

Love, Fear, Trust God: The Challenge

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The law of the LORD is perfect, converting the soul: the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple. The statutes of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart: the commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes. The fear of the LORD is clean, enduring for ever: the judgments of the LORD are true? and righteous altogether. (Ps 19:7-9)

We sing hymns praising God for His love. We sing hymns admonishing believers to trust God and follow His teachings; "Trust and Obey," for example. I can't recall a single hymn that praises God for fear or that exhorts believers to fear Him. I suggest that it is highly likely that we have not only corrupted our concept of faith and love, but especially the Biblical principle of fear toward God. Let me illustrate.

Our concept of faith, of trusting God, often builds on the premise of "blind faith," of trusting God that is wholly isolated from knowledge, either of God or of our circumstances. Biblical faith builds on the foundation of our knowledge of God and of His fixed character, His immutability. "He cannot deny himself" (2Ti 2:13). Scripture consistently urges us to trust God because of His revealed character that is knowable and trustworthy. We need not know precisely what God will do or how He will react to a given situation to know His character and thereby to trust Him.

Our concept of love toward God is often based on our Western sentimental corruption of the Biblical concept of love. For our culture love is a feeling, an emotion that floods uncontrollably over us and consumes us. For New Testament writers the love of God grew out of a moral conviction, not out of emotion. We view love as an act of the emotions; they viewed it as an act of the will. We cherish the passage that requires us to love God with all our hearts, but we fail to take note that the same passage equally requires us to love God with all our minds (Mt 22:37). Restricting our love for God to our emotions violates the Biblical concept of love as dreadfully as the idea of trusting God with no sense of His character, of "blind trust."

The verses that appear at top of this page applaud the fear of God. In this work I will make the point that our minds have as dreadfully corrupted the Biblical concept of the fear of God as His love and trust. Our Western minds equate fear with guilt and with a paralyzing slavish sense of morbidity. The whole theological framework that uses fear of hell to motivate people to obedience and trust in God cultivates this false characterization of the fear of God. We allow error to frame our thinking on this issue, and then we impose our false views onto Scripture. No wonder then that we struggle to grasp the Biblical concept that applauds the fear of God as, not only something good, but something to be desired. We sense the tension between our ideas of fear and what Scripture teaches, but we typically just give up and embrace a rather thoughtless abandonment of ever reconciling our concept with Scripture. Do we ever consider forsaking our false premises in favor of Scripture?

The depth of this discord between our thinking regarding the fear of God and Scripture appears when you ask someone to define the fear of God. Perhaps the most frequent response that I've received to that question has been "reverential fear." Basic science and basic language forbids that you use a word to define itself. You wouldn't think of using quantum physics to define quantum physics, for example. Or you wouldn't think of using cancer to define cancer. The answer reveals our utter lack of a reasonable concept of the fear of God.

Our pedestrian, almost vulgar, idea of Jesus as “my best friend, my buddy,” robs us of the profound dignity and glory that Scripture preeminently ascribes to God.

In this work I shall attempt to develop a more Biblical concept of these three basic elements to our concept of God. My focus will seek the basic foundation of knowledge upon which we are to build our trust in God. It will seek a moral foundation through which we may love God with our will, not merely our emotions. And it will seek to understand the Biblical idea that the fear of God is clean and desirable, not to be avoided and opposed.

It is no accident that David incorporated a series of spiritual concepts (six verses devoted to God as Creator and the remaining psalm dedicated to God as our spiritual Savior and director) into a psalm that begins with praise to God for creation. From the intricate order discovered in microscopic cells to the predictable structure and immense magnitude of constellations, nature shouts out the order and intelligence of its Creator. We join David in his opening words to this psalm, that the heavens also declare God’s glory. Regardless of the human language spoken in a region, God speaks His glory in ways that clearly declares His holy and powerful character, in ways that transcend human language with its inherent limitations. David shouts out to us, “There is no speech nor language where their voice is not heard.” From time immemorial man has looked up into the skies and marveled at the magnitude and glory of space and the orderly arrangement of constellations. Can we overlook that most of the major constellations visible to the naked eye carry names given to them by ancient astronomers? Recent scientific discoveries reveal that no less order and intelligence appear in the microscopic design of cells. Micro or macro, God has imposed His divine fingerprint onto His creation.

I am convinced that man inherently opposes the idea of God as Creator of the universe because he understands that such a concession will impose transforming moral implications upon his conduct, that he resists with fierce opposition. It is not that there is something profoundly unscientific about God as Creator of the universe that triggers man’s opposition. Rather it is man’s basic moral - or more correctly his basic immoral - disposition that prompts such consistent opposition to the idea of God as Creator of the whole universe. Either false notions of science or false notions of religion will pit us against the other viewpoint. A balanced and accurate view of God and of science will bring the two together in full harmony. Paul wrote about “oppositions of science, falsely so called” (1Ti 6:20). We typically interpret this passage as referring to false science. I suggest that it no less refers to false religion as to false science. The dominant religious error that challenged first century Christianity was Gnosticism. The Gnostics claimed a secret verbal tradition of knowledge that only their leaders could reveal to others. At the same time they very inconsistently claimed that the supreme deity was altogether unknowable and unapproachable. Do not overlook the profound inconsistency of this error. People who claimed superior knowledge also claimed that the most important being in their system of belief was unknowable. The Gnostics were actually agnostics. Inherent in this system of belief was the idea that anything material was inferior and to be avoided. I suggest that Paul was no less rejecting false religion in this verse than false science. We must not overlook that many of the most significant scientific discoveries were made by devoted Christians, who saw no tension between their faith and their scientific research. In several instances the Church of Rome fiercely persecuted these men for defending the true nature of the material universe. We do both science and Christian faith a disservice by accepting an unreconcilable tension between the two. If God created the universe, as Ps 19 and Scripture throughout asserts, God is the Creator of science, of knowledge, regarding the universe that He created.

While Christians occasionally throw all the rocks at the scientists who reject God, we might serve our

cause better to seek balance within our own framework of ideas. As an example, most conservative Christians fiercely oppose evolution, but their theological perspective advocates spiritual evolution, the idea that man must be involved in his own salvation. If we hold that God created the material universe by His sovereign power, we should also consistently hold to the parallel truth that we are “his workmanship created in Christ Jesus” (Eph 2:10). We cannot expect respect from scientific thinkers when we assault them for believing in natural evolution if we inconsistently hold to spiritual evolution.

Trusting God, loving God, and fearing God are not inconsistent or irreconcilable concepts. We have imposed our own difficulties onto these concepts by adding our errant ideas onto Scripture. This work will attempt to find a more Biblical view of all three concepts, views that will demonstrate the harmony of the three.

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