

Chapter 4.10 Inside and Outside

This chapter did not appear in the published book. It has not been carefully edited. This chapter evaluates the idea of salvation as an internal idea. It returns to this theme: Do not worry about salvation, justification, works, faith, grace, saving the world, personal level, or grand scale. Do not get caught in traps. Instead, just do what you can. Work toward a better world. Change as did Bill Murray in "Groundhog Day". If you are only comfortable working at a personal level, then do that. If you can work toward a better world through your job, then do that. If you are informed, have a vision, and are comfortable with politics, then do that. If you sit hunched over a keyboard writing, then do that. If we people do save the world, then good for us. If we do not, then God will explain it after we die. If you are sick, miserable, in prison, or in an evil place and cannot do much of anything except trust and hope, then do that.

On the one hand, getting this idea is purely internal. You can become a member of the Kingdom of God just by wanting to be. You only have to want to be useful and a good neighbor. You do have to really try, but you do not have to accomplish much. You do not have to save the world. Bill Murray did not save the world. You do not even have to be a sweet person.

On the other hand, purely internal ideas of Jesus invite abuses. If we substitute faith and salvation for getting the message of Jesus, we invite abuses. Instead of being a good member of the Kingdom of God, we can sit at home. We go to church to light a few candles while ignoring the food donation box by the door. We can dispute theology while children need medical care. We can just declare that now we are members of the Kingdom of God and have changed the inside while our behavior on the outside remains the same old selfish person. We can even fool ourselves.

Shortly after Jesus died, early Christians interpreted Jesus' message to be about salvation and justification. The internal idea became a matter of correct belief. If you believed the right doctrine then you had the right internal idea and you would be saved. As time went by and theology developed, it became clear that many people could not understand the correct doctrine in its full complexity, so the right idea became the right attitude. If you had the right attitude, then you had the right internal idea and you would be saved. Since the time of the Reformation, the right attitude has been simply faith. Of course, to make sure people did not believe silly things, theologians insisted that people have faith in the right doctrine. Even so, except for horrible episodes in which dogma was used as a tool (such as the Inquisition or the Witch Hunts), theologians have mostly been content to insist only that people have the right attitude of simple faith and consent on the outside to what their church teaches.

With Romanticism after about 1760, the content of the attitude did not matter so much as simply having an attitude and having a stance to go along with the attitude. The attitude is the secular faith while the stance is the secular ritualistic expression of that faith. You do not need faith in God; you need a conviction about life and a stance that acts out your conviction. Since Romanticism in the 1700s, a plethora of attitudes and stances have been acceptable. It would take a large book simply to list the attitudes and stances that modern people accept as indicators of living a valid life and being saved. For example, a right attitude and its expression can consist of being a cavalier highwayman; the stuff of

romance novels. Now it is necessary only to “have an attitude” in the sense of being snotty without necessarily having a particular attitude such as a belief in democracy.

A long time ago, before the Renaissance, Reformation, Enlightenment, or Romanticism, shortly after Jesus died, early Christianity had already gone through a similar process. People then came up with imaginative ways in which the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus could save them through changing their attitude. Some of those ideas were dangerous such as that Jesus had released everybody from all sin and all law, and so people could do as they wished, including adultery and incest, without incurring any guilt or punishment. Paul and the early Church Fathers fought the silly dangerous ideas, which we now call “heresies”. Many of the silly ideas are mental and spiritual traps. They are rationalization for selfishness. Once into them, it is hard to get out. It is hard to stop thinking that way, especially after we do something shameful. This is why the Church Fathers insisted on orthodox dogma to go along with faith. Modern people are rediscovering the traps that people can fall into when they believe that attitude alone can save you if we do not also pay attention to the content of the attitude and if the attitude does not have expression in particular kinds of activities such as charity.

Jesus Fails, and Internal Salvation.

The move to thinking in terms of internal ideas rather than an external kingdom, to thinking in terms of salvation, faith, and attitude, came largely as a result of disappointment over Jesus’ program and over his death and non-return. We need to be honest and clear about this.

Jesus failed in many ways. Jesus aimed his program first at Jews, did not claim divinity, and did not teach salvation except as resurrection. Jesus was probably wrong about the Kingdom of God as he saw it. Early Christians expected Jesus to return within a few years. Jesus was not resurrected, did not restore Israel, did not bring about most of the changes he aimed at, and still has not returned 2000 years later. Jesus did succeed in changing hearts and minds, did create an image of the Kingdom of God much wider than the Kingdom of Judah, and did succeed in giving the world a shot at a real success.

One group of early followers turned toward the inside. They developed the idea of salvation apart from membership in the Israelite Kingdom of God, and they claimed that Jesus saved the world in that way despite the apparent failures. The ideas of the Kingdom and of salvation became internal. If you have faith and are a good member of a church, then eventually you go to heaven to be with Jesus. The Church took the place of the returned Jesus. Membership in the Church set membership in the Kingdom. You had to believe what the Church declared. Theologians developed elaborate ideas of how Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection saved believers, but only believers. People had to believe all this even though Jesus never taught this kind of faith or salvation. Put this bluntly, it sounds like brain washing. It was not. We have to recall the disappointment that believers felt and of the wacky and dangerous ideas that were circulating at the time, and we see this was the safe sane middle of the road approach. While the early Church stressed belief in correct doctrine, it never forgot that people also needed to act on their faith. The Early Church was a powerful force of charity and social relations.

Maybe It Worked After All.

