epistemology one offers a rule for the regulation of some aspect of our beliefs, that rule will have to give appropriate standing to our beliefs about the criterial phenomena and not simply to the criterial phenomena themselves.

However, a subjectivist counterpart to the objectivist rule we have been considering suggests itself at once: One ought never, for any proposition to adopt a level of confidence in it which is not proportioned to what on responsible reflection one believes to be the strength of one's total evidence for it. When the limitations on the scope of application which were attached to the objectivist principle are attached to this subjectivist variant, does it then specify one of our epistemic obligations?

Assume that quality of evidence is to be determined by reliability. And
suppose that upon careful reflection one believes that one’s total evidence for some proposition is highly reliable and that the proposition is highly probable on that evidence. The principle instructs one then to place a high level of confidence in the proposition. But there is something strange about this injunction applied to this situation. Could one do otherwise? Could one, believing that the evidence is highly reliable and believing that the proposition is highly probable on the evidence, nonetheless adopt a low level of confidence in that proposition? If one did in fact adopt a low level of confidence in it, would that not indicate that one did not really believe that the proposition was highly probable on the evidence?

I have made no attempt, in the course of my discussion here, to analyze the phenomenon of levels of confidence. In keeping with that inhibition, I shall offer no suggestion as to what accounts for the connection here. In general, of course, adopting a certain level of confidence in a proposition is not identical with believing that the strength of one’s total evidence for it is of that level—since, for one thing, one might adopt a high level of confidence in a proposition for which one has no evidence at all. So the connection is not identity. Any analysis of the phenomenon of levels of confidence should set as one of its goals to explain and illuminate what the connection is.

But if the subjectivized version, specified above, of Locke’s Principle of Proportionality is unavoidably satisfied, then of course it doesn’t specify an obligation. The truth in the region is at best a descriptive law of some sort. Correspondingly, if there is indeed error involved when someone places a high level of confidence in some item of faith held on evidence, the error, pace Locke, is not to be located in the person’s failure properly to regulate his or her firmness of belief but rather in the person’s having mistaken beliefs about the strength of his or her evidence. The error will lie in the person having gotten his or her beliefs about the evidence wrong, not in having failed to get the right match between firmness of belief and strength (or believed strength) of evidence.

III

But if Locke’s position has turned to dust in our hands, does not Calvin’s claim also become at the very least deeply problematic, that Christians are obligated to trust the promises of God with that high level of confidence that they are accustomed “to have from things experienced and proved”? If that were what Calvin held, Yes indeed. But that is not what Calvin held. Admittedly he used words which, by themselves and out of context, suggest that to us. But he did not hold that. Indeed, so far as I can tell, Calvin did not propound nor intend to propound any rule whatsoever concerning the level of confidence that Christians ought to place in the promises of God. He held that a high level of confidence is desirable, something to be wished and hoped
for; since, for one thing, such a confidence “renders the conscience calm and peaceful before God’s judgment. Without it the conscience must be harried by disturbing alarm, and almost torn to pieces; unless perhaps, forgetting God and self, it for the moment sleeps” [III, ii, 16]. But though firm confidence is desirable for the sake of peace of mind, Calvin did not hold that it is obligatory.

Having just said that “he alone is truly a believer who [is] convinced by a firm conviction that God is a kindly and well-disposed Father toward him…” [ibid.], Calvin proceeds to say the following:

Still, someone will say: “Believers experience something far different: In recognizing the grace of God toward themselves they are not only tried by disquiet, which often comes upon them, but they are repeatedly shaken by gravest terrors. For so violent are the temptations that trouble their minds as not to seem quite compatible with that certainty of faith.” Accordingly, we shall have to solve this difficulty if we wish the above-stated doctrine to stand. Surely, while we teach that faith ought to be certain and assured, we cannot imagine any certainty that is not tinged with doubt, or any assurance that is not assailed by some anxiety. On the other hand, we say that believers are in perpetual conflict with their own unbelief. Far, indeed, are we from putting their conscience in any peaceful repose, undisturbed by any tumult at all. [III, ii, 17]

How does Calvin solve, or try to solve, “this difficulty”? In part by arguing that the Christian self, here on earth, is a divided self:

In order to understand this, it is necessary to return to that division of flesh and spirit which we have mentioned elsewhere. It most clearly reveals itself at this point. Therefore the godly heart feels in itself a division because it is partly imbued with sweetness from its recognition of the divine goodness, partly grieves in bitterness from an awareness of its calamity; partly rests upon the promise of the gospel, partly trembles at the evidence of its own iniquity; partly rejoices at the expectation of life, partly shudders at death. This variation arises from imperfection of faith, since in the course of the present life it never goes so well with us that we are wholly cured of the disease of unbelief and entirely filled and possessed by faith. Hence arise those conflicts; when unbelief, which reposes in the remains of the flesh, rises up to attack the faith that has been inwardly conceived [III, ii, 18].

