

The Courage of Our Convictions

1. The Fear Factor

“Courage is not simply one of the virtues but the form of every virtue at the testing point...”

¹ Which is to say – all other virtues are dependent on courage; if you don’t have courage, the other virtues do not operate well.

I am not giving this talk because I have been courageous but because I recognize my cowardice. But at least now I recognize it and nothing gets corrected unless it is recognized and named. God often blesses us with second chances. Very often a poor or incomplete witness can be addressed at a later time. In fact I have found that a second opportunity to speak to someone can come as a result of recognizing a missed chance. So let’s have a look at this commodity called courage and try and figure it out. Where do we get it? When do we need it? Is there more to it than we have perceived? Do we have more courage now than that we were born with? Can you learn it?

The point of this paper is an attempt to encourage us to get into the conversation, whether it be by internet or one on one or any other way you can think of to do it. We all know that God could in one fell swoop convert the world and rebut and dismiss all false teaching. But for some reason, He seems to want us to have a part in that. There is a lady of 89 who was brought up in the church of God, and very humbly said: “only recently did I realize that *I* was supposed to *do* something with my faith!” She is making amends fast and is doing all she can. To test the warning siren for tornados - the loudspeaker announces in an explosive voice: this is a test. What a good idea for church! Are we not required to put boots on the ground? I am probably speaking to the bravest of the brave – but I want to enlist your support in helping people to have a paradigm shift – to be active in the faith, to *stop muting* themselves. MG skirmish

If we agree that sharing our faith is required, rather than optional, then let’s get going! (Or do we need, as someone said, another confessional organization where we stand and say, “Hi, My name is Barbara and I haven’t been sharing my faith.”)

I think that there are about 500 verses telling us not to fear in the Scriptures. There is in fact, a handicapping effect of fear. 2 Pet. 2:19b “For you are a slave to whatever controls you.”

Isa. 8:13 “Do not fear anything except the LORD Almighty. He alone is the Holy One. If you fear Him, you need fear nothing else.”

2 Tim. 4:5b “Don’t be afraid of suffering for the Lord.”

Acts prayer for courage: “Make us brave enough to speak your message.” (Acts 4:29)

“Courage for the sake of truth is better than silence for the sake of unity.”²

Do we not have a predisposition towards cowardice? Peter certainly displayed that in denying Jesus. And yet his change from coward to stalwart is amazing. This is more than a common foible and this is *so* not a female issue. In fact, it is sometimes said that the women cave in last; that once the women cave and crumple – so goes society.

It does not matter how high up the ladder you are – this weakness of character shows itself in every possible economic or academic level – and perhaps it’s even worse the higher in those brackets you go as you then have more to lose. I am convinced that theologians have no better handle on courage or on character than do the rest of us. The big guns in theology cover themselves so as not to lose standing, reputation, salary, etc. At home we refer to this as nod, nod, wink, wink theology. They know, but they’re not telling!

Cowardice is so very very different from the example of Jesus who allowed himself to be spat on. How do you *do* that? To allow yourself to be treated like scum of the earth? How do you

¹ C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*

² Ariel Schneider, *Israel Today*, Apr. 2012

do the things we are supposed to do without courage? It is simply not possible. Our job description states that we must be productive (parable of the talents). We cannot be productive with fear as a motivating factor. Fear paralyzes, inhibits, and *excuses* us from doing what we should. Is fear a sin? Yes, because it is cowardice; it is wrong because it is broken fellowship. God did not give us a spirit of cowardice: 2 Tim. 1:7. It comes from that other source!

Sev. Trans. Of Pro. 29:25 – note The Message.

Pro. 29:25 “The fear of man brings a snare. But whoever trusts in the Lord shall be safe.” The fear of what man may do is a trap, NL “Fearing people is a dangerous trap, but to trust the Lord means safety.”

CEB “People are trapped by their fear of others; those who trust the LORD are secure.” GNT “It is dangerous to be concerned with what others think of you, but if you trust the Lord, you are safe.”

The Message “The fear of human opinion disables.”

Not to speak is to exclude yourself from the Great Commission.

1 Cor. 9:10 “Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel.”

Fear is wrong because it is broken fellowship.

