

INTRODUCTION

If you study the history of the church; it becomes clear that the greatest danger to the church of Jesus Christ in every age is false teaching that is promoted by false teachers. Very often these false teachers are within the accepted membership of the church and sometimes they may even be found within the established leadership within the church.

That is certainly the case in Ephesus and we have looked at these false teachers before and looked a little at their false teaching which is not easy to establish from the information that we have in this letter. Of course behind every false teaching and every false teacher there is Satan who we are told disguises himself as an angel of light (2 Corinthians 11:13-15).

But of course it is not always easy to discern the work of Satan in false teaching especially if it coming from a leader in the church that the church has grown to love and trust. That is why Paul time and time again in this letter warns the church in different ways to beware of false doctrine. In the verses that we are considering today he is basically laying out the marks of false teachers and the marks of false teaching. What should the church look out for? How can we distinguish the work of Satan in the life of our church?

If you have a physical illness then generally speaking you will have symptoms or marks by which the illness may be identified. Well the same thing is true in the spiritual world there are marks that clearly show there is something spiritually unhealthy about that teacher. When Paul uses the word 'if' in verse 3 he is not using the word as we use it in English. We use it, if we are not sure if something is really the case.

But in the Greek it is used to convey something that is certain. 'If' as indeed is the case anyone teaches false doctrines and so on. False doctrine was a reality within the churches at Ephesus; Paul has already outlined this before within this letter (see 1:3-4; 6-7 and 30. 4:1-5).

Paul does not name the false teachers he simply says 'anyone' which means anyone who at this present moment or anyone who in the future may arise and shows the marks of a false teacher. The church ought always to be on its guard for false teaching; it is wrong to think that it cannot happen to us and it is wrong to think that we as individuals may not in the future embrace false doctrines. So Paul warns the church then and the church now to look out for the marks. What should we look out for? What are these marks of a false teacher?

1. THE MARKS OF FALSE TEACHERS

a) They accepted doctrines that are not in line with general evangelical beliefs (v 3). The word 'false' simply means other doctrines, doctrines that contradict what has been the established teaching of the church. Doctrine that is contrary to God's truth as it is revealed in his word.

Paul says that doctrine that does not agree with the sound instruction of our Lord Jesus (both his own personal teaching and that of his apostles) and doctrine that does not lead to godliness (which is what the last phrase means) is false. Of course this false teaching can take many forms, it may teach error concerning God's nature and character, it may deny the trinity or be in error about Christ's person and work.

There are teachers who deny the virgin birth, or the sinlessness of Christ or his substitutionary death, or bodily resurrection.

Others will deny his personal return as Judge. There are other false teachers who teach error concerning the person and work of the Holy Spirit or there are others who deny the inerrancy of

the Holy Scriptures. I could go on but if you have been a Christian for any length of time you will I am sure have met people who teach such false doctrines. Of course at other times false doctrines are not quite as easy to spot, for often false doctrines start in very subtle ways, like questioning the doctrine of eternal punishment of the lost? Often what starts off as a genuine question and concern to be faithful to the text of Scripture leads eventually to a full-blown doctrine that is false?

Of course the truth is that false teachers and doctrines can very often creep into churches, which are not grounded in the Scriptures. Those who know the clear doctrines of the Scriptures are in all likelihood able to spot false teaching. Mature believers and mature churches will always be comparing what they hear with the Scriptures in order to maintain the purity of the gospel.

The problem is that we live in a day when generally speaking people are not grounded in the Scriptures and are very unsure about their doctrines; we have churches that major on experiences and they often do so at the expense of the doctrines found within the Scriptures.

But even in churches like ours, which hold to what is known as the doctrines of grace we can be a people who say we know what we believe without really knowing what we believe. We very often trust the leadership to maintain these great truths but we must not pass the buck here for it is every Christian's responsibility to maintain the great doctrines of the word of God, for who knows there may come a day when the leaders of this church embrace teachings that are contrary to the word of God.

But of course having our minds filled with the right doctrines does not mean that we are maintaining truth for Paul says that doctrine must lead to godliness. A doctrine that is just in the mind and not applied is just as false as one that is clearly not taught in Scripture for example the doctrine of election should lead to greater prayer and evangelism.

You can obviously tell a false teacher by what he teaches but there are other marks that we can look for. If we are not sure about their teaching, if we just have an instinct that it is false but are not sure then there are other things to look for.

b) He is conceited and lacks understanding (v 4) - At the heart of false teaching is pride; it takes a proud heart to set your own understanding of the Scriptures against the traditional teaching of the church, which has been believed over the centuries. It takes a proud heart to go against evangelical scholars both past and present who have systematised evangelical doctrine for us so that it is more clearly understood. The word used here for "conceit" means 'to puff up like a cloud of smoke,' we might say today that such a person is 'full of hot air.'

