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THE EARTHBOEN PROBLEMS

CONFRONTING THE SERVANT OF GOD

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"For a great door, and effectual is opened unto me, and there are many adversaries" (I Corinthians 16:9)

This discussion will center in the earthborn problems of the servant of God. As a proper approach to the subject, several things need to be said at the outset: first, something about definition; second, something about description; and third, something about diagnosis.

The definition of a problem may be stated as follows: It is a difficult situation involving uncertainty of solution. In the strictest sense of a definition, this cannot be true for the child of God. For the resources of God are sufficient for every difficulty and there are no uncertainties. But in the more relative sense of the definition, a sphere in which most of us move because we fail to appropriate fully the resources of God and to apprehend clearly the truth of God, it is painfully true. There are difficulties and the solution seems uncertain.

In attempting a description of problems, several characteristics deserve attention. Problems are earthborn and reside essentially in people. This explains why men have sought isolation from society as a solution to their problems. Usually they discovered that the seat of their problems centered in a person from whom they could not retreat. Problems are inevitable in a world of sinning people. It was sin that introduced difficulty and uncertainty into the stream of human relations. It is therefore to be expected that problems will be the course of human experience until the factor of sin is removed from the scene by the grace of God.

It is therefore an inescapable conclusion that problems will constitute the obstacles through which the servant of God must make progress. The servant of God must associate with people where the problems center. These people possess the sinful nature which produces the problems. There is no such thing as turning back in the path appointed of God. So, to make progress, the servant of God must confront the problem and find a solution. It is therefore a comforting fact of history

to the servant of God that problems are not insuperable. With renewed assurance the servant of God can move forward, knowing that "our sufficiency is from God" (2 Cor. 3:5) and that we can do all things through Christ who strengthens us (Phil. 4:13).

Precise diagnosis of the problems is the most important factor, perhaps, in finding the solution. It is like isolating the cause of a disease. It is not enough to recognize the symptoms and pore over them. The symptoms are the effects produced by the problem. They distress and irritate and aggravate and destroy. But all the effort expended to mollify and alleviate and arrest the symptoms is largely wasted because the real cause remains and the relief is only temporary. To penetrate to the cause and have the courage to face the problem in all of its grisly reality is probably the most soul-searching and the most soul-revealing experience any servant of God will ever have.

This discussion will not constitute a diagnosis. It will be nothing more than a listing of the areas where problems can and do occur. It will then be up to each man himself to examine his situation, and in all honesty with himself and God, be prepared to put his finger on the problem or problems in his area and deal with them.

I will now bring to your attention seven areas where problems do arise, and can and may arise in the course of your experience.

I. PROBLEMS OF THE SERVANT OF GOD THAT CENTER IN HIMSELF

The Apostle Paul, writing to his dearly beloved son in the faith, issued an admonition that deserves primary attention. "Take heed unto thyself" (1 Tim. 4:16). I am convinced, after many years of experience, both for myself as well as others, that we either failed to recognize this verse, or else we moved swiftly to the remainder and laid the emphasis on doctrine. And as a result, at that point where problems occur, and where they are most likely to affect our ministry, and over which we are the most likely to be able to apply solution, we failed, and the tragic consequences are degrees of faltering, fruitlessness, uncertainty, and absence of joy. I will discuss this under three heads: personality, performance, progress.

Personality is that collection of characteristics that qualify us for ordination to the ministry. These are spiritual, moral, mental. It is recognized by all of us that there is no absolute degree in which these are possessed. But, they are present in such degree that they are recognized by examining elders and electing congregations to be at least in minimum sufficient for induction into the ministry. Does this describe

a garden of virtues within which there shall be no cultivation and the emerging of new flowers and the giving of greater fragrance? So far as I am able to observe, not one of the qualities is necessarily static and is therefore incapable of further development.

