

A Pastoral Epistle of Exhortation and Warning

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To the First Baptist Church of Parker

Dear Church,

How could we begin to number or measure God's blessings upon us over the past six years? God has built us up, living stone by living stone, into a holy temple for His worship. He has taught us from His word by His Spirit. He has given us outreach through a growing tape ministry, national and international radio, and local television. He has given us a membership faithfully committed to tithing and liberal in freewill offerings. He has given us, debt-free, a public worship facility and 7 and 1/2 acres of land. More importantly, God has given us a deep, abiding love, unity, and peace among our church family. Most importantly, He has given us precious souls. Not only has God blessed us immeasurably in the past, His hand seems to rest upon us greatly even now. Our New Members and Inquirers Class has been blessed with 12–15 participants each Sunday, with several new candidates for membership. On consecutive Sundays in February we had twenty-six and twenty-four visitors, some of whom are either unconverted or potential candidates for membership. Our budget is stable, and we face the real possibility of the kind of “growing pains” that most churches of our persuasion do not have. *But let us be warned.* The last thing that Hell desires is for our church to prosper in truth and grow in grace or in any other way. Do not think that we are invulnerable to problems, or that we will have a future untested. Be assured, we will be tested. Satan is not pleased with God's blessings upon us, and we should be prepared for the strategies that he might use against us. So let us heed Paul's warning that we should not be ignorant of Satan's devices whereby the devil takes advantage of us, and let us explore both what these devices are and how they pose a danger to our church.

Satanic Strategy I: "Majoring on Minors"

In two months, God willing, I shall have preached twenty years, eighteen of those years as a pastor. During this time I have never seen a church divided over a major issue, such as some fundamental doctrine of God's word. As long as this church is "up front" about what we believe, incoming members will not be shocked to learn this or that about our theology. But on the other hand, in every case *where I have witnessed division in a church*, it has come usually from one person or a small but vocal number of individuals who chose to make an issue of some secondary matter.

A secondary matter divided the early church—how to deal with Gentile widows. Secondary matters divided the church at Colosse over whether or not to celebrate certain holidays or eat certain foods or drink certain drinks. May we always have a blind eye and deaf ear to anyone who would make a ruckus over Gentile or Jewish widows, Christmas or Halloween, fish or baloney, moderation versus abstinence. I know of one church which was torn apart while arguing about on which side of the church the piano should be placed, and another that split apart arguing whether or not Adam had a navel! Calvinistic churches are particularly vulnerable to such hair-splitting, but usually along more theological lines, albeit about secondary issues such as eschatology, ecclesiology, or sabbatarianism.

As we face the future, we also face many challenges, most of which will involve, not theological decisions about primary matters of faith, but pragmatic decisions about secondary matters of practice. *And these pragmatic, secondary matters are where the danger lies in our future.* In other words, "Where will we put the piano?"

If we continue to grow in number, how will we use the current space? Will we open up the west wing of classrooms for public worship, or will we go to two worship services and risk the physical and spiritual unity we enjoy with one worship service?

What about our Sunday Morning Bible Study Classes? How will we divide the age-groups into classes? Who will teach these classes?

What if we continue to grow? We will certainly be faced with the need to build a new worship facility. Will we build it behind or beside our present structure? Will it be brick, wood, or stucco? What color will the carpet be? Will it be a circle, a square, or a rectangle? Will we do much of the work ourselves, subcontract most of the labor, or hire a contractor to do it all? What if we grow to the size that a bi-vocational pastor cannot meet the demands of a larger membership, demands such as more counseling, more visitation, more shepherding. Will we elect a full-time pastor to meet these responsibilities, or will we elect an associate pastor or pastors to share these responsibilities?

And the list could go on and on. But what we must remember is that some pragmatic, secondary matter will most likely be the greatest source of potential danger to our church. So let us be wise .as serpents and harmless as doves. Let us be wary of the inherent dangers of "majoring on minors," of making secondary matters primary concerns.

Satanic Strategy II: "Watering Down the Doctrine of God's Free Grace"

This was the problem at Galatia, whom Paul asked, "Who hath bewitched you?" And how were they bewitched, by adding human endeavor; legalistic conformity; and empty, artificial ritual to the Gospel of Free Grace.

This was also the problem Jude addressed when he described some as having "turned the grace of God into lasciviousness"; that is, they had begun to preach a gospel that did not necessitate, yea, that did not demand, radical spiritual and moral reform; a gospel that maximized easy-believism but minimized the difficulty of true repentance. Such a gospel sounds its hollow echoes from almost every cold, concrete cosmopolitan corner of contemporary Christendom, but let us beware of this uncertain note sounded by the devilish trumpeteer, Lucifer himself, this doctrine that grace is not free but cheap, and let us beware of the satanic strategy" to water down Paul's teaching that by grace are we saved through faith, and that this is not of ourselves, but is the free gift of a sovereign God.

Satanic Strategy III: "Lifeless Calvinism"

How many Calvinistic or "sovereign grace" churches do you know of that have been split asunder by internal division? How many have disbanded in failure? How many struggle with only a discouraged handful? How many have become cold, sterile, narrow, hollow shells of intellectualized, lifeless Calvinism?

We are definitively and dogmatically Calvinistic, but our church has always been humble, tender-hearted, warm, and gentle in its presentation of the Gospel of Grace, and I believe that this loving approach is one reason God has blessed us so mightily.

