

Ask Dr. Hooker - the Perennial Problems of Congregations
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Once upon a time - no, it was actually in the mid-seventeenth century - there lived a clergyman named Thomas Hooker, the Rev. Dr. Thomas Erastus Hooker. He started out in the Boston area but eventually relocated to Hartford, Connecticut. Apparently he wrote an advice column; he was an early Dear Abby.

I was looking, the other day, through the stuff that came from my mother's attic, and I came upon a box from the family farm in Connecticut. And in that box I found a packet of letters, the Hooker correspondence. Let me warn you that the handwriting was quite illegible, and the letters had suffered during the past 360 years from neglect, mice, flooding, mold, mildew, and a tornado. As a result, I've had to make some guesses about what was intended, and I've had to fill in some gaps.

The first letter is from a woman named Mehitable.

1. Dear Dr. Hooker,

I think my next door neighbor, Theodosia, is a witch. Should I have her burned at the stake?

She is always doing strange things, and I think she's a threat to the community. Last summer, for example, I saw her husband hanging the laundry out to dry. What was she doing that she couldn't hang it out herself? Once in August, when she was cooking, I smelled a strange odor coming from her house. I think it was turmeric. How does she get turmeric on this continent, in this century? The last straw was on Christmas Eve. At the end of the service, when we were all leaving for home, I heard her ask our pastor, "Do you think Mary was really a virgin?" Can you imagine that - challenging the Bible! She is most definitely a witch.

Yours sincerely,

Mehitable

Here is Dr. Hooker's response:

Dear Mehitable,

Yes, witches most surely must be burned. How could our social fabric endure if such deviant behavior were allowed to survive and multiply?

Still, we must be careful. Not everyone who exhibits occasional witch-like behavior is actually a witch. While some might say, “better to burn ten innocent women than to let one witch go free,” doesn’t that seem a little extreme to you? It does to me.

As the population of New England grows, as immigrants come from different parts of England – indeed, we’ve even had immigrants from the Netherlands and France – not everyone will behave in exactly the same way. Customs will vary. While there are extremes that we shouldn’t tolerate, we can live with some variety. Indeed, we might even *benefit* from the variety. If we had Italians among us, for example, we could eat pizza; if we had Japanese, we could eat sushi. Back in England, we didn’t have potatoes or tomatoes or corn. Now we couldn’t live without them. Besides, what’s wrong with a little turmeric? I’m told that turmeric is just the thing for a three-day-old fish in August.

And, really, is it so bad for a husband to do the laundry once in a while?

Challenging the Bible is perhaps a more serious charge, but I don’t think we can set aside our reason when we read the Bible. The object, after all, is to understand it, not simply to memorize it. How can you understand the Bible if you don’t use your reason? The Bible has many difficult passages. If we can’t raise questions about them, then how will we ever understand them?

I suspect that your real concern here is the slippery slope. Once we start using our reason, our critical minds, in our Bible study, the Bible will gradually cease to be our ultimate authority, and we will propose reason, experience, and community as equally valid authorities. That day, I trust, is a long ways off.

But the bigger point is that religions change. Our religious world is very different from that of St. Thomas Aquinas. And his was very different from that of St. Paul. Three hundred years from now, six hundred years – who knows? Trust the process; have faith in your grandchildren’s grandchildren.

Yours sincerely,

Thomas Hooker

The second and third letters are from Hazarmaveth and Arpachshad; they address the same issue, but from different perspectives.

2. Dear Dr. Hooker,

I don't get it. Our town has lots of young families, lots of children. You see them everywhere. But when I go to church Sunday morning, rarely do I see more than one or two. Occasionally a new family with children will come, but we never see them again. What are we doing wrong?

