

# Faith as Virtue in Social Work Practice: A Reformed Perspective

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*This article is concerned with how Christian faith might impact social work practice. In particular, it explores the potential resource of faith as a theological virtue, with a special emphasis on perspectives from the reformed tradition. The article explores both definitions of faith and the nature of faith as understood within a virtue perspective. Finally, it presents implications for social work practice in several areas, including global practice and dimensions of burnout. Ultimately, the paper concludes that for many Christians faith understood in these ways serves as both comfort and calling.*

**T**HIS ARTICLE IS CONCERNED WITH CHRISTIAN FAITH. IN PARTICULAR, it explores the potential resource of faith as a theological virtue, with a special emphasis on reformed perspectives, my own faith tradition. Faith is one of the three “theological virtues,” a term used to differentiate them from other pre-Christian Aristotelian virtues, and most often identified with the thirteenth chapter of Apostle Paul’s first letter to the church in Corinth. Thomas Aquinas labeled faith “first among the virtues” (Aquinas, 1947).

In many Christian traditions, including my own reformed tradition, faith, along with hope and love, is understood as a free gift from God. While other virtues can be developed through careful practice, the theological virtues flow directly out of God’s grace. Indeed the status of faith as a virtue is predicated on the existence of God, for if God does not exist, faith is not a virtue (Chappell, 1996).

My interest in faith as a virtue stems from my own practice experience in the field of child welfare. I worked for more than ten years with a small non-denominational summer camp and year-round ministry that worked to promote racial reconciliation with children ages 8-17. It was immensely challenging work, but also tremendously rewarding. Some of the most challenging situations involved sending kids home from summer camp

as a result of inappropriate behavior. As a staff, we worked to provide an environment of support where any child could succeed, but at times we simply did not have the capacity to continue. This was true particularly when children came to us from institutional settings where restraints were used regularly (we operated as a hands-off facility) or from homes with a history of abuse. The most heartbreaking of these situations involved knowingly returning a child to an abusive home. As a staff, we took our responsibility as mandated reporters seriously, and dutifully filed many reports every summer, but as most social workers know, reports are by no means a guarantee that CPS will intervene immediately, and only very rarely will such reports result in removal.

As camp director, I was the last stop on the behavior management chain, and would often be called upon to intervene in crisis situations to de-escalate children who were losing self-control. In the majority of cases, when the child would finally stop the torrent of profanity and slowly let go of the bravado of “not giving a \*\*\*\* what you do to me” there would be an point of realization, followed quickly by crushing remorse and regret. At these times the tears would flow and children would beg not to be sent home to their parents, and relate stories of beatings and abuse, having moved suddenly from anger and detachment to fear. While we would report these, and often there were already open files on the individuals in question, at the end of the day we were not a residential or detention facility. We were a summer camp and children who had physically harmed other children had to go. The camp was an hour and a half drive from the city where the majority of campers came from, and that drive was never longer than when there was a terrified child sitting in the back seat.

I relate this story because for me it illustrates the potential that faith might have for social work. There is a tremendous amount of evil in the world, and social workers are often confronted with it on a daily basis. This evil makes some practitioners enraged, and rightly so. It causes others to become calloused and emotionally remote, and it causes still others to leave the profession entirely. In Christian thinking this is referred to as the problem of evil, why an all-powerful and loving God would allow suffering in the world. There have been many attempts at answering the problem of evil, called theodicies, throughout Christian tradition. Such answers are beyond the scope of this article, and significantly beyond the depth of my own theological imagination. Instead, this article will examine how faith as a virtue might serve to impel social workers into the global arena, and mitigate the burnout many social workers experience both there and in their practice at home.

Faith and social work are often presented as oil and water, thoroughly incompatible. While there are no doubt tensions, some of which will be explored, characterizing faith and social work in this way is not only ultimately unhelpful, it also ignores the reality that for tens of thousands of

social workers in North America, faith provided the motivation to become a social worker and daily sustains them in their work. If academic social work literature is to truly dialogue with the profession at the grassroots level, it needs to speak to faith.

