



The Reflector

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WHO HINDERED YOU?

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“You ran well. Who hindered you from obeying the truth?” (Gal. 5:7).

These words, addressed to the churches of Galatia (1:2), suggest the ease with which good churches can be hindered. In chapter 1, Paul expressed his surprise, not just that they were turned away, but that it happened so soon. “I marvel that you are turning away so soon from Him who called you in the grace of Christ...” (1:6).

Paul did not ask, “*What* hindered you?”, but “*Who* hindered you?” When *something* goes wrong with a church, *somebody* causes it. It may not always be possible to positively identify the culprit by name, but he (or they) exists. When the *who* can be identified, he needs to be dealt with sternly by brethren (Gal. 2:4,5; Tit. 3:10; Rom. 16:17,18). While many may become involved, usually there is one or two key persons at the center of the unrest — either provoking or enticing the others to get involved. Identifying and dealing firmly with the key person(s) will go a long way in solving the unrest caused by the problem. At Antioch, Paul had to deal with a problem caused by Peter's hypocrisy (Gal. 2:11-21). Peter was not the only hypocrite in the crowd: “And the rest of the Jews also played the hypocrite with him, so that even Barnabas was carried away with their hypocrisy” (Gal 2:13). Was Paul unfair in singling out Peter for this public rebuke? No. Peter was the ringleader and core of the problem. He was the principle *who* of that problem.

Paul indicates that while he knew *what* the trouble was in the Galatian churches, he may have not specifically known *who* the troublemakers were. Even though Paul may not have known *who* they were, he did not try

to mask how he felt about them — whoever they were. “The one who is throwing you into confusion will pay the penalty, whoever he may be... As for those agitators, I wish they would go the whole way and emasculate themselves!” (Gal. 5:10,12 *New International Version*) Oh, can't you just hear some whining brethren complaining as to why Paul did not show more “love, understanding, and patience” toward these agitators, even though they had thrown the church into confusion? No, this was no time to be tentative and timid, the churches of Galatia were in trouble — troubled by three timeless hindrances to the purity, peace and progress of churches:

False Doctrine

The false doctrine that said “you must be circumcised and keep the law” (Acts 15:1,24) troubled many of the first century churches. The churches at Jerusalem, Antioch, (Acts 15) Corinth (2 Cor. 11:22), Rome and possibly others were disturbed by it as well as Galatians (5:1-6,11). Like most doctrinal error, it worked like leaven and threatened the whole lump (Gal. 5:9). A little leaven, secretly and strategically placed in a lump of dough, may go unnoticed for a while. Even when it is noticed it may seem too little and insignificant to be concerned about at the time. However, if left unchecked, it will eventually spread through the whole lump.

False teachers seldom hit the church with a frontal attack. They usually begin covertly long before becoming overt. A wolf in sheep's clothing may secretly introduce his little leaven and let it do its initial work with as little fanfare as possible. “False brethren *secretly* brought in” their doctrine (Gal. 2:4). The idea is that they “smuggled” (*Strong's Concordance*) or “infiltrated” (*New*

International Version) it into the church. Peter also spoke of the secretive work of false teachers (2 Pet. 2:1). Once the leaven is in, it will continue to work until it destroys the church — unless someone is wise enough to spot it and courageous enough to deal with it decisively.

Few churches are destroyed and/or divided by words or deeds that are publicly initiated. Error is usually introduced privately — private conversations, home classes and counseling sessions — often designedly kept out of ear shot of seasoned veterans of the Cross in the congregation. After enough disciples have been indoctrinated to form a power-base, the chief advocates then feel confident enough to spring it on the whole church. The leaven is now out in the open, but it has already done its major damage. The whole church either embraces the doctrine or, as is more often the case, the church divides. Earlier in this century we saw churches disturbed by premillennialism and institutionalism in this fashion. We are seeing signs that the same pattern is being repeated in the divorce and remarriage issue.

Once divisive teachers have gone public or have been exposed, they usually try to reinforce their positions by attempting to destroy the influence of faithful, knowledgeable, and respected brethren, who stand in their way to gaining the preeminence that they, in their selfish ambition, desire. (cf. 3 John 9-11) With their “smooth words and flattering speech” (Rom. 16:18), they have won the hearts of enough naive brethren to feel confident enough to openly attack those who stand in the way of their ambitions. Often whole churches are turned against godly men, like Paul, who have unselfishly built up the church, and justly earned their respect, by toil and sacrifice. Factious men are good at stirring up a hornets nest and then skillfully shifting the blame for the confusion to those who, for truth's sake, must step in and sharply oppose them.