Notice that cowards are listed first in this passage from Rev. 21:8. “But cowards who turn away from me, and unbelievers, and the corrupt, and murderers, and the immoral...”

“If there is anything that links the human to the divine, it is the courage to stand by a principle when everybody else rejects it.” Abraham Lincoln

Demas was listed in Col. 4:14 in a positive context, but later in 2 Tim. 4:10 it is said that Demas had deserted Paul. We are left to surmise what had been his downfall.

Eric Chang’s book, *The Only True God* is one of the most honest, forthright and super-courageous books I know. If you read nothing else – read his first chapter (free online).

“Apart from this difficult problem of practically having to re-learn how to read the Bible in a new light, that of monotheism, there is also the demotivating factor of reckoning with the external pressures of being labeled a ‘heretic,’ which is intimidating for most Christians. That someone who proclaims that the Bible is monotheistic because it is the word of ‘the only true God’ can be labeled a ‘heretic’ by the Gentile church shows just how far the church has strayed from the word of God. Only the God-given courage to face up to the truth, indeed to love the truth at all costs, will enable us to go forward to know Him who is ‘the God of truth.’”³

Consider this: to believe something and be ashamed of it at the same time is absurd.

Along with apathy, a case could be made for the opposite of courage being shame. And we all know:

“If a person is ashamed of me and my message in these adulterous and sinful days, I, the Son of Man, will be ashamed of that person when I return in the glory of my Father with the holy angels.”

(2) Convictions

If you have understanding – you must have convictions. Convictions have power. They are a force. They hem you in. **They do not allow you to give the same respect to both Truth and error.** Convictions restrain us from blessing error and constrain us to stand for what we believe is Truth. In the judgment, will it not be a matter of how we valued the Truth? There is a time when we either stand or we will be swallowed up/crumpled. Jesus really was a rock! It seems that in essence He said: you can do what you will to me but I am not moving. So too Servetus who when he was being accompanied to his funeral pyre was urged just to recant on one word. In the South, the saying “Jesus is God’ is *required* for being part of the religious system. If you won’t say it, you cannot play, you cannot be a part of the system. Will it ever be necessary to say

³ *The Only True God, A Study of Biblical Monotheism*, Eric H. H. Chang, p. 27

it to save one's life? There is probably more at stake here than any of us can imagine. What if it's an adult version of "will this be on the test?" What if Jesus asks us what we have done for his cause?

Pressure can increase our faith. We all know about resistance training and how valuable it can be. How about the wrong sort of resistance? Is it possible that we avoid at all costs the very thing which would be best for us, the very thing which would cause us to grow. It would, of course, be the threat of persecution which we would resist and avoid. Prov. 13:20 he who walks with wise grows wise.

Our convictions should be examined from time to time -the unexamined life has repercussions! I can tell you honestly that one of the most common phone or email messages we get is to say: we haven't changed our beliefs but we now attend another church which teaches...how do we keep our children from absorbing...? Perhaps convictions in these cases are not in line with one's practices?

You have heard the expression 'standing on your scruples.' What are scruples? Hesitation, doubt, or uneasiness arising from difficulty in deciding what is right, proper, ethical. Actually, in old or middle English scruples are small sharp stones. This expression comes about through the idea of being bothered by the nuisance of a small stone in your shoe. Sometimes these were even used as reminders of how one was to behave. By placing a small stone or scruple in one's shoes, with tender feet and sensitivity, one should stand firm; one should stand on his scruples. That small stone may feel problematic, but you stand anyway. You stand faithfully. You stand even though you have tender feet. Jesus teaches a kind of walk through life that involves that kind of sensitivity. Mat. 5,6, and 7 & Rom. 12 – a good set of scruples.

(3) The World Changes

I don't want to over-glamorize our situation. People don't always listen. They are not always grateful when challenged. But it is when you pose the question of the trinity that the world changes. I have experienced "The Look"! If you have not experienced this, do try it. You can be perfectly OK one minute and a total pervert the next, for having questioned the trinity. When people hear truth they *think* heresy. This is the way the world is set up. What are we going to do about it? Do we hide and treat our priceless Unitarian heritage as a dirty little secret? I can absolutely promise that it changes you -this collision with those who defend orthodoxy– for the better. You *have* to grow. Like riding a bicycle, in order to stay on – you have to keep moving.

