

Stumbling Blocks to Faith

A. The Problem

Introduction

Stumbling blocks to faith are nothing new. They are the reason God warned the Israelites not to become involved with the beliefs and associated practices of the Canaanites. They are the reason why God sent the prophets to speak out against the beliefs and practices of various kings and religious leaders. They are the reason why Jesus spoke out against the traditions of the Pharisees, the Sadducees, and the teachers of the Law. And they are the reason why Paul warned the church in Corinth to be careful about taking part in certain practices.

But then, throughout the Bible, there is story after story of God's people straying from the path, being trapped by one or more stumbling blocks to faith. Furthermore, even when God came to their rescue, it wasn't long before the people fell back into their old ways and became trapped by those stumbling blocks again.

Stumbling blocks to faith, then, is a serious problem. And the story of God's people is a reminder of how easily people can get trapped. But lest we think that things are very different now, and that we have learnt from past mistakes, nothing could be further from the truth. Because just as there were stumbling blocks in the past so are there stumbling blocks today.

History Repeats

There's an old saying: 'History repeats'. And it's a saying that has been used many times and in many ways. Indeed, history is littered with people who have used the saying, as nations and individuals have repeated the same mistakes over and over again. And in the case of the church it has always been marked by a wandering away from God, and a movement towards other beliefs and practices with which people feel more comfortable.

And in the case of the modern church, that largely means beliefs and practices that have made the church 'more acceptable' and 'more inclusive' in society. As a consequence, the primary purpose for the existence of the church is often lost, sharing the good news of Jesus Christ is not considered to be a priority (at least not in practice), and caring for those outside the church is considered more important than caring for those within. Furthermore, the church is often represented by people who are not necessarily believers or faithful members of God's church.

Is it any wonder, then that many people outside the church today are unable to recognise it for what it is supposed to be? Indeed, the church is often confused as just another not-for-profit welfare organisation.

The Need for Reform

As a consequence, the church today—like the Israelites in the process of conquering Canaan, or the leaders in the times of the kings, or the Pharisees in the times of Jesus—is in desperate need of reform. But not just a limited reform, as in the days of the Reformation. It needs a far more radical reform. It needs to wipe away all the unhelpful and unhealthy additions and traditions, and it needs to restore itself to be the biblical and godly church it was intended to be. In short, the stumbling blocks need be removed, because they have corrupted the faith for those who are believers and are preventing faith for those who are not.

The Nature of the Problem

Having said that, in the majority of churches I have attended I have heard the Gospel preached (at least from the pulpit). Indeed, you can go into many of our churches today and hear the good news.

But I cannot make that statement about every single church that I have attended. For I have heard many preachers say that we will all meet our loved ones again in heaven. And by that they meant believers and unbelievers alike. Furthermore, the lack of knowledge of the Bible, particularly of the Old Testament, is very noticeable.

As a consequence, if our leaders—who are responsible for teaching—do not know the Gospel or the contents of the Bible, it is not surprising that their congregations don't know them either. And, as it is not just the Gospel that is taught but the Gospel with things added and things taken away, that has created real problems regarding stumbling blocks to faith.

But more than that, even in churches where the Gospel is proclaimed clearly and precisely, there is often a gulf between what is spoken from the pulpit and their normal accepted practices. For even in the most evangelical churches, their practices teach the people that the Gospel is not just about justification by faith, but it is about all the extra bits that have been added on and taken away.

As a consequence, I often think of the words that Jesus spoke to his disciples about the Pharisees shortly before his death. He said, '*The scribes and Pharisees sit on the seat of Moses. So you are to do and observe everything they tell you. But do not do their works, for they say one thing and do another*' (Matthew 23:1-3). And nothing's really changed.

Today's Stumbling Blocks

So if there are stumbling blocks—if the Gospel has been corrupted, with things added and things taken away—what are they? Well, I am enclosing a short list below:

1. The belief that we all go to heaven—believers and unbelievers alike.

Now this, as I have said, has been heard directly from the pulpit. But even it hadn't, it is implied through the church's partnering with governments in regard to wedding ceremonies and the distribution of welfare services—with all the limitations and controls which come with them. It is also implied in the public requests for money to help subsidise the work of the church. Indeed, involving both government and the general public in the work of the church gives legitimacy to the idea that church is not unique and does, indeed, belong to the general public. Yet the Bible quite clearly teaches that the church belongs to God, and that there is only way to heaven, and that is through faith in Jesus.

