

The Spirit of Religion or the Spirit of Truth?

The Devil's Counter-Offensive

Neil Girard

Spoiler alert: This subject is incredibly difficult to get into one article yet it is one of the most important topics a believer needs to consider. I'd apologize for the length but when you're dealing with an enemy who wants to kill you with a thousand tiny cuts without you ever once realizing you're being pricked to death, it takes quite a bit of explaining to get some people to see how the "magic" is done. Put another way, when you're used to interpreting reality through a certain mindset, having someone tell you that the mindset itself is the deception that is distorting your reality can be a difficult concept for some people to fully grasp.

At any rate, here goes.

How can you address a complex issue with simplicity?

Let's begin by retelling, a little differently, a story we are all at least somewhat familiar with.

The con artist had set up his victims and successfully convinced his prey to cooperate fully. Their compliance sealed their doom – or so the conniver thought because the King could never receive or condone such disobedience. Indeed, the King had promised death for those who disobeyed. But then the King stepped into the scene and said that a Descendent of the victims would crush the conniver's head. What?!? What about that death sentence? So the conniver plotted and planned and strategized and deceived and succeeded in killing that Descendent only to discover that the killing was actually the mechanism for his own defeat – when the Descendent came back to life, the con artist saw that he had indeed only succeeded in bruising His heel and now could only wait for his own head to be crushed. In desperation he plotted and planned and strategized and deceived and concocted a grand strategy that would surely defeat the plans of the King and the Descendent to crush his head. What was that plan?

As is true of all confidence schemes, especially intricate and complicated ones, truth must be intermingled with deception in order to steer the victim onto the desired course that ends in their loss and ultimate destruction. This particular scheme must have all that and in great abundance. It must touch upon the deepest aspects of human nature, take into account and even somehow thwart the Divine strategy while simultaneously displaying and somehow bringing into reality the antagonist's countering strategy that shows he is like the King. This con artist is not stupid. In spite of his having been thwarted in the first encounter with the King and in the second with the Descendent, he is still genius. Perhaps his insanity will not permit him to recognize the futility of his rebellion or perhaps his ego will not allow him to realize that his grand strategy must ultimately fail. Perhaps he believes that if he gets enough of those humans the King seems to love to attach themselves to him the King will change His mind about that eternal fire? Who knows? But for whatever reason, this mad genius is driven by the need to take as many victims as he can down with him in his fall and in this aspect of his endeavor, he is quite capable and effective – even as it remains true that all who truly trust in God and His Son Jesus Christ can never be snatched out of God's hand. (Jn. 10:28-29)

There are surely those who will use “theology” to protest and say that God’s children can never be taken down by Satan because of God’s foreknowledge and the eternal secure election of His saints. If we dig deeper into that “theology” though, we’ll see that while God’s children cannot be stolen and the prison gates of hell cannot prevail over someone who is truly God’s ekklesia (that is, keep genuinely transformed souls imprisoned in death and darkness), those children can harden their hearts, indulge in fleshly liberty, quench and even war against the work of the Spirit, disobey, rebel, practice lawlessness (what is right in their own eyes), fail to remain on the road that leads to eternal life, fall from grace and have God blot out their name from His Book of Life. No, Satan cannot steal a soul – he has to con that soul into voluntarily abandoning the redemption God gives in Christ Jesus. And such things are precisely what Satan’s counter-offensive is expert at teaching people how to do – as can be seen by the simple fact that many will arrive before Christ on judgment day and refer to all the things they did in His name, thinking they were following Him. (Mt. 7:21-23)

As a comparison of confidence schemes, at the time of this writing there is currently a great effort by a number of people trying to audit and expose the crimes that occurred during the 2020 American election. Because of the massive scale of fraud committed by so many parties in so many different ways, to even begin to discuss this subject requires election experts, computer programming experts, statistical analysis experts, legal experts, etc. and one must overcome the political and emotional biases of all the involved parties, not the least of which are the crooked politicians, bureaucrats and operatives who have benefited to some degree from the fraud and thus have at least some level of guilt and complicity to conceal. It has proven virtually impossible to expose and prove exactly what happened, let alone to present enough evidence to be able to take it to a court of law or legislative body and explain it all in such a way that action can be taken.

So too the devil’s counter-offensive – multiplied exponentially because of how deep the subject of salvation and eternal life, the truths as well as the deceptions, go into the human heart. But just as it is virtually impossible to discuss or write about the 2020 election fraud without going on for hours or into hundreds of pages, so too it is virtually impossible to cover every major aspect of the devil’s counter-offensive in a short span of time or pages. This too is part of the scheme – most humans will not devote the time and energy required to find out the truth of this matter and instead will blindly and unquestioningly and, for some, completely thoughtlessly, trust some other person’s writings, teachings or even practice on the matter.

