

Perilous Times Part 2: Features of Apostate Behaviour

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IN THE course of his prophetic words in *2 Timothy 3*, Paul moves swiftly to list the chief features of behaviour that will come to the fore in a perilous season, naming nineteen prominent sins which will take over society. These evil tendencies will be justified and applauded in the world, but the people of God must view them with great concern, recognising them as the very opposite of Christian character.

The first five are about self-service. Paul's prophecy tells us that people will unashamedly focus their attention on themselves, being 'lovers of their own selves', so that self-service will become the approved and the noble goal for all people. He virtually predicts the promotion of self-esteem as the atheistic basis of well-being.

It follows that family breakdown will be commonplace, because love for others will take second place to self-consideration in the warped society of perilous times. The vilest of evils – such as child abuse – will be prevalent, because gratification of personal lust, however perverted, will take precedence over the protectiveness of parents towards their own children.

This is how low people will fall under the influence of self-love. They will put their own interests before anything else, believing that only fools would do otherwise, and the philosophy of 'self-esteem' will conquer the willing minds of millions.

Young people will grow up trained to seek their own ends and their personal pleasure, and even young believers will be infected with the disease. Ask most young Christians today why they have chosen their particular course of study or career, and take note of the reply. Is it because they prayed for guidance or wanted to do some good? Or is it merely because they enjoy that subject, or because they want to make money, or be important and admired? Often a few questions will reveal that (unnoticed by the church or parents) the world has shaped their outlook on life, and even saved, earnest people have fallen into its mould.

Just look at present-day society, and its tastes! Think of the hours that people sit watching TV chat shows in which an endless line of celebrities talk about themselves, regaling gullible audiences with self-applauding anecdotes. The society of the past would have dismissed them as conceited, banal and pathetic, but now their arrogance is acceptable, and it pleases and entertains everyone. In line with Paul's prophecy, serving roles are now rather despised. Service and devotion are largely regarded as foolish sentimentality in an age which has 'put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter'. Gracious womanhood is a most precious jewel in the divine order; a conspicuous example of unselfish and loving commitment to the well-being of others; a radiant picture of the supreme goal for all human beings: to serve Almighty God, and to be devoted to him and his cause. We are intended to live and breathe for the purposes of God, and to serve one another, this being the substance of 'all the law and the prophets' (*Matthew 22.36-40*).

It is by God's kindness and mercy that a natural inclination to exercise care has been maintained in women, despite the Fall, and especially within families. It is a divinely provided picture of the standard and calling of all people. It is a rebuke to human pride and selfish independence, that seeks only to dominate and disdain others. But in perilous times people retort: 'I don't see it that way; meekness and service is pathetic and insulting. No one should have a serving role; everyone should exploit to the full their liberty to achieve acclaim and self-satisfaction.'

The present age puffs up the individual ego, promising everyone the centre of the stage of life.

Paul's warning that people shall be 'lovers of their own selves' is intended to put us on our guard. The churches of Christ must take the greatest care to ensure they are not shaped by the world's dislike of a serving stance, or by the hatred of biblical womanhood spread by atheistic feminism.

From the promoters of godlessness we are to 'turn away'. Proud-hearted people lacking the 'servant-spirit' of meekness (*Galatians 5.23*) should not be received into membership until the mindset of this perilous time is behind them, and a new outlook formed by the work of the Spirit.

Do we have church families who are 'lovers of their own selves', in that they live only for themselves? They worship at public services, and appear to enjoy the Word, but their energies are wholly applied to the well-being of their families, leaving nothing for the cause of Jesus Christ. Do we give no pastoral help to aloof and wayward friends? Do we bring no challenge, no exhortation and no persuasion? Do we not discourage waywardness and show the way to spiritual advance, service and fulfilment?

The selfishness and self-serving of this present perilous age is wholly offensive to God and must not be allowed to ruin the churches, claiming families, and becoming gradually accepted as a legitimate version of Christian living.

'Covetous...'

Paul's prophecy moves into yet further detail as it spells out the evil features of a perilous time, naming four supplementary manifestations of self-love. People, says Paul, will be 'covetous, boasters, proud, blasphemers'.

The present age is desperately covetous, presenting a formidable danger for believing churches, because the lust to have soon becomes the right to have. Yesterday's luxuries are today's necessities, and if a new generation (in the West) is already spoiled with plenty, where is it heading?