How can this be, someone asks. How “can fear and faith dwell in the same mind?” In the same way, says Calvin, that “sluggishness and fear so dwell” [III, ii, 23]. The phenomenon of the divided self is familiar to all.

It will have been noted that Calvin spoke about imperfect faith. Imperfect faith is faith which does not fill the whole self, faith which does not squeeze out doubt and anxiety and fear and “the disease of unbelief.” What Calvin does not say is that imperfect faith is faith of less than maximal firmness. After all, the difficulty he wanted to solve was how faith can be subject to doubt while yet being certain.
Is Calvin’s solution, or apparent solution, to the difficulty at all plausible; or is he engaged in verbal subterfuge? Can one be highly confident of something and yet have some doubts about it—some negative considerations to which one concedes at least some weight? Similarly, can one, as Calvin claims, be anxious about what the future holds and yet be sluggish—that is, not do what promises to avert that which one fears?

I am not persuaded that such states of mind are not possible. But rather than exploring the matter, I wish to suggest that we still do not have Calvin’s thought fully in hand. Earlier I suggested that the notion of firmness of belief is ambiguous. By saying of someone that she believes something firmly one may mean that she believes it with a high level of confidence. But may one not also mean that she believes it tenaciously, steadfastly, perseveringly? Perhaps to believe it thus is to believe it and to be reluctant to give it up, to resist giving it up. It seems to me that these two phenomena are indeed distinct—that of believing something with a high level of confidence, and that of believing something tenaciously. One might tenaciously believe something in which one does not have a very high level of confidence; and one might be not at all tenacious in believing something in which one does have a high level of confidence.

I do not contend that Calvin himself explicitly made this distinction; in that regard, he was like most other writers on matters epistemological. I suggest rather that he operated with the distinction. It is striking how often the language he uses is the language of tenacity rather than that of levels of confidence. I think that the most plausible account of what he was driving at is that Christians are obligated to hold the faith tenaciously, with steadfastness, with perseverance. Holding it with high confidence is indeed desirable for the peace of mind which that brings. But doubts assail us; we can do nothing about that. What we can do is be tenacious in our holding of the faith. Here is what Calvin says in one place:

> the godly mind, however strange the ways in which it is vexed and troubled, finally surmounts all difficulties, and never allows itself to be deprived of assurance of divine mercy. Rather, all the contentions that try and weary it result in the certainty of this assurance. A proof of this is that while the saints seem to be very greatly pressed by God’s vengeance, yet they lay their complaints before him; and when it seems that they will not at all be heard, they nonetheless call upon him. What point would there be in crying out to him if they hoped for no solace from him? Indeed, it would never enter their minds to call upon him if they did not believe that he had prepared help for them. Thus the disciples whom Christ rebuked for the smallness of their faith complained that they were perishing, and yet were imploring his help [III, ii, 21].

Clearly it is the tenacity of faith of which Calvin is here speaking. In fact, he himself speaks of believers as called to persevere in their struggle against unbelief [III, ii, 17], and as called to steadfastness [III, ii, 22].
What can and should we do so as to hang on to our faith in God's goodness amidst the doubts that assail us—to endure, to persevere, to remain steadfast? It is striking that Calvin does not say that we should put the doubts out of mind, ignore them. His language suggests that he thinks the doubts cannot be stifled. What he says instead is that the believer should remind herself of the promises of God, turning to the Word of God where the promises are proclaimed. In addition to the phenomena of believing with varying levels of confidence and believing with varying degrees of tenacity, there is the phenomenon of believing with more or less intensity; i.e., keeping some believed proposition more or less clearly in mind, closer to the center, focussed on more or less intensely. To endure in one's trust in the goodness of God, it helps to keep God's promises in the foreground of one's consciousness, says Calvin:

To bear these attacks faith arms and fortifies itself with the Word of the Lord. And when any sort of temptation assails us—suggesting that God is our enemy because he is unfavorable toward us—faith, on the other hand, replies that while he afflicts us he is also merciful because his chastisement arises out of love rather than wrath. When one is struck by the thought that God is Avenger of iniquities, faith sets over against this the fact that his pardon is ready for all iniquities whenever the sinner betakes himself to the Lord's mercy. Thus the godly mind, however strange the ways in which it is vexed and troubled, finally surmounts all difficulties, and never allows itself to be deprived of assurance of divine mercy [III, ii, 21].

