

Should A Christian Play Devil's Advocate?

by Staff

Forerunner, "Ready Answer," May-June 2008

*"Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven."
—Matthew 5:16*

Have you ever used a phrase or saying that you do not fully understand? We all have and do. We too frequently use idioms, especially, in our everyday conversation without the foggiest idea of where the particular expression originated or what it really means.

For instance, we might tell our children to "pipe down" when they are being a bit too noisy, and we need quiet to study. Most of us probably do not realize that this idiomatic statement comes from life aboard naval ships. The boatswain would blow various signals on a pipe or whistle to command the crew to do various things. Among the signals he blew were orders to "turn in" for the night and blow the "lights out" for sleep, when it was time for quiet.

Recently, I realized that, when I spoke of "playing devil's advocate," I had been using a phrase without really knowing what it entailed. Immediately after using it, I was left wondering what it really means.

Where did this phrase come from? What is its meaning today? More importantly, should we as Christians personify this phrase in our daily lives?

A little thought and study shows that a Christian faces real dangers in playing the role of "Devil's Advocate." It is time that we learned what it is all about.

Origins and Meaning

The term "Devil's Advocate" dates back to the sixteenth century to an official office within the Roman Catholic Church known in Latin as the *Advocatus Diaboli*—literally, "Devil's Advocate." This person was a canon lawyer appointed by that church to raise doubts against the genuineness of the miracles of a candidate for canonization. He was to expose any lack of formality in the investigation of the miracles, and to assail the general merits of the candidate, whose cause is sustained by an *Advocatus Dei*—literally, "God's Advocate." The position was established in 1587 during the reign of Pope Sixtus V, and it was not abolished until 1983 by Pope John Paul II.

According to thefreedictionary.com, *Devil's advocate* is today primarily defined as "one who argues against a cause or position, not as a committed opponent but simply for the sake of argument or to determine the validity of the cause or position." Since the Roman Catholic Church office has been abolished, and with the passage of time, the modern-day usage of this phrase has become more general, simply to identify a contrarian of sorts.

However, its origins cannot be ignored. Is it harmless in this day for us to play Devil's advocate? After all, is it just someone who argues the other side of a cause or position, or should we be conscious of something more?

We need to consider the question: Do we, as Christians, actually want to advocate for Satan the Devil? To provide another level of clarity, let us ask one more question: What is an "advocate"?

Using the same online dictionary, we find that an *advocate* is defined as "one that pleads the cause of another, specifically one that pleads the cause of another before a tribunal or judicial court; one that defends or maintains a cause or proposal; or one that supports or promotes the interests of another."

Using just the verbs in these definitions, we can see that an advocate is one who pleads, defends, supports, or promotes the interests of another. In this case, the "other" is Satan, the Adversary of God, His Son, and His true church! Do we really want to see things from his side? Or worse, take his side, even in argument?

While the Roman Catholic Church may have instituted an official Devil's Advocate more than four centuries ago, playing "Devil's Advocate" predates that church's practice by nearly 5,600 years. Interestingly enough, mankind has unwittingly played this role since the Garden of Eden.

Let the Games Begin!

Genesis 3 is the famous chapter that is referred to as "The Temptation and Fall of Man" in many Bibles. It could also be rightly named "Mankind Deceived into Playing Devil's Advocate." Here are the first seven verses:

Now the serpent was more cunning than any beast of the field which the Lord God had made. And he said to the woman, "Has God indeed said, 'You shall not eat of every tree of the garden'?" And the woman said to the serpent, "We may eat the fruit of the trees of the garden; but of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, God has said, 'You shall not eat it, nor shall you touch it, lest you die.'" Then the serpent said to the woman, "You will not surely die. For God knows that in the day you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree desirable to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate. She also gave to her husband with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves coverings.

In verse 4, Satan slyly convinces Eve that God has lied to them by withholding from them the ability to become "like God, knowing good and evil." God was being unfair, he argues, keeping them from their potential. The passage suggests that, after hearing this, Eve did not hesitate one bit in making her decision. She took the bait without even flinching and ignorantly promoted the interests of Satan by giving the forbidden fruit to her husband. In effect, she signed on to advance Satan's objective—to derail God's plan to create mankind in His spiritual image.

Satan's tack has been the same ever since, even though he must realize that, due to Christ's death and resurrection, he will ultimately lose (Revelation 20:10). While he still has time, he will try to make as many people as he can fail to reach their incredible human potential. He will do whatever is in his power—whatever God allows him to do—to convince them that his way is superior to God's.

For those that have been called by God in this lifetime, we have far more at stake here. If Satan can succeed in deceiving us to advocate for him more and more, he greatly increases our chances of being subject to the second death, the eternal death in the Lake of Fire (Revelation 20:14-15).

Peter warns us of the dangers that Satan poses to God's people: "Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour" (I Peter 5:8). According to the *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, "sober" (Greek *nepho*) is a verb found in the New Testament only in the figurative sense, implying "sober watchfulness." In addition, "vigilant" (Greek *gregoreuo*) means "to keep awake, i.e., watch (literally or figuratively)."