Such teachers will refuse to submit to the word of God even when they have been shown that their own teaching is contrary to that word. Their pride will not allow them to admit they are wrong and therefore need to repent of such false teaching. If you have had any sort of contact with the cults you will see this conceit manifested in them particularly if you are able to point out their error from the Scriptures.

Although false teachers think that they have the truth and this 'new' teaching is correct and the traditional teaching of the church has been wrong over the centuries, Paul dismisses such people as people who in reality understand nothing. Look at what Paul says elsewhere on this issue (1 Corinthians 2:9-16). Those who know and believe the word of God have far more insight and spiritual reality than any false teacher. The most simple-minded Christian has more wisdom and true knowledge of God than the educated false teacher.

c) He Loves Controversy (v 4) – Generally speaking false teachers love to stir up controversy within the church. They love to speculate which is what the word "controversies" means here and they love disputes (word battles). Such people love to quibble over terminology and meaning of

words and love to be involved in intellectual debates rather than serious study and submission to the word of God.

Such people will debate whether God meant six 24 hours days when He created the world, others will debate whether there is room for an evolutionary belief system in Genesis 1 and 2. Others will debate over the authorship of certain books like did Isaiah write all Isaiah and so on. Others love to stir up controversy concerning the nature of the church and whether it is right for churches to meet in buildings or in homes. Some love to debate and argue over versions of the bible or styles of worship and so on.

Don't misunderstand me; there is nothing wrong with discussing all of these things but if the motive for doing so is an unhealthy interest in controversy rather than a genuine desire to know God's will; then it is simply going down the road of the false teachers.

d) He has a corrupt mind – A false teacher possesses a corrupt mind, corrupted by the evil one. This is the mind of the unbeliever, which Paul elsewhere tells us is hostile to God (Romans 8:7). Such a mind cannot function normally when it comes to spiritual things, it does not react, as it should to the truth, it fails to comprehend and understand the things of God

e) He is robbed of the truth. (v 5) – The idea behind the Greek word is that someone or something has robbed him of the truth by pulling him away from it. If these false teachers people were Elders within the church; then they knew the true gospel, but for some reason they have allowed themselves to be robbed of the truth of God. Other false teachers had influenced them so that they came to reject the truth in order to embrace a lie.

There is a little warning here for us all, do not allow ourselves to be robbed of the truth by being persuaded by others to follow false doctrines. Of course the doctrines are never presented as false but are presented in such a way that the receiver is led to believe that this teaching will mean greater blessing in your life. Again the lesson is clear if we are going to reject falsehood then we need to know the truth and be able to identify falsehood from truth.

f) He believes that godliness is a means to financial gain (v 5) – Such false teachers suppose that godliness (false godliness) will bring them financial gain. You can of course see how such teaching could be very attractive to those at Ephesus, if you follow this teaching then God will richly bless you financially. Where have we heard such things before? America is full of such false teachers who exploit the Christian public and deceive them into giving their money to Televangelists. The false teachers promise that God will bless them with wealth because of their faithfulness.

There will always be people who are willing to exploit the Christian public and deceive them out of their money. Of course such false teachers believe that what they teach is truth, because they are robbed of the truth and have corrupt minds.

2. THE RESULT OF FALSE TEACHING (vs. 4-5)

If false teaching is allowed to develop within any church if an unhealthy (unhygienic) interest in controversy and word battles is allowed to foster then the result will be disastrous for the church. True teaching will produce godliness but look at what false teaching produces; envy, strife, malicious talk, evil suspicions and constant friction. All these words can be used to describe what happens in churches when there is disunity.

The result of false doctrine is disunity O such groups who teach false doctrines might put on a show of unity and indeed might even accuse the evangelical church of not being as united as they are but when you look below the surface you will find all these things present.

Envy is an inward discontent with the advantages and popularity enjoyed by others. Strife is uneasy tensions between people; this leads to talking maliciously (abusively) about others. Evil suspicions means that you ascribe evil motives to someone and all of this leads to constant friction. Have you seen those things in churches? If so then false doctrine is the cause for only the truth unifies.

The marks and the effects of false teaching are clear. The church must constantly be on its guard, and must seek to stop false teaching from spreading by teaching the truth and seeking to live out that truth in godly living. We must pray that false teaching will not take a hold in our evangelical churches but that every new teaching will be exposed for what it is. This is why we need good evangelical scholarship, scholars who are able to refute the errors of the false teachers as well as help the evangelical cause to come to a better understanding of God's word.

Let's pray that God will protect his church from false teachers and that His church will continue to be faithful to his truth both by preaching it and by living it out in godly living.

Amen