Jesus said that the devil “does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own resources, for he is a liar and the father of it.” (Jn. 8:44) When we begin to look at this counter-offensive, we must realize that it consists of lies. Lies consist of words – words subtly and cleverly distorted and corrupted away from their original meaning and intent. We must avoid getting caught up in semantics, the playing with words, even as we must delve into the true meaning and intent of words, especially words from God – we must be certain that God really did *say and intend* what we now believe to be truth! – so that we might grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

“When the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son...” (Gal. 4:4) When the Son of God defeated Satan at the cross, the battlefield had been well prepared by God. But even against

all that God had done, the devil did not just lay down to wait for the inevitable. Satan watched as the Good News was fueled along by the outpoured Spirit of God upon all flesh (Acts 2:16-17) and spread across the known world along Roman roads and across Roman-dominated seas because Pax Romana (the Roman peace) had removed the bandits and pirates. He saw how the Gospel was communicated in koine Greek, perhaps the most sublime of all human languages, and was received in hearts that already sought the Creator God (the “God-fearers”, Gentiles wanting to know Him more intimately and deeply – Acts 17:4, 12, etc.) And he saw this resulted in a growing number of groups of people who, through faith in God, became descendants of God, just like the Firstborn Descendant, and who called themselves ekklesia, the assembly of the Firstborn. (Heb. 12:23) Satan took full stock of all of God’s preparations and formulated his schemes.

Can we cut to the “bottom line”?

To cut to the bottom line, we can look at the results of Satan’s schemes. That is, there are enough records to see the overall pattern that occurred in the 1st and 2nd centuries that show that, and to a large degree, how the people of that time departed from their first love. (Rev. 2:4) The result of Satan’s strategic deception was that men replaced their personal, interactive relationship with God for a way of religion and they traded the Lordship of Christ over their lives for the rule of a man or men. By the 3rd century, this was largely a done deal though there would be ebbs and flows and mixtures of all of these in various measures across the centuries because Christ had promised that the imprisoning gates of death and darkness would not prevail over His ekklesia. (Mt. 16:18)

What was the devil’s counter-offensive that, if successful, would overcome and thwart all of these aspects that God had put into place? He concocted a scheme that would take the tares of the world (the devil’s own children – Mt. 13:38), put them in close proximity to and even in places of authority over and influence upon the sons of the kingdom, that would divert many from their eternal destiny in Christ and God and that would ultimately bring about what Paul referred to as the “apostasy” or “falling away.” “Let no one deceive you by any means; for that Day [of Christ] will not come unless the falling away comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of perdition.” (2 Ths. 2:3) Though Jesus has promised salvation to those who endure (Mt. 24:13) and has promised those who are truly His ekklesia (Greek word usually mistranslated as “church”) that the prison gates of hell will not prevail against those who are truly His (Mt. 16:18), we must recognize – with equal certainty – that the falling away will happen to those who, in reality, only practice lawlessness in the name of Christ and God. (Mt. 7:23) This is the deadly nature of Satan’s counter-offensive against the people of Christ.

Before we can begin to dissect the devil’s counter-offensive schemes, we need to consider some of the deeper roots that make understanding and resolution of misunderstandings more difficult. What is your standard for your beliefs?

- What you were told the Bible says.
- What you want the Bible to say or the parts of the Bible that you like.
- What you believe the Bible says.

- What the Bible really says when rightly divided and well balanced, rested perfectly within the whole counsel of God through the aid of the Spirit of truth.

Which of these standards do you really rely upon? Write down, circle or highlight your honest answer, assuming you can give yourself an honest answer to this question, before continuing.

Let us take care as we press on, however. Even if we label one major aspect of Satan’s counter-offensive as “the primary scheme,” we must resist the intellectual tendency to oversimplify. The grand strategy of the devil to accomplish all this simply cannot be readily condensed to one “bottom line” but rather should be viewed as a “death by a thousand cuts” kind of strategy. There are at least a dozen or more various major deceptions that overlay and interact with one another supported by countless lies that contradict every truth that God has put forth – and each aspect is integrated to work in tandem with the other aspects. All this detail and intricacy presents a bewildering array of opportunities to depart from one’s first love for Christ. (Rev. 2:4) Paul warned us of the “schemes, wiles, strategies, deceits,” plural, of the devil (Eph. 6:11) and this counter-offensive is extremely effective in its attempt to reach its goals.

All this can be easily demonstrated to be true by baldly stating the primary scheme. But be warned – as soon as it is read, something will rise up in you, the reader, to instantly dismiss the statement. I encourage you to be prepared to write down your objections that immediately arise in your mind as you read this next statement.

Here is the closest thing to a “bottom line” description of the devil’s strategy:

“Church” is a prostitute who replaces the role of the ekklesia as the bride of Christ.

Please stop reading and write down as many objections as you may have to this statement. Please consider – and write down – as many as you can of 1) your own beliefs about “church,” especially how it should be practiced and 2) the source of those beliefs. Then return to this article. And if your objections or beliefs have not been addressed, please send me an email at the link at the bottom and I will do my best to answer them individually.

It is not at all surprising that almost all readers of this article, especially those who still attend a “church,” unknowingly entangled in ancient deceptions, will have one or even several objections as most people come to this discussion table with many preconceived notions about “church,” either consciously or subconsciously, and the rightness or wrongness of how it is and has been practiced in their own experience. Having the truth laid out so baldly, after years of being exposed to the con artist’s clever ego- and pleasure-stroking deceptions, will jar badly with many, even those who know there is something wrong with the “churches” they have experienced. I get that. But we must press on.

