



# Unafraid: Moving Beyond Fear-Based Faith

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## **Unafraid: Moving Beyond Fear-Based Faith** Benjamin L. Corey

The creator of the popular Formerly Fundie blog on Patheos and a prominent figure within Progressive Christianity explains how the "American Christianity" we are currently taught is actually a fear-saturated distortion of biblical faith.

Benjamin L. Corey thought he was suffering a crisis of faith, but it turned out to be a spiritual awakening. Corey became aware that the constant fear of hell and judgment that defined his Christian faith was out of sync with the idea that God acts from love, and promises to deliver us from fear. In the wake of this realization came newfound insights--from reading the Bible to re-examining American life and the church's role in the wider world. Corey learned that what he had been taught was a distorted version of Christianity that was not only untrue but caused real spiritual harm.

He also discovered that he wasn't alone. Many Christians are yearning to distinguish between the Christianity that has become a rigid American civil religion and the authentic Christian faith embodied in Jesus. As he recounts his own spiritual journey, Corey offers a powerful and inspiring message of hope for every Christian increasingly frustrated with the church today. Do not be discouraged, he assures them. You do not need to give up your faith; you can rediscover the reality of a vibrant Christianity that delivers us from fear and inspires and guides us all today.

## **Unafraid: Moving Beyond Fear-Based Faith Details**

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# From Reader Review *Unafraid*: Moving Beyond Fear-Based Faith for online ebook

## Joe says

Benjamin Corey's *Unafraid* is a story about the author's faith deconstruction - breaking down the toxic beliefs about God that permeate so much of the modern evangelical movement. While similar ground has been covered in (the much better) *Sinners in the Hands of a Loving God* by Brian Zahnd, some of Corey's observations and experiences absolutely floored me.

Specifically, Corey's chapters about the danger of "rapture theology," the Bible, and the way in which Christians (especially women) are taught to be overtly critical of themselves in order to glorify God really struck a nerve with me. Even though it's short, some of the chapters drag, but it would be a handy introduction to anyone who grew up within an ultra-conservative religious environment who's beginning to suspect there may be something more to faith and spirituality than what they've been given.

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## Tim A Hoolihan says

I read this with a men's group bible study group. Almost everyone in the group struggled with the author's writing style, and bits of hyperbole. That said, the author has a unique and interesting perspective, and it is worth hearing his story. And there are points of eloquent summation toward the end that pay off for the effort of reading.

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## Robert D. Cornwall says

You have heard it said: "Put the fear of God in him (or her)." Christians have often used scare tactics to gain converts. "If you don't believe in Jesus then God will send you to hell, where you will burn forever." Really? If God is defined by love, would God do such a thing? As Benjamin Corey points out in the opening chapter of his book "Unafraid," many Christians have expressed their outrage at the burning alive of a Jordanian pilot by ISIS militants, and yet have no problem believing that this same Jordanian pilot will burn in hell for eternity, because he's not a Christian. Corey writes that "if the theology of hell is correct, God is like an ISIS terrorist---but like one on steroids" (p. 2). He asks us to consider whether this image of God is a correct one, or at least in line with the message of Jesus? How does such a vision fit with the confession that God is love? If love casts out fear, then how can the fear of God be in us?

Benjamin Corey has written a response to those who would use fear to define the Christian faith. He writes as one who grew up in a narrow fundamentalist culture that emphasized the fear of God. Eventually he broke free of that culture, but then found himself among progressive Christians who seemed to be just as narrow, only the form of fear had changed. With fundamentalists on the right, it was having the right beliefs. On the left, it was doing the right thing. Either way, the message was fear-inducing, and such a vision continued to bother him. So, we have this book. It is a response that calls for a sense of balance. More specifically, it is a call to center one's faith in Christ, and be less focused on boundaries.

This is a very personal book, for Corey wants to tell his own story, and offer a way out of narrow confines.

At the end of the book he admits that the book is about himself, but that he wrote it for others who have had similar journeys. It's important to remember that each of us has a different journey and a different vantage point. So, as a reader and reviewer, my experiences may have parallels, and yet still be different.

