

Young People's Forum (III.1)

Dear Young People,

In the last letter I sent, I talked a bit about the history of Naaman the leper from Syria and the miracle God performed through Elisha when Naaman washed himself in the Jordan River. You will remember that Naaman complained about this command to wash himself, because it seemed foolish to him. And he wondered why the waters of the rivers in his homeland were not just as good. But God had a specific purpose in this.

Jordan was a river in the land of Canaan. And Canaan was the one land in all the earth where God dwelt with a people whom he had chosen to be his own covenant people. And, because Jehovah, the God of Israel was alone able to cleanse from leprosy (a picture of regeneration and salvation), God was the only true God. He alone was God; the idols of the heathen were just that: idols. Naaman had to learn, and he did, that there is only one God in all the world, and that God is Jehovah.

There was a heresy that arose in the early church. It may already have been present in some parts of the church during the time of the apostles, for Paul seems to refer to it in his letter to the Colossians and John seems to refer to it in his first epistle. It was, however, a grave threat to the church in the second and third centuries. The heresy was called Gnosticism (a name that comes from the Greek word for knowledge [gnosis]). Its main purpose was to construct a system of doctrine that would unite in it the best features of the Jewish religion, Paganism (especially Zoroastrianism), Greek philosophy and the Christian religion. It would be a religion to which everyone in the world could give allegiance and all the world would be united under one broad doctrinal roof.

It was a grave threat to the well-being of the church, because it made the Gnostic form of Christianity palatable to unbelievers, and it united all religions into one system. When the church finally fought off this threat to its existence, it did so by insisting that the Christian faith is exclusive. It is unique. It stands in a class by itself. It has nothing in common with other religions. All other religions are the inventions of men, and therefore, idols; the Christian faith is not an invention of men, but is of divine origin. It alone gives us information about the one true God, the only God. To believe that religion is to be saved; to reject it is to be damned.

I mention this heresy in the early church, because today once again many churches and their theologians are doing all in their power to create a religion that embraces all the different beliefs of every church in the world. In fact, there are churches (such as those that belong to the World Council of Churches, who are even claiming that pagan religions and Christianity can be merged into one religion. One of our own presidents (President Carter, one who claimed to be a "born-again" Christian and a member of the Southern Baptist Church) a few years ago traveled to Egypt and said to the president of Egypt, who was a Muslim, "The God you serve is the same God that we serve." He traveled from Egypt to Israel and said to the president of Israel, a believer in Judaism), "The God you serve is the same God as we serve."

The ecumenical movement has as its announced goal the union of all religions into one world-religion. I think we may safely say that the men who are working for this goal will succeed in accomplishing their goal. But the religion of that day will be the religion of the Antichrist. Revelation 13

tells us that the Antichrist will not only be the head of a worldwide political kingdom, but he will be the head of a world-wide church. And already the pope claims to be the Christ-appointed ruler of all men in the world.

But not everyone will be a part of that worldwide church: the people of God will not join it. But the price they will pay for not joining it will be their life. In spite of the price, they will insist that their faith is the only true faith, and the God they worship and serve is the only true God. Antichrist will say to them (through his representatives) "Yes, but we have room for you too in our theological tent. You may believe what you want. All you have to do is say that there is good in all religions, and that your religion can very well be a part of a world-wide religion that takes the best of all religions, including yours." If God's people answer: "Our religion is the only true religion," The answer will be: "You are narrow-minded, bigoted, self-righteous, ready to condemn everyone else while you along claim to have a corner of the truth. You are an enemy of man; you do not love your neighbor as yourself. You condemn everyone else. You must be put in prison and tried in the courts as guilty of hate crimes."

This is going to happen, young people, perhaps in our lifetime. The day of which Scripture speaks is not all that far away. You and I must make up our minds about these things now and prepare for the days that are sure to come.

I mentioned to you in my last letter that I had preached a sermon on 2 Corinthians 10:4, 5. I want to make a few remarks about that verse as well. It struck me as a most important verse. "The text reads: "For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strong holds; Casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and brining into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ."

If you read this chapter (as I would like you to do), you will discover that Paul is concerned about a criticism that the Corinthians made of him. They said that Paul's letters were strong, but his presence was weak and his speech contemptible. They said of him that when he was not in their presence, he could write fierce letters and letters that sharply criticized them. But when he was face-to-face with them he was frightened by their presence and was weak.

