

THE CHURCH-ITS OPPOSITION THEN AND NOW

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The church of Jesus Christ has from her very beginning met opposition on every hand. Everywhere Christians went planting congregations of the Lord's church, they brought about religious evolution. Psychologically, any change we have to make in life is one of the most difficult things for a man to accomplish, especially when it pertains to the more basic and more emotional aspect of one's life, such as in the field of religion. Thus, the growth of the church came down a most rocky road.

Her first opposition as we discover from the Scriptures, came from among the Jews. It was to them that the gospel was first preached, for the church was begun in Jerusalem. The Jewish religion was a very ritualistic one and was manifested on the outward part of the man. Jesus said, "Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, for ye make clean the outside of the cup and of the platter, that the outside of them may be clean also. Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye are like unto whited sepulchers, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men's bones, and of all uncleanness. Even so ye also outwardly appear righteous unto men, but within ye are full of hypocrisy and iniquity (Matt. 23:25-28)."

The religion that Jesus Christ brought with Him down Calvary's road was diametrically opposed to what the Jews had practiced throughout their lives. His followers were not known by their many phylacteries, nor by their long prayers in public places filled with vain repetitions. To the contrary, His followers built widows houses, instead of devoured them. They were warm and loving people, made alive by Christ Jesus. Their lives glowed with joy and happiness, and their soul swelled with the security of salvation found in the church that Jesus Christ established and paid for with His own blood. His religion was an intimate and personal thing, and it could only be seen on the outward part of man through the vast changes that Christianity made within His own personal life. This vast change in the religious world was so greatly opposed to the things that had been handed down by the Jewish forefathers that many simply would not accept it. Many felt, as did the apostle Paul, then known as Saul of Tarsus, as he expressed in Acts the 26th chapter and verse 9, "I verily thought with myself, that I ought to do many things contrary to the name of Jesus." And that he did. For he told Timothy, "And I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who hath enabled me, for that He counted me faithful, putting me into the ministry; who was before a blasphemer, a persecutor, and injurious." (I Tim. 1:12, 13). In acts 22, verse 4, he said, "And I persecuted this way unto the death, binding and delivering into prisons both men and women." And then later, it was this same man, now known as the Apostle Paul, who had to go against the Judaizing teachers, which tried to lead brethren to bring with them into the Christian dispensation the laws and the customs of Moses, concerning circumcision, religious holidays, meat offered to idols, and many other aspects of their customs as is evident in Paul's writing the letter to the Romans. It was no wonder that he wrote to the Galatians in chapter 5, and beginning with verse 7, when he said, "Ye did run well: who did hinder you that ye should not obey the truth? This persuasion cometh not of Him that calleth you. A little leaven leaveneth the whole lump. I have confidence in you through the Lord, that ye will be none otherwise minded: but he that troubleth you shall bear his judgment, whosoever he be. And I, brethren, if I yet preach circumcision, why do I yet suffer persecution? Then is the offence of the cross ceased. I would they were even cut off which trouble you. For, brethren, ye have been called unto liberty; only use not liberty for an occasion to the flesh, but by love serve one another. For all the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this; Thou shalt love thy neighbor thyself. But if ye bite and devour one another, take heed that ye be not consumed one of another."

And thus Paul shows that through the false teachers and through the influences that they had upon the early church, stumbling blocks were thrown in the paths of many Christians, which impeded the work of the Lord, and slowed its growth. And when there was one who did stand in the assemblies for truth and right, many would not listen, even as it was in the city of Jerusalem when Stephen preached what was needed for their own salvation. They chewed his flesh like dogs with their teeth and crushed the life from his body with the stones that they hurled.