Before proceeding I would like to acknowledge that questions of the integration of faith and social work practice are serious ones, and rightfully approached with a degree of caution. When Christians use their position to promote their faith to clients, they are abusing their authority. David Sherwood (2002) rightly points out that there are similarities between evangelism and sexual exploitation of clients. Christians do need to exercise caution in how their faith integrates with and impacts their practice. This article discusses faith as a virtue and its implications *for* practice, rather than a direct element *of* practice.

### **Faith as a Virtue**

In his treatise on ethics, Aristotle spoke of a virtue as “that which is intermediate, not the excess nor the defect” (2005, p. 64). A virtue is the ideal balance between too much of an attribute or too little. Bravery is the balance point between folly and cowardice. This presents some difficulties when thinking of faith as a virtue, since traditionally Christian thinkers have been loathe to say that one should attempt to limit the quantity of one’s faith in any way. While danger lurks at both extremes for many virtues, faith has been seen as qualitatively different. Faith shares this distinction with hope and love, the other theological virtues that Thomas Aquinas sets apart from the natural virtues (Penelhum, 1977).

In addition to not suffering from excess, the theological virtues have traditionally been seen as special gifts of God’s grace. Aquinas (1947) states, “Therefore faith, as regards the assent which is the chief act of faith, is from God moving man inwardly by grace.” John Calvin (1989), in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, offers this definition of faith:

We shall now have a full definition of faith if we say that it is a firm and sure knowledge of the divine favor toward us, founded on the truth of a free promise in Christ, and revealed to our minds, and sealed on our hearts, by the Holy Spirit. (p. 392)

One of the guiding creeds and confessions of my own denomination is the Heidelberg Catechism, which was written in 1563. The document is written in question and answer format, and the 21<sup>st</sup> question and answer address: “What is true faith?” The answer follows:

True faith is not only a knowledge and conviction that everything God reveals in his Word is true; it is also a deep-

rooted assurance, created in me by the Holy Spirit that, out of sheer grace earned for us by Christ, not only others, but I too, have had my sins forgiven, have been made forever right with God, and have been granted salvation.

Note that in this tradition, faith has little, in fact nothing, to do with the person in whom it is kindled. Faith is revealed to us. Calvin (1989) states that, "God would remain far off, concealed from us, were we not irradiated by the brightness of Christ" (p. 387). In a more straightforward manner, Paul Tillich (2001) writes "Neither arguments for belief nor the will to believe can create faith" (p. 38). The gift of faith is then sealed by the work of the Holy Spirit. In the words of an anonymously written hymn from the 1890s,

I sought the Lord, and afterward I knew  
he moved my soul to seek him, seeking me;  
it was not I that found, O Savior true;  
no, I was found of thee.

It is perhaps helpful to point out that from this perspective the gift of faith is best understood in hindsight. It is in reflecting back on one's journey that the Christian perceives the grace of God in the gift of faith. Richard Mouw (2010a), relates a story his uncle Tunis, a Baptist preacher, told him on this point:

'The way I see it,' he said to me, 'we have to paint above the door of salvation the words 'Whosoever will may come.' I hope, though, once a repentant sinner walks through that door, he will look up and see that the Lord has written on the other side, 'You have not chosen me, but I have chosen you.' (p. 47).

From this perspective, Christians believe that we were found, not that we found God, and it amazes us that in the midst of our brokenness God offers us grace. As Calvin (1989) puts it, "in all men faith is always mingled with incredulity" (p. 389).

Contrary to some perceptions, faith is not only cognitive but also active. Popular conceptions of faith centered on belief or assent may relegate faith to the mind. In contrast, in the Jewish and early Christian traditions, faith has always been intimately and necessarily linked with action. The author of the book of James writes in Chapter 2:14-18 (NIV, 1984),

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. But someone will say, "You

have faith; I have deeds.” Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by my deeds.

While the reformer Martin Luther may have famously declared the book of James “an epistle of straw” in his 1522 preface to the New Testament, he dropped the comment from later editions and indeed himself stated that, “Faith, is a living, restless thing. It cannot be inoperative. We are not saved by works; but if there be no works, there must be something amiss with faith” (as cited in Bainton, 2009, p. 341). In distinctions between faith, works, and salvation, the primary difference is a question of motivation. In some Christian traditions salvation is accomplished by good works, by living a good life. Against such a view, the Heidelberg Catechism states,

we do good because Christ by his Spirit is also renewing us to be like himself, so that in all our living we may show that we are thankful to God for all he has done for us, and so that he may be praised through us. And we do good so that we may be assured of our faith by its fruits (Q&A 86).

