

THE CHURCH'S WORST ENEMY

The late Walt Kelley, the creator and author of the comic strip "Pogo" had the little opossum saying: "We have met the enemy and he is us." Since Satan is "an angel of light" (II Cor. 11:14) it is hard sometimes to recognize the enemy. Satan, being a liar and the father of lies (Jn. 8:44) operates in the realm of denial of the truth of the Scriptures. This being true his operation must take place where the truth is found. Since Jesus is the truth (Jn. 14:6), then the truth is found in his body, the church. The most dangerous operation of Satan, then is found in the church. After all, he controls the world: "We know that we are of God, and *the whole world lies in the power of the evil one.*" (I Jn. 5:19). So the thrust of his activity is toward the church, and the object of the evil one is to destroy the truth as revealed by Christ. What more effective way to do this than to infiltrate the church and use it against itself, thus making it its own worst enemy?

The church is supposed to be at peace with God and at war with the world. Often, we are at war with God and at peace with the world. We are told: "Do not love the world nor the things of the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is of the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but from the world. The world is passing away, and its lusts; but the one who does the will of God lives forever" (I Jn. 2:15,16). This, very poignantly, separates the believer from the world of unbelief, and illustrates unequivocally the believer cannot serve two masters. For "he will either hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth" (Matt. 6:24) ... ("wealth" in this passage is defined as "personified as an object of worship.") Many churches today have compromised with the world and sold themselves to the god of wealth. This is illustrated, not only in the attitude of many Christians but in the massive, ornate, expensive cathedrals built and dedicated to the God who does "not dwell in temples made with hands" (Acts 17: 24).

When the Apostles were with Jesus on the mountain of transfiguration and the glory of God was revealed to them, Peter said, "Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, we will build three tabernacles here, one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah." Notice what Peter said: "It is good for us! Let us build for you..." If it is good for us, we will build for him. Religious people are always building something; a church, a worship center, a family life center, a gymnasium, a worship center (so we can worship the God that does not dwell in a building). We believe if only we can find the right combination of buildings, teaching, or worship, or people, then it will be "good for us." What Peter did not realize, and what we, too, fail to perceive, is that the glory is in Christ, and not a method, movement or a sanctuary, and it is for him and not for us. That which is "good for us" inspires us to "build for you," but how many times have we built something "for" the Lord that really serves our own agenda? Strange how we can "meet the enemy" and he is us and we do not recognize it. Too often we are at war with God and at peace with the world. This is nothing new. We see it manifested in Ananias and Sapphira early in the life of the church (Acts 5:1-11).

To take care of the needy "all who were owners of land or houses would sell them and brought the proceeds of the sales and lay them at the apostles' feet, then they would be distributed to each as any had need" (Acts 4:34, 35). This is an example of how Satan works. It was a peril within the church. The sin of Ananias and Sapphira was not that they failed to give the money after they sold the land. They gave part of the price, and the sin was not that they kept part of the money for themselves. They did not have to give at all, and could have kept all the money, and given none to the Apostles. It would have been no sin. Peter told Ananias: "While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? After it was sold, was it not under your control?" (Acts 5:4). Their sin is seen in the questions Peter asked: "Why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit?... Why is it that you have conceived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to man but to God... Why is it that you have agreed together to put the Spirit of the Lord to the test?" (vers. 3, 4, 9). Their sin was the sin of hypocrisy and lying. This was simply a manifestation of what was in their heart: covetousness and greed, the hidden enemy of the church.

There is an abundance of preaching in the religious world today about money.... "giving to the work of the Lord... supporting the church with your tithes and offerings...being a faithful giver... "supporting this ministry...every member a tither... give and the Lord will prosper you..." and many people will use the common excuse for not attending church, "the preacher is always preaching on money." What they have missed is there is no command or precedent in the New Testament for the taking or receiving the Sunday morning offering every week. But what about I Corinthians 16:2, "On the first day of every week each one of you lay aside and save, as he may prosper?" (A passage read in most churches before receiving the offering). Now read verse 1. The purpose of this offering was "a collection for the saints..." and Paul wanted it to be ready "so that no collections be made when I come" (verse 2). Paul was receiving from the Gentile churches an offering for the saints in Jerusalem who were suffering famine (Acts 11:27-30; 24:17). This is discussed at length in II Cor. 8 & 9, passages used by many today to urge Christians to be faithful in their giving to the church.

What about the tithe? Many preachers today emphasize the tithe as the standard for believers to use in giving. However, tithing is not mentioned in the new Testament for two reasons: God does not expect ten percent from the believer, rather He demands one hundred percent. Also, tithing was a tax Israel was to pay, not only to cover religious obligations but to support the government. The tithe passed away, along with the passing of restrictions on "food or drink, and festivals, new moons and the Sabbath day" (Col. 2:16).

One of the church's hidden enemy is its attitude toward wealth and the use of money. On this subject the church has met the enemy and he is us. The New Testaments speaks of only two reasons for the believer to give of their material means: First for the preaching of the Word, and second for the care of the needy. To the Corinthians Paul wrote: "Do Barnabas and I not have the right to refrain from working? ...If we sowed spiritual things in you, is it too much if we reap material things from you? If others share the

right over you, do we not more? Nevertheless we did not use this right, but we endure all things so that we will cause no hindrance to the gospel of Christ. Do you not know that those who perform sacred services eat the food of the temple, and those who attend regularly to the altar have their share from the altar? So also the Lord directed those who proclaim the gospel get their living from the gospel. But I have used none of these things..." (I Cor. 9:6-15a). Paul wrote to Timothy: "The elders who rule well are to be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching. For the Scripture says, 'You shall not muzzle the ox while he is threshing,' and 'The laborer is worthy of his wages'" (I Tim. 5:17, 18). The "double honor" was the honor of being an Elder and receiving a salary. The early church's "Ministers" were the Elders from the congregation they served.

