

Ye are the Salt of the Earth - Keeping the Church Separate from the World

By J Gresham Machen
Church Issues | *The Sword & Trowel*
March 2014

‘Ye are the salt of the earth: but if the salt have lost his savour, wherewith shall it be salted? it is thenceforth good for nothing, but to be cast out, and to be trodden under foot of men’
(*Matthew 5.13*).

IN THESE WORDS our Lord established at the very beginning the distinctness and separateness of the church. If the sharp distinction is ever broken down between the church and the world, then the power of the church is gone. The church then becomes like salt that has lost its savour, and is fit only to be cast out and to be trodden under foot of men.

This is a great principle, and there never has been a time in all the centuries of Christian history when it has not had to be taken to heart. The really serious attack upon Christianity has not been the attack carried on by fire and sword, or by the threat of bonds or death. It has been the more subtle attack that has been masked by friendly words; not the attack from without but the attack from within.

The enemy has done his deadliest work when he has come with words of love and compromise and peace. And how persistent the attack has been! Never in the centuries of the church’s life has it been altogether relaxed; always there has been the deadly chemical process by which, if it had been unchecked, the precious salt would have been merged with the insipidity of the world.

The process began at the very beginning, in the days when our Lord still walked the Galilean hills. There were many in those days who heard him gladly. He enjoyed at first the favour of the people. But in that favour he saw a deadly peril. He would have nothing of a half-discipleship that meant the merging of the company of his disciples with the world.

How ruthlessly he checked mere sentimental enthusiasm! ‘Let the dead bury their dead,’ he told the enthusiast who came eagerly to him, but was not willing to immediately forsake all.

‘One thing thou lackest’, he said to the rich young ruler, and the young man went sorrowful away. Truly Jesus did not make it easy to be a follower of him. ‘He that is not with me,’ he said, ‘is against me...If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children...he cannot be my disciple.’

How serious a thing it was in those days to stand for Christ. And it was a serious matter not only in the sphere of *conduct* but also in the sphere of *thought*. There could be no greater mistake than to suppose that a man in those days could think as he liked and still be a follower of Jesus.

On the contrary, the offence lay just as much in the sphere of doctrine as in the sphere of life. There were ‘hard sayings’, then as now, which had to be accepted by the disciples of Jesus.

Jesus did not make matters easy for murmurers. He said to them, ‘Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink his blood, ye have no life in you.’ At that many even of his disciples were offended. ‘This is an hard saying,’ they said, ‘who can hear it?’

‘From that time many of his disciples went back, and walked no more with him. Then said Jesus unto the twelve, Will ye also go away? Then Simon Peter answered him, Lord, to whom shall we go? thou hast the words of eternal life.’ Thus was the precious salt preserved.

Death and new life

Then came the gathering clouds, and finally the cross. In the hour of his agony they all left him and fled; apparently the movement that he had initiated was hopelessly dead. But such was not the will

of God. The disciples were sifted, but there was still something left. Peter was forgiven; the disciples saw the risen Lord; the salt was still preserved.

One hundred and twenty persons were gathered in Jerusalem. It was not a large company. But salt, if it truly possesses savour, can permeate the whole lump. The Spirit came in accordance with our Lord's promise, and Peter preached the first sermon in the Christian church.

It was hardly a sermon which made concessions! Said Peter — 'Him, being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain.' How unkind Peter was! But by that merciful unkindness they were pricked in their hearts, and three thousand souls were saved.

So there stood the first Christian church in the midst of a hostile world. That little company was as separate as if it had been shut off by desert wastes or the wide reaches of the sea.

An invisible barrier, to be crossed only by the wonder of the new birth, separated the disciples of Jesus from the surrounding world. We are told that none of the rest of the people dared to associate with them.

So it will always be. When the disciples of Jesus are really faithful to their Lord, they inspire fear and awe. But it is not so when there is compromise in the Christian camp.

But after early persecutions, there came in the early church a time of peace — deadly, menacing, deceptive peace; a peace more dangerous by far than the bitterest persecution.

