

FAITHLESS FEAR OR FEARLESS FAITH? OUR ORIENTATION IN A MULTI-RELIGIOUS CONTEXT

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Abstract

The point is made that fear is incompatible with genuine faith. A fearless faith delivers us from studying the Bible in legalistic or literalistic ways. It enables us to help others search honestly for the life-related meaning of biblical passages in the worlds of the Old and the New Testament, respectively, and in our present world. It delivers us from anxious attempts to prove or defend truths of faith. Fearless faith empowers us to discuss key meanings in our dialogues with people of other religious convictions, and to share modestly, but dynamically and radiantly, the life-transforming Good News of our own faith.

1. The invisibility and visibility of faith

No one has ever seen God, but if we love one another, God lives in union with us, and his love is made perfect in us (1 Jn 4:12).

This meaningful sentence is written in the language of faith. It communicates the experience that God's presence becomes observable in words and deeds of genuine love. This inspiring experience only becomes possible, however, when a human being has been led into the dimension of real faith.

The apparent relative scarcity of such faith therefore tempts many others to try and create the impression that they too have access to the dimension of genuine faith. They try to fabricate the appearance of faith. They often succeed in presenting a grand show of make-believe faith, and they may even make themselves believe that they believe. Such a show often consists of truths of faith and proofs of faith. Impressive doctrinal systems are constructed, propagated and defended. Various, and often conflicting, sets of proof texts and orthodox definitions are construed by leaders and inculcated into followers.

When such a display is just a matter of human effort, however, it can never communicate the possibility of the divine gift of faith. When the attention is focused on humanly developed descriptions and dogmas, striking results may be obtained - but only within the scope of human achievement. The dimension of real faith as an inner dynamic cannot be reached by human exertion, not even by specialising in theology!

2. The incompatibility of faith and fear

It is not surprising therefore, that fear is experienced where a show of faith is performed. The acting may be superb, the sophistication impressive, but a haunting fear may time and again assert itself. In moments of honest silence some disconcerting questions may plague the producers and the actors: Does their popular, even famous, production really stand up to God's quality control? Does it bear witness to the inner reality of genuine faith? Does it honour the true God, or just a theologically constructed image?

Fear does not coexist with genuine faith, however. Essentially, faith is a *relationship*, interrelated with a relationship of love. It is these relational realities which cause fear to disappear.

There is no fear in love; perfect love drives out all fear. So then, love has not been made perfect in anyone who is afraid, because fear has to do with punishment (1 Jn 4:18).

Here too, we have a striking statement, written in the language of faith. It is either loveless fear, or fearless love. And in the light of the context, as highlighted in 1 Jn 3:23, we may also say: It is either faithless fear or fearless faith.

The options where fear exerts its influence are the ones where to some, greater or lesser, extent, expectations are focused on human effort. It is when human beings try to deserve merit that they fear their efforts may not be good enough and may even lead to punishment.

On the other hand, however, there is the possibility of simply yielding oneself to experiencing inner love and faith. Then human effort becomes totally irrelevant and totally unnecessary. When a yacht is driven at an appropriate speed and in exactly the correct direction by the wind filling its sails, there is no need to add any rowing efforts. Similarly, when the divine power of love and faith is given full scope, there is no need to try and supplement it by anxiously struggling to earn more credit for oneself.

Real faith is therefore never mixed with fear. Mark and Luke captured Jesus' succinct words to Jairus: "Don't be afraid; only believe" (Mk 5:36, Lk 8:50). It was when the news about death came, after the delay which must have frustrated the anxious father of the critically ill girl, that Jesus ruled out fear by referring to the dimension of faith and life (Lk 8:50).

When Peter succumbed to fear of those who tried to smother the vibrant new Christian religion in an outdated ritual straitjacket, he was courageously admonished by Paul (Gal 2:11-14). This happened precisely in the cosmopolitan city where religious exclusivism had been transcended (Acts 11:20), and where the new way of believing and living had given rise to a new name (Acts 11:26). And this urgent reprimand was given by an enthusiastic proclaimer of Christian faith, and a vehement opponent of religious legalism (Gal 2:16).

