

# *The Church Attacked: When, and Without or Within?*

## ***The church – the *ekklēsia* – is under attack***

The gospel and the *ekklēsia* are always under attack. The devil sees to that! As Hugh Latimer put it in 1548:

And now I would ask a strange question: Who is the most diligent bishop and prelate in all England, that passes all the rest in doing his office? I can tell, for I know him who it is; I know him well. But now I think I see you listening and hearkening that I should name him. There is one that passes all the other, and is the most diligent prelate and preacher in all England. And will you know who it is? I will tell you: it is the devil. He is the most diligent preacher of all other; he is never out of his diocese; he is never from his cure [that is, his spiritual responsibilities]; you shall never find him unoccupied; he is ever in his parish; he keeps residence at all times; you shall never find him out of the way, call for him when you will, he is ever at home; the [most] diligent preacher in all the realm; he is ever at his plough; no lording nor loitering can hinder him; he is ever applying his business, you shall never find him idle, I warrant you.

And what is the devil's business? Latimer again:

His office is to hinder the gospel and the *ekklēsia*,<sup>1</sup> to maintain superstition, to set up idolatry, to teach all kind of popery [as one among countless errors]. He is [as] ready as he can be wished for to set forth his plough; to devise as many ways as [he] can... to deface and obscure God's glory.<sup>2</sup>

For 'England' read 'the world', and for 1548 read 'throughout the gospel age'. Satan began his attack right from the start, and until the end of time he will never let up.

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<sup>1</sup> Original 'hinder religion'.

<sup>2</sup> Hugh Latimer: 'Sermon of the Plough' before King Edward VI in 1548.

Believers, consequently, must always be on the *qui vive*, keeping a weather eye open for the latest threat. This is the responsibility of each and every believer; above all, it is must be the special concern of the elders of the local *ekklēsia*.

Satan is at the bottom of such attacks:

Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. Put on the whole armour of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armour of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm. Stand therefore, having fastened on the belt of truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and, as shoes for your feet, having put on the readiness given by the gospel of peace. In all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one; and take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end, keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints, and also for me, that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains, that I may declare it boldly, as I ought to speak (Eph. 6:10-20).

Satan uses men, of course. As Paul was constrained to write:

I appeal to you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught; avoid them. For such persons do not serve our Lord Christ, but their own appetites, and by smooth talk and flattery they deceive the hearts of the naive (Rom. 16:17-18).

Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons, through the insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared, who forbid marriage

and require abstinence from foods that God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth. For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer.

If you put these things before the brothers, you will be a good servant of Christ Jesus, being trained in the words of the faith and of the good doctrine that you have followed...

Command and teach these things... Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers (1 Tim. 4:1-16).

So far, so good. There is no question but that believers – especially elders – must always be on the watch, always taking steps to protect the *ekklēsia* and maintain the gospel. This does not mean that we should be heresy hunters, quick on the draw, shooting from the hip, but neither is it right for us to be sleepwalking, or as easy as an old shoe. God has not left such instructions and warnings on record to no purpose. The fact that there are these passages in Scripture dealing with false teaching and those who promulgate it – even whole books (Galatians, for example) – shows us the importance of what we are considering. The Spirit, by setting the above-quoted principles and commands in Scripture, has left us in no doubt where our duty lies.

But here we need to stress that *the attack we have to deal with is the attack that is being made now.*

### ***The attack is always now***

Why do I say this?

Believers, alas, can so easily concern themselves with the wrong time; that is, some protagonists relish the slaying of old dragons, dragons long since put to death, while ignoring contemporary issues, especially those right under their nose. So that they can sidestep problems in the present to get on with attacks in the distant past, not a few keep a powerful broom handy, along with a plentiful supply of carpets under which to brush awkward questions. It is worse than useless,

however, to be adept at dealing with yesterday's defeated attacks, while ignoring problems much closer to home – in the very bosom of the local *ekklēsia*, indeed. Of course, it can be a very pleasant task grappling with old, long-dead dragons – dealing with errors which have no relevance to the local assembly – but today's attacks need to be faced today. Like charity, watchfulness begins at home.

There is a further question that must be asked – and answered: Which direction should we especially face?