2. The belief that other religions are equally valid.

This is implied in the church's involvement in multi-faith services. It is also implied in the more sensitive issue of the acceptance of refugees of other faiths into the wider community, and in allowing church property to be used for practices associated with other religions. This then replaces the idea that Christianity is an exclusive religion and that all other faiths are false. It also flies in the face of God warning the Israelites not to embrace other faiths or their associated practices.

3. The belief that God's gift of marriage (and marriage ceremonies) requires regulation by the State.

This is implied by the church's involvement in marriage ceremonies. It is also implied by the church's adoption (in full or in part) of community standards in regard to marriage relationships. Indeed, it contradicts the idea that marriage is God's gift to mankind (which does not require a formal legal ceremony) and it diminishes the importance of his list of prohibited relationships, which were designed with the health of the community in mind.

4. The belief that it is acceptable for the church to seek help and finance from those outside it.

Now some of the implications of this issue have been included in point 1 above. Indeed, outside help usually comes with strings attached, which restrict the activities of the church. But despite that, it also ignores the biblical idea that God's people are required to give sacrificially. And if they don't—but rather ask others to give at little cost to themselves—then it will not be acceptable to God.

5. The belief that you don't have to be a Christian to represent God.

This is implied through the employment of non-Christians on boards of Management, as face-to-face workers in church welfare agencies, and as volunteers in op-shops, etc. Because any worker in the church will be seen to be a representative of God, his church, and the Gospel. However, as an unbeliever, they will portray a false message to the world—one that many will accept as the truth. Which is why Jesus made the statement that come judgement day he will not recognise some who claim to have represented him.

Extent of the Problem

Now these are only five examples, but they all demonstrate the gulf between the church of today and the church of the Bible—to which we could add:

1. Integrating the values of the community into Christian beliefs and practices;
2. Explaining away Christian truths and values to make them more acceptable;
3. Using consecrated buildings for public (non-Christian) events; and
4. Owning and administering hospitals, nursing homes, schools, welfare agencies, etc., which are required to comply with government and public standards—often at the expense of the gospel.

No Appetite for Change

So, in summary, there are plenty of obstacles to faith today, but unfortunately there seems little appetite in our churches for change. Indeed, it's like our churches and leaders have become the modern-day Israelites corrupted by the Canaanites, or the kings and leaders who rejected the prophets, or the scribes and Pharisees who said one thing, but always did another.

Indeed, with all the publicity about child abuse in the church—with the church having to deal with what happened on its watch—it would be easy to think that there might be a mood to consider the wider implications. After all, the abuse of children (and other vulnerable people) is only one area in which the church has strayed. However, if you thought that, then you would be quite wrong.

Indeed, in regard to the issue of pastoral care alone, I recently had cause to follow up other instances where the church has not been as caring and loving as it might—this time in regard to its treatment of retired clergy. But all I was given was the run around before receiving the official response—and I paraphrase: ‘This is the way our church is. You can either take it or leave it.’

Now if I had been the only person having problems with the church, that would still have been an inappropriate response. But it does reflect the attitude of denial that is so prevalent today. Indeed, it’s like the church has taken the issue of child abuse—with its apology, compensation, and preventative measures—and treated it as though the matter has been dealt with—that the issue is now ended. And it ignores the fact that child abuse was simply a symptom of a much greater problem.

As a consequence, lack of care within the church continues to be a real problem. But then Christians not caring for Christians is not an issue that is likely to get much publicity. And that is sad, in a sense, because without it, it is hard to see that anything will ever change.

The Way Forward

So history continues to repeat itself. And this time it’s not the Canaanites, or the kings, or the Pharisees—it’s our churches. And yet the church needs leaders and people who are prepared to speak out. It needs people who are immersed in the scriptures and have the spread of the Gospel at heart. It needs people who can see beyond the existing practices, with all the stumbling blocks to faith. It needs men and women of courage willing to remove the obstacles, no matter how unpopular that will be.

The church needs, in a sense, to start again. It needs a commitment of godly people willing to stand up and be counted, to be committed to God’s cause, and to be willing to do what is necessary to undo those past mistakes. It needs a commitment that considers God’s ways to be more valuable than worldly ways. And it needs a commitment to make the necessary reform and to remove the stumbling blocks to faith, for both those within the church and for those without.

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The conclusion, *Stumbling Blocks to Faith. Part B. The Solution* next month

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