

The Body Of Christ

Why do people behave the way they do? What makes them tick?

Why does one person become a philanthropist and another become a serial killer?

Why is one person cheerful all the time and another person down-in-the-mouth all the time?

Since the beginning of recorded history, philosophers and scientists have been coming up with theories about what causes people to be the way they are behave the way they do.

Their explanations have ranged from astrology to sociology to psychology and even to demonology.

Over time, however, the theories have tended to fall into two opposing camps.

These have been called “heredity versus environment” or “nature versus nurture.”

According to heredity or nature theories, a person is the product of internal forces which shape him even as he is being conceived.

In modern scientific terms, he is the product of his DNA, the genes he inherited from his parents.

At the other end of the spectrum, environment or nurture theories argue that people are the products of external forces that act upon them after they come into the world—their parents, society, the economic circumstances in which they are raised, and so forth.

Most psychologists and social scientists now believe that the truth lies somewhere in between.

We genetically inherit much of what we are, but the environment we grow up in plays an important role in shaping us as well.

One thing the two theories have in common and makes them appealing is that they allow us to believe that the bad things we do are the result of forces beyond our control.

This lets us off the hook in regard to taking responsibility for our actions.

We can blame our genes or our parents or our teachers or society for our evil behavior.

"I didn't pick my chromosomes or my parents or the part of town I grew up in so don't blame me!"

Even though each one of us knows, deep down, that we really are responsible for what we do, it's tempting to place the blame on something or someone else.

We'd rather be *victims* than *villains*.

Unfortunately, our Lord takes that excuse away from us.

He clearly and unequivocally states in both the *Old* and *New Testament* that WE and no one else are responsible for what we do.

Through the prophet Ezekiel, the Lord said: "The soul who sins is the one who will die....The righteousness of the righteous man will be credited to him, and the wickedness of the wicked will be charged against him...I will judge each one of you according to his ways...."

And in the *New Testament* Jesus said, "Listen to me, everyone, and understand this. Nothing outside a man can make him 'unclean' by going into him. Rather, it is what comes out of a man that makes him 'unclean.' For from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and make a man unclean."

The world doesn't make us evil; we make the world evil.

We don't get infected by sin; we infect the world with sin.

As the great 20th-century philosopher, Pogo the Possum, once said: "We have met the enemy and he is us."

The wisdom of the Lord destroys the secular wisdom of our time, which prefers to call sinful behavior "dysfunctional" rather than "immoral" and argues that its causes lie beyond a person's control.

You don't see words like "evil" or "bad" or "sinful" applied to wrongdoers anymore; instead, they are characterized as "sick" or "challenged."

They suffer from psychological disorders rather than a sin nature.

But the wisdom of God is higher than the wisdom of man and our Lord has told us that WE are responsible for what we do.

But if **we** are the problem, what is the solution?

If the source of the darkness lies **within** us, where is there light and how do we let it in?

Christians wrestle with this problem every day of their lives.

We want to lead God-pleasing lives, but we find ourselves helpless before the power of sin.

We rejoice that our sins are forgiven, but we keep on sinning.

We have good intentions, but we continue to do the very things Jesus denounces: we have evil thoughts, we are immoral in thought and word if not in deed; we are greedy, malicious, deceitful, envious, gossipy, arrogant and foolish.

And we would desperately like to stop being that way.

Well, first of all the Bible makes it clear that the Christian's struggle with sin is not a matter of human warfare, but of spiritual warfare.

"Our struggle," Paul writes, "*...is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.*"

The darkness in our souls is more than psychological or moral darkness—it is spiritual darkness and that is why it has such power over us.

And the darkness emanates from the same enemy that our original parents first encountered in the Garden of Eden.

As we sing in one of our favorite Lutheran hymns: "*...his craft and power are great, and armed with cruel hate, no one on earth his equal.*"

But Christ is more than his equal and that is why we need to let the light of Christ shine into the pools of darkness that collect in our souls.

But where do we find this “Christ-light” and apply it to the dark corners of our lives, day by day?

The answer is **the church**, which the *Scriptures* call “the body of Christ in this world.”

It is through the church that we receive God’s light through worship and communion and word and prayer.