I should probably mention that there are some pretty significant differences in male/female reactions to hate mail or persecution. Anthony will be snoozing away after a particularly nasty attack (not many, but doozies when they come) while my little heart is racing and keeping me from sleep. It is almost an insult that he is sleeping – why should he not get up and worry with me?

As Chang says: "Trinitarian Christians like to rank themselves among Jews and Muslims as monotheists. The problem is that neither Judaism nor Islam recognizes Trinitarian Christianity as truly monotheistic, regardless of Christian claims."⁴

The state of theology cries out for revolution. Most people are denied access to the truth of Who God is, whether it is by being dumb sheep, by faith in tradition/in a pastor/in a church, biased translations, or the weight of history. (Or perhaps because *we* didn't speak.) As we would react to violent persecution which we witness with our own eyes, so should we react to this **deprivation**. The desire to share Truth should bubble up from within us as would anger against injustice.

Pascal: "Truth is so obscure in these times, and falsehood so established, that, unless we love the truth, we cannot know it."

⁴ The Only True God, p. 19

I have had the privilege of viewing the ‘greats’ in the theological world close up. What I have seen all too often are: cover-ups, retractions, explaining away, dismissing, giving with one hand and taking away with another. To me, these are all acts of cowardice. I could read to you from multiple sources quotations that come from the same author but are saying the opposite thing.

Is there any valid reason for violating our faith?! Not to stand is a violation. To understand Truth and not to share it – is that not like witnessing an accident and not coming forward as a witness?

(4) Spiritual Profiles in Courage

We must consider and examine who we regard as heroes and heroines. I do not think it is safe to contradict Pro. 17:15 – “One who justifies the wicked and one who condemns the righteous are both alike an abomination to the LORD.” Some of Luther’s statements seem to contradict flatly the spirit of the Bible. Many recognize a very dark spirit there, and certainly a spirit of anti-Semitism. It appears proven that Calvin was an unrepentant murderer, not just of one, but of several.⁵ I then deduce that it would not be safe to take part in a church which defends and exalts these men. We need to look at the lives and beliefs of men and women before we make them models or heroes in any way.

We must go further, for ourselves and for our children, to find real heroes. Mary Dana is one such brave soul.⁶

We should all be familiar with the Servetus story and our children should be so familiar with it that they are able to tell it to others. Imagine the courage it took to go to the flames when by the reversal of two words he might have saved his life. It is a tragedy that church goers are ignorant of this man’s name and his contributions to medicine, to free speech, and to the courage of his convictions.

It would be hardly possible to speak of courage without mentioning Churchill but I learned a new fact in doing this research. Although Churchill inspired hundreds of thousands to courageous acts, all the while – he would not go into a 2nd story room with a balcony – he was so afraid that he would throw himself over the side.

We believe because of the faith and courage of the apostles – our faith is built on theirs. The boldness of the disciples is a fantastic model for us in the Book of Acts.

Certainly David is and should be a spiritual hero to us and to our children. There is a fantastic new book out entitled *David and Goliath, Underdogs, Misfits, And the Art of Battling Giants*,⁷ by Malcolm Gladwell. I love the subtitle, the message and I thought it very appropriate to our cause as well. Let me tell you a few true stories from this book. Did you know that ballistics experts with the Israeli Defense Forces have done calculations showing that a typical size stone hurled by an expert slinger at a distance of 35 meters would have hit Goliath’s head with a velocity of 34 meters per second – more than enough to penetrate his skull and render him dead. In terms of

⁵ *Did Calvin Murder Servetus?*, Standford Rives

⁶ *Letters Addressed to Relatives and Friends, Chiefly in Reply to Arguments in Support of the Doctrine of the Trinity*, Mary Dana, 1845. “It has become my solemn duty to make you an announcement, which, I fear, will fill your hearts with sorrow. Would to God that I could save you from the pain, which, from my knowledge of your views and feelings, I am sure awaits you; but I believe, as God is my judge, that *truth* is dearer to me than life itself, and I dare no longer disavow the sentiments, which, after thorough, and *honest*, and prayerful deliberation, I have at length adopted.