Now, please consider each of the beliefs you have written down. Paul wrote, “Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.” (2 Tim. 2:15) Does each of your beliefs truly constitute a “rightly divided word of truth”? How would you know if it is or is not a “rightly divided word of truth”?

Further, who taught you what you believe to be the truth? Jesus said that the Spirit of truth would lead us into all truth. (Jn. 16:13) The “pastor,” no matter how well intentioned he may (or may not!) be, is not a sufficient source for the truth that leads to our living holy and godly lives before God. Man must live by the words that come from the mouth of God, not the mouths of men. (Mt. 4:4)

I plead with you to enter into some holy imagination with me. Just suppose that at least one of the beliefs you have about “church,” something you sincerely believe to be truth, turns out, in actuality, not to be a truth but is, in reality, a clever deception. Is it even possible that something of what you believe might be an error? Can you even admit to that as a real possibility? If not, what would it take for God to convince you that you are in error? If you are not willing to be led out of any and all erroneous thoughts you might have, how can you expect to be led into all truth? And please know I do not ask you to submit to my words or teachings but rather I demand that you, as best you know how and with fear and trembling, seek only and surrender only to the Holy Spirit of truth that is the Spirit of God and Christ Jesus. But know also that if you are a victim of one or more of Satan’s deceptions, you have been trained, commensurate with your number of years within a “church” system, to listen with the ears of the spirit of religion and to define your terms according to some deception. The truth, because it differs from what you are comfortable with and even though spoken by the Spirit of truth to your spirit, the truth will at first be difficult to hear and receive.

Some Last Asides

Let’s take in two more short insights as it truly is the underlying reason behind and beneath Satan’s counter-offensive. First, Paul told us that Satan, as the prince of the power of the air, was a spirit who works in those who are disobedient to God. (Eph. 2:2) Adam’s act of disobedience in the garden reveals to us the name of this spirit. One moment Adam and Eve walked through the garden naked and unashamed. After their act of disobedience, they both were ashamed and hid themselves from God. (Gen. 2:25, 3:7-8) The spirit of shame had come to rest upon them.

What is the most common human reaction when we realize that we have committed a wrong? Sewing fig leaves to cover the area involved in our wrongdoing. What do most people do to convince themselves and others that they are, after all, good people? Practice some religion. To seek “God” in some form or fashion (even without actually finding Him) surely must be the remedy for the shame that is upon us. Unfortunately, this deep-seated reaction is precisely the hinge pin of Satan’s counter-offensive against the people who trust Christ Jesus for their redemption. Those who doubt this is the hinge pin may want to consider that it was Cain’s religious attempt to bring the fruit of his own efforts and his demand that God receive them that was the impetus of the first murder. Let us also recognize that the spirit of religion can only cause a person to practice what is right in one’s own eyes (lawlessness, the fruit of the forbidden tree) and this stands in direct contradiction to the Spirit of truth who leads us ever deeper into what is right in God’s eyes. Man’s lawlessness still has nothing in common with God’s righteousness. (2 Cor. 6:14)

A second consideration that might make this “bottom line” description of the devil’s strategy more understandable is if we were to name the prostitute “religion” and the bride “relationship.” There is much truth in this oversimplification but the danger is that we will say, “Ah, I know what religion is – I’m not religious in my ‘church’ habits and beliefs.” when in reality we were trained to be religious at “church” but do not see it as religion, that is, some work or activity of the flesh that attempts to reach God outside of His proscribed path that leads toward eternal life. So, to the extent these designations help a reader understand that Satan’s overall scheme is to get us to practice religion when God desires relationship, then let us continue on with that understanding while resisting the tendency to presume that our own actions are in no way whatsoever religious.

What does exploration reveal?

Please continue to consider these things as we continue to explore Satan’s extremely complicated and intricate con game that he has constructed to ensnare people away from following Christ and God. Let us also recognize that the “church” deceptions have been cleverly and incrementally installed and even programmed into our “Christian” practice over the course of centuries, even millennia, and this renders most people who follow Christ today almost entirely unable to separate the truth from the error of this grand strategy, let alone able to enter into the liberty that Christ has for those who truly follow after Him. All is designed to get us to hear and follow the spirit of religion even as we turn our ears away from the Spirit of truth.

This inability (or refusal in some) to re-examine our beliefs is a hidden factor in the effectiveness of the counter-offensive schemes of Satan. That is, if we hold a misbelief as a truth and continue to practice that misbelief, it is not enough to merely change some outward, superficial practice. As Mark Twain observed and as the devil most certainly knows, “It’s easier to fool people than to convince them that they have been fooled.” Rather, we must let God do a deep work in our beliefs so that we may enter into a new practice with a pure heart. As we delve into specific deceptions, this should become clearer as to how this must be so.

With all the above held in view (or at least acknowledged), let us begin to break down the complexities of this statement that “church” is a prostitute who replaces the role of the ekklesia as the bride of Christ.

I have found it best to establish one standard rule of communication to begin to grapple with this issue. The Greek word “ekklesia” was the original word used by the New Testament authors and it is their original intent that we wish to discover. Thus, “ekklesia” will be used throughout this article and hopefully all our future discussions to represent the true, the original, whatever it was that the Holy Spirit of God had in mind when He inspired the New Testament writers to use that word.

