

The Character of False Teaching

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In Acts 13 and 14 Luke recorded how Paul and Barnabas preached Christ in the Gentile world with great power and conviction so that the word of the Lord spread throughout the whole region, including the province of Galatia (Acts 13:49). Sadly, the Devil wasted no time in attacking the young congregations established in the area. After Paul's departure Judaizing teachers came in and began preaching "another gospel" (Gal. 1:6-10). The Galatian epistle provides Paul's inspired response to those teachers and their teaching, including a significant section dedicated to exposing the danger and characteristics of false doctrine. It is important for the church today to understand what false doctrine seeks to accomplish so that we may recognize and avoid it—just as the Galatian Christians should have done so long ago.

False teaching causes one to ignore what they know to be true (Gal. 3:1-4). Paul bases his first argument in the doctrinal section of Galatians on the experience of the Galatian Christians. He asked four rhetorical questions in order to remind them of things they knew to be true.

"Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law or by the hearing of faith? ...Having begun in the Spirit are you now made perfect by the flesh? ...Have you suffered so many things in vain? ...He who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you, does he do it by the works of the law or by the hearing of faith?"

Again, each one would have known the answer to each of the questions, but they all imply that, by buying into the teaching of the Judaizers, they turned away from what they knew to be true. Such emphasizes the power falsehood has to blind hearts to truth. Paul told the young preacher Timothy to "avoid the profane and idle babblings and contradictions of what is falsely called knowledge" (1 Tim. 6:20). False teachers are skilled deceivers (2 Pet. 2:14) and excel in exploitation (2 Pet. 2:3). A silky-tongued orator peddling a devious message can quickly convince a person that up is down and green is purple. The Galatian Christians knew that the blessings of Christianity came as a result of obedience to the gospel and not to the Law of Moses, yet the Judaizers successfully persuaded them otherwise. Their example serves as a sobering reminder for us all that though we may know the truth, error can convince us that we do not.

Additionally, the desire to change or override truth remains a dangerous characteristic of false teaching. Consider Paul's argument in Galatians 3:15-18. God's promise to Abraham, referenced in Galatians 3:6-9, pointed to Christianity, so that all people would be saved through obedience to the gospel of Christ—not the Law of Moses. Yet the false teachers in Galatia had replaced the gospel with the Law, which in effect threw away God's promise to Abraham. In Galatians 3:15-18 Paul argues that just because the Law of Moses came into effect 430 years after the promise was made did not mean that God had forgotten or nullified either the promise or His eternal plan (cf. Eph. 3:9-11; etc.). Like the Judaizers, false teachers today do what they can to change or replace truth. Wolves disguised as sheep never preface their sermons by saying, "I am here to devour you so ignore everything that I say." They use "deceptive words" (2 Pet. 2:3) and mix a little error with a little truth in order to convince the gullible. Remember when the Devil changed the entire course of human history by adding the word "not" to God's command (Gen. 3:4)? Again, this truth should stand as an important reminder for us to be like the

Bereans and study our bibles carefully so that we can see through the chicanery of falsehood.

Regardless of the century, false teaching ultimately leads to spiritual bondage. In Galatians 4:1-7 Paul reminded the brethren of the benefits of moving from slavery to sonship. Then in 4:8-11 he lamented the fact that, though they had escaped the world through their obedience to the gospel, their acceptance of false teaching had put them right back in it. The Gospel of our Salvation (Eph. 1:13) has the power to break the chains of bondage to sin (Rom. 6). When we obey its commands the old passes away and all things become new (2 Cor. 5:17). But leaving the truth in exchange for error puts the shackles back on. Peter wrote,

For when they speak great swelling words of emptiness, they allure through the lusts of the flesh, through lewdness, the ones who have actually escaped from those who live in error. While they promise them liberty, they themselves are slaves of corruption; for by whom a person is overcome, by him also he is brought into bondage. For if, after they have escaped the pollutions of the world through the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and overcome, the latter end is worse for them than the beginning (2 Pet. 2:18-20).

False doctrine can scratch the itchiest of ears (2 Tim. 4:3) with grandiose promises of prosperity and happiness, but the only power it truly has is the power of enslavement. So we must be on guard for fabricated doctrines of men, to expose and defeat them. We must “stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage” (Gal. 5:1).