Thus, in the Reformed perspective, salvation is through grace by faith, and good works are an expression of gratitude for God’s grace.

The distinction between faith that is active and that which is purely cognitive is one of the keys to the discussion of faith as a virtue. Thomas Aquinas (1947) draws a distinction between “living faith” and what he calls “lifeless faith,” stating that while living faith is a virtue, “On the other hand, lifeless faith is not a virtue, because, though the act of lifeless faith is duly perfect on the part of the intellect, it has not its due perfection as regards the will.”

From this perspective, faith is more than either the cognitive set of ideas or an emotive personal experience. Faith is different than belief, especially as meanings of the word “believe” have changed to diverge from the original Latin “credo” which connoted offering one’s heart in complete devotion (W. C. Smith, 1998). Indeed, one of Calvin’s personal mottos, and the motto of the institution where I teach, is “My heart I offer to you, Lord, promptly and sincerely.” The sort of belief produced by faith is an all encompassing and necessarily active one. In the book of James, Chapter 2:19, the author provocatively states that, “You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder.” It is clear that faith is more than belief. Against describing faith as a set of cognitive beliefs or assents, Calvin (1989) states,

no mere opinion or persuasion is adequate. And the greater care and diligence is necessary in discussing the true nature of faith, from the pernicious delusions which many, in the present day, labour under with regard to it. Great numbers, on hearing the term, think that nothing more is meant than a certain common assent to the Gospel History (p. 387).

While the word “knowledge” certainly sounds like it could be a cognitive belief, Calvin chooses the word over alternatives partly in rebuttal to doctrine at the time which suggested that one could have “implicit” faith merely by attending Church and going through the motions. Calvin (1989) sharply critiqued such a position, asking, “Is it faith to understand nothing, and merely submit your convictions implicitly to the Church? Faith consists not in ignorance, but in knowledge—knowledge not of God merely, but of the divine will” (p. 388). This knowledge is not only more than belief it is also beyond our cognitive abilities. Calvin (1989) states that, “By knowledge we do not mean comprehension, such as that which we have of things falling under human sense” rather “what our mind embraces by faith is every way infinite, that this kind of knowledge far surpasses all understanding” (p. 398). Before examining what such a conception of faith might mean for social workers, those seeking to take an interest in the welfare of others, it is necessary to examine faith as a concept in the social work literature.

### **Faith in the Social Work Literature**

Currently, in the vast majority of social work literature, the word faith serves mostly as a synonym for religion, spirituality, or both (Canda & Furman, 2009). In this regard, the literature frequently references “people of faith,” “faith-based agencies” or “faith communities.” While not seeking to minimize or delegitimize such definitions, they represent a departure from traditional and theological definitions of faith as a virtue. I seek to return some of the richness of these previous definitions to the current conversation, particularly as a resource for practitioners. As mentioned, there are difficulties in attempting to do so, and the idea of mitigating potential negatives is common in discussions on the integration of faith and social work. However, in this article I seek to push the dialogue a little further forward. Social workers understand that is impossible to separate the faith from the rest of the self, that we cannot exist without beliefs, that persons are intimately connected to their environments, histories, and relationships. We understand identity to be intersectional and in many ways indivisible. All this is to say that for the Christian in social work, faith is an inseparable element even if they would not profess it as such. It is not a question of whether faith will impact practice, but how.

Therefore, while acknowledging that faith brings with it the possibility of exploitation, it should be possible, and prudent, to examine the faith of the practitioner through a strengths perspective. To extend Sherwood’s metaphor, in most practice contexts evangelizing clients is as ethically suspect as engaging in sexual relationships with them, but we cannot ask practitioners to remove their sexuality at the door, to become professionally androgynous. Likewise, the practitioner’s faith is at their core, “bubbling up

from the very center” (Brandsen & Hugen, 2007). It would seem appropriate to cautiously explore how that faith might move from a risk that must be managed to an asset that may be utilized in the pursuit of competent and professional practice.

