

Church Leaders in Glass Houses

By FRANKLIN PYLES

Do not throw stones—send prayers

There is a story of a physician who was asked to promote flu shots. He appeared on a popular afternoon talk show and gave the hosts their shots live on camera. It sounded like a good idea at the time.

Nervously, he administered the shots. Suddenly, to his horror, in front of a national television audience, he realized he had used the same needle for both people.

When a pastor or person in ministry makes a mistake, the cameras cannot be turned off. It's done, and everyone knows about it. Their decisions—and their mistakes—affect people's lives forever. For this reason people in ministry stand in particular need of intercession. Throughout his letters, Paul encouraged people to pray by saying that he was continually praying for them. But he also encouraged people to pray for him and the other apostles.

Paul would turn our prayer attention to the minister's effectiveness. Colossians 4:2-4 says, "Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful. And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains. Pray that I may proclaim it clearly, as I should" (NIV).

In prison Paul could have devoted himself to physical survival and to the development of his spiritual life. But in every situation he saw an opportunity to proclaim Christ. He was determined to continue to preach the gospel in the face of persistent attempts to shut down his ministry. He wanted prayer for open doors because he wanted people to be led to Christ even while he was in prison.

Why should we pray for open doors? Because by isolating people from the messengers of the gospel, Satan hinders God's liberating



entrance into their lives.

One of our problems is that we have become so secularized that we view certain events simply as natural occurrences. Thus, we pray for God to work providentially, but do not see what is happening as spiritual warfare against Satan. Because of our secularization, we are not effective in prayer. We simply pray on the surface of events.

Fighting Satan's Hold

Following are several strategies that Satan uses to close doors against Christ's ministers—and how we must pray against them.

Satan seeks to physically block messengers from going to people who need Christ. First Thessalonians 2:18 says, "For we wanted to come to you—certainly I, Paul, did, again and again—but Satan stopped us." Satan is

able to manipulate events to prevent God's messengers from going to places.

Missionaries are stopped by laws that forbid proselytization. It was the marketplace of ideas that gave Paul the opportunity to explain Jesus to the philosophers of Athens. But today in the city of Athens, Paul would be arrested because Greece has a law against proselytization. In some Muslim countries the penalty is death. The refusal of visas is another method used to keep messengers out.

These barriers must be met with vigorous prayer. God can provide new and creative ways for people to come in contact with the message. Lay-people can enter countries that are closed to missionaries. But they, too, will soon be the object of Satan's attacks when they begin to proclaim the gospel.

Pray that entire governments dedicated to hindering the light will be changed. This happened with the destruction of communism in the former Soviet Union. Pray for a new political situation in countries that need the Lord.

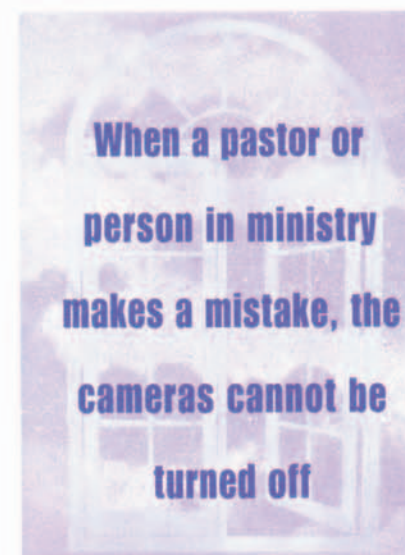
Disease and sickness are obvious ways for Satan to stop messengers from their appointed rounds. Many missionaries have found that as they move into remote areas, they or their families suffer unexplained illnesses. Just as Paul shook the viper into the fire (Acts 28:5), pray that people will be healed to the glory of God.

Loyalty Creates Resistance

Evil spirits hinder the gospel by developing loyalty to ancient customs as seen in tradition-based societies. Ancient customs identify an individual, his place in the family and society and his future. When the gospel brings change, it is very threatening.

Pray for wisdom for the messengers when dealing with these traditional societies. The first church council faced the question of which Jewish traditions must be kept to be Christian.

But the Christians led by Paul said that the Spirit was opening ways for people throughout the world to have the gospel available to them. Paul contended it was not necessary for converts to change their culture to be



Christians. If they were Greeks, let them remain Greeks. This was a tremendous revolution for Christianity.

Missionaries must tediously learn cultural ideals. But even after learning these in the classroom, they face the challenge of communicating the gospel in purity, without cultural baggage.

Pray for missionaries to have wisdom and insight from the Holy Spirit so they can point people to Jesus in a way that they will understand—they can remain

a citizen of their country, a functioning member of their culture, and still allow Christ to be real to them.

Penetration of Society

Pastors and professional Christian workers need open community doors. We all tend to gravitate to where we feel safe. I must be reminded that teaching and preaching on Sunday, while vital to the health of the church, is not penetration of society.

I learned this after moving from one inner-city church to another. Through door-to-door visitation in a Chicago community, the church experienced ongoing results. After moving to Detroit, however, I realized that witnessing in that city comes only after a relationship has been formed. This became the object of both prayer and action.

Our congregation met in a rented building in an urban renewal area. The city government wanted to evict us and demolish the building. Soon I discovered that our problem was shared by many people in the community. This became an open door to at least three subgroups in that neighborhood.

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