

OUR BEHAVIOR

The outer, physical church is ever plagued with all the survival problems and all the foibles and joys and successes that attend any other earthly endeavor. Always we are aware that the Message is better than our behavior, and that our outer success, or even existence itself, is tenuous at best. You could say we are a “sputtering beacon.” Yet the church is more than its physical existence. And its real story is never contained within the history of any one of its congregations or denominations. Nor is the story of the church ever contained in just one country or nation, or even in an entire generation or century.

Only Jesus knows who is really in His church. It has often been called the “church invisible,” though inaccurately. To cut confusion, my former parish called it “church-o” when they meant the church organization, and “church” when they meant the body of Christ, the fellowship of believers. When people say they don’t like the institutional church, they mean they don’t like the church-o. Few of us do. Those who do seldom have any real love for Jesus. It is the true church that draws and inspires us, not the outer structures and organizations of this world. Do not be fooled: Many people in every generation labor over very mundane tasks that seem to serve only the outer shell of some physical edifice, yet they do it in their hearts to serve the church invisible. They do it for Jesus. Jesus is more than the details; more than the successes or failures; more than the statistics of any given moment, whether we like them or dislike them. The beacon of the true, or invisible, church does not sputter nearly as much as does that of the outer form. Though at times this might impress some as a vague grasping at straws, one does have to contend with the fact that the church is still present in this world after *two thousand years* of serious sputtering. For all our mistakes and failures, something keeps inspiring us to go on. If all of us in this congregation decided at the same time to forget all this spiritual foolishness and just get back to the physical realities in the “real world,” this church would die in a hurry. But we can be very sure that others would pick up the banner in other places, and move on with the Message and mission of our Lord. We would only have cut ourselves out of the story. For all our concerns and complaining, the Spirit never asks us to participate unless we want to. The church is never for those who need it, only for those who want it.

So we may come to love a specific church – an actual faith family that we belong to. But our loyalty is always to Jesus – the Lord and Head of the church. *That* is the beacon that does not sputter. While we try to be His Body in this world – doing what He would want us to do – the product of our efforts is never the core of our confidence or the light of our lives. That is why those who try to get us focused on our own success or good works always lead us astray in the end.

While we are on the subject, the real difference between the Old Testament and the New Testament has nothing to do with God being wrathful in the Old Testament and loving in the New Testament. If that is what you think, you either don't think much or haven't read either Testament very much. (Read Second Peter and then talk to me about how loving the God of the New Testament is.) What is true is that the Old Testament is focused on hopes, promises, expectations, and rewards that must be fulfilled in this physical world. A good (promised) land, a good king, prosperity and peace – all are tied to the realities of this world. To the degree they are not forthcoming, it is the punishment of God – it is because Israel has not kept the Covenant. Right behavior (on the part of the whole community) and prosperity are inescapably linked.

The New Testament has switched its hope to a different realm. *“My Kingdom is not of this world.”* (John 18:36) Success in this world is not necessarily from God. Failure, trouble, even persecution in this world are not necessarily a mark of faithlessness. It may even be a mark of *faithfulness*. We are promised persecution more often and more surely than earthly rewards. We do not expect any of our most important goals to be achieved except through some form of dying. I would never want to unhook the Old Testament from the New Testament; without knowing where we came from, we cannot see where we are. But there is a huge leap – a huge chasm – between Old Covenant and New Covenant expectations. The core reason that most of Judaism would not accept Jesus as Messiah was because Jesus was not bringing earthly prosperity or prominence. It is unthinkable that Messiah could be about life in a different dimension, or peace in a different realm. A rabbi said to me years ago: “It is impossible that Jesus was the true Messiah! Do you see peace or justice all around us?” End of discussion, as far as he was concerned.

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The truth is, we keep dragging habits, attitudes, and ways of thinking and behaving that match the Old Covenant into the New Life of the New Covenant. But they do not fit. They must be left behind or we literally turn the New Covenant back into the Old, and our communities become Old Covenant communities, no matter what we call them. Do you remember Jesus' cryptic comment about new wine in new wineskins?

So if we seriously expect a church that we are part of to be a beacon of the New Covenant and the New WAY, we must at the same time *expect* it to be a sputtering beacon. If it does not sputter, it is built on Old Covenant assumptions and ways. Does that sound confusing? Well, it is! It keeps confusing some of us all of the time, and most of us some of the time. Every time we expect some outer person or some outer form or organization to be perfect in this world, we have forgotten everything the New Covenant teaches us – everything the New Covenant reveals. We are a fellowship of sinners – forgiven, and being forgiven. Our trust is in the Lord, and in His future. Our trust is *not* in our present behavior, in our present success, or in our present condition.

Yet when things go wrong, or we think they are going wrong, on the natural plane of this physical world, we wonder: “Where is God?” And if we are not careful, we revert to Old Covenant habits: make more rules; make punishment more severe; tighten up the membership requirements; stop eating with sinners; make sure the kids aren't running around with anybody who needs their help.

