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THE SHEEP AND THE WOLVES

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Many Christians suffer today from ecclesiastical schizophrenia. On the one hand they are urged by pastors to withdraw from worldly associations and activities, and on the other to proclaim the gospel to perishing people. It is impossible to do both!

The true solution lies in a return to the biblical concept of separation. Our Lord Jesus put it in a nutshell when he said to his disciples: "Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves." What a strange situation! A human shepherd tries to keep his sheep as far away from the wolves as possible. Here is a Shepherd, the Good Shepherd, who deliberately sends his sheep out into the midst of wolves. That is where he wants them to be! He sent them there! Are not the sheep in danger? Of course they are! What is the protection for the individual sheep? It is only as he realizes his constant danger and remains in touch with his Shepherd; then, and then only, is he safe. The inward strength the Shepherd gives is sufficient to overcome the outward threat of the wolves.

The Lord Jesus said to his own: "As the Father has sent me, even so send I you into the world." How was he sent? As a Lamb, a Lamb among wolves; and though the wolves did their worst, yet the Lamb was triumphant in the end. Did Jesus not pray specifically to the Father about the disciples: "I pray not that thou shouldst take them out of the world" (whether actually or practically) "but that thou shouldst keep them from the evil one"?

And what form of separation did he practice when he was here? Did not the "separated" and pious Pharisees say of him: "This man eats with publicans and sinners"? They did not say this with malice; they said it with a gasp. They were amazed at his willingness to mix with sinners.

They were afraid he would be defiled by such contact. But he never was. Instead, he drew many from among the publicans and sinners to himself and cleansed away their defilement with his own purity.

"But," you say, 'the Lord was God manifested in the flesh. I dare not mix with sinners as he did, for I have not his strength and purity.' Yes, you have! What else does it mean: "Christ in you, the hope of glory"? "I can do all things through Christ who strengtheneth me." Does he not say: "As the Father hath sent me, even so send I you into the world"? Are not all his resources at our disposal?

Does the Lord, then, want his people to withdraw from all worldly associations and activities? Absolutely not! He wants us to mix with the world, eat with unbelievers, make friends with them, enter into their homes, and invite them freely into ours. But he wants us to remember that in so doing we are in great danger. We are sheep in the midst of wolves. One failure to maintain contact with the Shepherd, one little yielding to the wolves' enticement to be as they are, and the whole pack will converge, hopeful for a kill. It is a place of great danger. But it is the place where the Lord wants us to be. Christians are expected to live on a spiritual frontier, ever alert to the danger without, ever drawing upon the Strength within.

But what about John's warning, "Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world"; and James' sharp word, "Know ye not that the friendship of the world is enmity with God?" Exactly! They both warn

about the same thing: the danger involved in being sheep amongst wolves. It is not friendship for the worldling that is dangerous but friendship for the world that the worldling loves. As long as the sheep acts as God's sheep, he is safe in the wolf's den; but when he forgets what he is and begins to think as a wolf, then he is in terrible danger. Thus Christians are to use the things of the world circumspectly but not to love them. To regard them as of great importance is enmity with God.

This understanding of separation is a far cry from any boredom and frustration of a monastic nature. It is, instead, a thrilling and daring challenge, appealing to the God-given love of adventure in every person. The Christian life becomes colorful and engrossing because it is fraught with danger and offers the exhilaration of successful combat with dark and sinister forces.

Further, such a concept makes Bible study and prayer exceedingly vital and useful. There is nothing like an awareness of danger to make an individual interested in weapons and strategy and the nature of the enemy. For spiritual danger, where is such help found? Only in the pages of Scripture and the place of prayer.

Is it not obvious that a separation which seeks to remove all danger also removes much incentive to growth and accomplishment? Has not the attempt to raise children in a totally Christian environment - schools, friends, societies, parties, etc. - produced a generation of molly coddles who lack both interest and ability to influence the non-Christian world for Christ?

If this is true, we the parents and pastors and Sunday school teachers are at fault for letting them grow up without teaching them how to fight the good fight of faith. We have conditioned them to avoid evil - not to overcome it; and when they finally must face an evil world, they easily succumb or try to run away. A few are able to make emergency adjustments and survive until they learn by necessity to become good soldiers of Christ.

We must listen again to the words of our Lord: "As the Father hath sent me, even so send I you - to do my work, that of reaching and winning the lost - in my way, by becoming their friend their confidant, their companion - exposed to my dangers, the allurements of the world, the selfishness of the flesh, and the independence of the devil--but overcoming with my weapons: faith in God, knowledge of his Word, personal righteousness, perseverance in prayer, and loving not your lives unto death." This is his command; we must prepare ourselves and our children to obey!

But someone asks: "What shall we do with the words, "Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers"?" Admittedly, these words appear to sanction an isolationist type of separation. But they only appear to do so. Carefully considered, they lend strong support to the sheep-among wolves concept we believe our Lord wants his own to follow.

Take the matter of the yoke, for example. This is a clear reference to Deuteronomy 22:10, where the people of God were warned: "Thou shalt not plow with an ox and an ass together." This was because of the differing natures of the two beasts, the ass customarily walking much faster than the ox, and reacting differently to various commands. It would be exceedingly frustrating to both beasts to be yoked together, and little could be accomplished. But nothing was said against an ass and an ox associating together or being placed in the same pasture, watering and feeding together, etc. It was the "yoke" that was forbidden, for it involved a union of forces which neither animal was free to break voluntarily.

So Christians may associate freely with unbelievers, even to joining clubs and associations where their mutual interests meet, as long as such association does not commit them legally or morally to some act or practice from which a mere word of dissent could not excuse them. Marriage is such a yoke, for it involves legal commitments beyond the mere will of the individual. Churches have rightly held that this passage forbids the marriage of Christian and non-Christians. A business partnership may likewise be such a yoke, though under most circumstances an employer-employee relationship cannot be considered so. There are borderline areas here where each person must be fully persuaded in his own mind about the proper action, and others need to remember that "to his own master a man standeth or falleth."

Christians could well remember the words of Thoreau: "If I do not seem to keep step with others, it is because

I am listening to another drumbeat."

We must keep step with the "other drumbeat" at all costs. But we must remember that when our Commander walked in tune with it here in this world, it did not prevent him from eating and drinking with sinners, or from being known as "the friend of sinners." God has called us to be distinct, not to be distasteful. We are to be separated unto God, not separated from others. We must deliberately seek the place "where cross the crowded ways of life" and there sing:

"In the cross of Christ I glory." That is the place of danger, but it is the place our Lord wants us to be - as sheep in the midst of wolves. Only when we are in that place shall we be able to fulfill our commission: "As the Father hath sent me, even so send I you."

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