



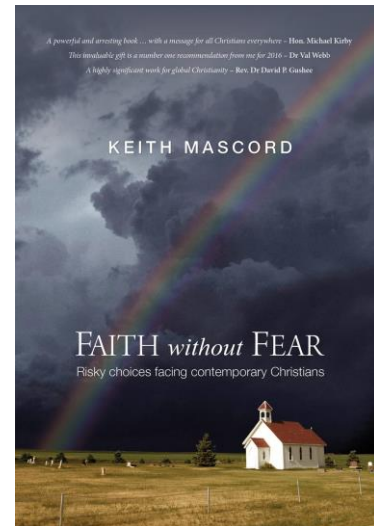
Keith Mascord, *Faith without Fear: Risky choices facing contemporary Christians* (Northcote: Morning Star, 2016).

Reviewed by Andrew Sloane.

In *Faith without Fear* Keith Mascord explores his own faith journey and articulates some of the concerns he has with contemporary (Australian [Sydney Anglican]) evangelical Christianity. While it is an interesting book and it clearly articulates his own views, in the end, I do not believe it achieves its purpose of outlining what Christian faith without fear might look like.

The book opens with an appreciative Foreword by Bill Lawton, followed by an Introduction in which Mascord outlines key concerns he has with (evangelical) Christianity and presents the first-person accounts of a mother and father of a gay son. There are ten main chapters. Chapters one through five outline key theological and cultural problems that Mascord identifies in contemporary (conservative) evangelicalism, namely: literalistic interpretations of Scripture; an inerrantist view of Scripture's inspiration; questions raised by the possibility of pseudepigraphy (the idea that, say, Paul did not author 1 and 2 Timothy); the unhelpful pushback against criticism and alternative views exemplified by a number of conservative groups; and the casualties these beliefs and behaviours create amongst conservative Christians and others. Chapters six through ten outline what he sees as the form that authentic Christianity must take in response to these challenges. It must: have the courage to be honest; risk asking questions; embrace critical and creative appropriation of Scripture; adopt love as its most reliable guide; and recognise that hope, rather than fear, enables us to develop a resilient faith.

Faith without Fear has many fine points. The most obvious of these is Mascord's willingness to ask hard questions and follow them wherever they seem to take him. Most of these questions have been around for a long time and plague many Christians. It is vital that they be given an airing. I also appreciated the way he points out the fear that drives segments of evangelicalism and how stifling honest questions and doubts damages people and the faith we are meant to safeguard. His observations on the sociology of conservative evangelicals



and the manner in which some of us police the borders of the faith were unsettling and at times painfully accurate. Quite frankly, it puzzles me that some of my co-evangelicals seem to think that the faith that we hold, or their grip on it, is so fragile that it cannot bear the weight of honest inquiry or withstand the pull of doubt. The disturbing questions of Ecclesiastes, and the searing pain expressed in Job and the Psalms of lament suggest otherwise. I'm not convinced that Mascord has framed the questions quite right, nor do I find myself persuaded to follow where he leads. Nonetheless, evangelicals need to do more to foster an environment in which doubts and questions can be explored in freedom and confident trust, rather than generating a culture reminiscent of a fideistic police-state.

Every chapter raised questions or dealt with issues that evangelical Christians need to address, often exposing flaws in how we have dealt with them. Let me give some examples.

The first two chapters, 'The Lure of Literalism' and 'The Error of Inerrancy', address literalistic readings of Scripture and whether the Bible might contain errors of fact. He presents reasons for rejecting classical inerrantist interpretations of the stories of Noah, and Adam and Eve, and explores a range of views on the question of biblical inerrancy. He argues that, while various qualified versions of inerrancy can account for the evidence he presents, they have so qualified the doctrine as to render it almost useless. While I think his conclusion is overstated, and recent evangelical discussions of Scripture have attempted to address his concerns, he does prompt us to ask whether 'inerrancy' is the best, or only category to use in our doctrine of revelation. Of course, Scripture Union and Lausanne have adopted alternative articulations (Scripture's trustworthiness or reliability), and I believe these, and other formulations, allow us to affirm our commitment to the full and final authority of Scripture. Even so, we need to address the questions he raises.

