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False Teachers

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False teachers will come

If you want to stay free from bother and calm in mind, read nothing except food-tin labels and your rent book. J.L.Carr

It is disturbing how many in our churches are unwilling even to consider the possibility of false teachers being among us. It ought to be painfully evident from history that such have been a regular feature of the life of the church. Sadly, in our day most would rather not consider it a possibility and therefore keep their minds firmly shut and change the subject when it is mentioned. Yet the Apostle Paul clearly knew that false teachers would arise. When he spoke to the Ephesian elders before his final trip to Jerusalem he warned them that after his departure savage wolves would enter the flock from outside (Acts 20.29). Even more disturbingly he warned them that even from among themselves men would rise up *speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves* (v30).

False teaching is inevitable. It is part of the work of Satan in trying to hinder the work of the Church. Yet, the division which it creates is not necessarily bad or wrong. Indeed *there must also be factions among you, in order that those who are approved may be recognised among you* (1 Cor 11.19).

Two types of error.

Most of the letters of the New Testament have to touch on the subject of error. Broadly speaking it falls into two categories, false teaching, and false living. God has given the scriptures to be used for teaching and training in righteousness. The former concerns doctrine, the latter life. But the Bible is not just for the positive, it is also useful for reproof (addressing erroneous teaching) and correction (erroneous living) (cf. 2 Tim 3.16). A well taught people will be aware not just of the positives of our faith, but why this necessarily means that certain beliefs and views are wrong and that certain acts should be shunned.

A number of passages in the New Testament show how God would have us deal with error. The two categories can be seen. In his commentary on the Thessalonian epistles F F Bruce states that Rom. 16.17 is concerned primarily with false teaching whilst 2 Thes. 3.6 is dealing with false living. The former has to do with people who rejected the doctrine of the apostles whilst the latter with those who see the gospel as permission to live as they wish. Often false teaching and false living feed off each other; the person who wants to feel comfortable in sin will find teaching that permits it and the person who holds false doctrine will often drift into immorality. It is not surprising therefore that in Jude we find verse 3 (about contending for the faith once delivered) followed by verse 4 (about those who turn the grace of God into a licence for immorality).

Responding to false teaching.

Faithful bible teaching churches will be ensuring that people know full well about error of both kinds. However, simply teaching these things is not enough.

When Peter erred in Antioch it was necessary for Paul to confront him face to face (Gal 2.12). Indeed it is the explicit teaching of the Bible that the first response to false teaching or living is to confront. (See for example Mtt 18.17 and Tit 3.10). Once this has been done, if the person will not change and the matter is serious enough then it is necessary that further steps should be taken. This is in marked contrast with what usually happens today. Today people prefer to get alongside the false teacher, they want to find common ground and focus on that. Their hope is that by working with others and debating with them the false teacher will change their views. Where serious error is involved it is hard to see how this approach is scriptural, no matter how reasonable it may seem to some.

The biblical pattern is consistent. We must separate from those who teach error or live unrighteous lifestyles. The expressions used are *do not keep company... do not even eat with* (1 Cor 5.11), *note them and then avoid them* (Rom 16.17). Likewise, *we command you brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you withdraw from every brother who walks disorderly and not according to the tradition which he received from us* (2 Thes 3.6). In speaking on Romans 16 John Chrysostom remarked *He does not say have a meeting and come to blows, but "avoid them". For if it was from ignorance or error that they did this, one ought to set them right. But if they sin willingly, spring away from them.*

It is sometimes argued that this was not Jesus' pattern. He ate with sinners. Moreover, people argue, Jesus told us not to judge others. Paul addresses both these foolish arguments in 1 Corinthians 5. First, it is not that Christians should separate from non-Christians, rather they should seek to keep impurity out of their fellowships. Jesus ate with sinners, but he confronted them (in some cases, such as the Pharisees, very severely). Secondly, Paul reminds the Corinthians that God will judge those outside the Church, but there must be judgement inside otherwise anything could be tolerated.

These errors today.

The first form of false teaching is to deny the teaching passed on by the apostles, the faith once delivered to the saints. There are many today, including many clergy, who have strayed a long, long way from the foundation of faith. Some disown or separate themselves from much of the teaching of the Bible others deny the very reality of God or pour scorn on the incarnation. Others assert that there are many ways to God, and much more.

