

Satan's Subtily: Prophecy

Satan is subtle! That is the first thing we are told about him from the Bible, and the last thing we are willing to believe. He is not obvious. He comes in ways little suspected and most likely to be accepted. To we who believe the Bible and love the truth, he does not come with blatant railings against truth or obvious heresy. He comes as an angel of light, speaking reasonable, appealing, biblically supported doctrines. He knows the Bible well and uses it skillfully. He speaks portions of it that are truth indeed, but misusing and misapplying it, adding to it, giving it a faint but fatal twist, warping it so that it becomes a dangerous error. Do not fancy yourself to be beyond a target for the evil one through this device. He tackled the Saviour Himself with it. And though the Lord Jesus did and does consistently see through the devil's subtilities, you are quite vulnerable, regardless of your intellectual power, scholastic attainment or spiritual maturity. No sheep is a match for the wolf. His only refuge is in the Shepherd.

God's people, in their longing for Spiritual awakening, have fallen into five traps set by the devil. These traps, while offering themselves as the very things we need, are, in my estimation, the greatest stumbling blocks now existing to genuine revival. I sincerely hope that when your "hang-up" is exposed you will not take offense and disqualify yourself from giving serious consideration to something that might be of great profit to you. I will list the five, discussing one of them in this issue and the other four in succeeding issues in this order. They are:

Prophecy

Revivalism

Deeper . . . Keswick

Neo-Pentecostalism

Sovereign Grace . . . Intellectual Calvinism

Every one of these are good words, Biblical words, representing sound Biblical truths. But the devil has so obsessed certain groups with a distorted view of *one* of these truths that they have become completely sidetracked from a healthy gospel that declares the whole counsel of God. While their movement may be experiencing phenomenal growth, enthusiasm, financial success and public acceptance, people are not being converted to Christ in it, but converted to the *movement*.

Prophecy

Since the Mid-East war of 1967, interest in prophecy has risen to unprecedented proportions. The more recent energy crises and the dominating role Arab nations have taken by their vast oil holdings have fanned the flames to a raging inferno. Pretribulation rapture premillennialism, a system of eschatology that appeared a little more than a century ago in England under a Plymouth Brethren minister, H. N. Darby, and popularized in the United States by Premillennial Bible Conferences and the Scofield Bible, has burst to the forefront in unchallenged preeminence. Hal Lindsay's The Late Great Planet Earth became the first religious best seller in centuries, selling millions of copies even in secular newsstands. A whole rash of fiction novels parading as truth now appear in Christian bookstores, depicting the rapture, the tribulation, the Antichrist and the Beast, etc. It is the hottest item in religious books today.

Notwithstanding the good all of this may have done in awakening some sinners to the prospect of the soon coming of Christ and their peril as they stand before His judgment in their sins, I am dismayed at the multitudes who have no interest in anything but speculative prophecy. The grand Bible themes of God, Redemption, Sanctification mean nothing to them. They are quickly wearied with anything that does not tell them about some unsearchable mystery of the future. I submit that a lopsided interest in prophecy is unhealthy for three reasons:

