

## THE HIDDEN ENEMY OF THE CHURCH

Herbert Schlossberg in his book *Idols For Destruction* has a chapter on *Idols of Religion*. He opens the chapter with these words: "From the time that Aaron, the first high priest, acceded to the people's wish by casting a golden calf (Ex. 32), the religious leadership has always prepared the way for apostasy. The constant refrain of the prophetic message was that the priests, prophets, and teachers had prostituted themselves and turned to the service of evil." He continued with this paragraph with these words, which inspires the subject of this article. "Any institution can become idolatrous, but it appears to be a particular hazard with the institutions of religion. The charge to live righteously and speak the Word of God faithfully apparently provides fertile ground for noxious weeds of self-righteousness, and they in turn render one impervious to the prophetic voice that demands repentance and restitution. From that low state, it is only a short step to the religious institution's becoming an active agent in the promotion of idolatry or even to become an idol itself as a people confuse the means of worship with the object of worship."

An example of this religious idolatry is seen in the temple worship of the Old Testament. The promise of God to David when he desired to build the temple was that Solomon would "build a house for My name" (II Sam. 7:13). After Solomon built the temple God said, "I have consecrated this house which I have built by putting My name there forever and My eyes and My heart will be there perpetually" (I Kings 9:3). However, by Isaiah's time the temple had been converted into an apparatus to the service of idolatry. In a time when Israel had become a desperately wicked nation, the temple worship of the Creator of the universe flourished. This is described in the first chapter of Isaiah. This chapter is a formal accusation of Israel for their unfaithfulness but they did not know or understand their condition (ver. 3) any more than the average church knows or understands what's going on around them today. They are said to have abandoned the Lord, despised the Holy one of Israel and had turned away from Him. Their cities had been burned with fire, their land lay desolate and strangers were devouring the land in their very presence. God had to send them a prophet to tell them what was going on right in front of their eyes. God said this great nation He had called out of slavery and redeemed them for a great purpose had become as useless as a watchman's hut in a cucumber field and as a shelter in a vineyard. Why did this situation exist and why were they not aware of their degenerate condition? Verses 11-15 answers this question: they were too busy being religious. In our language, they were too busy going to church. God looked upon their multitude of sacrifices, the burnt offerings of rams, and fat of fed cattle, their appearing before Him and trampling His courts, the offerings and observance of new moons and Sabbaths, their spreading their hands in prayer, and said: "I cannot endure iniquity and the solemn assemblies. I hate your new moon festivals and your appointed feasts, they have become a burden to Me. I am weary of bearing them" (vers.13, 14). In fact God said He hated all they were doing. Israel had been chosen to be a holy nation and a kingdom of priests. Their purpose therefore, was to tell the world about God and convince the world of His love. From this chapter we see the truth of Schlossberg's statement that "religious institutions can become an active agent in promoting

idolatry or even become an idol itself and people confuse the means of worship with the object of worship." In his book, *No God But God* Oz Guinness quotes Alexander Solzhenitsyn as saying: "Idolatry today is the idol of good and useful things from our modern world that, in the form of powerful modern myths, have been allowed to become distortions of the gospel and substitutes for faith in God. In the Biblical view, anything created...anything at all that is less than God and most especially the gifts of God...can become idolatrous if it is relied upon inordinately until it becomes a full-blown substitute for God and, thus an idol. The first duty of believers is to say yes to God, the second is to say no to idols."

Israel serves as an example of modern day idolatry in the church: "If your heart turns away and you will not obey, but are drawn away and worship other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall surely perish" (Deut. 30:17,18). Jim Nelson Black in *When Nations Die* says "When nations die, they do not simply disappear. Obviously certain elements of culture survive and forms of cultures that once dominated nations live on." This, then, influences both churches and individuals. It is the tenor of the times, the culture in which we live and the accepted standards of the nation which many times determines the status of both the church and the individual. In a nation that has made a god of wealth, a god of immorality, a god of fashion, and a god of youth it isn't hard to explain some of the modern attitudes found in our churches. This idolatry has become the hidden enemy of the church. When Israel embraced idolatry, they simply combined their worship with the paganism they embraced. This is illustrated in II Kings 23 in the record of the religious revival under Josiah (which didn't last very long after his death). He commanded that the vessels in the temple that had been used in the worship of Baal, Molech and Ashtoreth be removed. This is evidence that they had combined the pagan worship of the heathen with the worship of Jehovah, and displayed it in His temple.

The idolatry of wealth is described in Scripture as: material wealth or possessions having a debasing influence (mammon), the deceitfulness of riches, unrighteous wealth, worldly treasure, the love of money, sordid gain, and covetousness. The first example idolatry of wealth is when Aaron instructed Israel to bring all their gold rings, "and he took them and fashioned it with a graving tool, and made it into a molten calf, and said 'this is your god, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt'" (Exodus 32:4). In the New Testament, the idol of wealth is demonstrated in the church in Laodicea (Rev. 3) when it said, "I am rich, and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing." Christ's answer was "You are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked." This illustrates the hidden enemy of the church.

