

ENCOUNTER

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That night I was sustained as bishop many students came to offer their congratulations. One couple added, "Bishop, we're engaged!" I had not yet learned to catch that hint which actually meant, "Keep your eye on us — be open and concerned. We'll be in for a recommend interview eventually and, well, we're struggling."

Some weeks later a knock came at our door. This time the engaged young man, let's call him Bruce, was alone. "Bishop, I've got to see you." Again I was so new that I hardly felt the mantle of trust that Bruce was bestowing upon me. So I stepped outside, thinking that a stroll around the block would help Bruce reduce his tension. But it was soon apparent that Bruce's anxieties were justified. So we returned to the privacy of my study.

So here it was — that first encounter with the role of Judge in Israel. How different from my expectations! I had known sin before. It was just that I was unprepared to understand.

Memories of missionary days flooded back into my mind. I had wandered through a secularized, irreverent, crass society where imagination was the only limitation to sin. But that had been somewhat understandable. Those people had been depressed by their war-torn deprivations. Only a few had mustered the courage to try for baptismal worthiness. Night after night I had returned to the cold apartment more convinced than ever that the wages of sin are death. In so many cases the light had gone out of these people.

Then there had been the years in the armed forces. Daily demonstrations of humanity's willful depravity imprinted the conclusion on my mind that living the Gospel commandments was the superior way of life. There I discovered that men who took any faith seriously were islands of virtue. I felt a kinship with them which transcended doctrinal differences. Recent encounters with depraved public morality in the urban East — in entertainment, advertising and increasingly available pornography — had depressed me even as a mere traveler.

These were some of the experiences I carried into my new calling. They made me an advocate of obedience. But those years of being repelled by sin did not lead me beyond a superficial prescription for those who had disobeyed.

As I looked at Bruce, unwillfully the thought dominated my mind: "Why did you do it?" It was that automatic attitude of pity for the disobedient. Inside I could feel a fury kindling. How utterly inexcusable this was. An infraction of the covenant of sexual morality is so serious — especially for

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someone who had willingly made sacred commitments. Bruce had been raised in a stalwart family. He had the advantages of the full church program in a Mormon community. He had survived the rebellion of adolescence and had entered and served worthily in the mission field. I thought, "Why did you do it? You were fully aware of the temptation and the consequences. Yes, I was engaged too, and know the impelling drives of passionate love — but Bruce, that should have been no surprise to you. You should have planned in advance not to linger where you knew you could become weak."

As I pondered Bruce's predicament, I felt that his mission experience had been similar to mine. He, too, had felt that there was something wrong with people who sinned grievously. "At least they aren't like me," the missionary often thinks. "I'd never do that. I wouldn't dare. And besides, though I'm very human, I genuinely don't want to."

How had Bruce forgotten that burning resolve?

To this point I had said nothing openly. Bruce's agony continued to pour out. I tried to be a good listener. But it was hard not to act disgusted. Evidently my restraint encouraged the trust Bruce brought with him — he talked freely though with intense anguish.

The issue began to broaden. It seemed to me that in the mission field Bruce had succumbed to a seductive eliteness. He had felt the selectness of being a dedicated servant, but the Gospel remained something to be carried to others by the "chosen" servants. Neither Bruce nor admittedly I had seen ourselves as sinners — at least of the grievous sort. Somehow we underestimated our potential for sin.

As I looked further into those youthful eyes, I saw that Bruce had been rehearsing this interview for days. He was fully aware of the gravity of the situation. He had screamed at himself, "Do you realize what you've done? Do you remember your covenants? What have you always claimed and taught? Do you recall this scripture and that and yet another? How could you?" I saw this in tears streaming from Bruce's eyes, perspiration beading on his forehead.

I thought of ten things to say. But it was evident that Bruce had been saying them for days. They were all judgmental and they all tasted sour. What I could say seemed trite and useless. All I could come up with was blame.

New questions invaded my mind: "Why are you here, Bruce? Where did you find the courage to face such censure? Why didn't you subvert the system? You wouldn't need a temple recommend interview for many months yet. By then you could have yourself convinced that you were worthy again. It would be devious but it wouldn't hurt like this encounter."

I began to see some hidden depth in Bruce. He wasn't like those sinners I had pitied for years. He knew right from wrong. In reflection I had to admit that maybe they also had known. It was I who was quick to judge; dismiss and run from what I didn't want to see. But Bruce's commitment to the right screamed for action. Now he was deep in the wrong. Anguish

bound him. He had felt sick to his stomach for days. He could not run this time. Bruce was hiding nothing — leaving himself no escape.

Part of my world began to crumble. Evidently returned missionaries are not unusually fortified. Perhaps there is no natural superiority of the Saints. There was something divine in Bruce — in hundreds of Bruces — because he simply would not submit to the justifications that entered his mind. He had to do something. He believed I would know what.