Faithful believers must honour the duties of self-denial, sincere stewardship of means, and a modest, reasonable standard of life. Our Saviour and Elder Brother is a giving Saviour, and a family likeness is meant to be in all his children. In perilous times, however, covetousness enters the church like floodwater, rendering the place foul and polluted.

Big-time televangelists and charismatic leaders are often exposed as living in extreme covetousness, yet their supporters never seem to mind. True believers, however, know that covetousness is a breach of primary moral law, and is listed in *1 Corinthians 5* as an excommunicable offence. A grossly self-indulgent, rich-living man who will not change his ways, should not be allowed to remain a member of a Gospel church, let alone serve as an elder or deacon, for the apostle says, 'From such turn away.'

Once again we have a special duty to young people who profess the Lord. Could it happen in our church that an otherwise earnest young person might buy an expensive, stylish sports coupé, because there has been no practical teaching on the standards of the Christian life? Or is there a poisonous example from older members who run unnecessarily luxurious cars?

The young have grown up in an age which says: 'Spend it all on yourself! You are entitled to pleasures, luxuries, fashionable things and status symbols.' Are they helped to see that these are the values of godlessness, and the special goals of a conspicuously evil season?

'Boasters, proud...'

After covetousness, Paul's prophetic words move to two further cases of self-love, namely boasters and proud people. Boasters are those who brag verbally of their imagined accomplishments, whereas the proud are those who are haughty and unteachable. The latter have settled opinions, and are too puffed up to listen to anything which may challenge their ideas or lifestyles.

In Paul's remarkable prophecy, boasting is highlighted as a conspicuous feature of perilous times, and the more so as each successive evil age appears. We see, for example, the culture of television, with its non-stop boasting, hour after hour. Even Christian people, exposed to only short bursts of this, can become accustomed to it, and after a while boasting does not seem so bad after all.

Self-vaunting appears in extreme forms in seasons of apostasy because society ceases to revere

God, and to acknowledge or admire virtuous behaviour. This lack of approval leaves a great void which cannot be allowed. The human heart must justify itself. It must assure itself that by spurning good and spiritual things, it has set itself free to enjoy vastly better things. It must find an alternative focus for its applause and approval. Boasting is a triumph of satanic policy, for it serves to obscure God, and grace, and all divine values from human eyes.

In many congregations boasting has polluted the worship of Almighty God. Instead of the Lord being the sole object of worship, through the deep and powerful sentiments provided in the Word, people stand on platforms to show off their instrumental and vocal skills for the pleasure and applause of the people.

The creature is exalted, and that is what Scripture means by boasting. In some circles even the announcements are full of boasting, as 'wonderfully gifted' people are extolled one after another. A supposedly reformed charismatic mega-church recently issued a video of their pastor praising their worship leader as being the greatest rapper in the world. That same pastor authored a book on humility!

Has boasting become legitimate in our church? Does the talk of the members draw attention to their accomplishments, purchases, family successes, and so on? When the Saviour came, his speech was dedicated to the building up of others, not to his prowess in earthly matters, and that is the right path for his people.

Alongside boasting goes pride, which is self-satisfaction, self-confidence, and self-reliance. Pride has made up its mind. Although commended in the world it is vile in the sight of God, and must never be accepted as a legitimate character trait among believers.

These are perilous days, when pride and confidence are applauded in the world as the essential ingredients in career success, athletic achievement, and every other field of activity. People are increasingly proud in their manner and opinions, and Christians can grow so used to it that they no longer notice when it invades the church.

Dogmatic opinions dominate blogs and social networking sites, where young people are encouraged to assert themselves as though they were veterans of experience and sagacity. They feel absolutely no need for a period of learning and reflection. Pride brought about the fall of Satan and was a prime element in the disobedience of the Garden of Eden. It continues to ruin individual believers and churches, and must be fought so much the harder in an age where it reigns as a chief characteristic of society.

'Blasphemers'

Blasphemers are mentioned by Paul as the fourth and final subdivision of self-love, unusually prominent in perilous times. The end-product of self-love, with its covetousness, boasting and pride, is reached when people become slanderers of God.

Can blasphemy – slander of God – penetrate the churches? In a subtle form, it certainly can, because Christians may absorb the self-seeking, covetous, boastful, proud standards of the age, and so reach a point where they no longer seem to feel that God sees or cares. There is no longer any caution in their step, and no bells of conscience ring. They hear the preaching of the Word (and even preach it themselves) while remaining unmoved and unchallenged, even when their master-sins are most vividly depicted.

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