

# Strange Fire

by Arthur W. Pink

How much “strange fire” there is in the religious world today, far more so than is generally realized. Fire which has not been authorized by God: fire which has not been kindled by a coal from off His altar: fire which is not sustained by the oil of the Spirit. And therefore is it “strange fire.” It is the energy of the flesh turned into a religious channel: the same energy which moves the enthusiastic amateur-politician to seek votes for his party, only directed to another end. It is the expenditure of earnest zeal, yet a zeal which is not according to knowledge. It is the enthusiasm of youth, prompting them to run without being Divinely sent. It is the engaging in “Christian service” to which God has not called them, for they have no “Thus saith the Lord” to warrant them.

When we turn to the Holy Scriptures we are at once struck by the vivid contrast between that which was ordained of God and that which now obtains so widely in Christendom. Those who are familiar with the contents of the Pentateuch must be impressed with the fullness of instruction which was given to Moses for the ordering of Divine worship and service in Israel. Nothing was unprovided for, nothing was left to the choice of the people. The Lord Himself made known His will and gave commandment accordingly. He appointed those who were to serve, He specified their particular duties, He endowed with wisdom for special tasks. Down to the minutest detail everything was to be carried out as God had bidden. None were to obtrude themselves into any sacred office: none were to usurp authority: none were to undertake duties assigned unto others. Nothing less than death awaited those who dared to introduce confusion into the Divine arrangements.

“Thou shalt appoint the Levites over the tabernacle of testimony, and over all the vessels thereof, and over all things that belong to it: they shall bear the tabernacle, and all the vessels thereof; and they shall minister unto it, and shall encamp round about the tabernacle. And when the tabernacle setteth forward, the Levites shall take it down; and when the tabernacle is to be pitched, the Levites shall set it up: and the stranger that cometh nigh shall be put to death” (Num. 1:50, 51). Most definite was this Divine injunction, and all who belonged unto the other Tribes must submit thereto, or suffer God’s unsparing judgment. No matter how spiritual, how zealous, how devoted to the glory of God, none but the Levites were allowed to have any part in conducting the services of the tabernacle.

This Divine prescription and proscription was repeated again and again. “Thou shalt appoint Aaron and his sons, and they shall wait on their priest’s office: and the stranger that cometh nigh shall be put to death” (Num. 3:10 and see v. 38). “That no stranger, which is not of the seed of Aaron, come near to offer incense before the Lord” (Num. 16:40). “Neither must the children of Israel henceforth come nigh the tabernacle of congregation, lest they bear sin, and die. But the Levites shall do the service of the tabernacle of the congregation” (Num. 18:22, 23). Nothing could be plainer: all those pertaining not to the Divinely-ordained tribe of Levi were strictly prohibited and debarred from taking any part in the services of God’s house. Yet express as these

orders were, some in Israel dared to defy the Lord, and in consequence, they paid for their rashness with their lives.

“And Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, took either of them his censer and put fire therein, and put incense thereon, and offered strange fire before the LORD, which He commanded them not. And there went out fire from the LORD, and devoured them, and they died before the LORD” (Lev. 10:1, 2). Mark it well that these men were of the tribe of Levi, yet they took upon themselves that which the Lord had not commanded. They “offered strange fire before the LORD,” that is, fire which He had not appointed (cf. Exo. 31:9), and therefore they were slain before Him. On another occasion we find there was a group in Israel “two hundred and fifty princes of the assembly, famous in the congregation, men of renown” led by Korah, Dathan and Abiram, who strongly resented the Divinely- appointed restriction. “They gathered themselves together against Moses and against Aaron, and said unto them, Ye take too much upon you, seeing all the congregation are holy, every one of them, and the Lord is among them: wherefore then lift ye up yourselves above the congregation of the LORD?” (Num. 16:3). The sequel was solemn. (vv. 31, 32).

God is very jealous of His appointments and will not suffer them to be defied with impunity. He had given express commandment that, “None ought to carry the ark of God but the Levites: for them hath the LORD chosen to carry the ark of God” (1 Chron. 15:2). But this was ignored by David, for “they set the ark of God upon a new cart...and Uzzah and Ahio the sons of Abinadab drave the new cart” (2 Sam. 6:3). “And when they came to Nachon’s threshingfloor, Uzzah put forth his hand to the ark of God, and took hold of it; for the oxen shook it. And the anger of the Lord was kindled against Uzzah, and God smote him there for his rashness” (vv. 6, 7). Later, David owned his fault, saying to the priests, “The Lord our God made a breach upon us, for that we sought Him not after the due order” (1 Chron. 15:13).