Oh, it was not just the Jews who ardently opposed the church by their false teachings and persecutions. It seemed in the day of the early church to be a national pastime to thwart her in every way. As today in America, when thousands of people pour into the stadium on Sunday to see their favorite team, so it was in the city of Rome, when people flooded into the coliseum to see the continuation of the rivalry between the Christians and the lions. I am sure that there were many who must have lost their faith in the face of agonizing death, but I know too, that there were thousands of men and women, who bravely died with the sweet name of Jesus on their lips. Their faith never faltered, and their cause was never lost. Our Bible says, "As for Saul, he made havoc of the church, entering into every house, and haling men and women committed them to prison. Therefore they that were scattered abroad went everywhere preaching the word." (Acts 8:34). Notice, please, in verse 4, the writer tells us that it seems as though that the more the church was persecuted, the more it grew. Under the persecutions during the time of the Roman Empire, and under the persecutions of others who sought to do violence to the church of Jesus Christ, it tells us that it simply had the effect of spreading Christians. It lessened the number in a certain geographical area, but yet it greatened, for it increased the number of geographical locations. The seed of the kingdom spread throughout the known world, and it was because of these persecuted people and their faith, that today we are able to happily stand and say: "The church, still it stands." It was these early Christians, in the face of this persecution, who fought a good fight, who finished their course, and who kept the faith. And it is because of them, because of the heritage that they handed down to you and me today that we have the privilege that was spoken of a moment ago by the previous speaker, the privilege of being a member of the church of Christ. The identity that was spoken of last evening has never been lost, not even through the Dark Ages. She was borne away on the eagle's wings, but yet she still stood. Jesus said that the church would be built upon a rock and the gates of hell would never prevail against it, not during the Dark Ages nor any other. I grant you today that there has been times when the church has not prospered as perhaps God should want. But she has always stood, and she always will.

When we think of opposition to the church, it has not just been restricted to days past and gone. But I think we can understand from a study of God's word and even from a look at history, from a look at our communities today that the church today is still opposed on many sides.

When we think of the opposition of the church as it exists today, we need to understand that it takes many forms. One of those forms is denominationalism. The world today is filled by those professing to be followers of Christ, and members of His body, but in reality they are only a part of the rank denominationalism that covers the entire world. Jesus said in Matthew the 16th chapter and verse 18 that "upon this rock I will build my church." Church, singular! Possessed by a singular pronoun. Jesus said, "It is mine and there is no other." The apostle Paul said in Colossians 1:18 that the body is the church and in Ephesians 4:4 that there is but one body. Denominationalism exists today as proof of what the Master said, in Matthew the 15th chapter, beginning with verse 7, "Ye hypocrites, well did Esaias prophesy of you, saying, "This people draweth nigh unto me with their mouth, and honoureth me with their lips; but their heart is far from me. But in vain they do worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men." Thus it is that Jesus showed that even as the Jews did in His day, so it would be throughout the history of the church. Men today are still teaching for doctrine the commandments of men.

Much has been said throughout this meeting, even in its early stage, concerning the church, its establishment, its identity, showing that there is but one. Today may we emphasize this point and boldly say that there are many religious organizations in the world, but there is just one church. Denominationalism opposes the church of Jesus Christ today for those who are honestly seeking truth, those who desire to become followers of Christ Jesus, those who are ignorant of God's word, will know not where to turn. They turn to a religious organization because it has many things that may appeal to them. It has come to pass in our United States, that regardless of what you want to believe and what you want to practice, there's undoubtedly in your community a religious organization which will allow you to do so. This has hindered, I think, the growth of the church. It has not stopped it, nor shall it ever. But denominationalism today stands as a form of opposition to

the church.

Closely connected to this, and a little closer to home, we find that the church is opposed in this day and age by digression. So many times when we think of digression or digressives, we are thinking about those who use more than one cup or who use a class system of teaching, for this is just the way we were brought up, you know, anybody who worshipped like this were digressives. And it was not until I got quite a bit older than a child that I learned that digression can take many forms. Digression today stands in total opposition to the church.

Jesus said in John 4, verse 24, "God is a Spirit; and they that worship Him must worship Him in spirit and in truth." As far as His truth is concerned, He clarified that in the 17th chapter of John, verse 17. In His prayer, He said to the Father, Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth." The early restorers stood upon a foundation of "we will speak where the Bible speaks, and be silent where it is silent." So many times we see across the land, people professing to be followers of Jesus Christ allowing their battlefield to crumble, failing to stand upon a "thus saith the Lord." The silence of God is indeed a thunderous thing. It speaks throughout the oracles of God, even between the lines and the spaces. When God says do something, He means it. When He leaves something off from His blessed Word, He does not intend for us to do it. Jesus, as He closed the blessed book, in Revelations the 22nd chapter, tells us in verse 18 and 19, "For I testify unto every man that heareth the words of the prophecy of this book, If any man shall add unto these things, God shall add unto him the plagues that are written in this book: And if any man take away from the words of the book of life, and out of the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book."