Combining "sober" and "vigilant" paints an interesting word-picture for us. When a person is heavily intoxicated, he wants nothing more than to sleep it off, so it is impossible for the sleeping drunkard to be vigilant about anything. The message for us is that we must be attentive to our physical and spiritual condition so that we do not become spiritually intoxicated. This type of person is exactly the kind whom Satan seeks. If we enter this state, then we make ourselves a prime target to be devoured by the "roaring lion."

Both Ends Against the Middle

Another factor that can enter this equation is that Satan likes to "play both ends against the middle." This expression describes a person encouraging two people or groups to compete with each other in order to gain an advantage for himself. Satan is always trying to gain an advantage, and he even had the audacity to try this with his own Creator, Jesus Christ.

Both Matthew 4 and Luke 4 record for us Satan's attempts to separate the Son from the Father—dividing the Family of God for all eternity in order to gain the advantage for himself. Luke 4:3-4 records his first temptation:

And the devil said to Him, "If You are the Son of God, command this stone to become bread." But Jesus answered him, saying, "It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word of God.'"

Satan knew the power within Jesus' grasp, and by appealing to His physical need, His great hunger, he tried to persuade Him to rely on His own power. Obviously, his first attempt failed spectacularly, so he tried another approach:

Then the devil, taking Him up on a high mountain, showed Him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time. And the devil said to Him, "All this authority I will give You, and their glory; for this has been delivered to me, and I give it to whomever I wish. Therefore, if You will worship before me, all will be Yours." And Jesus answered and said to him, "Get behind Me, Satan! For it is written, 'You shall worship the Lord your God, and Him only you shall serve.'" (Luke 4:5-8)

Here, Satan tried to exploit his position and authority as the god of this age (II Corinthians 4:4) by promising authority and glory to Christ, the One who granted him the position he now fills! The price was that Jesus would have to worship him. The Devil's pride is mind-boggling—to think that he, Satan, a created being, would try to bribe his Creator to worship him! This was a second stunning failure. Satan makes a third attempt:

Then he brought Him to Jerusalem, set Him on the pinnacle of the temple, and said to Him, "If You are the Son of God, throw Yourself down from here. For it is written: 'He shall give His angels charge over you, to keep you,' and, 'In their hands they shall bear you up, lest you dash your foot against a stone.'" And Jesus answered and said to him, "It

has been said, 'You shall not tempt the Lord your God.'" Now when the devil had ended every temptation, he departed from Him until an opportune time. (Luke 4:9-13)

Even in His weakened state, Jesus knew that no physical harm would come to Him, as He drew His strength from His close relationship with His Father. His response shows for whom Jesus was advocating, His Father. Thus, Satan's third and final attempt fails just as completely as the other two had.

Many times, as physical human beings, we take Satan for granted—and this is exactly what he wants us to do. He hopes that we will underestimate him, and he works hard in the world to make his very existence a matter of superstition and primitive belief. He knows that when we take him too lightly, we let our guard down, and he can strike.

We must never forget that, if Satan had the arrogance to try this with Jesus Himself, he will not hesitate to try to separate us from the Father and Christ.

Without a doubt, to gain an advantage for himself, Satan would love nothing more than to make two of God's people or church groups compete with each other. As a result, he creates the element of distraction, and by becoming distracted from our true focal point, we have effectively allowed our spiritual armor to fall off. Jesus, in Luke 11:17, warns us of the fruit of such action: "Every kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation, and a house divided against a house falls." It is a recipe for spiritual disaster!

Ambassadors for Christ

An *ambassador* is "a diplomatic official of the highest rank appointed and accredited as representative-in-residence by one government or sovereign to another; an authorized messenger or representative." Scripture confirms that, after being called and baptized, we as ambassadors and citizens represent the greatest government the earth will ever see (II Corinthians 5:20; Ephesians 2:19; Philippians 3:20). We know this intellectually, but how often do we consciously force ourselves—in thought, speech, and action—to advocate for God and His way?

Matthew records Jesus' encouraging words that teach us for whom and how we are to advocate. Remember, an advocate is one that pleads, defends, supports, or promotes the interests of another. Our advocacy is intended to point others to the Source of our light—our heavenly Father—and we accomplish this by our godly examples:

You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do they light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven. (Matthew 5:14-16)

We need to be careful to examine the meanings and origins of idiomatic phrases of our common parlance, like "Devil's advocate," and not just repeat them without knowledge. Our Savior warns us "that for every idle word men may speak, they will give account of it in the day of judgment" (Matthew 12:36). As we have seen, we may be playing into Satan's hand. He is a formidable enemy whom we must never ignore nor underestimate. We must be spiritually sober and vigilant in resisting him because he is the last being for whom we should ever want to advocate.

Instead, we must follow Christ's encouraging instruction by letting our light shine before others so that, as His ambassadors, we will be God's advocates!