

HANDLING DISSENSION

by Ray C. Stedman

The parable of the wheat and the weeds (the wheat and tares in the King James Version) is the Lord Jesus' own prediction of conditions in the church during the age between his first coming and his second -- this present age in which we live. The whole series of parables there in Matthew 13 describes this, but in the parable of the wheat and the tares he said particularly that he, the son of Man, would begin by sowing in the field of the world those who would have the life of God in them, the sons of the kingdom. Shortly thereafter would appear certain signs of evil put there by the devil. The devil would also sow, he said, and do his sowing amidst the wheat so that right in the middle of the wheat would grow up weeds.

In the book of Acts we are tracing the historical fulfillment of Jesus' prediction. In this book we have seen the wheat springing up in the midst of the world -- men and women filled with the Spirit of God, equipped by the Spirit with gifts of ministry -- who, in trust and dependence upon the life of God in them, break out upon the city of Jerusalem with tremendous impact and power. They are not afraid, they are not discouraged, they are completely confident that God has already won the battle, and they move out to bear witness to the truth of things as they really are. But, up to Chapter 5 in the book of Acts, there was no sign yet of the weeds.

In Chapter 5 the first indication of this evil sowing by the devil begins to appear. It shows in the deceit practiced by Ananias and Sapphira which we have already looked at together, deceit in which they pretended to be something they were not. That kind of dishonesty spread death in the early church. These two people instantly dropped dead in their tracks, which is the Holy Spirit's way of portraying for us what happens spiritually in our lives the minute we act hypocritically -- the minute we adopt a self-righteous attitude, or pretend that we have no problems, that we have solved all the difficulties in our life, and put on a front, a mask of adequacy, and come to church to act as though there is nothing wrong at all. This brought death into the church but it was met by the honesty and the judgment of the Spirit of God.

Now the second evidence of the weeds of the devil's sowing is found in the account in Chapter 6 to which we come this morning. It is a story of dissension, the attempt on the enemy's part to divide the church by envy and misunderstanding. One of the favorite tricks of the evil one is to create dissension among the people of God.

Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, the Hellenists murmured against the Hebrews because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution. {Acts 6:1 RSV}

These Hellenists were Greek-speaking Jews. There were in the early church in Jerusalem two kinds of Jews who had become Christians by faith in Jesus Christ. Some had been born and raised in provinces away from Palestine so they had not learned Hebrew, but spoke Greek. Others, raised in Jerusalem, spoke Aramaic, which is a form of Hebrew. So here in the early church were two divisions separated, interestingly, by the language barrier between Greek and Hebrew.

There was a distribution made every day to the widows who were in need. That confirms what we pointed out before, that these early Christians did not live as Communists. They did not lump everything together, divide it up, and distribute it to all. The distribution was made only to those with a special need. There was provided a common fund out of which money was taken every day to meet the needs of the widows among them, those who had no other means of support. Everyone else had the normal means of support, by labor of various sorts, but widows did not and so a distribution was made to them. Some inequity arose (whether deliberate or not is difficult to determine, but very likely not) and became the cause of the first dissension.

Its expression was that of murmuring, and murmuring is always deadly. Murmuring is always wrong. These Greek-speaking Christians began to complain, but they did not complain to those in authority, those

responsible; they simply complained among themselves. With a murmuring attitude they spread discontent throughout the whole body of Christians. This is still the devil's favorite trick to divide Christians. You murmur when you complain about a problem, but not to the one who can do something about it. When you complain to other people who are perhaps involved but who are not in a position to do much about it, that is murmuring. As I said, it is always deadly. Murmuring brought the judgment of God upon the children of Israel in the wilderness, in Old Testament days. Murmuring is always the mark of a querulous, discontented, unhappy spirit.

In this case, it caused dissension throughout the whole congregation. The church was now under attack from within. Many a church since has been rendered absolutely useless by murmuring, by the spread of discontent and of strife that has never been brought to focus, or brought for remedy to the proper, constituted authorities, but was allowed simply to seethe and ferment throughout the body and to create division and schism. This was the attack by the enemy to try to destroy the effectiveness of this early church.

