

BEWARE OF FALSE TEACHERS

2 But there also were false prophets among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you. They will subtly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them—bringing swift destruction upon themselves. 2Many will follow their licentious conduct, because of whom the way of truth will be maligned.

3In their greediness they will exploit you with teachings they have invented. For a long time their condemnation has been actively being prepared, and their destruction is not sleeping. 4If God did not spare angels when they sinned, but consigned them to hell, putting them in dark pits where they are being kept for [the day of] judgment; 5and [if God] did not spare the ancient world (although he did protect Noah, a preacher of righteousness, along with seven others, when he brought a flood upon the world of the ungodly); 6and [if God] condemned the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah by reducing them to ashes, making them an example of what is going to happen to those who live ungodly lives; 7and [if God] rescued righteous Lot who was distressed by the conduct of lawless men [living] in licentiousness—8for by what he saw and heard as he lived among them day by day, that righteous man felt his righteous soul tormented by their lawless deeds; 9[then] the Lord knows how to rescue the godly out of trial and how to reserve the unrighteous for punishment until the day of judgment. 10This is especially true with regard to those who live for the flesh with its corrupting passion and who treat authority with contempt. Being bold and arrogant, they do not tremble as they blaspheme [about] glorious [things]; 11whereas angels, being greater in strength and power, do not bring a reviling judgment against them before the Lord. 12But these men, like brute beasts who were born as wild animals to be captured and killed, are blaspheming with regard to things they do not understand. By their corruption they will also be destroyed; 13suffering harm as the retribution for wrongdoing. They consider it to be a pleasure to engage in self-indulgence in the daytime. They are stains and blemishes [upon the church] as they revel in their lusts while they feast with you. 14With eyes full of adultery and an insatiable [appetite] for sin, they seduce unstable souls. Having a heart that has been trained by greed, they are accursed children. 15Having abandoned the right way, they have gone astray, following the way of Balaam [the son] of Beor, who loved the wages [to be gained] by wrongdoing. 16But he was rebuked for his transgression: a dumb donkey, speaking with a man's voice, restrained the madness of the prophet. (2 Pet. 2:1-16)*

**In verse 3, the phrase literally reads, "For a long time their condemnation has not been idle."*

Introduction

The good people of the little town on the Mississippi River were glad to see them! They were only sorry that they had come a day late!

Poor Peter Wilks had just died the night before his two "brothers" arrived—it was all so sad. The two of them, Harvey (he was a preacher) and William, had come all the way from Sheffield, England, to visit their dear "brother," Peter. The steamboat

deposited the two of them at the dock of this little river town, and they inquired, “Can anyone tell us where Mr. Peter Wilks lives?”

“I’m sorry, Sir,” answered one of the townsfolk, “the best we can do is tell you where he **did** live as recent as yesterday evening.”

Observing the mournful looks on the townsfolk’s’ faces, the two “brothers” bust out in tears, and Harvey wails, “Alas, our poor brother—gone, and we never got to see him!”

Pretty soon there are tears being shed all around, and those kind-hearted people offer to escort the two “brothers” to the house where their dearly departed “brother,” Peter, had lived. They come to the house, pay their respects at the coffin—where there is a lot more shedding of tears—and meet the deceased’s dear daughters.

In no time at all, Mary Jane—the eldest daughter—fetches the letter her dear father wrote on his deathbed and dutifully hands it over to her “Uncle Harvey.” Harvey reads it out loud, and breaks down crying again. It seems “brother” Peter bequeathed his house to the girls and just about everything else (his other houses and property and business and \$3000 in gold) to his dear brothers, Harvey and William. It sure is too bad the two “brothers” missed out on seeing Peter while he was still alive; but it sure is a good thing that they came all this way to receive their inheritance!

The only problem is that these two men are not Harvey and William Wilks! They are two frauds who got the information about Peter’s death from a gentleman heading down the river to New Orleans, and they just thought they would stop by the little river town and collect the loot, posing as Peter’s long-lost brothers, and thereby exploit Peter’s family.

That’s the way Mark Twain tells the story in his book, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.

The Apostle Peter issues a similar warning when he writes, “*there will be false teachers ... they will exploit you with teachings they have invented.*” The Word of God instructs us to beware of false teachers, because they will seek to exploit us with their destructive teachings.