In the practical letter of James we find another striking emphasis on the contrast between genuine faith and fear. Using a metaphorical extreme, the author reminds his readers about false believers who tremble with fear (Jas 2:19). He warns against the possibility of being bluffed by confessions of faith which are no more than testimonies of an inactive, lifeless "faith" (Jas 2:14,26).

3. The compatibility of faith with reverence and carefulness

Without detracting from this emphasis on fearless faith, we briefly have to pay our honest attention to a few fear-related realities which may very well go along with real faith.

The one is the attitude of *reverence*, which have been called "fear of the Lord" in old Bible translations. In contemporary translations the valid dynamic equivalents of worship (cf, for instance, Deut 10:12, Acts 10:35), honour (cf, for instance, Josh 24:14) and obey (cf, for instance, Ps 25:15) have been used (cf also Louw & Nida 1988:735b, semantic subdomain 87.14).

And the other is the attitude of *carefulness* in situations of potential danger. It is not necessary, however, to call such cautiousness *fear* (cf, for instance, Lk 21:9, 1 Pet 3:6, and Louw & Nida 1988:317b, semantic subdomains 25.264-5). It should rather be seen as an attitude of responsibility for one's own safety and the safety of others. Real faith need not be affected at all by realistic precautions, provided, of course, that such an orientation is not

allowed to develop into a debilitating obsession to avoid all conceivable and inconceivable dangers.

4. A few examples of the implications of fearless faith

Let us then look at ways in which fearless faith can empower us with an inner dynamic, and inspire us with a radiant enthusiasm.

4.1 When we study the Bible

A fearless faith obviously delivers us from legalism. At a time when many Christian believers found it hard to believe that they were indeed part of a new religion, clearly written messages were communicated to them:

- God ... made us capable of serving the new covenant, which consists not of a written law but of the Spirit. The written law brings death, but the Spirit gives life (2 Cor 3:5-6).
- No longer do we serve in the old way of a written law, but in the new way of the Spirit (Rom 7:6).
- God gave the Law through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ (Jn 1:17).

Unfortunately, however, it seems as if a vast majority of Christians, from the 1st to almost the 21st century, have not taken the radical newness of the Christian Good News seriously. What Jesus said then to the religious authorities in Jerusalem, now still needs to be understood by many, if not most, Christians:

You study the Scriptures, because you think that in them you will find eternal life. And ... Yet you are not willing to come to me in order to have life (Jn 5:39-40).

One telling and widespread example of this lack of understanding may be found in the way many well-intending Christian preachers and workers use the expression "The Bible says." Following these words an indiscriminating combination of quotations is often heard or read. Religious convictions from the more than 20 centuries of the making of the Bible, of which at least 19 belong to the era of the law and 1 to the era of grace and truth, are naively mixed in syncretistic fashion! Effort language, which was quite appropriate during the era of the law, but became inappropriate and obsolete in the Christian era, is intermingled with the new language of the Christian faith.

The drastic reproach and challenging question of Gal 3:3 are therefore still as necessary and urgent as they were in the 1st century:

How can you be so foolish! You began by God's Spirit; do you now want to finish by your own power?

By delivering us from legalism a fearless faith therefore also delivers us from this very prevalent, almost popular, effort error (cf Gundry 1970:260, Malan [1983]:9f). Without any awareness that they are denying and repudiating Jesus, many Christians say glibly: "I am trying my best to be a good Christian." The same people may very well realise the nonsensicalness of saying: "I am trying my best to love my life partner." But while thereby admitting that love depending on effort is no love, they keep bluffing themselves by conniving at their effort faith and effort ethics. Whenever individual Christians, surrounded by disappointingly large numbers of effort advocates, are effectively liberated from their do-it-yourself endeavours, it testifies to the amazing power of divinely initiated fearless and effortless faith.