At a still later date it is recorded of Uzziah the king that, “When he was strong, his heart was lifted up to his destruction: for he transgressed against the LORD his God, and went into the temple of the Lord to burn incense upon the altar of incense. And Azariah the priest went in after him, and with him fourscore priests of the LORD, that were valiant men: And they withstood Uzziah the king and said unto him, It appertaineth not unto thee, Uzziah, to burn incense unto the LORD, but to the priests the sons of Aaron, that are consecrated to burn incense: go out of the sanctuary, for thou hast trespassed; neither shall it be for thine honour from the LORD God. Then Uzziah was wroth, and had a censer in his hand to burn incense: and while he was wroth with the priests, the leprosy even rose up in his forehead before the priests in the house of the LORD...And Uzziah the king was a leper unto the day of his death, and dwelt in a several house” (2 Chron 26:16-19, 21). What a solemn lesson was that! How plainly it manifested the sore displeasure of the Lord against those who chafe against the restrictions which He imposes, and who determine to take upon themselves a work to which He has not called them. Yes, king though he was, yet his royal dignity could not afford shelter from Divine judgment, for God is no respecter of persons, and monarch and menial alike must obey His commands or suffer the consequences of insubordination.

Now my reader, have these unspeakably solemn incidents no message for us today? It is true that in this Christian dispensation there is no Divinely appointed class to come between the Lord and

His people. It is true that all believers are “a holy priesthood to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 2:5). But this does not mean that there are no Divinely called and Divinely qualified officers of Christ to administer the affairs of His kingdom, and that every Christian may regard himself as entitled to preach His Gospel and administer His ordinances. No indeed: very far from it. Nothing but the utmost confusion can ensue where every Tom, Dick, and Harry pushes himself forward to perform work for which he is not qualified. The principle of “And no man taketh this honour unto himself, but he that is called of God” (Heb. 5:4) holds good as truly today as it did in Old Testament times.

“My brethren, be not many masters (R.V. “teachers”), knowing that we shall receive the greater condemnation” (James 3:1). The word which is here rendered “masters” signifies “teachers” being the plural of the one used in John 3:10, “art thou a master in Israel?” “Many converts to Christianity would be desirous of the distinction of teachers: with a view to the credit and pre-eminence of that office, or from a mistaken idea that they could not glorify God or do good to men in other states; while perhaps they were not aware of the weight and difficulties of the work, and the solemn account which must be given of it. But they ought to know and seriously consider that teachers must stand a greater or more strict judgment than other men...Did men but truly weigh the importance and difficulty of the sacred ministry, the account which must be given of it, the trials and temptations to which it exposes them, they would be less forward than they sometimes are in aspiring to that distinction” (Thomas Scott).

“For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears” (2 Tim. 4:3). During recent years much has been written upon the first part of this verse, but in all our reading (now more than two million pages of religious and theological literature) we do not recall having seen a single comment upon the words we have placed in italics. It is a most significant and ominous fact that the fulfillment of these two predictions have synchronized, for the rejection of “sound doctrine” and the multiplying of men who term themselves “Bible teachers” have kept pace steadily with each other. The solemn thing is that the “teachers” referred to in 2 Timothy 4:3 are not Divinely called, but self-appointed ones, and they may easily be identified by their opposition to the Truth. Not one of the “Bible teachers” we have read believes in Unconditional Election, Particular Redemption, or the Christian Sabbath!

Not only has there been a noticeable multiplication of religious “teachers” during the last 50 years, but the rank and file of professing Christians have, in many instances, been pressed into the doing of “Personal work.” In some circles of considerable prominence young Christians (of both sexes) are taught it is their bounden duty to become “soul winners,” and that only by regularly “leading sinners to Christ” can their own spiritual lives be kept in a healthy estate. Every once in a while we receive letters from those who have been brought into deep distress by such erroneous teachings. They did not feel qualified for the task, but unwilling to be thought “strange” by their friends, they ignored the instincts of modesty and propriety, and spoke to their acquaintances about Christ, only to be repulsed and made miserable through lack of “success.” Then they fear there must be something seriously wrong with themselves, seeing that God withholds His blessing from their efforts.

Of course such “teachers” and leaders make a pretence of appealing to the Scriptures in support of their vagaries. “Pretence” we say, for they cannot find a single sentence in either the Old or the New Testaments where the Lord bade the rank and file of His people to engage in any such activities. What, then, do they do? Why, they “wrest” the Word of God and wrongly “divide” the same. In the past we have called attention to several misapplied and wrongly appropriated promises of the New Testament; we now direct notice to some precepts which are put to an entirely false use. These promises, as we showed, pertained only unto the Apostles and their immediate successors—so, too, the precepts we are to look at are given to God’s official servants and not unto the saints at large.