I. Beware of False Teachers, ...Because They will Come

Peter reminds us that false prophets arose among the Old Testament people of Israel. Note, for example, Jeremiah 23:25-32,

I have heard what the prophets say who prophesy lies in my name. They say, I had a dream! I had a dream! ²⁶How long will this continue in the hearts of these lying prophets, who prophesy the delusions of their own minds? ²⁷They think the dreams they tell one another will make my people forget my name, just as their fathers forgot my name through the worship of Baal. ²⁸Let the prophet who has a dream tell his dream, but let the one who has my word speak it faithfully, for what is the straw in comparison to the grain? declares Jehovah. ²⁹Is not my word like fire, declares Jehovah, and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces? ³⁰Therefore, I am against the prophets, declares Jehovah, [against each one] who steals my words from his neighbor. ³¹Yes, indeed, declares Jehovah, I am against the prophets who wag their own tongues and yet declare, "Jehovah says." ³²Indeed, I am against those who prophesy false dreams, declares Jehovah. They tell them and lead my people astray with their reckless lies, yet I did not send them or appoint them. They do not benefit these people at all, declares Jehovah. (Jer. 23:25-32)

These prophets are described as men who "*prophesy lies in [the LORD's] name*" (vs. 25.) They employ the LORD's name and His divine authority, but they do not bring His message; on the contrary, they bring lying words. What are the lying words that they speak? Jeremiah 23:17 indicates that they pronounce a blessing upon those who continue in their sins and continue to defy God, assuring such people that no judgment shall befall them: "*They continually say to those who despise me, 'Jehovah has said, You shall have peace.' And to every one who walks in the stubbornness of his own heart they say, 'No evil shall overtake you.'*"

These false prophets are said to prophesy from "*the delusions of their own minds*" (vs. 26.) That is to say, they invent their message and convince themselves that it is from God. Note that in this self-delusion they are aided by the deluding spirit of the devil, which is permitted to operate with God's consent in those who desire falsehood and sin. Consider the testimony of Micaiah, a true prophet of the LORD, as he stood before King Ahab, who was intent on doing evil and whose prophets willingly supported him by prophesying a message he desired to hear, one that encouraged him in his sinful way and assured him of success:

Micaiah continued, Therefore hear the word of Jehovah: I saw Jehovah sitting on his throne with all the host of heaven standing on his right and on his left. ¹⁹And Jehovah said, Who will entice Ahab king of Israel into attacking Ramoth Gilead and going to his death there? One suggested this, and another that. ²⁰Finally, a spirit came forward, stood before Jehovah and said, I will entice him. By what means [will you do so]? Jehovah asked. ²¹He said, I will go and be a lying spirit in the mouths of all his prophets. You will succeed in enticing him, said Jehovah. Go and do it. ²²So now Jehovah has put a lying spirit in the mouths of these prophets of yours. Jehovah has decreed disaster for you. (2 Chron. 18:18-22)

When men knowingly and intentionally resist the truth and deny the truth, because of their desire to practice unrighteousness, the judgment of God takes the form of His permitting the devil to deceive them and lead them to their own destruction and to final perdition:

The coming of the lawless one will be in accordance with the work of Satan, displayed in all kinds of counterfeit miracles, signs and wonders, ¹⁰and in every sort of evil that deceives those who are perishing. They perish because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. ¹¹For this reason God sends them a powerful delusion so that they will believe the lie ¹²and so that all will be condemned who have not believed the truth but have delighted in wickedness.
(2 Thess. 2:9-12)

The design and intent of the false prophets is to make the LORD's people "*forget* [His] *name*" (vs. 27.) Their design is to make the people lose sight of the truth of God by presenting and magnifying an abstraction of God—for example, focusing only on His great attributes of love and mercy to the exclusion of such other divine attributes as holiness and justice. Or, they might seek to carry out their evil design by substituting a pagan idol in the place of the true God—in the Old Testament era the false prophets led the people of Israel to forsake the LORD and worship the pagan idol, Baal.

We must beware of those who only proclaim the LORD's great attribute of love to the exclusion of His attributes of holiness and justice, creating a spiritual atmosphere that is conducive to sin, but that will ultimately lead to the judgment of God. We must also beware of those who would proclaim a substitute "Jesus," a "New Age Jesus," in the place of the biblical Jesus:

First, the New Age esteems Jesus as a spiritually attuned or evolved being who serves as an example for spiritual discovery and evolutionary advancement [as opposed to Jesus being the eternal Son of God as taught by the Bible.]

Second, the New Age separates the historical Jesus from the universal and impersonal Christ consciousness. According to New Agers, the historical Jesus merely tapped into this cosmic power sometimes referred to by them as "Christ consciousness."

Third, the affirmation that Jesus is the supreme and final revelation of God is denied by the New Agers.

