

## **The Spoiling of the Church (No 1)**

*In recent decades we have witnessed very significant changes in the Anglican Church; changes that threaten to shatter the theological structures of the Church. I am not speaking about the huge tensions that exist in the Anglican Communion at the present moment with regard to the moral debacle in North America and Canada. I am speaking of changes that are far more sinister because, on the surface, the changes appear non threatening, in fact, the changes are introduced as 'therapeutic'; with the promise of 'health' to the church and a way out of its present decline. The changes to which I am referring in the Anglican Church is the increasing disuse and disregard of the Anglican Liturgy; changes that have led to the declining understanding of the theological doctrine of God and its concomitant or accompanying doctrine of godly living, both gloriously enshrined in the public Liturgy of the Church. This rapid change or shift in the thinking of leadership in the Church making the use of the Liturgy almost obsolete, has progressively eroded the teaching that has underpinned Anglicanism from the Reformation.*

*The change to which I am referring is serious; so serious that it has spawned a brand/s of Christianity that teeters on the edge of heresy and hell. However, while these changes are new, the danger they represent has been a recurring theme in the history of the Church since the Apostles. Let me turn to Colossians 2 and refer to the theme of, **The Spoiling of the Church (The Scene in Scripture)***

*Colossians 2:8-10, says, 8 See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ. 9 For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, 10 and you have been given fullness in Christ, who is the head over every power and authority.*

*The words translated in v.8 'takes you captive' means 'to carry away as booty'. A literally translation would read, "take care lest there will be anyone who carries you off as spoil". The older RV translation captures the meaning when it says, "Take heed lest there shall be any one that makes spoil of you through his philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ." The words carry the force of an urgent warning of imminent danger! The 'warning' occurs in the first word, "take heed"; and continues, "lest anyone" or "that no one" take you away from the gospel, as an enemy takes spoil from the savage overthrow of his victim; or it could be equally translated, "take heed"; and continues, "lest anything" or "something" take you away from the gospel as an enemy takes spoil from the savage overthrow of his victim. In other words, don't be removed from the teaching of the gospel so as to become 'the spoil' of false teachers/teaching!*

*Paul sets **the 'gospel'** over against, **"hollow and deceptive philosophy"**. There is a dramatic 'contrast' in Paul's words! **"Christ"**, is set over against, **"hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world"**!*

*Now, we do not need to 'explore' exactly what kind of philosophy Paul is referring to, nor the 'human tradition', nor 'the 'principles of the world'!*

*While exploring the meaning behind such phrases may be of some 'historical' interest, I doubt its present relevance ie., what God's Spirit is saying at the present moment! The common idea of all three phrases is, that they originate in the 'world,' or from the 'world' and are opposed to 'revelation' ie., that which is divine or supernatural in origin. The 'philosophy', 'human tradition' and 'basic principles of the world' to which Paul refers are those ideas and ways of thinking, that originate in men's minds unaided by 'revelation' or void of revelation! One commentator says, "Folly indeed it is to seek to establish a science wholly Divine on foundations wholly human. And this is what they do who seek to judge the things of faith by the principles of philosophy."*

*Now, there is no doubt in my mind, nor should there be in yours, that many in the Church are being carried away from the safety and security of the gospel because they have become the spoil of theological corruption / false teaching.*

*Theological corruption or error from biblical teaching is 'spoiling' the Church right at this very moment! It is carrying away Church members as 'spoil'; and eventually it will 'slay' them in Hell, unless they are warned and rescued!*

*We see this occurring in the Liberal church world wide as it welcomes and embraces every kind of theological and moral error. But let me say that 'philosophy' and 'human traditions' and 'worldly principles' are not always as easily recognizable as the straightforward Liberal theology outlined above. The gospel can be altered to a 'human' system by far more subtle changes and distortions, of which many have no suspicion and remain unaware; Satan comes as an 'angel of light'! What I want to establish clearly in our minds is that the Christian Church (of which you and I are members) is being constantly 'spoiled'. Is this statement alarmist? Not if you take seriously the teaching of the Scriptures. I don't have time to consider all that Scripture says on this subject, but I trust that what I do lay before you may convince you that Paul, in this passage, and many other passages of OT and NT confirm what I am saying! How would you describe God's Church in the Old Testament? If you are a little vague about how to answer that question let me turn your attention to the scene of the 'spoiling' of the Church' in the O T, and by that I mean individuals who comprised God's Church, being carried away by error and falling under God's judgement. Paul says in 1 Cor 10:1-6, 1*

*For I do not want you to be ignorant of the fact, brothers, that our forefathers were all under the cloud and that they all passed through the sea.*

*2 They were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. 3 They all ate the same spiritual food 4 and drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ. 5 Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them; their bodies were scattered over the desert. 6 Now these things occurred as examples to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did.*

*These people had immense privileges; they were following Christ but the enemy of souls carried them off as spoil to worship the 'golden calf' and God judged them of them most severely! When Peter writes to the Church he says in 1 Peter 5:8, **8 Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. It is hard to image a more devastating illustration of what Satan is presently up to; in fact, it is his primary task to make spoil of those who claim to believe the message of the gospel!***