Digression today exists throughout the world in opposition to the church. And so many times, brethren, this opposition is not opposed by those who profess and claim to have the truth.

Another form of opposition that is existent today and so very prevalent in our land and our time is that of modernism. Modernism is that philosophy which expresses the thought of "live for today." Many think that a man's life is not told by his deeds nor his hereafter, but in what he might gain and accumulate for himself in whatever time God might grant him on this earth. It has, I think, even as it has been expressed by a well known author, crept into the church as a Trojan horse, and now exists within her gates, standing as a most difficult opposition for the church to overcome.

The apostle Paul said in Titus, chapter two, and verses 11 through 15, "For the grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men, teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world; looking for that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto Himself a peculiar people, zealous of good works."

With this writing, the apostle simply shows us that the doctrine of God needs to be adorned by every Christian person. The church today has become so modern in many places that Christianity is relegated even by the apparel so-called Christians sometimes wear. When the apostle Paul spoke concerning adorning the doctrine of God our Saviour in verse 10, He was not living in an age when the mini-skirt was popular or even accepted. But rather, if we might continue our thoughts on fashion, the apostle Paul is living in the age of the maxi. The doctrine, that he was talking about to be adorned, was such a doctrine that would completely cover the whole man. There are many in this modernistic world, who, when they find something in God's word that they are not content with, or something which kind of rubs against their grain, they want to just throw it off, or tune it out. They would like for the gospel of Christ to cover what they want it to cover, and yet they want it to omit that which they like to participate in. Brethren, today we need to consider the gospel of Christ as the total and complete garment. As Paul said, that which is able to "thoroughly furnish us all every good works." (II Tim. 3:17) It is complete. It is unblemished. It is, as the robe of Jesus Christ, woven from the top throughout. It has come to us through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, through the inspired men that penned these blessed words, and today it is without seam. It is without loophole. It is without blemish. It is made in such a fashion to cover the completeness of the man. The gospel of Jesus Christ, written nearly 2,000 years ago, was written in a fashion that it would cover the generations of

man and all the changes that man might bring into his troubled world. The doctrine that Jesus Christ brought with Him is as good for us as it was to those that the Apostles spoke it to. It is as good for us today in the twentieth century church, as it was in the first century. It thoroughly furnishes us unto every good work. It restricts us in a way of benevolent work. And yet, we should not look at it as a restrictive thing but rather as James said in his first chapter, "a perfect law of liberty." We have liberty within the law, brethren, but may I emphasize the fact that there is no liberty from the law. You have no liberty from the law, no, not with one commandment. When God says do it, it must be done, When He says do it in a certain way, that's the way He intended it to be done. After all, this is not too much to expect.

Paul tells us that the doctrine of God teaches us, that we should live soberly, that we should live righteously, Paul says yea, we should even live godly or God-like. When we think about living in a God-like fashion, when we begin to think about being like God, that is so unbelievable that we think it belongs to a different world; to the next, in particular. The apostle does not direct it in such form, for he says that "we are to live soberly, righteously and godly in this present world." He would have us to know that is not too much to expect, for as he said in Romans 12, it is our reasonable service, for Jesus Christ gave Himself that He might redeem us from all iniquity and purify unto Himself a peculiar people, zealous of good works, Brethren, when we fill our lives with modernism, when we fill our congregations with such, we have lost our distinctiveness. We have lost, as was noticed last evening, our identity.