Somehow the apostles heard of the murmuring. It is not very long until you hear these rumors that go around. When they heard they acted:

And the twelve summoned the body of the disciples and said, "It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. Therefore, brethren, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this duty. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word." {Acts 6:2-4 RSV}

Now, it would be very easy to read that as though the apostles were saying, "We're too good to serve tables. After all, we're apostles. Let's pick out seven flunkies who can do that, while we devote ourselves to the tremendously spiritual work of prayer and preaching the word." But if you read it that way you completely misread this passage because that is not what they did at all.

Remember that these apostles had been in the upper room with the Lord Jesus. They had seen him divest himself of his garments, gird himself with a towel, take a basin of water, and wash their filthy, dirty feet. They had heard his words, "He that is greatest among you must become the servant of all," {cf, Luke 22:26}. They were not, in any sense, downgrading the ministry of serving tables. They made this decision on the basis of a difference in spiritual gifts. Here we have a very clear example of the way the early church assigned duties upon the basis of the distribution of gifts by the Holy Spirit.

The glory of this church was that they were conscious of the superintendency of the Holy Spirit -- so aware that the Lord Jesus himself, by means of the Spirit, was the head of the church. He was apportioning gifts, giving certain ministries to various individuals and sending them out, giving the orders. All through this book of Acts you can see tremendous manifestation of the direction of the Holy Spirit. It is the Spirit that sends Philip down to Gaza in Chapter 8. It is the Spirit that arrests Saul on his way to Damascus. It is the Spirit that allows the persecution that sends the disciples down to Samaria. Through this whole book of Acts the Spirit of God is at work.

Here, then, they recognize that he had given various gifts. The apostles understood that their gift was that of an apostle. They were to lay the foundation of the church, for it was given to the apostles to lay foundations. That foundation is the Scriptures. It is on the Scriptures that the church rests. The minute the church departs from these Scriptures it loses its strength, its light and understanding, and its ability to operate. That has always been true. It is the unchanging pattern throughout twenty centuries of church life. Whenever the church has rested upon the foundation laid by the apostles, the truth as it is in Jesus, the church has always had strength, power, and grace.

Therefore it was most necessary that the apostles give themselves to the ministry of apostleship, which involved, as they themselves said, "prayer and the ministry of the word." As they met together in prayer they learned and understood the mind of God. The Spirit of God reminded them of things which the Lord Jesus had taught them, and they in turn imparted this to the church. At that time the Scriptures, as we have them, were not written. None of the New Testament was in writing at this stage of the church. Yet all of the truths which

we have reflected in these New Testament pages were being uttered by the apostles as they taught the people from place to place. They taught them what we now have written down for us. And all we have, of course, is the word of the apostles. This whole New Testament is nothing but the word of the apostles given to us. So it was essential, as they understood it, to devote themselves to this.

But they recognized also that there were other gifts of the Spirit. There were gifts of helps and gifts of wisdom, and men and women in this vast congregation had these gifts. So all they are doing here is charging the church with finding among themselves men who had gifts which would qualify them to do this kind of work -- gifts of helps and gifts of wisdom -- that they might know how to solve these practical problems within the church. They are saying, in effect, every gift is important. "We simply are sticking with the gifts that were given to us, and we want you to find among yourselves those who have other gifts." They charged the congregation to do this. The word is *episcopate*, meaning "look out" or "look over." Look over the congregation, they said, and elect out from among yourselves seven men who have these gifts.

They gave the qualifications they were to look for:

First, they were to be men, not women. Later on women are given the ministry of deaconess. Deacons and deaconesses are those who serve the church in any capacity as representatives of the whole body. The treasurer of this church is a deacon, in the New Testament sense. The officers of the Womens' Fellowship are deaconesses, in the New Testament sense. But here they were to be men for this particular ministry of distributing the goods.

Second, they were to be believers. The church never has any reason to go to the world for help in carrying on the life of the body. The Holy Spirit has adequately equipped the body of Christ to do all that it needs to do. Therefore they were to rely, not upon unbelievers but upon believers, for what they had to do. This is very important today in the whole matter of fund raising. I think it is a great mistake for the church to rely upon secular organizations to raise funds. It is a denial of the life of the body.

The third qualification was that they were to be "men of good reputation," i.e., they were to have a good witness in the congregation. They were to be men of good character who could be trusted, men who had already won the confidence of others. That was very important. Later, in the epistles, you will find that listed among the qualifications of deacons and elders.