Fourth, Jesus' crucifixion, if recognized at all, is not deemed as having any atoning significance. Jesus' suffering on the cross is either rejected as unhistorical or reinterpreted to exclude the idea that he suffered to pay the penalty for sin.

Fifth, Jesus' resurrection and ascension are routinely denied or spiritualized so as to exclude his unique triumph over sin, death, and Satan.

Sixth, Jesus' second coming is spiritualized and democratized to include the evolutionary ascent of an awakened humanity.

Seventh, the New Age accepts arcane, extra-biblical documents as sources for authentic information about Jesus. Although the Bible is selectively cited, its function is secondary to texts that reveal a different Jesus. (*Christianity Today*, 4/29/91, pp.20-21)

Peter warns that just as there arose false prophets in Old Testament Israel, so, too, *"there shall be false teachers among you"* (the New Testament era church. Compare Peter's warning with that of the Apostle Paul:

I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. ³⁰Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. ³¹So be on your guard! (Acts 20:28-31a)

Let us beware of false teachers, knowing that they will come.

See the accompanying Appendix for a consideration of the case of Anne Hutchinson and her disruptive influence upon the church in colonial New England

II. Beware of False Teachers, ...Because Their Teaching is Destructive

Peter describes such teachers as bringing into the church *"destructive heresies"* (vs. 1.) We must take note of the fact that doctrine is important: doctrine supplies a basis for our conduct and dictates what conduct is acceptable and pleasing to God. True biblical doctrine roots us into Christ and lays the foundation for a godly Christian life; contrariwise, false doctrine separates us from Christ and leads to ultimate and eternal ruin. With regard to doctrine, the Apostle Paul gives the following exhortation to Timothy: *"What you heard from me, keep as the pattern of sound teaching, with faith and love in Christ Jesus. ¹⁴Guard the good deposit that was entrusted to you—guard it with the help of the Holy Spirit who lives in us"* (2 Tim. 1:13-14.)

Peter informs us, *"many will follow [the] licentious conduct"* of these false teachers, thereby causing the Way of Truth to be maligned (vs. 2.) When the life of godliness is forsaken by those who claim to belong to the Lord and to know Him as their God, their sinful lifestyle causes the Lord's name to be blasphemed. Note Romans 2:23-24, a passage in which the Apostle Paul rebukes the Jews for the inconsistency of their lives and points out the consequence of such a life: *"You*

who boast about the Law, do you dishonor God by breaking the law? ²⁴As it is written: God's name is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you."

Peter warns that such teachers bring upon themselves—and their followers—*"swift destruction"* (vs. 1.) This is the inevitable result of their teaching because they are corrupting and perverting the truth of God (vs. 10.) By turning the gospel of grace into a license to sin—Peter describes them as being followers (disciples) of *"the flesh with its corrupting passion,"* rather than being followers (disciples) of Christ. The inevitable result of their teaching brings destruction both to themselves and their followers because God will take vengeance against wrongdoing, as He repeatedly demonstrated in the past (vs. 4-6.) God did not spare the angels when they sinned (vs. 4;) this is apparently a reference to the angels who joined Satan in his rebellion against the LORD. God did not spare the ancient world when it had become utterly corrupt in His sight; He visited it with the devastating flood in the days of Noah (vs. 5.) God did not spare the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah when their iniquity reached the depths of degradation (vs. 6.)

Let us beware of false teachers, because their teaching is destructive. Let us be willing to receive the truth and grow in conformity to it—producing a life that is holy unto God. Let us resist the desire to entertain teaching that will condone the lusts of our old nature and promote the old self-centered self.

Conclusion

This is the word of warning issued to us by the Holy Spirit through the Apostle Peter: Beware of false teachers who will seek to exploit you with their destructive teaching.

What criterion must we employ to detect false teachers and false teaching? The first question to ask of any and all teaching is, "Does this teaching deny, or at any point go contrary to, the God of the Bible?" The admonition given by the LORD through Moses to His Old Testament people equally applies to whatever teaching the church encounters today:

If a prophet, or one who foretells by dreams, appears among you and announces to you a miraculous sign or wonder, ²and if the sign or wonder of which he has spoken takes place, and he says, Let us follow other gods (gods you have not known) and let us worship them, ³you must not listen to the words of that prophet or dreamer. Jehovah your God is testing you to find out whether you love him with all your heart and with all your soul. ⁴It is Jehovah your God you must follow, and him you must fear. Keep his commandments and obey him; serve him and hold fast to him. (Deut. 13:1-4)

A second question to ask of any and all teaching is, "Does their teaching urge you to go beyond Christ?" The Apostle John issues this warning to the church: *"Anyone who*

runs ahead and does not continue in the teaching of Christ does not have God; whoever continues in the teaching has both the Father and the Son” (2 Jn. 9.)