Again, we find that the church is opposed at this moment, by universalism. As I understand this philosophy, it simply teaches that salvation is for all through the grace of God. It is the fact that Jesus Christ is everybody's Saviour, and when He died on the cross, since He died for the salvation of the world, the world was saved. Basically, this is, in reality, the truth of God's word. It's just that its application is wrong. Salvation is a universal thing. It is given for all men, as Jesus said, it is for "whosoever will." But it has never been for "whosoever will not." Jesus Christ could have saved the world without faith, without obedience, without works. He could have redeemed us in a much easier fashion. But He didn't! The doctrine of universalism, salvation of all through the grace of God, is something that until recent years, at least, was only a part of the denominational world. But today we see it even within the church. There are those today, brethren, who call themselves Christians, who profess to be members of the church of Christ, who profess to be conservative people in their belief, in their worship, and in their lives, who are preaching the absence of law in the presence of grace. Preachers preaching the absence of law in the presence of grace!! If such a godless doctrine could be true, those preaching it would find themselves out of work. For you see, if there is not law in the presence of grace, there is not sin. John said in I John the 3rd chapter, and verse 4, "Whosoever committeth sin transgresseth also the law: for sin is the transgression of the law." There has been many things called in God's word as sin, but in this particular verse of Scripture, we find that the apostle just distinctly defines the term, and says that sin is the transgression of the law. Those who profess that there is no law in the presence of grace, must equally affirm that there is no sin. For if there is no law to transgress, and sin is the transgression of the law, there can be no sin. If there is no sin, why preach? If there is no sin, why did Jesus die? If there is no sin, why the church? Today the church still stands. Jesus is a reality. He lived on the earth. He's a reality now. And the law is as real as anything can be.

As we said in the beginning, opposition to the church today takes many forms. And the forms that we have just briefly listed, I think, have been just representative of the opposition that we face today. In reality, I believe that the church today is opposed by only one force. This force takes many forms and we've just noticed four of them, but in reality the church today is opposed by just one force. We are not opposed today by a different gospel. The apostle Paul teaches us that in Galatians the 1st chapter, and verses 6 through 8, when he said, "I marvel that ye are so soon removed from Him that called you into the grace of Christ unto another gospel: which is not another; but there be some that trouble you, and would pervert the gospel of Christ. But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed." There are those who profess to believe a different gospel. There are those who profess to see the Scriptures in a different light, but Paul says there

is no other gospel. That which they claim to be gospel is not another.

So, today we're not opposed by another gospel, for there is not another gospel. We're not opposed by another church for there is, as we've said, just one. Today we are not opposed by government persecution as was the early church for we live, at least we in the United States, in freedom where we have the privilege to worship as we believe is right. We have no fear of outward persecution. Therefore, I believe that the church is opposed by only one force, and that force is apostasy. Denominationalism, digression, modernism, universalism, and you can go on and on, are all but a form of apostasy. Brethren, the church of Jesus Christ has fought throughout her existence, and today she still must fight the battle against error.

It has been said that you can drop a frog into a pot of boiling water, and his reflexes are so fast that his legs will spring him to life without even being burned. But it is further stated that you can take that same frog, and put him in a cauldron of water on the fire, and just slowly raise its heat, and you will boil the frog to death. If you list gradually increase the heat, even to a boil, the frog will not jump. So it is in the church today. I think we need to understand, that if there was one who came into our assembly, if there was one who began in our brotherhood to profess a false doctrine, which was so diametrically opposed to what we know to be true, we, like a frog, would jump from the boiling water. But let those come within our midst who slowly bring in the wiles of the devil, who slowly increase their untruthful teaching down a slow and progressive avenue, we will find ourselves in the position of the frog, individually working toward a very agonizing death, spiritually.

I do not believe that the church shall ever crumble. I do not believe she will ever fall. Jesus said it would not and His words are true. But today the church in many places is not what it could be or maybe should be, because of the apostasy that exists within it.

In closing, may we notice what the apostle said in I Timothy the 4th chapter, and verses 1 through 3, "Now the Spirit speaketh expressly that in the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils; speaking lies in hypocrisy; having their conscience seared with a hot iron; forbidding to marry and commanding to abstain from meats, which God hath created to be received with thanksgiving of them which believe and know the truth."

Today as we bask within the warmth and the security of the fact of "the church, still it stands," we realize brethren, that it is only so because of those who have gone before us, have waged a war against sin, and have handed us down this glorious heritage. It has come from them through a most difficult path, through standing against false teaching, through enduring, through the persecutions that they received on many occasions. Today, our persecutions are few. But opposition is still existent because we allow it to be so through our own apostasy. Many today who profess to be Christians, by their own lives and often times by their own words, find themselves in opposition to the church.