Those whom Paul called, “false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into apostles of Christ” (2 Cor. 11:13), had apparently succeeded in turning many of the Corinthians against Paul (2 Corinthians, chapters 10-12). Paul laments, “the more abundantly I love you, the less I am loved.” (2 Cor. 12:15). While pleading with them “by the meekness and gentleness of Christ” (10:1),

he did not step aside and let them have their way. He directs some of his strongest words toward those who were getting carried away with these teachers. He asks them to bear with him in a little foolishness (11:1) as he defended himself against their unfounded charges. With biting irony, he writes:

“For he who comes preaching another Jesus whom we have not preached, or if you receive a different spirit which you have not received, or a different gospel which you have not accepted — you may well put up with it! ... I say again, let no one think me a fool. If otherwise, at least receive me as a fool, that I also may boast a little. When I speak, I speak not according to the Lord, but as it were, foolishly, in this confidence of boasting. Seeing that many boast according to the flesh, I also will boast. For you put up with fools gladly, since you *yourselves* are wise! For you put up with it if one brings you into bondage, if one devours *you*, if one takes *from you*, if one exalts himself, if one strikes you on the face. To *our* shame I say that we were too weak for that! But in whatever anyone is bold—I speak foolishly—I am bold also.” (2 Cor. 11:4,16-21)

Feeling the pinch of rebuke, brethren who are being corrected often try to relieve the pressure by charging those who are correcting them and other brethren with wrong doing. Not wanting to appear self-righteous, the ones rebuking are often hesitant to deny the counter charges. This leaves the one who leveled the charges with a sense of victory in the confrontation and feeling less a need to correct his wrong — for after all, at least in his mind, he has shown that his critic is just as guilty of wrong as he is. Paul was not willing to allow the Corinthians this luxury. He knew he had done them no wrong and flatly said so: “We have wronged no one, we have corrupted no one, we have cheated no one.” (2 Cor. 7:2). We need more men of the character and courage of Paul to deal with those who are sinning against the Lord and hindering His churches, without letting them shift attention away from their mischief to the faults of others — real or imagined. One is not going to be helped until he faces up to his unfaithfulness and ungodliness —

regardless of what anyone else has done or has not done.

Discord

After dealing sharply with false teachers, using some of the sharpest language in all Scripture, Paul now warns the Galatians against another hindrance — internal discord: “For you, brethren, have been called to liberty, only do not use liberty as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. For all the law is fulfilled in one word, even this: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ But *if you bite and devour one another, beware lest you be consumed by one another!*” (Gal 5:13-15).

While false doctrine is at the root of much of the strife and division among churches, it is by no means the cause of it all. Brethren are quite adept at generating and perpetuating internal strife by other means. One does not have to teach a destructive doctrine to be a divisive or factious man (cf. Titus 3:10) Of the original word, *hairetikos*, Vine says, “causing division...not necessarily ‘heretical,’ in the sense of holding false doctrine”. While one who introduces into the church unscriptural doctrines and practices is certainly a divisive man, generating strife, there are other ways to stir up trouble. One can generate strife with his sinful *disposition* as well as his false *positions*.

One may create discord with his contentious disposition. There is a vast difference in contending for the faith and just being plain contentious. We can abuse that militant spirit needed to “contend earnestly for the faith” (Jude 3; cf. Gal. 2:5, 11-14) by approaching every disagreement, no matter how minor, insignificant, or inconsequential with the same degree of militancy. While it is absolutely necessary to contend earnestly for the faith, it is not necessary to turn every point of discussion that might arise among brethren into a major issue.

There is such a thing as being “obsessed with disputes and arguments over words” (1 Tim. 6:4,5) or “unhealthy interest in controversies and quarrels about words that result in envy, strife, malicious talk, evil suspicions and constant friction between men of corrupt mind...” (*New International Version*).

Paul urges Timothy to “avoid foolish and ignorant disputes, knowing that they generate strife.” (2 Tim 2:23) He gives a similar admonition to Titus. (Tit. 3:9).

One may destroy unity with his overbearing and never bending disposition. (cf. Eph. 4:1-3) If one has a forceful personality and is also inclined to be highly opinionated, self-willed, and unwilling to yield, he will generate strife sooner or later.

“Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show by good conduct that his works are done in the meekness of wisdom. But if you have bitter envy and self-seeking in your hearts, do not boast and lie against the truth. This wisdom does not descend from above, but is earthly, sensual, demonic. For where envy and self-seeking exist, confusion and every evil thing are there. But the wisdom that is from above 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. (Jas. 3:13-18).

