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The Theological Possibility of Legitimate Distrust: Anthropological and Ethical Reflections on the Church's Credibility Crisis

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Abstract. The study examines the theological interplay between trust and distrust in the context of the Church's credibility crisis. The study proceeds from the premise that abuses of power in Christian communities, expectations of unconditional loyalty, and institutional distortions of trust call for a reconsideration of the notion of trust. The meaning of trust is analysed here in an anthropological and ethical approach, then, the notion of legitimate distrust is introduced through the insights of the Reformers and other Protestant theologians. The author argues that legitimate distrust does not mean a lack of faith, but it is a form of responsible judgement stemming from fidelity to the truth of Christ revealed in the Gospel. In other words, we can speak of legitimate distrust when appeals to trust becomes a tool of silencing criticism, of leaving power unchecked and of exploiting vulnerable people. The study comes to the conclusion that Christian trust and critical discernment are not mutually exclusive, but mutually dependent dimensions of a responsible Christian life.

Keywords: trust; legitimate distrust; church credibility; responsible judgement

The church's credibility crisis requires some rather complex theological and church leadership reflections. After the 2026 Hungarian parliamentary elections, voices urging self-reflection have become increasingly prominent within church discourse. These voices highlighted that, apart from evoking people's criticism, the debates

around church institutions, the tensions regarding participation in public life and the self-critical reflections voiced by church leaders themselves challenge the church's self-interpretation too. Thus, the theological examination of the relationship between trust and credibility is not only a theoretical question, but an urgent task both from the point of view of the church and of society.[1]

The church's confessional self-image and the ideal of the communion of saints are often cynically or provocatively invoked in public discourse, while Christians themselves must also repeatedly grapple with experiences of crisis concerning the church's mission. So, the question arises: how can the experience of the church's lack of credibility lead to the theological reconsideration of trust? When does obedience become a possible form of *cheap grace*, and how can Christians recognize the responsible role of distrust in their own relationships and church attachments?

Thus, this study interprets legitimate distrust as a form of responsible Christian judgement. It is based on the idea that Christ's commandment of love does not eliminate the need for critical judgement: although human beings live in a fragmented world, they cannot forego the risk and responsibility of love.

1. Trust as a fundamental feature of human existence

The purpose of the divine order of creation is to enable human beings to live freely with the gift of relational fullness. This fullness does not imply flawlessness or a state of completion in itself as an end in itself but refers to the rightly ordered unity of the relationships between God and man, man and man, and man and creation. People usually become aware that this unity is lost when they act against the will of God. As a result of the Fall, this rightly ordered unity is broken; people are alienated from God, from themselves, and from each other, and thus experience the fragility of human community.

People, as relational beings, carry in themselves both the desire for fullness and the experience of alienation. While longing for fulfilment in their relationships, they must grapple with the fact that their relationships with themselves, with others and with God are all shaped by brokenness.

The fact that human beings can be addressed and are capable of dialogue is a characteristic feature of their creaturely existence: they are beings who can be addressed and engaged in dialogue, and who are able to experience freedom and unconditional trust in their relationship with the Creator (Genesis 2–3).[2] Thus, the original trust depicted in the creation story can be understood not only as a lost quality, but as a free and risk-bearing openness to relationships that includes the possibility of loss.

The story of creation shows us that trust cannot remain just a psychological or moral issue, because it is one of the fundamental characteristics of human existence. In the Garden of Eden, full self-surrender still represents the original form of trust.

[1] Ehhez lásd pl. Dr. Fekete Károly megszólalását: https://szemlelek.net/fekete-karoly-tiszantuli-puspok-a-politika-melyen-bekerult-a-reformatus-egyhazba/

[2] Karl Barth: *Church Dogmatics*, T&T Clark, Edinburgh, 1960, III/2. §45.

In this order, the other person is not considered to be a threat or a rival, but to be a companion – a companion with whom living in community also means participating in God's order of creation. So being open to each other and trusting the safety of the relationship ultimately stems from trusting the goodness of God and his will as Creator.

Yet, the tragedy of the Fall also brings about the breakdown of this order of trust. In their state of alienation, people reinterpret themselves and their relationships based on blaming, thus, they fail to relate to God, to themselves and to fellow human beings according to the order of creation.

2. "Trust!" – trust as the normative basis of the responsible practice of faith

The exhortation voiced in the Gospel in the face of existential threat points out the fundamental human significance of trust. "*Take courage (Trust me); it is I. Do not be afraid.*" (Mark 6:50 ESV) – Jesus says. In these words peopleencounter both the uncertainty threatening their existence and the possibility of courage regardless of uncertainty. Thus, trust is not an emotional state only, but also the experience of freedom and self-surrender in Christ.Though, as a result of the Fall, complete trust has been broken, it still remains a possible form of longing for fullness of human existence. In their response, people connect with the Creator who calls them, so, instead of being a passive state, trust becomes a living and active relationship. The vulnerability of man stems from their own creaturely condition, yet, a form of trust that transcends them is only made possible in this situation. This move means that one is participating in the order of creation which is called "good" in Genesis at the moment of creation. Therefore, "good" is not only a value judgement, but refers to the fullness of the relationship between God and man. Whenever people turn to God, to themselves or to others with trust, they become part of that original order of relationships which characterised human existence before the alienation.

