

11.

THINGS THAT DESTROY

DESTROYER #1: THE TONGUE

In this book we have been speaking about the glorious experience of the true church. We have been examining many of the aspects of the bride of Christ which are truly remarkable and enjoyable. This sublime intimacy with God and other believers is something which flows freely from the heart of the Father. It is something which should be a natural experience for all Christians.

Yet in practice, this is often not the case. While the true church experience should be easy, it is frequently not found at all, or quickly lost after it has once been known. Believers living in love and meeting in godly simplicity should be a normal and common experience. It seems as if this should be something which is natural and easy, since it requires nothing dramatic, spectacular or expensive. Yet in practice it is one of the most difficult things on earth to find.

The problem here is that God has an enemy. The devil is constantly at work trying to destroy something which is so much on the heart of God. Since God loves His bride and since the experience of the true church is such a powerful vehicle to effect growth and perfection in His body, Satan always does his best to destroy any such expression.

Not only does the devil have many demons and fallen angels to aid him in his destructive work, but he also finds many Christians who are ready and willing to help him. I am not saying that these believers wittingly are cooperating with the devil, but nevertheless, they are people in whose lives he finds much which he can employ. Any untransformed, sinful part of our soul is something which the devil can and does use. When our natural, sinful nature is intact, when we have not thoroughly seen and repented for our sins, then we are easy prey for God's enemy.

Many believers can be and often are used by him to destroy the work of God. Perhaps your experience in the Christian church will verify this unfortunate fact. When believers are infantile, carnal, untransformed and have very little intimate communion with God, they are easily used as tools of the devil. Since they are in the very core of the church and have access to many hearts and lives of other believers who make up the body of Christ, they are the perfect instruments for the works of Satan.

One of the best uses to which the devil puts carnal Christians is to slander others. The devil loves an untransformed tongue. He likes nothing better than someone who likes to gossip, speak evil of others, recite others' faults and tell everyone the bad things they have heard about someone else.

You see, natural soulish believers are still very much like worldly people. They like to imagine that they are better than everyone else. They think that by criticizing others, they are elevating themselves. By sharing their demeaning thoughts concerning others with you, they are trying to convince you that they are superior to those they are defaming. They imagine that by putting others down, they are lifting themselves up. However, what they are really doing is revealing their spiritual infancy and their distance from true intimacy with God.

Many Christians, when they hear something bad about another brother or sister, can't wait to tell someone. It is like something burning on their lips, just waiting to spread to someone else. Proverbs 16:27 reads: "An ungod-

ly man digs up evil, and it is on his lips like a burning fire." They find a certain glee in exposing the faults and failings of others. They take delight in trying to demonstrate how weak others are and how they have been caught in some sin or other.

The Bible teaches us that it is "...out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks" (Mt 12:34). No one but God can see into our hearts. Our interior life is invisible to other men. But when we speak, we reveal what is inside of us. Therefore, what we say is a clear demonstration of what we are. What comes out of our mouth is a transparent expression of what is in our heart. So, when we speak gossip, criticism and defaming things about others, this shows that our souls are not yet transformed.

This is why James speaks so forcefully about our tongue. He explains that it is an unruly member. It is often "set on fire by hell" (Js 3:5,6), that is to say that it is a part of us which is frequently used by the devil. He further asserts that if we are able control our tongue, this reveals that we are people in whom God has done a miraculous work. He has perfected us, transforming us into His image. You see, if we have been changed inside, then nothing evil can come out. But if we remain fleshly, then our speech will reveal this lack.

When we speak something evil about another brother or sister, we are talking about a member of Jesus' body. Therefore, we are also speaking about Him. We are using our words to hack and tear at the fabric of His church. We are being used by Satan as a weapon to wound and destroy others. Our words are his tools to separate and divide believers. They are instruments of the devil used to cause others to think worse of someone else. We "bite and devour" (Gal 5:15) one another, being stimulated by our fallen nature, for fleshly gratification, amusement and a sense of being superior.

All this then serves to destroy love, break down unity, sow discord and in general tear down the work of God. When we slander and gossip, instead of building up the church, we tear it down and desecrate it. In place of edify-

ing His body, we hurt and crush it. This is the work of the devil. He has come to steal, kill and destroy (Jn 10:10). When we allow our tongue to speak evilly or demeaningly of others, we are simply instruments of the king of darkness. We are being used as his pawns to tear down the work of God.

One common sin which often generates sinful speaking about other believers is a lack of forgiveness. When we refuse to forgive others for things which they have done against us, we become bitter. This bitterness gives rise to angry thoughts and feelings which eventually find their expression in our words. Springing from the fountain of our flesh, these words tear down and divide. When we do not obey our Lord in forgiving others, we easily become an instrument of the devil to destroy the work of God.