Many of the sect of the Pharisees came into the church — false 'brethren' secretly brought in. They were not true Christians, because they trusted in their own works for salvation, and no man can be a Christian who does that.

Yet they were Christians in name, and they tried to dominate. It was a serious menace, and for a moment it looked as though even Peter, true apostle though he was at heart, would be deceived.

His principles were right, but by his actions at Antioch those principles were for one fatal moment belied.

However, it was not God's will that his church should perish, and so the 'man of the hour' was placed there.

There was at that time one man who would not consider personal consequences where a great principle was at stake; who put all personal considerations resolutely aside. This man refused to become unfaithful to Christ through any fear of 'splitting the church'.

'When I saw that they walked not uprightly,' said Paul, 'according to the truth of the gospel, I said unto Peter before them all...' Thus was the precious salt preserved.

But from another side also the church was menaced by the enticements and flatteries of the world. It was threatened not only by a false Judaism, which really meant the substitution of man's self-righteousness for the grace of God, but also by the all-embracing paganism of that day.

Unlikely converts

Once the Pauline churches were planted in the cities of the Graeco-Roman world the battle had only begun. Would the little spark of new life be kept alive? Certainly it seemed unlikely in the extreme.

The converts were for the most part not those of independent means and mind, but slaves and humble tradesmen. They were bound by a thousand ties to the paganism of their day. How could they possibly avoid being drawn away by the current of the world?

The danger certainly was great; and when Paul left an infant church, like that at Thessalonica, his heart was full of dread. But God was faithful to his promise, and the first word that came from that infant church was good.

The wonder had actually been accomplished. The converts stood firm. They were in the world but not of the world. Their distinctness was kept. In the midst of pagan impurity they were living true Christian lives.

The same conflict is observed in more detail in the case of Corinth. What a city Corinth was, and how unlikely a place for a Christian church! The address of Paul's epistle is, as Bengel says, a mighty paradox: 'Unto the church of God which is at Corinth'.

In *1 Corinthians* we have attested in all its fulness the attempt of paganism, not to combat the church by a frontal attack, but to conquer it by the far deadlier method, in merging it gradually and peacefully with the life of the world.

Those Corinthian Christians were connected by many ties with the pagan life of their great city. What should they do about their membership of essential 'trade' clubs and societies? What should they do about invitations to dinners where meat that had been offered to idols was set before the guests? What should they do about marriage and the like? These were practical questions, but they involved the great principle of the distinctness and exclusiveness of the church. Certainly the danger was very great; the converts were in great danger of sinking back into the corrupt life of the world.

Undermining doctrine

But the conflict was not only in the sphere of *conduct*. More fundamentally it was in the sphere of thought. Paganism in Corinth was far too astute to think that Christian life could be attacked when Christian doctrine remained.

And so pagan practice was promoted by an appeal to pagan theory. The enemy engaged in an attempt to sublimate or explain away the fundamental things of the Christian faith.

Paganism in the Corinthian church sought to substitute the Greek notion of the immortality of the soul for the Christian doctrine of the resurrection. But God had his witness. The apostle Paul was not deceived; and in a great passage — the most important words, perhaps, that have ever been penned — he reviewed the sheer factual basis of the Christian faith.

Paul recorded — 'How that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; and that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the scriptures.' There is the foundation of the Christian edifice.

Paganism was gnawing away at that foundation in Corinth, as it has been doing in one way or another ever since, and particularly in the United States of America just at the present time.

But Paul was there, and many of the five hundred witnesses were still alive. So, the Gospel message was kept distinct from the wisdom of the world, and the precious salt was still preserved.

Then, in the second century, there came another deadly conflict. It was again a conflict not with an enemy without, but with an enemy within. The Gnostics used the name of Christ. They tried to dominate the church, and they even appealed to the epistles of Paul. But despite their use of Christian language they were pagan through and through.

The church was saved — not by those who cried, 'Peace, peace; when there is no peace', but by zealous contenders for the faith. Again, out of a great danger, the precious salt was preserved.

