



The Christian's Greatest Enemy

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East of the Jordan in the territory of Moab, Moses began to expound this law, saying: The Lord our God said to us at Horeb, "You have stayed long enough at this mountain. Break camp and advance into the hill country of the Amorites; go to all the neighboring peoples in the Arabah, in the mountains, in the western foothills, in the Negev and along the coast, to the land of the Canaanites and to Lebanon, as far as the great river, the Euphrates. See, I have given you this land. Go in and take possession of the land that the Lord swore He would give to your fathers - to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob - and to their descendants after them"(Deuteronomy 1:5-8).

In the Old Testament, the enemy that threatened Israel the most was the dictatorship of the customary. Israel became accustomed to walking around in circles and was blissfully content to stay by the safety of the mountain for a while. To put it another way, it was the psychology of the usual. God finally broke into the rut they were in and said, "You have been here long enough. It is time for you to move on."

To put Israel's experience into perspective for our benefit today, we must see that the mountain represents a spiritual experience for a spiritual state of affairs. Israel's problem was that they had given up hope of ever getting the land God had promised them. They had become satisfied with going in circles and camping in nice, comfortable places. They had come under the spell of the psychology of the routine. It kept them where they were and prevented them from getting the riches God had promised them.

If their enemy, the Edomites, would have come after them, the Israelites would have fought down to the last man and probably would have beaten the Edomites - Israel would have made progress. Instead they were

twiddling their thumbs, waiting for the customary to keep on being the customary.

What is the worst enemy the church faces today? This is where a lot of unreality and unconscious hypocrisy enters. Many are ready to say, "The liberals are our worst enemy." But the simple fact is that the average evangelical church does not have too much trouble with liberalism. Nobody gets up in our churches and claims that the first five books of Moses are just myths. Nobody says that the story of creation is simply religious mythology. Nobody denies that Christ walked on the water or that He rose from the grave. Nobody gets up in our churches and claims that Jesus Christ is not the Son of God or that He isn't coming back again. Nobody denies the validity of the Scriptures. We just cannot hide behind liberalism and say that it is our worst enemy. We believe that evangelical Christians are trying to hold on to the truth given to us, the faith of our fathers, so the liberals are not our worst enemy.

Neither do we have a problem with the government. People in our country can do just about whatever they please and the government pays no attention. We can hold prayer meetings all night if we want, and the government would never bother us or question us. There is no secret police breathing down our backs watching our every move. We live in a free land, and we ought to thank God every day for that privilege.

Dictatorship of the Routine

The treacherous enemy facing the church of Jesus Christ today is the dictatorship of the routine, when the routine becomes "lord" in the life of the church. Programs are organized and the prevailing conditions are accepted as normal. Anyone can predict next Sunday's service and what will happen. This seems to be the most deadly threat in the church today. When we come to the place where everything can be predicted and nobody expects anything unusual from God, we are in a rut. The routine dictates, and we can tell not only what will happen next Sunday, but what will occur next month and, if things do not improve, what will take place next year. Then we have reached the place where what has been determines what is, and what is determines what will be.

That would be perfectly all right and proper for a cemetery. Nobody expects a cemetery to do anything but conform. The greatest conformists in the world today are those who sleep out in the community cemetery. They do not bother anyone. They just lie there, and it is perfectly all right for them to do so. You can predict what everyone will do in the cemetery from the deceased right down to the people who attend a funeral there. Everyone and everything in a cemetery has accepted the routine. Nobody expects anything out of those buried in the cemetery. But the church is not a cemetery and we should expect much from it, because what has been should not be lord to tell us what is, and what is should not be ruler to tell us what will be. God's people are supposed to grow.

As long as there is growth, there is an air of unpredictability. Certainly we cannot predict exactly, but in many churches you just about can. Everybody knows just what will happen, and this has become our deadliest enemy. We blame the devil, the "last days" and anything else we can think of, but the greatest enemy is not outside of us. It is within - it is an attitude of

accepting things as they are. We believe that what was must always determine what will be, and as a result we are not growing in expectation.

The Progressive Stages

As soon as someone begins talking like this, the Lord's people respond by getting busy. What I'm talking about, however, is internal. It is a matter of the soul and mind that ultimately determines our conduct. Let me show you the progressive stages.

I began with what I call the rote (mechanical or habitual repetition of something). This is repetition without feeling. If someday someone would read the Scripture and believe it and would believe what is sung in the great Christian hymns, there would be a blessed spiritual revolution underway in a short time. But too many are caught up in the rote, repeating without feeling, without meaning, without wonder and without any happy surprises or expectations. In our services God cannot get in because we have it all fixed up for Him. We say, "Lord, we are going to have it this way. Now kindly bless our plans." We repeat without feeling, we repeat without meaning, we sing without wonder, and we listen without surprise. That is my description of the rote.

