

A Danger to be Avoided

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The formation of the church of God is recorded in Acts 2. The power that marked its earliest days though it was from the outset in the place of rejection by the world, is recorded in Acts 3 and Acts 4. Then in Acts 5 we have recorded the first evil that was manifested in the midst of it. This was the sin of **pretentiousness**; of posing as though a higher standard of spirituality and devotedness were possessed than really existed.

Many were selling their possessions and devoting the proceeds to the Lord. Ananias and Sapphira sold theirs, and presented a part of the proceeds as though it were the whole. Ananias **acted** the lie. Sapphira **told** it. They desired to acquire a reputation of being more heavenly-minded than they were. Pretension to higher spiritual condition was the **first** recorded sin then, in the church's history. It will also be the last, as we shall see.

This sin of pretension began with individuals, and it is a danger which threatens every Christian as an individual; this is made very plain in the Epistles. We quote a few passages in support of this assertion.

"For I say . . . to every man that is among you, not to **think of himself more highly** than he ought to think" (Rom. 12: 3).

"If any man **think that he knoweth anything**, he knoweth nothing yet as he ought to know" (1 Cor. 8: 2).

"Let him that **thinketh he standeth** take heed lest he fall" (1 Cor. 10: 12).

"If any man **think himself to be a prophet, or spiritual . . .**" (1 Cor. 14: 37).

"If a man **think himself to be something**, when he is nothing, he deceiveth himself" (Gal. 6: 3).

Those were the days when indeed there were men who knew the things of God, if anyone ever did. There **were** those who stood, who were prophets and spiritual, and therefore **were** something in the Divine way of reckoning, but these were just the ones who were happily occupied with Christ and His service, and not **thinking of** themselves. Those who were doing the **thinking**, and making **claims** for themselves, based on that thinking, were largely pretenders. This the Apostle's language indicates. In two instances, above cited, he plainly says, "he knoweth nothing," "he is nothing;" in the others he plainly infers that the pretenders were by no means all they thought themselves to be.

But the most striking exemplification of the point we are considering is found in the addresses of the Lord to the seven churches of Asia, recorded in Revelation 2 and 3. In six out of the seven this sin of pretension is alluded to.

To Ephesus He speaks of "**them which say they are apostles**, and are not." He characterizes them as "liars."

To Smyrna: "**them which say they are Jews**, and are not, but are the synagogue of Satan."

To Thyatira: "that woman, Jezebel, which **calleth herself a prophetess**, to teach and to seduce . . ."

To Sardis: "thou hast **a name that thou livest**, and art dead."

To Philadelphia: "the synagogue of Satan, **which say they are Jews** and not, but do lie."

To Laodicea: "**thou sayest I am rich and increased with goods, and have need of nothing;** and knowest not that thou art wretched and miserable, and poor, and blind and naked."

In these scriptures notice several things.

First of all, the claimants here are companies rather than individuals. It is "**them,**" which say. **Jezebel** is a typical woman, representing more than an individual. To Sardis and Laodicea it is "thou," but this is said to the "angel," who represents the church! so that it indicates virtually the whole church, with the exception of a small remnant.

Then it is "**say**" here, and not merely "think." The evil has intensified since the day of Paul's epistles. An hour had arrived when these pretensions were not only in people's minds, but said boldly out in the ears of all.

Further, viewing these addresses to the churches as prophetic, it appears that the evil deepens as the history proceeds.

Ephesus was troubled with a little band of men who claimed apostleship. This was a claim likely to deceive in the days when most of the genuine apostles had been removed by martyrdom, and the canon of Scripture was hardly complete. The same dangerous claim has however been raised in our day on behalf of men, who are deemed to be "spiritual," and whose utterances in properly convened meetings are therefore to be accepted as almost, if not entirely, as authoritative as Scripture.

In the age of Smyrna there was trouble and bitter opposition from a certain clique, who claimed a place analogous to that of the Jew. They were truly a "synagogue," but it was of Satan. They were religionists and ritualists without reality.