LOVE COVERS

As we have been seeing, God's way is the way of love. God is in love with His body, His church. When you love someone, you don't speak badly about them. Let us imagine that you have a son or daughter whom you love. Perhaps they have sinned in some way or another. They have slipped up in their spiritual walk and committed an error. Since you love them, you don't go around spreading this news. You don't tell everyone you know about their failure or moral lapse. Instead you cover their sin, keeping it between you, them and God.

The Bible teaches us that "...love will cover a multitude of sins" (I Pet 4:8). When we are filled with God's love, we don't advertise and expose the sins of others. Instead, we cover them. Being motivated by divine love for them, we deal with the situation and with them, involving the minimum number of persons and with an attitude of lowliness and love.

This is not to say that we should tolerate sin. Certainly anyone who is sinning needs to be spoken to. They need to be admonished, rebuked, counseled or dealt with in any number of ways. Yet, because we ourselves are sinners in

need of mercy, we must deal with them in the same way. Without an air of superiority, but with humility and love, we must go to anyone who is in sin and try to help them come to repentance.

In no way is our job to advertise and tell the world about this person's sin. Instead, because we love them, we do our utmost to rescue them out of the snare of the devil and restore them to an intimacy with God. This kind of loving care for them is an expression of Jesus' heart.

As we have been seeing, the true church is held together by love. Our loving communion with others is the substance which causes believers to adhere to one another. So the devil constantly tries to attack this bond. He will put into weak believers' minds various thoughts of criticism, judgment and rumor. Then, since these believers are vulnerable to his thoughts, he stimulates them to verbalize these thoughts to others. Then they too function as an "accuser of our brethren" (Rev 12:10).

When we hear something bad about someone else, our immediate reaction is to pull back from our relationship with them. We begin to think that if they are so deficient, who wants to be close to them? If they have such serious weaknesses and problems, we might get hurt or abused by remaining in relationship with them. So our reaction is to close our hearts to that person and tend to spend less time with them.

In this way, Satan uses believers to attack others verbally and tear down the fabric of the church. When many Christians are weak and fleshly, then the body of Christ will be full of such talk. This is one of the most powerful tools which the devil has. It is one thing which is extremely destructive to a genuine church experience.

Therefore, those who wish to experience the reality of church must come to an important and firm decision. They must choose never to speak evil of another brother or sister. We read: "...speak evil of no one" (Tit 3:2). Also that we should "...not speak evil of one another" (Js 4:11). This decision is absolutely essential. We must constantly watch our tongue. We must be vigilant that we do not let our mouth

express words of reproach against another, even if our mind is full of them and our tongue is itching to say them.

When and if we gossip, judge or defame another, we sin against them and against God. If we do let these words slip out, we must immediately repent to the person who heard us and to the Lord. Only in this way, can we maintain the loving unity which God has for us. Only in this way can we build up the body of Christ instead of being used to tear it down.

SOWING DISCORD

There are some things which God hates. One of them is "...one who sows discord among brethren" (Pr 6:19). When we allow ourselves to become an instrument of the devil, we put ourselves in opposition to God and all of His purposes. Whether we realize it or not, we are cooperating with the kingdom of darkness. When we have a habit of speaking evil of others and gossiping about their failures, then we are a regular member of the devil's staff.

Sadly, there are many believers who do much more to promote the devil's kingdom than the kingdom of God. Since they have not been convicted of their sins, including their sinful speech habits, they are not repentant before God. Their lack of repentance inhibits their transformation. The direct result of this is that they are not very effective in any work they do for the Lord. But even worse, they are frequently and powerfully used by Satan to tear down what God is trying to build up.

Let us be very clear that just because what we are saying might be true, this does not justify our saying it. Many suppose that if the gossip or judgment they are sharing with someone else is true, then it is O.K. with God. Those who imagine this are sadly deceived. Any words of ours which denigrate someone whom God loves and tear down loving relationships between brothers is a work of darkness.

Many of the faults and failures of others about which we become aware are true. Much of the rumor and evil

speaking about brothers and sisters is based upon some fact. But love does not speak these words. Again, love covers sins (I Pet 4:8). Love always hopes the best for and speaks well of others.

God our father loves each of His children enough to die for them. Unless we too arrive at this position, we will never succeed in living in the reality of the one true church. Instead, we will remain someone who is susceptible to the influence of Satan.

JUDGE NOT

No one of us is in a position to pass judgment upon another brother or sister. We are not able to see into their hearts. We don't know their inward desires, problems, fears or experiences. Therefore, we can't really know their motives for what they did or said. Only God is in a position to rightly judge. Let us leave this judgment with Him.