Now not only the ordination but the mantle had been placed upon me. The ordination came from an apostle — but the mantle came from the anguished faith of a simple youth.

My mind finally cleared. A new freshness stirred within me. The question was not, “Why did you do it?” nor “Why did you come?” but, “Where do we go from here?”

Bruce and I had each given the “Call to Repentance” missionary lesson often. So we started there. How different it seemed this time. Our hearts swelled as we both began to grope toward the Gospel’s first base. I saw in Bruce the fortitude that I had missed in everyone else before — largely because I hadn’t known where to look for it. Memories poured in on me of my own lost opportunities to repent.

I saw in Bruce a weakness, yet also rare strength. It was the power to admit, to confess, to do an about-face instead of justifying the wrong. The answer to the question, “Why are you here?” came with Bruce’s simple trust: because the consequences of not coming would be compounding the sin by hiding it. It would mean living a lie. For me Bruce made a principle come alive: Justification is the natural way, the easy way — but the way of self-alienation. It takes courage to face the consequences of one’s actions. It seemed to me that we are so often nourished on acclaim that we are unable to face the responsibilities of serious mistakes. We want acceptability so desperately that we prefer escape rather than endangering our hard-won reputation by confessing. But that’s just it — prevarication is a second temptation which follows the first. The only solution of integrity is to stop before sin becomes a chain.

So here we are, Bruce. You’ve sinned and you’ve suffered. You will suffer more. You have almost miraculously opted for confession rather than facade. So where do we go from here? That is the pertinent question.

The doctrine behind those junior Sunday school steps of repentance became urgent. “Obviously, Bruce, you’ve forfeited much of your right before God.” Bruce looked at me and queried, “Yes, and what about my priesthood?”

The weight that I had so neatly left on Bruce’s shoulders began to spread out to include me. I could see that some day soon I was going to have to speak for the Lord. I recalled a recent meeting with a member of the Presiding Bishopric. His words hit home now: “The Gospel’s purpose is to help people, not to blame them. If being harsh will help them most, then be harsh. If leniency will actually help them, then do that. But, Bishop, remember it is not your decision to make. It is the Lord’s. Contact Him. That is your calling. Avoid following your own convenience.”

We concluded that first night with a prayerful supplication that transcended anything I had known for years. During that communication these words came to my consciousness:

Behold, he who has repented of his sins, the same is forgiven, and I, the Lord, remember them no more. By this ye may know if a man repenteth of his sins — behold he will confess them and forsake them. (D&C 58:42)

The weight Bruce felt was as heavy as he feared but he surprised himself at his own strength. He felt like he was his own man now. As we parted I was overcome with gratefulness for his trust but even more grateful for that divine option of repentance. Throughout the evening it had unfolded itself to me in expanding beauty. Everything I could have said to Bruce would have been so phony, so superficial, without that doctrine. What I said to him would seem severe to anyone without a commitment, but for the two of us, it was like a fresh miracle to discover that link between confession and redemption. In many ways Bruce was a man to be admired.

For the first time I was able to relate to a sinner. The term itself took on a new tone. I remembered how Jesus had used the word with an openness that had always eluded me.

Weeks and months passed. Bruce and I learned together. Both of us re-read Matthew Cowley, who said, "Somehow, I just can't get past the first principles." Jesus began to take on a new role. He looked quite different through the eyes of one who stands forfeit before God. Dependence on Him is altogether different from mere admiration. "Unto you I command that you forgive all men, but I will forgive whom I will," He said. "There are so many people to forgive, particularly myself," Bruce thought. I admitted, "Up to now sinners somehow seemed generically deficient. But do they ever look different now." Bruce found a new view of other people. I just swallowed hard trying to mask my inadequacies in perceiving the most basic precepts of the Gospel while being surrounded with it all my life. For example, there was "grace." That doctrine had seemed so arbitrary to me. Leave it to the Calvinists. Mormonism's uniqueness spoke of free agency and eternal progression. But grace looks different from a sinner's viewpoint. It is an unhaughty hope in which one feels a new comfort in a Savior. Redemption likewise becomes so crucial. It is like human magnanimity — but with divine power attached. Until now it had seemed too theological to me, but through Bruce I found I had just been ignoring my own soul. I, like most, had been tantalized by acceptability rather than knowing myself and "harkening unto the Lord."

Later interviews had to battle with despondency and regression. In addition there was the question of restitution. Bruce's youthful exuberance about the pursuit of perfection had to adjust to a whole new view. It was not just this one serious transgression. It was his lifetime of ignoring repentance. True, he had admitted his faults and misdeeds. He had prayed