The Physiology of It – Faith vs. Evidence

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St. Faith and Dr. Evidence have gone to the blogs, duking it out for custody of LIKE and DISLIKE. You two seem as separate as East and West and never the twain shall meet except at Armageddon. You seem to think you’re apples and oranges growing in separate groves continents apart, incapable of cross-pollination, brought to proximity only by UPS Air Freight and Trader Joes, or Spectrum or Educate Truth. Each proclaims he holds the keys to the kingdom and the other the keys to hell.

Break it up, you two! Very unseemly. You’re supposed to be married, a marriage made in heaven, remember? And you’re Adventist, remember? Alas, Another Adventist divorce, and not an amiable one.

It’s time you two got some serious counseling. I’ve been waiting for that to happen. Alas, it hasn’t. I’ll try.

I’ll try by parables, not by syllogistic vectoring or fusillades of quotes. And the parable I give is physiology. For to me, being an MD (parabolic of the health professions), physiology is the most immediate and compelling parable of how Faith, by whatever name, and Evidence, by whatever name, work. It is what I’ve studied for a lifetime, and — since announcing it seems important nowadays, even in the pulpit — have my doctorate in. Also parabolic is the research laboratory, where I spent a couple of years of my life.

Physiology is the parable of how, in His image, we are fearfully & wonderfully made. Right now physiology might well be even more informative than theology or academia.

Faith and Evidence: you are organs in the same organism, integral and integrated, afferent and efferent: you are the sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous systems, the frontal cortex and brain stem. You are systole and diastole, the left and right ventricles, one balancing and empowering the other. The left ventricle can’t eject until the right ventricle empties into it.
You are male and female, and what God hath joined together, thus and thus only to be fruitful and multiply, let no man put asunder.

It works very like human physiology with enzymes and hormones, cells and organs, bone and stromal jelly all working together in the same person. Or like the separate kingdoms, animals breathing carbon dioxide out and oxygen in, and plants taking carbon dioxide in and producing oxygen.

When thinking of separate organisms, it’s most like symbiosis. Symbiosis, as per favorite professorial PowerPoint, is when two beings or creatures, like fungus and intestine, or fungus and orchid, not merely assist each other but depend upon each other for mutual survival. The very excrement of one is food for the other, food the other gets nowhere else.

Where does Evidence end and Faith begin? Ideally one can’t tell: it’s seamless. But sometimes Evidence seems to have abandoned Faith, a sore trial. Alas, Faith is sometimes the one that weakens, falters, faints. Evidence and Faith are designed to work as fail-safes, backups, as reserves so that when one kicks out the other kicks in. It’s normal and physiological for one to be active and the other not. So it’s diastole and then systole, diastole-systole, forever. If both ventricles are active simultaneously that’s arrhythmia and you’re sick; if neither, that’s cardiac arrest and you’re dead.

With Faith and Evidence working together like that, there’s no room for philosophical detours into servitude or blind Faith, a term which, it will be happily noted, is not herein used. Except that it brings us to commensalism and our next PowerPoint. That’s when two beings or creatures or living entities simply coexist on the same planet, or in the same organism, but are functionally oblivious of each other. Then Faith is dead blind; Evidence is a dead-end. By the way, when they coexist on the same blog they tend to be hostile and oblivious.

That’s all very poetic and beatitudinal but now for the nitty-gritty, the lab. Popular wisdom and scientific myth to the contrary, the lab is not the model of Evidence supreme. It’s more the model – in the lab we have experimental “models,” not parables — of total, constant interdependence of Faith and Evidence, sometimes a tense and sweaty relation, interested or disinterested, manipulated or liberated. Mountains of Faith are required before Evidence ever comes on the scene, or can: first by the investigator, overarching Faith in the hypothesis he sets out to prove, not infrequently against already existing proof to the contrary. Faith by the university in the investigator’s record and his spiel. For grant funding by the NIH or whatever governmental agency or parochial foundation, the grantor will have to have Faith that the conclusions accruing from the investigation will be totally objective even if unwelcome or quite the opposite, friendly. Finally the lab proceeds by Faith in hiring techs and engaging research fellows and expensive analytical and data processing equipment and experimental animal cages, and likewise exercising their own kind of Faith, Animal Rights Activists who somehow are in the process.

Then and only then come the data, the closest science ever sees of pure Evidence.

And finally, the – ta dah! — conclusion!, hopefully (Faith is already back) reflecting only, and honestly, and intelligently, the data. “From the foregoing data it can be concluded that…” is the required, so familiar way The Journal of Clinical Investigation or Nature or Lancet put it, whereupon the rebuttals and counter experiments, the counter-conclusions, the rancor, the ardor, the hubris settles in. Again. I’ve been there.

Meanwhile back at our big tent, big enough for every diversity of culture, every worship- and lifestyle, ideology, theology and theodicy, ethic and ethnic, thus big enough, surely, but apparently questionably, for both Faith and Evidence. By the way, I’m so old I remember when the big tent was for evangelism; now, more like a flea market.
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We all have attaché cases bulging with proof texts for either Faith or Evidence – either or. To me, all those texts prove neithe r. They prove both. Like John 20:7, where Christ instructed Thomas to “reach hither thy finger, and behold my hands; and reach hither thy hand, and thrust it into my side,” for proof. In the next breath He blessed those who didn’t require such proof, but didn’t curse Thomas either, but gave us Thomas’s experiential proof for our own Faith. And John 10:38 where He says, even though you “do not believe me, believe the works, that you may know and understand that the Father is in me, and I in the Father.” Which immediately confronts us with the consummate circular interaction: “No man can come to Me except the Father … draw him,” but “no one cometh unto the Father but by Me.” John 6:44; 14:6.

And do we SDAs not understand – perhaps it is peculiar to and distinguishing of Adventists – that the whole Great Controversy is the story of God presenting proof to the universe, consummated by the Evidence of His crucifixion, of His character, and proof that Satan lied? God, we believe, we know, could have simply proclaimed both those things and commanded that the universe simply believe it.

As Adventists, what happens when, as foretold in Matthew 24:24, St. Faith does the St. Vitus Dance and Dr. Evidence is operating without a license, behind a mask behind a mask – so that if it were possible the very elect will be deceived? Then, only those who have stocked up on both will survive.

For an Adventist, where do Evidence and Faith end and God begin? From the beginning and throughout. Without Him central, this whole essay, never meant to be heavy, would be foolishness. If Faith cannot survive without Evidence, neither of them exist without God. Directly or indirectly, everything comes from Him. In the end, at bottom, always, that’s what Faith and Evidence are all about, God. To prove Him, confirm Him; to serve Him; to worship Him, praise Him, which is why we were created. As described in Genesis 1, where Faith and Evidence first embraced, and were first put asunder, whereupon Cain bashed Abel to pulp.

For the Evidence and Faith of Adventism, Genesis 1 is Ground Zero.