This genuine faith also frees us from the temptations of literalism when we study the Bible (cf Grollenberg 1979:2). It convinces us of the futility of using the-Bible-says quotations to prove or defend formulations of doctrine. It gives us the crucial insight that when we try to *prove* truths of faith, we inevitably abandon the dimension of faith, and take refuge in the dimension of religious formalism.

At the same time true faith makes us honest, contextual interpreters of all the symbolic, metaphoric language in the various parts of the Bible. It sets us free from the notion that the symbolic idiom of ancient times has to become the literalistic underpinning of intricate dogmatic structures. It guides us to the meaning communicated by a passage or an expression, when it is understood in its apparent historical, cultural and religious context, and interpreted as an example of a particular type of literature (for instance, poetry or apocalyptic material). It helps us distinguish between culturally confined meaning *then*, reinterpreted meaning *now*, and timeless meaning *then and now* (cf Smart 1970:30,44).

4.2 When we help others study the Bible

In our time it is surely a matter beyond dispute that no sign of proselytising or evangelising may be allowed in public education. From this consensus some have drawn the conclusion that the topic of (formative) faith should preferably be avoided, and that the focus could rather be shifted to the (informative) topics of sacred stories, places, persons and ceremonies.

Another conclusion is also possible, however. When we remember that all manifestations of religion are based upon faith and exert their influence by virtue of faith, we have to admit that no proper study of any religion can be made without taking faith seriously. Both the essence of faith itself, and the essentials of a particular religious conviction have to be explored. But it is possible to do this without pressurising students to make personal commitments with regard to a particular faith.

As long as this provision is taken seriously, the phenomenon of genuine, fearless, Christian faith can be studied thoroughly and critically. One of the most useful and meaningful approaches may be the imaginative reconstructing (cf Minear 1948:6) of the worlds of the Old Testament (cf Anderson 1978:xv) and the New Testament (cf Kee & Young 1987:viif).

When we, as teachers, are ourselves studying the Bible with the honesty and insight outlined above, we may guide our students towards a similar understanding. We may share our mental pictures of biblical events with them and help them to *think themselves into the life situations and faith experiences of the people of biblical times*. (In my own theological training of more than four decades ago, before the time of Biblical Studies, I experienced an elementary study of the geography and archaeology of Palestine as an eye-opener. It helped me to realise that the people we read about in the Bible were real people in actual life situations.) We may help them envisage the coming into being of the books of the Bible through the apparent processes of initial discussion, shorter- or longer-term oral tradition, eventual writing, later and final editing, and official authorisation. We may also guide them, even if it has to be cursorily, through the history of Christianity in order to help them understand, interpret and re-interpret the doctrinal and ritual products of this history contextually (cf Smart 1970:67).

Through two decades my experience with Biblical Studies students has been that such a life-oriented approach indeed helps many of them to penetrate the layers of denominational interpretation and content familiarisation, and reach the level of meaning, *especially the life-*

related meaning then and the life-related meaning now. This approach can also help students to disentangle where necessary the religious convictions of biblical times from political issues and cultural traditions. When focusing on events recorded in the New Testament, they can develop an ability to identify Jewish legalism, Greek philosophism, and Roman organisationalism. Some do manage to grasp the pivotal importance of the parting of the ways of Judaism and Christianity as recorded in Acts 15. They therefore arrive at a clear differentiation between Old Testament lines of thinking and believing, and the Christian breakthrough to the divine miracle of a changed human mind (Mk 1:15, Rom 12:1-2) and changed human attitudes, words and deeds (Jn 13:35, Phil 2:5, 2 Cor 5:17).

Along such lines students can indeed be guided to understand the intrapersonal, interpersonal and intergroup implications of the Christian faith. Regarding the aspect of fearlessness they can be prompted to venture some critical thinking about the difference between fearlessly dying for a dogma and fearlessly living in Christian love and faith, and about the difference between a real faith *relationship* and superficial versions of "faith" at the levels of literalism, dogmatism or effortism.