“Church,” is an English word that was never spoken by Jesus during His time on earth because English wasn’t even a language at the time and because it was not the focus, by any stretch of imagination, of His teachings. Much wisdom is found in the observation that “Jesus came proclaiming the Kingdom, and what arrived was the Church.” (Alfred Loisy) “Church” is a word that was inserted into the 1611 text by royal decree of King James himself over the

objections of some of the interpreters of the New Testament. Thus “church,” at least in this article, will be used to refer to the false, the deceptive, the added on meanings and ideas that simply were not part of the original concept of ekklesia.

If we stick to this linguistic standard, we at least have a vocabulary by which we can begin to differentiate between what is original and what is added, what is truth and what is deception and we will avoid all the confusion that attends oversimplifying the discussion with “good church” vs. “bad church.”

With this understanding, let us peel back a layer of this onion. And please bear with me, there are many, many layers. As we begin, let us ask the question “Why?” That is, what does “church” do for the human being that causes him or her to drift away from the truth and reality of being a real member of Christ’s body and bride? The “simple” truth is that “church” provides a religious experience that quenches and drowns out the work of the Spirit of truth. God still meets people in “churches” because He stands at the door and knocks and goes in to dine with whoever opens the door to Him (Rev. 3:20) – thus there is the perceived need to “go to church” to be “fed.” But this dining together is not the same as taking up one’s cross and following after Him (Lk. 9:23) nor is it the same as standing on Mt. Zion with the Lamb and following Him wherever He leads. (Rev. 14:1-4, Heb. 12:22-24)

Many people are confused at this time and don’t even know what it means to truly be a member of Christ’s body and bride. Having gone to “church” and gone forward at an “altar call” to repeat a “sinner’s prayer” (none of which is found anywhere in the New Testament) leaves them with the idea that they have become a “Christian” and have received an unconditional guarantee of experiencing eternal life when they die. Because of the greatness of God, this religious ritual can be (or at least can lead into) a spiritual reality for some, however, usually only a tiny few of all those who perform the ritual go on to exhibit real fruit for God. That is, though the ritual formula above is not found anywhere in the Scriptures, if the person who repeats this “sinner’s prayer” is truly repentant and has real faith in their heart, this can be or at least can become a genuine spiritual conversion experience. For many, however, sadly it is not and yet the person continues on in routine “church” attendance, quite (or at least mostly) content that this attendance (and perhaps some financial contributions) is the requisite dues one must pay to attain this eternal life that is promised from the “pulpit” (which also has no place in the Scriptures). This is perhaps the most blatantly obvious way in which the “church” performs as a prostitute and steals the role of bride from the people.

“My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge.” (Hos. 4:6) Nowhere is this more true than in coming to grips with the deceptions involved in deceiving the ekklesia into becoming “church.”

Can we get into some specifics?

As was touched upon at the beginning of this article, Satan deceived mankind away from the path of obedience to God. What humanity would be like if it never fell we may never know. What was the fall? God had said, “In the day that you eat of [the tree of the knowledge of good and evil] you shall surely die.” (Gen. 2:17)

In many “out of church” or “done with church” circles, it is commonplace to call the “church” “Babylon.” This is not unfounded but neither is it entirely accurate. That is, Babylon has aspects that far transcend, spiritually, historically and prophetically, modern churchianity. Thus it is more precise to think of modern “church” as a subset, a fruit or the modern expression of the satanic spirit of Babylon rather than that the “church” is the whole of what Babylon represents. The clearest indication that an assembly is under Babylonian captivity is the presence of pulpits and pews (even if the pews have been replaced by modern chairs). The pulpit places one man (or woman) higher than the people and places the people seated passively at the feet of that one exalted person.

To the ekklesias of Ephesus and Pergamos, Jesus spoke of the Nicolaitans. (Rev. 2:6, 15) No one has completely and conclusively identified just who this group is (of course, some “theologians” and Bible “scholars” are certain they know even though not everyone agrees with them). Not all agree with taking a simple, literal interpretation of the word but that does seem to be the best approach – indeed even some Nicolaitan “pastors” have taught this truth! “Nico” is “to conquer or rule over” and “laitan” is “the people.” It speaks of those who believe they have been delegated authority from God to rule over or at least lead the congregation, taking and relishing the preeminence before the flock to do so. Unfortunately for these “delegates,” a delegate is by definition *apart from* the sender. Jesus still says, “Apart from Me you can do nothing.” (Jn. 15:5) This exercise of delegated authority is a common practice among “church” “pastors,” “prophets” and “apostles” alike, but we should at least notice that this Nicolaitanism is a sin that Jesus hates. This understanding is also very consistent with His command that lording over His people would not be acceptable among us. (Mt. 20:25-26, Mk. 10:42-43, Lk. 22:25-26)

The command to “go to church” is not found anywhere in the Scriptures. We are told to “not forsake the assembling of ourselves together” (Heb. 10:25), but “go to church” is nowhere to be found. Is there a difference? Some say there is none but this is not so.

