

Beloved in Christ in a world of danger and fear,

“Why are evangelical Christians in the U.S. gripped by so much fear?”

There are few questions I’ve been asked more often in recent years, and even in recent days, than this one. It’s posed by Christians and by critics of Christianity, by people of other faiths and by people of no faith. And by some evangelicals.

Having been an evangelical pastor for more than 40 years, and during the last decade the president of an evangelical seminary, I’m understandably a person to whom others would direct this question.

People want me to explain to them why fear seems so controlling, even defining, for American evangelicals.

My response sometimes surprises them. I not only share their perplexity; I raise the ante: Why are so many evangelicals allowing fear and panic to cause them to act in ways that further shatter the credibility of the Christian faith and its witness to the name of Jesus? What exactly are the dangers some evangelicals see that cause a fight or flight – mostly fight -- response? When fear defines our lives it impairs love, the central Christian vocation.

The fear so many see among evangelicals is typically far less evident to evangelicals themselves, especially among those who have chosen to fight. The claim seems to be that fear is in their rearview mirror. In fact, this sub-culture sublimates the fear which then drives the over-compensating, steely, spiritual/political bravado. Many might say that fear isn’t even relevant to them, and that the pursuit of Christian conquest is what drives them.

We all juggle fears daily, a gift and a tyranny. For the community of faith, the Bible says a great deal about fear, most of which turns in some way around maintaining “the fear of the Lord,” not to nurture a life of divine terror, but as a foundational humility and reverence before God that leads to the faithful stewardship of what God has entrusted to human beings. For example, a belief in God’s purity and goodness, God’s truth and love, God’s justice and mercy, establishes a sense of spiritual and moral responsibility.

All human lives and actions have meaning, dignity, and consequences. Stewardship of the gifts and responsibilities entrusted to those who seek to be disciples of Jesus means there is a particular seriousness and value to human existence, relationships, actions, and decisions. So, a Christian moral framework is at work for evangelicals (despite the painful evidence of it not being credibly practiced).

As these evangelicals know, the Bible repeatedly exhorts, “Do not fear.” Some may simply presuppose that if fear is not a faithful response, then as long as the faithful are “in the world,”

many in the U.S. Church have decided that the well-trodden, if often tragic, path of fighting in the name of their faith is the right course.

You add to this alchemy that many (especially white, male) evangelicals have convinced themselves that they, their families, and “their” nation are being drowned by sinister forces of secularism or liberalism. They feel like they are being held under water without hope. Of course, they will fight. The hegemony of religious dismissal by secularists in the U.S. is a thick presumption in so many circles, and the illiberalism of such attitudes can be oppressive.

The abortion battleground has shifted since the Dobbs decision bringing the right to abortion to an end, and handing it onto the consolidated leading voices of each State. This victory, and the Supreme Court appointments that made it possible, is the sign and seal for pro-life evangelicals that they can defeat their fears with enough battle. Their claim of exclusive moral clarity is one way of stemming fear by taking (absolute) control.

The horrific inheritance of racism is another mark of some white, fundamentalist-evangelical fears in congregations, movements, political motivations, and political speech. Traditionally, exclusively evangelical institutions, organizations, and networks often exude white normativity and supremacy. When people of color who share evangelical beliefs are met by hostility and judgement from those institutions, they are unsurprised. Racism is one of the hidden, and not so hidden, drivers of Christian Nationalism, a movement engulfed by white evangelical fears of having lost cultural dominance.

We also see this pattern in the area of sexual ethics and the advances made by the LGBTQIA+ movement, from gay marriage to medical treatments for transgender minors. It doesn't help matters that some within the progressive movement, which has its own illiberal tendencies, argue that you either fully embrace and celebrate every dimension of the LGBTQIA+ reality or you're a bigot. Donald Trump, of course, capitalizes on this type of concern, going so far as to say that Christians in the U.S. aren't even allowed to say, “God in Heaven” anymore – and if you do, “they want to arrest you.”

[<https://www.mediaite.com/politics/christianity-will-not-be-safe-trump-tells-faith-group-they-could-be-arrested-for-religion-under-biden/>] The claim is ludicrous – throughout its 2,000-year history Christians have rarely had it as good as they do in 21st century America -- but for those seized by terror and wed to an underlying narrative of fear, the claim otherwise is potent.

Binary thinking is common, and, as is plain, evangelicalism can seem to be permeated with it. They take aspects of the Bible, such as the spiritual clash between good and evil, God and Satan, and apply that template to everything. The result is that it obliterates nuance and subtlety, concepts some evangelicals consider to be traps laid by the Evil One. (It's worth noting that by no means are evangelicals the only binary thinkers, a fact that decades working in Berkeley have richly taught me.) But when you take as your premise that you (and maybe you only) are on God's side and your opponents (by definition) are on the side of Satan, bad things will often follow. Some of the worst sins in history have been committed by those who were convinced they were on the side of God.

It's important to restate that some of the grave fears that evangelicals have are legitimate and are ones I share. Dangers to religion do exist (and dangers by religion do as well). Religious conscience needs to be respected and how faith-informed values properly inform life in a pluralistic nation can certainly be complicated. My worry, then, is less that Christians are fearful – fear is a common human emotion, after all -- than what that fear is doing to them. It is overwhelming the evangelical movement to the point of defining them and, in the process, making them angry, agitated and aggressive. It's not exactly what Jesus had in mind when he delivered the Sermon on the Mount.

Fear casts out love. Jesus' example and his admonition is that his followers should be known not by their fear but by their love. Many American evangelicals are doing a very bad job at mirroring what Jesus commanded. Their unregulated, castigating, and vengeful fear cauterizes our ability to live out the Christian's primary calling -- to love God and to love our neighbors.

But Jesus goes even beyond that, asking us not only to love our neighbors but also to love strangers, and even to love our enemies. We worship an enemy-loving God. That's the only way anyone, evangelical or not, gets adopted into the people of God. Loving is meant to be the authenticating evidence that we belong to and reflect the God we claim to worship. It's precisely in fearful times like these that Jesus' followers are meant to be liberated from the fears of the age. They are instead told to be passionately committed to the generous, life-giving love of God. No one is beyond his love, and no one should be beyond our love.

I came to faith in college, despite the warning my father had instilled in me about not allowing religion to make a serious inroad in my life. The reason is, as he put it, "Religious people take great things and make them small."

I get what he meant. My father's damning aphorism has too often stood the test of time. And for a while, I wholeheartedly accepted my father's counsel, which is why I was shocked into Christian faith when I discovered Jesus' call to be the antidote to small-making: to find abundant life in the loving and just expansiveness of God's reign. This cracked open the true and rich purpose of life. The discovery started me on a path away from my obsessive, curated and, yes, fearful self, into life in an entirely unexpected, richly complicated, and highly diverse communion with people who became like family. Many of them don't look like me or talk like me, or necessarily vote like me. The embrace of God's love has blown my world wide-open.

This has been the road of God's grace in my life. Others have traveled different journeys. What has made all the difference to me is that evangelical Christian friends, in the U.S. and internationally, who live and serve in some of the most violent and desperately poor places in the world, live lives uncontrolled by fear. So too do many who love the neighbors whose yard signs could, but don't, keep them awake. There is liberation in that, and beauty, too. Perfect love casts out fear, Jesus said. He was not denying a world of dangers and fears. He was inviting his disciples to live out of a different center. Those who claim to be his followers should be the evidence of such a life, not the case that proves the crisis.

For freedom Christ has set us free from slavery. Do not submit again to another yoke of slavery.