



“Art Thou He that Troubleth Israel?”

Kevin Presley

It had been three and a half years since Israel had seen a drop of rain or even as much as a single drop of dew. There were no crops, no water. The ground was cracked and parched. The nation was suffering from a protracted drought that Elijah had prophesied before he went into hiding. He was now Israel's most wanted man, blamed by King Ahab for the drought and the suffering that came with it. Since he had prophesied it, he must've caused it; that was Ahab's reasoning. Of course, as is often the case, the REAL culprit didn't stop to think that his sin might be the problem. Instead, he wanted to blame the one who exposed his sin for causing such trouble and confusion. Well, after three and a half years, Elijah was finally ready for a showdown with Ahab. He came out of hiding and went to meet the angry king.

I Kings 18:17 “And it came to pass, when Ahab saw Elijah, that Ahab said unto him, Art thou he that troubleth Israel?”

In other words, *are you the one who brought all of this on us? Are you making trouble for me and my people?* The quick-witted prophet turned it right back on this wicked and sinful king. His response is very relevant to the many issues and divisions that trouble spiritual Israel today.

Ahab and his wife, Jezebel, were two of the most wicked rulers in history. Their names are infamous even today. Ahab led the people to worship Baal and commit sin before the Lord, so God punished the nation under Ahab's watch.

I Kings 17:1 “And Elijah the Tishbite, who was of the inhabitants of Gilead, said unto Ahab, As the LORD God of Israel liveth, before whom I stand, there shall not be dew nor rain these years, but according to my word.”

God then told Elijah to go and hide himself, and He would take care of him throughout the drought. God directed him to go and live beside a little stream, and He directed the ravens to bring him food to eat each day. The drought set in and it didn't take long for the land to dry up and even the creek where he

was hiding dried up. So, God moved him to the house of the widow and her son, who thought they were about to run out of food and water and die themselves.

After some time there, God finally told Elijah to show himself to King Ahab. It had been some three and a half years that Ahab had been looking for Elijah, and as you might imagine, he was furious with Elijah because of the drought. You can hear the impatience and anger in his voice and imagine how his temper flares when he finally sees Elijah coming toward him as he asks the question, *Art thou he who troublest Israel?* In other words, *Are you the same prophet who prophesied all of this gloom and doom three years ago? Now look what you've done: you've troubled the people and stirred all of this up. It's your fault that we're suffering!*

I don't suppose that it ever dawned on Ahab that the drought was sent by God because of his own sin. That's the way most sinners are: we live how we want to and then get mad about the consequences. We break the speed limit, then get mad at the policeman for writing the ticket. If we had obeyed the law, the policeman would've left us alone, but we don't usually look at it that way.

James 1:13-15 “Let no man say when he is tempted, I am tempted of God: for God cannot be tempted with evil, neither tempteth he any man: But every man is tempted, when he is drawn away of his own lust, and enticed. Then when lust hath conceived, it bringeth forth sin: and sin, when it is finished, bringeth forth death.”

The sin brings a very terrible consequence. Ultimately, we only have ourselves to blame for committing the sin. It's not God's fault when we sin, nor is it anyone else's fault but our own. Even when others tempt us and lead us to sin, it's still the person who gave in to the temptation and committed the transgression who is to blame. Then we get into a mess because we do so.

It was Ahab's fault, and the people who followed their wicked leadership who brought all of this suffering on the nation of Israel. When Ahab tried to 'shoot the messenger' and blame the faithful prophet, Elijah shot right back.

I Kings 18:18 “And he answered, I have not troubled Israel; but thou, and thy father's house, in that ye have forsaken the commandments of the LORD, and thou hast followed Baalim.”

He told Ahab, *you have caused the problem by your sin. Had you been faithful to God, there wouldn't be a problem in Israel.* Then commenced the fateful showdown between Elijah and the prophets of Baal when they all prepared sacrifices and called down fire from their gods. Jehovah God revealed Himself to be the only true and living God by burning up the wood that Elijah had prepared and even soaked with water. So goes the story in **I Kings 18**.

That was an interesting and fairly typical accusation that the king made against Elijah that day, *art thou he that troubleth Israel?* We often hear the same charge hurled against those who preach and stand for the truth even today. Those who contend for what is written are often called *troublemakers, rabble-rousers*. Accused of causing confusion and distress in spiritual Israel.

Trouble is not a new thing in Israel; in fact, spiritual Israel—the church—has seen more than its share of trouble since nearly the time of its founding, in Jerusalem so long ago. The church in every age since its Pentecost beginning has had to deal with antagonism from without and digression and apostasy from within. Sometimes people have this utopian idea of the church and they'll say, *well, if it's really the*

Lord's church, there will never be any strife or division, no disagreement or turmoil. It is true that it is God's will for the church to dwell together in unity. Paul said this:

Ephesians 4:3-6 “Endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling; One Lord, one faith, one baptism, One God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all.”