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We go one step further and come to what I will call the rut, which is bondage to the rote. When we are unable to see and sense bondage to the rote, we are in rut. For example, a man may be sick and not even know it. The doctors may have confided in the man's wife instead, "We don't want to frighten your husband, but he could drop any minute. He is critically ill, so just expect it any moment." The man himself does

not know he is seriously ill. He goes about his business as if nothing is wrong. He may play golf or tennis, maybe even go on a hunting trip. He is sick, and yet he does not know how sick he really is. This may in fact hasten his end. Not knowing is risky business and full of danger. Spiritually speaking, the rut is bondage to the rote, and the greatest danger lies in our inability to sense or feel this bondage.

There is a third word, and I do not particularly like to use it, but the history of the church is filled with it. The word is rot. The church is afflicted by drive rot. This is best explained when the psychology of non-expectation takes over and spiritual rigidity sets in, which is an inability to visualize anything better, a lack of desire for improvement.

There are many who respond by arguing, "I know lots of evangelical churches that would like to grow, and they do their best to get the crowds in. They want to grow and have contest to make their Sunday school larger." That is true, but they are trying to get people to come and share their rut. They want people to help them celebrate the rote and finally join in the rot. Because the Holy Spirit is not given the chance to work in our services, nobody is repenting, nobody is seeking God, nobody is spending a day in quiet waiting on God with open Bible seeking to mend his or her ways. Nobody is doing it - we just want more people. But more people for what? More people to come and repeat our dead services without feeling, without meaning, without wonder, without surprise? More people to join us in the bondage to the rote? For the most part, spiritual rigidity that cannot bend is too weak notice how weak it is.

What Is the Church?

For clarification, what is the church? When I say that a church gets into the rote and then onto the rut and finely to the rot, what am I talking about?

For one thing, the church is not the building. A church is an assembly of individuals. There is a lot of meaningless dialogue these days about the church. It is meaningless because those engaged in the dialogue forget that a church has no separate existence. The church is not an entity in itself, but rather is composed of individual persons. It is the same error made about the state. Politicians sometimes talk about the state as though it were an entity in itself. Social workers talk about society, but society is people. So is the church. The church is made up of real people, and when they come together we have the church. Whatever the people are who make up the church, that is the kind of church it is - no worse and no better, no wiser, no holier, no more ardent and no more worshipful. To improve or change the church you must begin with individuals.

When people in the church only point to others for improvement and not to themselves, it is sure evidence that the church has come to dry rot. It is proof of three sins: the sin of self-righteousness, the sin of judgment and the sin of complacency.

When our Lord said, "*One of you will betray Me,*" thank God those disciples had enough spirituality that nobody said, "Lord, is it he?" Every one of those disciples said, "*Lord, is it I?*" If they would not have so responded there could not have been a Pentecost. But because they were humble enough to point the finger in their own direction the Holy Spirit fell upon them.

Self-righteousness is terrible among God's people. If we feel that we are what we ought to be, then we will remain what we are. We will not look for any change or improvement in our lives. This will quite naturally lead us to judge everyone by what we are. This is the judgment of which we must be careful. To judge others by ourselves is to create havoc in the local assembly.

Self-righteousness also leads to complacency. Complacency is a great sin and covers just about everything I have said about the rote and the rut. Some have the attitude, "Lord, I'm satisfied with my spiritual condition. I hope one of these days You'll come, I will be taken up to meet You in the air and I will rule over five cities." These people cannot rule over their own houses and families, but they expect to rule over five cities. They pray spottily and sparsely, rarely attending prayer meeting, but they read their Bibles and expect to go zooming off into the blue yonder and join the Lord in the triumph of the victorious saints.

Is Simply Self-Deception

I wonder if we are not fooling ourselves. I wonder if a lot of it is simply self-deception. I hear the voice of Jesus saying to us, "You have stayed long enough where you are. Break camp and advance into the hill country." This would be a new spiritual experience that God has for us. Everything Jesus Christ did for us we can have in this age. Victorious living, joyous living, holy living, fruitful living, wondrous, ravishing knowledge of the Triune God - all of this is ours. Power we never knew before, undreamed of answers to prayer - this is ours. "See, I have given you this land. Go in and take possession of [it]." The Lord gave it to you in a covenant. Go take it - it's yours. It was given to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and all their seed after. Jesus prayed, "My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in Me through their message" (John 17: 20). That embraces all those who belong to the church of Jesus Christ.

If we call Him Lord, how dare we sit any longer in the rut! The Lord has called us to move on. But when people are in a rut, not even the angel Gabriel can help them if they will not come out of it. This is not an accusation but a suggestion. If you are not in a rut, don't get mad - somebody else is. But if you are in a rut you ought to get out of it.

The difference between a wooden leg and a good leg is that if you prick a wooden leg the person would never notice. The difference between a church that has dry rot and a church that is alive is that if you prick the live church it will respond. If you prick the other kind, it is already dead. The tree that stands alive has lush, green leaves. Take a knife, scar the bark deeply and the tree will bleed. It is alive. The old dead tree just stands there, a watchtower for old sentinel crows. Take your knife and dig in as far as you want to, and nothing will happen because the tree is dead.

So it is with my message. If you'll get neither mad nor glad nor sad under my preaching, I know nothing can be done. But there are some who are alive, and I believe it is the majority.



"Declare ye among the nations, and publish, and set up a standard; publish, and conceal not"
(Jeremiah 50:2)

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