

KEEP IT SIMPLE

by Ray C. Stedman

In the final chapters of Second Corinthians, the Apostle Paul is dealing with probably the most powerful tool, the most dangerous threat to a church the devil has -- infiltration -- the destruction of a church from within by teachers who are veering off from the truth.

This is still the most dangerous threat to a church today. As you drive through any of our American cities you find church buildings on almost every corner. It would seem that Christianity is the dominant faith in this land of ours and that the church is a powerful moving force in our society. Yet, as you well know, many of those church buildings are empty; many of them have a mere handful of people coming to services that are prosaic and devoid of real vitality. It is clear that the churches represented by those buildings are long since gone as an effective force in our society.

What happened?

Well, most of them were destroyed from within by the satanic process of infiltration, by people who came in and gradually began to teach a deviate gospel. That is what was happening here at Corinth, and that is what is threatening many of our churches today.

In the 10th chapter of this letter we have already noted the weapons that we can use to counteract the evil strongholds and evil arguments in our midst. We have also noted the personal credentials that we ourselves must have in order to be effective in this battle. Now we come to chapter 11, where we are going to look at the tactics the apostle employs to counteract this threat to the church at Corinth. These are tactics which we may use today.

If you look in our prayer sheet this morning you will find two or three requests for prayer for people who are drifting into error, people who are being trapped in cults. Many of us, too, know people who are getting into some form of theological error. What do you do about it? What kind of tactics can you use? Well, let us look at what Paul did.

The first note that is struck is rather an amazing one. Paul reveals to the Corinthians the jealousy of his heart. Listen to these words:

I wish you would bear with me in a little foolishness. Do bear with me! I feel a divine jealousy for you, for I betrothed you to Christ to present you as a pure bride to her one husband. But I am afraid that as the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning, your thoughts will be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ. {2 Cor 11:1-3 RSV}

Perhaps the most vicious and destructive quality in the world today is jealousy. It has been properly called, "the green-eyed monster." Jealousy is an angry, strong, powerful emotion that refuses to tolerate a rival. It can be a very powerful motivator to aggressive action. It is one of the most frequent causes for broken homes, broken hearts and broken bodies in the world today.

Yet amazingly, God declares in the book of Exodus, "I the Lord your God am a jealous God," (Exod 20:5 {RSV}). All through the Scriptures there is this emphasis upon the jealousy of God.

Now if jealousy is so bad, why is God jealous? Here Paul says that he feels "divine jealousy," a godly jealousy, literally, for these people. Surely that indicates that jealousy can be both good and bad. So when you feel jealous of someone you have to ask yourself, "Is my jealousy a rightful one, or is it false?" The difference is right here: False jealousy is always selfish; it is concerned about my feelings. It is possessive; it wants to control another person. It is therefore often dominating, even cruel and tyrannical. It usurps the rights of others

and insists on its own way. It is imposed upon someone else whether he likes it or not. Because it is so vicious in its cruelty and its tyranny, jealousy perhaps is the most destructive force in the world today.

A true jealousy, a godly jealousy, on the other hand, as Paul felt for the Corinthians, is one that arises from a deep passion for the welfare of another. It becomes careless of self, and it is always manifested in a tenderness and a thoughtfulness about someone else. It may never cease, because it is a powerful motive, just as this one is here in the heart of Paul, as it is in the heart of God.

Paul likens his jealousy to that of a father who has betrothed his daughter to a young bridegroom. From time immemorial fathers have had the privilege of giving their daughters away in marriage. We reflect that when, in a wedding ceremony, the father walks down the aisle with the bride. Every father (I speak from experience) longs to be able to present his daughter, having raised her in a careful, nurtured home, as a chaste and lovely virgin to the young man. This is a rather startling analogy to use about these Corinthians, for we saw in Chapter 6 of First Corinthians what they had come out of. There Paul tells us that some of them had been adulterers, immoral people, homosexuals, thieves, drunkards, robbers and cut-throats. "Such were some of you," he said {1 Cor 6:11a RSV}. And yet now he says, "I have desired to present you as a chaste virgin to Christ."

That is a wonderful commentary on the tremendous reality of forgiveness of sins. I have often used this passage with people who struggle to believe that God can forgive their past. Not long ago I sat down with someone who told me his life story. He said, "I don't believe God can forgive me. The things I have done have been so vicious and so hurtful to others. I have been so cruel, so selfish." I turned to this very passage and said, "Do you see what Paul said about these Corinthians who came from this sordid and ugly background? God has cleansed them so they are like a chaste and lovely virgin, and he longs to present them to Christ in that way."

