

Thanks to the 12-step program of recovery, popularized by Alcoholics Anonymous, I felt empowered on two different occasions to fight back. I chose to respond to passive-aggressive behavior and "anonymous" criticism. The outcome didn't change in either setting, but at least my faith, integrity and self-respect remained intact.

Basically, I was told "the congregation" wanted me "to change." So I responded:

"If I'm being asked to change, let's be clear on what that word actually means. Obviously, none of us can change who we are. We can only change what we do and/or how we do it. Therefore, any request for me to change can only mean one of three actions:

1. To *start* doing something that I'm not presently doing.
2. To *stop* doing something that I am presently doing.
3. To do something *differently* from the way I am presently doing it.

If the concerns don't fall under one of those three actions, then the real issue is that the congregation wants me to be somebody other than who I am. Even if I were to try to act like that somebody, I seriously doubt that God would bless my efforts. Moreover, there is no demonstrable way to measure whatever progress I'd be making, or to establish some reasonable deadline by which it's decided that such "issues" are no longer to be considered matters of concern.

If there are no specific problems with the quality of my *work*, I understand and accept that some people simply may not care for who I am. If that's what needs to change, I believe such persons could be encouraged to respond in one of three ways:

1. To try to accept me the way I am (as I do them).
2. To try to overlook or "excuse" me for the way I am. (Note: This is not to be confused with "forgiveness." God does not "forgive" *who* we are, which are states of being. The only sins God asks us to confess are those actions we did that we should not have done, and those actions we failed to do that we should have done.)
3. To recognize that the problem may not lie with me."

As I said, the decision had already been made following numerous secret meetings of the Staff-Parish Relations Committee (no paid staff were ever present). Obviously, there was nothing I could do, and nothing my denomination *would* do to stop it or protect me. They chose to support the handful of malcontents, only one of whom is still a member of that congregation.

Intermittent and sporadic employment followed. It took several more years of self-flagellation to finally decide to stop beating myself up. It's taken a long time for me to realize that only an unhealthy person can survive in an unhealthy environment. I'm still heavily in debt; I still live with fear and mistrust in spite of a good calling in a healthy

setting; and my physical health could be much better. But I still have my faith, my call, my gifts, and my integrity. Most of all, I still have and will always have my blessed Lord and Savior, the Great Physician, Healer and "Friend who sticketh closer than a brother"!

Here's to a 2012 that remains filled with opportunities for each of us to become that much more conformed to His image!

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