Fourth, they were to be spiritual men. Now, what does that mean? I find that this word, *spiritual*, is one of the most misunderstood in the whole Bible. What does it mean when you say of someone, "He is spiritual"? To most of us it conjures up an image of some kind of pious Joe, Bible tucked under arm, going around mouthing pious sayings, using every situation to quote a verse of Scripture. Is he truly spiritual? Not according to the New Testament. In fact, I have learned that those people are probably not spiritual at all. Most of them are phonies, fakes. They are trying to put on a facade of spirituality, but really are not genuine. A spiritual person is a normal person, a person as God intended people to be.

I thought one of the highest compliments ever paid to our teams that go to college campuses was given recently by the professor of psychology at Taylor University. He was speaking to another teacher, discussing our team. The conversation was reported to me later. The other professor said, "You know, these men have come here and are really getting to these kids. They're living with them in the dorms and talking with them, and I've been listening to what they have to say in class and in chapel, and I'm quite impressed." And the psychology professor said, "Yes. You know, they're Spirit-filled men. But the thing that really interests me is, they're normal people."

That is what a spiritual person is. Spirituality is dependence on the activity of God. It is the fact that you recognize God is within you and that he intends to work through you, and you expect him to do it. That is what makes you spiritual. Its opposite is carnality. A carnal Christian is one who counts on something within himself. He says, "I've got what it takes. Just give me a chance, I'll show you what I can do for Christ. What a tremendous thrill it must be for Jesus to have me on his team! Look at all the qualifications I have! Look at my ability, look at all the experience I have. You can count on me, I can do it." That is a carnal Christian. He may be very zealous, very dedicated, impressively so. He may be ready to give up his sleep, his wealth, and

his girlfriend or what have you. But he is still carnal because he is not resting on Christ, he is not relying on the work of God, as does the spiritual man. These men had to be spiritual men.

Fifth, they had to have the gift of wisdom. They were to be "full of the Spirit and of wisdom." The gift of wisdom is the gift of applying Scriptural knowledge to a practical situation. It often is linked in Scripture with the gift of knowledge, the ability to read the Scriptures and quickly to see what the truth is there, to understand it. But the gift of wisdom is to take that truth and apply it to the practical situation right at hand. That is what these men were to do. They had a problem. There was an inequity of distribution caused perhaps by neglect, or a lack of concern, or by some technical problem that made it difficult. Whatever it was, it required the application of truth, and men were needed who knew how to take truth and apply it to a specific situation.

These seven men were to be chosen on this basis. The apostles gave the church this charge, and told them what to look for. "Go through the congregation and look for seven men like this and bring them to us."

And what they said pleased the whole multitude, and they chose Steven, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. [That means he was a Gentile who had become a Jew by conversion, but was now a Christian.] These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands upon them. {Acts 6:5-6 RSV}

There is something wonderful here. All of these names are Greek names. That means they were probably chosen from among the complaining party, the Greek-speaking Jews. When the far larger majority of Hebrew-speaking Christians were asked to choose men they chose them from the very group that was issuing the complaint. In other words, they were saying, "Look, you Greek-speaking Jews. You are not as many as we Hebrew-speakers, and you evidently do not trust us, but we trust you." That ended the dissension. As soon as they chose these men there was no longer any dissension. They entrusted them with the responsibility to work it out within their own ranks, and thus they indicated their trust of them and of their ability to solve this problem, in the Lord.

Evidently these men were elected by the congregation, and then were called before the apostles who laid their hands upon them. That indicates that the apostles were identifying with their ministries. In the Old Testament, whenever a Hebrew brought a lamb or a bull or any animal to be sacrificed he first laid his hands upon it, by which he said, "This animal and I are identified. My sins are laid upon him and his blood shed for me is as my own blood being shed." In other words, it is a very dramatic way of saying to God, "There is nothing in me that merits anything in your sight. I have lost my life before you. I have nothing to offer." It is exactly the same truth that we learn in the New Testament. We do not come offering God anything. We come as guilty, lost, hopeless sinners saying, "Lord Jesus, you must save me. I can do nothing to save myself." That is what the Old Testament practice of the laying on of hands meant.

