

The Letter to the Hebrews was written for a particular developmental stage of Christianity, which is long past. It was written when the Jesus movement was becoming more distinctly *not* a Jewish movement but its own thing. It was attracting non-Jews as members, and most of the Jesus communities had decided not to include observance of Jewish Law as intrinsic to their lives together. But the Jewish past was very, very recent, and for many of the Jewish members of the Jesus movement, it sometimes seemed like this Jesus thing had been a phase they'd gone through but that they might well return to the Judaism in which they'd been raised. The Letter to the Hebrews is written to prevent their recidivism, as it were. So its arguments all rest on this notion that Judaism was an earlier and inferior stage of God's revelation to human beings, but that it has been superseded by the revelation in Jesus. Judaism is the old thing we need to be done with; Christianity is the new, supreme revelation by which we must be transformed.

Hebrews says some great things, but that teaching of supersessionism has to be dropped. We cannot see Judaism as a more primitive and inferior spirituality that Christianity replaces; Judaism is its own path. It gave birth to Christianity, but Christianity does not replace it. Unfortunately this seems to be assumed even today by many preachers.

Today's reading assumes a knowledge of the architecture of the Temple and the atonement ritual of Judaism at Yom Kippur. The author is making a parallel between the holiest area in the Temple and the dwelling place of God, and the offering of an animal's blood that the priest makes, and the offering of his own life that Jesus made. If you really get into it and try to draw out all the parallels, you run into trouble, because Jesus is both the sacrificial animal *and* the priest, but I think we can wave that aside. The author's point is that God's intention of

reconciliation with human beings continues, whether or not you participate in Temple life.

There can be new ways of enacting reconciliation, but it's always the same divine motivation.

God wants to be like this 🙏 with us.

The companion scripture for today, Matthew 12, tells the story of Jesus breaking an old rule for the sake of God's intentions. The rule was that you not work on the sabbath, so as to focus on and enjoy the gift of life. However, Jesus' disciples were hungry and they started eating the heads of grain in the field. When the Pharisees reproved Jesus, he reminded them of a parallel infraction that David had committed before he became king, when he was living his vagabond Robin Hood existence in the wilderness with his merry men. They had come to a shrine (no Temple yet at that time) and demanded bread, and when the priest said he only had the sacred bread that was reserved for the priests, David assured the priest that his troops were good, clean-living boys and wouldn't desecrate it, and then he helped himself. It's actually not a story that covers David with glory, but it's right there in 1 Samuel, and Jesus knows his Bible.

Again, the point is that God's *intention* is served in this case by getting the disciples fed, even though it's a technical infraction of a rule that is also meant to fulfill God's intention. Jesus says, "I tell you, something greater than the temple is here," and what he means generally is, sometimes you have to break the rules or innovate in order to conform with God's will.

This reminds me of a fascinating book I just read, *Ungodly Women* by Betty DeBerg. It's about the rise of fundamentalism in the early 20th century, and it argues that fundamentalism was *not* primarily prompted by resistance to new Biblical scholarship or to scientific advances

like the theory of evolution. DeBerg says most ordinary Christians weren't paying attention to intellectual issues like that, but they WERE paying attention to the challenges of daily life, and fundamentalism arises and gets its strength from industrialization and other factors that diminished men's sense of masculinity.

It's a whole book, but just briefly—pre-industrial men in western society based their male identity on work (especially work that required physical strength or skill), assumption of risk, as in hunting and soldiering, and a family role as controller of his sons through the promise of economic security (handing on property). Industrialization and a wage-based labor economy in the 19th century led to men being away from home during the day, often working in jobs that did not require physical strength and could, in fact, be performed by women (teachers, secretaries, etc.). With the traditional measures of manhood increasingly fragile, society compensated by rigidly delineating the genders and creating the “cult of true womanhood,” in which women were virtually a different species from men, operated best in the sphere of the home, identified as either virginal or maternal, and submitted entirely to husbands, fathers, and brothers.

Unfortunately for this strategy, there were also social factors that propelled women into public life. The more affluent ladies who had stayed home had started clubs and societies, and began to agitate for temperance, abolition, prison reform, and eventually the vote. Women learned to organize. And the less affluent women got jobs away from home just to survive—and even more women got jobs when men had to go off to World War I. So even while the cult of true womanhood was a coping strategy for the changing roles of men, it wasn't all-powerful. So the church pushed back with “The Fundamentals,” of which feminine submissiveness was

one fundamental.

The editor of a journal called *Our Hope* wrote in 1912 that women's "great political agitation" had been a chief factor in the downfall of Pompeii (I thought it was Mt. Vesuvius). "Woman leaving her sphere, becomes by it an instrument of Satan. . . . Corruption of the vilest kind must follow." The journal *The King's Business* said in 1917 that even though women were superior to men intellectually, morally, and spiritually, "her divinely appointed position is that of subordination, and it is her ruin to fight against that which God . . . had ordained for her."

In short, fundamentalism arose as a reaction against changing gender roles, to protect an older order on which men's sense of identity and value depended. And I am fully in support of men feeling good about themselves, because men are human beings and human beings should all have a well-grounded sense of value. But to protect that particular way to feel valuable at the expense of the rest of humanity is not God's will, I'd argue. Those old rules, in which men were assured of their value by eliminating competition from women, needed to be broken so that *all* people had greater potential for abundant life.

That example is pretty easy to understand, because it lies far enough in the past. But technological change and social change and climate change have all speeded up, and it's truly hard to see sometimes what rules are still supporting full and abundant life. When I was raising my daughters, I was very conscientious about limiting their TV watching to one hour a day because I wanted them to learn how to generate their own fun. But now parents have to be thoughtful about phones and computers, and they're all over, not just the one TV set in the unheated family room in the basement, which was part of my strategy. But you can't say that the internet and electronics are just evil, either. They're indispensable.

Rapid change is part of what led to Donald Trump's election, and I don't need to go over that well-trod ground, except to point out that there are a lot of people who feel like the old rules of society need to be reinstated harder so everybody gets back in their place. And just as with the rise of higher Biblical criticism and scientific theories in the 1800s, intellectual, logical arguments are probably not relevant to how this worldview gets shifted. Our question, when we have to make choices, needs to be, what offers abundant life? What helps more people experience the goodness of God? I can't take responsibility for other people's resistance to change, but I can examine my own resistance and self-protective instincts and deal with them with integrity. And we can dial down the polarization, like June with her Jehovah's Witness visitor or what Deb's daughter-in-law calls "redirecting blaming-energies toward constructive reflections."

What this section of Hebrews tells us is that the change you see happening may be the hand of God. Change entails loss, and I for one resist it. But if it's the hand of God, it's also offering growth and healing and renewal. So that's what we should look for and that's what we should build on.

God help us to change.
To change ourselves and to change our world.
To know the need for it.
To deal with the pain of it.
To feel the joy of it.
To undertake the journey without understanding
the destination.
The art of gentle revolution.
Amen.
God of justice, we confess that in the pursuit of
our own dreams and desires,

we have not always been honest, perceptive,
not always right.
Guided by your Spirit,

what we would like to do is change the world –
make it a little simpler for people
to feed, clothe, and shelter themselves
as You intended them to do.
Help us to be your witnesses,
by fighting for better conditions,
by speaking up unceasingly for the rights of the
workers,
the poor, of the destitute –
the rights of the worthy and the unworthy poor,
so that we can, with your help, change the
world.
Enlarge our hearts to love each other,
to love our neighbor,
and to love our enemy as our friend. **Amen.**