Yours sincerely,

Hazarmaveth

Dr. Hooker responds:

Dear Hazarmaveth,

I assume you're familiar with the Cambridge Platform, are you not? It specifies that a congregation should have two kinds of ministers. One is a preacher, the other is a teacher. My guess is, and tell me if I've got this wrong, my guess is that while you have a preacher, you lack a teacher, that is a professional educator, sometimes known as a director of religious education. Do I have that right? The job of the teaching minister, the DRE, is to design the educational program for the kids, recruit and train and inspire the classroom teachers for the different age groups, obtain all the needed supplies and make sure the facilities are first rate, lead children's worship, assist the parents in providing religious education for their children during the rest of the week, be the advocate for children with church leaders and the congregation as a whole, deal with whatever problems come up, and reach out to the greater community beyond the walls of your church. And I'm sure I've left something out. If you don't have a well-trained professional doing all of this, how do you expect to attract the young families? How do you expect to have any children in your program?

Yours sincerely,

Thomas Hooker

And here's Arpachshad's letter:

3. Dear Dr. Hooker,

Don't get me wrong, I don't have anything against kids, but we've got this guy in our congregation, Hazarmaveth, who's always mouthing off about how we should do something to get some kids on Sunday morning. It's a free country, isn't it? If they want to come, fine, if they don't, that's fine too. How can I get Hazarmaveth to shut up?

Yours sincerely,

Arpachshad

Dr. Hooker responds:

Dear Arpachshad,

Here are two things for you to think about. First, where do you want the children of your community to learn their religious and moral values? Second, do you want your congregation to be around still, in fifty years?

Yours sincerely,

Thomas Hooker

Next is a letter from Eliphalet.

4. Dear Dr. Hooker,

What are we permitted to do on the sabbath? I've always understood that we should go to church in the morning, read the Bible all afternoon, and go to church again in the evening. But my neighbor Ephraim claims that it's permitted to take an hour off from Bible reading in the afternoon to go outside and toss a small pig around. He says this pig tossing leads to male bonding and builds a stronger community. Is he pulling my leg?

Yours etc.

Dear Eliphalet [Dr. Hooker responds],

As I read the Bible, it doesn't give us clear and explicit guidance on sabbath observance. The starting point, of course, is the 4th commandment, in chapter 20 of Exodus:

Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy.
Six days shalt thou labour, and do all thy work:
But the seventh day is the sabbath of the LORD thy God: in *it*, thou *shalt not* do any work.
[Exod. 20:8-10 (KJV)]

This commandment tells us that we are *not* supposed to work, but it doesn't tell us what we *are* supposed to do. You'll recall that Jesus told his followers that "the sabbath was made for man, and not man for the sabbath." [Mark 2:27 (KJV)] And the Christians moved the sabbath from Saturday to Sunday. I think, as a result, that we have some discretion in this matter.

And, of course, it goes without saying, that women's work is never done. After all, we have to eat on all seven days of the week.

Here's my recommendation. I see Sunday divided into five periods.

First comes worship, that doesn't require any special justification.

Second comes Bible study.

(1) When you read the Bible, try to put yourself in the position of the author – what was he (or perhaps she) trying to do in writing the passage?

(2) Then put yourself in the position of the various characters in the passage. What problem were they confronted with? What do *you* think of how they tried to solve their problems?

(3) Then think about what was left out. Is there a character who isn't given a name? Is there a character who's missing altogether? Is there a social practice that's taken for granted that we would find questionable?

(4) Finally, ask yourself whether anything that you've read is relevant for us today.

Third, spend some time outdoors. Get some exercise; experience the wonders of nature. If you want to play a game that involves throwing a pig around, that's OK, but don't just sit inside watching through the window as others throw the pig.

Fourth, come back to church in the late afternoon or evening for study and discussion or meditation. This is important not only for educational reasons, but also for building your community, and learning about each other's pastoral needs, and tending to them.

Fifth, after you've had your study and discussion, have more study and discussion over a pint of beer – or root beer, if you prefer.

Yours etc.

Next is a letter from *Gamaliel*.