It is especially difficult to experience this in any structure in which trust becomes conditional and appears as a tool for legitimating the exercise of power. Since where questioning the leader or the structure is understood as the lack of trust, and where credibility and maturity are measured with loyalty, the anthropological interpretation of trust becomes distorted, and receives an institutional framework. In the Christian tradition, however, the critical approach to power is not unknown.

The experience of the Reformation also underlines that the authentic practice of faith necessarily involves the critique of distorted church structures. This critical approach originates in the realization that the ultimate object of faith cannot be any kind of finite reality, not even the church itself.[3] Thus, Christian trust is ultimately directed at the God who calls everyone personally, and not at any institution. Calvin understands the trust of faith in/as the unity of mind and heart, which comes to

[3] Paul Tillich: *Létbátorság*, Teológiai Irodalmi Egyesület, Budapest, 2000, 170.

life, according to Christ's promise regarding the work of the Spirit, thanks to the goodness of God towards human beings.[4]

Yet, the trust directed at God does not remain on a personal level of faith, but necessarily shapes connection to the Christian community.

So, the Christian living in community looks at Christ, who is the reality of freedom and self-surrender. Consequently, trust is freedom and responsibility at the same time. Though, being aware of the lost fullness, trusting anyone will always bear the mark of the fragmentary nature of our human existence – be it love, knowledge, or relationships, it cannot suggest that any relationship should be unconditionally accepted.

According to Bonhoeffer, Christian community is nothing other than a community in Christ and through Christ. Nothing more, nothing less. So, the responsible people who form the community must realize one by one that they need each other due to the will of Christ, it is only through Christ that they find one another, and that they are accepted and united as the children of God in Christ. Who lives in Christ lives by the Word. And the Word can only become reality in relation to others.[5]

Still, this theological realization cannot be exclusive to the ideal relationship with other Christians, as Christians must strive to follow Christ in a way that is also recognizable in the world. Consequently, trust is not only a question in solving relationship issues within the church, but an ethical task which involves the full relational reality of created man.

3. Legitimate distrust as a responsible Christian attitude

Legitimate distrust is a form of responsible ethical behaviour. It is a Christian attitude which, being aware of human brokenness, assesses every personal and institutional authority according to the truth of Christ revealed in the Gospel, while remaining open to the risk of love.

The recognition that one does not understand oneself based on some historical or institutional affiliations anymore, but from the point of view of the new life in Christ is at the heart of Chrisitan identity. Thus, conversion is not a moral change only, but a reformulation of one's self-interpretation, too. The biblical images of the old man and the new man express this change of identity. Christian thinking also takes into account the possibility of radical change from an eschatological point of view. It is not simply about the passage of time, but the possibility for one's understanding of oneself, one's relationships and the purpose of one's life may undergo fundamental changes.[6] So, Christians interpret their lives from the point of view of having gained new life in Christ again and again. And if one's life changes, one's goals must also

[4]Kálvin János: *Institutio. A keresztyén vallás rendszere*, Kálvin Kiadó, Budapest, 1995, III. 2.15.

[5]Dietrich Bonhoeffer: *Szentek közössége*, Harmat Kiadó, Budapest, 1997, 11.

[6]Joel Robbins: Continuity thinking and the Problem of Christian Culture: Belief, Time, and the Anthropology of Christianity, in: *Current Anthropology* 48 (2007/1), 5–38, 11. https://doi.org/10.1086/508690

change: it can mean nothing less than following Christ and serving the truth of the Gospel.

As Bonhoeffer warns, active life in Christ must always keep in mind the priority of the following of Christ and the truth of the Gospel. Thus, the characteristic of Christians at all times is that they act for the truth under the guidance of the love of the Spirit, so neither human sympathy, nor the expectation of obedience, and nor even desires can override the truth of Christ revealed in the Gospel.[7] Consequently, being faithful to the truth of Christ necessarily involves distrust in some cases. It is not provocative cynicism, but a responsible Christian behaviour stemming from sensibly acknowledging the fragmentariness of human existence. Thus, true knowledge of Christ is brought into question in case of any abuse of power, expectation of obedience without critical judgement, exploiting the goodwill of vulnerable people, and even in cases of unconditional self-surrender in personal relationships. Despite the experience of the fragmentariness of human existence. Christian hope and trust remain open to experiencing love and to taking risks.

4. Conclusion

In the middle of the credibility crisis of the church, it is necessary to see that trust does not mean that critical judgement should be altogether abandoned, but that it should be practiced with responsibility. One of the defining features of Christians called and saved in Christ is that they do not regard grace as cheap and do not subordinate it to any relations of power or dependence.

In practice, it also implies that Christians do not cover up harassment or abuse with reference to defending the good reputation of the church, do not turn a blind eye to injustice, and do not consider obedience synonymous with unconditional loyalty. Thus, legitimate distrust is not the rejection of trust, but a form of trust which examines all practice and authority according to the truth of Christ. This is why the ultimate determination of Christians does not stem from authorities or institutions, not even their own vulnerability, but from the truth stated in Christ. So, the ethical direction of faith in Christ becomes visible in freedom, in the practice of love and in faithfulness to the truth.

[7] Dietrich Bonhoeffer: *Szentek közössége*, 25.