“And He said unto them, Go ye into all the world, and preach the Gospel to every creature” (Mark 16:15). He said unto whom? The verse immediately preceding tells us: unto “the Eleven.” What right has any man to apply the apostolic commission promiscuously? None whatever—to do so is to play fast and loose with the Holy Word of God. In the parallel passage those whom Christ here ordered to preach the Gospel He authorized to “baptize” and to “teach” (Matt. 28:19, 20) which makes it quite clear to any God-fearing soul that such offices can only be discharged by the duly authorized ministers of God. To “preach the Gospel” is no child’s play: it requires an extensive knowledge of the Scriptures, long training in the school of Christ, an experimental acquaintance with its contents, and a special endowment from on High. “Novices” are debarred from this holy vocation (1 Tim. 3:6), for instead of attempting to expound the Divine mysteries, they themselves need to be thoroughly indoctrinated.

“Now then we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you by us: we pray you in Christ’s stead be ye reconciled to God” (2 Cor. 5:20). Probably quite a number of our readers will be surprised to hear that such a verse as this is given a general meaning and application to all God’s people and that babes in Christ (and empty professors) are told they are Christ’s “ambassadors”; but we ought not to be surprised at anything in this decadent and demented age. One had thought the very term “ambassadors” would be quite enough to prevent such an excuseless mistake. An ambassador is the official representative of a potentate duly authorized to mistake. An ambassador is the official representative of a potentate duly authorized to act on his sovereign’s behalf. King George has his ambassador in Washington: but suppose that every British subject now residing in the U.S.A. should busy themselves in diplomatic affairs and pretend they were ambassadors of the Court of St James: not only would they serve no useful purpose, but they would mislead people and create endless confusion. And this is exactly what these “personal workers” do; uncalled of God, unqualified by the Spirit, possessing the merest smattering of the Truth, they distort the Gospel and delude those whose ears they gain.

It is at this very point that untold damage has been done. Wrongly taught themselves, holding an entirely false conception of God’s purpose and His design in the Gospel, these “personal workers” have gone forth only to deceive and seduce the unwary. Telling all who will listen to them that God loves everybody, that Christ died for the redemption of the whole human race, they assure their hearers they can be saved immediately by “simply accepting Christ as your personal Saviour.” They know not that God “hateth all workers of iniquity” (Psa. 5:5), and that Christ died to “save His People from their sins” (Matt. 1:21). They say little or nothing about the requirements of God, the righteous demands of His Law, the fact that His wrath is revealed from

Heaven against all unrighteousness and ungodliness (Rom. 1:18), and that the wicked must sincerely repent of and forsake their sins before they can obtain mercy.

This “personal work” campaign is a cheapening of the Gospel, a lowering of God’s standard, a perverting of His Truth, and has produced a generation of unregenerate professors, who now infest the churches and assemblies. The “making of converts” is their goal, and quantity rather than quality is the great desire. We were personally acquainted with one of these personal workers, who had three years’ training in a large “Bible Institute.” He had vowed to “win a soul to Christ” every day that year. We met him after a rainy spell, and he told us the weather had sadly interfered with his schedule, for while it was so wet there was no one in the public parks whom he could accost. He was then “five souls behind,” and he told us, “I shall have to make up for lost time and win six souls to Christ today.” The tragic thing is that so few now can see anything wrong with this blasphemous burlesque.

It is needless to examine all the passages appealed to by these “teachers” in support of their errors, but we will look at one or two more. “He that winneth souls is wise” (Prov. 11:30). Yes, because he has been specially called, qualified, and owned of God. But let Scripture interpret Scripture: “They that be wise shall shine as the brightness of the firmament; and they that turn many to righteousness, as the stars forever and ever” (Dan. 12:3), and as to what is signified by the “stars” Revelation 1:20 informs us. As to what is meant by the “watchman” in Ezekiel 33:2-6 the very next verse tells us, “O son of man, (the Prophet Ezekiel), I have set thee a watchman unto the house of Israel; therefore thou shalt hear the Word at My mouth, and warn them, for Me.”

When a sinner has been saved the Saviour’s word to him is, “Return to thine house, and show how great things God hath done unto thee” (Luke 8:39). We are to “show forth the praises of Him who hath called us out of darkness into His marvellous light” (1 Peter 2:9). But is a young Christian never to open his mouth in testimony for Christ? We have not said so; but he must be very careful or otherwise he will be guilty of disobeying that Divine injunction, “Give not that which is holy unto the dogs, neither cast ye your pearls before swine” (Matt. 7:6). We shall not go far wrong if we are regulated by that exhortation, “Sanctify the Lord God in your hearts: and be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear” (1 Peter 3:15). Let us beware of “strange fire”—zeal which is not according to knowledge. Let us be on our guard lest the Lord has occasion to ask us, “Who hath required this at your hand?” (Isa. 1:2). Read diligently through the whole of the Epistles and see where the members of any church were exhorted to do “personal work” or seek to “win souls to Christ,” and you will find there is not one. Then be governed by God’s Word even though all your religious associates deem you “cold,” “self-centered,” or “ensorious.”