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# The Temptation of the Church

A Study of Matt. 4:1-11

By J. J. PELIKAN, JR.

**T**HIS brief essay purposes to examine the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness, not so much the problems which this narrative poses for the area of dogmatics we call Christology (though these are considerable), but the way the story highlights some of the most profound temptations to which the Church and its ministers are subject. For in the three questions which the devil put to Jesus, as Dostoevsky observed, "the whole subsequent history of mankind is, as it were, brought together into one whole, and in them are united all the unresolved historical contradictions of human nature."

## I

The first of the three temptations came in the devil's challenge: "If Thou be the Son of God, command that these stones be made bread." To this challenge our Lord responded with the word from Deuteronomy: "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth from the mouth of God." Faced by a choice between the spectacular and the kerygmatic, Jesus chose the kerygmatic. Miracle worker that He was to be, He nevertheless insisted that the allure which the miraculous holds for men was not the purpose of His coming nor the central feature of His work. For man does not live by bread alone, not even by bread miraculously wrought, but by the speaking of God. This was not the last time in Jesus' career that He was confronted by this choice. Repeatedly He drew men by miracles whom He did not hold afterwards by His message, for men will always respond to the miraculous, but it is only the speaking of God that gives them life.

The temptation to succeed through the miraculous and the spectacular rather than through the kerygmatic is one which has come over and over again to the Church, as it came to Christ; and the history of Christianity is testimony to the fact that the Church has not always been as able to withstand the temptation as was its Lord. "Not by bread alone": an obvious application of this word

to the church suppers which have become so integral a part of our ecclesiastical life in America. When the Church is cumbered about much serving, it is in danger of supposing that though man cannot live by bread alone, he can live by bread and sauerkraut and Swiss steak and all the other delicacies featured at church dinners. But this is only an indirect and occasional example of the fundamental evil this temptation brings. The whole desire for the miraculous and the spectacular to which our ministry so often caters shows how deep-seated a temptation this is and how persistent is the Tempter in addressing it to the Church.

Man shall not live by bread alone, and the ministry does not live by management alone either. Contrary to the impression one sometimes receives, it is not enough in the ministry to be busy, and I dare say that the fires of hell are not quenched by tears which devils shed over busy pastors as long as they are just busy and forget to feed those committed to their charge with that by which alone men live. When a ministry ceases to be basically kerygmatic and prophetic in character and becomes instead a ministry of public relations and publicity, statistics and meetings, then someone has forgotten, or is at least in danger of forgetting, that man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word proceeding from the mouth of God. And the marks, or, as they have been called, the "constitutive aspects," of the Church's life are still the means by which the speaking God addresses Himself creatively to men, the preached Gospel and the administered Sacraments.

The first temptation of Jesus offers us all an excellent opportunity to look once more at ourselves, at our own ministries, and at our church life. One of the great threats to church life in American Protestantism, it seems to me, is its preoccupation with externals, its endless church societies, and the gradual atomization of its parish life through the substitution of bread and circuses for the living proclamation of the living Word. The revival movement, which has characterized American Protestantism for two centuries, is in many ways an admission of its failure on just this score and an attempt to substitute something spectacular for its utterly unspectacular failure to hold men by other means. Call it activism or social consciousness or busy church life, anything which leads men to believe that they do not live by the Word, and that the

Church does not live by the Word, represents the Church's "Yes" to the temptation to which our Lord said such a decided "No." The devil is not sad over the fact that someone enters the ministry, as he would not have been sad over the Lord's demonstration by a miracle that He was the Son of God. But he is sad when, as is the Church's ancient custom, men make the sign of the Cross to drive him away; for the Cross, which was the supreme word proceeding from the mouth of God, gives men a life over which the Prince of death has no control.

"By every word that proceedeth from the mouth of God" — here is the secret of life. As our first parents began their fall by the question "Hath God truly said?" so the Second Adam begins His repair of the damage they did by countering the temptation to live by bread with the assertion that not bread, but the speaking of God, is what makes a man alive. Students of such things have frequently pointed to the many parallels existing between the temptation narrative in the Gospels and the temptation narrative in Genesis. Whatever may be the literary merits of this parallelization, it is theologically sound; for when tempted to prove His divine sonship by a miracle, Jesus preferred to take His stand as the Second Adam: "It is written, *Man* shall not live. . . ."

As in New Testament days, men will always seek a sign and marvel at a miracle; they will be taken with the spectacular and the miraculous. God help the Church if we ever permit the Tempter to succeed in substituting this standard of values for the standard Jesus sets down in this first temptation, not bread alone, but the Bread of Life, the bread which He broke beside the sea, the bread which does not pass away as did the manna of old, the bread by which all bread and all eating and drinking are sanctioned and made truly *epiousios*, the word of grace and mercy and pity which God spoke at diverse times through the Prophets, but which now for the last time He has spoken in His Son. By this bread man shall live, and in this bread is the source of the Church's life as well.