Corey speaks of having a spiritual mid-life crisis that led to a loss of his church, pastorate, friends, all because he of changes of perspective on issues like guns and gays. He found himself questioning his faith, and on the verge of leaving all together. He found liberation among progressives, but then found himself facing a different set of challenges. As I read his story, I saw a pattern present that I've seen in others. It seems that many who start out in very conservative (and possibly liberal) environments swing all the way to the other end of the spectrum, and find that equally frustrating. Perhaps it's safer to have shorter swings (that is my experience). I must admit that while I did spend some time among rather conservative Christians, and took on some of the beliefs of that community, I didn't start out there. In fact, I started out in the Episcopal Church, and I didn't learn much about hell in that context. So when it came time to leave behind some of my conservative beliefs, it wasn't that difficult. Again each of us has a different story.

There is much to like about this book. I have a few qualms here and there (at one point, for instance, I thought I saw a bit of supesessionism, when Corey was dealing with how one reads the Old Testament, but he didn't linger there). While he mentions community a few times, it seems as if, from my reading, Corey's journey is rather individual. He says little if anything about being involved in a congregation (as a pastor I know that even the best congregations have their issues), and I wish he had said something about what it means to be in community. He seems averse to tribes and labels, but at least in most mainline circles, there is little overt tribalism. I'm Disciples, which was an early "no-labels" effort, but I get along just fine with my ecumenical partners. In fact, I rather enjoy working with people across tribal boundaries. We have our differences, but they don't prevent us from working together. So, I'm wondering, has Corey experienced that ecumenical reality?

With that said, I do appreciate the emphasis on love over fear. To be a Christian, to be a follower of Jesus, should not be defined by fear. I gave up "hell-fire" a long time ago. I stopped for awhile at annihilationism, but ultimately I came to believe, as I believe Corey believes, in the end God will welcome us all into the realm of God. There might be some fire, but it simply burns off the dross.

Having experienced the boundary police on both the left and the right, Corey has tried to come to a more centered position. I don't mean centrism as in moderation, but simply being centered in Christ. Corey has doctorate in Intercultural studies from Fuller Seminary. In that context learned about the difference between centered-set reality and bounded-set. That language was developed by Paul Hiebert, a long time Fuller professor of mission and anthropology. I too have embraced that vision (I'm a Fuller graduate as well, though from the School of Theology). In that vision, faith is understood in terms of moving toward the center, which is Christ. If, Jesus reveals the essence of God, which is love, then that center toward which we are moving is love. If we move toward love as evidenced by Jesus, then we can say good bye to this God of Fear.

Corey writes near the end of the book that his "in-versus-out approach to the Christian journey--one that was measured by either right thinking or right doing -- had completely side tracked me from my ultimate purpose of living. Instead of expecting me to rigidly focus on getting my theology right or getting my behavior right, God really wanted me to focus on moving in the direction of Jesus, which naturally expands our capacity to love" (p. 219).

My hope is that this book can help others who are stuck in fear based religion to break free and find a new vision. As we do this, we need to be careful with how read Scripture, especially the Hebrew Bible. As a Christian I read the entire Bible through the lens of Jesus, but if I'm Jewish I will read it with a different lens,

and still experience God's love. One can enjoy living within a faith family without engaging in tribalism. I'm a Disciple because that fits me, not because it is a superior tribe.

In the end, let us heed the word of the angel to the shepherds in the fields as they witnessed the angel choir singing praise to God: "Fear not, for I bring you good tidings of great joy!" Indeed, Fear not, for God is love, and Jesus reveals that love to us.

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### **Alana Muir says**

One of the best books on Christianity I've ever read. A reminder of why I still consider myself a Christian in spite of growing up Evangelical.

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### **Sally says**

Wow, that was a great book. Normalizing the faith crisis, not as a crisis, but as an inevitable, healthy period of growth and clarity. My faith has different particulars when it comes to cognitive dissonance contributors. His focus on rejecting fear, and embracing everything that enlarges the capacity for love, was spot on. For any belief system.