5. Dear Dr. Hooker,

How do we hold onto our children? When I was growing up, everyone in our village went to church every Sunday, and the congregation was the focus of village life. I thought that that was how I brought up my son, Hezekiah, but something has led him astray. Some Sundays he goes to church with his mother and me. But he is just as likely to travel to Boston to hear

some fancy preacher and their so-called praise band, or go to the Indian village and sit in a circle with the men and beat on drums and smoke bad tobacco late into the night.

My pastor, Rev. Theophilus, told me that it's just a phase that young adults in this modern age go through, but Hezekiah is forty! Where did I go wrong?

Yours etc.

Here is Dr. Hooker's response.

Dear Gamaliel,

I recommend a seven-part program as providing the best hope for keeping our children, when they become adults, as members of our religious community.

(1) Decide whether you're committed to your faith community yourself. If *you* are not committed, you can hardly expect your children to be, and why would you care?

(2) Talk to them about religion, about your religious journey, about your doubts and hopes. And be sure it's a two-way conversation. Listen to what *they* have to say. Take their questions seriously.

(3) Model the behavior you would wish to see in your children. Remember that they are learning all the time, not just when they are in class, not just when you are consciously trying to teach them. Take seriously what the religious educators say, "*Everything* is curriculum."

(4) Enable them to have experiences that they will remember for a very long time – for example, a week at a summer camp, such as Rowe, in northwestern Massachusetts, or a week for the family together at a summer institute, such as UUMAC, near Bethlehem, in Penn's Forest.

(5) Include them in worship. They may not fully understand it, but they will remember it.

(6) Have religious education teachers who will show their love for the children.

(7) Rest; it is time for a sabbath. Have faith in your children; they may not end up where you did, but they'll end up in a good place, eventually.

Yours etc.

Here are two letters, the first is from Noadiah, and the second is from Obadiah.

6. Dear Dr. Hooker,

What's wrong with the new people in our congregation? They know there's work to be done, but I just can't get them to do it. There are candles to be prepared, hymnals to be counted, coffee to be brewed, bread for communion to be baked. But the new folks just aren't interested. They think the old timers will do the work forever. Do they think I'm immortal? Or sometimes they volunteer, but after a few weeks they just stop doing what they've agreed to do, without any explanation.

Take Obadiah, for example: he said he'd bake the communion bread, but what did he do? On the first Sunday he brought corn bread. Everybody knows you don't serve corn bread for communion. The next Sunday he brought raisin bread. Raisin bread! Can you imagine? The third Sunday he didn't show up at all, and we haven't seen him since.

And here's Obadiah's letter.

7. Dear Dr. Hooker,

What's wrong with the old people in our congregation? They're always bellyaching about how nobody – none of the new folks, they mean – will do any of the work. They want someone to count the hymnals every Sunday, before and after the morning service, before and after the evening service. What a waste of time!

One old guy, I think his name is Noadiah, was on my case, so to shut him up I said I'd bake the communion bread. I asked him if there were any special instructions, and he said, No, it's just communion bread. Well, the next Sunday I brought in some very tasty corn bread, and you'd think I'd brought the Virgin Mary with me herself. Noadiah liked to have a fit. After the service I tried to ask him if there was anything wrong with the bread, but I couldn't get a word out of him.

The next Sunday I made raisin bread – it's one of my favorites, and you know how hard it is to find raisins around here. Noadiah very ostentatiously picked the raisins out of his piece, one by one, held them up for everyone to see, and then put them in his pocket. Well, I've had it. I don't need them on Sunday morning, and they certainly don't seem to need me.

Here is Dr. Hooker's response to the two of them.

Dear Noadiah and Obadiah,

Please talk to each other. No, let me rephrase that, please *listen* to each other.

The next letter is from Melatiah.

8. Dear Dr. Hooker,

Do Indians have souls? On the one hand, I've been told that Indians are dangerous, threatening, primitive savages. On the other hand, I actually met one once. I met him in the forest. He seemed a little strange, and he couldn't speak a word of English. I had two apples with me. I handed him one, and I took a bite out of the other. He took his first bite, and a smile came across his face. With that smile, he seemed like one of us.