I have said from our pulpit *many times that we do not want to be just another Calvinistic church where everyone demands that everyone else "dots their i's and crosses their t's it the same way "I" or "you" do it*, especially about secondary matters. This is not to say that we will not be "valiant for the truth." We have been, and we will be. But we will also continue to resist the narrow-minded sectarianism and legalism that has destroyed so many churches, especially Calvinistic ones.

I am thankful that God has given us members in this church who have seen Calvinistic churches wither and die for the very reasons I have delineated. From our experience in past churches we recognize the kinds of problems that will kill a church, none of which is worse than lifeless Calvinism.

So let us remember that our business is not to search high and low for five-point Calvinists who agree with us on every theological detail so that they can join our exclusive holy club; no, we are commissioned, even commanded, to go out into the highways and hedges and compel sinners to come in to our fellowship, and to feast at the banquet of God's Grace. We are also to seek out weaker brethren who need to be taught those glorious truths which we and our ecclesiological ancestors, including Calvin, have held so dear, truths such as God's sovereignty and holiness, and the more excellent way of His unconditional love, mercy, and grace.

No, let us not be ignorant of the Satanic device of cold, lifeless Calvinism. Let us not be like Sardis, who had a name that she was alive but, in fact, was dead.

Satanic Strategy IV: "Compromise with Sin"

One would think that if modern charismatics wanted to imitate true spirituality, they would pick a model other than the Corinthians, the most carnal church in the New Testament. The Corinthian church was plagued with numerous problems: they misunderstood and therefore abused spiritual gifts, just like their modern counterparts. They deemphasized solid doctrinal preaching, but they magnified preachers with flamboyant style. They worshipped in a disorganized and disorderly way, letting domineering, overzealous women and spineless men take control of the church. They desecrated communion by opening it up to any Tom, Dick, or Jane who would partake.

But all the Corinthians' problems were rooted in one major catastrophe—they compromised with sin in their membership. Now when I say "sin" I do not mean to imply that our church or any church is sinless. But I do mean to say that all true churches have a responsibility not to permit flagrant, persistent, and unrepented evil of any kind to go on unchecked without following the Bible's teaching about church discipline.

The sin at Corinth was illicit sexuality, specifically incest. It could have been anything—heresy, stealing, gluttony, unfaithfulness, gossip, failure of a man to provide for his household, etc. But no matter what the evil, a Christian who rebelliously clings to sin without repenting should be disciplined by the church, or in Paul's own terrifying language, "delivered unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh that the spirit may be saved in the day of Jesus Christ."

We must also remember that if a sinner offends 70x7 and repents 70x7, we should forgive him or her 70x7. But we should also confront an erring brother or sister all 490 times he or she falls into sin. And if on the 489th time the brother or sister refuses our exhortation to repent and be reconciled, we cannot compromise; we must follow Jesus' instructions concerning the obstinate brother or sister. First, each of us has an individual responsibility to tell an erring member his/her fault one on one; if they will not hear us, then we must take with us one or two more and tell them again, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word can be established. If they still refuse to hear, we are lastly to bring it before the whole church. If the errant one refuses, then we must excommunicate him/her from the fellowship of the saints, or in Jesus' words, let them become like a heathen and tax collector to us.

Sin at Corinth destroyed their ability to be one with the Spirit and one in spirit. It destroyed their ability to worship, observe the Lord's supper properly, or to understand the proper balance between spiritual gifts and preaching. So let us be warned lest we too fall into this Satanic trap!

Satanic Strategy V: "Failing to Sever the Wagging Tongue"

Every problem I have ever dealt with in every church I have pastored has originated with, or has been exacerbated by, a wagging tongue. James calls the tongue the littlest member, but he warns that in the

same way a rudder can turn a ship or a bridle a horse, little tongue can take control of the biggest Christian or the biggest church and dash them to pieces like a ship on rocks or throw them like a bucking bronco.

James also calls the tongue a fire, and warns that even a little spark can kindle a blaze that will consume everything in its path. Moreover, he calls the tongue a "world of iniquity," with a creative capacity, not to speak light and order, but to bring forth darkness and chaos in the church of God.

Gossip, criticisms, lies, murmurs against God's chosen leaders, exaggerations, innuendos, backbiting—this is the spittle spewed by the poisonous tongue. It is the duty of every member to stop the wagging tongue, in their own mouths or in the mouths of others. Cut it off like you would cut off the lethal head of a rattlesnake, for James says, the tongue too can be full of deadly poison. Be angry at the tongue, but do not let the sun go down upon your anger. Rebuke the brother or sister who refuses to bridle the tongue, and warn them that by their words they will be justified, or by their words they will be condemned. May our words be well seasoned, both in tone and content, with the salt of kindness and the sweetness of genuine love for those to whom and about whom we speak, lest our tongue become a deadly weapon in the devil's arsenal.

Conclusion

Other Satanic devices could harm our church in the future—materialism, jealousy, envy, strife, heresy—and we must be prepared to recognize the devil's devices for what they are and to meet them head on. But a number of practical exhortation as are in order to equip us to combat him when he attacks.

First, let us arm ourselves with the whole armor of God. Ephesians 6:

Secondly, "Let each esteem others better than himself." Philippians 2:3

Thirdly, Let us "Be kind one to another, and tenderhearted, keeping the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." Ephesians 4:2–3

Fourthly, Let us "Be swift to hear and slow to speak; slow to wrath, slow to anger." James 1:19 .

Fifthly, "Let [our] speech be always with grace, seasoned with salt" Colossians 4:6

Finally, let us "Be sober, be vigilant, because [our]adversary, the devil, stalks about seeking whom he may devour," and let us not be ignorant of his devices lest Satan take advantage of us.