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### **Amory Blaine says**

Reading a white, male, ex-military, Christian internet celebrity is fairly off-brand for me. Thankfully, I had no idea who Benjamin L. Corey was until he introduced himself in the text, and by then I was already hooked. His journey from fearful commitment to Christianity to confidence in a loving God moved me deeply. He makes it clear that he's not on one political side or another, and nowadays he has just as many questions as answers. I was blown away by how humble, hopeful, vulnerable, and relatable this book felt. Some parts, like analogies between God and us and Corey's adopted children, especially resonated. I don't agree with all of the author's conclusions, but I WISH I did. Maybe I will eventually. For now this book has helped me see a little farther down a path toward love, free of fear. I'm grateful for that.

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### **Christine says**

*"So we have a choice: we can stay in these systems of false binaries and remain loyal to Christian labels, settle into groupthink, and submit to the pressures of tribalism. Or we can step out into a world that is far more difficult to define with word or categories."*

On the whole, I felt that this book was a bit simplistic and repetitive, and I was a little disappointed that the author didn't seem to use many sources to back up his thoughts. This was kind of a shame, because I didn't necessarily disagree with what Corey was saying - it just felt like this was more of a series of opinion posts at times rather than a carefully researched book. I also think that the lack of sources and the emphasis on

feelings would be a hard thing to get over for some of Corey's intended audience.

I'd still say that the book comes across as a heartfelt, personal journey that I (and probably lot of people who also come from Fundamentalist/Evangelical Christian backgrounds) could relate to and reflect on. The author's honesty about his struggles (particularly a point where his therapist had him do an exercise where he addressed God as if addressing someone who he'd had a toxic relationship with) was refreshing.

Related Reads:

In the Grip of Grace (Lucado)

Jesus Feminist (Bessey)

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## **Zachary Houle says**

I know I've told this story on Medium before, but in the context of Benjamin L. Corey's upcoming book, *Unafraid*, it's a story well worth repeating. When I was about two or three years old, and my parents and I lived in Toronto, Ontario, my mom took me to a Catholic church service. In my memory, this was probably the first time I had stepped foot inside a church, after my infant baptism (and, for the baptism, I don't think I was walking quite yet). Anyhow, I remember feeling that the service was boring and stuffy, and I know I was either acting up or fidgeting or otherwise driving my mom (bless her heart) crazy.

So my mother, at some point halfway through the mass, turns to me while pointing to a door to the right in front of us, located beside the altar area, and says to me, "If you keep on acting up, the boogeyman is going to come out of that door and take you away." Now, I don't remember if I actually smartened up and sat piously for the rest of the mass, but I do remember eyeballing that door and wondering how many kids of my age had been spirited away by monsters.

Flash forward to Grade 3. At that time, my family was now living in Barry's Bay, Ontario, a small village just to the east of Algonquin Provincial Park. One of the local Catholic priests?—being that I was attending a Catholic school and all?—paid a visit to my class to field answers to our burning religious questions, and mine was something along the lines of how good did you have to be to get to Heaven? And I think the priest tried to convince me that God doesn't keep a scorecard of all of the good and bad things that you've done in life. But I wasn't convinced.

For many, many years I thought of God as being a wicked, unloving entity?—fuelled by Old Testament stories of God sending she-bears after sinners and flooding the earth after much debauchery. So this is where Corey's book comes in. He had a fundamentalist upbringing, and pretty much thought that our Christian God was a God that was going to condemn us all to a lake of fire if we didn't repent our sins. The thing is, Corey has come to see God in a different, more kinder light. In fact, Corey?—while still retaining ties to the Anabaptist movement?—is a radical Christian who believes that gay people should be included in the church, among many other things.

Read the rest of this review at: [https://medium.com/@zachary\\_houle/a-r...](https://medium.com/@zachary_houle/a-r...)

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## **Rita says**

Finally, a book that addresses all of the things that keep sitting in the back of my head with that wee small voice saying "but what if you are wrong". I don't agree 100% with everything written but it definitely gives me food for thought along with some historical information to follow up on. If you are questioning the idea of God punishing people in hell and not a God of love, read this book and get out of it what is meant for you.

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### **Belinda says**

I loved this book. I have been thinking some of these same thoughts and wrestling with the same issues. Especially the realization that Christianity is not a clearly defined theology that is like a test that you pass or fail. People who would be interested in this book are those going through a transition in their faith. If you are deconstructing your faith, this is a good place to start. I find Covey to be hopeful and brutally honest. I love that he presents centered set theory. And I love that he focuses on Jesus. Thank you so much for writing this book. It was like water to my parched soul.

