

A Total Make-over

The Apostles are back in Court

The doors of the jail had somehow been opened. Whether by an angel from heaven or simply by anonymous insider is not clear, technically from the Bible text. It just says they were set free, by the “messenger of the Lord.” (Either way it was a miracle). But they now have been re-arrested, even though they could have stirred the crowd to rally to their support. But the apostles of Jesus had restrained themselves, knowing a bloody riot could easily break out. If they’d been delivered from the jailhouse once, there was no reason not to believe that the divine hand would continue to uphold them as they proclaimed and lived out their Easter faith in the midst of a corrupt and spiritually sick culture. Theirs was a resurrected spirituality. They were baptized into a union with the risen Lord. They could do nothing but rise.

But still the Easter faith requires a defense as well as a celebration. They must face the intimidating threats of those in power. Do they know peace with God? O, yes. But they also know the cost of that peace. And Jesus said they too, must count the cost. All who would follow him must bear their own crosses. For us, bearing the cross is largely symbolic. But for them, it could easily be the real deal. And they are, after all, only human, and so as they are brought back to stand before the Jewish High Council: *will it be faith or fear?* Will they trust in the what they have been experiencing since Easter morning, and more recently since Pentecost? Is the resurrection spirituality and worship in the church, and continued care of the Good Shepherd a authentic experience? Is it reality? Or will they be bullied back into the fold of Judaism? Will they respond with faith or fear? For fear has the Ruling Counsel by the throat. And for them, fear is their *only* option. . .

The accusers are now on the defensive

The Chief Priest said, "Didn't we give you strict orders not to teach in Jesus' name? And here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and you're trying . . .to blame *us* for the death of this man."

As a growing number join the apostles in this community defined by the Easter event, as ever larger numbers are experiencing the power of the resurrected life, the Jewish ruling council is gripped by growing fear of a back-lash; because everyone knows *they* are clearly *responsible* for Jesus' death. An angry mob could break down the door seeking revenge for the death of one now believed by many to have been the Messiah. The Sanhedrin fear for their very lives.

Fear clouds our judgment. Fear hinders our objectivity. And when fear is cornered like a wild animal among the immovable rocks of religious belief, this religiously motivated fear is humanity's most irrational and dangerous force.

Their fear has blinded them to marvels of physical healings were taking place at the hands of the apostles of Jesus and those tormented by evil spirits being delivered in Jesus name. Why fear one so full of love and healing power and forgiveness? But so gripped are they with fear, they don't even ask the most logical question of the apostles, which would be, 'Who let you guys out of jail?' "None of this matters, because, *they are now all about* saving their own necks. Their fear was not totally without cause.

The fact is, they *had* conspired to kill Jesus. Sure, they thought they had good reasons. Blasphemy. He claimed to be Messiah – co-equal with God. He had challenged Roman rule, thus pose a threat to social order. If they didn't put a stop to this Jesus fellow, *their* ability as leaders

would have soon be called into questioned. The result would be chaos. They had their reasons.

But as someone has said, “God made us in his own image, so we decided to return the favour” Over time, religious communities can “make God after their own image. Religions can eventually enslave their followers behind a great wall of fear. Unless we dare to think for ourselves, the fear religious beliefs provoke in us can lead normally reasonable people into heartless acts of prejudice, hatred and even violence.

The Jewish Ruling Council is gripped by beliefs that keep them bound – beliefs they can’t easily walk away from. But even now they are being . . .

Called out

Now a voice comes to them from the other side. It is the voice calls them to a higher loyalty. More sacred than religious tradition, more inspiring than national pride, deeper than even family ties. . . . This Gospel “*calls them out*”

Did you know that Greek word in the New Testament that is translated as “church” is ecclesia. It literally means “the called out ” The church by definition is an EXIT strategy. In Jesus, we are *called out* of whatever old structures and patterns of life, that would keep us bound in fear. And we are called *into* a whole new life lived by faith.

This is why there has always been is a comparison between the church and Israel. Israel was born and shaped in an Exodus. Fearful slaves brought out by a mighty hand and led to a new and promised land. And when Israel went astray the prophets would always call them to return to their roots in the exodus event. They were asked to come out of whatever had re-enslaved them and renew their covenant and rediscover their true identity as God’s people.

This comparison between Israel and the church continued to be a major theme in the New Testament. Peter compares the church to Israel. He says in **1 Peter 2: 9-10**. . . .

Like Israel, the church has frequently forgotten it’s origins. It goes through times of wilderness wanderings. The church idolizes certain “golden calves” –issues that distract it from it’s real purpose. The church can forget that it *called out to live out* a resurrection spirituality. Could we be living in such a time? If so, it’s time for

A total make-over of the Church

You have maybe noticed the current popularity of “make-over shows” on TV. In the course of an hour (between commercial breaks) we watch an expert team transform a home, or car, or someone’s wardrobe. . . . We are introduced to a contributor, an ordinary person, just like you or I, who is not a TV actor, who is willing opens their life to the cameras of reality TV. They have been recommended by friends and family as someone who really needs help with some area of their life.

We watch as they go through the stages of cosmetic surgery or a weight loss regime, culminating in the dramatic “reveal” of the “new Mary” with those stunning “before and after” pictures that tell the tale. By the end of the show, friends and family are marvelling at the dramatic change the make over team has managed to pull off. How much happier their loved one is! People jump up and down in tears over their wonderful new livingroom. Hugging the make-over team.

I must admit, I *enjoy* watching these shows. Why? I wish that was me. I wish something like that could happen in *my* life. Don’t you?