### ***Which direction?***

Let me explain my meaning by way of illustration. During the Second World War, everybody (not least the Germans) knew that the allies had to invade mainland Europe – first across the Mediterranean from North Africa, and then across the English Channel from Southern England. As Winston Churchill said about the first, any fool (I paraphrase) knew it had to be Sicily (as the allies were planning). Moreover, a glance at the map shows at once that across the Straits of Dover was the obvious, the shortest, route into northern France, the closest to Berlin. (The allies, however, were planning to invade Normandy). Consequently, the best the allies could hope for was to persuade Hitler that they had chosen Greece and not Sicily for the southern invasion, and had agreed and settled on the Pas de Calais in the north for D-Day, and get him to move top-quality divisions to defend the wrong places, facing the wrong way, facing the wrong (that is, non-existent) enemy. In both cases, Hitler was deceived – by Operation Mincemeat over the invasion of Sicily, and by Operation Bodyguard over the invasion of Normandy. Fooled by the deceptions which had been foisted upon him, to counter each supposed invasion, he moved and kept crack troops to defend non-existent points of attack. He was utterly misled over both, and the allies successfully invaded Europe while saving the lives of many men who would otherwise have been lost in the assault.

Such is the danger of getting ready for the enemy, but expecting the attack in the wrong place.

The point is, should we expect attacks on the *ekklēsia* (and, hence, the gospel) from without or within?

The question is invidious, of course: the *ekklēsia* (and, hence, the gospel) is always under attack from both directions – from without and from within.

But which is the more dangerous?

From within.

***An internal attack is worse than an external – every time***

Take Israel.

Right from the start, at Kadesh Barnea, it was the defeatists from within, among the spies – not the Canaanites – which caused Israel so much trouble.

True enough, Israel had to cope with enemies from without, but it was the internal enemies that were the more dangerous; namely, the false prophets, who led – or at least, encouraged – Israel away from the Mosaic covenant. Encouraged by the false teaching and flattering promises of such prophets, Israel and Judah sinned and were consequently taken into captivity.

And, following Judah's return from exile, the leaders Ezra and Nehemiah had to keep their eyes open for infiltrators and fifth columnists,<sup>3</sup> as well as external enemies (Ez. 4:1-3; Neh. 6:1-14,18-19).

As with Israel in the old covenant, so with the *ekklēsia* in the new: internal attacks are more dangerous than external – and they are bad enough!

I am not alone in saying this.

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<sup>3</sup> A fifth columnist is a member of an internal group working for the enemy.

Take James S.Stewart (speaking and writing seventy years ago):

The greatest drag on Christianity today, the most serious menace to the *ekklēsia*'s<sup>4</sup> mission, is not the secularisation without, [but] it is the reduced Christianity within, the religious generalities and innocuous platitudes of a pallid, anaemic Christianity.<sup>5</sup>

And (bang up to date) Michael Youssef:

The greatest threats to the *ekklēsia*<sup>6</sup> have always been internal. The greatest threats have come from those who claim to be Christians, who are leaders in the *ekklēsia*,<sup>7</sup> but whose teachings and doctrines are at odds with God's word.<sup>8</sup>

Above all, we have Scripture.

As Paul told the elders of the *ekklēsia* at Ephesus:

I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears (Acts 20:29-31).

As he said to the *ekklēsias* of Galatia, warning them about the preachers they were so fond of:

I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel – not that there is another one, but there are

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<sup>4</sup> Original 'church's'.

<sup>5</sup> James S.Stewart: *A Faith to Proclaim*, being book which came from his Lyman Beecher lecture at Yale, 1951. See also Francis C.Lightbourne: 'One Gospel', *The Living Church*. July 5th, 1953.

<sup>6</sup> Original 'church'.

<sup>7</sup> Original 'church'.

<sup>8</sup> Michael Youssef: *Saving Christianity?: The Danger In Undermining Our Faith – and What You Can Do About It*, Tyndale Momentum, Carol Stream, 2020, p4.

some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed. For am I now seeking the approval of man, or of God? Or am I trying to please man? If I were still trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ (Gal. 1:6-10).

Having explained how these men had penetrated the *ekklēsia*, and having set out the havoc they were wreaking, the apostle reminded the Galatians what he had done about it (and, consequently, what they should do about it if and when it erupted again):

Because of false brothers secretly brought in – who slipped in [had infiltrated our ranks, had sneaked in among us] to spy out our freedom that we have in Christ Jesus, so that they might bring us into slavery – to them we did not yield in submission even for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might be preserved for you (Gal. 2:4-5).

As he warned Timothy:

Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers (1 Tim. 4:16).

