

## Pharisaism in the Church:

### *Undermining the good news*

Pharisaic religion is a main theme running through the pages of the New Testament, like a wild and dangerous dog snapping at the heels of believers (and potential believers alike) who sincerely desired to follow Jesus. And guess what? Pharisee-like leaders are still with us today, only now they are mostly *inside* the Church. And to make matters worse, they are usually running it!

Paul made a valiant effort to keep Pharisee-types out of the early Church and to prevent them from distorting the Gospel, but it was a constant battle. We, on the other hand, have not only let them in, we've embraced them and exalted them to positions of leadership and influence! The wolf is now guarding the sheep pen, and keeping true shepherds out.

The truth is, Satan *has* infiltrated and distorted God's original plan and design for much of the Church's history, and he still keeps myriads of men and women trapped in a false version of the Body of Christ. We call this false version Pharisaism. It is fueled by the all-too-human desire for influence, power and control born of selfish ambition, insecurity, fear, and worst of all, pride. Pharisaic Churchianity is a "religion of the Book" much like Judaism became and we have failed to recognize its dangers and its obvious worldliness, despite, or perhaps because of, its often slick veneer of spirituality. And perhaps predictably, but sadly, the very Bible we hold dear has often been the main weapon the enemy has used to ensnare and divide us.

How can that be? Isn't Jesus "the Word" of God? And as Paul said, "Has Christ been divided," let alone conquered? Not in truth. The true Church is one Body, one faith, one Lord, one baptism. But a false church has arisen alongside it and it is characterized by popular acceptance and respectability, though it has many faces. Satan knows that what he can't beat he must join, divide, infiltrate, distort and dilute, and so he has. He has created a parallel "body of christ" devoid of life—a skillful decoy—and it has taken over much of the visible Church. We see its influence infecting all of Christendom: the airwaves, the publishing houses,<sup>1</sup> the bookstores, the institutional churches (especially denominations), the seminaries, Christian colleges, Bible schools and universities<sup>2</sup> and many parachurch and mission organizations.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, he

---

<sup>1</sup> Many of which are owned by secular parent companies who also publish pornography or such travesties as the Satanic Bible.

<sup>2</sup> The second law of thermodynamics applies to all institutions, including these. They start out with the best of intentions, but over time they are diluted and perverted to reflect the "god of this world" rather than the God who is.

<sup>3</sup> We realize this is an inflammatory statement. Are we saying that all these organizations are entirely corrupt and evil—that there is no good in them? No, but virtually all of them are tainted with the lust for power and success that Pharisaism

has also infiltrated the *true* Church to rob it of spiritual power and create confusion. And he is working behind the scenes to bring the many faces of the false church into a false unity based on a false brotherhood.

The truth is though, modern-day Pharisees are much easier to identify than one might think (once you know what to look for) and we can often find them in the world of Christian scholarship. Note this important and insightful statement by Søren Kierkegaard:

*“The matter is quite simple. The Bible is very easy to understand. But we Christians are a bunch of scheming swindlers. We pretend to be unable to understand it because we know very well that the minute we understand, we are obliged to act accordingly. Take any words in the New Testament and forget everything except pledging yourself to act accordingly. ‘My God,’ you will say, ‘if I do that my whole life will be ruined. How would I ever get on in the world?’ Herein lies the real place of Christian scholarship. Christian scholarship is the church’s prodigious invention to defend itself against the Bible, to ensure that we can continue to be good Christians without the Bible coming too close. Oh priceless scholarship, what would we do without you? Dreadful it is to fall into the hands of the living God. Yes, it is even dreadful to be alone with the New Testament.”<sup>4</sup>*

If this statement shocks you, consider it evidence of how much you have bought into the false system. Our position? Pharisaic Christianity is what keeps the Church from functioning like a Body, where every member is treated with equal dignity, respect and purpose.

**A QUESTION:** If you’ve ever looked for a book on modern-day Pharisaism, you’ve probably noticed they are hard to find. The reason? Qualified authors (those considered marketable by publishing companies) would, for the most part, be writing about themselves. And most successful Christian publishing companies (many of which are owned by secular parent-companies) would not dare to print such a controversial and self-sabotaging attack on their main customers: seminaries, Bible students, pastors, teachers and other scholarly individuals. They would probably be blacklisted! So a message such as this will probably never see the light of day. Just as the devil would have it.