We also receive Christ-light through other members of the Body of Christ—our fellow saints in the church.

Christianity is all about community.

It’s not just “me and Jesus”; it’s Jesus IN and AMONG His people.

God gave his first church the name “Israel” and called it His covenant community.

He rejoiced over His covenant community as a groom rejoices over his bride.

Jesus gathered His disciples together time and time again to speak to them as a body of believers.

The Holy Spirit came to the Apostles in tongues of fire and forged them into a covenant community called the church which spread like wildfire through Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth.

One of the most notable things about the early church was how its members cared for each other.

The Roman historian Tertullian reported that people were saying about Christians: “*See how they love one another!*”

Many people in those days were drawn to Christ when they witnessed the love that Christians showed for one another.

There are two kinds of community in this world: Christian community and all the rest.

In Christian community—the Church—Christ is present among us and people can relate to one another THROUGH Him.

Through Christ we give and receive love, joy, hope and forgiveness, along with the blessed knowledge that the relationships we have here are going to endure into eternity.

In secular communities, we gather together in friendship but we are not gathered together as the Body of Christ.

As a result, it is very easy for these communities to end up as what the author Tom Wolfe called “bonfires of vanities”—each member struggling to feed his ego, work his agenda and have his way—however subtly or cleverly or even unconsciously he may go about doing so.

Ever spend an evening with another couple and then spend the ride home musing on their shortcomings? “How wonderful to see you! How lovely you look! (Was that ever boring. Man, has she aged!)”

That’s a bonfire of vanities.

And even if we have the self-control not to express such thoughts out loud, we think them and then congratulate ourselves for having the self-discipline not to speak them.

We can even find virtue in our sins.

Let's face it folks, every one of us is a bonfire of vanities.

Our motives are vain, our thoughts are frequently unconscionable, we shouldn't say a lot of what we do say, and a fair amount of what we do leaves much to be desired.

If you doubt that, compare your thoughts and words and actions to the standard God has set for us in the *Ten Commandments* and you will be forced to conclude that truth be known, you are a moral shipwreck.

We need help.

We need the light of Christ.

And Christ has offered to shine his light on us through each other: “*For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them.*”

The church is the Body of Christ and we are all members of that body.

Some of us are the brains, some the hands, some the eyes, some the ears.

I figure I'm the mouth, since that's always been the most active organ in my body.

And every single part of the Body of Christ needs every other part.

We are helped by each other, nourished by each other, and sustained by each other.

IT IS THROUGH EACH OTHER THAT WE TANGIBLY RECEIVE THE LIGHT OF JESUS CHRIST INTO OUR LIVES.

All the gifts of Christ which the Holy Spirit extends to us—love, forgiveness, comfort, help, admonition and encouragement—all these come to us through each other.

Now our enemy, the devil, is very good at convincing us that we don't really need to be part of a Christian community.

That going to church is a nice thing to do but not a necessary thing.

He also likes to persuade us that we don't need to be involved in doing the work of the church.

But the church doesn't run itself; it takes bodies and hands and feet to function.

Fortunately, here at Hope we are blessed with a small group of very dedicated people here who put a lot of time and effort into keeping the Body of Christ healthy and humming.

But they need help.

The Apostle John wrote, "Let us love each other not merely in words and tongue, but in truth and action."

Love, which is at the core of everything Jesus taught, is not just a matter of feeling but of doing.

If God had merely felt love for mankind, yet done nothing about it, we would still be in a pickle.

But he did something—something enormously painful to himself to help mankind.

He submitted his Son to humiliation, torture, despair and death in order to give us freedom, joy and eternal life.

Love—Biblical love—involves self-sacrifice.

The Body of Christ on earth—depends upon the love of its members to stay healthy.

It cannot survive if only a few of its members are functioning.

There is an abundant life to be had in the Body of Christ—especially for those who put its needs above their own.

It is a life of bringing the light of Christ to each other and to people outside the church as well.

Offering yourself up as yeast to leaven the loaf.

Immersing yourself in the love of the brethren.

Enjoying not only Christ IN us, but Christ AMONG us as well.

Together, we are a living, breathing body, being renewed in faith and hope and love through each other and serving as lights to banish the darkness.

Amen.