Then came the Middle Ages. How long, and how dark, in some respects, was that time! It is hard to realise that eleven centuries elapsed between Augustine and Luther, yet such was the case.

Never in the interval was God altogether without his witnesses. The light still shone from the sacred page; but how dim, in that atmosphere, the light seemed to be! The Gospel might have seemed to be buried for ever.

Yet in God's good time it came forth again with new power — the same Gospel that Augustine and Paul had proclaimed.

A Gospel that survived the Middle Ages will probably, it may well be hoped, never again perish from the earth, but will be the word of life unto the end of the world.

Yet in those early years of the sixteenth century how dark was the time! When Luther made his visit to Rome, what did he find — what did he find there in the centre of the Christian world? He found paganism blatant and triumphant and unashamed.

He found the glories of ancient Greece come to life in the Italian Renaissance, but with those glories

was self-sufficiency and rebellion against God, and all the moral degradation of the natural man. Apparently the church had at last become quite indistinguishable from the world.

But in the midst of this scene of dereliction one thing at least was preserved. Many things were lost, but one thing was still left the medieval church had never lost the Word of God.

The Bible had indeed become a book with seven seals. It had been buried under a mass of misinterpretation never equalled perhaps until the absurdities indulged in by the modernism of the present day. This hideous mass of misinterpretation effectively hid it from people's eyes. But at last an Augustinian monk penetrated beneath the mass of error, read the Scriptures with enlightened eyes, and the Reformation was born. Thus again was the precious salt preserved.

Then came Calvin with that great, consistent system which he founded upon the Word of God. How glorious were even the by-products of that system of revealed Truth; a great stream of liberty spread from Geneva throughout Europe and to America across the sea.

Victory of Truth

But if the by-products were glorious, more glorious by far was the Truth itself, and the life that it caused men to live. How sweet and beautiful a thing was the life of the Protestant Christian home, where the Bible was the sole guide and stay!

Still the conflict of the ages went on as paganism prepared for an assault greater and more insidious than any that had gone before. At first there was a frontal attack — Voltaire and Rousseau and the goddess Reason and the terrors of the French Revolution and all that.

Spirit of the world

As will always be the case, such an attack was bound to fail. But the enemy has now changed his method and the attack is coming, not from without but, in far more dangerous fashion, from within. During the past one hundred years the Protestant churches of the world have gradually been permeated by paganism in its most insidious form.

Gradually the church is being permeated by the spirit of the world. It is becoming an 'inclusive' church. It is becoming salt that has lost its savour and is henceforth good for nothing but to be cast out and to be trodden under foot of men.

At such a time, what should be done by those who love Christ? I think that they should at least face the facts. I do not believe that they should bury their heads like ostriches in the sand; I do not think that they should soothe themselves with the reports and the imposing figures which Christian periodicals contain.

Truly we have wandered far from the day when entrance into the church involved confession of faith in Christ as the Saviour from sin.

But what shall we do? I think, my friends, cost what it may, we ought at least to face the facts.

It will be hard. It will even seem improper to timid souls. Many will be hurt. But in God's name let us get rid of shams and have reality. Let us face the spiritual facts; let us get back to a standard of gold.

Only when we come to God in prayer and spread the real facts before him — as Hezekiah spread before him the letter of the enemy — will things begin to happen which will cheer our hearts.

God has not left himself altogether without his witnesses. Humble they may often be, and despised by the wisdom of the world; but they have favour with God.

What are you going to do in this great time of crisis? What a time it is to be sure! Will you stand with the world? Will you shrink from controversy? Will you witness for Christ only where witnessing costs nothing?

Will you hope, and pray, not for a mere continuance of what now is, but for a rediscovery of the Gospel that can make all things new?

God grant that some of you may do that! God grant that some of you, even though you be not now decided, may come to say, as you go forth into the world: 'It is hard in these days to be a Christian; the adversaries are strong; I am weak; but thy Word is true and thy Spirit will be with me; here am I, Lord, send me.'