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### **Pam says**

Are you tired of living in a fear-based belief system (whichever faith you ascribed by) but still believe in the core beliefs and don't want to leave it all together? This book may be for you.

Growing up in a fear-based evangelical faith, Corey (of the Formerly Fundie blog) had numerous "crises" of faith until he realized basing your belief on fear is probably not good for you psychologically. He talks about how he journeyed through this discovery to where he is today, a faith in Christianity based on love, not fear.

I nodded my head several times because I see the similar thing in my religious community. It is something I am trying to transcend myself, but since I do not share the same belief system as Corey, I have to pave my own way. However, it's always nice to know I'm not alone.

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### **Pat says**

One of the best books I've read recently. The author does a good job identifying the fear that is embedded in so much of traditional Christian teachings. Even if you didn't grow up scared of hell or the rapture, you've undoubtedly experienced the effects of tribalism and the fear of going against the grain. But as the saying goes, we have nothing to fear but fear itself. Oh sure, there are things we encounter along the journey that strike fear or dread in us, but when we stare these issues in the face, choose to name them for what they are, what we've associated with them drains away and we can find freedom. As the author himself says,

what he came to "learn on this journey is this: a crisis of faith might not be a crisis at all. What if confronting the things we *don't* believe is exactly how we discover what we *do* believe? What if a faith crisis is actually something God has orchestrated in order to free us from false beliefs about him, false beliefs about ourselves, and false belief about others?" (p. 14)

Of course, the fear of a crisis of faith is something that many in churches will warn fellow parishioners of and try to steer them clear of either out of a sense of their own fear of questions and/or a need to maintain the status quo.

However, as with many things, not just matters of faith, "the fear of what we don't know can often be more powerful than what we currently do know" (p. 16).

Other insights from the book include:

"...I am reminded that it is entirely possible to be so busy trying to follow the follow that a person never actually ends up following Jesus" (p.64).

Boy, do I know some folks like this!

"I love having my beliefs expanded and challenged" (p. 89).

I do too! It's one of the reasons that I find environments that are not open to questions very stagnating.

We all see through lenses and "these lenses completely bend and shape our realities; they determine how we assign meaning to our life's events; and they most certainly shape how we view ourselves. But they are changeable, and that's where the growth happens" (p. 93)

In reference to traditional end times beliefs, Corey says, "this twisted worldview"....is something that "we eat it because it's what we've always been fed, not because it's actually what's most nourishing--or true" (p. 112). This is true of so many things that are taught in some churches--something we've always been fed and so what we end up believing is sometimes not only wrong, short-sighted, or outdated, it leads us to believe that any teaching introduced to the contrary can't possibly be true simply because it doesn't line up with what we've always believed. Some just cannot bring themselves to accept that maybe what they've always been taught is not up to snuff. Plus, it's easier to just continue with the status quo rather than stretching the mind to new limits.

As I said earlier, Corey also takes on the tribalism in churches and says that "fear keeps everyone in somewhat conformity with group norms, because fear of being excluded, forced out, or ostracized acts as chains on our hearts and minds to prevent us from thinking or doing anything the group does not approve of" (p. 130). "Christian tribalism thrives on making new members conform to whatever degree is possible and expelling them if it starts to become apparent that they can't be safely trusted to operate within the boundaries the tribe has set to determine who is a good conservative, a good progressive, or a good whatever" (p. 131). Yes, you read that right, "a good progressive". Tribalism knows no bounds; it can be found in liberal as well as conservative circles and the means for keeping people in line may differ in terms of methods ("fundamentalists will escort you out, while progressive Christians will publicly shame you until you go away"), but the goal is still the same--to prevent individual thought that would seem to conflict with the norms that the group has decided that they stand for. The root, however is fear "because "fear demands we eliminate that which triggers our fear" (p. 131). "If someone gets even one of the answers wrong, that person can easily be seen as a threat because new ideas always have a way of triggering fear in those who aren't ready to be open to them" (p. 132). Of course, this is a fallacy that people buy into--that they have to be accept everything set before them. But in fact, we don't have to! We can decide to mull something over before accepting it and even reject it, if need be, but it certainly doesn't mean doing so by forcing out anyone who dares to think differently. That's where having a broader mind come into play. It allows room for more than one belief in the community. As Corey says, "I came to believe that when others force us to pick a side



and give us only two options, a totally legitimate Christian response is to dismiss the invitation entirely and to become a more independent thinker" (p. 156)