Chapter 4, 'Inevitable Pushback', changes both tack and tone. It outlines what Mascord calls two contemporary 'resistance' movements in evangelicalism, The Gospel Coalition, and the Global Fellowship of Confessing Anglicans. He likens them to the Fundamentalist movement of the early twentieth century, and suggests that such movements are characteristically militant, authoritarian, simplifying, paternalistic, conformist and fearful. This was, I must confess, an unsatisfactory chapter. He made some good observations on the politics of faith, and his account of damage done to him and others in the name of evangelical truth makes for sobering reading. Unfortunately, there was also a good deal of generalising overstatement and unfair caricaturing of adherents to more conservative views. I was particularly disappointed with his tendency to damn by association, making it seem that the movements as a whole exemplified all the vices of their worst exponents. This is simply not true. It is also

a great pity (and rather ironic) given Mascord's legitimate concern that we not stereotype those who disagree with us.

Chapters 7 and 8, 'The Exhilarating Risk of Inquisitiveness' and 'The Inescapable Need for Appropriation', deal with a number of issues, focusing on women and men and ministry, and homosexuality from the perspective of epistemology (especially how we deal with cognitive dissonance, Ch.7) and hermeneutics (adopting Ricoeur's interpretive method, Ch8). While he made some interesting points, and I broadly agree with his egalitarian conclusions on gender relationships and women and ministry, and disagree with his inclusive conclusions on homosexuality, the arguments themselves were unpersuasive. Indeed, he often regurgitated caricatures of Scripture that have been well-addressed in the evangelical literature. For instance, Mascord argues that the Old Testament's endorsement of slavery and the chattel-status of women renders traditional views of the inspiration and authority of Scripture implausible, requiring an alternative approach to the texts and allowing us to reject problematic features of the biblical witness. But both of those issues have been treated—often at length—in evangelical OT scholarship (see, for instance, Christopher Wright's work on OT ethics, or even my own). Perhaps Mascord is not persuaded by the arguments. Fine; but to proceed as if these questions haven't been raised and wrestled with, and perhaps even answered, by evangelical scholars is unacceptable.

I could say more: the book is characterised by an intriguing mix of whimsy and pugnacity, and a puzzling mix of careful reasoning and offhand caricature. The whimsy of the writing sometimes veils, sometimes accents the pugnacious tone of the claims being made. The careful reasoning is evident in some of the discussion of inerrancy; the offhand caricature is evident in the discussion of slavery and women (and, for that matter, what the empirical data suggests about homosexuality and how conservative Christians have responded to it).

But let me end where the book ends. Having dealt with a wide range of issues, and explored some of his own journey of faith, Mascord closes with some reflections on what he thinks a defensible faith might look like. In the process, he questions the legitimacy of classical doctrines, such as sin, the Incarnation, and the need for atonement. Now, I think all of these questions can be satisfactorily addressed in evangelical theology (and, indeed, have been satisfactorily addressed—see, for instance, Graham Cole's work on the Incarnation and the atonement). It would have been helpful for Mascord to have pointed to those discussions, even if he is not convinced by the arguments. It is a shame that he does not do so, a failure that seriously undermines the force of his case.

Mascord has done us a service in seeking to explore honestly and fearlessly the questions and doubts of faith. Unfortunately, in the end, I fear little of the faith is left. Those looking to explore the questions might find Mascord's book of interest; but for fruitful explorations of how they might be answered, they will have to look elsewhere.

About the Reviewer

Andrew Sloane is Lecturer in Old Testament and Christian Thought, and Director of Postgraduate Studies at Morling College, Sydney. He studied medicine at the University of NSW and practiced briefly as a doctor before training for Baptist ministry. His academic interests include Old Testament and Biblical interpretation, philosophical theology, bioethics and epistemology (philosophy) and the integration of theology and other disciplines.