Jesus teaches us to: "Judge not, that you be not judged. For with what judgment you judge, you will be judged; and with the measure you use, it will be measured back to you" (Mt 7:1,2). This means that, unless we repent, God will use the same standards to judge us which we used on others. The exact measurement in terms of judging others' motives and actions will be used to expose us before the universe.

We are all sinners. All of us have faults and weaknesses. Therefore, we are in no position to sit in judgment of others who also are weak. We read: "Do not speak evil of one another, brethren. He who speaks evil of a brother and judges his brother, speaks evil of [or according to] the law and judges [according to] the law. But if you judge [using] the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge" (Js 4:11).

We are not allowed to judge others using the standards of the Old Testament law or even what we might believe to be "New Testament principles." Our standard must be the love of God. It is only by seeing through His eyes and sensing the love of His heart that we can act and speak in a way which pleases Him.

No doubt there are times when the words and actions of others displease Him. There are occasions when we must rebuke, exhort or correct someone else. Yet this does not allow us the liberty to share with others the sins of the offending person. Our words must be given to the person who is offending and not to the rest of the body.

So we see that one of the principle ways in which the loving unity of the body of Christ is destroyed is by our uncontrolled tongue. Our words are powerful instruments which Satan can use to further His purposes. Therefore, we must seek God to do a transforming work within us. We must pray that it would be His Spirit which would be expressed through our mouth. We must be vigilant so that we do not let our tongue express many thoughts which might come into our mind. It is only by submitting our thoughts and our words to the control of the Lord Jesus that we can build up His house instead of tearing it down.

DESTROYER #2: AMBITION

Another thing which works powerfully to destroy the house of God is human ambition. Natural human beings often have within them certain desires. They desire to be admired. They like to be seen and heard. They love it when others think and speak well of them. They enjoy accolades, praise and even worship which comes from other mere human beings. Some love to rise up above the others to control and dominate them. They are proud when others look upon them with envy due to their position and fame. Not a few strive with all their might to achieve just such a status in this present world.

These desires are works of the fallen flesh. They are ugly, putrid, stinking expressions of the sinful nature which lives in unholy, untransformed men and women. It is the manifestation of such ambition in the church which frequently serves to tear apart and destroy the work of God. The impulse that many have to rise up and dominate others is the cause of much division, confusion and lack of spiritual life in the church today.

When we become born again, we receive gifts and spiritual abilities from God. These things are given for us to use in serving one another so that all can grow up into the fullness of Christ. However, when some believers have within their hearts a desire and ambition to rise up, be noticed and even adored, then they can begin to use these gifts to try to impress others and so obtain the results which they are seeking. They want to do a mighty work "for God."

For example, let us suppose that someone has been given a powerful gift of preaching or teaching. When this person opens their mouth in the exercise of this ministry, there is a supernatural anointing which accompanies their gift. Naturally, others are impressed. So when this child of God is not humble, when there is in his or her heart an ambition to rise up, then they begin to use their gift to achieve their goals.

These men and women are constantly seeking an ever larger audience. They are eager to accept any and all invitations to show off their spiritual prowess. They are always anxious to be able to make their impression on the maximum number of people possible, thereby increasing their fame and their sphere of influence. This tendency is not limited to preachers and teachers but also to those with gifts of healing, prophecy, miracles, singing, etc.

The heart attitude which Christians need to have is entirely different. We read: "Let nothing [this really does mean nothing] be done through selfish ambition or conceit [vain glory], but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself" (Ph 2:3). You see, pride and the ambition to rise up, be seen and heard and to dominate others have no place in the life of a true follower of Jesus.

Let us think about this together. Who was the first person to use the talents and gifts which God had given him to secure a group of followers? Who was the one who had the intelligence, good looks, and spiritual abilities to attract and hold a large number of adherents and devotees? This gifted person was Satan himself. He was the first one to take the things God had freely given him and use them to

carve out a personal following. Therefore, it is logical to conclude that those who follow this path are not following in the footsteps of Jesus, but someone much more sinister.

When ambition is the motive behind someone's works, many problems occur. One is that they begin to divide the body of Christ. Obviously, every single Christian is not going to be impressed with them, so they must naturally try to carve out of the church a special group for themselves. They work to separate to themselves a part of Christ's body which is enamored with their person and their works. This then becomes their "church" or group, resulting in a division within the body.

Those who are so divided become limited in their contact with others. The ministry which they receive is also limited, coming from only one or a few approved sources. Thus their spiritual growth is restricted since they do not have free access to the many facets of the entire body of Christ. The division of the church into factions which embrace and follow certain gifted leaders is a very common ailment today.