Because of Jesus, the world is a different place, and, on the whole, better. Jesus allowed other countries,

peoples, and groups to become like Israel as instruments of God to teach and to lead. There is not one new Israel now but many new Israels. As one of the Israels, Jews have continued to give knowledge, wisdom, beauty, and leadership to the world. They became something like what Isaiah foresaw even if not as they understood Isaiah and as Jesus understood Isaiah. Did Jesus really succeed in his original program after all? Does all this amount to a success according to Jesus' program? Is this a valid Big Change even if not exactly the Big Change Jesus intended? Is this the real Kingdom of God, or as close as real people are ever going to get? Did Jesus really save the world after all even if not as he intended and not as standard Christianity teaches?

This situation might amount to a success for Jesus if we could be sure the world would continue to get better for everybody and would surely succeed as a prosperous, free, healthy, and ecologically sound place. If so, then Jesus did create a Kingdom of God, create new Israels, and save the world, even if not quite as he originally intended. We are far from the point where we can declare this kind of success so we cannot claim that Jesus somehow fulfilled his mission even in this indirect way.

Until we do succeed in this external way, we have to fall back on understanding membership in the Kingdom of God as much as a question of intent as a question of actual external success. We cannot deny membership in the Kingdom of God to all the people that get the idea and really try just because humanity is too stupid or too vile to succeed in the end. How do we understand membership in the Kingdom of God as largely an internal matter without screwing up?

Personal Salvation Through Belief in the Divine.

People that are not sure about how to contribute to a better world still look to Jesus for personal salvation through the feeling that Jesus loves them and God loves them. This has to be enough for some people. If so, does this count as a success for Jesus too? I am not sure but I hope so. Does this count as salvation? I still am not sure but I do not worry about it very much. It is not my problem. Does this idea of salvation undermine the people that get Jesus' full message and work toward a better world without necessarily achieving it? No.

People need to put the divine into their ordinary lives. People that look to Jesus for connection to the divine tend not to be able to rest with the idea that Jesus was only a prophet or only human. They have to believe that he was fully God. Jesus was not God but a lot of people can only connect to the divine if they believe he was God. This is likely the single biggest reason that people continue to believe in Jesus as the divine Christ and the Son of God without being fully sure what that means and without avoiding heresy. They are not guided by Church dogma but by their need for internal salvation.

Standard Christians are often shocked to learn that other religions offer people an incarnation of the divine, a connection with God, a personal savior, and a relation with their savior, even a personal relation with their savior, although other religions are not also usually monotheistic. What people want and get is not confined to Jesus or to Christianity. If so, does this still continue to count as a success for Jesus? Again I do not know.

Salvation as Church Member.

Some people can conceive of a relationship with Jesus only through their Church. Salvation amounts to Church membership and vice versa. Church membership seems like an external act but it amounts to an internal act of faith.

If their story went only that far, there would be no problem. They would do their thing, we would do ours, and we would both rest happy at each other's success. But their train of thought goes further to undermine our position, and we have to put up mental barriers for protection. If people can get saved outside of church membership, then the people that need their church to be saved could not logically depend on their church for salvation. They would have to worry that being a church member did not really save them. They cannot allow a point to following Jesus other than their kind of salvation, and they cannot allow salvation outside their church or they undermine the reasons to go to church. So, salvation is what Christ is all about, and only what Christ is all about, and salvation can only be given by their church. People outside their church are damned. Christ was all about founding the right Church. I do not know what to say about this view except I doubt Jesus came primarily to found the Church, their church, or any particular church.

Most churches do good work and I do not want to deride them but I doubt that church membership it is the only way to God. No church by itself is the Kingdom of God on earth. No church takes the place of getting Jesus' message. No church takes the place of working hard toward a better world. So I cannot say Jesus succeeded because the Church was founded, any church.

Faith versus "Getting It".

Both faith and getting the message of Jesus are internal ideas of what Jesus was all about. Neither one absolutely requires any external action. Even so, I want to keep them distinct, and I think standard Christians would want to keep them distinct as well but for different reasons. To me, "getting it" is the bigger category. Faith cannot take the place of "getting it" if you do not get it. Faith does act as a substitute for "getting it" among people who cannot get Jesus or will not get Jesus, especially if they have given up trying. Faith is a poor substitute for people that want to have the benefits of salvation but do not want to do as Jesus taught. Getting the idea of Jesus involves understanding some fairly clear goals while having faith seems to have no object except a relation to the Church or sometimes a subjective personal relation to Jesus as Savior. I do not wish to undermine faith but faith has to be about more than correct dogma or "Oh, Wow". There has to be a change of heart and sometimes there has to be a change in behavior too. The standard Christian churches recognize all this in their own ways but do not insist on it too much because it drives people away from the church, undermines need for the church, and seems to place works above faith.

It does not make sense to say that we "get it" if we do not also have some faith in something. The very idea of "getting it" implies that we have faith in what we get or in what lies behind what we get. The difference is that getting it does not require much in terms of specific articles of faith but does require a change of heart and a commitment to acting if possible. It is hardly necessary to believe in Jesus is God and in the magical power of the crucifixion-and-resurrection in order to follow him in building a better world. You just get it and do it. You can abuse the idea of "getting it" by saying that you get it and then doing nothing, or by then working hard to get rich by screwing the poor. Other people will not believe you, and I doubt God will believe you either, but there is no absolute logical grounds to argue with you if you

insist. I do not worry about that case in the same way that a priest has to worry about somebody who passes catechism but then sins daily. The idea of “getting it” is not proof against mental and physical traps but it is better than most versions of standard faith in Christianity or in most other religions.