But now Paul sees a threat to this, and as you look closely you can see what he fears is going to happen. "I fear lest you be led astray in your thoughts as the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning, your thoughts will be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ." (Literally it is, "from the simplicity and purity which is in Christ." Some manuscripts even leave out the word "purity," so it becomes basically, "that you might be led astray from the simplicity that is in Christ.") This is one of the most important phrases of the Bible because there is nothing more important than to maintain the simplicity that is in Christ.

I have often quoted this to you, but it will not hurt to quote again the saying, "The main thing about being a Christian is to see that the main thing remains the main thing." That is what Paul is saying. The "main thing" is that at the heart and center of your life is the "simplicity that is in Christ," a simple thing.

I have noticed, over many years of observation, that when religion becomes complicated it is always a sign that it is drifting away from the realities and centralities of faith. The world around us is getting increasingly complex, and it is because it is drifting farther and farther from God. Look around at the world of nature and you can see the simplicity of God's design everywhere. He builds the year around four seasons which repeat themselves endlessly and never fail. We are entering upon the most beautiful time of all perhaps, springtime, when everyone delights in the new life that surges on all sides. Yet that simple pattern of four seasons contains within it all the possible variations of weather. Look at a flower and see how simple the pattern of its makeup is, and yet what an infinite variety God produces in a field of flowers. You can see this everywhere. God basically is simple. When religion becomes complex it is a sign that it is departing from Christ.

Let me quote something here that is very helpful and confirming about this. The old medieval saint, Thomas 'a Kempis, has gathered this idea up. (Perhaps he got it from this very verse.)

By two wings man is lifted from the things of earth -- simplicity and purity.

And Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones says:

As life in general becomes more and more complex, so religion tends to be affected in the same way. It seems to be assumed that if the affairs of men are so difficult and complicated, the affairs of God should be still more

complicated, because they are still greater. Hence there comes a tendency to increase ceremony and ritual, and to multiply organizations and activities ... the argument is that it is ridiculous to assert that the vast problems of life today can be solved in an apparently simple manner suggested by those who preach the gospel in the old evangelical manner... The fact is, that as we get further away from God life becomes more complicated and involved. We see this not only in the Bible, but also in subsequent history. The Protestant Reformation simplified not only religion, but the whole of life and living in general... The truly religious life is always the simple life.

That is what Paul is concerned about here. When you ask yourself just what is that simplicity that he is talking about, the answer from everywhere in the Word of God is: The daily companionship of the Lord Jesus. How many of you sense that Christ is yours all day long? How many of you reckon upon that, think about that, live out of that relationship and out of that sense of the expectation of his presence? We often say, and rightly so, that Christianity is not a creed, it is a relationship; it is living with a Person. That is the simplicity that is in Christ. The danger that we constantly face, even in a church like this where the Word of God is taught, is that we get involved in the things about Christ and fail to live in a relationship with Christ. That is what Paul is deeply concerned about. That is why he is jealous to maintain "that simplicity that is in Christ."

The first Corinthian letter starts on that very note. Paul says in Verse 9 of Chapter 1:

**God is faithful who has called us into the fellowship of his Son Jesus Christ our Lord.
{cf, 1 Cor 1:9 RSV}**

When your Christianity begins to cool down and you find yourself getting complicated it is a definite sign that you are being threatened in this area of understanding the relationship you have with the Lord Jesus. He is a living Lord -- he is not dead. He is not for Sundays only. He is for all the moments of life. In Philippians, Paul says: "To me to live is Christ" {Phil 1:21} -- everything, he fills my moments. Though he had one of the busiest lives ever recorded, a life of constant activity, yet he said at the heart of it lay this quiet reckoning upon the presence of the living Lord, the realization that he was with him to do everything that was to be done. That is the simplicity that he is talking about.

Karl Barth, who has gained a reputation as a great theologian and who wrote a tremendously effective study of the book of Romans which revolutionized theology a few decades ago, was once asked, in what has now become a famous story, "What is the greatest theological thought that has ever crossed your mind?" Some very complicated answer was expected, but his answer was this: "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so." That is the "simplicity that is in Christ."