Still another, much more serious problem is that these leaders who rise up to attract a following begin to substitute for the leadership of Christ in the lives of their adherents. It is very easy for many believers, especially those who are not spiritually mature, to begin to look to and trust in human leadership for their direction. When these leaders rise up, exhibiting spiritual gifts and supernatural powers, this only serves to stimulate this misplaced confidence.

INVISIBLE AND OMNIPRESENT

Today Jesus is invisible. We do not know Him physically, but we know Him through the Holy Spirit. This invisibility is necessary for Him to be omnipresent. If He were visible as He was almost 2,000 years ago, He could only be in one place at one time. But since He now is "the Spirit" (II Cor 3:17), He can be present with all of His people all the time. It is through His spiritual presence that Jesus leads and guides each one of His children. It is this

invisible leadership which produces the reality of the one true church.

Any time any other person begins to substitute for the headship of Jesus in His body, serious problems arise. The ability of the Head to guide each one is proportionally restricted. Further, the focus of each member of the body is shifted from seeking God alone to looking to human sources. This then serves to paralyze, confuse and hinder the full functioning of the church. It keeps them from following every direction and nuance of the Head.

Human beings are made with a certain physical restriction. They can look in only one direction at a time. There are other creatures, such as lizards and fish which can look in two directions at once, but people cannot. Although this is a physical limitation, it has spiritual applications.

It is not possible for Christians to have two "heads," or sources of direction and ministry. They simply cannot focus constantly on them both. It is not possible to have two masters (Mt 6:24). These will continually compete within us for supremacy until one wins. Usually, the one with a more tangible presence dominates, since human beings are much more attuned to the physical world than to the invisible world of the Spirit.

We have already studied in chapter five about the meaning of the Greek word "antichrist." This would be someone who is taking the rightful place of Christ in the assembly. Such a substitution is extremely prejudicial in the lives of those who are then governed by mere human beings. But it is also extremely dangerous for the spiritual life of the person who is rising up to take the place of Jesus Christ in any assembly. Although in today's "age of grace" we do not see the judgment of God falling on us for our errors and sins, when He returns to judge His people, these failures to obey His clear instructions will have serious and eternal consequences.

The carnal desire of Christians to rise up and dominate the others was present even in the early church. We have already studied about the works and words of

Diotrephes who took control of and began to dominate the church as described in III John. But there were many others who, lacking spiritual understanding and humility, also had natural ambitions.

PAUL'S EXAMPLE

Paul was a man who ministered to the churches as a servant. He never exalted himself. He often appeared "weak" and was sometimes reviled and despised for his lack of a commanding human appearance which awed others (II Cor 10:10). His service to the body was one of helping them to become attached to Christ as a bride is to her husband (II Cor 11:2). He did not seek to become some great, famous leader. Yet God had revealed to him that others, who came later, would seek exactly this position.

When Paul visited the leaders in Ephesus on his way to Jerusalem, he explained this future peril to them. They were all together on the beach weeping and expressing their love for one another (Acts 20:37). In this situation he said: "I know that after I leave...even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them[selves]. So be on your guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you [about this future problem] night and day with tears" (Acts 20:29-31 NIV).

These coming individuals were people who would twist the scriptures and the truth of God. They would use these slightly altered truths to justify and fortify their position of rising up and attracting followers. These were Christians who would have ambitions to be "leaders" and so use their gifts and the things which God had given them to satisfy their fleshly desire for position and fame.

Paul constantly warned about this danger. He knew that others would come later who did not have the same heart attitude as he did. They would not have the same understanding of the importance of maintaining the headship of Christ. And he was right. Later on we read of Paul telling Timothy: "This you know, that all those in Asia have

turned away from me..." (II Tm 1:15). (Remember that Ephesus was in what was called "Asia" in that day). Just as he had prophesied, some had risen up in these churches to attract followers for themselves and so turned them away from Paul.

You see, as in any such situation, these kind of leaders have to defend their turf. They have to "protect" their flock from others who might compete with them for leadership. So they begin to undermine the influence of anyone else. Using words, innuendoes, subtle inferences, or outright lies, they attack anyone who might be seen as a competitor. In this case, because Paul was influential due to his relationship with Jesus and his anointed ministry, these leaders in Ephesus and Asia had to turn people away from him.

BEING DEFRAUDED OF YOUR REWARD

In Colossians 2:18,19 we read: "Let no one defraud you of your reward, taking delight in false humility and worship of angels, intruding into those things which he has not seen, vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind, and not holding fast to the Head..." Upon first reading, these verses seem to describe an animal which I have never seen in over 30 years of ministry. It seems to speak about someone who is falsely humble, yet puffed up, worships angels and claims to have visions. Although there may be a few who could fit into this category, it seems strange for Paul to use a part of his short letter to warn about such a rare bird.

