

WHO DO YOU SAY THAT I AM?

Immediately after the New Testament church was born, Satan attacked it.

His weapon of choice was the lie, for as Jesus said, *“When he lies he speaks his native language for he is a liar and the father of lies.”*

And so Satan tried to destroy the church by spreading lies about Jesus Christ, its founder and its head.

He wanted to create doubt in people’s minds about who Jesus was and what He had done.

As we heard in today’s Gospel lesson, when Jesus asked his disciples, *“Who do you say that I am,”* Peter responded *“You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.”*

Jesus then affirmed that this was the truth by saying, *“Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven.”*

But Satan doesn’t want people to believe that Jesus is the Son of God and the Savior of mankind, because he knows that if they believe this they will be free of his power.

So he tries to convince them that Jesus is something other than the Messiah—a prophet, a philosopher, a poet, a wise man—anything other than the Son of God and the Savior of mankind.

If he can get people to believe in a fictitious Jesus rather than the real Jesus of the Bible, he can keep them under his power because an imaginary Jesus has no power over Satan.

Satan promulgates his lies in three different formats.

The first is through pagan religions.

Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Janism, Confucianism, polytheism—there are hundreds if not thousands of pagan religions which draw people away from Christ.

They all promise the same thing: if you work hard enough at whatever they say you will earn a great reward.

This may take the form of prayer, acts of charity, meditation, study, good deeds or moral behavior.

In some cases it can take the form of destroying those who do not subscribe to their religion.

Different pagan religions have different requirements but the bottom line is that if you do a good enough job of meeting them, God will reward you.

The reward they promise goes by different names: nirvana, paradise, peace, wisdom, karma, oneness with the universe, communion with God, Om.

In any case it refers to a state of ultimate joy or perfect happiness which you can earn if you lead a good enough life.

YOU are your own savior; YOU alone can free yourself from the cares and troubles of this world.

This is one way Satan works to draw people away from Jesus.

The second way Satan lures people away from Christ is through cults.

Cults usually begin with some charismatic individual who takes bits and pieces of Christianity, mixes them up with other religions and attracts a following.

The Jehovah's Witnesses began with Charles Russell, who denied the divinity of Christ and promised that anyone who followed his teachings would become one of the 144,000 elect mentioned in the *Book of Revelation* who would be saved.

He ran into a problem when the number of Jehovah's Witnesses exceeded 144,000 so he had to adjust the number.

The Mormons began with Joseph Smith who claimed he had received a special revelation from God on tablets that he alone could read with the help of special eyeglasses God had furnished.

He couldn't produce the tablets or the eyeglasses but the message was that if you led a morally pure life and tithed to the Mormon Church you would get a large number of wives and a planet of your own when you die.

The Christian Scientists began with Mary Baker Glover Patterson Eddy who taught her followers that God was not a living being but an abstract philosophical truth, and that Jesus was not divine, but a man who taught some of this truth.

And there are 7th Day Adventists, Schwenkfelders, Christadelphians, Theosophers, scientologists and a myriad of other cults.

Like the pagan religions, all of them teach that you can attain perfection and find happiness through your own efforts.

They offer what the Bible calls "a way which seems right to a man but whose end is death."

Satan's most effective use of lies, however, is when he sows them WITHIN the Christian church.

It is easier for the Church to deal with attacks from the outside than to have to deal with a cancer within.

If Satan can incite division and rebellion within the Body of Christ, he can force it to dedicate all of its energy to fighting an internal enemy rather than to bringing the Good News of Jesus Christ to the world.

And since this was the most effective way to use his lies, this was where Satan began his attack when the church was young and vulnerable.

Initially, he was successful: some of his lies attracted large followings and came to be called heresies.

Some of these heresies attracted so many people that they threatened to produce a schism: a rending apart of the Body of Christ.

The largest and most threatening heresy of the early church was started by a man named Arius.