The second form of false teaching is to promote or practice forms of immorality which are condemned in the Bible. The root of all of these problems is a rejection of truth that the Bible is, in its entirety, the Word of God. People feel free to modify biblical teaching which has been by and large accepted and taught by the bulk of the Church for the last two millennia.

Ultimately these matters are salvation issues. Classically, Augustine formulated the view that error which touches on salvation should properly be called heresy. Those who deny the divinity of Christ, or the nature of the atonement are leading people to put their trust in other things and are thus turning people away from the way of salvation. Moreover, those who tolerate or promote sexual immorality are deceiving people, because the Bible teaches that those who practice these things will not enter the kingdom of heaven. Those who deny that the Bible is the Word of God are turning people away from the means God has given for us to know of Him and His works.

Separation

The issue for bible Christians is how to be obedient today to the voice of God in scripture. When God calls his people to '*avoid*', '*not keep company with*', '*withdraw from*' and '*reject*' those who are false teachers what should we actually do? It is tempting to think that we must immediately up sticks and leave the Church of England. Indeed there is a long history of Christians since the reformation who have understood this as the only way to be faithful to the commands of God. It can seem that the grass is greener on the other side, but it rarely is. There is little evidence that the bulk of those who separated have been able to preserve doctrinal purity in the long term any better than the established Church. Moreover, once a principal of separation has been followed, when should it stop? The incessant splintering of protestant churches shows that the principle has no theoretical limit.

Whilst many left in the past it is equally clear that many did not. Though it can sometimes seem like a charade, the Church of England is the historic union of churches in England. A great debt of gratitude is owed today to those who, at the time of the Reformation, did not see their task as setting up a new Church, but of reforming the Church of England under the Word of God. Many were ready to shed their blood for such an end. Our forefathers were prepared to speak out against error and immorality but most did not separate themselves from the historic Church of England.

Staying in the structures of the Church of England does not excuse us from being obedient to scripture. The goal must be to be faithful in our own teaching and practice, including in separating from false teaching.

The actual practical outworking of all this is likely to be different in every circumstance. Certainly we cannot welcome as teachers those who are false shepherds and many evangelical churches have long practiced this.

- We will be wary of any expression of fellowship with those who are in error, including necessarily not sharing at the Lord's Table.
- We will want to take every opportunity to stand up for the truths of the gospel and to seek to work for reform. Supremely we will want to promote and defend bible teaching ministries in local churches and more widely. Moreover we will take the opportunities that arise both to bring about change for good in the Church whilst also seeking to safeguard biblical truth. This means a willingness to work within the structures to a degree so long as we ensure that we remain utterly faithful to the Word of God, even if it means being in a minority of one.
- We will be unwilling to prop up ministries of false teachers or those who tolerate or promote falsehood in the Church. If the Bible calls for us to separate from false teaching it is ludicrous to suggest, as some do, that we must pay to facilitate it spread!
- Finally, we will seek fellowship with all who uphold the faith once delivered to the saints whether they are part of the same formal structures as ourselves or not. Unity in Christ will matter far more to us than organizational unity.

Deadly serious

The toleration of false teachers in the Church is deadly serious. They deceive believers thereby weakening their faith and damaging lives. They push people wide-eyed and ignorant along the wide path that leads to destruction. They dishonour the Lord.

Very often false teaching comes from those who appear genial and are spoken well of by many. Jesus warned that false prophets will come in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves (Mtt 7.11)

Disturbingly many will roundly welcome false teaching. The reason for this is that they are not prepared to endure sound doctrine, it is too stern, too difficult, too old hat. They want new things, and their ears are always itching to hear new teaching, new ideas which will confirm them in their sin (cf. 2 Tim 4.3).

The gates of hades will not prevail

It is easy to look at all this and believe that the game is up, things can only get worse and the cause of the gospel will be lost. However, we know that at many times in the past it appeared that the way of error had prevailed, but it did not. More importantly, the bible tells us that in the end truth will prevail.

*“On this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it”
(Matt 16.18)*