But perhaps with a little help, we can see something much, much more common here. First, we can understand that these people were not holding onto the Head. They were not submitted to Jesus. Further, they were disrupting the relationship of others with this true authority, thus depriving ("defrauding") them of spiritual rewards which come from such a submission. This is exactly what we have been discussing.

They were teaching a "false humility" which could easily be understood as encouraging others to submit to them. Further, they taught them to worship "angels." The

word “angels” here is literally “messengers” which many Bible scholars see as referring to “pastors” or church leaders.

So here we very probably have a description of exactly what we have been studying. Men and women who rise up, encourage others to humble themselves (submit to them) and even “worship” or exalt them, substituting themselves in the lives of the believers in the place of the true Head. Unfortunately, this animal is not rare at all.

The interruption of the flow of authority from the Head is something which paralyzes and destroys the true functioning of the body of Christ. It is an extremely common but dangerous practice which causes confusion, limits spiritual growth and retards His full expression here on earth. It is a custom which generates strife and contention, generated by those who are promoting their own leadership and seeking personal followers.

When men take the place of Jesus in the church, many evil results are seen. This gives rise to competition for more members and bigger ministries, envy, jealousy, contention and strife. We read: “But if you have bitter envy and self-seeking in your hearts, do not boast and lie against the truth.” “For where envy and self-seeking exist, confusion and every evil thing will be there.” “This wisdom does not descend from above but is earthly, sensual [soulish], demonic” (Jas 3:14,16,15).

It is very sad but I have heard horrible stories about some meetings of Christian leaders who held positions of authority over congregations. In these “conventions” there were leaders who shouted and argued, fought with fists, swore at each other and even pulled out knives and guns striving to get or maintain positions of power. Others bought, sold and traded congregations for money to try and achieve more influence and income. This kind of wisdom is certainly earthly, soulish and demonic.

Christians need to be alert and aware of this serious problem of ambitious men seeking to dominate and run the church. It is such a common practice in today’s world that many do not see anything wrong with it. Yet it is one

of the things which most destroys the house of God and ruins His work among us.

So, believers need to be taught this truth. They urgently need to understand this message. Every Christian should be diligent to avoid this error and stay away from all who insist upon it. Such enlightenment will greatly improve our experience of the true church.

The biblical understanding that men do not and should not have their own authority will serve as a kind of divine quarantine. It will work to isolate those who have ambition and drive to dominate others. When believers correctly understand spiritual authority, it will be hard for someone to exalt himself and lead the rest astray. In this way, the errors which arise should be limited in their scope.

THE IDEA OF COVERING

In the church today there is a popular teaching. This teaching is that everyone should be under some kind of "covering." The thought behind this is that every man should be in submission to another leader or group of leaders who supervise their lives. They believe that through this supervision, many errors, excesses and sins will be avoided. They imagine that by submission to other men, they will be protected and properly guided. Since this teaching is so prevalent today, it is necessary to spend some time examining it.

So what does the New Testament teach us about covering? There is, in fact, one very important passage which specifically addresses this subject yet it is not often well understood. In I Corinthians 11:3-7 we read about the importance of women using some kind of head covering when praying or prophesying to demonstrate their submission to a man, be it their husband, father, etc. This covering then is a symbol of their submission to a man.

The reason I use the word "symbol" here is that it is possible for a woman to physically cover her head, but not be in the least submissive. A woman could be extremely

rebellious, yet wear some kind of veil or hat. So it is only logical to conclude that any covering she might use is only symbolic of her heart attitude. The true covering means that she has humbled her heart before her husband or father and is willing to let him be her head in all the senses of this word we have been studying.

In the first part of this same passage men are strictly forbidden to use any sort of covering. When men are exercising their spiritual gifts in the church – praying or prophesying for example – they are not permitted to have their head covered (vs 4). Why is this? It is because their true head is Christ (vs 3). If and when they use a covering, they dishonor Him.

Let me repeat here that any physical “covering” is simply a symbol of the position of their hearts. Following our previous logic, this must mean that if and when they put themselves under the covering of, or in submission to, another man they shame their true Head. They “dishonor” Christ who is their Head (vs 4).

When a man places himself “under,” or in submission to another man, he declares that his true Head is not sufficient. He is placing his confidence in someone else. If a woman who has a husband places herself in a position of submission to another man (which occurs in the case of adultery for example) she shames her husband. In essence she declares that her husband is not manly enough to lead and satisfy her.