Any over-bearing and/or self-willed member hurts himself and the church, and if he is allowed to lead, he may make havoc of the church. One with this type of disposition should never be allowed to serve as an elder. (Tit. 1:7; 1 Pet. 5:3) — or any other position of influence for that matter. He will cause trouble sooner or later.

One may create unrest with a zeal untempered by knowledge and good judgment. (cf. Rom. 10:1). If one's zeal for God runs ahead of his knowledge, wisdom, and judgment, he can create more racket than a dozen wise men can quite. He is like a car equipped with a souped up engine, oversized fuel tank and reinforced body -- with no steering system nor brakes. Such a one often has his own idealistic concept of how things should be and tries to push and shove the brethren into his visionary mold. Even if his view is correct, he needs to learn to gently teach the brethren into conformity. (cf. 2 Tim. 2:23-26).

Such zealots, in their over-heated enthusiasm to get on with things, often rush into matters with little or no forethought or preparation. Their method is to act now, think later. In their fervor and self-confidence coupled with ineptness, they usually tear up far more than they fix. It is this kind of mentality that James is countering in

when he says, “let not many of you become teachers...” (James 3:1-12).

One may cause problems with a meddlesome disposition. (Read about busybodies in 2 Thess. 3:11; 1 Tim. 5:13 and 1 Pet. 4:16). If this disposition happens to be blended with the overly zealous personality described above, then stand back and watch the fireworks! A busybody tends to *inject himself* into every problem he can find among the brethren, thinking he must instantly solve it without regard to the nature of the problem. He cannot see, while some problems can and must be solved immediately, before they have time to do irreparable damage, others are less urgent and menacing and should be left alone — giving time for long-term spiritual growth to solve them. Too, before one injects himself into *every* problem he spots among his brethren and makes it his problem he needs to remember: “He who passes by and meddles in a quarrel not his own is like one who takes a dog by the ears.” (Prov. 26:17).

He may even infuse himself into problems that have been dormant for years. I have known a preacher (or other member) to come into a congregation and learn of an old problem that brethren, who were on the scene at the time, had done their best to solve. Because of the complexity of the problem, they may have not have been able to resolve it ideally, but were able to reach a workable solution that would leave the brethren at peace without compromising the gospel. Now this intruder, armed with an unshakable faith in his ability and a few fragments of information about the background, details, and complexity of the situation, jumps right in and proceeds to impose his ideal(?) solution. (Brethren, as much as we might like it, all problems and solutions are not simple). It is not only highly unlikely that he will be able help the affair at this late date, he is far more likely to get brethren to biting and devouring one another again over things that they probably would never have thought about again, had they not been reminded.

One can generate strife with an overly talkative disposition. “In the multitude of words sin is not lacking, but he who restrains his lips is wise” (Prov 10:19). “So then, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath” (James 1:19) Constant critics, gossips, talebearers, can cause endless strife within a

church. The book of Proverbs tells of the damage that such can do:

“A talebearer reveals secrets, but he who is of a faithful spirit conceals a matter.” (11:13)

“A perverse man sows strife, and a whisperer separates the best of friends.” (16:28)

“A fool's lips enter into contention, and his mouth calls for blows.” (18:6)

“He who goes about as a talebearer reveals secrets; therefore do not associate with one who flatters with his lips.” (20:19)

“Where there is no wood, the fire goes out; and where there is no talebearer, strife ceases. As charcoal is to burning coals, and wood to fire, so is a contentious man to kindle strife. The words of a talebearer are like tasty trifles, and they go down into the inmost body.” (26:20-22).

Worldliness

The third hindrance that Paul deals with in Galatians 5 is *worldliness* — the lusts or works of the flesh. (Verses 16-26; cf. 1 John 2:15-17). These things mentioned spring from a carnal mind rather than a spiritual one. (vv. 16,17). We might categorize the “works of the flesh” as follows:

1. Worldly sensuality — Adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness.
2. Worldly cults — Idolatry, sorcery (witchcraft).
3. Worldly dispositions — Hatred, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions.
4. Worldly strife — Dissensions, heresies, murder.
5. Worldly pleasures — Drunkenness, revelries.

All of these hinder the church when found among its members. Again, “a little leaven leavens the whole lump” if left unchecked. (cf. 1 Cor. 5:6). Those who have been redeemed by the precious blood of the Lamb must live above this level.

How well are we running, individually and collectively? Are we helping or hindering the church? Are we guilty of false teaching, generating strife, or worldliness? Are we allowing ourselves to be adversely affected by those who are? We all need to reexamine our positions and dispositions from time to time lest we become a hindrance to the congregation and the Lord's Cause in general.