I will keep you no longer in suspense, but will proceed to declare that I do not now believe that my blessed Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ is the Supreme God. I believe that there is *one* God, the Father, of whom are all things, and one Lord Jesus Christ, by whom are all things. I believe that ‘all power’ was given unto him in Heaven and on earth; that he was the Messiah predicted by the Old Testament writers, who, in the fullness of time, came into the world with a commission from God, and full power and authority to do the work which God gave him to do. In other words, after long and earnest deliberation, much diligent study of the Holy Scriptures, and fervent prayer to God for the assistance of his spirit, I conscientiously and firmly reject the doctrine of the Trinity.”

⁷ *David and Goliath, Underdogs, Misfits, And the Art of Battling Giants*, Malcolm Gladwell

power, this would be equivalent to a fair size modern handgun. The studies showed that David could have slung and hit Goliath in little more than one second, allowing Goliath no time for protecting himself.

In the book of Judges, slingers, which was what David was, are described as being accurate within a 'hair's breadth.' The sling was a devastating weapon. There is apparently, in the scientific world no doubt whatsoever, that David could have done what he did.

Here is a question for you: "Suppose you were to total up all the wars over the past two hundred years that occurred between very large and very small countries. Let's say that one side has to be at least ten times larger in population and armed might than the other. How often do you think the bigger side wins? Most of us, I think, would put that number at close to 100 percent. A tenfold difference is a lot. But the actual answer may surprise you. When the political scientist Ivan Arreguin-Toft did the calculation a few years ago, what he came up with was 71.5 percent. Just under a third of the time, the weaker country wins."⁸

The point is this: we have a definition in our heads of what an advantage is, being big, for example, and Gladwell maintains that the definition isn't right. As a result, we make mistakes – we misread battles between underdogs and giants. And in misreading battles – there are consequences. We underestimate how much freedom there can be in what *looks like* a disadvantage... What happens when ordinary people confront giants?

Gladwell's thesis is that there are such things as *desirable difficulties*. He credits Robert and Elizabeth Bjork, two psychologists at the Univ. of CA with this concept and says that it is beautiful and haunting way of understanding how underdogs come to excel. Desirable difficulties would be things that cause one to **compensate** and thereby become stronger. **An** example would be: dyslexia which forces you to develop skills that you otherwise might not have.

Gladwell says this - and I think it is so appropriate with regard to our fear of speaking of our faith: "We are all of us not merely liable to fear, we are also prone to be afraid of being afraid, and the conquering of fear produces exhilaration...The contrast between the previous apprehension and the present relief and feeling of security promotes a self-confidence that is the very father and mother of courage."⁹

How is this for a challenge: the powerful are not as powerful as they seem, nor the weak as weak?! Developing a faith – like gold requires the fiery heat of refining situations. And, of course, biblically this is accurate: "My strength is made perfect in weakness." 2 Cor. 12:9 – "...My power works best in your weakness."

(5) Dual Role of Courage and Preparation

Consider how v. dangerous it is *not* to stand against the crowd. (when have the majority ever been right?) It was the crowd that crucified Jesus. How very dangerous to be manipulated by the crowd. Strength of character is shown by standing against the crowd. We have to be willing to stand alone, to stand against the flow; we must recognize the necessity of standing, alone if necessary, against the tide. When the tide goes against the Father – then we must go against the tide. If Jesus served and worshipped God alone, should we not also?

Hard things are worth it. Life is hard. God will have some very hard things for us. We can find strength in weakness. We ease the burden for ourselves *and* for others when we stand. Standing is such an active word – along w. stance, posture, position and of course, we cannot stand lying down!

We often hear that sharing Truth is too difficult, that people don't feel equipped. Never forget that 'easy wins the day.' If you are weak in substance – then fix that – as you would a flat

⁸ Ibid., p. 21

⁹ Ibid., p. 152

tire. Gain ground. Plant a seed, possibly even a seed of doubt (e.g. eternal torture a mind numbing prospect). Always keep in mind that Truth is a very great blessing – we can be the source of that blessing. We have all manner of resources available – books, videos, websites, even a live person on the end of the ‘phone! It is a privilege and an honor and a responsibility to defend one’s faith. Pray to be effectual, an often used word in Scripture, simply productive.