It is easy to lose that. You can lose it in the midst of Christian activity. You can lose it in Bible study. You can get so involved in some of the fascinating aspects of Scripture that you can give yourself to a lifetime of Bible study and lose "the simplicity that is in Christ." Last week I sat with a prominent theologian who is known all over the world and we talked about his teaching experiences in various seminaries. He told me how almost all of the seminaries that he was involved in were filled with men who had a great, worldwide reputation for scholarship but whose personal lives were dull and dead (and deadening) because they had lost the simplicity that is in Christ.

You can lose it in the pressures of daily living. You can get so busy and so worried and so anxious about yourself and the things that are happening to you that you lose the sense that Christ is with you and he is adequate. This is the beautiful, "simplicity that is in Jesus." Here in Corinth they were assaulted with these teachers who were exposing them to things that caught their attention, but they were drifting from that central point. They were involved with fascinating philosophies based on the Word of God, but which went off on side tracks and rabbit paths of thought. They were being challenged with certain ego-appealing experiences which if they could just grasp would make them feel so great, so wonderful, so God-possessed -- just like people today who are invited to explore strange and wonderful mysteries all involved with Christian faith -- but which tend to move them away from the simplicity that is in Christ.

Notice how Paul puts it, Verse 4:

For if some one comes and preaches another Jesus than the one we preached, or if you

receive a different spirit from the one received, or if you accept a different gospel from the one you accepted, you submit to it readily enough. {2 Cor 11:4 RSV}

What he is saying is, "If you take in, in a gullible fashion, without questioning, all the things that these people are teaching you, how much more ought you to listen to me? I have taught you the truth. You submit to those teachers, now submit to me and listen to me."

Then Paul brings into focus a tactic he seldom employs in his letters. (You will find it in Verses 5 and 6 and on.) It is what we call "irony." Irony is a gentle form of sarcasm. Many of us employ sarcasm, but the difference between sarcasm and irony is that sarcasm hurts people and that is why we use it. We all know what it means to be sarcastic to someone. It is a way of appearing to agree with something that has been said, but obviously your tone and your attitude convey the fact that you do not really agree. So sarcasm is an apparent agreement that really conveys a sharp disagreement, and it is usually designed to hurt somebody. Irony, on the other hand, acts the same way, but it is not designed to hurt, it is designed to help. Irony consists of playing back words to people in a way that helps them to hear those words in a different way so that they will see how foolish they have been. It is not designed therefore to hurt but to help them. Here is Paul's irony, Verses 5-6:

I think that I am not in the least inferior to these superlative apostles. Even if I am unskilled in speaking, I am not in knowledge; in every way we have made this plain to you in all things. {2 Cor 11:5-6 RSV}

Here he is using the language of these adversaries of his in Corinth. He is saying, "they call me unskilled in speaking and maybe they are right." He freely admits this because he says in another place that he did not employ the normal, flowery oratory of that period (rhetoric), or a "stained-glass" voice. How many times do you hear preachers doing that today, "My dear friends, we are gathered here to worship on this Sunday morning..."? The whole thing sounds as phony as a three-dollar bill, doesn't it? But there is nothing of that in Paul. He says, "I may not be a very good speaker, but what is important is not style, but content. Look at what we have told you. What do these men know? They titillate your senses, they capture you with flowery words, etc., but what do they know?"

In the realm of knowledge Paul was absolutely superb. His writings have for twenty centuries unveiled truth that men have never thought of before, and can be found in no other place but in the Word of God. He came to unveil reality, to tell us how life really is, therefore he speaks the truth. It is universally agreed by all who study the Word of God that there is no apostle who writes more penetratingly, more perceptively, more aware of the nature of reality and of human life than the Apostle Paul. His writings are marvelous studies on human psychology, on basic sociology, all the realities of life as we know them, because he had such a vast knowledge given to him. Paul is the one who wrestles with the tough, hard questions of life and gives us answers that satisfy the mind and set the heart at peace.

Now in a further use of irony he deals with a charge that he did not love the Corinthians enough to even let them support him, Verse 7:

Did I commit a sin abasing myself so that you might be exalted, because I preached God's gospel without cost to you? I robbed other churches by accepting support from them in order to serve you. And when I was with you and was in want, I did not burden any one, for my needs were supplied by the brethren who came from Macedonia. So I refrained and will refrain from burdening you in any way. As the truth of Christ is in me, this boast of mine shall not be silenced in the regions of Achaia. And why? Because I do not love you? God knows I do!