Now, it is striking that Paul admits that his presence with them was indeed weak. Read I Corinthians 2:1-5. But, Paul says, "Even though my presence is weak and my speech contemptible, I preach the gospel, and the gospel is not anything that belongs to the flesh (as my appearance does) but is far more powerful. My appearance is very weak, but the gospel I preach is powerful. It is so powerful that it storms and captures strongholds, lays waste imaginations, and brings into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ." That is powerful language!

Let us take a close look at it. It is obvious that Paul is talking here about the antithesis in thoughts, ideas, doctrines and systems of philosophy or theology. They are the strongholds of the enemy. The gospel, which speaks of the knowledge of Christ, is the conqueror.

To understand this, we must understand that when Adam fell in Paradise, he believed the lie of Satan. What was that lie? If you will eat of the forbidden tree, you will be as God. Now you are a servant of God and you are bound in the chains of doing only that which is imposed on you by God – obedience

to what he says. But if you will do as I say, you will be able to decide for yourself what you may do. And that sounded good to man.

Satan did that because he wanted to become king in this world and push God out the back door. But he could do this only if he gained man to his side and persuaded man to join his cause. Sadly, man agreed. And so man, ever since the fall (for all men fell in Adam) has decided that he will determine what is right and what is wrong, and no longer allow God to do this for him.

The problem wicked men face is the fact that the whole creation speaks of God: of his glory, his majesty, his power and his right to be the only one worshipped and praised. All men know this speech of God too. You may find that clearly taught in Romans 1:18-32 and Romans 2:14, 15. But they hate that word of God and are determined to persuade all men that their word (and Satan's word) is better than God's word. And so all the efforts of the thought of the world are geared to that end. Let us mention a few of them.

Pagan religions are not born out of ignorance of the truth but are, as Paul insists in Romans 1, wicked attempts by wicked men to **change** the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like unto corruptible man. If you change something, you know what you are changing. All the philosophical systems that have been developed throughout all history are calculated to explain this world apart from God's own speech. When I was going to college, I was taught that the philosophical systems of Socrates, Plat, Aristotle, etc., were groping of men after God and evidences of the truth – although by no means the whole truth. We were told that Plato climbed the ladder to God and almost made it, but failed to climb the last rung. The heresies in the church that have always appeared are men's inventions, designed to prove that all things can be explained in terms of man: even salvation can be explained apart from God in some important ways. Man can do what is necessary to help along with his salvation. Pelagianism, Arminianism all denials of the truth present to us a god quite different from the God of Scripture. The god of the Arminians, for example, is a god who wants to save all men, but can't do it, and so he waits for man to make his own choice.

Probably the most elaborate system of thought is the theory of evolutionism, a theory which openly denies that God is the Creator of all things and upholds them every moment, but that all things came into being by the development of new species through genetic mutations, and the survival of the fittest who inherit the best mutations that guarantee improvement in the species and even changes to other species. God is banished from his own creation.

These systems of thought, says Paul, are "strongholds". They are forts, castles, bulwarks behind which the wicked feel safe from the word of God that surrounds them on every side. But they are also imaginations, because they are all ideas that exalt man against the knowledge of God. They are expressions of man's pride and openly opposed to giving God all glory.

But the gospel smashes them all to pieces. The gospel is the preaching of the truth found in the Scriptures that God is God, sovereign in all that takes place in this world. The gospel has done this through the ages. It has demolished philosophical systems and destroyed the strongholds of pagan thought. It has done this because the gospel is God's power, not man's. The gospel lays waste by reaching into the very stronghold of the enemy and pulling out of these strongholds the elect who turn from their false philosophies and now confess the truth. The gospel demolishes the arrogance of man

when it snatches out the strongest defenders of these wicked castles and breaks their stubborn pride. The gospel puts them on their knees, crying, "God be merciful to me, a sinner."

Jeremiah calls the word of God a hammer that breaks the rock in pieces and is like a fire that burns all in its path (Jeremiah 23:29). Paul is not concerned about his outward appearance, which the Corinthians called weak. His weapons are not the weapons of the flesh, but are spiritual weapons that blast into smithereens all ideas and all knowledge that is opposed to God, for the gospel is God's power: it is "mighty through God." It is the power of God unto salvation (Rom. 1:16).

And, at the time when Christ returns and all men see him, all the powerful systems of thought the wicked have devised shall be obliterated when God is revealed for who he truly is and only the truth shall endure forever.

With love in the Lord,

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