Having knowledge of the truth and not sharing it might be comparable to being a witness at a crime and not stepping forward. Who does Pro. 13:7 refer to when it says that “Some who are poor pretend to be rich, *others who are rich pretend to be poor.*” Why would they do this? Is it possible that they don’t recognize what they have?

Preparation and determination are essential - so that *when* the day of evil comes... (you will not be engulfed ...Eph. 6:13.

Education *should* equal empowerment. Combine it with love for your fellow human being and you might have an unstoppable force.

Knowledge comes with a promise and a responsibility. Is it not our duty to point out faulty logic? Who is supposed to do this? Eric Chang says: “If we still have a modicum of logical thinking left in us we would see that: if there is God the father, God the Son, and God, the Spirit then, obviously, there are three Gods according to this dogma. Yet we seem unable to face up squarely to the plain fact of the matter! Here we see the power of indoctrination and its capacity to overpower logical thought.”¹⁰

People *sense* how important things are to you; give them cause to wonder and be amazed.

Educating oneself in order to share Truth is a very noble art and one that, I believe, God will bless. One of the Scriptures speaks of constant improvement, a very sobering requirement. So too, the question put in a class I recently attended: what grade would you give yourself on the exercise of sharing your faith? The fact that continuous learning has *not* generally happened in the evangelical mind work *for* us. According to *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* – “...American evangelicals are not exemplary for their thinking, and they *have not* been so for several generations...evangelicalism has little intellectual muscle.”¹¹ I say this to encourage us all; it is not that difficult to challenge the system, generally people know so very little. And consider this: “Some evangelical pastors have several reasons for not preaching on abortion and one is fear of man.”¹² The article maintains that many pastors (meant to be shepherds) are silent on abortion or only whispering. Whispering is not good enough. Silence is worse.

Remember this gem: “Not to speak is to speak. Not to act is to act.”¹³

Another author speaks of the evangelical spirit as the common reasoning process by which one chooses to *evacuate* one’s mind.¹⁴ He paints the picture like this: 1) religious faith is not propagated by logic or learning; 2) it was best propagated by unlearned and ignorant men (wrongly referring to both Jesus and his disciples as such); 3) learning was a handicap in the propagation of faith; 4) since passing on the faith is the most important task – it is best done by those who are “ignorant as babes.”¹⁵ His conclusion is that humble ignorance is far better than logic and learning. I say this to paint the picture of what you may find and to give us all confidence that we can go against this giant.

(6) Practical Helps

Expose yourself to positive peer pressure. Always being with those who make you feel good about yourself can be misleading if not blinding.

¹⁰ *The Only True God*, pp. 24, 25

¹¹ *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, Mark Noll,

¹² *World* magazine, Jan, 25, 2014

¹³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer

¹⁴ *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*, Richard Hofstadter

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

Don't settle, don't be content with your own frail or feeble stand. You may often return to a situation; this time – do it right. Take advantage of second chances. Do your homework.

Our faith/courage needs all the help it can get; give your friends permission to point out blind spots (no pretending).

What prevents courage? Fear and shame. Deal with them. Eliminate them.

What begets courage? Example and modeling. (Age segregation is very much against us here. Children need to see their elders as they worship and as they pray, a very important principle, I think.)

Failure can be disguised, so that we don't even notice it, especially in ourselves. Is it possible we could be guilty of failure to stop and think through the implications of being silent? Which is to say that you are willing to let something pass when you know it is not true.

The dynamic of the "I've Got Your Back" principle is critical in this faith business. It is easier for me to stand and I am stronger if I know that someone in TN or CA or WA is standing too. I take courage from knowing others' stances. We take strength from one another and we give it as well, a sort of mathematical formula of multiplication of courage and steadfastness and determination. We are, according to Scripture, "in this fight together", Phil. 2:30a.

This profound statement from Dr. Martin Luther King should stir us: "In the end, we will remember not the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends."¹⁶

Practice is vital! And not only practice, but preparedness. An example would be a hub or grouping of verses on various controversial subjects in your Bible – not for yourself but for others.

