

THE DESIGNED DECLINE OF SUPPLY-SIDE FEAR

ELLIOTT THINKSHEETS

309 L.Eliz.Dr., Craigville, MA 02636

Phone 508.775.8008

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Today I confronted a woman who grew up in an "unchurched" home & hasn't been to church for 40 years: "I've never felt any need of it." My approach went something like this: How do you know what you need? You know what you want, but how do you know what you need? In fact, you may need what you don't want. You don't want to go for an annual mammogram, but you need to. And when you do go, you may discover that without immediate attention you'll soon be dead. Well, when you go to church, especially if you go regularly, you may find a spiritual need you're now insensitive to. You're asking for trouble when you go to church or for a mammogram, but it would be trouble you should ask for....Of course there were positive aspects to the conversation, such as that the central point of church-going is to please God, & that the spiritual support of other worshipers is nourishing (the church being the earliest & best "support group"), & that weekly experiencing of God's cleansing forgiveness brings comfort-strength-peace-joy. And another negative: When she said there are hypocrites in church, I invited her to come "because one more won't make all that much difference" (to profess to believe in the biblical God, & then practice neither form of biblical religion, being hypocritical).

My point for this Thinksheet is that there's no fear of God in that woman, & there should be, & I saw myself as sent to try to put the fear of God in her (as well as to speak of love from & for God, which also I did). Now, if on her own, without any Christian's verbal confrontation of her, she came to fear God, that would be--in my analogy--**demand-side fear**. Evangelism, Christian witness, is **supply-side fear**: I was seeking to meet a spiritual need of hers, viz to supply her with fear, "the fear of the Lord, "the beginning of wisdom" (Prov.1.7 & 9.10). No wonder God, loving his people, says "I will make them fear me with all their heart" (Jer.32.3). So we are to "be grateful and worship God in a way that will please him, with reverence and fear; because our God is indeed a destroying fire" (Heb.12.28f). But the God-rejector has no fear of God "because he thinks so highly of himself, he thinks God will not discover his sin and condemn it" (Ps.36.1f; qtd. in Ro.3.18).

But what about love driving out fear (1Jn.4.18)? That's stage two, as in Jn. Newton's "Amazing Grace": "'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear, / And grace my fear relieved."

I could have avoided the personal discomfort of confronting that godless woman. Why didn't I? Fear & love. I don't have to explain love; you know, goodwill, compassion, that sort of thing. But fear? Yes, the negative fear of what will happen to me if I am unfaithful to my Christian commitment, which includes personal verbal witness in Jesus' name; & positive fear of what won't happen to God--that I will miss an opportunity to improve God's reputation on earth (the point of the Lord's Prayer's central petition) & to please God.

For us committed Christians, personal evangelism is not optional.

1 Now, fact is that the above intro will seem downright weird to secularists & liberal Christians. Being a liberal evangelical, it sounds somewhat weird to me, though more true than weird. It makes perfect sense within the providentialist paradigm (in contrast to both the moralist & the empiricist paradigms, which also are in me, but with less vitality [exposition of the three? See #1910]).

2 USA 1990 is full of fears, but for most Americans (yes, including church-goers) the fear of God is not one of them. Why not? Because it's been designed out of the psyche. The decline in this root ethico-religious fear has been designed, intended, by cultural leaders who want nothing to do with God, neither fear nor love. The past 30 years have seen one alienating movement after another--some of them mainly beneficial, but all of them estranging the young from the old God-fearing America. It was easy for **fear-denying hedonism** to penetrate these movements.

3 The Woodstock generation (acquiring it's name from the 1969 mass rally in rural NY) now has children in highschool & college, & the mass amorality among them is appalling sociologists, criminologists, and increasingly the general public. Cheating

in school, being lightly punished if at all, is more than rampant, it is majority behavior. The children's parents & teachers, infected with Woodstock & Summerhill & Skinnerian (only) positive reinforcement, "feel defeated if we have to resort to fear," as they often put it.

4 In college, my 1930 car often needed a push to get it going, & there were always a couple of guys around to give me a shove. It didn't take much, get enough to turn the motor over a few times, giving the battery a boost....Pearl Bailey witticism: "A man without ambition is nothing. A man without love [of someone] is nothing. A man with both: wow!"...Fear, including the fear component in ambition, is the push, the negative sanction (or reinforcement): love is the motor, the positive sanction (or reinforcement), the internal self-generator of energy, of life....When that old car of mine started "by itself," it really didn't unless you think of its starter as part of it. Of course it was part of the car, but not of the motor. Well, fear is the starter toward the internalization of virtue & value. No starter or push, & I might just as well not have had a motor. No fear, no private or public morality.

5 **Anomie, amorality,** makes chaos of private life through undisciplined genitals, promisebreaking, sloth, & financial irresponsibility. As for public life, I need only mention Watergate, Irangate, corruption at both ends of human services, the over-influence of PACs, junk bonds, & the S&L crisis. Raising the fear level would lower both private & public corruption, but the public has gone too soft, too antiPuritan, to support private or public severity. (Right now, a 37-year-old American caught with marijuana in Malaysia is subject to mandatory execution. This law has virtually eliminated drugs in the country & would do so in the USA. I mention this to show how preposterous it would be to expect the public to stand for laws that would greatly reduce crime & corruption. We do indeed need to increase the severity of fear-inducing laws, but only tandem with incitements to virtue, to the love of the good, to righteousness. But in a hedonistic time, the latter is almost as difficult to believe possible as the former.)

6 But if a fistful of forces conspired to design the decline of fear (in a Cavalier period), is not the pendulum beginning to swing? Are there not now **converging forces designing an increase in private & public fear of evildoing?** I think so. And Christians & their institutions ought to be giving more thought as to how to punish sinners & reward the righteous. But in a pluralistic culture, can we define "sinners" & "the righteous," so as to know whom to punish & whom to reward? Twice yes: (1) Through our laws, our traditional ethics, as in our community-forming-&-keeping documents, can be more rigorously & efficiently enforced than at present; & (2) Certain virtues, such as honesty & its social forms (eg, not cheating in school or on your income tax), are in the public domain essential in a free society, & should accordingly be vigorously engendered (by education) & enforced (by prosecution). Is it vicious, not virtuous, to drive while intoxicated? What virtue does the drunk driver violate? The negative virtue of avoiding injury to one's neighbor. In a certain town in which I was speaking, I learned that a drunk highschool boy two nights before had killed five by driving at a high speed on the wrong side of the road. In the two cars, he alone survived. He'd been previously thrice arrested for failing the breath test. I asked the assemblage I was addressing whether they considered their average annual death-by-drunk-teen-driver rate an acceptable level of death. Many shouted "No!" It turned out that what they were shouting at was not the town's death-level but me! They were shouting at me for using the phrase "an acceptable level of death." "No level of death is acceptable!" they said. Why then, said I, is your court so light on drunk teen drivers? You punish them so lightly, if at all, that your teens have no police-fear of driving while drunk. Of course they have almost no accident-fear: "It won't happen to me" whispers always in the adolescent psyche, & shouts when alcohol is added. Showing films of bloody-mess accidents momentarily tames adolescent boys, but police-fear would be more effective if the consequences of driving while drunk were more severe--say, two years in a slave labor camp. Could we get that town, or any American town, to pass such a law? Of course not. American towns prefer an acceptable level of teen death by the mix of gasoline & alcohol....Our moral-ethical-spiritual-legal crisis is profound.