And what I do I will continue to do, in order to undermine the claim of those who would like to claim that in their boasted mission they work on the same terms as we do. {2 Cor 11:7-12 RSV}

What he is saying there is very evident. He himself had taught these people the principle that he who preaches the gospel has a right to live by the gospel. It was he who taught them the old proverb, "Thou shalt not muzzle the ox that treads the corn," {cf, Deut 25:4}. Yet the strange thing was that when he came to Corinth he would

not accept any support from anybody. All the time he was there he made tents to support himself, but it is evident from this that he did not do very well at times. Either he did not have much time left over for that occupation or there was not a very good trade in tents. He was in want, he says, and he could barely make it financially.

That may encourage some of us who are struggling today in these times of inflation. Paul could barely make it but he said he still would not receive any support from them, although he did receive support from some of the churches in Macedonia where he had already been. These teachers in Corinth were saying, "You know the reason why Paul isn't supported by you? It is because he's an amateur apostle. He's not a professional one like us. He didn't graduate from the right school; he doesn't have a degree. He can't get anybody to support him because nobody believes him or trusts him enough." But Paul says, "The real reason is that I wanted to show you how free the gospel is. I wanted to demonstrate in my own life that the gospel is free-of-charge. It is good news that God does not ask anything back from you. He offers it freely in Christ. I determined that I would not be a burden to any of you when I came." From this you can see what Paul's practice was. He would never accept support from people to whom he was preaching the gospel for the first time. The only ones he would accept any support from were those -- whom he had already led to Christ so that when he went on he would allow them to help him in his ministry in a new place.

"Furthermore," Paul says, "I don't intend to change because I don't intend to let these false teachers claim that they work as we do. They're leeches, they're parasites, they're not teaching you the truth. They're using up your resources, living off you people, and then they want to turn around and claim that they live like we do. I'll never give them that advantage, and I'm not going to change just to satisfy them."

That leads then to a third tactic he employs which sometimes becomes necessary. That is an open, frontal exposure. Verse 13:

For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. So it is not strange if his servants also disguise themselves as servants of righteousness. Their end will correspond to their deeds. {2 Cor 11:13-15 RSV}

With these words he strips off the facade that these false teachers were trying to hide behind. He says, "They're impostors, they're phonies, they're impersonators, masquerading as apostles of Christ but they were not sent by Christ and they're not teaching what Christ said to teach. They're teaching attractive lies instead of the truth."

This tactic is one of the great missing elements in the church today. One reason why many churches are destroyed is because nobody will stand up and say this about false teachers. We are so caught up with the world's philosophy that anything goes, that we have to be nice to everyone always.

Notice the apostles never did that, nor did Jesus. Look at the sharp language he employed on occasion with the Pharisees. Right to their faces he called them, "snakes and vipers." He said they were like "dead men's tombs full of rotting bones" {cf, Matt 23:27}, filled with an awful stench. That is not the way to win friends and influence people! Jesus set all that aside and told them the truth.

Paul says these people are like their invisible master, Satan. The most dangerous form in which Satan comes to us is as an angel of light. When he comes like a roaring lion he is scary, but he is not nearly as dangerous as when he comes as an angel of light. If the devil knocked on your door and took off his top hat and said, "Good morning, I'm the devil. I've come to ruin your life. I want to trip you up and destroy all your relationships and fill you with hatred and violence and I'm about to do it today," you would not have any trouble handling it, would you? But when he comes and says, "Ah, good morning. I'm your friend. I've come to help you. I want to introduce you to something so alluring and so exciting and so fulfilling that you can't afford to miss it," and begins to set forth something that looks fulfilling and good, that is the way hundreds of thousands are being destroyed today.

Paul says their end is inevitable, "Their end will correspond to their deeds." In other words, they will fall

victim to their own lies. They will lose the ability to tell truth from evil and they will fall victim of their own errors. That is the terrible tragedy of those who get sucked into something that is wrong and that is not in line with the simplicity that is in Christ.

Do you know what all this is saying to us, basically?

The way to avoid being trapped, in a world filled with delusion today, is simply this: Keep close to the Shepherd.

Retain the simplicity that is in Christ.

Walk closely with the Son of God himself every day.

Prayer

We thank you, dear Father, for faithful words that expose error and show us reality. Thank you that though we live in a dangerous world we are kept by a faithful Shepherd. Grant that we may walk close to him and not let anything take us away from that day-by-day, moment-by-moment companionship of his presence. We ask in Jesus' name, Amen.

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