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Miscellanea

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Miscellanea

The Meaning of "Fearing God"

The question before us is: Does the verb to *fear*, in Luther's Small Catechism mean essentially to be afraid, or does it mean substantially to stand in awe of or to venerate? In other words (to use the ancient classification current in the Church since time immemorial), does Luther there mean servile fear (*timor servilis, timor coactus, horror Dei*, which, as Luther says, is a *seminarium odii*), or does he mean filial fear (*timor filialis*)? Or we may ask: Does he mean *Gesetzesfurcht* (fear flowing from the Law) or *Evangeliumsfurcht* (fear having its source in the Gospel)? Or, wording the question still differently, we may ask: Does he mean *Fleischesfurcht* (fear flowing from the flesh), or does he mean *Glaubensfurcht* (fear flowing from faith)? The very terms used, when considered carefully according to their connotations, shed valuable light upon the issue.

It requires, of course, no further proof to demonstrate the fact that the concept to *fear* (*fuerchten*) has the twofold meaning: 1) to be apprehensive or afraid of and 2) to regard with awe or reverence, or to venerate (*Standard Dictionary*). These two significations are peculiar to the concept of *fear* in all languages because the emotions thus designated are found in the hearts of men throughout the world. Fear is either of a servile nature, and then it denotes properly to be afraid of; or it is of a filial nature, and then it denotes reverence, awe, respect for authority, veneration, and the like, so that, for example, the expression the fear of God, in its proper Christian sense, means due reverence for His constituted authority and will. In his still very useful *Handkonkordanz*, G. Buechner aptly defines servile fear as "apprehension in view of punishment." According to this definition a person's fear is servile if he does or omits an act because of God's threatened wrath and punishment. Servile fear is therefore fright, or terror, arising from the consideration of the threats of the Law. It is found especially in the heart of natural man, in particular, when he is troubled by an awakened conscience that charges him with transgressing God's Law. In Scripture, God makes use of fear in this sense, for pedagogical purposes, threatening and warning also His children inasmuch as they still are flesh and therefore rebellious. To the Old Adam of His followers He, for example, addresses the words of the Law: "I, the Lord, thy God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate Me," Ex. 20:5. In his explanation of these words Luther rightly says: "Therefore we should fear His wrath and not act contrary to them" (the commandments). (Cf. also Deut. 27:7; Gal. 3:10.) When God thus inculcates fear, or apprehension, upon His children, He does so as their omnipotent, sovereign Judge, whose vindictive justice is urged upon them, inasmuch as their corrupt nature, too, is carnally secure, stubborn, and disobedient. By thus instilling the fear of punishment in the Old Adam, the divine Law serves as a curb, check-

ing the gross outbursts of sin, which the flesh, because of its habitual perverseness and depravity, constantly desires. That also Christians, inasmuch as they still are flesh, need such fear-compelling admonitions, warnings, and threats of the Law, Scripture teaches us in many clear and emphatic passages, Rom. 7:14-25; 1 Cor. 10:21, 22; etc.

Nevertheless, such fear of wrath and punishment, though necessary for the flesh, produces only "works of the Law" and not "fruits of the Spirit," that is to say, not good works done in true faith and love, with proper joy and willingness, and according to God's holy Law, Ps. 1:1 ff.; 119:1 ff.; 110:3; Rom. 7:25 b; etc. (Cf. Formula of Concord, VI:4, 5.) But it is just the "fruits of the Spirit" which God demands of His children, and therefore it cannot be *servile* fear which He requires of His children, whom He addresses in the Decalog (cf. "I am the Lord, thy God"), but *filial* fear, that is to say, *loving, joyous, willing reverence and respect for His authority and will*. Works done in *servile* fear are not good works at all; however, in His Law God asks of His children truly *good works*, that is, works done in such holy fear as is joined with, and is the fruit of, love and trust. Hence, when Luther writes: "We should fear, love, and trust in God above all things," and again: "We should fear and love God that," etc., he can only mean *filial* fear, as our Lutheran teachers have invariably taught.