Intentional living communities – a philosophy that could help us.

Knowing the real heroes of the faith – Servetus, Mary Dana, John Biddle, Jean Boucher,¹⁷ Francis David¹⁸ etc. We should be brought up on these.

What price courage? There is a price to pay. The truth is expensive.

God has a marvelous way of bringing His children great opportunities brilliantly disguised as impossible situations or opportunity disguised as imposition. In the Chinese picture-letter alphabet, the symbol for crisis is a combination of two characters—one meaning 'danger' and the other "opportunity. You can look at it either way. So too, with the 'danger' of giving a challenging remark; it could mean 'danger' or it could mean opportunity.

What Jesus did most of the time was to try to persuade people. Why do we not copy this behavior? There are very great benefits to sharing one's faith. *You* will be the beneficiary. Pay it forward, as the saying goes.

People *love* stories. Tell your faith story instead of the 'when I got saved' version. Mention things that caused you to stop and think and to change your mind. You can often begin a conversation by just saying: I was just thinking about

Think of *blessing* someone with the freedom to *think, to reason, to ask questions*. *Not to think* is bondage and you can release people from that bondage. If you view it as the greatest blessing that you could give to someone – this Kingdom hope (and that it is a complete tragedy that people don't have this) – then you will *naturally* want to share it.

Perception is everything. If you perceive the sharing of Truth as a burden, then it will be. If you perceive it as being a blessing to others, you will be much more eager to do so.

¹⁶ Dr. Martin Luther King

¹⁷ Also known as Joan of Kent. She was arrested as a heretic in 1548, jailed for 1 yr. , pressured to recant. She would not and was therefore burned at the stake. Her crimes: she believed in re-baptism (as an adult), and she did not believe in pre-existence. She was also involved in smuggling the N.T. into England under her skirts.

¹⁸ Founder of the Unitarian Church in Transylvania, questioned the trinity in 1565. He died in prison in 1579. Some attribute to him this statement: "We need not think alike to love alike."

If our behavior does not reflect our beliefs, then something might be amiss. Our beliefs must be translated and channeled into behavior. Boots on the ground.

Is it a sin to be fearful? Is it a sin *not* to show courage? Rev. James 4:17 – “Remember, it is sin to know what you should do and then not do it.”

(7) Conclusion

There are so many conversational opportunities now, even the movies, *Hell and Mr. Fudge*, and *Son of God* lend themselves to discussion. Both provide excellent talking points. I find that just *naming* the books you are reading can be good. E.g. *When Jesus Became God*¹⁹, *They Never Told Me This in Church*²⁰, *Jesus Wars: How Four Patriarchs, Three Queens, and Two Emperors Decided What Christians Would Believe for the Next 1,500 Years*²¹, *When God Prays*²² There are a myriad ways of getting into the conversation. Each one teach one really does work. But you gain even wider coverage, of course, with the internet. Surely we should voice our opposition. Because *not* to voice our opposition makes us Minimally – we should be known for what? Must we not break the spirit of timidity? Personally, I am compelled to speak of John 17:3 each time I hear John 3:16.

Calvinism is a great conversation starter. Not very long ago we were discussing the ethics of waterboarding. Waterboarding would be *nothing* to being tortured eternally. How is it we have been so hoodwinked that we could actually think that of our God? If you really think about it, Calvinism does not allow God to show mercy – because once He has designated one for damnation – no matter what that person might do – even if he should want to repent – God *cannot* have mercy on him. I wonder where that idea came from?!

Perhaps one of the penalties of being afraid is the acceptance of it (& so for all of sin).

Is there any valid reason for violating our faith?! Not to stand for the faith is a violation.

Another profound statement from Dr. King: “Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter.”²³

Queen Esther’s magnificent “If I perish I perish... (Esther 4:14) as a response to “For if you remain silent at this time...”

How do you follow something like that? Perhaps we might follow Esther’s example and decide: - if I am mocked I am mocked...if I am scorned and ridiculed so be it. It is to the glory of God.

¹⁹ Richard Rubenstein

²⁰ Greg Deuble

²¹ Philip Jenkins

²² Skip Heitzig

²³ Dr. Martin Luther King