The apostle explained why constant vigilance is necessary:

The time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths (2 Tim. 4:3-4).

Do not miss the heavy emphasis upon internal attack in those five extracts.

Paul made much the same point when writing to Titus:

There are many who are insubordinate, empty talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision party. They must be silenced, since they are upsetting whole families by

teaching for shameful gain what they ought not to teach... Rebuke them sharply, that they may be sound in the faith, not devoting themselves to Jewish myths and the commands of people who turn away from the truth (Tit. 1:10-14).

Nor was Peter slow to warn his readers of the same:

False prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies (2 Pet. 2:1).

And then we have Jude:

Beloved, although I was very eager to write to you about our common salvation, I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints. For certain people have crept in [secretly slipped in, wormed their way in] unnoticed who long ago were designated for this condemnation, ungodly people, who pervert the grace of our God into sensuality and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ (Jude 3-4).

So watch!

Believers must not fall asleep, must not be gullible about how and what they listen to, expecting attack but looking in the wrong direction for it. Some so-called Christian preachers pose a far greater danger than avowed agnostics or atheists. A nice bedside manner is no guarantee that the physician is a safe physician, let alone a good one. The cults have to be guarded against, yes, but we need to keep our eyes and ears open for enemies within the gates.

### ***Why issue the warning now?***

That's the wrong question. The real question is: Why *not* draw attention to the danger now? The warning is always relevant, always necessary. Right from day one, it has been so – witness the scriptural warnings throughout this article. Moreover, we have Paul's plain statement:

Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith (1 Tim. 4:1).



Understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty. For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power. Avoid such people (2 Tim. 3:1-5).

And by ‘last days’, ‘later times’, or ‘last times’, we are to understand the entire gospel age from Pentecost until Christ’s return. ‘The last days’ started with the first coming of Christ (Heb. 1:1-2). Peter knew he was in ‘the last days’ when he preached at Pentecost (Acts 2:16-17). John could say ‘it is the last hour’ (1 John 2:18). ‘The last days’ or ‘the latter times’ or ‘the last time’ or ‘these last times’ all refer to the gospel age (1 Tim. 4:1; 2 Tim. 3:1; 1 Pet. 1:20; 2 Pet. 3:3; Jude 18). Christ has come ‘at the end of the ages... to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself’ (Heb. 9:26); ‘the ends [fulfilment] of the ages have come’ upon us (1 Cor. 10:11). All that was said nearly 2000 years ago!

That’s why the warning is necessary today. Indeed, it could be argued that the warning has never been more badly needed than it is at the present time. Let me list some of the reasons.

The general level of spiritual discernment among believers is very low, and sinking all the time.

Doctrinal distinctives count for less and less for most believers; stressing doctrine gets in the way of the great shibboleth; namely, the re-engineering of the church for evangelism.

Reliance on ‘the pastor’, ‘the man of God’, and his pulpit ministrations – with the concomitant ‘touch not the Lord’s anointed’ – shows no sign of diminishing.

Conditions like these – and, no doubt, others could be added to the list – make the *ekklēsia* ripe for attack. And from within.

***Above all***

Yes, we have to keep our eye open for attacks upon the *ekklēsia* and the gospel, and yes, we must be concerned for our fellow-believers individually. We must not doze off, but keep a prayerful watch (Matt. 24:42-43; 25:13; 26:41; Mark 13:33-37; Luke 21:36; Acts 20:31; 1 Cor. 16:13; Eph. 6:18; Col. 4:2; 1 Thess. 5:6; 2 Tim. 4:5; Heb. 13:7; 1 Pet. 4:7; Rev. 3:2-3; 16:15, for instance). Yes, all that is true.

But there is one above all we should be concerned about – self (1 Tim. 4:16). Paul was explicit:

Let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall (1 Cor. 10:12).

Do not misread the ‘let’ – it has all the force of apostolic command.

Peter, too, as he closed his second letter, spelled it out:

Therefore, beloved... be diligent to be found by him without spot or blemish, and at peace. And count the patience of our Lord as salvation, just as our beloved brother Paul also wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, as he does in all his letters when he speaks in them of these matters. There are some things in them that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures. You therefore, beloved, knowing this beforehand, take care that you are not carried away with the error of lawless people and lose your own stability. But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity. Amen (2 Pet. 3:15-18).

May we never have to echo this lament:

They made me keeper of the vineyards, but my own vineyard I have not kept! (Song 1:6).