Performance is a good word in this modern industrial society. It is likewise good for the minister. His method for commanding respect is that of being an example of the believers in spiritual conduct (I Tim. 4:12). To get recognition as a faithful shepherd is to be absolutely dedicated to his task, to give himself wholly to the things of the ministry (I Tim. 4:13-15). This ministry must take first place. He must give himself to reading, exhortation, doctrine, ministry (I Tim. 4:13,15). Though he must have a schedule, and follow it as nearly as possible, he is bound to find that it will be interrupted over and over again. Why? Because the pressures of his task do not follow a schedule. And they must take precedence.

Progress ought to be evident in his experience. That is the point of Paul's words to Timothy, "that thy profiting may appear to all" (I Tim. 4:15). The word profiting refers to progress made through difficulty. Every hindering circumstance confronting any man will be the experience of the minister. There is no use to cite these as excuses for failure to move ahead. He must rise above the obstacles and find a way to move ahead. Every week ought to find him preaching better sermons, teaching better classes, giving better counsel, developing spiritually, reaching the lost with greater effectiveness. This should be manifest to his people, not only those on the inside of the church but also those among whom he moves on the outside. It is this progress that builds confidence in people and creates the determination to retain and support this man in his leadership.

Therefore, take heed to thyself. This is the primary and basic problem confronting every pastor and servant of God.

II. PROBLEMS OF THE SERVANT OF GOD THAT CENTER IN HIS FAMILY

When outlining the qualifications for the ministry, the Apostle Paul made clear reference to the family. The man himself is to be "the husband of one wife" (I Tim. 3:2), and he is to be "one that ruleth well his own house, having his children in subjection with all gravity; for if a man know not how to rule his own house, how shall he take care of the church of God?" (I Tim. 3:4-5). Human nature being what it is, the response of men follows the same principle in all ages. The words of the Apostle Paul now have the seal of the Spirit of God upon

them, so the problem of the family is therefore quite real. For anyone who seeks to serve God and in any sense to exercise oversight, his second major concern must be his family.

The head of the family is very possibly primarily responsible for the situation that develops in the family. At least that is the very clear implication from this passage of Scripture. He is probably mainly responsible for the kind of woman he has for a wife. He was certainly aware of the qualities of the woman that aroused his affection. He then deliberately chose her for a companion. From that moment on he had it in his power to mould her by his devotion to her. Love has its own way of weaving its spell over the object of its affection. Thus Solomon spoke of the way of a man with a maid, and admitted it was too wonderful for him. The phrase "the husband of one wife" quite literally means a one-woman man. This means that a man gives his devotion to one woman. That kind of man will beget the same in his wife. And where love is the prevailing atmosphere, the element of authority is not difficult to maintain.

The wife in the family then takes her place as an object of emulation in the Christian society. Certainly she will seek to do her husband good, to advance the ministry in which he is engaged, to cooperate so that in this little kingdom they are building there will be harmony, prosperity, good will and praise to God. The finances will constitute a large part of her responsibility. Their income will be limited. But she will have taken it as from the Lord and be subject to it. This will limit the dwelling, the furniture, the clothing, the food. It may be necessary under most conditions to exercise frugality in everything. But such sacrifice will be with joy as to the Lord. And the atmosphere created by the wife will be radiated to the children. Where she shows subjection to the husband, she will inspire this among women in the congregation.

The children play a major role in the success of the servant of God. A well-regulated family is a recommendation. Children need to know their place, that is, to be in subjection. But this cannot be realized by mere compulsion. To rule well means more than the mere exercise of force. In such a case the home could turn out to be a concentration camp. It means to be able to stand before. This suggests first of all the ability to set a good example of all that is presented as the ideal for life. Tempered with real affection for the children, authority will be accepted willingly, and in cases where the situation is far more tense, will even in those cases be tolerated. It was the absence of this in Eli, the priest of Israel, that brought the condemnation of the Lord. Eli's children were wicked. They sensed a lack of devotion to their father to the sacrifices of God (1 Sam. 2:12-17). They encouraged this among the people as well as leading the people in gross immorality

(2:22-25), and in addition to their vile conduct, Eli made no real effort to restrain them (3:11-14).