In the New Testament this was carried on into the body of Christ as an act of identification. These apostles were saying, "These seven men whom you have chosen, who have the gifts and the qualifications we outlined, are part of our ministry as apostles, and we are part of theirs. We belong in the body together, and in the body every gift is important."

Paul will later write in First Corinthians 12: "For the body does not consist of one member but of many,... The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you,' nor again the head to the feet, 'I have no need of you,'" {cf, 1 Cor 12:14-21 RSV}.

The members are interdependent, one upon another. Here is where we run into problems, oftentimes, in the modern church. We do not understand and recognize that every member of the body has been given a gift. Unless each member begins to exercise his or her gift or gifts, the body is suffering. As Paul says, "If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together," {1 Cor 12:26 RSV}.

It is a terrible crime against the life of the body for any of you to sit in the congregation week after week after week and make no effort to discover what are your gifts, and to put them to work. It makes the whole body suffer. What the apostles are seeking to demonstrate is the identity of the members of the body with one

another. Those with leadership gifts are equal, they say, with those who serve tables. Each gift is absolutely essential to the operation of the body.

When Ron Ritchie first joined our staff he told us of an incident that occurred at the Walnut Creek Presbyterian Church some time earlier which illustrated this well. They had noted that a sizable number of converts were joining the church, all from one particular geographical area. They became curious and found that a member of the church was a milkman in the area. He was witnessing widely to people during the course of his work and winning them to Christ, because he had the gift of an evangelist. Now you do not have to hold mass meetings, like Billy Graham, to have the gift of an evangelist. I am sure there are scores of people right here this morning who have the gift of an evangelist, but who never put their gift to work. This man had that gift and he was exercising it all alone, just because he loved the Lord. He did not realize that he had any ties to the rest of the body, but he was witnessing and reaching others and winning them to Christ.

A number of the leaders of the church called him in one day and said, "Look. We've been watching you and we note that you have the gift of an evangelist. You've been reaching many people. We want to show you that we are behind you, that you're not by yourself but that we're all one body with you. We want to identify with you." So they had a little service and asked the man to kneel, and they all came and laid their hands on him and prayed for him and thus expressed this great truth: We are members one of another. "We all belong with you," they said, "and when you go out and witness now, remember, we're with you. We're praying for you. We want to help you in any way. If you need help in following up any of your converts, let us know. We'll be with you in it." This man was tremendously touched. Tears rolled down his face as he stood and thanked them for this identification with the body of Christ.

Now that is body life. When it begins to flow, as we have said all along through this book of Acts, amazing things start happening in the world around. The church is the key to society. The church is the key to life. If things are not right in the church, they will not be right in society. That is what has been wrong with our nation. That is why it is subject to tremendous attack and the outbreaks of violence, of immorality, and all the other painful, hurtful trends going on in our country today. They are due to the fact that the church has lost its sense of body-ness and that there is little body life flowing.

Now, thank God, God is healing this. We are so grateful for what is happening in our own congregation in this respect. Yet I still sense considerable resistance to this among many. The other morning when we spontaneously joined hands together and sang at the close of the service, some people resisted it. They did not want to hold hands with anyone else in the congregation. Well, I can understand that. It is sometimes difficult to change set patterns of life. But it is very essential that we love one another, that we say so in various ways and so develop the gifts that are present among us.

It is not my gifts, nor Bob Smith's, nor Dave Roper's, nor Bill Dempster's, nor Ron Ritchie's gifts that are going to make this church operate; *it is your gifts*, developed before God and put to work where you are, within the life of the church meeting together, or where you are dispersed into all the power structures of the life of the world around. You are to exercise those gifts.

The immediate results of this healing of the dissension in the church and the flowing of body life are given to us in Verses 7-8. Four things result:

First,

And the word of God increased; {Acts 6:7a RSV}

What does it mean when it says "the word of God increased"? This phrase is used several times in Scripture and every time it means that the word of God abounded more, i.e., it was more widely proclaimed. There was a wider proclamation of the truth. Obviously the apostles now had more time to speak, to utter the words of God, the mind of the Spirit.