In the same way, any man who substitutes Christ’s headship by taking another man as his covering is doing the greatest dishonor to Him. It is a disgrace. It is declaration that they prefer and have confidence in the leadership of a human being instead of their true Head. They are testifying by their actions that Jesus is not sufficient for them. However, our Lord Jesus is totally capable of being the head and leader of every man (vs 3).

While many believers over the years have used this passage to argue about and divide from each other over the subject of women using or not using hats or veils, it seems that very few have really understood the main point

of this teaching. Paul begins this discourse with the issue of men, not women. His first instruction is about the possibility of a man dishonoring his true Head by accepting another covering.

It is only further on that he brings in the issue of women, using them as examples to more exactly explain his meaning. If we miss the warning here about men submitting to an authority figure other than Christ, we have missed the message completely. Certainly Paul's main concern was not about men wearing hats in meetings but about them accepting a head other than Christ.

DISPUTES AND CONTENTIONS

One thing which does severe damage to the true church is when brothers dispute and contend with each other about ideas and Bible doctrines. Many imagine that when they strive with others about what they believe to be the truth that they are doing the work of God. Yet this is not the case.

We are taught by Paul that: "...a servant of the Lord must not quarrel [strive, argue, contend] but be gentle to all, able to teach, patient..." (II Tim 2:24). Further, "contentions" and "strife" are clearly labeled as works of the flesh (Tit 3:9; I Cor 3:3; Gal 5:20; II Cor 12:20; I Tim 6:4; II Tim 2:23). Jesus, as our example, never wasted His time arguing or contending with others about His teaching.

You see, we are not required to try to convince anyone of what we think we understand. The work of God is not a mental thing. It is based upon revelation. Someone else will only be able to receive a revelation given to us or through us when they are open, ready and willing to receive it.

When others are not open to something which seems important and even precious to us then there is a temptation to try to appeal to their mind. Perhaps we think that we can convince them. We might begin trying to explain what we mean or even arguing with them when they do not understand or agree. But when we do so we move from

the spiritual realm to the carnal, from the spirit to the mind. Such discussions can do nothing to edify anyone.

An even worse situation occurs when brothers argue in front of other believers. Sometimes these others are young or new converts. When they see brothers contending and disputing, this can harm their faith. They see an unholy activity which leaves an unpleasant impression in their minds. This can undermine their respect for those who are striving. Such activity is very harmful and is forbidden by God's word. We read: "Remind them of these things, charging them before the Lord not to strive about words to no profit, to the ruin [destruction] of the hearers" (II Tim 2:14).

Very often, such arguments are a result of someone wanting to appear more spiritual or advanced than others. Sometimes this willingness to dispute reveals a hidden desire for recognition and influence among the other believers. When brothers strive and contend it is often because one or both of them are wanting to be seen as leaders, showing how the others are wrong and they are right. Such activity only reveals a lack of maturity and a natural desire for power and influence. This is the work of the flesh and it damages rather than edifies the one true church

DESTROYER #3: DISOBEDIENCE

We have been discussing the glorious possibility of experiencing Jesus as the head of all things to His body. We have been seeing how it is possible and desirable for Him to lead everything and everyone. He will lead us individually and He will lead the church as a whole. However, when we opt for divine leadership, we begin to tread on holy ground. When we leave the worldly idea of following man and decide to follow the King, then we enter into a very serious relationship with Him. When we declare that He is our leader, then we must obey His instructions to us. He must actually *be* our leader.

The necessity to hear and obey Jesus is not only true for each individual, but for the congregation as a whole.

Any time Jesus' authority is rejected, He simply moves on. He moves on to others who are ready and willing to hear and obey. As we have stated previously, He is not bound to our ways of practicing the church or even our revelation concerning this theme. Simply understanding His will is not enough. We must also do His will by following His leading every day.

Through the years I have seen several groups of believers, who were meeting more or less informally, simply disappear. Some of them had been meeting together for quite a few years and then suddenly were gone. Often this dismantling of the meetings and relationships was something which occurred quite unexpectedly. Why did this happen? It was because Jesus had spoken to them, clearly and over a period of time, concerning a direction which He wished them to take. Yet they did not hear. They did not obey. So He moved on and their group fell apart. Since these meetings did not have any human structure to hold them up, when Jesus moved on, they collapsed.

The reason for this disobedience varied. Perhaps they were so pleased with the way things were that they did not want to change. Possibly, they had a personal resistance to what Jesus was saying. But for whatever reason, they stubbornly refused to move in God's direction and so He simply withdrew from them. Lacking the presence and guidance of the Lord, these groups fell apart. Some of these members are still, to this day, wondering what happened.