Dear Melatiah,

Of course they don't have souls. I don't know why I'm even responding to such an impertinent question. It's a dangerous question, really.

Think of the implications. If Indians had souls, then we would have to recognize our common humanity. We would have to recognize that they, like us, have inherent worth and dignity. If they had souls, we would have to ask ourselves whether we are morally justified in taking their land. Our dream of a nation spanning the continent, from the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific Ocean, a nation of men who speak English and whose forbears came from England – our dream could become a moral nightmare.

You've read Genesis. Think of that all-important sixth day of creation:

And God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness." [Genesis 1:26a (KJV)]

God made man in God's own image. Do you think God looks like an Indian? Have some common sense. If God included the other races in his blessing, in his assignment of "dominion . . . over every living thing that moves upon the earth," [Genesis 1:28b (KJV)] then we would have to share that dominion with all of them. We couldn't claim it for ourselves alone.

But it gets even worse. If Indians had souls, immortal souls at risk of being lost forever, then how could God ever justify his decision just to have one Son, born on the European side of the ocean and depriving those on this side of the ocean of His saving message? What kind of God would that be?

So, if we English-speaking, pale-skinned settlers are to maintain our moral standing, if our God is to maintain *His* moral standing, then we must conclude that Indians lack souls.

Yours sincerely,

Thomas Hooker

Here are two letters, the first is from Ebenezer, the second is from Epaphras.

9. Dear Dr. Hooker,

As someone once said – I forget who – you don't need a weatherman to know which way the wind is blowing. Likewise, you don't need to be a sailboat scientist to figure out that it takes money to keep a congregation afloat. Yet some people just don't get it. Perhaps they imagine that we have an endowment, or that the King sends us a subsidy. Get real. What can I do about these free riders?

Take Epaphras, for example. He's been a member for five years or so. He'll bring in a turnip or a few logs from time to time, and once he brought in a bloody deer liver, but that won't pay the bills.

And here is the letter from Epaphras.

10. Dear Dr. Hooker,

I've been a member of my congregation for fifteen years, and I still can't figure it out. Take money, for example, I know it must cost money to run a congregation, but I have no idea how much – or where it comes from. For all I know, we've got an endowment, or the King sends us a subsidy. People just don't like to talk about money.

I remember once, maybe five years ago, I tried to ask Ebenezer – he always seems to be in the know – about how much we pay for the religious education materials that we receive from Boston from time to time. You'd've thought I'd asked him what he and the Mrs. do in bed! I try to be generous, but I don't know what counts as generosity. I figure that turnips and firewood are always appreciated, and I really felt good about the deer liver I brought in during hunting season – it was beautiful. How can I get the congregation to be more open about money?

Here is Dr. Hooker's response to Ebenezer and Epaphras.

Dear Ebenezer and Epaphras,

I'm neither a banker nor a psychotherapist, so I'm not sure I can be of much help, but my experience is that part of the health of a congregation is financial health. Here are some principles that I have found trustworthy.

(1) Leadership is important for a congregation, and financial leadership is as important as any other kind of leadership.

(2) Financial support follows commitment and involvement – and vice versa.

(3) People are unlikely to support their congregation financially unless they believe that their money will be well taken care of and wisely spent.

(4) People are more likely to support their congregation, and to support it generously, if they are asked to give, especially if they are asked by someone they know and respect, and if they are asked for a particular amount. Experience indicates that people rarely give more than is asked of them, and no one is insulted by your believing that their income is higher than it is.

(5) It feels good to be generous. Remember this when you are deciding what to give, or if you are asking others to support their congregation financially.

(6) Sustaining your religious community financially is sustaining the community of which you are a part; it is furthering your vision; it is empowering your dreams. It is sustaining an institution that will be there long after new horses and vacation trips are forgotten.

(7) People like to be thanked. Say “thank you” – say it often, and creatively.

Yours etc.

Those are the letters, the Dear Dr. Hooker letters. I could spend another 20 minutes with my commentary, but I'll spare you.