

“JERUSALEM MEETS ROME AND FINDS BABYLON: A STUDY IN CHURCH PURITY”

FALL 2022-SPRING 2023

April 26, 2023

“DEALING WITH CORRUPTION” Part 2

III. PERSONAL BATTLES WITH INHERENT SIN AND OTHER ENEMIES USING THAT TOOL

- A. Every believer knows that he has a **personal battle with his own lusts and temptations**. This is an ongoing struggle for every believer for all his life. The battle for personal sanctification is hard-fought because it is internal. God’s plan for winning that battle was humility, repentance, faith and putting off the old and putting on the new.
- B. Paul was chief in reminding us that we also are not wrestling with flesh and blood but **with principalities, powers, rulers of the darkness of this age, spiritual hosts of wickedness in heavenly places**. These create strongholds, arguments against truth and high things that exalt themselves against the knowledge of God. They appear as messengers of light but are the powers of darkness.
1. Their teachings masquerade as truth and can lead one astray from the truth found in the scriptures and in Christ. The path then taken by the believer is non-productive and fruitless. It leaves and not fruit. It needs to be pruned. Lost time.
 2. These messengers produce high-sounding doctrines that fascinate the imagination and draw the hearer into a thought-life that can seem so true. But it winds up being a useless path of fiction and a distracted journey away from holiness.
- C. But when **worldliness** and fleshly lusts combine with principalities et al and become the practice of the church the battle is almost too intense to fight within the church.
1. Some true believers attempted, by truth and Holy Spirit, to cast out the spirits and purify the church within its structure. An internal struggle followed within the mind and heart of the believer. Often the erring leadership structure, upon seeing this threat to its power, tried to

eject the purifiers out of the fellowship, many times with violence.

2. Others, witnessing the futility of the struggle, separated from the main corrupted body and formed new fellowships in a new location. Emotionally and psychologically this can be a painful loss of friendships. Some attempted to separate from error in a solitary manner. This too was often met with persecution by the main corrupted body.

3. In all cases of corruption of the main body, it is an adulterous relationship with Babylon, the spirit of whoredom and filthiness. She will always seek the death of the remnant believers.

D. The enemy outside the believer, persecution and even martyrdom, helped hold in check believers wondering into ungodliness. As long as they were being pursued for practicing righteousness there was not time to practice ungodliness. That is the principal of putting off and putting on. There was a stark difference in the godly and ungodly. For the first 300 years, the pressure of the outside enemy kept them following truth personally. It is usually leisure time, free time, that allows the believer to wonder from godliness.

E. As with the Ephesian church in Revelation 2, believers were busy trying to discern false teachers from true ones and keeping up good and useful works that defined the believer. As with those at Ephesus, with such practices becoming routine, it would be easy to redefine our Christian faith as a militant group of false-teacher hunters or allow their good deeds to become routinized requiring no love to empower it. Another great internal battle is keeping first things, first. It becomes easy to ignore our only and true power, the Holy Spirit, and to do things in our own flesh.

F. As churches used human power instead of supernatural/divine power, the church could become institutionalized and its members simply worker bees to keep up the traditions, sensual teachers could gain a foot hold in their assemblies. Sensuality is the result of losing spiritual power. Persecution would bring sobriety back to the sensually-drunk churches or they ceased to exist.

IV. CORRUPTION IN THE CHURCH'S PRACTICE

- A. *For the first three hundred years of persecution and martyrdom, the churches were largely autonomous assemblies with loose connections to one another. They did send circular letters to one another and share teachings with each other but due to persecution having large public gatherings of many churches at the same time drew too much attention to them. The bishops, ruling elder or pastor, had authority only in his own church. Any meeting of bishops together was the gathering of equals and no bishop held authority over another.*
- B. *Those churches understood they held a universal or catholic faith in Jesus as the Messiah. There was, at times, major differences in their understanding of the person and the work of the Lord Jesus Christ. It is alleged that during this time the communion became the Eucharist, the central focus of the gathering.*
- C. *The structure of the church was quite simple following the structure of the synagogue and the traditions given to it by the apostle Paul. There was a moderator or president of the gatherings who was the pastor or the teaching elder. There was a plurality of elders to watch over the flock and preserve true doctrine. There were deacons who served the meal, set the table and met the needs of qualified widows and those in severe need. Spiritually gifted people participated as needed by the use of their gift.*
- D. *Due to pressure put upon them by unbelievers and their love for the Lord Jesus Christ their was a natural and a spiritual unity formed that brought them to living together as a community. The bishop was the "superintendent" of the community and the elders/deacons served with him to meet community needs.*
- E. *But when Constantine and the Roman emperors who followed made the church legal rather than illegal and then made it into the official religion of the state, dramatic changes would take place in church structure and interaction.*
- F. *Roman emperors assumed moderator roles acting as the "head" of the state religion, Christianity. He sought unity and uniformity among the churches and church councils started.*
- G. *The decisions of those councils became orthodoxy. Those churches/bishops not adhering to the council orthodoxy were not permitted to stay in the fellowship. Exchanges of written documents between disagreeing bishops became the*

documents known as the Church Fathers. These exchanges often clarified official church dogma or doctrine.