So, the question is *what happens when those sacred truths are challenged? What are we to do when men depart from the pattern laid down by Christ and His apostles?* Unfortunately, that has been the case many times throughout the church's history and it still is today. The Bible even warned that men would depart from the faith, trying to subvert the faith from within. Not long after the church began in Jerusalem, you may recall that an argument broke out about whether Gentile believers had to be circumcised. The apostles had to step in and settle the matter to avert what could have been a major disruption and split in the church.

The church in the city of Corinth was splintered and fragmented by carnal Christians over their own agendas and jealous disputes. That church was filled with contentions, jealousies and outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, backbitings, gossip and whisperings, conceit and tumults, according to Paul (**II Corinthians 12:20**). The church in Galatia was troubled by false and Judaizing teachers who were leading new Christians away from the cross and back to Moses. The apostle John wrote about a man who was bent on ruining what he could not rule and was throwing some out of the local church. His name was Diotrophes.

All of these had something in common: there was trouble. But trouble came because someone departed from the truth. That's the common denominator. You see, division and controversy are sometimes inevitable, unfortunately. But they are never desirable because they are always the direct result of **SIN**. I'm going to repeat that: division and controversy are sometimes inevitable, unfortunately. But they are never desirable because they are always the direct result of **SIN**.

Psalm 133:1 “Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!”

Division is the work of the devil. He operates by the motto *divide and conquer*. But how does he do that? Well, for division to take place, sin has to enter the picture. Whenever the church is troubled, you will find sin somewhere present. When division occurs, somewhere there has been a breakdown in biblical understanding and obedience. That's what Elijah told Ahab. He said, *I've not troubled Israel, but YOU have troubled Israel by forsaking the commandments of the Lord.*

Friend, have you ever stopped to question why there is division in so-called Christianity today? Do you ever wonder why there are hundreds of conflicting church groups and scores of denominations and sects splintering and fragmenting the religious world today? Is that what Jesus intended when He said this:

Matthew 16:18 “And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.”

Is that what He was praying for?

John 17:20-21 “Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on me through their word; That they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us: that the world may believe that thou hast sent me.”

Paul told the church at Corinth that there was to be no division among them; that they were to be *of the same mind, the same judgment, and speak the same thing*. Surely what we see today is not that which Paul commanded and that for which the Lord prayed and pleaded. Surely the Lord is not glorified or honored by the mess that so-called Christianity represents today.

But whence cometh it? Why does division exist? Friend, it is because of sin. It's because men leave the word of God instead of turning to it. Some say, *there are so many disagreements about the Bible. We could never agree over the Bible, so if you try to go by the Bible, you're going to have division*. Actually, that is not true. The Bible has never caused a single division between faithful people. I'm going to repeat that, too: the Bible has never caused a single division between people faithful to God. The ideas of men have caused countless divisions, but the Bible does not create division or denominations. The creeds of men—humanly produced confessions of faith, disciplines, catechisms, human opinions and matters of faith—those are what create denominations. If you subscribe to this or that church manual, it typically results in you being a member of that certain denomination. If you profess that creed over there, it will align you with that denomination. The Westminster Confession of Faith, the Philadelphia Confession of Faith, if you subscribe to one or the other, you're likely to end up with this group or that group, and so forth.

I want to repeat: following the Bible does not create division; departing from the Bible creates division. So, if departing from the Bible creates division, and we really want unity, what is the answer? The answer is not to get away from the Bible. It's not concocting some sort of human creed or document for men to follow. It is to simply go back to the Bible. But you see, that is the sad history of what men have done to the church for which Jesus died.

The apostasy that spread after the death of the apostles began a long, long trail of doctrinal changes and innovations in the structure, worship and work of the church. The so-called *reformation* resulted in a myriad of denominational bodies, which is simply another way to say division. No matter how noble the motives of the men who launched the *reformation* may have been, the result was division, no matter how you slice it. Even the Lord's church has been impacted by multiple unscriptural innovations that men have brought in from the denominations and foisted upon congregations throughout the land, resulting in more division over corporate matters, such as the work and worship of the church. You see, the devil won't leave well enough alone. Missionary societies, parachurch organizations that supplant the work assigned to the autonomous local church, instrumental music in worship, women preachers and elders, individual communion cups, Sunday schools...on and on we might go. None of which are taught or even implied in the New Testament scriptures, but they were introduced over the objections of conscientious brethren who, in good conscience, opposed them on scriptural grounds. It seems that when innovation brings trouble, the one insisting on the new practice or innovation will always point at the one who resisted and say, *Troublemaker! You're causing division!* Well, I would say with the prophet Elijah, *No, I've not troubled Israel, but thou and thy father's house, in that ye have forsaken the commandments of the Lord (I Kings 18:18)*.

There are many points that we could take up, but let me illustrate it in just one point. Churches typically observed the Lord's Supper in the same fashion as Jesus and His disciples did: by coming together and sharing a loaf of bread that aptly signified Christ's one body, and a cup of fruit of the vine which pictured

their sharing in the new covenant which was sealed by the blood of Jesus (**Matthew 26, Mark 14, Luke 22, I Corinthians 11**). In fact, the early disciples and churches for centuries did this, as Jesus when He instituted the Lord's Supper made it a pattern by saying, *This do in remembrance of Me*. Even after apostasy had taken hold in so many other areas, churches still followed the pattern of Jesus.