The Idolatry of wealth has been so embraced by the modern church that the majority of offerings in church today are used to pay preachers to preach to Christians and to construct and maintain their buildings while the idea of preachers evangelizing the lost and nurturing believers, church offerings being used to feed and care for the poor are lost concepts. The church that has the money to build modern buildings is considered a success and the task of caring for the needy has been handed over to the government. There are only two reasons for the giving of money stated in the New Testament: (1) for caring for the poor and

needy (I Cor. 16:1-3; II Cor. 9:1-13; I Tim. 5:9-16; Gal 2:10), and (2) for the preaching of the gospel (I Cor. 9:6-14; I Timothy 5:17-18; Phil. 4:15-18). It is remarkable that the spiritual descendants of the one who “had no place to lay his head” (Lk. 9:58), and taught “you cannot serve God and mammon” (Mt. 6:24), who are the body of Christ on earth (I Cor. 12:27), and his ambassadors who “stand in his stead” (II Cor. 5:20 KJV), could be said to be guilty of idolatry in bowing to the god of wealth. W. Herbert Scott wrote in *The Christian Position: Above or Beside the Needy*: “Christians need to re-examine the scriptural injunctions of their world-responsibility. It seems we have become one with the world in our love for material things and for economic security. Few of us really know experientially the reality and blessings of full commitment to God of all we are and have.” When the Apostle Paul said, “Covetousness is idolatry” (Col 3:5) and the Apostle John said, “Guard yourselves from Idols” (I John 5:21), they were warning against the hidden enemy of the church—Idolatry.

That the idolatry of immorality has invaded the church is evident from the many tragic cases of immorality not only among the “laity” but also evident in the “clergy” (we use these terms as used in modern religious circles), and the divorce rate among Christians is about equal with the world, not to mention the modern debates concerning ordination of homosexuals to the ministry. No one can deny that the spirit of immorality has taken over our country, and the idolatry of the nation influences the church and the individual. In the Corinthian church immorality had so influenced the church it had become worse than that of the world. The Apostle wrote: “It is actually reported that there is immorality among you, and immorality of such a kind as does not exist even among the Gentiles...” (I Cor 5:1). He goes on to show that Christians are expected to live in a world of wickedness without embracing its way of life: “I wrote in my letter not to associate with immoral people; I did not mean the immoral people of the world, or with the covetousness and swindlers, or with idolaters, for then you would have to go out of the world. But actually, I wrote to you not to associate with any so-called brother if he should be an immoral person, or covetous, or an idolater, or reviler, drunkard or swindler...” (I Cor. 5:9-11).

In the “free love” decade of the 1960’s the new left refashioned immorality into a new image. Under the guise of moral freedom, pornography, homosexuality, pedophilia, adultery and abortions have become not only the accepted standard of behavior but is celebrated as the symbol of liberation from the old-fashioned idea of moral standard of right and wrong. As a result of this thinking the church is faced with the hidden sin of the idolatry of immorality. With the advent of HBO, the internet and smart phones immorality is no longer hidden behind counters or practiced in the dark, but is piped into homes and has become a number one problem with parents who want to protect their children from the filth being spewed out by the purveyors of the “new freedom” which has no respect for anything decent or godly.

In his book *The Enemy Within* Michael Savage speaks of colleges and universities that “invite prostitutes as guest speakers, think there’s nothing odd about assigning pornography for homework, and encourage class trips to strip clubs.” These are colleges attended by many average church young people. The institution of marriage and the family is being steadily dismantled as our society has embraced Freud’s theory of sexuality and rejected the Biblical teaching on these subjects.

The idolatry of fashion has so influenced the church today that Abercrombie and Fitch, the Malls and designer clothing demand more attention from many people than anything related to their spiritual growth. Many Christians think nothing of paying a hundred dollars for a pair of tennis shoes or a pair of jeans yet gripe if the preacher mentions money. Thus, fashion can become the secret enemy of the church.

In the July/August 2015 issue of *Christianity Today* Robert Covolo wrote an article entitled *The Biblical Meaning of Clothing* in which he stated: “The Bible doesn’t directly address fashion, which today refers to the rapid interplay of clothing in consumer societies. But the Bible has a surprising amount to say about clothing. Right from the beginning, after the fall, Adam and Eve became aware of being undressed. Then God provides for them in their nakedness. Theologians call this *proto-evangelism*—literally a ‘first gospel.’ The gift of clothing reveals a God who meets us in our shameful, sinful condition and covers us through a sacrificial death.” Jesus said: “I say to you, do not be anxious for your life, as to what you shall eat, or what you shall drink; nor for your body, as to what you shall put on. Is not life more than food, and the body than clothing” (Matt. 6:25). Jesus is here speaking of life’s necessities; food and clothing. He is telling us not even to be concerned with the basics of life, let alone the luxuries. The believer does not need to be wealthy to let material things (fashion) get in the way of his relationship to Christ.

The idolatry of youth is a relative new phenomenon to invade the church. The present youth subculture is described by noting that until 1950, youth subculture as such did not exist. Children aspired to (or were pushed into) adulthood as fast as their physical development allowed. Since then, however, the media and advertisers, among others, have made youth the dominant culture of Western societies, to the point that many people retain adolescent attitudes far into adulthood. Many parents hate the fact they are growing older. In order to either forget or try to hide it they try to act like their teenage children. Mothers shop with daughters and buy the same clothes in the same store. The result is they look more like high school kids than a grown woman. Many older parents are trying too hard to be “cool.” The god of youth is evident when parents try to be a kid and not the parent.

Youth is the predominant factor in most churches today. It is now common practice in most evangelical churches to offer the people, especially the young people, a maximum of entertainment and a minimum of serious instruction from the word of God. Michael Spencer in *Those Magnificent Young Men In Their Pastoring Machines* states: “Youth ministry, in general, was the American church’s great experiment with pragmatism. If it worked, i.e. got the kids interested and kept them in church, it was all right. The idea of ‘if it works, then God will use it,’ has grown from youth ministry to everything that is evangelical seeker sensitive ministry today. Most seeker churches are grown up youth groups. They are doing what we taught them was OK in youth ministry, and now they are redecorating the church to suit themselves. And they are good at it.” Many churches, it must be admitted, have grown in numbers by having an active youth ministry. However, there is always the danger that the loud music and contemporary songs leave the older Christians standing silent while rock music and repeated choruses without any Biblical content, leave them left out of what should be a time of spiritual experience in reverent worship.