Why is it true that if we are a faithful beacon of the New Covenant, we are also a sputtering beacon? So many ways to say this, and I am eager for you to see it so clearly you will never forget it. But if I am correct, I will sputter a bit, and some of you will not get it – yet. Try anyway.

Whenever we set out to create a really good church – whether it is Paul in Corinth, or Calvin in Geneva, or the Puritans at Plymouth – we start to think about our behavior. Our behavior always suggests – even begs – for some improvement. We assume that the beacon sputters because our behavior is not good enough. And if we are thinking about the organization – and every church is some kind of an organization – then it follows (or we think it follows) that we must do something to assure quality control. We must do something to make sure that the individuals within the church family behave in ways that bring honor

to the community. It is only logical. And that is exactly right: it is *only* logical ... and not spiritual.

Today's passage from Hebrews shows this very concern. Its author wants the Christian community to move beyond little things like repentance, conversion, forgiveness, trust, and reliance on God. It is time, he thinks, for them to "grow up" and perfect their behavior. So he starts to scold and threaten: If you stumble, you are out! "*If you have once committed your life to the guidance of the Holy Spirit and then fall away again, then you can never be restored.*" (verse 4) He got *that* from Jesus? No. Like Thumper (in *Bambi*), he added that part all by himself.

He gets better in the last two verses of the chapter, but at this point – focused on cleaning up everybody's behavior – the author of Hebrews has gone right back to the assumptions of the Old Covenant. He has forgotten the Gospel: the amazing grace, the offer of the Cross, the mercy and love of our Lord. If you trust the Bible to be truer than Jesus or His Holy Spirit, this passage will scare you right out of grace and mercy. If you believe the author of Hebrews more than you believe Jesus, you deserve the terror you get. And did you notice how I just reverted to Old Covenant persuasion?

You see it, don't you? The Book of Hebrews is wrong! Apostasy is *not* an unforgivable sin. It does *not* go deeper than the Cross. This passage flies straight in the face of Jesus' own teaching: that there is only one unforgivable sin, and that is the sin of not *wanting* forgiveness. On top of that, many of us know people (and some of us have *been* such people) who come to the Lord and then enter a new phase of life and fall away – and, *Hebrews notwithstanding*, we come back, more grateful and humble and obedient than ever.

Jesus told a parable about the wheat and the weeds: "*Another parable he put before them, saying: 'The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field; but while men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away. So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared also. And the servants of the householder came and said to him, "Sir, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then has it weeds?" He said to them, "An enemy has done this." The servants said to him, "Then do you want us to go and gather them?" But he said, "No; lest in gathering the weeds you root up the wheat along with them. Let*

both grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, 'Gather the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.'" (Matthew 13:24-30)

Why is the church a sputtering beacon? Because we are instructed *not* to try to take the weeds out of the picture. Wolves, yes! But not the weeds. The church is not a pure beacon of light because the church is where sinners go for help and love and forgiveness. You cannot be a hospital and the Olympic Team at the same time. If we start thinking that we are Jesus' Olympic Team, we know for sure that Jesus is no longer among us. *"But when Jesus heard it, he said, 'Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, 'desire mercy, and not sacrifice.' For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.'"* (Matthew 9:12) "In Christ's army, only the wounded soldiers can fight."

Any clear-thinking fundamentalist can tell you that I don't understand the parable. Weeds don't turn into wheat; weeds go to Hell. We are still instructed to live with the weeds because it's not our job to decide which are which. Only, I think the parable is much deeper than that. Some of the weeds will turn into wheat – they will be born anew. The very reason for patience is that we never know when a weed will turn into wheat (or vice versa), so we dare not pull one up early. If weeds do not turn into wheat, there certainly is no hope for me!

When I was in seminary, Mariana and I drove to Amherst, New Hampshire, each weekend. I worked as a sort-of "pastor in training" under Frank Weiskel at the First Congregational Church of Amherst. Frank was a wonderful friend and a great Mentor. But sometimes he would be a bit appalled at my attitude, for in those days I was much better at "Law" than at "Gospel." If you really want to hurt my feelings, you can remind me that I still am.

Anyway, from time to time, Frank would look at me out from under his bushy eyebrows and say, "Bruce, Bruce, we are not in the morals business. We are in the forgiveness business." It *does help* to know what business you are in! Are we in the Old Covenant – or the New?

Many years later, two years into my ministry at the First Congregational Church of Redlands, California, the church split right up the middle. Happily but barely, my side lost the vote. And so, unencumbered,

we got to start a new church from scratch. It was a weird feeling and an amazing opportunity. Here were all these people – from my perspective, “the good guys” – and they were all caring, serious, committed Christians, or they wouldn’t have been in this camp; they wouldn’t have stayed on our side through all the flak, which was enormous. And now together we wanted to be a *real* church. One common denominator among us was that all of us were sick of the “pretend church”: the lies; the subterfuge; the half-heartedness; the pretend commitment; the endless blocks to ever doing anything different, real, or significant about our Faith. But there we were, with no bylaws, no structure, no mutual assumptions or understandings about anything on the practical level of being a church.