The faith of practitioners is often discussed as a potential liability, and as I previously mentioned, rightly so. When faith is discussed as an asset, it is almost universally in reference to client populations and not practitioners. When faith is discussed as an asset it also seems more likely to reference religions other than Christianity or faith among vulnerable populations. For example, there are several recent articles on cultural competency and the faith of Muslim clients (Bushfield & Fitzpatrick, 2010; Graham, Bradshaw, & Trew, 2010) as well as articles on the faith of survivors of colorectal cancer (Clay, Talley, & Young, 2010), those suffering from depression (Loewenthal, Cinnirella, Evdoka, & Murphy, 2001), faith among minority populations such as African Americans and Chinese Americans (Antle & Collins, 2009; Brade, 2008; Lee & Chan, 2009; MacMaster, S. A., Jones, J. L., Rasch, R. F. R., Crawford, S. L., Thompson, S., & Sanders, E. C. I., 2007) and how faith might be useful for the development of social capital (R. K. Brown & Brown, 2003; Candland, 2000).

There is an additional large and rapidly growing body of literature on faith-based programs (Hugen & Venema, 2009; Kaseman & Austin, 2005; Popescu, Sugawara, Hernandez, & Sewan, 2010; Stasi, 2009; Tangenberg, 2005; Wineburg, Coleman, Boddie, & Cnaan, 2008; Wubbenhorst & Voll, 2003). In recent years this body of literature has focused particularly on outcomes and evidenced based practice (Ferguson, Wu, Spruijt, & Dyreness, 2007; Smith & Teasley, 2009; Steinberg, 2010). Given the public funding of such private and religious programs, this research is much needed, but does little to shed light on the topic of this paper, the personal faith of the practitioner.

The literature on the potential benefits of personal faith for the practitioner is quite limited. There is a developed and growing social work literature on mindfulness, and some has been written about the benefits of meditation, but little about the potential benefits of Christian faith. One article examined potential benefits for Christians regarding coping mechanisms to reduce burnout and stress, themes this article will also examine (Collins, 2005, p. 263). Collins sees in the command to “Love your neighbor as yourself” the command to love the self appropriately, and create boundaries to avoid burning out (2005, p. 265). Collins (2005) recommends several practices, including Sabbath keeping, Holy silence, expressing gratitude, expressing spiritual essence, developing a sense of compassion, and embracing a principle of stewardship. Another specifically Christian article explored the benefits of spirituality based on the teachings of St. Ignatius Loyola and Jesuit teachings, particularly prayer and reflection and contemplation, for social work students (Staral, 2002).

### Implications for Practice

Whether in relationship to clients, programs, or practitioners, in the definitions of faith explored above, faith is almost universally equated with a cognitive set of beliefs or an emotional and experiential relationship to a divine being. In contrast to these more popular definitions, this paper has focused on faith as a theological virtue, a paradigm shift that comes with its own implications for social work practice. There are many to explore, but this article will examine two as illustrations: global practice and burnout.

#### Global Practice

Social work is a global profession. International social work is on the rise, including all of the collaborations across continents that accompany it. While debates over terms will continue for years (Healy, 2008; Hugman, Moosa-Mitha, & Moyo, 2010; Midgley, 2001), it is clear that social work has spread outward from its roots in Europe and North America, especially in the last thirty years. Alongside the expansion of the profession, there is an increased awareness of the global nature of the social and environmental issues facing vulnerable populations around the world (Healy, 2008). Problems like HIV/AIDS, climate change, poverty, child trafficking and refugees are transnational (Caragata & Sanchez, 2002, p. 223; Midgley, 1997). A social worker in Grand Rapids may have a client who fled fighting in southern Sudan into Ethiopia, crossed the border once more to the Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya, and was finally adopted by a family in West Michigan.

