

WHO NEEDS ENEMIES ?

We all face opposition, maybe even persecution, however hard we try to do good. In fact, the harder we try, the more likely we are to be opposed. Some cynic has observed, "No good deed goes unpunished!" My entire career serving congregations has been filled with much tension because of opposition. Who have been my "enemies"?

Although I have spoken out against the famous, blatant atheist, Madalyn Murray O'Hair, neither she nor any of her tribe have ever so much as noticed me. I have felt no malicious onslaughts against my efforts in serving God from any of them.

No newspaper has ever taken me to task or slandered my work, as obnoxious as I might have made myself in the community. On the contrary, newspapers have given helpful coverage to our newsworthy projects.

Even though I have refuted doctrines of other churches repeatedly by radio, the leaders of other local churches have never launched a campaign to close down my congregation or to run me out of town. About fifty years ago I joined the local Ministerial Alliance. There I found that all the other ministers were totally respectful of each other and they were as unwilling to compromise their convictions as I was.

No TV or radio station has slandered me or my work. None to which I applied ever refused to sell me and my congregation time. I have conducted thousands of radio programs with full cooperation and personal friendship with the station personnel.

At no time have police come to warn, arrest, or subpoena me for my religious activity. Police have always been most courteous and helpful in escorting funeral processions. And a few times when I have deserved a fine for speeding, they favored me with a warning instead of the fine.

While I always advocated the separation of church and state, at various times city or county work crews gratuitously helped the church with such things as driveways, parking areas, and signs.

Yes, I have had to deal with the dreadful IRS! Rules applying to preachers have even baffled professional tax returns preparers. Many times I have filed my own returns, ever so inaccurately done, I am sure, but I never received audits or threats.

Just out of college and only preaching part-time during registration for the draft in WWII, my draft board never questioned my exempt status or demanded my enlistment into active duty in the military.

WOW!! Is this a great country, or what? What a blessing to live in such freedom as never to be molested by government, civil authorities, religious leaders, or community leaders. None of these were my adversaries.

Did I ever face opposition? Have I had enemies who worked against my efforts in serving God? I know this will sound harsh. I say it to cause us to be ashamed enough to change our ways. **WHO NEEDS ENEMIES WHEN YOU HAVE BRETHREN WHO SERVE THEIR PURPOSES?**

I recount experiences here, not out of self-pity, but to express what most any preacher or leader in the church has come to recognize: Our greatest enemy has been within the church. Brother has been too eager to rise in opposition to the work of his brother. Not willing to allow others to have freedom of conscience, those who differ on most any sort of issue are often slandered and their work is maligned. Even with the sincerity of a Saul of Tarsus in misguided zeal, we can fill the role of adversary-accuser-slanderer-“satan” while supposedly standing for truth. Far more than a novel thought, this is a most frightening truth

An enthusiastic “telephone friend” who works in one of the several Memphis Urban Ministry projects in Memphis recently sent me the mailout of an area preacher. This successful work of reaching souls is denounced because it supposedly uses the wrong name, the wrong terminology, the wrong pattern, and the wrong organization. His arguments are forced and his Scripture prooftexts are twisted. He offers no commendation for them helping the poor and rescuing souls. He refuses to participate and opposes, seemingly preferring to leave those souls in their sins if they do not meet his narrowed concepts. That is the sort of negativism that has plagued our churches from within for generations. No urban opposing enemies like drug dealers and gangs are needed in Memphis while there are brethren who do their job for them!

Following the long established practice of conducting lectureships and workshops among us, several years ago some of the churches in Nashville drew thousands of enthusiastic disciples to lectureships in Nashville. But they called it Nashville Jubilee. Horrors! Some of the area churches paid for a full-page advertisement in the Nashville Tennessean denouncing the unholy event to all the public. Such proud self-righteousness! Wasn't it Pogo who said, “We have met the enemy. It is us!”?

These two sad pictures are not aberrations, but they depict the very character of many of our people who have opposed most everything that has been attempted. It has brought splits about most every aspect of our supposed “worship services,” evangelistic efforts, and benevolent, congregational, and church-related activities. In spite of this negativism, we have grown in numbers mainly due to the partisan zeal that self-righteous separatism engenders. One of the ironies of the two preceding examples is that those trying to defeat the work of other congregations contend for congregational independence!