Yet, in our opinion, Pharisaism is responsible for the vast majority of corruption in the Church. It is the single greatest curse the Church has had to deal with these past 2,000 years.

---

breeds and feeds. Satan is too clever to think that Christians will follow an obviously and totally evil organization. He leaves plenty of good in place to facilitate the coverup.

<sup>4</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Provocations: Spiritual Writings of Kierkegaard*, ed. Charles E. Moore (Farmington, PA: Plough, 2002), 201

Strong statement? Indeed. We'll do our best to explain.

The Pharisees were not just a first-century phenomenon, as we've made clear. At its core, Pharisaism manifests as a religious system, and the Pharisees of Jesus' day are the equivalent of modern-day seminary-educated pastors—and vice versa. If you find *this* a shocking statement it is probably because the word "Pharisee" is universally used among Christians today as a derogatory term, but in Jesus' day it was a title of honor. The Pharisees were respected, highly educated, influential and complex leaders, which is why Paul described *himself* as a Pharisee in his list of pre-Christian accomplishments and credits (Phil 3:5). Failing to recognize that this is how the term was understood by the public in the New Testament will keep you from recognizing who the Pharisees are today, which in turn will blind you to the system of Pharisaism in Christianity.

Jesus warned the disciples about these men and the system that produced them. Far from heeding this warning however, the Church has reproduced a religious system that is an exact replica of the religious system prevalent in Jesus' day (the system that crucified Him). Only the jargon is different. Our Bible schools and seminaries are functional "Pharisee factories," institutions that fuel (and are fueled by) church division, dogmatism, and doctrinaire policies. These educational institutions crank out the employees needed to keep this system operating. The schools themselves ensure that only the "best and the brightest" will have seats of power and control in the churches. In turn, the Church has become institutionalized, and functions as a financial backbone for the factory. It is an effective recruitment and promotional center for the entire system, just as the synagogue system was for Pharisaic Judaism. They are interdependent and symbiotic entities.

This religious system breeds competition among Christians at every level (for grants, scholarships, academic awards, influence, jobs, salaries, positions, credentials) and creates deep division in the Church. Academic professors and universities promote these factions by touting their particular doctrinal stance and denouncing (or ignoring) others, breeding arrogance among eager but easily indoctrinated students. Many radio preachers and authors do the same, even though Paul cautioned us not to wrangle about words, causing factions and divisiveness. But instead of humble dialogue, we point fingers, take sides, denounce and alienate each other in a constant game of spiritual one-upsmanship.<sup>5</sup> Sound familiar? It should. Paul spoke of it in

---

<sup>5</sup> Someone might say we are doing the very same thing we are condemning others for, pointing the finger, inciting divisiveness, exhibiting arrogance. If so, one must be willing to accuse Paul and Jesus of the same offense when they attacked the Pharisees and Judaizers of their day.

1 Corinthians 1:10-13.<sup>6</sup> It's the way of the world, but it was never meant to be acceptable in the Church.<sup>7</sup>

How does all this square with what Jesus said?

You be the judge. Jesus reserved His most scathing comments for the religious leaders of His day. He was not so hard on any other group. He called them fools, hypocrites, vipers, blind guides and He lashed out at them not once but repeatedly. Yet these were the *conservatives* of Israel! They were upholding the inerrancy of Scripture and the resurrection of the dead. Why chastise *them*? Because they were also, by and large, self-righteous, self-promoting and arrogant – legalistic word-parsers with unconverted hearts—seeking places of honor, titles, and the mantle of leadership.

But not everyone in a position of leadership is equally “leavened,” and this was true of the religious leaders in the New Testament also (compare Caiaphas with Nicodemus). Many appear above reproach on every level and truly desire to serve God and His people. Nevertheless, everyone involved with Pharisaism is spiritually compromised and handicapped, especially those who think they are not. There is only one ultimate solution, and Jesus handed it to the Pharisees on a silver platter: *“Do not be called Teacher; for One is your Teacher and you are all brothers. And do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven. And do not be called leaders; for One is your Leader, that is Christ. But the greatest among you shall be your servant. And whoever exalts himself shall be humbled; and whoever humbles himself shall be exalted.”*<sup>8</sup> If the Church followed this one simple command, Pharisaism would shrivel up overnight.

