



"Living by faith includes the call to something greater than cowardly self-preservation."

—J.R.R. Tolkien

10-May-13

Whom Do We Trust?

This past week, *Reader's Digest* released a nationwide, 1,000+-respondent poll managed by a marketing research firm called The Wagner Group. The poll's purpose was to find out which people and ideals have most earned the confidence of Americans, thus the name, "Reader's Digest Trust Poll." This spawned a list of "The Most Trusted People in America," which contained some surprising results. The magazine's press release about the list explains how the polling worked:

Reader's Digest compiled a list of more than 200 American opinion shapers, leaders and headline makers from 15 highly influential professions and presented it to more than 1,000 Americans, a representative sample of adults living in the United States, asking them to rank each name on how trustworthy they thought each individual was. Trustworthiness was determined by integrity and character, exceptional talent, drive to personal excellence, internal moral compass, message, honesty and leadership.

In other words, the list of individuals from which respondents had to choose were pre-selected by the marketing research firm, pre-biasing the results, and

the responses were, of course, entirely subjective and based on the public face of the shaper, leader, or headline-maker. That being the case, the individuals listed as "trusted" may not in fact be trustworthy at all but just appear to be so from what (little) the respondents know about them. In the end, then, the list itself is meaningless—more of a popularity poll—but it does give some insight into the American psyche.

Liz Vaccariello, *Reader's Digest* editor-in-chief and chief content officer, provided her assessment of the poll and list to ABC's "Good Morning America" co-anchor Robin Roberts, who happens to be the list's most trusted woman on television:

The poll results were fascinating, fun and shocking. We trust because it feels good, but putting our [faith](#) in the wrong place often carries a high price. While the list showed what Americans think about those they see regularly in the news, on television and in movies, our poll also revealed that we put our trust in do-gooders, that tweets do not always equal trust, and that we trust people we know more than anyone famous.

As she indicates, the poll behind the list reveals that most people trust their doctors (77%), "spiritual advisors" (71%), and their children's teachers (66%) more than any public figure, but the difference is slight. Sixty-five percent of Americans find actor Tom Hanks—the highest-scoring public figure—to be trustworthy, followed closely in spots two through four by actors Sandra Bullock (63%), Denzel Washington (62%), and Meryl Streep (61%). Five actors in all made the top-ten (these four plus actress Julia Roberts), and ten more actors slotted in lower on the list. Unbelievably, these scores made movie acting the most highly trusted profession in the survey! Now we know why actors feel so free to spout their frequently extreme views on the issues of the day: A good majority of Americans trust them and their opinions.

That is just the influence of the big screen. While so-called legendary silver-screen actors fill the top slots, those who appear on television may just have even more sway due to the sheer number of TV personalities on the list. Television anchors, journalists, and talk-show personalities—such as the aforementioned Robin Roberts, as well as Ellen DeGeneres, Diane Sawyer,

CGG Weekly: Whom Do We Trust? (10-May-13)

Brian Williams, Rachael Ray, Katie Couric, Barbara Walters, Whoopi Goldberg, Anderson Cooper, Oprah Winfrey, Christiane Amanpour, George Stephanopoulos, Scott Pelley, Kelly Ripa, Steve Harvey, Savannah Guthrie, Matt Lauer, and Shepard Smith—fill a disproportional number of spots.

This television dominance continues outside of the news category. Americans seem to [love](#) both TV doctors and TV judges, as the names of doctors Mehmet Oz, Sanjay Gupta, Travis Stork, Nancy Snyderman, Richard Besser, David Drew Pinsky (Dr. Drew), Phil McGraw (Dr. Phil), and Deepak Chopra and judges Judy Sheindlin and Joe Brown all rated highly. (In fairness, all nine Supreme Court justices also made the list, but most of them placed lower than the TV judges.)