In the privacy and inner sanctum of the home this confronts the servant of God. It is here that he lays the ground work for the larger ministry beyond.

III. THE PROBLEMS OF THE SERVANT OF GOD THAT CENTER IN THE PARISH

Addressing the Ephesian elders the Apostle Paul said, "Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood" (Acts 20:28). This charge is replete with problems. But they can be summarized under three heads: identification, administration, and compensation.

The problem of identification stands at the head of the list, and in some sense incorporates all the rest. That is, therein lies the solution to all the other problems. "If a man desire the office of a bishop, he desireth a good work" (1 Tim. 3:1). Contrary to the English translation, this does not refer to an office or position. It refers to an opportunity for service. This is clear when one considers the description of the task with which the sentence ends, namely, a good work. The word bishop refers to function and means overseer in the sense of one who visits another to communicate good. This calls for identification with the flock of God, so that what they experience he experiences. What they feel he feels. It is this intimate understanding and recognition of need that leads the overseer to feed the flock of God willingly, not as though compelled, not for the sake of money, but because here is an opportunity to communicate benefit, not as exercising lordship over, but as types to the flock. Just as Christ, the Chief Shepherd, identified himself so completely with the flock that he gave His life in their behalf, so should the elder (1 Pet. 5:1-4; Matt. 20:28).

The problem of administration grows out of identification with the congregation. It requires the exercise of wisdom more than the demonstration of authority. The focal point is always what is best. The provision for this task is the message of the Word of God. It is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness (2 Tim. 3:16). That does not mean that this message is to be used as the whiplash in the moment of trial. The foundation must be laid ahead of time. But always in method the minister should preach the word, be instant in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and doctrine (2 Tim. 4:2). The word

longsuffering is especially pertinent in approaching the problems of the parish. It means that the leader holds back his wrath in order that he might accomplish a beneficial end. The Lord is constantly doing that with us. It is therefore in order for us to exercise the same for them.

Few there are in the ministry who are not confronted with the problem of compensation. It is true that "the elders that rule well (should) be counted worthy of double honor, especially they who labor in the word and doctrine. For the Scripture saith, Thou shalt not muzzle the ox that treadeth out the corn. And, The laborer is worthy of his reward" (I Tim. 5:17-18). Some pastors wonder whether their congregation ever knew that passage was in the Bible, or if knowing, care less. In discussing the use of Christian liberty the apostle argues convincingly in the first half of I Corinthians, chapter nine, that a pastor has the right to expect pay. But in the last half of that chapter he points out how that right ought to be exercised if it is to be effective. At this point it would be well for the pastor to take a hard look at the proper way to bring this responsibility of the congregation to their attention. A mere barrage of denunciation could well fail, where an overmeasure of benediction would succeed.

IV. PROBLEMS OF THE SERVANT OF GOD THAT CENTER IN CHURCHES

A survey of the New Testament will reveal the progress in establishing churches. At the outset there was one local congregation that centered in Jerusalem (Acts 2:47). But this could not last, if the great commission was to be carried out. In the good providence of God it took a persecution to scatter believers and begin the spread of churches (Acts 8:1). It was not long until there was a church among the Gentiles at Antioch (Acts 11:19-30). From there the church spread to Cyprus, Asia Minor, Macedonia, and Greece (Acts 13:1; 14:23, 28; 15:1-6, 22, 41). In the 1900 years since, churches have been established in almost every part of the world. There are two great segments of the professing church: Catholicism and Protestantism, with proliferating splits in both segments, to say nothing about the cults that are clamoring for equal status, and the great pagan religions that are emerging in our own society. These in part or all will confront the pastor with problems.

