

SEVEN BY SEVEN

Sometimes one thing comes clear by comparing and contrasting it to another. That sort of thing has been happening to me in a particularly interesting way, and with great frequency, for over three years now. I keep seeing comparisons and contrasts between the church and twelve-step recovery. Even when I do not mean to draw comparisons, the church (you might be surprised) is a subject that comes up for frequent mention in twelve-step meetings. My ears prick up whenever that happens. I cannot help it.

Many twelve-step recovery members do not realize it, but their organization is intentionally patterned after the basic concepts of the Christian Faith, and specifically tailored from the Christian path of spiritual growth as developed by the Oxford Group Movement. All the ingredients are the same. Only the language has been changed to protect the innocent – well, to protect against exclusiveness – and to give folk a chance who either misunderstand or have learned to hate the concepts as they have been taught by the traditional church.

So they talk about “sobriety,” and we talk about “salvation.” They say “serenity,” and we say “peace.” They talk about being “on the program,” and we talk about “commitment” or “dedication” to Christ. They say “twelve-stepping,” we say “evangelism.” We say “penance,” they say “amends.” And so forth.

But it does not stop there. The parallels are more profound than that. They talk about going to meetings and what happens if you do not. We talk about going to church but no longer remember what happens if you do not. They know it is essential to confess you are an alcoholic, and only some of us know it is essential to confess that we are sinners. In one way or another, a twelve-step recovery group and a congregation face all the same problems and promises. A twelve-step recovery group is not a church, except by a correct definition almost never used anymore. The spirit of Jesus Christ, as we would understand and define it, is sought and understood as the core and hope of the program. But our words for that are not used because there are still Buddhists, Muslims, Jews, atheists, agnostics and others who need to get sober and find a new life.

So it is fascinating to have one foot in both camps, so to speak, and to watch the two compare and contrast. Often I feel that one makes it clearer to me what the other is trying to do. Often the twelve-step recovery program reminds me of what a church is supposed to be about, and I have a great urge to share that with you. It happens in reverse too! So I hope I am not stepping on any toes as I make these comments.

We were talking about the Gospel a few weeks back – salvation by faith and not by works, and the way in which the love of God changes us from within, when we come to believe in it. Everything changes when that happens. We go at things differently. It occurred to me that a twelve-step recovery group illustrates this in a way that clarifies our own purposes.

Imagine, if you will, a person who is in the advanced stages of the disease of alcoholism. (Some of us do not have to use imagination.) Almost anything can happen at that stage: stealing, murder (especially drunk driving), assault, and so on. Not everyone in a twelve-step recovery program has done all of these things, but everyone in such a group knows friends who have done all of these things and who are now living productive, caring, exemplary lives. How does that happen?

Go back to the beginning of the change – the first days on the program. People come into the program with incredible problems and with unbelievable wreckage surrounding their lives. But when they walk through those AA doors, they are greeted, applauded, and accepted as valuable and important human beings, no matter what they have done. That's gospel. That's what the church is supposed to be about. That's what the church is supposed to be like. If that did not happen, the many sane and lovely people – some almost “normal” – who attend most twelve-step recovery meetings (four and a half million of them) would not be alive today. The few who were would be into even greater wreckage and would not last much longer either.

Now, imagine that a policeman who is also a recovering alcoholic (such things happen) is the one to arrest a drunk for, let's say, breaking and entering. A few weeks later, perhaps on probation, the same officer sees the apprehended crook at a twelve-step meeting. In that meeting, it is still gospel! In the meeting, those two may become dear friends. And from the beginning, that policeman will be assuring the arrested person, “Hey, if you keep coming here and work the program, everything's going to be fine.” Maybe the next day, on the outside, the policeman

will be testifying in court against this same person. That's the law, not the gospel. Both things have their place. And the person will have to live under the law, serve the term, pay the fine, be on probation or whatever the court decides. What is going to "save" that person and bring him into a whole new way of life? Not the law! It will be the gospel, acted out in that twelve-step group. If that person keeps coming to the meetings, he will soon be helping others and finding a way of life he did not even know existed. That's the gospel. That's what the church is all about.

For me at least, that really clarifies some of the issues between Law and Gospel. Sometimes it helps to see what the church is – and is supposed to be about – from a different vantage point. Please do not think I am saying twelve-step groups are perfect or better churches than churches are. Lots of twelve-steppers take potshots at the church without having any notion what they are talking about. Lots of twelve-step folk are fond of saying that they believe in the spiritual life but do not like religion (especially organized religion). That's like saying the twelve-step program is wonderful but there should not be any twelve-step meetings. Interestingly, it does not bother me much that some of them have not thought it through and make dumb remarks about the church. What bothers me is that some of *you* say things just as strange. But that's a topic for another day.

In twelve-step programs, we also have people who come, stop drinking, but do not work the program. They are called dry drunks. They stop the worst of the old life, but they do not start a new one. They are not drunk anymore, but there is no joy in their lives either – a sad place to get stuck, and most of us find ourselves stuck there at times. The same thing happens in the church: dry Christians. Every organization, I suppose, has people who talk the talk but do not walk the walk. This is sad for the people who do that. It also tends to kill whatever organization they pretend to be a part of.