Only one significant Christian minister finds a place on the list: Billy Graham at number 67. A Jewish rabbi, Arthur Schneier, who received the Presidential Citizens Medal, appears at number 48. Of conservative political types, only Condoleezza Rice (#68) and Steve Forbes (#97) made the list, but on the other end of the spectrum, Michelle Obama (#19), Madeleine Albright (#23), Jimmy Carter (#24), Colin Powell (#32), Hillary Clinton (#51), and Barack Obama (#65) did. A fair number of Nobel Prize winners, corporate executives, and sports figures round out the list.

These results suggest that Americans do not really know what trustworthiness is or how to identify it in a person's character. As the *Reader's Digest* editor noted, Americans "trust because it feels good" and "we put our trust in do-gooders." In other words, they place confidence in people who provide them emotional satisfaction and seem to have good intentions. Those whom they trust do not necessarily have to be honest, dependable, faithful, or responsible (all synonyms of "trustworthy"). In fact, Americans are willing to put their trust in people that they do not really know—except for what has been pre-packaged for them to see on their movie or television screens. In essence, they trust a manufactured image, a lie (consider [Habakkuk 2:18](#) in this light).

The Bible contains a great deal about trust, although it does not always use the word. The New Testament uses "trust" infrequently, but it employs a broader, more important term quite often: "faith." Trust is a major facet of faith—along with belief, submission, agreement, hope, and others—and in

this vein, *trust* means "to have faith in another because one is convinced of his reliability." Ultimately, we can trust [God](#) because He is the gold standard of reliability. [Zephaniah 3:5](#) says of God and His righteousness and justice, "He never fails." His love never fails.

People, though, are a different story altogether: They let each other down with regularity in small things and large. In [Micah 7:5](#), the prophet warns, "Do not trust in a friend; do not put your confidence in a companion; guard the doors of your mouth from her who lies in your bosom." If in these times of unbelief we should be wary of those closest to us (see [Mark 13:12](#)), how much more should we distrust the flickering image of someone on a screen?

Human beings are inherently untrustworthy due to being full of a grasping, self-centered nature that always seeks to put itself in the best light and in the best situation when the dust settles. We have a treacherous heart ([Jeremiah 17:9](#)), one that cannot be fully trusted. As the psalmist writes in [Psalm 118:8](#), "It is better to trust in the LORD than to put confidence in man." He is the only One truly worthy of it.

- Richard T. Ritenbaugh

From the Archives: Featured Sermon

[The Danger of Trusting in Oneself](#)

by Martin G. Collins

There is nothing new under the sun. Everything, including fashion, thought, and evil, endlessly recycle. America, as well as the rest of the world, has gone through a series of turnings, raveling, and unraveling. Suffering always follows sin; if we break physical or spiritual laws, these laws will automatically break us. When humanists set themselves up as the determiners of right and wrong, they commit egregious idolatry. People don't know how to use their minds properly because their carnal natures are hostile to God's laws. When people, apart from the knowledge of God, profess themselves as wise, they become abject fools. The horrible perennial conflict between the descendants of Isaac and the descendants of Ishmael is the result

of Abraham doing his own thing, trusting in himself. Narcissism and self-absorption, the chief characteristics of Satan and Cain, destroy the relationship with God. Knowledge and wisdom are not synonymous; knowledge of Scripture is not the same as applying or living Scripture. People who have been wise in their own eyes, including philosophers, politicians, educators, and religious leaders have miserably failed in their quest to make the world better, but have lead us into world wars, economic disasters, and perennial conflicts. There has never been humanism without attending or accompanying moral perversion. When people set themselves up as the ultimate authority, they inevitably descend into moral depravity, unable to extricate themselves from their abject foolishness.

From the Archives: Featured Article

[Wandering the Wilderness in Faith](#)

by John W. Ritenbaugh

The wandering of the children of Israel stands as an object lesson for God's people. Hebrews 3 testifies that a whole generation of Israelites died in the wilderness, failing to reach the Promised Land, because they lacked faith in God. John Ritenbaugh examines this vital component of Christian living, exhorting those whom God has called to choose to trust Him and avoid the Israelites' lamentable failure in the wilderness.

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