He was a famous preacher in Alexandria, who taught that Jesus was NOT God, but simply a creature like other men.

According to Arius, Jesus was god-like and man-like, but he was neither actually God nor man.

This teaching came to be known as Arianism and it attracted a large number of followers.

Arius was opposed by a man named Athanasius, who was the Bishop of Alexandria and whose creed you all—especially Dan—look forward to reciting on Trinity Sunday.

Athanasius pointed out that the Scriptures clearly say that Jesus was both God and man, and that is why his death on the cross could atone for the sins of the world.

Athanasius taught that while this cannot be comprehended by human reason, it is clearly what God's Word teaches.

It was THIS Jesus and ONLY this Jesus who could pay the penalty for our sins and reconcile us with God.

The battle between Arius and Athanasius lasted a long time.

The Jesus of Arianism appealed more to human reason but the Athanasian Jesus was unquestionably the Jesus described in the Scriptures.

One of the people who accepted Arianism was the Emperor Constantine, who banished Athanasius into exile for seventeen years.

Finally, however, Athanasius' view prevailed and the church rejected Arianism.

They wrote the Nicene and Athanasian Creeds to make clear Who Jesus was and what He did.

We recite these creeds to this very day.

So why do I take up your time with this dry history lesson?

Very simple: Satan continues to spread lies in the church to this very day.

He still attacks the church from within by sowing lies about who Jesus was and what He did.

These lies issue forth from seminaries, from religion departments at prestigious universities and are proclaimed every week from the pulpits of churches that have abandoned the Scriptures and the creeds and make up their own theology.

Many souls are deceived and lost because of them.

C. S. Lewis wrote that pastors and other church leaders who promulgate these lies are not only intellectually dishonest, they are professionally malfeasant.

Having declared themselves to become ministers of the Word they spend their lives attacking its authority and integrity.

Jesus calls them, “wolves in sheep’s clothing” and they do incalculable damage to Christ’s church.

Ari Goldman, a religion reporter for the *New York Times* and an Orthodox Jew, took a sabbatical leave from the *Times* back in the late 80’s, and enrolled for one year in Harvard Divinity School—one of the first Christian seminaries to be established in America.

After a year of attending classes he observed that virtually any religion was treated with respect at Harvard with one exception and that was Biblically based Christianity.

Repeatedly he saw the faith of Bible-believing Christians ridiculed and heard the Word of God disparaged by faculty and students alike.

The miracles of the Bible were dismissed as myths, the teachings of the New Testament were written off as politically incorrect, and its authors were called bigots.

It is no wonder that anti-semitism has erupted at Harvard and other campuses: the road for it has been paved for decades by heretics.

None of this should surprise us.

Paul warned Timothy that false teachers would rise up to plague the church: *“For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths.”*

In the face of this, Paul’s admonition to the young pastor Timothy was simply: *“Preach the Word—in season and out!”*

And Jesus’ instruction to His church?

“Preach the Gospel to all nations!”

Our hope and deliverance always lie in the Word of God for God’s Word is mightier than all of Satan’s lies.

The day will come when you and I and every person who has ever lived will have to stand before Jesus Christ and answer the question Jesus put to his disciples: *“Who do you say that I am?”*

The answer of some people will be: *“You are a possibly historical person about whom we actually know very little, who was not prophesied throughout the Old Testament, who probably said no more than 20% of what has been attributed to you, who did no miracles, who may or may not have been crucified,*

who almost certainly did not rise from the dead, and who by no means ascended into heaven.

I'd like to be there when someone tells Jesus that!

The other answer is the one Peter gave:

"You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God."

I thank God that He has given me the faith to give that answer, and I hope and pray that He has given you that faith as well.

I also thank God that we belong to a church that doesn't base its beliefs on the pipe dreams of some charismatic yahoo or on upon the wokish proclamations of the philosophers of our age, but upon the Word of God and the faith that has been handed down to us through the creeds and confessions of the Church.

Amen.

