

Member Letters - Nov 20, 2013

Dear Brethren,

As many of you are no doubt aware, the Church has once again undergone an attempt to overturn members' faith and confidence in the leadership. Along with such opposition there is sometimes the dissemination of unsolicited ideas that are at odds with the Church's teaching and practice.

This is not new; it is, in fact, a very old tactic, though the exact nature of the opposition may vary. Paul advised the Thessalonians "not to be soon shaken in mind or troubled, either by spirit or by word or by letter, as if from us, as though the day of Christ had come" (2 Thessalonians 2:2). Some of the Corinthians had heard "that there is no resurrection of the dead" and were repeating the false idea (1 Corinthians 15:12). And the Galatians had quickly fallen prey to "a different gospel" (Galatians 1:6).

The hope is always that there will be a change of heart on the part of those who have strayed in their actions and attitudes. But if not, in such situations the Church must act decisively to protect the members. Sometimes we must remove the source from among us: "Now I urge you, brethren, note those who cause divisions and offenses, contrary to the doctrine which you learned, and avoid them" (Romans 16:17-18). Accordingly, I am saddened to say that Steven Andrews had to be disfellowshipped. We should bear him no ill will.

Criticism and opposition to the work that is being accomplished is often a feature of attacks such as these. Paul said that at Ephesus there was before him "a great and effective door," yet there were also "many adversaries" (1 Corinthians 16:9). When the captives who returned from Babylon worked at rebuilding Jerusalem's walls, strong opposition came from some of the surrounding peoples. They were angry, enraged and mocking. They jeered, harassed, conspired and tried every way to discourage Nehemiah and his colleagues from restoring the city's walls and gates. Though they were sometimes delayed, with God's help and their own persistence they kept on building despite this opposition, and eventually the work was done. The marvelous account of this is found in Nehemiah chapters 2-6.

We find ourselves in similar situations in our lives at times, and certainly in the day-to-day work of the Church. But God has promised never to leave us or forsake us.

In such times it is very important for all of us to judge by the fruits and attitudes in all circumstances. When we hear accusations, it is essential to consider the source. We are taught that *Satan* is the accuser of the brethren. He never rests but seeks to devour the unwary. Yet we have protection if we stay close to our Father and His Son in attitude and actions.

Some of the concerns that have been raised in this recent situation relate to

government in the Church. Not surprisingly, this subject has featured in similar circumstances in the past. How ironic that the personal letter to me was distributed to others at the same time, and then far and wide. We understand that the government structure God has ordained is hierarchical, yet not in normal human terms. When Jesus said to His disciples, "The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them, and those who exercise authority over them are called 'benefactors'" (Luke 22:25), He was reminding them that the Roman world named its emperor "benefactor," though that man was far from God's standard for loving concern. He went on to say that physical, human, top-down structures should not be their way of relating to others. Rather, they must "let the greatest among [them] become as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves" (verse 26, English Standard Version). This was Paul's example: "We were gentle among you, like a nursing mother taking care of her own children" (1 Thessalonians 2:7, ESV). Yet he was also one in authority for their good, "like a father with his children" (verse 11), seeking to exhort, encourage and charge them "to walk in a manner worthy of God" (verse 12). Godly government is hierarchical yet benevolent, authoritative yet humbly serving. Accusations to the contrary notwithstanding, this is the standard we have tried to pursue.

Another concern relates to the study project I have launched into the matter of the prophetic identity of Israel. For many years the Church had a book on the subject of the United States and Britain in prophecy. At our inception 15 years ago, we understood that giving the witness of God's coming kingdom to these nations fell within the commission to preach the gospel "in all the world" (Matthew 24:14). While we have been reviewing this subject for some time, after the ministerial conference I set up a study team made up of seven ministerial members. They are tasked with producing a collective paper on how this material should be addressed to the world of the 21st century; that paper will then be shared with the whole ministry for their input. We live in a very different age than the one in which the material was originally written. The group is paying careful attention to the biblical evidence and historical information in order to make the material as clear as possible. A momentous development took place in the histories of the United States and Britain around the year 1800. Their remarkable place in the world today, in what we sense are the closing years of human civilization, makes their identity a significant subject. That we are looking into how to best address this material should not give cause for concern. Prejudging the process and its outcome is not helpful.

Brethren, over the past couple of years I have tried to alert you all by way of sermons to trends that I sensed in the Church as a result of internal and external pressures. One topic was the importance of peace in the Church. No sooner had I emphasized this than the attacks began to intensify. Defending ourselves against "the wiles of the devil" was another sermon topic that addressed a developing wrong and critical spirit among us. Externally, we are very much affected by the world we inhabit. Just as first-century Roman culture presented problems and opportunities to the Church of the apostolic era, so the dominant culture of today

challenges us. Our young people need to be fortified in their application of God's principles of life, and our more mature members encouraged to revive their first love for the way of God.

Let us now all "press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 3:14). The effect of God's Spirit in our lives "is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy. Now the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace" (James 3:17-18). This is the immediate goal for us all.

Sincerely, in Jesus Christ's service,

David Hulme