Faith as a virtue provides several possible resources for a global perspective on social work practice. From a broad perspective, faith provides resources for dialog between social workers globally. While faith and social work have had a somewhat contentious relationship in North America and Europe in recent decades, the language of faith is still readily embraced, and part of the every day functions of the profession, in the majority world. Far from eliminating faith from discourse, globalization has actually been associated with the spread of faith, particularly in Pentecostal and charismatic iterations, and especially among the poor (Robbins, 2004, p. 117). However, Pentecostal Christians have traditionally emphasized faith as the product of a voluntary choice, the opposite of the perspectives this paper has explored. In fact, the emphasis on a voluntary choice available to all has provided much of the drive behind the evangelistic efforts of Pentecostal denominations (Robbins, 2004). How might an understanding of faith as virtue compare in its ability to compel Christians into the global arena and shape their interactions with the world?

One possible answer is the way in which faith as a virtue is predicated on a sovereign God. The sort of living faith Aquinas refers to recognizes



the reality of Psalm 24's proclamation that "The earth is the LORD's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it." Faith is assured that God is sovereign over all of the creation, and that, as Abraham Kuyper declared, "There is not one square inch of the entire creation about which Jesus Christ does not cry out, 'This is mine! This belongs to me!'" (as cited in Mouw, 2010b, p. 168). Working across continents and between nations is way of prophetically declaring that such boundaries are human creations and witnessing to the truth we hold in faith that one day the prophecy of John will be realized:

After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice: "Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb" (Revelation 7:9-10).

Thus faith compels Christians to worldwide service, and to seek out and provide hospitality to the stranger at home.

Another way faith as a virtue shapes global action is that the gift of faith is accomplished through and accompanied by the Holy Spirit. As it is written in John 20: 21-22, after his resurrection, Jesus appears to the disciples and says "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit." My own denomination has a contemporary testimony that puts it this way:

The Spirit renews our hearts  
and moves us to faith...  
The Spirit gathers people  
from every tongue, tribe, and nation  
into the unity of the body of Christ.  
Anointed and sent by the Spirit,  
the church is thrust into the world,  
ambassadors of God's peace,  
announcing forgiveness and reconciliation,  
proclaiming the good news of grace. (Our World Belongs to God,  
2008)

The Spirit who animates our faith also compels us into the world as witnesses to the grace we have received.

After examining some positive potentialities, it is necessary to address one of the differences. An important contribution of a more traditional approach to faith as a virtue is to offer to the global community an alternative to some of the more extreme forms of Pentecostal or charismatic

Christianity, including the so-called “health and wealth” gospel and the more intense expressions of spiritual warfare that have been expressed in practices such as the “child witch” hunts in Nigeria, Ghana, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and other West African nations (Adinkrah, 2011; Federici, 2008). Both movements originated and continue in North America, but are most represented, and experiencing the majority of their growth, in the majority world (Robbins, 2004).

Contrary to the prosperity gospel, which emphasizes the material blessings God has in store for those who have faith, faith as a virtue emphasizes that the heart of faith is, as has been said, centered on what the Apostle Paul refers to in 1 Corinthians 1:18-21 as the “foolishness” of the cross. Faith as a virtue means accepting that “The ultimate scandal of the cross is the all too frequent failure of self-donation to bear positive fruit” (Volf, 1996, p. 26). Faith is a virtue when it is centered on God and is self-donating rather than self-centered and self-serving. Paul Tillich (2001) writes, “In true faith the ultimate concern is a concern about the truly ultimate; while in idolatrous faith preliminary, finite realities are elevated to the rank of ultimacy” (p. 12).

Faith as a virtue is not an all access pass to the favor of a divine being whose ultimate concern is our earthly success. In the prosperity gospel, faith secures success, the stronger one’s faith the greater one’s blessings. In contrast,

Faith does not promise us length of days, riches and honors (the Lord not having been pleased that any of these should be appointed us); but is contented with the assurance, that however poor we may be in regard to present comforts, God will never fail us. (Calvin, 1989, p. 407)

When Calvin speaks of God never failing us, he seems to be primarily referring to the belief that the God who in sovereign power sustains the universe will not *forsake* the beloved. “For faith includes not merely the knowledge that God is, but also, nay chiefly, a perception of his will toward us,” for “our safety is treasured up in him; and we are confirmed in this when he declares that he studies and takes an interest in our welfare (Calvin, 1989, p. 391). In this way, faith as a virtue sees “precisely in the scandal... a promise” (Volf, 1996, p. 27).