When students have attained such insight into the uniqueness of the Christian way of thinking, believing and living (cf Grollenberg 1979:37), they should be in a better position to make decisions about their own commitment. In school they have the further advantage of not being pressurised at all. Their individual decisions, either for or against, Christianity, can therefore be more free and frank.

4.3 When we learn about other religions

It is when we, both as teachers and as students, are understanding the coming into being and the message of the Bible, and especially of the New Testament, in such a receptive, critical and honest way, that we are in a position to take note of other religions. In fact, part of the process outlined above is nothing else than learning about another religion: Judaism.

When we take the contextual interpretation of the various parts of the New Testament seriously, we begin understanding the Old Testament period and the inter-testamental period as a meaningful but also contrasting background to the new era of Christianity. And when, having this background insight, we explore the actual setting of Jesus' ministry, the contrast between law and faith, merit and grace, effort and trust becomes still more vivid and dramatic.

If, as outlined above, we think and imagine ourselves into the debates, the Sabbath conflicts, the opposition of the religious establishment to Jesus, the eventual attempt to eliminate him and his influence, and the opposition of Jewish groups against the dissemination of the Christian message, we experience something of the tension that can easily develop and escalate between people of different religious convictions. We have to remember, however, that the problem we read about in Acts 15:1-5 and Gal 1-6 (the problem for which a remarkable solution was found, according to Acts 15:6-35) was not really one between the two religions, but rather one between different persuasions within Christianity.

All these insights enable us to listen fearlessly to the religious convictions of others. We are firstly delivered from the fear of being unable to prove or defend the Christian faith. Christians (perhaps "Christians") who are afraid of other faiths and of any multi-religious situation, are most probably those who have entrenched themselves in positions where they try to defend a biblical content "faith", a doctrinal "faith" and/or a merit "faith".

Secondly, we are delivered from the fear that our Christian faith, when compared to other religious faiths, will prove to be inferior. The change of mind (*metanoia*) and change of life which Jesus proclaimed (Mt 4:17, Jn 3:3) and which his followers endorsed (Eph 4:23-24, Rom 8:4, Gal 5:6,16,25), is such a unique message in the whole domain of religion (cf Grollenberg 1979:32f, but also Streeter 1936:24, with reference to Jeremia) that any fear of comparing unfavourably may be ruled out altogether.

Positively, these insights can help us, when we listen to people of other religions, to ask crucial questions. In order not to get lost in numerous details, it is important to inquire about key meanings, key elements and key words. And in order to avoid focusing on abstract ideas and ritual ceremonies, it is important to find out how the way of believing affects the way of living. It may also be revealing to find out to what extent the adherents of a religion yield themselves in human relationships and into relationships of faith, and to what extent they simply try (and fail) to improve themselves by human effort.

4.4 When we share our Christian convictions

Fearless faith can also make a radical difference in the way we share our Christian convictions with others. When "faith" is coupled with fear, "believers" are often tempted to witness in pressurising and even arrogant ways. Afraid of dialogue, and absolutely "certain" of their own "proved" "truths" of faith, they confront people of other convictions with sermonising monologues. Explicitly or implicitly, they denounce the other religions and forcefully proclaim their own. They may even have recourse to charismatic rhetoric and/or fanatic fundamentalism.

When faith has been purged of fear, however, convictions may be shared by way of a genuine dialogue. Then, representatives from each side are willing to listen openmindedly and receptively to the explanations of the other side. Clarifying or probing questions are asked and answered. Mutual understanding is aimed at. Mutual tolerance and respect are revealed.

Such an atmosphere is conducive to reciprocating attitudes of real interest and real love. Such a setting encourages all involved to talk the language of faith and to talk it honestly. And in such a context those of us who are really committed, not to the churchianity of a particular denomination, but to the Christianity Jesus initiated, can share modestly but convincingly the life-transforming Good News of our faith. And, needless to say, such words will be confirmed by the radiant life we are living, not by own effort but by what we may aptly call the grace of God.

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