

January 15, 2023
Second after Epiphany

MEDITATION: “BBB”

There was a fundamentalist church that was growing by leaps and bounds. The pastor there didn't offer individual classes for people who wanted to join the church, but waited until there was a group of people who wanted to join. One day he met with three couples, one in their 60s, one in their 40s, and one couple who were newlyweds in their 20s.

“Before you can belong to this church,” he said, “there are a couple of matters that need to be discussed. Have you all accepted Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and Saviour?” “Yes,” they all replied. “Do you believe that Jesus died for your sins, and that if you believe in the Lord Jesus Christ you will go to heaven?” “Yes,” they replied. “Well,” said the pastor, “there is one more thing. There's a test, a 30 day test. If you pass the test we will welcome you into the church, otherwise you are not welcome here. Understand?” “Understood,” they said. “Alright then, for the next 30 days you may not kiss your spouse. Come back in a month and we'll talk about how you did.”

A month later the three couples met with the pastor. First he approached the couple in their 60s and asked them, “Well, how did it go?” “Piece of cake,” they said. “Welcome to the congregation,” said the pastor. Then he approached the couple in their 40s and asked, “Well, how did it go?” “Well,” said the husband, “the first week was really tough, and I just knew we weren't going to make it through a whole month if we didn't do something drastic, so I switched shifts with a buddy at work so my wife and I were on opposite shifts, so we didn't see each other for the rest of the month, and we made it.” “Congratulations,” said the pastor, “welcome to the congregation.” Finally the pastor turned his attention on the newlyweds and asked, “Well, how did it go?” “Awful,” said the husband, “the first week was the hardest week of my life, and then, in the middle of the second week I was lying down and my wife walked by, tripped on her shoelace, and landed on top of me. There we were, in each other's arms,

face to face, and.....” The pastor glared at them, pointed to the exit and said, “You are not welcome here.”

“That’s alright,” said the husband, “we aren’t welcome at Sleep Country Canada either.”

For hundreds, if not thousands of years the church has insisted that in order to belong to the church, one must first believe the right things, and behave in a certain way. This is particularly true since the rise of Protestantism, but it goes back well before that. Think about it, when Emperor Constantine decreed that Christianity was the official religion of the empire, he did so in the hope of uniting all the various peoples of the empire. In order to achieve that, he needed for there to be universal agreement amongst Christians about what they believed, so in the year 325 he convened the Council of Nicaea. The council was to create a creedal statement of what all Christians believed. We still call it the Nicene Creed and you can find it on page 920 of the Voices United. This insistence on believing the right thing worked well for hundreds of years in societies that were largely illiterate. The insistence on specific modes of behaviours was also a great way to maintain social order.

And then came the 20th century, and things changed, particularly after the Second World War. As increasing numbers of people had access to higher levels of learning, that is as they learned critical thinking skills, they became increasingly critical and suspicious of institutions, and refused to automatically give intellectual assent to things without thinking them through. The days of saying you believed something because your parents did, or because someone told you to were over. Another thing that changed late in the 20th century is that people became increasingly mobile, that is, they became semi-nomadic, moving around the country, or even the world, in pursuit of work. Unlike farmers, who are tied to the land, being employed by large corporations meant that people were tied to the whims of corporations, and government regulations and tax subsidies. You moved where the company wanted you to move, or you faced

unemployment. This means that the sense of community changed radically.

In the 1960s and 70s a man by the name of John Wimber changed career paths from being a keyboard player for the Paramours to a life of religion. In 1963 he became a Quaker, and within a few years had founded a church in his house. By 1974 he was teaching at Fuller Seminary as founding director of the Department of Church Growth, and by 1978 he started what would eventually become the Vineyard Church. One of John's greatest contributions to what we call Emerging Church was what he called bound-set thinking and its centrality to Christian practice. John insisted that Christian bodies must take the position that everyone who wants to come belongs just because of the wanting and without regard to how he or she may behave or what he or she may claim to believe. John turned the historical and institutional position that one must believe and attest to certain things and agree to behave in a certain way before being allowed to belong upside down.

John's position, and this makes sense in a semi-nomadic society, is that what we long for most now is a sense of community, a sense of belonging. If we show up, because we want to show up, then we should be welcomed and feel that we belong. If we belong to a group, over time the group will have an impact on our behaviour, will modify our behaviour. When our behaviour changes and we reflect on it, we examine what it is that is important to us, and that impacts on our beliefs. This is the secret to harm reduction philosophy and safe injection sites when dealing with addicts, there needs to be a relationship before there can be a discussion about behaviours. The old Believe-Behave-Belong, becomes, in our time, Belong-Behave-Believe.

I'll give you an example. You may believe that if you join a committee at church that there will be a lot of meetings and work, most of it tiring, demanding, or boring, and so you don't want to belong to a committee.

But, if you were to belong to a committee, let's say the Ministry and Personnel committee, you may find that the workload is light and enjoyable, and in the process you may come to appreciate the value of the work the committee does and its importance to the future of the church. Right now, just about every committee or working group in this church or at the Regional Council would love for you to belong, behave, and believe in the important work they do, not because they want you to help with the work, but because they believe in the importance of the ministry in which they are engaged.

So far, although you may understand BBB, I haven't mentioned the gospel lesson. John and his disciples (students) were standing around as Jesus came by. Two of John's disciples started to follow Jesus. Jesus asked what the disciples wanted, and they told him they wanted to know where they were to go for their lessons from their new teacher. Jesus did not ask if they believed he was the messiah, that he had died for their sins, or anything else. Jesus did not ask if they could behave in an acceptable manner. Jesus said, "Come and see." In effect, Jesus said, "You belong. You are welcome to join with me." And they did. And in the process of following, they heard Jesus' teachings, and saw the things that Jesus did, and their behaviour was modified just by being exposed to all of that. And when Jesus died and rose again, they believed. They believed that Jesus' way of love, compassion, distributive justice was the way that humankind would find peace and joy on earth.

If the church wants to live, and there is a difference between wanting to live and not wanting to die, if the church wants to live, it must move from its insistence on Believe-Behave-Belong to Jesus' way of Belong-Behave-Believe. Belonging must come first, regardless of how people behave or what people may believe. Belonging must come first, not because I say so, but because in God's eyes we all belong, we belong to God. Thanks be to God.