The doctrinal will be the first consideration of those who move in conservative circles. And the problem will focus on what attitude and methods should be employed toward those churches that do not subscribe to the doctrinal tenets of the pastor. The problem will range in religious bodies from those that are positively pagan to those that constitute a conservative variation. It will not be difficult to make pronouncement on paganism. The problem will be slightly more difficult

in dealing with Catholicism. The cults will accentuate the problem. Liberalism will complicate matters much more because it employs the same terminology even though with different meaning. Denominational differences produce one of the most touchy problems. And the variation from congregation to congregation, even in the denomination, is the stickiest issue of all.

The ethical will confront the pastor as his most worrisome problem. Even if it were true that all doctrine were the same, it still would not be true that practice would be the same. Starting with the same premise of doctrine, it is amazing how the application varies. In one case there may be the strictest of separation, whereas in another separation may be practiced in the loosest fashion. All this must be traced to the measure of understanding and submission to the Word of God. The degree may be high among some, but low in others, and in some totally absent. This constitutes the problem of the pastor in his wider associations, in the local community, and even in his own local church. Nor can the problem be ignored. He must find some solution: a solution that will satisfy the Word of God, his own local church, and his own conscience.

The personal also constitutes a problem for every pastor. Being what he is, and having developed over a certain pattern, he is bound to have his own feelings on matters. Unconsciously imbedded in his nature will be a desire to conscript a following for his own church, perhaps even for himself. This will lead him to develop certain attitudes and responses to any church, pastor, or form that varies from his own. This is not new. The Apostle John complained to the Lord Jesus that a certain one was casting out demons in his name, but he didn't belong to the apostolic company (Mark 9:38-40). The disciples of John the Baptist were concerned that when Jesus started His public ministry it seemed that all men were going to Jesus and no longer following with John (John 3:25-30). Within a local area or congregation there could be good reason for concern on the part of the pastor in the face of such trends. But he will need to be careful that these reasons are not borne of personal obsession.

V. THE PROBLEMS OF THE SERVANT OF GOD THAT CENTER IN THE LOCAL COMMUNITY

The pastor is called to community. He must live and work among people. That is his field. He may be assigned by the Lord to a rural community. He may find himself in a small town or a moderately-sized city. Or he may perchance be located in a large city. Each place will possess certain excellencies that attract him, and certain faults that repel him. The principal virtue of each centers specifically in the

fact that there are people with whom to work. One field may appear to be easy, while another appears to be difficult. But in either case, it can be safely concluded that people are sinners and need the grace of God. The greater the degree of imperfection the more that pastor is needed. It is therefore utterly inconsistent with the call and placement of the Lord to quarrel with the circumstances. What he needs to do is confront the problems and devise some method of solving them. But he must remember that communication of good requires interaction.

The cultural pattern of the community can well constitute a major problem for the pastor. When Paul went to Ephesus he was confronted with patterns of culture that were on the lowest level of ethics, and entirely inimical to the message he was preaching. If you should come to Indiana you would find a hysteria that stands squarely in the way of many programs you would like to promote. It will be the business of the pastor to maneuver around and through these obstacles to make progress in the work of the Lord.

Governmental structure in communities will pose difficulties that are sometimes almost insurmountable. With liberalism insinuating itself into government, this sometimes results in discrimination of one kind or another. It may be as to messages that go out over the air. It may be with respect to a location for a church building. As government and false religion get more closely linked together, it may issue in restriction to the preaching of the gospel and the right of public assembly, such as in Russia and China.

Religious alignment has always been one of the major factors hindering progress. In this country it is not uncommon to hear that a community is entirely given over to unbelief. Or that the community is predominantly disposed to Roman Catholicism. Or that a certain community is dominated by one Protestant denomination. Or that sectarianism is entrenched and it will be impossible to break through this encrustation.

That all these things pose problems, there is no question. But that these problems constitute reasons in themselves why the work of the Lord shall not be promoted numerically and spiritually is not true. When God called a man to a place, He first surveyed it and listed the problems. Then He expects to provide the necessary solution to each one. And this He will do through the leader of the congregation.

"Faithful is he that calleth you, who also will do it" (I Thess. 5:24).