What would it be like if a twelve-step group went on a "membership drive" the way a lot of churches do? Can you imagine? All the members would be out saying to people: "Hey, it doesn't matter if you drink or not; it doesn't make any difference if you want to go on drinking; it doesn't matter if you work the program. You don't have to care about sobriety – just come and join our group. You will find a lot of nice people there, and we serve refreshments after the meeting." Can you imagine what would happen to a twelve-step group if it started caring about attendance records instead of about sobriety?!

Actually, a twelve-step group puts tremendous emphasis on attending meetings. Even an old-time traditional church looks flabby by comparison. Twelve-step people tell each other: “If you stop coming around, you will be drinking again.” That’s twelve-step language for: “If you don’t come to church regularly, you are going to go to hell.” It makes me nervous how so many of us ministers take poor church attendance as an inevitable reality we can do nothing about. In twelve-step recovery, however, the point is never that “we wanted a big turnout” or “we hoped fifty people would show up and only thirty-five came out.” People do not think or talk like that until they have absolutely lost sight of their purpose and no longer know what they are doing or why they are doing it.

Lent is a time of special spiritual stock-taking – a time to take some new step on the spiritual path. During each Lent, it is the opportunity of every Christian to get ready to “die” to something in their life, in order that something new may come to life within them. Crucifixion/Resurrection is not just our belief; it is our “WAY,” our expectation, our principle. The power of the Christian Faith is not just in the big death that separates this realm from the next. It is also in all the lesser and even little crucifixions and resurrections that move us from one awareness to the next, from one task to another, from one attitude to a better one.

So we begin Lent by asking questions like: Am I just talking the talk, or am I walking the walk? Am I on the program, or am I just putting in time? Am I really finding peace and learning love – that is, am I a recovering sinner – or am I still a practicing “sin-aholic”? And if I really am a sinner, caught in the disease, how many meetings can I miss – how long can I stay off the program or put off working the steps – before I run out of time or end up getting evil? (For those of you in twelve-step recovery programs, that is the church’s word for getting “drunk.”)

According to our tradition, there are seven sins which summarize and epitomize all that holds us back from the good life, from communion with God, from faithful and loving service in the grace of Jesus Christ. They are called the Seven Deadly Sins – deadly because they lead toward death, take all the fun out of life, ruin us, and leave us in despair.

Though I have stumbled across them again and again from seminary days on, it came clear to me not so long ago that I had never really studied or meditated much on the Seven Deadly Sins. They were part of my vocabulary but not part of my awareness.

So I started asking people about them, including some of you. I discovered that none of us could even name the Seven straight out. Clearly they are no longer part of our daily or working awareness.

That seemed a bit strange, as if it did not matter; as if we did not care if the enemy took us over; as if we were so cocky we did not have to worry about that which has devastated the saints in every generation before us. Of course, this is not our real attitude. At least I don't think so. We have simply never thought to take them seriously. As John Loudon says, "At first the Seven Deadly Sins seem mere relics of the medieval past. They remind us of life-denying asceticism – a vengeful God who tempts, then damns." To our ears, the Seven Deadly Sins seem a quaint list, more suitable for marketing perfumes than for serious study or contemplation. In fact, our society has refined the Seven Deadly Sins into the most acceptable character traits of a healthy American way of life: Self-gratification is a national goal. Thinking positively, especially about being rich and successful, is every American's solemn duty. You are supposed to think that way, whether you want to or not, because it's good for you and good for the country. Retiring early, or as soon as possible, with lots of money is a standard and normal goal. The only thing wrong with anger is repressing it. And so forth. How incredible that the standards have not merely changed or developed or moved into a different emphasis. They have literally reversed! We want what the saints before us feared. We fear what the saints before us wanted. Is that not fascinating, and maybe just a bit disturbing? Were they really so far off course – or are we? Or is it just that we are using an opposite language to try and mean the same thing?

To match the Seven Deadly Sins, there are also Seven Lively Virtues. They lead toward Life, put joy back into our hearts, make it possible for us to live faithful and obedient lives in the grace of Jesus Christ. I have been wondering if the virtues "match" or countermand the sins. That is: Is each one of the virtues, though good and appropriate in its own right, also specifically designed to counteract one of the sins? I find no lists that seem to match them up this way, so it must not be the case. Yet I find it interesting to play with the list that way, and I hope to get you doing it with me.

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One of the greatest fascinations of all is the realization that each of the Seven Deadly Sins is also a trait or instinct specifically designed to ensure our physical survival. Within balance, the Seven Deadly Sins are necessary here in this realm. I suppose that means we will never be entirely free of them. We can only look for ways to keep them from taking us over.

Likewise, the Seven Lively Virtues are designed to ensure our spiritual survival. If the tension between virtue and sin ever came to complete resolution – that is, if one or the other “won” us over entirely – we could not survive here, at either end of the spectrum. If the virtue wins, we only die physically. If the sin wins, we die both physically *and* spiritually. One suspects, or at least I do, that God does not expect us to entirely resolve the issues in one lifetime here. That, I suspect, is no reason for us not to try.

In Christian Faith and comprehension, we are not saved by being virtuous, and neither are we abandoned for being sinners. We are saved by the grace and love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord. To study sins and virtues is not the core of our Faith. But it can help us to see “where we are” on the road: how well we are cooperating with God, and where and how we are struggling hardest still.

Lent may not be known as a particularly joyful time, from a secular or agnostic point of view. But it is a joyful and exciting time from a spiritual point of view. We get to move closer to the Way of Jesus Christ our Lord. That is bound to draw us toward everything we truly want and desire in our lives.

In His name, may it ever be so.