Filial fear, as we have just said, is the fruit of Christian love, which again is the fruit of saving faith, Rom. 8:15; 10:4; Gal. 4:3-7, etc., which is wrought by the Holy Ghost through the Gospel, Rom. 1:16; 8:9-17. It is found therefore only in those who are truly converted and who as regenerate children of God serve Him in sincere faith and love. Rom. 8:15: "Ye have not received the spirit of bondage *again to fear*"; (*servile* fear). 2 Tim. 1:7: "God hath *not* given us the spirit of fear but of power and of love and of a sound mind." The *Apology* recognizes this fact when it writes: "Thus filial fear can be clearly defined as such anxiety as has been connected with faith, i. e., where faith consoles and sustains the anxious heart. It is servile fear when faith does not sustain the anxious heart [fear without faith, where there is nothing but wrath and doubt]." (Cf. *Triglot*, p. 261.) The *Apology* at this place does not attempt a complete description and discussion of filial and servile fear, with all that Scripture teaches with regard to this matter. All that it is interested in here is to show the blessed power and meaning of faith, concerning which it has spoken in the preceding context. "This faith cheers, sustains, and quickens the contrite." "This faith justifies before God." "This faith made the contrition of David and Peter avail." "This faith works love." "This faith works also filial fear" because it "consoles and sustains the anxious heart," so that there is no longer any *servile* fear, which is "fear without faith," yes, "nothing but wrath and doubt." When the *Apology* says that filial fear is such *anxiety* as has been connected with faith, it, of course, uses the term *anxiety* in an improper sense; for where faith "consoles and sustains the anxious heart," there, properly speaking, is no longer any anxiety but only joy and happiness, Rom. 8:31-39. From the wording of the statement it must not be argued that also filial fear is anxiety (*pavor, Furchten*).

und Entsetzen), just as is servile fear. (We say this here because that very argument has been used.) But the *Apology* uses a *modus loquendi* which lends emphasis to the matter, just as if some one would say: "A cured toothache is such a pain as is connected with full relief." That is, it is no pain at all. Certainly, if servile fear is "nothing but wrath and doubt," then filial fear, according to our Confession, is the very opposite of that, namely, "nothing but love and certainty." Thus this famous passage in the *Apology* must be interpreted.

To such filial fear, or childlike reverence, of God, which practically manifests itself as a sacred desire to do what is pleasing, and to avoid what is displeasing, to God, Holy Scripture exhorts us again and again. In the Hebrew and Greek originals various synonyms (e. g., פֶּחַד, φόβος θεοῦ) are used to describe this fear. But though these terms differ etymologically, the *usus loquendi* is always the same. Luther very fittingly defines the filial fear of God as follows: "To fear God is nothing else than to serve God with the heart inwardly and with the conduct outwardly; it consists in this, that we hold Him in honor, revere Him, and do or omit nothing but what we know pleases Him." (Cf. Meusel, *Kirchl. Handl.*, sub "Furcht Gottes"; Erl. Ausg., 34, 174.) According to Scripture filial fear leads to the fleeing of sin, Gen. 39:9; 2 Cor. 7:1; Eph. 5:21, and is the beginning of all true, spiritual wisdom, Ps. 111:10; Eccl. 12:13. It has the promise of *salvation*, Ps. 85:9: "His salvation is nigh unto them that fear Him"; of *God's love*, Ps. 147:11: "The Lord taketh pleasure in them that fear Him"; of His *pity*, Ps. 103:13: "The Lord pitieth them that fear Him"; and of His *gracious protection*, Ps. 33:18: "The eye of the Lord is upon them that fear Him." Such consoling promises, which all ultimately have in view the *sootaeria*, or eternal salvation, certainly are not meant for those who merely are afraid of God, or have servile fear, that is, who fear because of God's punishment. No indeed; filial fear, as Luther declares time and again, is the fruit of love, *fructus amoris*, and is the gift of the Spirit of adoption, Rom. 8:15, through faith in Christ. According to Scripture the person who fears God also trusts in Him, so that Luther's explanation "We should fear, love, and trust in God above all things" is truly Scriptural. Ps. 115:11: "Ye that fear the Lord, trust in the Lord: He is their Help and their Shield." How could those who have slavish fear trust in the Lord when in their hearts there is nothing but wrath and doubt?