The second reason for giving was to support the needy. The Old Testament establishes the precedent for caring for the poor and needy. When they reaped their harvest, they did not reap it completely: "When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not wholly reap the corners of the field, neither shall you gather the gleanings of your harvest. And you shall not glean the vineyard, neither shall you gather every grape of your vineyard: you shall leave them for the poor and stranger. I am the Lord your God" (Lev. 19:9,10). Sometimes the farmer granted gleaning rights to the deserving poor. Boaz and Ruth is a good example of this. One of the sins of Sodom was that "she did not help the poor and needy" (Ezek. 16:49).

In the New Testament when Jesus inaugurated his ministry, he quotes Isaiah 61:1, and the first thing on Isaiah's list describing his ministry was that "God had anointed him to preach the gospel to the poor" (Luke 4:18). The whole ministry of Christ shows his compassion for the poor. He, to the derision of the religious leaders, mingled with them (Matt. 9:11,12), eating with them (Luke 5:27-32), and feeding them (Luke 9:10-17). When Jesus told the rich young ruler the things he should do to inherit eternal life and concluded with "One thing you lack, sell all that you possess and distribute to the poor and you shall have treasure in heaven. But when he heard these things, he became very sad, for he was extremely rich" (Matt. 18:22, 23).

George Grant in his book *Bringing in the Sheaves* reminds us that "It is not surprising to find that Scripture repeatedly mentions love evidenced in faith is in the context that focus on service to the poor, the hungry, the dispossessed, and the lonely." "He who oppresses the poor reproaches his Maker, but he who is gracious to the needy honors Him (Prov. 14:31). He who is gracious will be blessed, for he gives food to the poor (Prov. 22:9). "We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. But whoever has the world's goods and beholds his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him? Little children, let us not love with word or with tongue, but in deed and truth" (I John 3:16-18).

It is here that we meet one of the church's worst enemy, and "he is us." If we are right in saying the only two reasons given in Scripture is for support of the ministry and giving to the poor, then what about our lavish church buildings we build and dedicate to the Lord? First, let's be reminded that the "Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands" (Acts 17:24), and it is not a place: "neither in this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father" (John 4:21). Second, as we stated above,

"too often we say we are building for him: but it serves our own purpose." For the first 300 years of the church's history they had no church buildings and it seems they got along very well without them. However, it is not wrong to build church buildings, but we should be honest and not include them as "giving to the Lord" and we do not have to extravagantly rival the world with buildings.

Another enemy of the church we have met and "he is us," can be stated in one word: "pragmatism" if it works it must be right. The roots of this pragmatic thinking can be found in the church's passion to be relevant. Churches have operated under the assumption that we should do anything and everything in order to win people, especially young people, to the church. Anything to get them and keep them interested in church is thought to be all right. As a result many things that "work" to attract people are never held accountable to Biblical standards. This idea that "if it works then God will use it" panders to the whims and fancies of a generation that is more concerned with the spirit of the age rather than the Spirit of God. This thinking has resulted in the church's substituting "church membership" for Christ and the Kingdom. There is a tremendous difference in Kingdom Christians and Church members. In fact in the gospels Jesus mentions the Kingdom a hundred and thirty-two times and the church two times. If we want to understand what a Kingdom Christian is, just read the Sermon on the Mount recorded in Matthew 5-7, and compare it with the average church member today.

The church as a whole has embraced a "relative" ministry. It stresses psychology, psychiatry, counseling, recreation, and services geared to meet our ever real or imagined need in order to face the stress and conflict of modern society. Its preaching is tailored to gaining interest on a superficial level, not to solid doctrinal teachings. Because sin is condoned, it talks about co-dependency, victimhood, self-image and other psychological garbage. The Scriptures are plain on this point: "...because they did not receive the love of the truth so as to be saved, God will send them a deluding influence that they might believe a lie, that they all may be damned who did not believe the truth but took pleasure in unrighteousness" (II Thessalonians 2:10-12).

As believers the modern church has tended to measure success by the same standard used by non-Christians. Rather than living out the gospel before the world, most church members have patterned their lives after the world. We have forgotten the words of Paul to the church in Corinth: "God has chosen the foolish things of the world...the weak things of the world...the base things of the world and the despised things of the world, that he might nullify the things that are..." (I Cor. 1:27-28). Far from being despised by the world, we expect and often receive its praises. It is sad that the effort of churches today to be "relevant" brings about their irrelevance. Alexander Shemann in *The East and The West May Yet Meet* wrote of the schizophrenia that characterizes the modern church today. He said: "People tend to be unaware that their Sunday worship, from beginning to the end, repudiates the culture that they daily uphold as their way of life." James, in one of the earliest writings of the early church, speaks poignantly on this subject: "You lust and do not have... you are envious and cannot obtain...you do not have because you ask not, you ask and do not receive...you adulteresses, do you not know the friendship of the world is hostility toward God?...whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God" (James 4:2-4). If the church becomes an enemy of God, it becomes its own worst enemy. Pogo was right. We have met the enemy and he is us.

(Sorry about these extra pages, I couldn't delete them....HB

+

