

Scratching Our Itches

by **Richard T. Ritenbaugh**

***Forerunner*, "Prophecy Watch," September-October 1997**

The church of God does not exist in a vacuum. Events, trends, moods and ideas that grow popular in the world—whether good or bad—soon find their way into the church. This incursion of worldliness is a "natural" process that Christians must constantly guard against.

For instance, if tetherball suddenly surged in popularity, someone among us would take up the game and try to spread it among other members. Tetherball is fairly innocuous, though an errant ball occasionally whacks an unwary player. The skin may sting for a while, but the players soon resume the game. Perhaps, at the worst, if the competition became so fierce that unchristian attitudes began to surface, certain steps would need to be taken.

Yet, generally, such a situation is benign. But what if it is not tetherball but government in the church that is being batted about? Or a particular prophecy? Or the race issue? Or the nature of God? Worldly ideas on these topics generally muddy the waters, "For all that is in the world . . . is not of the Father but is of the world" (I John 2:16). John later writes, "The whole world lies under the sway of the wicked one" (I John 5:19).

The Process

In earlier times, the process of worldly things flowing into the church was less insistent and pervasive. In the first century, for example, philosophies and beliefs foreign to God's way had their influence but less directly and constantly. Church members may have been exposed to unchristian concepts in the local marketplace, workplace or forum, but they probably learned to avoid such discussions after a few bad experiences. On the other hand, they faced having pagan beliefs forced on them by Imperial Rome. At least they could flee to the frontiers to escape it.

Notwithstanding, today it is far worse. The ideas of Satan and his world are virtually unavoidable. Radio, television, direct mail, billboards, the Internet and other means throw a chaotic melange of unbiblical ideas at us from the time we wake up to the time we go to bed. Retreating behind the four walls of our houses does little good in keeping the world at bay.

We try to shield our children from the world's influences, but they spend several hours each day absorbing worldly attitudes in the classroom and on the playground. Children's movies, television shows, books and magazines deliver constant references to demonic, sexual or rebellious activities. Try finding truly wholesome adolescent entertainment—it is nearly impossible!

Where can we go where little of this world's influence can reach us? Many have tried to "go forth from Babylon" (Isaiah 48:20; see Zechariah 2:6-7; Revelation 18:4) only to find that Babylon follows them into the most remote wilderness. And here lies the rub: We can never really leave the world's influences behind because they are **in** us! We not only have to shield ourselves from Babylon, this world and all its ways, but we must also purge them from our hearts and minds.

It begins at birth. For many years, Satan exposes us to his way of life, and consciously or not, we accept much, if not all, of it. Second-generation Christians, too, are not spared this indoctrination.

Paul calls the Devil "the prince of the power of the air" (Ephesians 2:2), which Herbert Armstrong explained by using the analogy of radio broadcasting. Satan's spirit permeates this world, and all humanity by nature is "tuned in" to his frequency (verse 3). That influence drives mankind to oppose God at every turn (Romans 8:7).

But at some point, God mercifully calls us to throw off that enmity and turn to Him. Suddenly, the two opposite systems clash—warfare breaks out in our minds, and sometimes in our lives! Satan does not want to lose any of his foot soldiers, so he fights to retain them. God has commissioned us to fight back:

Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities and powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places. (Ephesians 6:11-12)

Peter advises, "Resist him, steadfast in the faith, knowing that the same sufferings are experienced by your brotherhood in the world" (I Peter 5:9). Not only do we fight Satan and his influence individually, we fight the same battle back-to-back with all our church brethren. Yet sometimes we let the enemy sneak in behind our lines, and what havoc he wreaks!

How well is our war against this world progressing? Who holds the high ground? Would the Commander-in-Chief regard our station as solid and invincible to enemy forces? Can He count on us to hold our ground?

Special Interest Groups

What are some of society's current ideas? Have they caused changes in the way society operates? Have they found their way into the thinking of church members? Have they caused damage in the church?

One of the prevalent movements over the past forty years is special interest groups. Because of selfish human nature, everyone wants his group to be recognized and given certain advantages. Minorities want Affirmative Action to "grease the rails" for them so they can grab their "piece of the pie." The Americans with Disabilities Act regulates the rest of us in how we treat the blind, deaf, deformed and otherwise disabled. Gays want the same rights and privileges as heterosexuals. Even animals and trees have advocates fighting for their rights!