There is a distant lowering with Thyatira. Jezebel called herself a prophetess, and she indicates, we believe, the Romish hierarchy, who claim the exclusive right of interpreting the Scriptures, and thus of voicing the mind of God. Jezebel is **suffered**. The pretender here is thoroughly inside the church and is in power.

Out of this state of things Sardis springs. Protestantism — using the word in the largest sense — has a far more respectable exterior and has established for itself a certain reputation, or "name." Yet it is pronounced to be dead. This God-given movement soon got linked up with worldly powers and politics, so that its very life was drained away in wars as well as internal contentions. It is no longer the pretensions of a clique, but the whole church is indicted, though a few things remain not yet dead.

In Philadelphia we get a little glimpse of the brightness and reality which marked the church at the beginning. Once again pretension is confined to a clique outside its pale rather than inside. The religionists, who love to claim a place on **earth**, again appear.

In Laodicea we reach the sad climax. The whole church is infected, as in the case of Sardis, but there it was only a claim to live whereas here the church actually claims to be a paragon of perfection! The claim ends, "I have need of nothing." Could pretension go further? And could the Lord's condemnation be more severe?

Notice one thing more. **In every case** the Lord, who scrutinizes the churches with eyes as a flame of fire, disallows the claims, and that in most incisive language. In not one case is there the smallest foundation in fact for that to which they lay claim. The very reverse. "Liars;" "Synagogue of Satan;" "Dead;" "Wretched, miserable poor, blind, naked;" are some of the terms He uses.

Now all this has a very distinct voice to us. We live in an age which more and more is taking on the character of Laodicea. And more than this, alas! Many of us, who have aimed at walking in the truth, and having our church life in accordance with the order laid down in Paul's epistles, are conscious how this spirit of pretension has been displayed in such circles, and of how we ourselves may have become infected by it.

Looking back over the years, we have heard claims to be "the spiritual," or, "a new lump," or, "Gideon's three hundred." Or, to possess "the new light," or "the needed truth," or to be "bearing the ark of the testimony" or "standing for God."

It is a fact, thanks be to God, that there are today spiritually-minded saints, who in their measure are standing for God, bearing His testimony and ministering needed truth. He knows them all, and their secret approbation is with Him, as is also their public recognition in the coming day, as Revelation 3: 9 shows. But let us beware of trying to label them, lest we fall into the folly of labelling ourselves thus. Never let us forget that **to claim** to be, or to have, these things is **certain proof** that we are or have **nothing of the kind**.

What then is becoming in the Laodicean age? Just that which is indicated in these verses (14-22). First, to recognize the Lord as He presents Himself to us here. He is the "Amen;" the One in whom is found the completion and perfect response to all the purposes of God. He is "the faithful and true Witness," who stands forth as the complete and full representation of all that God is, when the church in its witness has failed. He is "the beginning of the creation of God," for in Him, risen from the dead, God has made a new start. He, and not the church, is the foundation of all. Thus all human pretension is demolished.

Second, be it ours to accept the chastening, spoken of in verse 19, and with zeal in our hearts — the opposite of lukewarmness — to repent. Now repentance works such a salvation from the things repented of as is permanent and abiding, as 2 Corinthians 7: 10 indicates.

Third, as we hear Him knocking at the door of our hearts, to swing that door open, that He may enter. Then will be established communion of the sweetest and most heavenly sort. He will condescend to our table that He may know our things, and lift us to His table that we may enter into and enjoy His things.

If in any measure this experience is ours we shall not only find "the things of earth" growing "strangely dim," but our own selves, in our natural self-importance, will disappear, "in the light of His glory and grace."

It is evidently possible to enjoy such communion with our risen Lord even in the last days of the church's history. In the measure in which we do so we shall be marked by the repentant spirit and the avoidance of that self-occupation which leads to pretentious claims.