In my lifetime there has been open season to shoot out of the saddle anyone trying to lead us out of our traditional ruts. Men like Carl Ketcherside and Leroy Garrett were choice targets of the enemies within as they directed us back to the basic Scriptural aims of our Stone-Campbell Movement. Journals, church bulletins, and pulpiteers denounce those of this generation who are courageously leading in redirection. We can hardly produce leaders of national stature simply because they are opposed by their brethren. In spite of all this, Max Lucado has won national recognition and genuine respect. He has had to go into private ministry to be able to do it. If our people were supportive of him, our whole Movement might regain the image of the original Movement by Stone and Campbell. He is not hindered by the atheists, humanists, and leaders of other religious groups but by those who are his brothers in the Church of Christ.

Non-conformists and people with problems have not always found nurture among our churches. They may not have been withdrawn from but many have been distanced and discouraged by lack of care by the shepherds and by the frigidity of the flock.

It would be comforting to know that I have always been on the right side of every issue, but purity of purpose and sincere zeal that I might claim do not guarantee wisdom. My talents have not prepared me for all the expectations congregations have for preachers. And who could possibly please everyone in the congregation? Would you work for a corporation if you had to please every manager and employee in it? As long as the preacher can wrap our traditional, credal teachings in new illustrations and interesting narratives, he does well. Let him learn something new and teach it -- well, he should have known better. If he is not dismissed immediately, angry members may leave, and he is to blame for splitting the church! Need I tell you how I know that?

When I finally began to see our legalistic entrapment and began to give redirection from the pulpit, it was received enthusiastically by many. But others began to hear strange sounds and rose in opposition. I could understand their opposition, yet in my limited wisdom I tried to break the chain of our traditional "objector rule" without success. I had to begin my private ministry in order to publish my convictions. There was a multitude of souls ready for release from suffocating rules and enslaving legalism who welcomed my teachings. But there were more who were not.

It must be that God knows my timid nature and has protected me from personal attacks. When protectors of the faith are out giant-killing, they don't win a medal for attacking a midjet. So I have been spared much. However, many have told me of pulpit and bulletin denouncements and warnings preachers have made about my books. Two books by different parties have been published intended to critique Free In Christ as destructive teaching. One has the menacing title, "A Cloak of Malice." My books have not received much welcome in preacher training schools. Twice some good sisters honored me by circulating petitions that I change addresses! I have been blamed for dividing churches where I have never been. Try to figure that out! Teaching unity and love is divisive!

A good number of my books have gone to people in other churches. They offer no opposition. The writings have been accepted in some of their seminaries. What I consider the highest evaluation ever given Free In Christ came from the pastor of a large Lutheran congregation. So these folks are not my adversaries.

I do not count any brother who disagrees with me as a personal enemy even though he misrepresents me or slanders me. I understand his mindset in which he was nurtured. I just wish he could see himself as he really is, like Saul of Tarsus kicking against the ox goad, hurting mostly himself and his supporters. Am I being arrogant? We do not think it arrogant to recognize that in Saul.

My years of work with congregations have been rewarding. Many dedicated people have been supportive and gracious. May the Lord reward them generously. Yet I could never feel secure. No high flying. Others of you know the feeling. The preacher's blood pressure rises as he attends the elders' meeting or business meeting of the men. He never knows what he will be called into question for. He never knows what verdict concerning him will be announced that was reached by a clandestine meeting prior to the regular meeting. He may be censured, warned, or dismissed without ceremony or recourse. He has no standing in the court of the elders. He is their hired man. Our development of the "professional surrogate-elder system" has produced a conflict-ridden situation as you have learned through experience.

In spite of all I have reviewed, I am optimistic that good change in attitudes is developing among us, and we are becoming more Christ-centered and less doctrinal-scruple-centered. We are recognizing that unity in diversity is the only kind of real unity there is. Unity by conformity is forced unity and it can be enforced only by a totally authoritarian system. Those who seek to enforce conformity become the divisive enemies within. It is sad, but true.

Preachers and teachers, I beg you to become conscious of the negativity of your message. We are not brothers, not the "adversary", "satan," fighting or competing against each other. We are children of the same Father, bearing and forbearing with each other, demanding perfection in no one except, perhaps, in ourselves.

(Cecil Hook; February 2003) []