Gleefully we said, “Okay, no more fooling around! We are going to be a really sincere band of Christian disciples.” I suspect that underneath was some undetected pride – that we would “show the world” what a real church could be like: A beacon on a hill. A light without much sputtering.

So we started to work on new bylaws: Every member would swear to tithe. Every member would agree to attend our worship services and congregational gatherings if it was humanly possible to do so. Every member would be part of a smaller Bible Study group. Every member would promise to pray and study the Bible on a personal level every day. It went on for seven absolute requirements, and three strong suggestions of recommended behavior. It was mouthwatering to contemplate what our fellowship would be like if all of us lived together in such a covenant of sincere and faithful behavior.

Weeks later, we were in total confusion and disarray. Meeting after meeting, we all agreed that this was exactly the kind of church we wanted to be. To each stipulation, ninety percent of us agreed that we would happily swear to live by such precepts. But no matter which discipline came up, a few of us – and never the same few – said sadly that they could not make such a promise. They might want to in theory; they might realize how important and beneficial it would be if everybody would live by such a standard. But they themselves could not swear to it, at least not at the present moment.

We were at the height of our enthusiasm – eager and determined to be faithful beyond any church experience we had ever had before. Yet we could not all agree to any precept we could think of that would further the life of the church. Thankfully, we were also staying honest.

As you might imagine, we were also praying – a lot! Were we wrong to want to be a church together? Was the Spirit telling us to all go join other churches and try to enrich their lives rather than form a church of our own? We were trying to be open to the Spirit's guidance, and to be willing to go in any direction indicated. And I had several invitations to come pastor other churches, so I was not being impacted by concerns to provide for my family.

Nevertheless, after over sixteen years in the ministry, I had forgotten all over again: We were trying to head back into an Old Covenant approach. How could I be so stupid?! (That's not really much of a question ...)

Nevertheless, grace abounds. Finally (from out of the shadows, it seemed) the Spirit broke through: "You cannot get there from here. Reverse the principle." We were trying to set up a church where the church tells all its members what they should do. The Spirit wanted us to set up a church where *the individual members tell the church what they are able and willing to do*. It might sound obvious to some of you; it took us quite by surprise – and delight: WE COULD EACH WRITE OUR OWN COVENANT. We would all swear to accept whatever each of us was willing and eager to promise. It would not be perfect, but it would be real and honest and, in many ways, more exciting than the way we were trying to go at it. And indeed it was!

Now *you* get to live with this approach, and hopefully it will never become "old and taken for granted." Hopefully you will continue to experience the zeal and enthusiasm of those who originally designed it.

What, then, of our behavior? Have we no standards, no expectations, no borders at all? That is poorly put. We have *all* the standards and expectations of the Law – *but not in the form of Law*. What if there were no consequences whatsoever for our mistakes and misbehavior? Would we gleefully change our behavior to what we know is destructive, short-range, and wrong? In some cases, for a while, perhaps; we are still learning and growing. But most of us, I suspect, try to steer our behavior according to our hearts and souls – and more and more by the Spirit's guidance. The longer we walk the Christian Path, consequences have less and less influence on our choices.

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On the other hand, do all of you know – do *most* of you know – that whatever mistakes or blunders you make, this is a place of forgiveness and acceptance? Oh, I hope so! I assume repentance because I assume we love our Lord and want the blessings of His WAY of Life. But more and more, our lives turn and move toward some combination of willing *obedience* and deep *gratitude*. *Obedience* not to a code or organization, but obedience to a PERSON – to Jesus, whom we trust and love above all others. *Gratitude* not for “things” we want on some physical plane or because things happen to be going well for us at the moment, but gratitude for who HE is – for His purposes and truth and love and future.

When no law, threat, fear of consequences, or outside pressure or circumstance can control our behavior, *then* we can live for God. Only then do we discover our own true selves. Is this truly our WAY in this place? Is Jesus our Lord and Light?

Well, do you get coerced or manipulated here? Do you get the feeling I want you for *me*, and not for *Him*? When you are around us for a while, do you get more and more freed to be and do what the Spirit truly wants you to be and do, despite all the pressures and expectations all around you?

Yes, some folk do wander from here to other places and purposes that apply more structure, more threat, more promises on a different level – appeals to “ego” or earthly acclaim or success. That has to be okay with us; the wheat and the weeds grow together. Some will come back. And when they do, I hope they will still find here a deeper, truer, more Spirit-filled and Spirit-guided LIFE.

In any case, I am not at all discouraged. My faith is not in this world, and I hope yours is not either. Keep sputtering. It is proof that we are not trying to control everybody just so we can look good. It is the mark of our being a place of repentance, forgiveness, mercy – a place where sinners still find Jesus, and walk with Him, and find New Life.