The elders of the church must exercise the oversight to detect error and guard the church of Christ against it, as they are exhorted to do by the Apostle Paul:

Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood. ²⁹I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. ³⁰Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. (Acts 20:28-30)

The Christian must know the Bible and test all teaching in the light of the Scriptures, imitating the Bereans, of whom it is said: *“Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true” (Acts 17:11.)*

**Appendix:
The Case of Anne Hutchinson
and Her Disruptive Influence upon the Church in Colonial New England**

Mrs. Hutchinson and her husband arrived at Boston in 1636, and immediately joined John Cotton’s church, for she had been an admirer of Cotton’s when he had been preaching ... in England ... as for Cotton, never had he met anyone who was so enthusiastic about the Gospel, or who had such a quick grasp of the deeper things of the Spirit.

Mrs. Hutchinson’s own enthusiasm now reached the point where she started inviting women to her home after church, to discuss the high points of Cotton’s sermons ... Gradually—imperceptibly—Mrs. Hutchinson began sharing some of her own beliefs, which were not entirely in line with what was being taught by Cotton—or anyone else for that matter.

Heresy begins when one takes a basic truth and pushes it slightly out of balance with the rest of the body of truths, which together comprise the essence of the Christian faith. Anne Hutchinson was teaching that a Christian was saved by faith alone. That much is true, but she went on to state that therefore, no amount of sanctification or good works could be taken as proof of salvation ... she maintained ... also that the absence of sanctification and good works was no sign that a person *was not* saved. How *could* one tell, then, if one was saved or not? According to Mrs. Hutchinson, the Holy Spirit entered bodily into a person when he became saved. And anyone who had the Holy Spirit in him could tell whether someone else had the Spirit in him, too.

For individuals who are caught up in the heady intoxication of profound spiritual experiences, it is so easy to slip into error ... spiritual experience is only one leg of a three-legged stool. Unless it is balanced by the Word of God ... and ... other Christians ... the stool will topple.

What keeps the stool in balance? Facing the reality of our own egos, being willing to be corrected and shown where we are wrong ... This is the Way of the Cross ... It was a way that ... Anne Hutchinson chose not to go.

Soon Mrs. Hutchinson was claiming that the direct revelation of what she called the Holy Spirit was superior to “the ministry of the Word.” ... Believing that she was always in direct communication with the Holy Spirit, she therefore felt that she did not need to submit to the rest of the Body of Christ in order to hear God. If anyone ever dared to openly question whether the inner voice she heard was indeed of God, she would grow fanatical.

The showdown came on that inevitable day when she was summoned to appear before the magistrates to answer to the charge of heresy.

How, the court asked her, did she know it was God who revealed these things to her, and not Satan? And with that, fire fairly blazed from her eyes.

The Court needed only a short deliberation to decide upon banishing her and those who would not disavow her beliefs.

Mrs. Hutchinson’ husband died the following year, and the badly deformed child she was carrying at the time of her exile died at birth. Whereupon, she decided to leave Rhode Island and moved the remainder of her family to a lonely settlement in the Dutch Colony of New Netherlands, near a place called Hell’s Gate. There, in September 1643, she and her family were cut down on their doorstep, the first victims of a local Indian uprising.

There is an even more macabre footnote to the Anne Hutchinson story, which, the Puritans were convinced, bore out all the other evidence that she was a mouthpiece for Satan ... In the same year that Anne Hutchinson had given birth to her grotesquely deformed stillborn child, so did her chief protégée, Mary Dyer ... the mothers endeavored to bury both babies without entering them into the town records. But word got out about Mary Dyer’s baby—that it was a monster.

In giving his account of these things, John Winthrop wrote: The Governor, with advice of some other of the magistrates and of the elders of Boston, caused the said monster to be taken up from its grave, and though it were much decomposed, yet most of those things were seen, as the horns and claws, the scales, etc. When it died in the mother’s body ... the bed whereon the mother lay did shake, and withal there was such a noisome savor [i.e.; noxious odor], as most of the women were taken with extreme vomiting and ... were forced to depart.

Governor Winthrop is too mature a witness to suspect him of distortion or exaggeration. If anything, his presentation would be conservative. And perhaps the Puritans, who somberly regarded it as a sign of Satan's authorship of Mrs. Dyer's and Mrs. Hutchinson's teachings, were not that far wrong. (*The Light and the Glory*, Peter Marshall and David Manuel, Power Books/Fleming H. Revell, Old Tappan NJ, 1977, pp. 199-203)