

Column

Have you ever longed for a perfect church? There may be such a church, but I must tell you that I have never found one. Indeed, a parable that Jesus tells seems to preclude the possibility. I am thinking of the Parable of the Wheat and the Tares recorded in Matthew 13:24-30.

This parable contains the story of a farmer who had his newly planted wheat field over-sown with weed seeds by an enemy. His instruction to his servants was not to pull up the weeds immediately, but to let them grow along side the wheat plants until harvest. Then and only then could wheat and look-a-like plants be separated with certainty and safety.

Jesus' parable is a picture of the world but, I think we would have to say, of the Church as well. In the visible congregation of Christ, one finds both wheat and tares; but, what is to be done about this situation?

One option is to go to work immediately pulling up the 'weeds' – ferreting out and getting rid of all who do not measure up. A second is to give up the quest for purity and righteousness altogether and to tolerate and celebrate any and all behaviours and beliefs. Which is right?

If the first option is taken, if you zealously and hastily begin pulling up and casting away weeds, you will probably be left with a pure but empty church, for none of us, even the most sanctified, completely measures up to Christ's standards. We are all works in progress.

But what about the second option – to tolerate and celebrate any and all behaviours and beliefs? Well, there seems to be problems with this approach as well, not the least of which is that it doesn't square with the whole counsel of Scripture. For example, in I Corinthians Paul gives church leaders some rather direct orders to exercise responsible correction and discipline.

What then is the answer? Well, it seems to me that a balanced approach is needed. On one hand, there must be within the Christian household standards and correction, but on the other there must be much wisdom and patience. Put another way, we must stand tall for both righteousness and grace.

Three principles might be helpful as we seek to follow this approach. The first is to realise we are all part of the problem. A little four-line verse sets us onto

the right track: There is so much good in the worst to of us, / And so much bad in the best of us, / That it hardly becomes any of us / To talk about the rest of us.

The second principle is that the God we meet in Jesus Christ is a God of Transformation. St. Augustine of Hippo wrote somewhere: “Those who are the tares today may be the wheat of tomorrow.”

The third principle is that it is ultimately God’s responsibility to separate the wheat from the tares. Our task in the present is not to try to force our timetable on God, but to get on His.

A pure church is coming, but it is not yet. So what are we to do in the interim? Well, it is to work and pray to make our church the best we can.

O LORD, we beseech thee, let thy continual pity cleanse and defend thy Church; and, because it cannot continue in safety without thy succour, preserve it evermore by thy help and goodness; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

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