

MAKING HAVOC OF THE CHURCH

Acts 8:1-4

Was Saul guilty of Stephen's death? So far as the records go, he did not cast a stone. There is no indication that he lifted so much as his hand, or spoke a word, yet, he gave his consent by his presence, by his silence, and by his willingness to guard the garments of those who did the deed.

What constitutes guilt? Does it require an overt act for a man to be guilty? The scriptures tell us that murder lies in the hate within the heart, and that adultery is in the evil look, and that stealing is in the covetous wish.

No court would convict Saul for the death of Stephen, yet he stood convicted before the court of God. The courts of men can judge only the words and deeds of men, but the court of God judges the thoughts, the motives, the desires, and the silent attitudes of men.

The court of public opinion is based on popular and prevailing sentiment, but the court of heaven is based on the principles of right and wrong and eternal justice, regardless of the prejudices and opinions of men. Saul was justified by men, but condemned by God; he was acquitted at the bar of public sentiment, but he was condemned at the bar of God. He was excused and protected by the courts of the Jews and the Romans, but he was blamed and censured at the court of heaven.

When a man is tried before the court of God, he must give account of his silence as well as his words; he must answer for his thoughts as well as his actions; he must answer for his motives as well as for his deeds; he must face his spirit as well as his conduct. His eyes may tell more than the words he has uttered. The very silence of a man may speak louder than his utterances.

There are degrees of guilt. All men are not guilty alike. The guilt of the sin done ignorantly is not the same as the sin of light and knowledge. More is expected of the man who knows more. His obligation is greater, and his responsibility is greater.

The guilt of the sin of impulse is not the same as the guilt of the sin of premeditation. Conditions may spring the trigger of impulse and make a man do what he never would do if he had but a moment to reflect; but premeditation has carefully reflected and then decided to engage in wickedness. The guilt of the sin of weakness is not the same as the guilt of the sin of determination.

Saul was prejudiced, but he was responsible for his prejudice. He willed it so; the truth was placed before him, and he rejected it and followed error. He was ignorant of the real facts, but not because he did not have the light and knowledge offered him. Saul's silent consent did not tell the whole story. The look in his eyes spoke more than the words from his lips. His silent presence in that murderous mob meant more than his participation in the stoning. It was not what Saul did, but what he wanted to do; not what he said, but what he thought. His lips may have been speechless, but his heart was filled with hate, murder and the venom of hell.

Saul may have been the first church wrecker, but he was not the last one. There have been and are various types of church wreckers.

Saul made havoc of the church by his cruel, ruthless campaign of hate and slaughter. This has been Satan's method in many places. Wherever Christianity is first introduced in the country, Satan tries to crush it.

Constantine made havoc of the churches by officially declaring Christianity a state religion and forcing men to accept it. By this means he filled the churches with godless

members, commercialized them, and robbed them of their power.

In the dark ages the priests made havoc of the churches by lowering their moral standards, by selling the rights of indulgences, and by making them political institutions. Wherever this system has been accepted, the church has ceased to be a spiritual institution and has become a machine, a system of formalities, and a hiding place for corruption.

In later days more have made havoc of the church by popularizing it. It has become popular but weak; it has become rich but powerless; it has become worldly by lacking in spirituality.

Some people have made havoc of the church by splitting it into factions, smashing the fellowship, wrecking the membership, and filling the hearts of the members with contention, strife and hate. Who can measure the woe of such internal foes of the church? Who can repair the damage done? Who can heal the hurt in the hearts of good men? Some men do it ignorantly; some men do it deliberately; some men do it for personal attention, gain, and glory; some men do it because they are but tools in the hands of the devil; but whoever does it and for whatever cause, must answer to God for the havoc he has made of the church.

But doubtless the greatest havoc made of the church is made by its friends. They wreck the church by their neglect; they have theoretically endorsed it, but practically denied it. Many a church has been stabbed to death by its friends; it has been killed by the painless method. They belong to it, but do not support its worship.

There are various reactions to such havoc. The reaction to Saul's murderous campaign was that the Christians were scattered. Wherever they went they preached the gospel of a risen Lord. Wherever they preached people believed and were saved, and wherever people were saved new churches sprang up. That generation did not pass until the persecutors saw that they had only multiplied the church.

Another reaction was that the church was purified. The godless element was afraid to align itself publicly with the movement; it was not willing to pay the price. Consequently only such men and women as were sincere, and born again, and willing to pay any price for their faith, were the ones who made up the membership. A church under such conditions may not have as many members, but it will have more power. Our churches are suffering today because membership in them does not mean enough nor cost enough.

Another reaction to that campaign of carnage was that it disgusted the persecutors. Wickedness may prevail in a community until wicked men themselves become disgusted. The devil often overdoes a thing.

The fact that the churches have lived in spite of these raids upon them is unanswerable evidence that they are divine. Such slaughter would have finished any other organization or institution in the world, and it would have been the end of the churches if they had not been creations of God. Through the dark clouds that overshadowed the churches, there is one star of hope that shines brightly. Our Lord has promised ultimate victory to His servants.

From verse three we learn that Saul made a personal visit into the homes in an effort to destroy the conviction which the people had in Christ and His resurrection. His campaign was one of propaganda, seeking to break down the Christian sentiment. It was a whispering campaign, like an enemy that silently sows his tares in the night and laughs when they spring up in the daylight, like an enemy that pollutes the spring from which the city gets its water until disease and death spread their pall over the whole community.

It was also a campaign of intimidation. The people were made afraid to think unless they had the sanction of the rulers above them. Occasionally such a condition prevails now. A church or a whole community trembles under the assumed power of some man or group of

men, and they dare not cross the purposes and schemes of these ruling lords.

This campaign drove the Christians out into new fields, and wherever they went they bore testimony to Christ and His resurrection, and people believed, and new churches sprang up. God can make even the wrath of men praise Him. And He can even make the devil bear testimony for Him.

Saul of Tarsus was the man who initiated and directed this campaign of hate. Suppose all of his energy and zeal had been turned to worthy ends! Who could measure the good done? Suppose his personal visits had been in the interest of the souls of men, to give them faith, hope and blessedness! Who can estimate the value of such a man in the community? Suppose his ability to direct and carry on such a campaign had been used for God! How far would it have reached in its blessing?

If Saul had gone out in his house-to-house visitation to win the lost, to lift the fallen, to build up the weak church, to comfort the sorrowing, and to scatter hope and good cheer, instead of criticizing, destroying and wrecking the hearts, lives, homes and hopes of the people, his campaign would have made all hell tremble with fear. What a lesson for men everywhere! Let them give their energies and talents to doing good and not evil, to building up and not tearing down. In other words, let God control their talents instead of the devil.

Was this young Jew intended for such a work of destruction? Was this the best use for his talents? Had he discovered himself? The wail of his later life was, "What a waste of life that mad zeal was." Ask yourself this question, "Am I using my talents to the best effect? Is this the best contribution I can make to the world?"