## II

After failing in his first attempt to seduce Jesus by a temptation, the devil tried a second. In the first he had been rebuffed when Jesus refused to make bread of stones and quoted the Old Tes-

tament Scriptures to back up His refusal. Taking up where Jesus left off, the Tempter appears, as Bengel has it, "*sub specie grammateos*," in the form of a scribe. He makes his appeal now not to miracle nor to hunger, but to the most sacred things in the religious vocabulary of the pious Jew.

Note the progression in this second temptation. "Then the devil taketh Him up to the holy city" — to Jerusalem, the center of religious life for Jews all over the Graeco-Roman world, to the city which had such reverent association for every Jew, and specially for this Jew, since it was here that there occurred the one incident from His boyhood important enough to be remembered and recorded. But not only to the holy city — "and setteth Him on a pinnacle of the Temple" — in this holiest of holy cities, this was the holiest of holy buildings, the center of the center, the dwelling place of the glory of the Most High God, and the abode of His covenant presence.

But more: standing now in Jerusalem, and on the pinnacle of the Temple, the Tempter quotes the Psalter, matching the Lord's previous quotation with one of his own. To the holy building in the holy city he adds the Holy Book, the record of God's promises and actions for His people, thus summoning to the mind of Him whom he was tempting all the reverence which a son of the Torah felt for the Old Testament. And from the Old Testament he quotes a promise concerning angelic help, a promise with the echoes of the death cries in Sennacherib's camp and the wailing of Egypt over her first-born playing an obbligato, a promise of help from the mysterious but strong messengers who had so often intervened in the history of the Old Testament people.

The accumulated holiness of all these things — the holy city, the holy temple in that holy city, the Holy Scriptures quoted on top of that holy temple in that holy city, and the holy angels promised in those Holy Scriptures quoted on top of that holy temple in that holy city — the accumulated holiness of all these things was fairly overwhelming. Not the stomach hungry for bread, but the soul athirst for the Eternal, was the object of this temptation: not man's materialism, but his very religiousness was here addressed.

It is this that made the temptation so profound and our Lord's answer so telling. For in His answer Jesus based His refusal to

accede to the Tempter's request on that one Holy to whom the devil made no reference: "Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God." Holy city and holy temple and Holy Bible and holy angels—all were holy only by derivation from Him of whom the *Gloria in excelsis* correctly sings: "*Quoniam Tu solus sanctus, Tu solus Dominus*: Thou only art holy, Thou only art the Lord." Thus Jesus points to the fact, verified by the lives of the saints ever since, that man's deepest temptations to sin come not in his lower, but in his so-called "higher" nature, they are addressed not to his immoral urges, but to his moral and even religious urges. And in His reply Jesus points to the one way we can overcome these temptations, the holiness and the inviolability of God.

Of all the three temptations this one seems in many ways to strike closest to our life and work. For the sin of a false trust in holy things at the expense of our trust in God is a respectable and a pious sin. It is trust in things which are in themselves not only not evil, but good—things like the holy city and the holy temple and the Holy Bible and the holy angels—and, for that matter, theology, liturgy, synodical organizations, the holy ministry. All of these are holy, and yet none of them dare claim our trust for its own sake.

Now, no one of us is in danger of supposing that just because he is a theological student or an orthodox theologian or a member of the Missouri Synod or an ordained minister he can go jumping off buildings with impunity. But we are all in danger of supposing that because of our occupation with holy things we own a controlling interest in divine protection and can afford to neglect the sources and resources of that protection. For we have our holy cities, too; we have our holy places in those cities; we have our Holy Scriptures, and we all study them, at least professionally, every day; we all pray: "Let Thy holy angel be with me." And yet all of these holy things are the means of disgrace to which the Tempter had recourse when his first strategy had failed.

"Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God"—this is what Luther discovered when all the holy things, Holy Mother Church and Holy Father and sacred theology and even the Holy Bible had failed to give him peace: that any religious disposition which settles for less than God, that fastens upon anything holy except the

Holy One of Israel, is a surrender to the pious fraud of the impious and fraudulent Tempter. All other holiness except the holiness of God can become an idol unless He touches it in whom the holiness of God was revealed and made available. Because He fought off the attack of the Tempter, resisting him to the very death, we can enjoy the sustaining and hallowing presence of the Holy Spirit, the Sanctifier, who makes us holy and who also consecrates what could have been an idol and makes it holy in His service.

And so "we our earthly temples rear" and call them houses of God, because in them the Holy God makes us His own through Word and Sacrament. And we read our Scriptures and rightly call them holy, because they are they which testify of God's grace in Christ Jesus. And we hear the whirring of the angels' wings around us because we know that the God who has loved us in Christ preserves all His creation, and especially His new creation.

Yes, and we study theology and call it sacred because all theology is Christology and the message of His grace; we form synodical organizations because the tasks of His service demand our best and our united efforts; we enter the ministry because we can thereby serve Him. Holy things, all of these, and deeply to be cherished: because He has made them holy and promises to use them. But dangerous things all of these, and tools of the Tempter, if we ever begin to trust in them and not in Him who made them and sanctified them and without whom they would not be holy at all. Thou shalt not tempt the Lord Thy God, the Holy One, even with holy things!