Filial fear therefore is incompatible with the fear of men, Matt. 10:28; for God's children, who in true fear and love of God and trust in Him serve and honor Him certainly obey Him rather than men, Acts 5:29, while those who fear men rather than God have no filial, or true, fear of God at all. Where there is true filial fear of God, there is freedom from the servile fear of the flesh, the *horror Dei*, as Luther calls it, which is incited in man by the threats of the Law and the accusations of the aroused conscience. 1 John 4:18: "There is no fear in love [no slavish fear]; but perfect love casteth out [servile] fear, because fear hath torment. He that feareth [slavishly] is not made perfect in love." Blessed indeed is the person in whose heart the Holy Spirit through the means of grace has engendered true filial fear with love and trust in God, Heb. 2:15. He certainly works out his salvation

with fear and trembling, Phil. 2:12; that is, he seeks after salvation in true faith and with earnest desire; but his "fear and trembling" is nothing else than "reverence and godly fear." Heb. 12:28: "Let us have grace whereby we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear." His fear is the fruit of forgiveness; Ps. 130:4: "There is forgiveness with Thee that Thou mayest be feared." It is marked by willing obedience to God's will, Ps. 119:63: "Of all them that fear Thee and of them that keep Thy precepts"; by true praise of God, Ps. 135:20: "Ye that fear the Lord, bless the Lord"; by avoiding sin, Prov. 3:7: "Fear the Lord and depart from evil"; by walking in uprightness, Prov. 14:2: "He that walketh in his uprightness feareth the Lord"; in short, by a truly Christian life.

Servile fear, on the other hand, or the dreadful apprehension in view of God's wrath and punishment, flows from the "spirit of bondage," Rom. 8:15; 2 Tim. 1:7; Heb. 2:15, and is, in its culmination, most terrible, Deut. 28:65-67. This kind of fear even the devils have, Jas. 2:19, and they are most miserable because of it, Matt. 8:29, so that it is joined with the greatest hatred of God, Rom. 8:6,7; 7:11. Hence Luther's dictum "*Horror Dei est seminarium odii*" is genuinely Scriptural. Truly, it is not such miserable fear that is demanded in the divine Law, which to Christian believers is a "fixed rule according to which they are to regulate and direct their whole life" (*tertius usus legis*; Formula of Concord, VI:1). If the Law threatens such fear to the rebellious Old Adam, it is only for the reason that this "intractable, refractory ass" (Formula of Concord, VI:24; Triglot, 969) cannot be coerced by anything else than by the severest threats of punishment.

Buechner, then, is right, when he defines the concept *sich vor Gott fuerchten* (*Gottesfurcht*), in the sense of Scripture and Luther's Catechism, as "eine kindliche Scheu haben und ihn mit Ehrerbietung in wahrer Busse, Glauben und Gehorsam als den allerguetigsten Vater verehren." ("To fear God means to possess a childlike respect for God and to venerate Him with reverence in true repentance, faith, and obedience as the most gracious Father.")

With respect to the proof-texts quoted in our Synodical Catechism, we readily agree that more fitting ones might be offered to bring out more clearly the idea of filial fear, which is always joined with love and faith. The array of passages given above will make the choice very simple and easy.

A few corollaries may help to illustrate what has been said above and impress the Scriptural truths regarding filial fear of God more lastingly upon the mind.

1. To our stubborn, rebellious Old Adam the Law says: "Fear God, or He will punish you." To our humbled, but believing heart the Gospel says: "Fear not, for Christ has redeemed you."

2. We are afraid of God inasmuch as we are "Old Adamites." We are not afraid of God inasmuch as we are His children in Christ Jesus.

3. Just as the Law and the Gospel are more than contradictory (*plus quam contradictoria*; Luther), so also the Scriptural "Fear!" and

"Fear not!" are contradictory, and each must be understood in its peculiar sphere. The Law cries: "Fear, O sinners!" The Gospel cries: "Fear not, O ye redeemed!"

4. We must not say that the threatening appendix of the Law is meant only for the ungodly who transgress God's commandments; for it is meant also for believers, namely, inasmuch as they are still Old Adam-ridden. The Old Adam of believers is just as corrupt as the Old Adam of unbelievers.

5. While the proper use of the Law by Christians is that of a *rule* and of a *mirror*, it is to them also a *curb*, namely, inasmuch as they still are flesh. It is as a *curb* that the Law addresses Christians in their natural corruption: "Fear His wrath."

6. The difficulty which faces the Christian theologian whenever he distinguishes between the Law and the Gospel faces him also when he inculcates the Ten Commandments with their demand for true, godly filial fear. Only that minister can teach the Ten Commandments rightly who can rightly distinguish between Mount Sinai and Mount Calvary.

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