The world is broken. Social workers know this, and at times it can be a crushing knowledge, an overwhelming sense of our own insignificance against powers and principalities that are far more influential than we are. Reflecting on the genocide committed by his own nation, Jurgen Moltmann (1974) writes, “How is faith in God, how is being human, possible after Auschwitz? I don’t know” (p. 9). While his reply may seem dismissive, or even heretical, it can also be seen as expressing the sense of mystery that at

times accompanies faith. From the virtue perspective, faith is not the sum of a series of logical steps that lead one to God. Faith does not always read easily off of the creation alone. On a fundamental level, faith in a good and sovereign God, given the reality and extent of evil, does not make sense. St. John of the Cross (2007), speaking about the theological virtues, states that,

These three virtues render empty all the powers of the soul; faith makes the understanding empty and blind... Faith teaches us what the understanding cannot reach by the light of nature and of reason, being, as the Apostle saith 'the substance of things to be hoped for.' And though the understanding firmly and certainly assents to them, yet it cannot discover them; for if the understanding discovered them, there would be no room for faith. And though the understanding derives certainty from faith, yet it does not derive clearness, but rather obscurity (p. 83).

It is important for Christians in social work to acknowledge this, and to resist easy answers that may only alienate those with whom we work around the world. As Moltmann (1974) states, "Faith that originates from the God-situation at the cross does not answer the question of suffering with a religious explanation of 'why everything must be exactly as it is,' so that one simply submits to it" (p. 17). Faith is mysterious, and faith is a gift.

For Moltmann, faith is also centered on the cross, where, as Karl Barth (2004) puts it, God "condescends" to us in Jesus Christ to "take to Himself and away from us our guilt and sickness" (p. 142). At the cross, Christ suffers with and for humanity, and in this suffering opens the door for faith and hope. As Moltmann (1974) concludes, "A theology after Auschwitz would be impossible... were not God himself in Auschwitz, suffering with the martyred and the murdered. Every other answer would be blasphemy" (p. 10).

Still, in a world filled with genocide, wars, and rumors of war, where the top 10% of the world's population controls 71% of the world's wealth (Davies, Sandström, Shorrocks, & Wolff, 2009), and where 21,000 children under five died every day (UN, 2011), there is much for Christians to lament. As Moltmann (1974) states:

For us who are white, rich, and dominant, it is the cry of the starving, oppressed, and racially victimized masses... At this point, too, our optimism collapses. What will take its place? Cynicism and apathy? (p. 9)

What resources does the virtue of faith have to address the cynicism and apathy that understandably creep into our lives?

## **Burnout**

Social workers are in a field with a higher than average risk for burnout (Himle, Jayaratne, & Thyness, 1991; Kim & Stoner, 2008; M. Soderfeldt, Soderfeldt, & Warg, 1995, p. 638). The social work literature on burnout focuses a lot of attention on workers in child welfare, in particular (Anderson, 2000; Beck, 1987; Conrad & Kellar, 2006; Daley, 1979; Van & Rothenberg, 2009; Zosky, 2010). Most troubling for Christians, “The literature on burnout suggests those most vulnerable are young or inexperienced workers who are strongly nurturant individuals likely to over-identify with certain clients, and who approach their work with high ideals and strong commitment” (Anderson, 2000, p. 841). As Christians we strive for “high ideals and strong commitment,” we seek to love our neighbors as ourselves, and to always look for the image of God in every individual. Karvinen-Niinikoski (2009) states that practitioners must not get “caught in a self-made professional trap...of becoming exploited by their idealism but simultaneously feeling unable to act in the complexity of our era” (p. 346). By pursuing such ideals and seeking to live by such commitments are we exposing ourselves to an increased risk of burnout?

Although there are many definitions of burnout, three key elements are often identified: emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and diminished personal accomplishment (Kim & Stoner, 2008, p. 7). I will limit my considerations here to how an understanding of faith as a theological virtue might mitigate, or at least interact with, these three elements of burnout.