As we struggle with the constant pull to fit in and assimilate, it would be wise to remember that "sometimes doing nothing gives us enough space to breathe so that we can learn to make better decisions and think rationally again. Feeling like we don't fit can be an extremely uncomfortable position, and our instinct is often to relieve that tension by forcing ourselves to fit somewhere else, even when we don't. For me, doing nothing--realize that I didn't have to be any particular type of Christian right now and that I didn't have to be afraid of that--gave me the freedom to rediscover myself and to find a better expression of faith, without someone else doing the defining for me" (p. 134). As I read this section of the book, I came to the conclusion that sometimes, some people or groups simply are not your tribe, and realizing that is very freeing. You then can walk away without guilt and find your freedom elsewhere. In doing so, you find (or at least I and the author did) "that *me* was the only thing I was interested in being--because it was the only way I was going to find peace. My life got instantly better the moment I accepted that I didn't have to fit perfectly anywhere on the Christian landscape, and that this would be okay. In fact, I went on to realize that trying to fit within a Christian label was one of the very things that made me feel crazy so much of the time--because that's what labels do to Christians" (p. 135).

Labels however, in and of themselves, aren't really the problem. They're just words, identifiers. "The issue is...*how we relate to the labels* that start to form us into people who look like *anything but* the Jesus of the New Testament" (p. 140). "Second, when we allow our identities to be defined by tribal labels, we slowly become people compelled to fight for and defend the label, even if it means causing harm to fellow Christians. We do this because any perceived threat to *the label* becomes (in our minds) a threat to *ourselves*, even though this is usually not the case" (p. 142-143).

Towards the end of the book, Corey relates an experience in his therapist's office of speaking out loud to God his frustrations and disappointments and then speaking on behalf of God the same thing. This was a powerful experience and even reading it, I could sense the power this experience had in helping to free him from some faulty thinking and behavior that had loomed over him for much of his life.

In short, this book is a great read and will be of benefit to anyone struggling with their faith or to remain plugged in to a church system that falls far short of being what it purports to be.

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**Julie Porter says**

**Do Recommend**

My family and I read this together and loved it! We read a blog post of his that led us to this book. Lots of

good things and lots of stuff to think about! Interestingly, specific chapters spoke to each of us as we went along, which made the whole experience that much more powerful.

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### **Brad says**

too bad I can't go with zero stars. That would be a better reflection of the letdown I experienced as I read this. I was SO excited at the premise of this book, I couldn't WAIT to get into it. I wanted to be overwhelmed by stories of how GOOD God is, and how exciting and wonderful a relationship with him was supposed to be. Stories that mainstream Christianity often miss.

Instead, I found this to be more of the same. Rather than espousing the GOOD, rather than emphasizing the positive position, he spends the majority of the narrative running down the things he disagrees with, or the attitudes he's been hurt by in the past. In reality, this book essentially devolves into angry negative rantings against all the things that are WRONG and the WRONG things that all those ignorant unenlightened people out there do and believe.

Please. Spend more time telling me what you DO believe, WHY you believe it, and attempt to get me as enthusiastic about those things as you are. There are already enough voices out there proclaiming all the ills of the world, and all the ways we're all doing things wrong.

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### **Pam Herbert says**

I became acquainted with Benjamin through his book "Undiluted". This book ("Unafraid") actually spoke loudest to me as I emerged out of fundamentalism years ago and evangelicalism about 12 years ago. His words described my journey to a T and it was all about refusing to be afraid any longer. I refused to be afraid of the Father. I refused to be frightened by the (empty) threat of hell. I lost many friendships when I left evangelicalism and it even affected my marriage but I could not remain AFRAID any longer because I was at the point of risking my most important relationship - the one with Jesus. I was not willing to risk losing that most intimate of relationships.

I urge you to read this book, especially if there is something within you crying out that there has to be something more than a relationship built on fear. And grab "Undiluted" while you are at it.

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