### III

The third and last temptation which the devil addressed to our Lord in the wilderness was in many ways more subtle than the previous two. No longer did he challenge the fact that Jesus was the Son of God or ask Him to prove this by a miracle or a demonstration of divine help. Instead he sought to strike a bargain with Jesus, to exchange the whole world for one small act of worship.

Certainly this looked like a good bargain and more than a fair exchange. Commentators have frequently noted the fact that the world was not the devil's to give and that it really belonged to the Lord. But they have often forgotten to note the power of this temptation precisely in that fact. For though He was rich, yet for

our sakes He became poor, depriving Himself of that very thing which the Tempter was now offering Him.

Imagine the good He could have done if He had had the entire world at His command, instead of a few followers in an obscure portion of the Roman Empire, if He had been able to use the untapped resources of that entire world for the spreading of His message, if Caesar and king and Oriental potentate and Greek philosopher and Mithraic priest had all been subject to Him. Just think of the mission possibilities involved in this exchange, to conquer the world for the Gospel — and all for one act of worship! Surely the most practical thing to do would have been to accept the bargain, to go through the motions of worship, and then to use the kingdoms of the world and all the glory of them for some good and sacred purpose. Prudence would have dictated that Jesus make this slight concession in order to gain the world. Instead He refused all of this with the summary dismissal: "Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and Him only shalt thou serve."

That looks like the ultimate in ivory-tower idealism, to be so squeamish when so much was at stake, an exchange that makes the sale of Manhattan Island for \$24.00 look like highway robbery. Didn't God give us our common sense to use in His service? And wasn't it common sense that when He permitted such an opportunity to come, He was thereby indicating that He wanted Jesus to take it? And Jesus said "No."

The Church since Jesus' day has often had more prudence and more common sense than He did, and has often accepted the trade. In the days of the persecutions, Christians were asked to offer up to the emperor just a pinch of incense. They didn't have to believe that the emperor was divine, all they were required to do was to go through the motions. A lot of them did. But those days are past; except for our brethren in Communist lands, twentieth-century Christians no longer worry about this problem. For ours is a "Christian country," where the requirements of good citizenship, social respectability, and practical common sense are the same as the requirements of the Christian life. And so today all of us are involved in the practicalities of compromise and concession, with the view, of course, to gaining a great good by a small compromise.



Like the sin of seeking the spectacular and of trusting in holy things rather than in God, so this sin of practical compromise is a constant temptation of the ministry. No devils come to claim our worship or to offer us the kingdoms of the world and all the glory of them. But we are constantly being confronted by the opportunity to gain a lot by conceding a little, just a pinch of incense. This opportunity takes various forms. It has even acquired a title: "an ethic of middle principles," which is a nice way of saying that, given the kind of world we have to deal with, we have to make allowances and strike bargains in order to get along.

"Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and Him only shalt thou serve" is the haunting reminder which our Lord would have us remember when these opportunities come along. The claim which God makes upon us is an exclusive and an absolute one, and it brooks no competition or compromise. He does not bid us be practical or sensible or successful; He bids us only to "know that the Lord is God alone, He can create and He destroy." And as we cannot worship anything above Him, so also we cannot worship anything in order thereby to worship Him. Nor dare we, like latter-day Faustus in clerics, strike a bargain with the devil in order thereby to advance the kingdom of God. Given the kind of world we have to deal with, all its kingdoms and the glory of them, we must hear again the thunder of the first and the only Commandment: "Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and Him only shalt thou serve." No middle principles here, as though God permitted us to get at Him or to serve Him through the idols of our own making. Rachel left her father's house to serve the Almighty; but just to play safe, she carried a few vest-pocket deities, not to replace, merely to supplement, Jehovah. In like manner we nurse our little idols—the idols of self, of intellect, of numbers, of self-satisfaction in our ministry, of coming to terms for the sake of a greater good, of being practical when all that is required of a steward is that he be found faithful.

We need to be reminded again of the words of Paul to the Corinthians, that an idol has no existence except for the existence which the devil gives it; and this applies to our little Christian idols too. Jesus fought off the temptation of a little idolatry in exchange for a lot of success in order that we who bear His name

and claim His service might henceforth live not to ourselves, but to Him who died for us and rose again, and to Him alone.

The Cross serves to remind us how far God was willing to go in order to shatter the hold of idolatry upon us, to the length of giving up His only Son. It was for this that Christ came, that He might redeem us from the very sins with which He was faced in the temptation and lead us to proclaim the Word by which alone man can live, to trust in God and not in holy things, and to worship Him alone. The forgiveness of sins which He wrought was the gift for such a life in the Word, such a trust in God, and such an untarnished worship.

But the Tempter is not willing to give up. He failed in his attempt to win Jesus, but in us he finds more willing victims. He knows he cannot win us with base and coarse seductions; but he can win us, and often does, with the pious temptations to which our ministerial craft is peculiarly subject. May we fight him off, as did our Lord, with the power of the speaking of God, with the inviolability of the holiness of God, and with the singleness of the worship of God — all of these made ours in the victory over the devil which is the gift of His holy Cross.

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