In the context of comparing the devil’s counter-offensive to the 2020 election fraud, it has been wisely pointed out that, when the tabulating machines steal and manipulate and fractionalize the votes, what we call “voting” isn’t really voting any longer. In the same way, what we generally call “going to church” is not “assembly.” For each person (depending on where their walk with Jesus is at and because each fellowship has variations), gathering with others will be different and may have different significances but for far too many, even most Christians, “going to church” is merely attendance, the performance of a ritual so as to appease the “God” of the “church” they attend, the price one pays to get out of hell. It is to wear the cloak of the spirit of religion, a garment made of fig leaves, while seeking to be free of the spirit of shame that dwells upon us. If some sincere saint or saints attend a small enough “church” or one where a weary soldier doggedly attempts to speak the Word of God from the pulpit, it is possible that some true assembly can happen in spite of the deceptive forces at work to prevent it. But this is the exception and not the rule.

Consider anew the work of the “minister” in the pulpit. The pulpit is nowhere to be found in the Scriptures. Yet because the pulpit is so prevalent, we don’t even stop to think or question its presence, let alone its central place. What little we find about the pulpit speaks volumes. The King James version, just as it inserted “church” into the New Testament, inserted the word

“pulpit” into the story of when Ezra read the law to the people returning to Jerusalem from Babylon (Neh. 8:4) but that insertion is deceptive. The other 49 times the word is used in the Old Testament, it refers to a tower or platform, not to the lectern or podium we now call a pulpit once it is inside the “church” building. This story about Ezra provides no support to the notion of continual pulpiting. Ezra nor any other priest is ever said to use a platform or pulpit ever again. No command is given to use such a thing in the law and the closest piece of furniture one can find is the reading table used in the synagogue (that also came out of Babylon and was nowhere prescribed in the law.) The New Testament does not even mention a pulpit, inserted or otherwise.

We do find the pulpit elsewhere in history however. In the Greek temples and Roman basilicas (judgment halls), it was called the “ambo.” Once the ambo had been brought into the Christian buildings that were springing up around the empire, from behind the ambo, the bishop or someone bearing his approval stood to read the Scriptures, to announce the liturgy and to deliver sermons or homilies to the people who usually stood for the Christian “service.” It was not until the Protestant Reformation that pews were brought in so that people might sit. So, in spite of the complete absence of this piece of furniture and from the simple practice of reading the written Scriptures, the pulpit has been made the centerpiece for the Christian religion.

However, religion is not what Christ came to bring. He brings life – eternal and abundant. Religion, unless it curbs the tongue, addresses the needs of the orphans, widows and poor and keeps one unspotted from the world’s corruptions, is useless in following Christ. (Jas. 1:26-27)

Further, the pulpit (and the expert use of it) presents the subconscious notion that the speaker is more educated, more moral, more spiritual, more in touch with God than the persons sitting in the pew. This perception remains even when the reality is far different and the speaker is secretly a demonized, arrogant, womanizing, child-abusing or homosexual, abusive, flagrant sinner – a condition far from uncommon as it is always easier to concoct a sermon from the written Scriptures than it is to sit face to face with people and share deeply from one’s own personal experiences in walking the walk with Christ. Yet even where the speaker strives to be a sincere man of the Word and/or of God, the subconscious elevation of the man drowns out the applicability of the sermon to the people. Only the elevated men of God who speak in pulpits really need to know that information – only they can attain to real holiness anyway so they are the only ones who are really required to retain such superior Bible knowledge. Though nothing can be further from the truth about the needs and conditions of our souls, this subconscious programming is built into the furniture and its usage. And modern churchianity keeps the pulpit as its centerpiece making it the perfect representation of the people’s Babylonian captivity. That the pulpit is front and center and is positioned between the people and that franchise’s symbol for God is no coincidence either but few have eyes to see that for what it is.

What all this means is that the pulpit is a carnal means for a tare to attain to power placed front and center where the wheat assembles so that the tare can stand over them and, drawing them after himself, can find his own significance in how many people he so “helps.” This power is available to those who know how to scratch and soothe ears. (2 Tim. 4:3-4) It is available to those who know how to hold onto the preeminence and drive off everyone who contradicts the infallible aura and image he projects. (3 Jn. 9) It is available to those who know how to

recognize sycophants (yes men) whose glory is found in attaching themselves to the “right” “man of God” who fills the pulpit and from it sounds forth those “great swelling words of emptiness” that lures in the spiritually immature and unstable through the lusts of the flesh, through licentiousness, so as, if possible, to draw back in the ones who have actually escaped back among those who live in error. (2 Pet. 2:18)

Is there more?

Those who, entirely or partially, are simply done with “church” so as to spiritually walk with Christ and with those He puts alongside us in our spiritual journey on the narrowing road that leads to life, simply have no desire to attend “church” just to rub palms, shoulders and elbows with people who neither know us nor deeply care about us. Praise God there are exceptions to this generalization but for far too many of us all we can honestly say is that indifference to one another was all that we really shared at “church” because the agape love of the people was dead, replaced with a “fellowship” moment of shaking hands and saying “hello.” The smaller the “church” or the more one was involved in the “church’s” smaller groups or “ministries,” this was less true but indifference was still present and became all the more apparent after one left the group because no one, almost always literally no one, called to see why that one had stopped attending. This is an underlying pattern within churchianity, especially among mega-“churches.” It remains true that the “church” is only nice to you when she needs you – but in the end, she’s killing you.