IV

The book of Job is the great biblical book on the topic of the endurance of faith. The recitation by the writer of Hebrews of the sufferings endured by the heroes of faith—they "suffered mocking and scourging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, ill-treated...wandering over deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth."—this recitation invites from the believer the question: But what do I myself do if, in the face of suffering, my trust in the promises of God threatens to slip away? It is to this question that the book of Job can be read as giving (part of) an answer. (Hebrews 12 also gives part of an answer.) The question to which Calvin addressed himself in the passages I have cited was closely related, yet different: What do I do when my life is painful and I begin to wonder whether God is truly well-disposed toward me? Remind yourself of the promises of God. Yes, but what do I do if, when having the promises fully in mind, I find trust in them slipping away from me because of the darkness of my existence?

Introspect, said Job's three friends, Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar; uncover...
Faith and Philosophy

your sins, and repent. What is happening to you is to be interpreted as God’s punishment.

I refuse to accept that, said Job. Nothing I have done calls for this suffering. Though God slay me, yet will I defend my ways to his face [Job 13:15].

It was Elihu who suggested the answer which Job embraced. Though possibly the evidence we have in hand appears, on balance, to be against the trust-worthiness of God’s promises, we have so limited a glimpse of human destiny as a whole that our total evidence concerning the trustworthiness of God's promise is not even minimally satisfactory. One’s present life may look dark indeed. But that is not satisfactory evidence against God’s having the will and power to carry out his promise to save one. And further, as to power: Remember who God is. God is the one who made all this!

Job endured in the faith—with what level of confidence, we are not told. By doing so, he “pleased God” [Hebrews 11:5].

Of course we in the modern world wonder whether there is any God who has promised anything. To have doubts about that is to have doubts as to whether faith, as Job, Hebrews, and Calvin understood it, is even an option. To such doubts, something different must be said.

V

To tell someone that they ought to persevere in the faith, come what may—is that not to encourage the evil of intolerance in societies where there are others who do not share the faith? We come at last to Locke's pragmatic argument for the thesis that Christians ought to hold their faith with distinctly less than maximal firmness.

In the light of our discussion, let us distinguish, as Locke did not, between the claim that holding the faith with a high degree of confidence encourages intolerance, when there are others about who disagree with one; and the claim that attempting to persevere in the faith encourages intolerance. And let us distinguish between social and personal intolerance, understanding social intolerance to consist of the view that others ought to enjoy full civil rights only if they accept one's own faith, and personal intolerance to consist of being unwilling to listen attentively to, and take seriously, objections posed by others (or indeed oneself) to one’s faith.

There would seem to be no particular connection between social intolerance and either holding the faith confidently or perseveringly. There are, after all, plenty of Christian believers who are confidently and perseveringly convinced of the importance of equal civil rights in a religiously diverse society. Social tolerance or intolerance has to do with the content of one’s beliefs, not one’s mode of holding them.

There would also seem to be no particular connection between personal intolerance and holding the faith confidently. One can hold mathematical or
logical propositions with great confidence and yet be quite willing to listen to those who contend that certain sets of such yield paradoxes. Is there any reason to think it is different for religious beliefs?

We are left, then, with the claim that a resolution to persevere in one's faith encourages—or perhaps just is—personal intolerance. Is it not a condition of authentic dialogue that on the issues discussed both parties have an "open mind"? Is it not the case that to be "a true believer" is perforce not to take seriously what is said in objection to one's beliefs? There can be no doubt whatsoever that the resolution to persevere in one's trust or beliefs does often yield personal intolerance. Often a fundamental part of a person's strategy for persevering is refusing to attend to objections.

The question to consider, though, is whether this is necessarily so. Is the resolution to persevere in the faith inherently incompatible with personal tolerance, or is it rather certain strategies for persevering which are incompatible? Quite clearly it is the latter. There are ways of carrying out one's resolve to persevere in one's beliefs and trusts which are fully compatible with taking objections seriously. Some, indeed, require taking objections seriously. There are philosophers of all stripes who are examples of this—though there are also philosophers of all stripes who are examples of not taking objections seriously. Actually, Calvin gives the impression of believing that believers have no option but to listen to objections, since they do not just come from without but arise spontaneously in the heart of the believer.

One thing the believer might do is that which Calvin and the writer(s) of *Job* recommended: listen to the objections but keep the whole picture in mind by reminding oneself of God's promises and of God's power, and of the fact that we have but a glimpse of the full pattern of God's dealings with humanity—to which I would add, reminding oneself of the signs of God's goodness.

Secondly, the persevering believer, rather than merely counterbalancing objections with considerations drawn from the full picture, or contending that we do not yet have anything near the full picture, might try to answer the objections. Instead of accepting them at face-value, as providing negative evidence, and then looking around for counterbalancing positive evidence, the believer might seek to show that the objections don't come to much, that they don't in fact provide much of any negative evidence to be put in the balance. The believer might either seek to defeat the objections by showing that their conclusions are mistaken, or seek to undercut the objections by showing that the arguments offered do not yield the conclusion.