Special interest groups have only succeeded in fracturing the nation. We are no longer just Americans in this country, but white-Americans, Native Americans, African-Americans, Asian-Americans, Hispanic-Americans, Jewish Americans, rich Americans, poor Americans, middle-class Americans, liberal Americans, conservative Americans, religious Americans, secular Americans, etc., etc., etc.! What ever happened to "one nation under God"?

Has "the one true church" caught the special-interests bug? How many splinter churches are there these days? The number must be well in excess of a hundred! What special interest separates one from another?

Some churches formed around a particular doctrine like the new moons, postponements or Passover observance. Others gathered around a personality. A few organized for geographical reasons. A

handful separated over racial problems, abusive ministers or petty disagreements such as whose house should host Sabbath services. Far too many people have ceased attending any church at all because none meet their criteria.

The apostle Paul encountered this in his day in Corinth:

For it has been declared to me concerning you, my brethren, by those of Chloe's household, that there are contentions among you. Now I say this, that each of you says, "I am of Paul," or "I am of Apollos," or "I am of Cephas," or "I am of Christ." Is Christ divided? (I Corinthians 1:11-13)

In chapter 12, he concludes his thought:

For as the body is one and has many members, but all the members of that one body, being many, are one body, so also is Christ. For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body . . . and have all been made to drink into one Spirit. . . . [T]here should be no schism in the body. . . . Now you are the body of Christ, and members individually. (verses 12-13, 25, 27)

There is one church, a spiritual organism, presently scattered about in various organizations, but "The Lord knows those who are His" (II Timothy 2:19). True members of the body will be doing God's will and following His doctrine. As Paul goes on to say in the same verse, "Let everyone who names the name of Christ depart from iniquity."

Those of the true church are united by the Holy Spirit common to them (Romans 8:14-17). They are one because God is in them all (John 17:20-23), and with this common mind (I Corinthians 2:16; Philippians 2:5), they will—in time with God's help—unite in one organization. This may not take place until the Tribulation begins, but God promises to gather His people "to her place" (Revelation 12:14). Maybe only then will real and lasting unity occur.

Playing the Victim

Another pervasive idea in vogue is victimization. Everyone is a victim of someone or something, and as a result, people demand recompense for their sufferings. No one is responsible anymore for his actions; a person is "forced" by circumstances in his life to act a certain way. It has become so ridiculous that recently a jury acquitted a woman of murder because she had had a "bad hair day"! Her own unruly hair had victimized her!

It seems that many routinely cop insanity pleas in murder trials. But do they have no responsibility in the matter *even if they are insane*? They still took a human life! How many criminals blame their parents or lack thereof for their "life of crime"? Did they not choose that lifestyle or did their parents put a gun to their heads and make them lie, cheat, steal, rape and murder?

Have the cries of victimization resounded through God's church? Indeed, it is a major complaint throughout every organization! "I suffered terrible abuse from my last pastor!" "I served and served and never got even a 'thank you!'" "I never got to tell my side of the story!" Sound familiar? Are these complaints truly valid, or are they another example of the trend of victimization?

Some of these cries are certainly true, but they are no excuse for any lack that may be in us. A minister, abusive or not, cannot be blamed for spiritual immaturity, rotten marriages, rebellious children or poor finances. Some people also play the victim to cover the need to overcome personally.

Besides this, God points out that every issue has two sides (Proverbs 18:13, 17), and it is very rare that one side in a matter holds total responsibility (see Ezekiel 34:1-10, 17-22). It is proper to sympathize with those who have been abused, but abuse, a very strong term, should be proved rather than assumed. What parent would tolerate a charge of child abuse against himself without proof? Thus a charge of abuse of any kind should be backed by solid proof.

Abuse, where it has been proved to exist, is heinous, deplorable and punishable. However, accusations without proof or biblically justified ministerial actions (rebuke, correction, even disfellowshipping) do not necessarily constitute abuse. Christians should learn discernment and "judge with righteous judgment" (John 7:24).

Reducing Government

Realizing the tremendous growth in the federal government from 1930-1980, Americans in the nineties have taken "Reduce the size of government!" as a battle cry. Grassroots movements have sprung up everywhere to lobby for handing control of the country back to the people. The national government is the "bad guy" who has over the years taken more than its constituted powers allow, and the people have organized to wrest it back.