The real secret to the success of the make-over team on these shows , what they know that we don’t know , is that the real change is not about clothes or interior decorating, but in the way the people see themselves. How people feel about themselves. The contributors discover they are

beautiful. Their lives can be better. The transformation works from the inside out. So imagine this . . .

A Church Needs Make-over

An I don't mean the building. I mean the people. Sometimes it seems we spending a lot of time and energy in the just trying to keep people in the church. Many tell us their bored and frustrated and want to be Christians, but not in the church. Even the most diligent and faithful among us in an moment of weakness wonder, "What am I doing here?" We run into the frustrating politics, or the self-gratifying consumerism. Worship that follows patterns from the entertainment world.

We wonder if the church in our day isn't shaped more by the culture than it is by the biblical and early church principles of God's people living in community. . . (Weber p___)

But what if we could call in . . .

A Church Make-over team

Imagine a TV show called "Heaven Help the Church!". For this show, someone would recommend a church that is in need of a makeover. (Not the building, paint and carpeting, but the spiritual life)

Greetings! Your Church has been chosen to be featured on our show "Heaven Help the Church!"

Should you decide to invite the team to do a total make-over of your church, these are our rules: You must give over your church and allow us to do whatever we want in your church for an indefinite period of time.

But first, we would like take this opportunity to introduce the make-over team that will be working in your church:

Each member comes with unique qualifications and vast experience. Some have been blessed to preach with power and have had some success as published authors. Your make over team will also include at least one good organizer. Do not worry if a lot of the clutter around your church suddenly disappears. Trust us. Nothing of *real value* will be lost or thrown away by the team. Also be prepared for our team to take the lead. In most places we have gone, this has not been a problem, although occasionally there has been real resistance to our radical approach.

There are a few cautions. Our team will do our work and then leave town. You will have to live with the changes they make. You can be guaranteed that your church will be perceived differently by the neighbourhood. This can be a very positive thing, but some places we have had to leave town after our work has caused riots and disturbances. You also need to know that almost everyone on our team has been in jail more than once, and isn't afraid to go again. But don't worry, it was never for any wrong-doing. Nevertheless you trust us completely working with your youth, however, occasionally youth have been known to leave home fired by a passion for other lands.

You will be responsible for feeding us while on site, although if you can't afford it we are also prepared to second jobs to help pay our way.

The churches we have worked on are usually small, although some where located in large cities. We have not always gotten along too well with the local religious and civic leaders in different towns where we have worked, in fact, some of them have sued us and occasionally even attacked us physically.

We are quite used to discovering some hesitancy on the part of our participating churches. In fact,

we plan to push issues out into the open. This can get a little intense.

But we are thankful for what God has done already. And we will especially uphold those who have worked faithfully among you. They deserve special honour. But on the other hand we will never use flattery. What we say to you, we say to *all* the churches we work with.

We do recognize that we too are not perfect and will be open to your suggestions, but with us, it's "what you see is what you get". We will not become more outgoing, or soft-spoken, or conservative, or more cutting-edge. We will not pander to the old or young.

We are willing to risk our relationship with you and are willing to walk away and lose any potential future involvement with you. We will not, however, compromise for the sake of money, support, or saving face.

We are strong believers in teamwork and believe the Word of God is best heard through multiple voices, **not** just one person. This is not about us. This is bigger than any of us.

However, if you are willing to hand your church over to us, we shall do our best for you.

Yours Truly,

The Make-over Team

I'm sure you've figured out by now that my imaginary TV team is in fact the apostles of Jesus.

But, all things being equal, would we hand over our church to such a team? Or would we be just too afraid?

Peter tells the Ruling Counsel, that the foundational principle of spiritual make-over is incredibly simple. It is this: ". . . God rather than men. " It is simply that. And to the extent that we dare to live that, we will be brought back to the roots of . . .

The Resurrection Faith.

Peter sums it up by saying that in Jesus we are given " the gift of a changed life and sins forgiven.

The Original church was far from perfect. The church has always struggled in its human limitations. We all, in one way or another, put Jesus on the cross. But the proof of the resurrection faith we proclaim, the proof that we do have eternal life and sins forgiven is found in a church that embodies that kind of changed life, a church that overcomes evil and tells the truth. But the movement from fear to faith cannot take place without. . .

The Holy Spirit,

"Whom," Peter says, " God gives to those who obey him. . . "

When we read about this early apostolic church, we have to ask, was Luke actually describing the actual experience of the early church; or is what we read in the Book of Acts more of Luke's "artist's conception" of "ideal church" that didn't really exist, but he hoped eventually would? Did they really enjoy that amazing worship? Did they really know a miraculous sense of community that broke down old cultural barriers and prejudice and hatred with an overwhelming LOVE? Did they really open their homes to one another and share meals together in joy and gratitude? Did they actually organize themselves and generously meet the needs of the poor and widowed and the infirm in the communities in which they lived? Did these first Christians actually

gain the respect of even the unbelievers? Did the church really grow in the astounding numbers we read about in the Book of Acts? Thousands at one time?

Who can prove say what really happened two thousand years ago?

Perhaps the only way to find out if it's really possible is to try it for ourselves. Does it work? Can we live in power of the Holy Spirit? Can we move from fear to faith? Because there is one thing for sure: the church in the book of Acts is very different from the church we know in our contemporary experience.

But the apostolic community was ever conscious of the presence of the Spirit of Jesus. And we are led to believe that they experienced a total make-over by simply knowing that **HE LIVES**.