

# A critique of ralph waldo emerson's self- reliance

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Self-reliance, as put forth by Ralph Waldo Emerson, might seem like an ideal way of forming a utopia. However, Emerson's advice is not at all practical for a fallen world and is indeed dangerous to fallible man.

It is only when man is reliant on something much bigger than himself—namely, God as revealed to man through the Catholic Church—that he can be confident in his convictions and actions. Our modern world has great confidence in self-reliance; we live in a relativistic society where each man can decide his own truth. We are constantly encouraged by cheery bumper stickers, flowery T-shirts, and colorful artwork on coffee mugs to “be yourself,” “follow your heart,” “chase your dream,” “believe in yourself.” Now, this all sounds fine and dandy as long as “dreams” means the good and noble endeavors of men like George Washington or Albert Einstein or Martin Luther King Jr., as long as “follow your heart” means “follow your well-formed conscience.

” There is truth in Emerson's idea that the human heart has a certain intuitive instinct for truth, that we can, in using our reason, draw closer to knowledge of God, that God does call to us in everything we see and hear and do. But the world Emerson envisions is a perfect world, where man's intellect is unclouded and his heart is unflawed. He does not take into account man's inclination to sin, which Christians know to be the result of the Fall. In this fallen world—in the real world—it is an extremely dangerous thing to “follow one's heart”; for the sad fact is, that heart might be wrong. It might always be yearning at its core for goodness, truth, and beauty, but that does not guarantee it will find goodness, truth, and beauty. The intellect might mistake something dangerous for something good, and the heart, in

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accordance with its natural tendency, will leap after it: " Because not everything is good for everything, it is up to man's judgment to determine what things are good for him.

Human judgments are open to error, and therefore he may mistake the apparent good for the true good" (Fagothey 33). This results in great damage to the human soul and to society. Often those who " follow their hearts" use this principle as an excuse for satisfying every pleasure, no matter how perverted and dangerous, that comes their way. Lancelot du Lac and Guinevere followed their hearts, and committed treason and adultery against King Arthur. Henry VIII followed his heart, and ended up splitting with the Church so he could divorce his wife and marry another.

Martin Luther followed his heart, and began the Protestant Revolt which fractured Christianity into thousands of denominations. " Follow your heart" becomes an excuse for gluttony, adultery, calumny, bullying, addiction, stealing, cheating, lying, murder, and every affront under Heaven. As G. K. Chesterton puts it, " The men who really believe in themselves are all in lunatic asylums" (6).

What, then, are we to do? If each man cannot be his own moral compass, the only solution is to find another moral compass, one that never falters, one that is incapable of error. We must abandon our own will, our own ideas, our own beliefs, to the direction of something bigger; and once we are clinging to this something bigger, we can be truly self-reliant, because our self-reliance will not be reliance on our own powers but on those of an unerring truth. Emerson got pretty close to this when he said self-reliance is reliance on

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Virtue. The Catholic mind automatically translates this “ Virtue” to “ God,” who is the essence of virtue. Emerson’s main mistake lies in assuming man can intimately know Virtue through his own power. We have seen that man, being utterly and pathetically fallible, cannot know God’s will clearly on his own power.

If he does discover God’s will by himself, it is far too easy for him to wander from the right path because distracted by various temptations. We cannot attain ideal union with God and knowledge of his will on our own; we must, then, be in need of a mediator. And that is why it makes so much sense that God has provided us with the Church. The Church works exactly in the way Emerson thought the human person should act. It is a living thing continually instructed by and nourished on the Spirit of Truth himself, what Emerson would have called “ intuition.” From the Council of Nicaea which denounced the Arian heresy, to the Council of Trent which responded to the Protestant Revolt, to the infallible declaration of the pope that Mary was indeed immaculately conceived, the Church has always turned within herself to discern God’s will and listen to the promptings of the Holy Spirit.

Guided and protected by God, the Church is the only institution that can safely “ follow her heart,” because at her heart is the wellspring of grace and truth and infallible knowledge. She has no will, no intellect, no power of her own; she is filled completely with God, and, as such, can be perfectly and totally self-reliant, because her “ self”, without actually being God, is in complete union with God. If we would be infallible - if we would be self-reliant - we must not look to ourselves. We must look to the Church, the

wellspring of all grace. We must bind ourselves to her, fill ourselves with her, for she is dependant not on herself but on the Spirit of God.

And, in the end, God's heart is the only one worth following. Works Cited  
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