

OBSTACLES AHEAD FOR THE CHURCH

PART THREE

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The church faces some obstacles. Satan has cleverly thrown into the path of the church many hindrances which were not even known in the days of Paul. In a real sense what we have discussed in Part II are all obstacles to the church.

ECOLOGY

There is a science which has just come into its own called Ecology. A few years ago, only those who were interested in semasiology knew anything about the word "ecology." It certainly was not a household word. Today it is. Ecology is the branch of biology which treats the relations between organisms and their environment. It is the science of environment and the various movements of society or animals in response to environment. Some obstacles to the church come under the heading of ecology.

God's ecology was perfect when He created the Garden of Eden and placed a man and woman in it and told them to be "fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the fowl of the air and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth" (Genesis 1:28). Everything in nature, including man, was in perfect balance. There was no pollution, smog, dirty alleys, open sewers, tobacco smoke, drugs, alcohol or human filth.

It was man's sin which wrecked the ecological balance of the world and has been disturbing it ever since. It is true that man has

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been very fruitful and has multiplied to the point that a burgeoning population may even outrun our food supply in the future. It is man who has used the rivers, lakes and oceans of earth for sewers and filled the air with industrial nuclei which injure his respiratory system. The irony of the whole situation is that man is most threatened himself as he continues to make his environment more and more unlivable. He is gradually committing suicide.

Ecologists tell us that in the long run, the most important aspect of human ecology is that all environmental factors exert a direct effect upon the development of human characteristics in health as well as disease, which makes the issue a moral one. The life of mankind is at stake. It is certain that our relationship to our environment is bound up in a larger complex which includes our relationships with men and God and this involves the church. Men who see creation as something supremely exploitable are not going to be concerned about spiritual values but may even try to manipulate God. This materialistic, covetous attitude reduces man to a worshipper of nature. Secularism and materialism have always been arch foes of the church. They are more effective now. By clear Bible teaching, the church must show that God's ecology is still perfect and thus desirable.

COMPLEXITY OF LIFE

The complexities of our living, including mountains of red tape, increase day by day. Someone estimated recently that we spend fully 15% of our time making out forms of some kind or another and complying with the codes and regulations of our day. The pressures of our jobs, driving to and from these jobs on the freeways, keep us in a constant state of irritation and often frustration. People are so fatigued that when the time arrives for church or to perform some Christian service, they are so exhausted it's easy to abstain. This situation is far more serious than many pastors want to admit. It is hard to handle. Scolding spiritually delinquent people when they are exhausted is likely to bring a strong adverse reaction. These conditions create difficulties in the approach and development of the church. Better methods and programing can help. The frequency of meetings is important. Efforts should be made to concentrate several church meetings, committees, etc. on one night. Over-organization can make a church very inefficient.

VACATIONS AND LEISURE

Taking a careful look at the holidays and vacations of the year shows that the church is almost constantly facing some kind of a holiday weekend or vacation situation. Christmas and New Year come very

close together and consume the greater part of a week. It isn't long until the Easter vacation comes. Then comes Mother's Day and Father's Day and school is out and people are gone on vacation during June, July, August and parts of September. July 4th is usually accompanied by more days of weekend vacation. Then comes Labor Day and back to school. But then there's Thanksgiving and back to Christmas again, not to mention Washington's birthday, Lincoln's birthday, family reunions, etc., etc.

Leisure is a virtual god today. Unions strike for shorter hours and higher pay. The pay we may understand, but not the hours. Now leisure itself is creating problems, hang-ups and frustrations. Many people are like a child with boxes of toys who says, "I don't have anything to do." Surveys now tell us that people with 25 to 30 hours per week leisure time are bored and unhappy. It had to happen in California! "Constructive Leisure" is a California consultant firm which charges clients \$27.50 to tell them how to best use their leisure time. The business is thriving. Dr. Jean B. Rosenbaum, President of the New Mexico Psycho-Analytic Association, suggests that lonely adults get themselves a teddy bear. It seems we have been so brainwashed by our socialistic philosophy that we cannot even think for ourselves. This does not make us ripe for the gospel, but for dictatorship. And yet, the gospel is the answer. When people are genuinely saved, the Holy Spirit provides plenty for them to do in their leisure time.