The election steal of 2020 may be the crime of the century but, as has been detailed above, getting believers to forsake their heritage in the assembly of saints (in the original New Testament sense of all those called out of darkness into Christ’s light and not in the modern religious sense of “saints,” some super-holy person who did “great things” or special miracles) is a Satanic scam of no small scale and proportion, the crime of the first millennium.

The “assembly” (Greek “ekklesia” [1577]) spoken of in the 1st century was that of local believers (who had no cars or internet to easily go beyond their local region) who had been “called out” of this world’s darkness and now were equipped for the work and tasked with the responsibility to attend to the affairs, agenda, aims and business of Christ’s kingdom of light in the context of their own locale. This is why ekklesia is literally “the called out ones.”

The modern religious “church” most often gathers a “mixed multitude” of believers, non-believers, pseudo-believers and mis-believers all under one roof and has no problem with calling that entering into “the holy of holies” or “the sanctuary” in nothing less than “God’s house.” It is precisely here that we can begin to see the presence of intentional deception and why “going to church” is not the same as “assembly” because the lecture hall was pulled from the sophists, those who delivered rhetoric and eloquence and entertainment for pay. It became part of both the “church” and the university, the speakers of both venues expecting to be paid for their services. And it is this distortion, that turns many people in mere hearers of the word and not doers (Jas. 1:22), that shows, perhaps more than any other, how the way of following Christ changed between the first and the third centuries. It will always remain true that a lecture hall routinely filled with a mixed multitude is simply not a holy sanctuary for the living God.

Some people believe they need a “church home” even though there is no such thing ever mentioned in the New Testament. The early believers did meet in homes. What is strikingly different from today is that there were no automobiles that made travel convenient nor was there an internet that made long distance communication possible. One’s ekklesia was in one’s own neighborhood or at least within walking distance. Today, because of technology, we have “commuter churches” and even “virtual churches” where we can gather with those who either believe as we believe or who don’t interact with each other enough to know (or care) what anyone else believes. As a result, the people gather with no real idea of what they are supposed to accomplish other than to listen to the person up front speak and perhaps donate some money to keep them in the talking business and no spiritual assembly of the saints ever truly occurs.

How deep does this rabbit hole go?

Peter warned, “But there were also false prophets among the people, even as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Lord who bought them, and bring on themselves swift destruction.” (2 Pet. 2:1) To say this is mistranslated is not exactly correct – but what is true is that the common meanings of the words used do not match up to the original intent. The worst offender here is “heresies.” In modern usage, chiefly because the Catholic sect burned “heretics” – people supposedly preaching dangerously false doctrines and leading people away from “the faith” – at the stake, we think a heretic is most closely related to some religious lunatic or cult leader. The truth is more damning. The meaning of heretic is someone who is simply and only a sectarian, someone who forms his own group or sect by dissenting from some practice or teaching from a larger or older group. Since the victors write the history, such sectarians are conveniently labeled as “heretics,” especially if they were killed so that the practice or teaching could continue unchanged. Today, the closest synonym for “heretic” is “denominationalist.”

Thus, Peter’s warning is better stated that false teachers would secretly bring in destructive divisions. Paul said the same thing, “From your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them.” (Acts 20:30) Again, what is lacking is a careful unpacking of what Paul is saying. He is speaking to elders and prophetically says, “From the elders will arise bishops who will distort the truth so as to gain followers for themselves.” This is precisely what happened in the 1st, 2nd and 3rd centuries. Bishops began to wield power according to the size and strength of their base and they provided a visible unity of the “church” but fractured the spiritual unanimity of the Spirit and of the faith. (Eph. 4:3, 13). The practice continued until not only were there Donatists and Montanists and Marcionites and Augustinians in the first millennium, there were in the second Lutherans and Calvinists and Mennonites alongside the Catholics and the Orthodox and the Jesuits and after that the Baptists, the Pentecostals, the Presbyterians, the Episcopalians, the Nazarenes and the supposed Non-Denominationalists (to name but a few of the hundreds, even thousands of sects that now compete against one another.)

Most often overlooked, however, are the first divisions among the people of Christ, the ones mentioned by Paul himself: “And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual people but as to carnal, as to babes in Christ.” (1 Cor. 3:1) After the apostles were gone, the spiritually mature, among whom a deeper wisdom was spoken (1 Cor. 2:6, etc.), began to be known as the

“pneumatics” (from the Greek word for spirit, these were the “spirituals”) and the carnal, immature, unlearned or unstable were the “psuchicos” (from the Greek word psyche or soul, these were the “soulicals” or “carnals”). These categorizations are not often recognized or remembered.