### ***Emotional Exhaustion***

Emotional exhaustion is not a common term in religious literature, but it seems to correlate well with despair, and despair is something that people of faith have wrestled with since Christ cried out on the cross “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” As Jurgen Moltmann (1974) has put it, at the “core of Christianity” is Jesus Christ, someone who “entered into the way of suffering and was killed as a blasphemer, as a threat to national security, and, on the cross, as one abandoned by God” (p. 7). One of the primary resources faith offers to emotional exhaustion is the knowledge that Christ understands emotional exhaustion, that Christ is, in the words of Isaiah 53:3 “a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief.” In this passage Christ also demonstrates one of the ways in which faith addresses despair, in that even in the midst of his suffering, the plea from the Psalm he is quoting is still addressed to “My God.” This is evidence of the firm and sure knowledge faith produces. As Calvin (1989) puts it,

Thus the pious mind, how much so ever it may be agitated and torn, at length rises superior to all difficulties,

and allows not its confidence in the divine mercy to be destroyed. Nay, rather, the disputes which exercise and disturb it tend to establish this confidence. A proof of this is, that the saints, when the hand of God lies heaviest upon them, still lodge their complaints with him, and continue to invoke him, when to all appearance he is least disposed to hear. (p. 402)

Perhaps the most famous example of such faith in the Bible is Job. Job's wife, far from offering social support in his time of emotional exhaustion, urges him to "Curse God and die!" but Job's faith is not shaken. Faith maintains the relationship with God even when we are angry with God and confused by the evil around us.

In Hebrews 11, the author provides an extensive list of individuals who lived by faith. At the beginning of the next chapter, the author gives the following advice for Christians seeking to combat emotional exhaustion:

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. (12:1-3)

The prescriptive element here is to "fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith," not necessarily to seek to avoid situations that might be emotionally exhausting. To fix our eyes on Jesus through practices of prayer and worship might be a form of what some have referred to as "proactive coping skills," defined as "efforts undertaken in advance of a potentially stressful event to prevent it or to modify its form before it occurs" (Aspinwall & Taylor, 1997, p. 417). One of the practices of faith is to continually remind oneself of the source and sustenance of that faith. As Calvin (1989) states, "faith has all its stability in Christ" (p. 388).

### ***Cynicism***

In the social work literature on coping and burnout, recommendations to combat cynicism involve developing high self-esteem and a sense of optimism (Aspinwall & Taylor, 1997). In this instance, faith would potentially provide very different answers. Faith is strongly related to humility, as will be discussed in the next section, and particularly in the Reformed expression is realistic, some would say pessimistic, about the capacities of

human beings to do good apart from God's grace. However, in response to cynicism, faith opens the door to the related virtue of hope.

For if faith is (as has been said) a firm persuasion of the truth of God—a persuasion that it can never be false, never deceive, never be in vain, those who have received this assurance must at the same time expect that God will perform his promises, which in their conviction are absolutely true; so that in one word hope is nothing more than the expectation of those things which faith previously believes to have been truly promised by God. (Calvin, 1989, p. 418)

In this way, "Faith believes that he is our Father; hope expects that he will always act the part of a [good] Father towards us" (p. 418). In my own experiences, as mentioned previously, cynicism was always at the door. The cynic in me saw little hope for the child in the backseat being driven home after failing out of yet another part of life. The cynic saw little but the cycle of violence, where perpetrators fashion victims in their own likeness (Volf, 1996). However, by faith I believe that God loves the world. I believe that God loves the children of the world, and loves them more and better than I ever possibly could, that Christ has died for them on the cross. As Moltmann (1974) observes, "there is no true theology of hope which is not first of all a theology of the cross" (p. 8).

Therefore, by faith, I believe that in some way I do not understand God holds the children I worked with in the palm of God's hands, and that gives me hope. Hope and faith are thus in a reciprocal relationship, "Faith is the foundation on which hope rests; hope nourishes and sustains faith" (p. 418). Hope gives the Christian the ability to, as in the words of Psalm 46, "Be still and know that I am God." This sort of a teleological perspective (i.e., focused on the ultimate end) provides resources for coping with cynicism that are not always available in other traditions.

For while hope silently waits for the Lord, it restrains faith from hastening on with too much precipitation, confirms it when it might waver in regard to the promises of God or begin to doubt of their truth, refreshes it when it might be fatigued, extends its view to the final goal, so as not to allow it to give up in the middle of the course, or at the very outset." (Calvin, 1989, p. 418).