*I only have to look at what happens in the Church and I am utterly convinced of his ferocious devouring of the Church; he is making spoil of its numbers so rapidly and at every opportunity that I am amazed that the Church still continues; people who once believed the gospel are being turned to 'imagine' all kinds of human philosophies and worldly ideas that are passed off as some new brand of Christianity - Christianity 'grown up' to suit the 21st Century cultural norms - which is no Christianity at all! Satan is spoiling the Church; and spawning his own brands! What 'brand' of Christianity do you own? Does it matter? Is our brand of Christianity 'biblical' and 'Anglican' as expressed in the doctrinal stance of the 1662 Prayer Book; its Articles and Homilies? These questions may seem irrelevant and academic, but will your 'brand' of Christianity see you through, ie., will you be saved? Satan is a 'real' foe or enemy; what I am speaking about is a 'real' threat; it is not imaginary!*

*It is Satan's task not only to keep the world in darkness, but also to draw those, who say they have 'seen the light', back into darkness; and back into darkness such persons go if they do not stay 'alert' and are vigilant to be 'aware' of the peril that exists along the path of Christian discipleship! The Church needs to be alert and beware! The NT make it crystal clear that it is the greatest folly not to heed its admonitions/warnings to be alert to the danger of being carried away as the spoil of false teaching! The real possibility of 'falling away from the living God' is what Jesus says in Matthew 7:21, "Not every one who says unto me Lord, Lord ... but he who does the will of my Father". Let me turn to another NT passage to seek to support what I am saying about Satan's 'spoiling of the Church'; carrying away those who once believed the gospel into all kinds of false teaching. Do you remember Paul's sobering words in Acts 20:17-31?*

*From Miletus, Paul sent to Ephesus for the elders of the church.... **28 Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood. 29 I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. 30 Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. 31 So be on your guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears.***

*Do you see what Paul is saying in Colossians 2:8, "See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ." Paul, you see knows the history of the Church; it is the history of 'the spoiling of Church' by Satan; it is a history in which you and I are involved right at this very moment! Some are quick to explain away all such*

ideas as 'the spoiling' of the Church' as stemming from the cranky disposition of the Apostle Paul! Christ, they would suggest, would never take such an approach. Is that right? Let recall the words of Jesus in Matthew 25: 1-12!

*"At that time the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. 2 Five of them were foolish and five were wise. 3 The foolish ones took their lamps but did not take any oil with them. 4 The wise, however, took oil in jars along with their lamps. 5 The bridegroom was a long time in coming, and they all became drowsy and fell asleep. 6 "At midnight the cry rang out: 'Here's the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!' 7 "Then all the virgins woke up and trimmed their lamps. 8 The foolish ones said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil; our lamps are going out.' 9 "No,' they replied, 'there may not be enough for both us and you. Instead, go to those who sell oil and buy some for yourselves.' 10 "But while they were on their way to buy the oil, the bridegroom arrived. The virgins who were ready went in with him to the wedding banquet. And the door was shut. 11 "Later the others also came. 'Sir! Sir!' they said. 'Open the door for us!' 12 "But he replied, 'I tell you the truth, I don't know you.'*

Archibald Alexander, the Principal of Princeton Theological Seminary in the USA said in the 1840's, "all my experience and observation lead me to believe that, in our day as well as in former times (and he could have said – and in 'future' days), the 'foolish' virgins constitute a full half of the visible Church."

Alexander testifies to the reality of Satan's spoiling of the Church; Satan causes 'half' of the Church to be 'asleep'; they are neither alert nor vigilant about their salvation and "the door will be shut"! I began by referring to the massive shift in the Anglican Church; the abandonment of the Liturgy. With that 'shift' the whole theology of salvation has altered; salvation is now 'slick' and 'simple'! But to look squarely at the Liturgy (to repeat its doctrines week by week) is to realise that the Christian faith is neither 'slick' nor 'simple'; it is the most serious commitment: the sacrifice of 'self' to take up the cross of Christ, which will call forth the most strenuous effort every single day of our lives. If you want to make Christianity 'simplistic', then 'remove' the Liturgy!!

When the Church is no longer 'face to face' with biblical Christianity in the Liturgy, it will invent its own 'brand' of Christianity, and the 'spoiling' of the Church will continue.... and the door will be shut!

In 1854 Henry Alford, the Dean of Canterbury Cathedral in the UK, preached on the parable of the Ten Virgins. His words on that occasion highlight the great seriousness of the words of Jesus with respect to those who profess to be members of God's Kingdom who await His return with their lamps burning. Drawing his congregations attention to the behaviour of the five foolish virgins recorded in Matthew 25 Alford says, "The one party (the five foolish) thought within themselves, if they thought at all, that the lights once kindled would always burn; once converted to God, once the religious profession put on, once come out of the world, all was well..."

Of all the follies in religion, the first is that to which our Lord here would have our attention more especially directed: the folly of thinking, that because the lamp of God's Spirit has been once lit within us, it will always burn on, without care or nurture. That is

*folly of the most fatal kind .. remember, that all through the Christian's life, the outward influence of the world, the inward temptations of the flesh, the spiritual attacks of the Devil, are ever working to extinguish the light which is kindled within us; that to maintain that light is a struggle against nature, against habit, against inclination.*

*How then can it be maintained without continued conflict and effort? How, without daily application to the source of all grace? Foolish indeed then is that Christian, however earnest, however thoroughly convinced of sin and righteousness and judgement by the Spirit's inner agency, who does not make every provision and value every opportunity to keep alive the work once begun....*

*And wise indeed is that Christian.. to whom all means and opportunities of grace are precious; who does not say within himself, "Once the Lord's always the Lord's", but prays and strives and presses onwards .. that he may at any moment rise and trim his lamp, and go forth with joy to meet his Lord".*

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