VI. PROBLEMS OF THE SERVANT OF GOD THAT CENTER IN THE COUNTRY

Though Christianity came into existence during the imperial sway of the Roman Empire, it recognized, nevertheless, that believers would be living in every country and every clime before the passing of many years. This has since turned out to be the case. The New Testament records have therefore made adequate provision for the functioning of the Church in any country. The principles of operation are adaptable anywhere and under any set of circumstances. Though a great deal is said about how Christians should respond to the treatment they receive (Rom. 13:1-7; Gal. 6:9-10; I Tim. 2:1-2; I Peter 2:12-23), I want to mention specifically the trends that are now creating problems for the pastor.

Philosophical trends are changing the thinking of people on the whole scope of reality. These trends are definitely in the direction of removing the supernatural from the realm of consideration, and reducing the perspective of reality to the human and natural level. This is placing man in the position of the supreme good and the chief end in life.

Sociological trends grow out of this movement of thought. It produces either isolation or integration of the nationalities or the races. It produces a new approach to property, industry, education, morality, because it arrogates to man the final word of authority. This temper is gradually filtering down through the various levels of society: those benefitting from higher education, next, those in secondary education, and finally to the lowest level.

Political trends follow pretty closely on the heels of the preceding two. Government in the hands of the people is being moulded to satisfy the thinking and desires of the people. This country is gradually becoming a socialized state, and except for some unforeseen crisis which could break up the trends now in operation, it will continue in this direction until the ultimate is reached.

Financial trends are merely the handmaidens of all that precedes. The movement now in process is inflation. For this there seems to be no apparent terminus. The change of administration can arrest the progress, but probably can do nothing more. The programs now in progress cannot be reversed, even if there were a desire to do so. So the prospect is that others will be generated in order to live with those now in course.

All these trends make their impact upon the pastor, and create problems with which he must live.

VII. PROBLEMS OF THE SERVANT OF GOD THAT CENTER IN THE WORLD

In these days of shrinking distances with high powered means of transportation and communication, every pastor is a citizen of a world community. The movements of the world are therefore being felt in every nook and cranny. Change is perhaps the most evident of all -- trends that bring their problems ever closer to each congregation of believers. In order to claim the promise of I John 2:17, "The world passeth away and the lust thereof, but he that doeth the will of God abideth forever," one must be highly knowledgeable of the trends and the solution.

The trend toward internationalism is gaining momentum. The League of Nations has been superseded by the United Nations, and even though there seems to be little fruit from the endeavor, the principle is now fixed in the minds of men and they will not abandon it until some united state of the world is achieved.

A similar trend in the field of ecclesiasticism is now running parallel with that among nations, and with increased acceleration. To the dismay of many in conservative circles, this move is being welcomed with eager acclaim. As this proceeds, it is evident that a closer tie is being made with the political element of nations (Rev. 17:1-3).

The trend toward pantheism in thinking, that is both secular and sacred, is providing a groundwork for both the religious and the political in life. This sort of thinking will make way for a great political genius to appear on the scene and be accepted as the solution to the confusion that now exists among the nations. In this same context the nations of mankind will be prepared to receive this one as God.

The trend toward degenerationism is already making marked progress in the toboggan slide to the bottom. A whole new ideology has gripped the nations, especially evident among the younger generation, that doubtless cannot be stopped until it has reached that stage when every imagination of the thoughts of men's hearts is only evil continually. (Gen. 6:5; cf. Luke 17:26-30).

Conclusion

These are the many problems that confront the servant of God. The situation is serious, though not beyond hope. God placed us in the world, and promised to keep us from the evil. He appointed to us a responsibility, and He will enable us to the fulfillment of that task.

When the situation gets to the place where there is no solution to the problems, that will be the time when He is finished in His work with the Church and will call us out of this world. That could be sooner than we think. It could be today. But until He is pleased to call us to Himself, let us not forget that the first half of the verse with which I opened reads, "For a great door and effectual has been opened."