Jesus spoke to the church in Ephesus: "...repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place" (Rev 2:5). This meant that this church would simply disappear. And to the church in Laodicea He says: "I will spew you out of My mouth" (Rev 3:16) thus indicating a rejection of them. The Lord was issuing some instructions to these believers. If they did not hear them, then they would suffer the consequences which He promised.

Dear brothers and sisters, these things are very serious. We cannot play around with God. Perhaps while we are participating in human constructions for God, we can

get away with acting and doing as we please. Possibly we can play around with our Christianity. But when we enter into a covenant relationship with Him, then we are obligated to hear Him and do His will.

DIVINE JUDGMENT

In the early church, sometimes sudden divine judgments occurred. The story of Ananias and Sapphira lying concerning what they did with some money is an extreme example of this. Further, in I Corinthians 11:29, 30 we read that God judged believers who did not rightly discern His body. They did not treat other believers as if they were members of Christ but simply as other human beings.

Due to this failure, they ate and drank “judgment” to themselves. Many became weak and sick. Some had even died due to their sins of mistreating others. Although these judgments of weakness, sickness and death could, and probably do typify spiritual problems which some might suffer, there is no doubt that Paul was also referring to actual, physical illness and death. These judgments were a result of believers’ disobedience to Jesus.

Many are curious as to why we do not see such severe judgments happening today. Why is it that so many believers are so far from obedience – sinning so much against each other and against God in so many different ways – but yet we don’t see this divine judgment falling on them? What is different about our situation today?

The answer to this could be that many of the “churches” which we see today are not really the work of the Lord. They are perhaps works which some man or group of men is doing *for* God, but they are not the work *of* God. They are not something which God Himself is doing. Therefore, since it is not His work, God feels no need to defend it. He senses no impulse to severely judge errors. Since it is not really His in many senses of the word, then He feels no necessity to protect His testimony. He has no need to defend His Name from being degraded since the work is not truly His.

THE FEAR OF THE LORD

This means that if and when we decide to let God be our commander in chief, we must walk in the fear of the Lord. When we set out upon the course of truly enthroning Him among us, then we must act with the consciousness that He really IS among us. Consequently, His presence, His leadership and direction must be respected. We must esteem very highly His position and His will.

To live in the presence of God and under His authority is a very sober, solemn proposition. This is not a game. His church is precious to Him. It is not something which we can treat lightly. Although He is very loving, He is also the Judge. We must therefore only enter into a covenant relationship with Him with a sincere heart and a readiness to follow Him wherever He goes.

No doubt, Jesus is full of mercy. He is patient, kind and good. He is certainly not going to turn His back on us just because He sees that we are a little stubborn, short sighted, fearful or some other such thing. As long as He sees some small possibility of our going His way, He will continue to work with us.

But if and when our resistance to His will is strong and prolonged, then we can expect to experience some consequences. If and when we begin to resist Him and even destroy His work with our words, attitudes and actions His judgment cannot be far behind. When we seriously enthrone Jesus as our Head, we may see Him begin to judge some situations in ways which we have not seen before. One of the saddest of these results is that Jesus simply moves on to work with others who have an opening to what He wishes to do.

Again I would like to stress that Jesus is not committed to our doctrine. He is not bound by the fact that we have the "right" vision or practice. He is only attracted to those whose hearts are humble and broken before Him. He will work with any who are pliable and willing to move and work along with Him in His way.

HOW GOD SPEAKS

Jesus, our Head, communicates with us personally in many different ways. But when He speaks to the assembly, He almost always speaks through another person. For example, He almost never speaks audibly to the group as a whole. Instead He uses men and women, the members of His body, to direct His body. As we have seen, He most frequently speaks through members who have the greatest intimacy with Him. He uses the vessels who are most open and available to Him to express His authority.

All of us need to hear and respond to God's direction being given through such members. When the church fails to heed the Lord's direction, His expression is limited. When the participants in any communion of believers will not obey the voice of God flowing through a brother, then the collective experience of His presence is diminished. Being tuned in to the voice of the Lord, we all must be able to receive His instructions through others and obey (Ecc 5:1).

It is not uncommon for Christians to have a very difficult time recognizing and submitting to genuine spiritual authority. This is because those through whom it is flowing are humble people. They are not exalting themselves. They don't put on a special attitude of superiority or greatness. They don't have distinctive uniforms, or titles. They don't exude self-importance or have that almost imperceptible swagger of those who are rich, famous or have positions of power.