PEOPLE ON THE MOVE

It is now estimated that about 2.5 people out of 6 move annually somewhere. For this reason many churches are what might be called "spiritual processing plants." Often a soul won to Christ is not in the same church long enough to take a two or three months follow-up Bible study course. In some churches the flow of incoming church members does not even equal those who move away. If the church roll is kept active as it should be, the statistics indeed look very poor. These trends are destined to increase and not to decrease. Therefore, the church must face these facts and do whatever is possible to minimize their adverse effect on the local congregation. Many of those who move are not followed up and simply disappear from the Christian scene. Any pastor is dilatory and untrue to his divine commission in failing to conserve the spiritual life of a former member in a new community by suggesting a church there if possible.

WANING ATTENDANCE

Loyalty to the church is also a waning virtue. Very often even those who are considered to be spiritual Christians carelessly absent themselves from the meetings of the church. According to a Gallup

poll, church attendance declined from a high of 49% of the adult population in 1958 to 43% in 1968. The decrease continues. Inevitably, this begins with the Wednesday night prayer meeting, then Sunday night, then Sunday School and then the morning worship hour. Sunday night services are less popular constantly. If you get 50% of the morning crowd, you are considered successful. Through the week church functions and meetings, such as evangelistic meetings or even prophetic conferences, seem to receive less support from church members and the general public. There is a decreasing sense of spiritual values. It is not as important to go to church as it once was. This reflects a lack of interest in the study of the Word of God and also in Christian fellowship. It is true that we have regimented church worship to certain regulated times on Sundays and Wednesdays. Historically and existentially the weekend has been the pivot of the Christian calendar. A Roman official once noted that Christians meet on "an appointed day," the first day of the week commemorating the bodily resurrection of Christ. They learned also to account this the 8th day. One of the things that distinguished the early church was their desire for fellowship. Even then the writer of Hebrews had to counsel in 10:24 and 25: "And let us consider one another to provoke unto love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as ye see the day approaching." This is more than a command. It is to be done in view of the coming of Christ. The fact is that believers worship God best with other believers in the worship services. The practice of the ordinances, which is a group function, is made virtually impossible otherwise (I Cor. 11:26). If believers in Jesus Christ are loyal to the Lord, then they will be loyal to the church. Otherwise, their attendance will be a legalistic thing which will not bring spiritual grace and blessing to their lives.

After saying all of this, we must realize fully that consistent church attendance lies at the very heart of the church's program as it is today. It makes the difference between the success or failure of the local church. If people are not present they cannot be edified. They cannot fellowship in collective prayer and planning and sense as a group the direction of the Holy Spirit of God. Giving of money will decrease. Missionary activity will be affected adversely. Community witnessing programs will suffer. In effect, the whole work of God on earth suffers when believers are careless about their church attendance. The image of the church to the community is a poor one. It demonstrates that members of the church do not really have a vital interest in the things they profess. Satan has a trump card here. To be successful the church must get together, whether in small or large groups. One of our critics says, "We tend to think of a 'good Christian' as one who attends church Sunday morning and evening and on prayer meeting night"

(Richards, A New Face For the Church, page 48). If all things are normal in the ministry of the church, that will be exactly correct. Gentlemen, we must teach believers these facts.

THE WCC AND NCC

The World Council of Churches and the National Council of Churches have immeasurably aided the progress of apostasy. The World Council comprises more than 200 church groups which have a constituency of close to 325 million people around the world. It has little to do with Scripture. Aside from ecumenicity, its main thrust is socio-political. Even though it takes themes like "Christ, the Hope of the World," its dealings are foreign to any such theme. It is shot through with communism and socialism. In the name of the church today it helps black and white militants and subversives. The National Council of Churches represents 34 denominations, 41 million church members, 140,000 churches and 110,000 clergymen. It has overall influence in theology, education, sociology and political authority over its member churches. Its vast power extends through a bureaucracy of 7,000 people in hundreds of agencies. At this time it is in financial trouble. I trust this will get worse as people in its denominations see the true nature of its anti-Biblical and anti-Christ attitude. These two apostate organizations constitute a serious obstacle to the true church in confusing the thinking of John Public about the church and its function.

OCCULTISM

In addition to these and many other obstacles facing the church of today and tomorrow, there has been a frightening and amazing revival of occultism. The Church of Satan where he is worshipped as God is flourishing. Man, Myth and Magi, a new magazine, proposes to investigate 1,000 supernatural subjects such as witchcraft and voodoo in 112 issues which become an encyclopedia on the supernatural. In Los Angeles it is estimated now that there are between 10,000 and 30,000 witches. Some of the most famous are men and the number is increasing rapidly. I was horrified to hear the leading witch say on TV that their god is little different from ours. They pray, talk about salvation, etc. Based on ancient Egyptian teachings, the cry is "Reestablish reverence for nature." Satan is a master counterfeiter.

The church's obstacles are many and effective.