Such a scenario was the backdrop for the 1994 "Republican Revolution," where voters booted scores of career politicians from their congressional seats, and replaced them with conservative republicans who campaigned on a platform of reducing government. Because the polls showed this to be the country's mood, President Clinton embraced the idea, appointing Vice President Al Gore to head a commission to streamline Washington's bureaucracy. In its ever-so-slow manner, Congress has begun to return some power to state and local governments. Calling "town meetings," a form of "pure democracy," is a favorite ploy among politicians to seem to be acceding to the people's demands.

Is it any surprise that government and turning control over the church to the laymembership are also primary concerns of many brethren? They have been immersed in this worldly mood for a few decades! No wonder they think government of any kind is the enemy of the people; power should be spread among many to limit the control of any person or group over the church; and all the members of the church are holy, so all should have a say in all its functions.

Some have become so dead-set against government in the church that any attempt to show government from the Bible is harshly rejected as twisting Scripture. No amount of proof will satisfy them! They deny verses from the Old Testament because they are "Old Covenant." They turn plain, literal meanings of New Testament scriptures on their heads to say the opposite. Arguing with such people, as Paul says, just "increase[s] to more ungodliness . . . [and] generate[s] strife" (II Timothy 2: 16, 23).

Does God support democracy any more than totalitarianism? What does the Bible say? Basically, it says that God has set up His government like a family, with a father in authority. All His

governmental systems contain one person in authority, constrained by His law and motivated by His Spirit. If the members, also likewise constrained and motivated, work in harmony with the person in charge, they produce great fruit.

However, any government—even those using God's form—will make mistakes because fallible human beings run it. Rejecting government in the church because of past mistakes is "throwing the baby out with the bath water." The government is not the problem—sinful men are! The Bible provides instructions and remedies for situations where men in authority abuse their power.

Beyond that, God knows and avenges those who fall victim to such abuses. He will correct His servants in His own time and His own way. In a similar situation, concerning the rich oppressing the poor, James advises:

[To the oppressor:]

Come now, you rich, weep and howl for *your miseries that are coming upon you* ! . . . Indeed the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out; and *the cries of the reapers have reached the ears of the Lord of Sabaoth* [hosts]. You have lived on the earth in pleasure and luxury; you have fattened your hearts as in a day of slaughter. You have condemned, you have murdered the just; he does not resist you. (James 5:1, 4-6)

[To the oppressed:]

Therefore *be patient* , brethren, until the coming of the Lord. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, waiting patiently for it until it receives the early and latter rain. You also be patient. *Establish your hearts* , for the coming of the Lord is at hand. *Do not grumble against one another* , brethren, lest you be condemned. Behold, the Judge is standing at the door! (verses 7-9)

James instructs us to leave these matters in God's hands, clean up our own lives and continue our walk toward His Kingdom. We can use these trials to make us stronger, more patient and more godly. Paul counsels similarly:

Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Therefore let us, as many as are mature, have this mind; and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal even this to you. (Philippians 3:13-15)

"Itching Ears"

Just before his martyrdom, Paul warned Timothy that such a situation as ours would arise:

For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables. (II Timothy 4:3-4)

Paul's description of people having "itching ears" is picturesque. The Greek word, *knethomai*, literally means "to itch, rub, scratch or tickle." This figure of speech implies that they have an itch that must be scratched, or as William Barclay puts it, "they have ears which have to be continually titillated with novelties" (*The Letters to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon*, p. 202). Such people open their ears to any teacher who will relieve their particular "itch" regardless of how it measures against the truth.

The solution to this resides in proper discernment based on God's infallible Word. John writes, "Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world" (I John 4:1). Christ commends the Ephesian church for this:

I know your works, your labor, your patience, and that you cannot bear those who are evil. And you have tested those who say they are apostles and are not, and have found them liars. (Revelation 2:2)

Paul says it most simply, "Test all things; hold fast what is good" (I Thessalonians 5:21).

As the fall festivals approach, it may be a good idea to evaluate the "causes" we endorse. Are they truly of God, or are they itches we want scratched? Have we allowed the world to influence our thinking, or are we on solid biblical footing? Have we held our ground against Satan, or have we given in to his relentless onslaught?

Our effort now should be presenting ourselves "blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ" (verse 23), for God is not concerned with scratching our itches but transforming us into the image of His Son. That is our only cause!