



Perfect Fear Casts Out All "Luv"

Have you ever noticed the amazing fact that most modern "religious educators" try to remove the very thing the Bible calls "the beginning of wisdom"? I mean, of course, fear—"the fear of the Lord."

An army of modern psychologists in on the side of the educators rather than on the side of the Bible—at least, in America. For Americans desperately want to be wanted, like to be liked, need to be needed. ("People who need people are the luckiest people in the world," you know?)

Then sometimes I think the situation couldn't possibly be that bad, that clear-cut. I must be misunderstanding these modern religious educators. Perhaps the fear they want to erase is not the fear the Bible speaks at all. What they say is that this biblical fear really means only *respect*, and the fear the bad old days instilled was *terror*. Is this true? I think both parts of the claim are untrue.

First, what the Bible means by "the fear of the Lord" is far deeper than mere "respect." You can have respect for policemen, and for debating partners, and even for money. But the "fear of the Lord" is something that takes its specific character from its object, from the Lord. It is awe. It is worship. It is wonder. It is absolute adoration. It is "islam," total "submission" to God. This is precisely the thing absent from both modern religious education and from modern liturgy. The reason is simple: You can't give what you don't have; you can't teach what you don't know yourself.

The second part of the claim is also false. The church did not instill terror in the past, nor is traditional religion based on terror. You have terror toward an enemy, like cancer, or a lion, or a bullet. It is a dead, dread, doomsday kind of feeling. "The fear of the Lord" is exultant and wonderful.

The church used to instill this awe. The main reason she is so weak and wimpy today is because she no longer instills this awe. For this awe is "the beginning of wisdom" and the heart of all true religion.

We have to distinguish three things, then, three kinds of fear: mere respect, awe, and terror. Awe is, in fact, closer to terror than to respect; for awe and terror have in common *passion* and *mystery*. Take passion and mystery out of religion and it becomes "psychobabble"—something lukewarm and nice, something flabby and flat and floppy and flaccid, like a wet noodle.

But doesn't the Bible say, "Perfect love casts our fear" (1 Jn 4:18)? And don't Jesus and the angels always tell us, "Fear not"? Yes, but *this* fear is terror. God would not tell us not to have "the beginning of wisdom"!

Terror is a bond, however primitive, between us and God. It is supposed to be there, and it is supposed to be cast out. It is supposed to be there because we are born original sinners, and the sinful self is naturally and rightly terrified of the goodness of God, which is sin's enemy. It is meant to be cast out because God saves us from sin, and then the relation changes from enemies to friends, and from terror to wonder.

"As long as there are wild beasts around, it is much better to feel fear (terror) than to feel secure," says George MacDonald.

If there is no fear for love to cast out, the love will not arrive as a great conqueror. If there are no dragons, a knight is just a big boy in a tin suit.

Love should cast out terror, but it should not cast out awe. True love includes awe. This is one of the great secrets of sex and marriage that our age has tragically forgotten: awe at the mystery that sex is. Science has not explained away this mystery, nor has psychology. No true mystery is ever explained away. Sex, death, love, evil, beauty, life, the soul, God—these remain forever infinite mysteries that we never exhaust and should not want to. They are like the ocean, for us to swim in, not like a glass of water for us to drink and drain dry.

God is love. And love is not "luv." Luv is nice; love is not nice. Love is a fire, a hurricane, an earthquake, a volcano, a bolt of lightning. Love is what banged out the big bang in the beginning, and love is what went to hell for us on the cross.

The difference between love and "luv" is the difference between the prophetic model of religion and the therapeutic model. In the prophetic model, God commands us to *be* good. In the therapeutic model, people use religion to make themselves *feel* good.

Not only are we missing something when fear is absent from religion, but (far worse) we are sinning grievously. For the absence of the fear of God is arrogance and pride. How dare sinners sashay up to God as a chum without first falling down in repentance and fear and calling on the Blood of Christ to save us?

This is not a private opinion; it is the teaching of the Bible, the church, and the saints. All the saints, who are far more advanced in love than we are (that's why they're saints), continued to have fear (awe) of God. They also continued to have terror-fear: not at God, but at sin. They often said things like: it would be better for the world to be destroyed than for one more sin to be committed. Things like: One sin is a thousand times worse than a thousand sufferings. Even the good pagan Socrates knew that "it is far better to suffer evil than to do it." He had a better understanding of the terror of sin than most modern Christians.

Christ himself told us to fear, and whom to fear: "Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell" (Mt 10:28).

If the thing we fear most is sin, then we will not fear death much, for after death we will no longer be able to sin. That's why the saints look forward to death instead of fearing it. It's a little evil, like a tourniquet or a quarantine; it prevents a far greater evil, like bleeding to death or an epidemic.

Islam has not lost this awe. That's why it's the world's fastest growing religion. Eastern Orthodoxy has not lost it as much as we have in the West. That's one reason why we need reunion with it. The pope often says the church has two lungs, East and West, and needs both to breathe. He has confided that reunion with the East is one of the three most important goals of his pontificate. (The other two are saving the world from nuclear war and cleaning up the church in America. One of these is much easier, the other much harder, than reunion with the East.)

Yes, "perfect love casts out fear." That is, *agape* casts out terror. But perfect fear also casts out "luv." Awe casts out "luv" as a hurricane casts out a teddy bear.

Perfect love casts out fear, but unless we begin with fear, we cannot progress to perfect love. Fear is the caterpillar; love is the butterfly.