- H. Ultimately the bishop of Rome assumed headship. This was a problem for the bishops of the East whose view of the episcopate was plurality of equals.*
- I. Making the church the official religious vehicle of the empire led to more “conversions” and enrollments of Roman citizens into the church.*
- J. This would lead to political, social and doctrinal confusion and corruption. To be a bishop could mean wealth, power, control and political gain. Leadership positions could be “purchased” or obtained through political manipulation.*
- K. As one might guess, this led to many unbelievers entering the church and especially, the church leadership. Church leadership is going to determine the direction, purpose, goals, desires and ambitions of the church. Since bishops had divine authority, what the bishop wanted was what God wanted! To resist would be rebellion. Developed traditions would supersede biblical truth.*
- M. The church took its model for leadership not from that laid down by Christ but from the empire’s model of leadership. King-like authority was given to mortal men using the title bishop to do his will. He would use commander-like authority to tell a congregant what to do and when to do it. He became the mediator between God and man and usurped every believer’s God-given privilege of priesthood.*
- N. Martyrdom was no longer a practice; there was no need to be disciplined about godliness or holiness since no one was going to be persecuting the believer. Whatever the church member did was considered acceptable behavior. With this new freedom the practice of the member of the church would be consistent with that to which no one objected. Consequently, all manner of corruption brought in by unbelievers now in leadership positions became the practice of the day.*
- O. To that remnant believer who was genuinely born again and sensing the pull of the Holy Spirit to be godly, came an overwhelming sense of grief, disappointment and often, disgust. This could not be the church of Jesus Christ! He was poor and identified with the poor. He built no elaborate church buildings; he did not wear gold and silver and, as He*

said Himself, had no place to lay His head. This church of this age is becoming wealthy and powerful, full of unbelievers making a mess of it. The true believer grieved!

V. SOLUTIONS (Starting around 250 A.D.)

- A. For that believing brother or sister whose internal struggles with the faith and his flesh, grief with his own personal sin led him to seek someplace where he could discipline himself and set himself free of his lusts and sin. He could see that often his mouth got him into trouble. Some of these early believers punished themselves physical with whips and sharp implements hoping to drive out lust through asceticism. Because they chose to separate themselves from the church community to avoid temptation they would find solitary places in the wilderness surrounding the Christian community and live alone in cells. This would often include a vow of silence unless it was to pray, praise or speak the word of God. These would come to be known as **Hermits or the Hermit Fathers or the Desert Fathers.***
- B. There had already been a model for this in the Essenes of Galilee and the Dead Sea area. They held high the model of John the Baptist who lived away from the corruption of the Levites in Jerusalem or Elijah*
- C. But for that believing man or woman viewing the sickening, God-grieving, corruption in the church, no amount of asceticism would be helpful. Appeals to church leadership were only met with scorn or accusations of simplicity and vanity. Going off by themselves would not allow them to fulfill Jesus' command to love one another. They longed for community in which the truth of the Christ would be the central focus.*
- D. It was the loss of persecution and the rise to prominence that gave rise to the corruption and it was the corruption that gave impetus to the rise of an alternative "church", Christian monasticism.*
- Christian monasticism is a structured, ascetic pursuit of the Christian life. It involves a return to God through attention to the classic spiritual disciplines of silence, chastity, prayer, fasting, confession, good works, obedience, and vigils. (Source: Dallas Baptist University Online article "Monastic Overview")*
- E. These were believers who agreed to live together in community in individual cells but with a common meeting place for*

assembly. All participants had to agree to the rules of that community or order. Vows of poverty and celibacy is the usual practice as well. These communities are about good works, intensified by the efforts of the community, and devotion to prayer, reading, study, writing, singing psalms, etc. The leadership structure usually included an Abbot (from Hebrew “abba” meaning “father”) who was responsible for discipline and order in the community. All had to agree to his orders and authority. The Benedictine order, the Franciscan order are examples of this type of living.

- F. But for those who were already married and wished to stay so who also were disappointed with the corruption in the church the monastic life of celibacy was not acceptable. For these people who wanted devotion to Christ and the spiritual disciplines to be their order of living, parting from the corrupted church was the only option. They would move themselves as groups of families, find new land to farm and make provision, and set up entire communities in a communal order. This is groups like the Novatians, the Montanists, the Donatists, the Amish, the Huguenots, etc.*
- G. But these separatist groups seeking purity in the church were often held in disdain by the organized mixed church of the day. They were often declared heretical and excommunicated from the church. It was not unusual for them to come under the persecution of the Roman church. Once the church began its persecution, they tried to wipe out any evidence of the separatist group’s existence by destroying their writings, their communities and any other reminder of their existence if possible. Often all we know about these separatist groups is what we find in the declarations of heresy made by the Roman church.*