Unfortunately for too many of the pneumatics, spiritual pride was the distortion that took over and a bishop named Montanus and his prophetesses, while practicing an outward religious ascetism (rituals, fastings, etc.) also became what we would now call hyper-charismatic with “spiritual gifts” and ecstatic utterances and gained many followers to their sect. The soulicals, who also had their own bishops and districts, relied on the recognized authority and position of the bishop (who had distorted the truth to gain followers after themselves), ostracized and drove off the hyper-charismatics and settled even more comfortably into the buildings built in the pattern of the Roman basilica (many more such buildings were funded by Constantine after he won the empire), never realizing they had secretly introduced the first of the destructive divisions that Peter had warned about. Two thousand years later, we have rampant denominationalism and never realize that each group is a sect, a heresy (group), a dissension, a schism that was never meant to be a part of the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:25), a division that whoever practices such things should be noted and avoided. (Rom. 16:17)

We need a deeper understanding of this original division of the spirituals versus the carnals or soulicals. Paul wrote, “He who sows to his flesh will of the flesh reap corruption, but he who sows to the Spirit will of the Spirit reap everlasting life.” (Gal. 6:8) This division is a very real thing and it is the dividing line between those who are saved and those who are perishing! As believers, we are called out of the carnality and darkness of this world so as to become citizens of God’s spiritual kingdom of light that is characterized by love, truth and obedience to God. But none of us have all our carnal habits and ideas entirely removed upon the new birth from above – in truth, our flesh is never entirely dead within us and thus we have the need to crucify the flesh routinely. (2 Cor. 4:10-11, etc.)

Rather, attaining spiritual maturity is a process and this is precisely why Peter wrote, “Giving all diligence, add to your faith goodness, to goodness knowledge, to knowledge self-control, to self-control perseverance, to perseverance godliness, to godliness brotherly kindness, and to brotherly kindness love. For if these things are yours and abound, you will be neither barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.” (2 Pet. 1:5-8) This is the pattern by which carnal babes in Christ transition into mature spiritual children of God.

The writer of Hebrews wrote that we would have to go outside the camp to meet Jesus. (Heb. 13:13) It is only outside the camp of men’s ideas and divisions and religious practices that we find the Spirit of truth and love that is Christ. Why? Because men’s camps are carnal, fleshly and worldly and we must step away from all that and partake of the realms of the spiritual where there is righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. (Rom. 14:17)

Rather than practicing “church” where some exalted teacher delivers supposedly spiritual words down to a passive audience, we should look for those whom God has put on our heart today or this week. It may be a friend, a relative, a shut in or a family but there is someone God wants us to be sharing our life with. He calls on us to love one another as He has loved us (Jn. 13:34)

because love is our most potent weapon in the spiritual war against the deceptions of Satan and his demonic and angelic hordes. Do we honestly believe that God cannot lead us to the encounters He wants us to have and to the good works which He created us to do? (Eph. 2:10)

And for those who worry about the need for leaders to protect vulnerable sheep, do we honestly believe that Christ, after promising to build His ekklesia (Mt. 16:18) will somehow fail or forget to provide the leaders He Himself has raised up in His body for this time and season? After having called Himself the Good Shepherd, will He suddenly fail to watch over, love and protect His own sheep? (Jn. 10:11) How foolish we are when we fear that God will not be faithful to His own word or to believe that it is now up to us alone to fulfill only what He can do! Having begun in the Spirit, are we now being made perfect by the flesh that fears and doubts and misbelieves?

There is one last word from Peter's warning that we should note. "...even denying the Lord who bought them..." (2 Pet. 2:1) In those days, lords bought slaves to do the work they wanted done. Ancient slavery and modern employment have more in common with each other than many realize. But there were no "unions" and the military solidly backed the lords because they were the ones with money and power. Thus the lord was the absolute master and, should a slave run away or commit disobedience, the slave was punished or even killed and no one thought that was a wrong thing. The word used here for "Lord" is "despotes" from which we have derived the word "despot." Peter's warning was not that people would deny the deity or transcendence of the Christ, they would deny Him His right to be absolute Master, King and Lord. And this is precisely what the "church" does best. At "church," Christ can be anything to us but our King even as we declare Him to be our King with our words and our songs.

What can we conclude?

In the end, how we do "church" is not really the most important issue and this is one of the main reasons the devil chose this as his primary deceptive strategy. The devil's counter-offensive is like a set of Russian dolls – a diversion within a diversion within a diversion repeated many times over so that one rarely gets down to the real, "bottom line" diversion. No matter which portion of the devil's counter-offensive we fall for the most, when we listen with the ears of the spirit of religion, we will never be led into all truth by the Spirit of truth. How we do "church," or more accurately, how we do ekklesia – our way or God's way – shows who gets to be the real and functional King and God of our life – Him or us. And this is the ultimate goal of all of Satan's deceptions – to remove God from the throne of our life and to seat himself there in one guise or another. (2 Ths. 2:4) Thus, choosing which "church" we will attend because of our own preferences rather than seeking God as to His will on how to be His ekklesia is really practicing lawlessness, whatever is right in our own eyes, because Jesus is not really our King.

"Jesus, You can be my Comforter, my Healer, my Encourager, my Teacher, my Feel Good Buddy, maybe even my Friend – anything but my King. And You certainly can't be King over my theology!"