### ***Diminished Personal Accomplishment***

The final aspect of burnout considered here is diminished personal

accomplishment. Here, a Reformed perspective on faith provides very different answers for the practitioner from the traditional secular literature. It is reported that before Calvin died, he uttered “All I have done is of no worth...I am a miserable creature” (as cited in George, 2009). Taken at face value, this is perhaps the ultimate statement of diminished personal accomplishment. Was Calvin burned out? Or was Calvin expressing the humility of faith? Karl Barth (2004) states,

Faith is not a self-chosen humility. It is not the humility of pessimism, skepticism, defeatism, misanthropy, a weariness with the world and oneself and life. These are possibilities which a man can choose for himself, and in fact often does choose. They cannot be substituted for the humility of faith.... Faith is the humility of obedience. (p. 619)

Calvin’s faith gave him a perspective that was far beyond himself. For Calvin, and for Reformed thinking broadly, the good that we are able to accomplish is only because of the grace of God. As Calvin (1989) states, “the proofs of our utter powerlessness must instantly beget despair of our own strength” (p. 264). Faith produces humility. There is a certain freedom in this perspective. It is not up to humanity to save the world, and in fact humanity is entirely incapable of doing so. This is not to say that we should retreat from doing good, or ignore the plight of others, it is to say that “when he bids us work out our salvation with fear and trembling, all he requires is, that we accustom ourselves to think very meanly of our own strength, and confide in the strength of the Lord” (Calvin, 1989, p. 404). In this view, social workers struggling with burnout as a result of a diminished sense of personal accomplishment embrace their finite nature, and subject themselves to the infinite God through faith. When social workers face feelings of diminished personal accomplishment, instead of seeking increased personal agency, they might work to meditatively reframe the situation, to be still and know.

The constant reminder of faith is that God reaches out to humanity though we do not and cannot deserve it, that as Romans 5:8 says, “while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.” Such knowledge produces the humility of faith, but it also grounds us in the assurance of God’s unconditional love. In the Reformed perspective our accomplishments accomplish little for us. As it says in Ephesians 2:8-9, “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— not by works, so that no one can boast.” What good works we do are manifestations of our gratitude for this unearned grace which faith reveals. As Calvin (1989) writes, “Faith, then, has no firm footing until it stands in the mercy of God” (p. 409).

### Limitations

As I mentioned, I am not a theologian, or a Biblical scholar. This article is written from a lay perspective within my own faith tradition, as an offering to the wider community of faith, and to those open to dialogue with communities of faith. The intention is to open a space for practitioners to explicitly explore the resources of their various traditions for the personal strengths that may support effective practice. Social work cannot continue to validate religion and spirituality, even in sectarian forms, within client populations while at the same time discouraging practitioners from exploring similar themes. Proselytizing is inappropriate in professional practice. That said, appropriate boundaries can be drawn between personal religious resources and professional practice.

There are potential limitations to a virtue perspective on faith. Some have taken the perspective that works cannot earn salvation and adopted a faith that the Apostle James would probably pronounce dead on arrival. In my own community, some have accused adherents of Reformed theology of being the “frozen chosen.” While I think such perspectives seriously misconstrue the theology, it is clear that any perspective that leads to inaction on the part of social workers would be inappropriate for the field. But for Christians in social work, Christian faith may have a quite different consequence: sustaining professional practice under the most difficult and discouraging conditions.

### Conclusion

Social work is a profession that emerged from faith communities, and that spiritual heritage includes a rich variety of theological concepts and virtues that could potentially benefit the profession today (Holland, 1989, p. 28). At the core of a Reformed understanding of the virtue of faith is a radical humility that explodes in gratitude and praise, rippling out into the global community, a community that God loves more than we can imagine. We have a firm and sure knowledge of that divine favor toward us, founded on the truth of a free promise in Christ, who in suffering on the cross has embraced humanity and given us a model for a living faith that donates itself to the other.

The first question and answer of the Heidelberg Catechism address what many in the Reformed perspective would consider one of the great gifts of faith as a virtue, faith that is both comfort and calling. The question asks, “What is your only comfort in life and in death?” The answer replies, “That I am not my own, but belong—body and soul, in life and in death—to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ.” This assurance “makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him.” ❖



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