But little by little, change ensued. Churches began to relax the practice. In some cases, they began using two cups or multiple cups. That is, until March 6, 1894, when a doctor and minister in northern Ohio named John G. Thomas invented and received a patent from the United States government for the first set of individual communion cups, forever changing the design of the sacred supper that Jesus and His followers so simply observed in the beginning.

To see churches communing with individual/multiple loaves and individual communion cups has become so engrained in our religious culture that people take it for granted, as though it has always been done that way. Friend, the idea of *individual communion* can be traced back no farther than a hundred years. 1894. Denominations that had little regard for following biblical patterns in worship anyway immediately began to adopt this novel invention of Dr. Thomas. It didn't take long for it to find its way into churches of Christ--1915 to be exact.

I have had a book in my library for many years. It is the autobiography of a well-known, prolific and eloquent preacher among the churches of Christ in the early 20th century, Grover Cleveland Brewer, aka G.C. Brewer. He was a giant among gospel preachers in that era of the brotherhood's history, and he wielded a powerful and far-reaching influence. His autobiography is called Forty Years on the Firing Line, appropriately named because brother Brewer was a party in numerous public debates throughout his career and often found himself engaged in controversy over doctrinal divisions in and out of the church. You might also call him a bit of a trailblazer. In fact, he boasts of that fact in the opening lines of his book. Here is an excerpt from the introduction to Forty Years on the Firing Line, where he makes the following boast from about the year 1915:

“I think I was the first preacher to advocate the use of the individual communion cup and the first church in the State of Tennessee that adopted it was the church for which I was preaching, the Central Church of Christ at Chattanooga, Tennessee, then meeting in the Masonic Temple. My next work was with the church at Columbia, Tennessee, and **after a long struggle**, I got the individual communion service into that congregation. I was fought both privately and publicly and several brethren took me to task in the religious papers and called me digressive.”

Notice he didn't say the first church to practice it that way was the church in Jerusalem in A.D. 33; rather the church in Chattanooga, TN in 1915. He goes on to describe how the practice spread and he and other preachers encouraged its spread throughout the brotherhood. I have to tell you that churches were divided back in that time all across the land. In fairness, brother Brewer was far from being alone in his fight to win acceptance for this innovation that J.G. Thomas had invented some 21 years earlier. Churches were divided all over the nation as he and others insisted on this decades-old denominational practice, compared to what Jesus did 1900 years prior, and what most churches had done for most of the time since. *Troublemaker! Anti!* they shouted at those, who on grounds of conscience and a *thus saith the Lord*, could not accept their practice.

I am to begin a gospel meeting this month at a congregation that 60+ years ago was locked out of their own building because they refused to go along with and accept this new practice that was being spread

throughout churches. It begs the question that was asked so long ago: *Art thou he that troublest Israel?* That was Ahab's question, but was it Elijah's fault that Ahab's practices had met with the disapproval of God? Is it the messenger's fault today when he contends for what he can read in the Bible, as opposed to what CANNOT be read in the scriptures?

Is there anything that you would stand against if someone tried to impose it on you in worship or in the work of the church where you attend? Who troubles Israel? Friend, brother, sister, examine your faith and your practice. Return to only what you can read and what you can hold by the New Testament scriptures. Reject the creeds, dogmas and practices of mere men whereby comes division and trouble in Israel. The only answer to the division of the religious world is to go back to the Bible.

There's a story that I've told throughout the years. I heard it from someone else a long time ago. It's about a group of weary travelers who thought they were not going to be able to find water to drink as they were crossing over the Sierra Nevada mountains back in the gold rush days. They finally did come across a stream, but as they drank out of it, the water was bitter. So, disappointed, they nearly despaired until someone began to wander up the hillside, tracing the stream up the hill. Soon he found another tributary flowing into that stream, and he discovered why that water that had looked so clean tasted so bitter. The pollutants were being added as the stream made its way down the mountainside. You know, that's the way it has been in religion. What Jesus Christ established 2,000 years ago was pure. Jesus established His church; not a hundred or a thousand churches. HIS church. Folks, we can read about it right here in the Bible. We can see its identifying marks in the Bible. But nearly 2,000 years have brought the changes, innovations, dogmas, creeds and ideas of men that have polluted the pure stream of Bible Christianity.

Won't you strike hands and hearts with us upon a *thus saith the Lord*? Won't you resolve today to return to the Lord's way and to seek not union, but true unity?

©2017 BibleWay Media. All rights reserved.
BibleWay Media grants permission to copy this material for personal use. Permission is also granted to distribute this transcript as long as it is reproduced in its entirety, used solely for its original purpose of spreading the gospel, and attribution is given to the author and Let the Bible Speak.