At the same time as He castigated the Pharisees, Jesus had compassion on the multitudes who were trapped in this religious mire. He saw those sitting in the synagogues as “harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd”<sup>9</sup> – because no one walked alongside them, getting their feet muddied and humbly tending to their spiritual needs. In other words, these shepherds were spiritually useless.

---

<sup>6</sup> “Now I exhort you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all agree, and there be no divisions among you, but you be made complete in the same mind and in the same judgment. For I have been informed that there are quarrels among you. Now I mean this, that each one of you is saying, ‘I am of Paul,’ and ‘I of Apollos,’ and ‘I of Cephas,’ and ‘I of Christ.’ Has Christ been divided? Paul was not crucified for you, was he? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?”

<sup>7</sup> Are we hypocrites for exposing and criticizing what we see in the churches and then criticizing *them* for denouncing each other? Was Paul a hypocrite for exhorting the disciples to remain unified in love and brotherhood and then publicly excoriating Peter or others for their hypocritical behavior? Was Jesus a hypocrite for exhorting his followers to seek and save the lost while at the same time publicly denouncing the lost Pharisees? The end-days Church is excoriated by Jesus himself in Rev.3. But nobody’s listening. Is Jesus a hypocrite for criticizing his own? Are we shooting our wounded? It’s true they’re wounded, but their means for healing is not God’s means. They multiply the wound of God’s people.

<sup>8</sup> Mat. 23:8-12

<sup>9</sup> Mat. 9:35-37

If you belong to an institutional church that is staffed by Christian professionals who were trained in Bible schools and seminaries, or if you attend one of these schools, then you are in a religious system that matches the one Jesus warned His followers to avoid. I was educated in several of these "factories" as a young Christian and helped spread the "gospel of Pharisaism" for many years. It is not the Gospel of Jesus Christ, though it uses the same lingo. If you are currently *in* one of these "factories," we suggest you rethink your position and your goals and values. We understand that the devil has made it nearly impossible to be in fulltime ministry in the Christian Church unless you graduate from one of these institutions, but don't be deceived. Entering in to this system will change you, and once it does, it will be very difficult to extricate yourself or to undo the damage. Why? Because just as literal leaven cannot be removed from bread, spiritual leaven is very difficult if not impossible to remove from our hearts once we allow it to take root. We can't even see it, let alone remove it. That is precisely why Jesus chose this metaphor.

If you think this is too strongly stated, we suggest a simple experiment: Read Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, comparing the ministry of Jesus with the synagogue system of His day. (In fact, you can do that with us in the chapter on the four gospels.) Then take a close look at Jesus' followers. What kind of people did He choose? Were any of them from within the religious system? If not, why not? How was He treated by the religious establishment? Who were the people Jesus identified as spiritually blind? As you read through the Gospels, you will immediately notice Jesus had a lot of contact with these men and the institutions that both formed and fed off of them. There is no lack of information on this subject if you have "eyes to see and ears to hear."

Jesus warned His followers to have nothing to do with "the leaven of the Pharisees" because it is the leaven, or deception, that makes a person spiritually blind. (Jesus called the Pharisees "blind leaders *of the blind*.") We mention this because it is not enough to avoid *being* a Pharisee. That much should be obvious. But it is just as important to put distance between yourself and the well-oiled machinery that keeps Pharisaism running. We mean this: you will be blind to the Kingdom of God if you don't do what Jesus said (e.g. Matthew 13:14-15). If you instead see academic credentials as the essential route to usefulness in the Church, or think of yourself as a "peacemaker" who can live and work within this leavened system, we advise you to take Jesus' instructions seriously. Your faith will suffer until you make Him Lord of your heart in every area. The consequences may be much worse than this, but certainly your experience with God will be shallow compared with those we read about in the New Testament.

K.C.