1. Most of it is not sound doctrine. It has too much conjecture in it. There is little dogmatic truth that can be declared. So much of it has to be stated in terms as, "It could well happen," "It seems to me that . . .," "What is happening now could be the fulfillment of this particular prophecy." Of what value is such speculation, except to stir the excitement of carnal men? All eschatological systems are woefully incomplete, leaving large holes for which the honest Bible teacher will have to answer, "I do not know." And contrary to what many declare, there is no easy formula to unlocking the mysteries of prophecy. If prophecy is that clear and that easily understood, then why are so many good sound Bible teachers diametrically opposed to one another? The only thing clear about prophecy is that it is never clear until its fulfillment. There is too much scripture about which we can give a certain sound that cannot be gainsaid to occupy ourselves with things hidden in God. "The secret things belong unto the Lord our God: but those things which are revealed belong unto us and to our children forever, that we may do all the word of this law" (Deut. 29:29). Therefore, this obsessive occupation with prophecy is not inspired by the Holy Spirit, but the wicked one who would detract the Lord's people from truth they should know.
2. It feeds an escapism complex. There is a vast difference in knowing and loving the Lord so that your heart longs to see Him, and looking for His coming as an easy way to get out of the mess you have made for yourself. Take a look at the poplar "gospel" music of today, and you will find at least 9 out of 10 songs are about heaven, the second coming, or "poor old me down here in this world." God has given us a battle to fight, and it is a useless soldier who fritters away his time longing for it all to be over. It is a defeatist philosophy. The good soldier rejoices in the conflict, for in it his glorious King demonstrates His worthiness of all our trust and adoration. He is not trying to figure out all the maneuvers, anticipating which will be the last one: He is too busy obeying orders and tumbling the enemy's bulwarks.

3. It misses the scriptural usefulness and purpose of prophecy. Prophecy is not given in order to reveal to us a time-table and exact order of events for the future. If so, then it has always been a dismal failure, and failure is something of which God is incapable. Men have never understood prophecy until it came to pass. Certainly, all the learned scribes had formulated their Messianic theories, but they were all wrong. Since they were all wrong about His first coming, is there not some likelihood that they might be all wrong about His second coming? Prophecy is given to us for warning, for spiritual principles woven through it, for comfort and encouragement, and so that when it does come to pass, it will demonstrate the faithfulness of God.

Someone will now say that a heavy emphasis on the imminent return of the Lord is necessary to motivate the sinner to repentance, and therefore prophecy preaching can produce more converts. Not so! Christ's coming is certainly never more imminent than death. It is appointed to man once to die, and after that the judgment. Is that not sufficient incentive for repentance? Death is a demonstrable fact. It happens every day before people's eyes. Christ's second coming is a fact, but not demonstrable. No one has seen it happen yet. Which should have the greater impact upon an unbeliever? Hear some wise words from the Baptist preacher who saw more converts under his ministry than any of his contemporaries. C. H. Spurgeon speaks to us yet today:

More and more I am jealous, lest any views upon prophecy, church government, politics, or even systematic theology, should withdraw one of us from glorying in the Cross of Christ. Salvation is a theme for which I would fain enlist every holy tongue. I am greedy after witnesses for the glorious Gospel of the blessed God. O that Christ crucified were the universal burden of men of God. Your guess at the number of the beast, your Napoleonic speculations, your conjectures concerning a personal antichrist . . . forgive me, I count them but mere bones for dogs; while men are dying, and hell is filling, it seems to me the veriest drivel to be muttering about an Armageddon at Sebastopol or Sadowa, or Sedan, and peeping between the folded leaves of destiny to discover the fate of Germany.

Blessed are they who read and hear the words of the prophecy of the Revelation, but the like blessing has evidently not fallen on those who pretend to expound it, for generation after generation of them have been proved to be in error by the mere lapse of time, and the present race will follow to the same inglorious sepulcher. I would sooner pluck on single brand from the burning than explain all mysteries. To win a soul from going down into the pit is a more glorious achievement than to be crowned in the arena of theological controversy as Doctor Sufficientissimus; to have faithfully unveiled the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ will be, in the final judgment, accounted worthier service than to have solved the problems of the religious Sphinx or to have cut the Gordian knot of an apocalyptic difficulty. Blessed is that ministry of which Christ is all.

Marvin L. Fieldhouse, author and missionary to Japan, writes some closing thought on the subject:

The important thing in Bible prophecy is the fact that Christ is coming again. The next important fact is, "It is not for you to know the times or the seasons, which the Father hath put in His Own power" (Acts 1:7). The next important thing is this: "But we know that when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is. And every man that hath this hope in him purifieth himself, even as he is pure" (I John 3:2b-3). The fourth important thing, based upon the other three, is "Be not wise in your own thoughts."

- C. M.