Natural people easily respond to these outward expressions of importance or authority. But since those who are simply transmitting the authority of Jesus do not exhibit these characteristics, it is very easy for immature, unspiritual believers not to recognize or to ignore their words. It is extremely easy to miss the voice of the Lord speaking through someone who appears unspectacular.

This then becomes a real challenge for the church. We must not look simply at the appearance of our brothers.

When we fail to hear God speaking through humble men and women, we lose our direction and blessing. If we are not finely tuned to His Spirit, it is easy to miss His voice and consequently not enjoy His leadership. It is essential that we escape from our worldly concepts of how and through whom God speaks and remain open for His word to flow through the brethren. If we don't, then our church experience will be greatly limited.

There are also times, perhaps more often than we would think, that God speaks through other members who are not perceived as "leaders." Perhaps the usual vessels are not open to the particular revelation or direction which He desires to give. Possibly, He wishes to test us to see if we can hear Him speaking and not just rely upon the more mature to lead us. But for whatever reason, God can and does sometimes speak to the group through a member who may not stand out to us as special. This might be a person whom we don't expect the Lord to use.

Perhaps this one through whom God speaks is young in the faith. Possibly he or she is not thought of as being really "spiritual." Maybe they have some sort of physical deficiency or are not especially beautiful or well thought of. The result of this is that we must continually be sensitive to His Spirit. We must be attuned to hear His voice. We must be ready and willing to hear and obey Him, no matter how He chooses to speak to us. We must be "...submitting to one another in the fear of God" (Eph 5:21). Our need is to have humility, the genuine fear of the Lord and a readiness to receive His word and follow Him.

Disobedience destroys the work of God. It cuts off the flow of divine life which is the source of the church and all that is genuine in our Christian experience. When we, individually, become resistant to His leading then our spiritual life will suffer the consequences. We will lose our sweet fellowship with Him and end up only walking in the soul.

Further, when any group of believers begins refusing the direction of the Holy Spirit, they are in great danger. They run the risk that Jesus will simply move on and leave them without His tangible presence and leadership. This

removal of the divine presence from any group is disastrous. Without it the group will simply fall apart or begin to rely upon human methods and means such as natural leadership and authority to hold itself together.

IN THE MEETINGS

We have spoken in earlier chapters about how we must follow the leading of the Holy Spirit in our meetings. Such gatherings, conducted by the Lord Himself, are full of His presence and beneficial to all. This is a wonderful experience and a divine privilege. In such meetings, all have the opportunity to share and minister.

Yet there is something which we must be sure to do. The authority of Jesus must be maintained. We must preserve His rulership over these gatherings. If not, this sublime experience will be destroyed. Those who are more sensitive to Him must have the boldness and faithfulness not to let someone take control of the meeting and deviate it from the Holy Spirit's track.

We have covered this ground in an earlier chapter, yet it bears repeating. There is a danger here which I have encountered many times over the years. This is that some men and women, coming into a situation in which there is no apparent leader, see this as an opportunity to express themselves. Perhaps they imagine that they can become the leader which this group seems to be lacking. Possibly they love to talk and to be seen and heard. Conceivably they are young in the faith and do not know how to follow the Holy Spirit. Maybe they begin speaking or praying in the Spirit, but continue on too long, following some emotional stimulation and get into the flesh.

For whatever reason, there will be times when someone is talking, singing and/or praying on and on and on in a way which is not led by the Lord. If this situation is allowed to continue on too long, it will quench the Holy Spirit. It will destroy the work of God. It will drag everyone down to a natural, human level and the presence of the Lord will be lost.

If we are to meet in God's presence we must maintain His authority. Therefore, when such a situation occurs, those with discernment and maturity must act. In gentleness, kindness and with all consideration not to hurt the other person, they must bring the meeting back under the direction of the Lord. This might be done with a simple prayer or word. It might involve speaking directly to the offender. Whatever is done must serve to stop the action which is taking the group out from under Jesus' dominion and bring it back on His course.

As mentioned earlier, there is some room for error. We don't need to jump on anyone immediately when they stray. But if fleshly, human participation is allowed to continue too long, the whole meeting will suffer. When this happens frequently, people will lose their enthusiasm to meet together since their spirits will be unsatisfied. Soon the work of God will be destroyed by the lack of action on the part of more discerning believers to preserve the authority of the Holy Spirit.

There are also many other things which serve to destroy God's work. These include allowing a "root of bitterness" (Heb 12:15) to grow in our hearts; the failure to forgive others; allowing sin to continue without confronting the offenders; and many other such things. It is impossible to detail and deal with all the possibilities in this writing. However, Jesus is capable of leading His people. As we walk in intimacy with Him, He will lead us in dealing with every situation and need. May we entrust our lives and hearts ever more to His leadership and care.