There is yet a third thing which believers can do and have done by way of taking objections seriously while yet resolved to persevere: They can take the objections as a stimulus to deeper reflection on the content of the faith. Sometimes when believers have done this they have come to the conclusion that the faith as received is compatible with what is true in the objection. At
other times they have responded by revising the content of the faith as re­ceived, so that thus revised it is compatible with what is true in the objection.

“OK. So there are various ways of taking objections seriously while yet resolving to persevere. But isn’t there something wrong with the very reso­lution? Or strictly, with the motive underlying the resolution? When all is said and done was there not some truth in Locke’s suggestion that believing with a firmness not proportioned to the strength of the evidence must be due to some affection other than love of truth? Let it be conceded that Locke’s way of putting his insight was not on target. Yet he was on to something: The resolution to persevere in the faith—or indeed in some philosophical system or anything else—has to be motivated by some affection other than love of truth. Yet when dealing with the question of whether to believe, only love of truth should enter the picture.”

Is the physicalist who is resolved to persevere in his physicalism motivated by something other than love of truth? Is the Christian believer who is re­solved to hand on to the conviction that God has spoken to her motivated by something other than love of truth? Not necessarily, I would say. But often, Yes. Is that, though, necessarily wrong?

A whole new topic of inquiry opens up before us. On this occasion we shall have to be content with glimpsing the vista. We have no time to enter it.⁶

Yale University

NOTES

1. To my knowledge, the finest theological articulation in the contemporary world of this understanding of faith is that by Gerhard Ebeling in The Nature of Faith (London: Wm. Collins & Co. Ltd., 1961).

2. All quotations from John Calvin’s Institutes of the Christian Religion will be from the translation by Ford Lewis Battles (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publ. Co., 1970).

3. All quotations from John Locke’s An Essay concerning the Human Understanding will be from the text in the edition by Peter H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975). Here and there, however, I have changed spelling and capitalization.

4. Suppose the principle had been couched in terms of firmness of belief instead of levels of confidence, and suppose it had been formulated affirmatively rather than nega­tively, so that it read thus: For any proposition which comes within one’s ken, one ought to believe it with a firmness proportioned to its probability on one’s total evidence for it. (The qualifications attached to the principle formulated in the text should be understood as attached to this variant as well.) Suppose, then, that the probability of some proposition $p$ on one’s total evidence is .9; the principle instructs one then to believe $p$ very firmly. Suppose one does that. By the complementational principle for negation (principle of additivity) in the Pascalian calculus, the probability of not-$p$ is, in the situation envisaged,
1. And so, according to this revised principle of proportionality, one ought to believe \( \neg p \) very weakly. But of course one will not succeed in doing that; or if through some gross absent-mindedness one did, one shouldn't. One won't or shouldn't believe \( \neg p \) weakly; one won't or shouldn't believe it at all. Thus a principle of proportionality formulated affirmatively and in terms of degrees of firmness of belief (or of degrees of certainty, or of degrees of credibility) is patently unacceptable. I'm not sure that Locke realized this. But in the text above I have, whenever there was a choice, adopted a charitable interpretation of what Locke had in mind and formulated his principle in terms of levels of confidence. (George Mavrodes points out the difficulties with the principle formulated above in his paper, to the best of my knowledge unpublished, "On Proportioning One's Belief to the Evidence.")

5. Cf. later in the same section: "Faith, then, as Paul teaches, serves as our shield. When held up against weapons it so receives their force that it either completely turns them aside or at least weakens their thrust, so that they cannot penetrate to our vitals. When, therefore, faith is shaken it is like a strong soldier forced by the violent blow of a spear to move his foot and to give ground a little. When faith itself is wounded it is as if the soldier's shield were broken at some point from the thrust of the spear, but not in such a manner as to be pierced. For the godly mind will always rise up so as to say with David, 'If I walk in the midst of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evils, for thou art with me.' Surely it is terrifying to walk in the darkness of death; and believers, whatever their strength may be, cannot but be frightened by it. But since the thought prevails that they have God beside them, caring for their safety, fear at once yields to assurance. However great are the devices, as Augustine says, that the devil throws up against us, while he holds no lodgment in the heart, where faith dwells, he is cast out. Thus, if we may judge from the outcome, believers not only emerge safely from every battle, so that, having received fresh strength, they are shortly after ready to descend again into the arena; but besides, what John says in his canonical letter is also fulfilled: 'This is the victory that overcomes the world, your faith.'"

6. I wish to thank my colleagues at Calvin College for their critique of an early draft of this paper. I have also been much benefitted in thinking through the issues here by reading an as-yet unpublished manuscript by Richard Foley titled *Working without a Net.*