Of course, we wouldn't dare say this out loud – we even call Him our King on those occasions when it's the "right thing to say" or when it makes us look good or feel better about our life. But

truly our King? Nah. So long as we feel good about what we're doing, God must be good with it too. Really? Jesus still says, "But why do you call Me 'Lord, Lord,' and not do the things which I say?" (Lk. 6:46)

There is one word that epitomizes the essence of being a King – obedience. Without obedience, He is not King. The writer of Hebrews even says it plainly: "Having been perfected, He became the author of eternal salvation to all who obey Him." (Heb. 5:9) He is not the author of eternal salvation to those who disobey Him. If Jesus is not our King, then He is not our Savior and the last thing we will hear Him say will very likely be "Depart from Me. I never knew you." (Mt. 7:23) It doesn't have to be like this. Yet for far too many it is exactly like this – and this will certainly be the fate of those who are merely workers of lawlessness.

In this life, we can find all manner of ways to deceive our self into believing we're where God would have us to be. We'll attend the right "church" (right in our own eyes, that is), we'll do the right kind of work (evangelism, reform of some current trend, outreach to the poor or to orphans, or even just some form of "self improvement" we deem worthwhile – again, whatever work is good in our own eyes, of course), we'll abandon certain sins (fornication, alcohol, drugs, smoking, pornography, etc. – or not, sometimes we'll just continue to do these sins in secret, feeling guilty while we do the "right" kind of work to "make up for" these sins) but we won't even look at our sins of parading ourself in front of others (attending our "good" "church," doing the "right" works and leaving off our "big" sins) or of our pride in having all the "right" answers to all the "right" Bible questions (right in our own opinion, of course, as we already have all the right answers to those questions that we will entertain because we find them acceptable, palatable and not too challenging – and the hard questions we don't want to touch are just deflected away by any means necessary.)

Recently someone even said, "I'm focused on Jesus and His perfection, not the imperfections of the church." This is the epitome of what is wrong with America (the Christian part that claims His name) and why judgment must come. This has to be the most simultaneously honest and dishonest statement about America's sin as can be said! And the person saying it was so deceived in this area that they think it's an admirable attitude to have! But while God waits for us to even look at what we call our "imperfections" – especially of how we assemble in His name where He can be anything but King over our assembly (which in reality is our carnal enmity against God – Rom. 8:7) – while He waits for us to humble ourselves and turn from our wicked ways, we, as is epitomized in this statement, refuse to even look at our wicked ways, dismissing them as mere "imperfections" that all humans have.

"My way of "church" is good with Him because it's good with me." Again, we would not likely dare to say this out loud. But is this really so? God still says, "I cannot endure iniquity and the sacred meeting." (Isa. 1:13) Not much chance God is going to come and heal our land then. (see 2 Chr. 7:14)

Telling someone to "go to church" is no different than telling someone to go vote without fixing the election fraud which still continues. It's like saying, "Don't worry about your wife, go to the prostitute." Or "You want a healthy child? Send your pregnant wife to the abortionist." The

reality is this is not about mere imperfections such as all humans share – it's about the lethal enmity of the "church" against the people of God.

"Churches" that mock the "10% rule" ("10% of the people do 100% of the work") but which themselves cannot muster but at most 5% to do the work *cannot* be something God has designed! Evangelistic crusades that see a mere 2 to 3% of the people attending go forward to say a sinner's prayer and then go on to become "church" members (whether truly born again and redeemed by Christ or not) *cannot* be something God has designed! Perpetual symbiotic, ear-tickling and ear-scratching relationships between "pastors" and their congregation where 85% of the people do nothing whatsoever and 10% do nothing but give some money (usually not even a full "tithes") and the other 5% may or may not pray for and visit the sick, imprisoned and homeless populations in their city *is not* something God has designed!

What ought to be the most sobering question arises: If God did not design the "church," who did? Yet this question is not even asked among the circles of churchianity. Such wisdom is too lofty to attain because their ears are turned away from the truth and their souls are filled with the noises and sensations that distract them away from even hungering or thirsting for God's true and complete righteousness. God's design is that 100% of the people do *all* the work of the ministry and every part of the body do its share. (Eph. 4:12-16) The "church" is quite content to have a small percentage burn themselves out doing all the work while the vast majority sit passive and idle, expecting to be "fed." Idle hands are still the devil's workshop.

Yet here too is the graciousness of God. He continues to meet us in this place of abomination because He is nursing critically ill patients to life and health. He comes in among our filthy rags that we parade and shove in His face and He feeds us simply because we open the "church" door to Him. He overlooks our ignorance (that causes His people to perish) and feeds us until such time as we will obey Him, rising from our sick bed to follow Him wherever He leads.

How much truth can we routinely ignore, neglect or reject and still be pursuing the King of truth? How much sin can we habitually commit and still be following the Spirit of God? Esau stands as a warning – he sold his birthright for a single bowl of fleshly stew. (Heb. 12:15-16)

The kingdom of God is that state of existence where Christ and God are obeyed. It is not a part of this world and only enters into this world when followers of Christ actively obey Him. (Mt. 6:10) When we refuse to let Christ be King of our theology, particularly over our assemblies and how and with whom we gather and are assembled, we are literally even if unintentionally building the fiefdom of some man and strengthening the kingdom of Satan. There simply is no middle ground in this war between God and Satan. The sooner we come to recognize this, the more spiritual our lives will become and the closer we will be to being the spotless and blameless bride for whom Christ will return. (Eph. 5:27)

Let he who has ears hear.

Website – www.paidionbooks.org

Email – neilgirrard@gmail.com

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