Second, as a direct result of that,

... the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem; {Acts 6:7b RSV}

That is always the effect of the abounding of the word of God. All we need to do is get the truth out to people. The Bible is the truth, it is the way things really are. We are living in a world ruled by illusion and fantasy where people are confused, disturbed, and upset. They feel that there is nothing certain, nothing to be trusted. Everything is a phantasmagoric cloud of uncertainty and illusion. They do not know where to turn or what to believe. The truth hits with wonderful impact upon such minds. There is an immediate awareness, as there was in Jesus' days on Earth, that what is being said is right. There is a ring of truth conveyed. As the word of truth abounds, disciples multiply because men and women are drawn to the truth. They want to know what is right and what is real, what is honest, what is genuine.

The third result:

... a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith. {Acts 6:7c RSV}

This is wonderful. Here were men who were active all day long in religious ritual. These priests were the ones who had to slay the animals that were offered as sacrifices on the altars of the temple. They had to perform many rituals and read certain prescribed passages. They were religious people performing ritualistic observances. But now, with the word of God hitting them, and the truth about Jesus being set before them, something was happening. They were discovering that Jesus was the key to their ritual, that all these sacrifices, all these animals, all these ritualistic practices had an explanation in Jesus. They all pointed to him.

If you want to see this, read the book of Hebrews. That was undoubtedly the book used most widely in the early church to reach the priests, because it speaks about all the sacrifices and how they find their culmination in Jesus. The priests began to be obedient to the truth as they heard and saw the application of these sacrifices to themselves.

Finally,

**And Stephen, full of grace and power, did great wonders and signs among the people.
{Acts 6:8 RSV}**

Stephen became the first martyr. The next chapter is wholly devoted to the message he preached, the longest sermon in the book of Acts. At the close of it, they stoned him to death because of his testimony to the truth. And in Chapter 8 we read of Philip, another one of these seven, who also did great signs and wonders. Now neither Philip nor Stephen did signs and wonders until they had the hands of the apostles laid on them, which indicates that, in some sense, the ministry of these deacons and later, of the elders of the church, was an apostolic ministry. At first it was a part and an extension of the ministry of the apostles. They did these great signs and wonders as a result of having been identified with the work of the apostles. Last week we saw how the signs and wonders of Mark 16 were the signs of an apostle.

The second thing to be noted is that these signs were to confirm the introduction of new things in the church. When the apostles first began to proclaim the gospel of the resurrected Lord it was confirmed to the people by signs and wonders. Now, when the apostles extended their ministry to include others with gifts within the church, it too is confirmed with signs and wonders. The word of God makes clear that these signs and wonders, these mighty miracles, are:

1. Particularly slanted toward the Jewish mind, and
2. Are for the purpose of confirming something being introduced for the first time.

They did not continue in the church, and they do not continue to this day. That does not mean that God is not able to do miracles. He can, and does. But they are no longer of the character of signs and wonders. God does work physical miracles today in most amazing ways. But they are no longer of this confirmatory character. These were reserved for the initial experiences of the early Christians, as they introduced truth into the world.

Now the first two attacks of the enemy against God's church have been repulsed, and grace prevails. The

deceit of Ananias and Sapphira was met in the honesty of Peter and the Spirit of God. The dissension of these early Christians, the murmuring that threatened to split them was met by the harmonious action of the body. These are the two threats to the church today:

- Deceit, pretense, hypocrisy; and
- Dissension, murmuring, strife, and conflict.

How are they to be met? In the same way.

When they are met, when body life flows again, then the word of God increases, disciples are made to abound, a great company even of the religious turn to God and find reality, and great and wonderful things are done by God in the midst of his people.

Ours is another day that calls for this kind of demonstration. May God grant that we will be this kind of people in this hour of history. The possibilities are all before us.

Prayer:

Heavenly Father, we are impressed anew by this story of the early church and its ministry, and we know that we are still living in the age of the Spirit and the age of the church. We ask that you will use us in this same way today. Root out from among us all causes of dissension and strife, stop any murmuring that is going on among us, and stop us, Lord, from being pretentious, deceitful, hypocritical, pretending to be without problems when we have them, trying to hide things and not let anyone know what is going on, for you have judged all of this, Lord. We ask you to make us loving, and honest and open, in Jesus' name, Amen.

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