

## **BE ALERT**

2 Peter 2:1-3, 17-19; Jude 17-23

There are estimated to be more than 45,000 Christian denominations worldwide. This number includes denominations like Pentecostal, Presbyterian, Lutheran, Baptist, and Apostolic, as well as many smaller, independent churches. The exact number of denominations is difficult to determine as some denominations have a wide range of local variations, and there are many independent congregations that don't formally belong to any larger organization.

Why so many? Different interpretations of various passages in the Bible are probably the reasons that most groups would state that make their denominations distinctive. The kinds of differences could be catalogued in several major categories such as “means of salvation,” “method and significance of baptism,” “end-time prophesy questions,” “observance of the Sabbath,” “authority and church polity questions,” “holiness and separation from the world,” “operation of Spiritual Gifts,” “sovereignty of God and free-will of man issues,” and the list goes on and on.

Which group has it right and is most faithful to the true meaning of God’s Word? Of course, the answer is “the group to which I belong.” What are the consequences of believing a misinterpretation of Scriptural passages and acting upon that erroneous belief?

That which came to mind from Old Testament scriptures were the misinterpretations of what God meant and the way He was going to fulfill His promise to Abraham and Sarah about having a son. Their misinterpretation produced Ishmael, while the truth produced Isaac. Another obvious example was the thinking that the Messiah was going to be a political leader that would restore physical Israel to its glory days. That belief resulted in most of the Jews rejecting Jesus and the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple.

When we believe and act upon a misinterpretation of the truth, it can cause terrible and last complications in life and cause us to miss out on the blessings that God would like us to have by rejecting the truth. Some people called Jesus a troublemaker. Paul was thought by some to be a troublemaker. A lot of times, we will be advised by those who profess “conventional wisdom” to not be a troublemaker. One way we have of saying that is to recite a line such as “sit down, you’re rocking the boat.” Being a troublemaker is not bad as long as the person has truth on his side. Problems arise when the bases for making changes are fundamentally flawed precepts that lead to collapse and ruin rather than to real improvements.

When a person who rocks the boat comes along, the way to deal with such a person is to determine whether or not the basis for his or her ideas is in agreement with the word of God or if the person has a hidden agenda and is being less than truthful. The second thing to consider is whether the proposed changes will result in real improvements and spiritual growth or if the changes will cause discord and controversy. One of the best defenses against lying troublemakers is a good offense based on an active program for spiritual growth and an ever-increasing dependence upon God’s grace and protection as we are being transformed into the image of His Son.

Does it matter if the false teaching stems from good intentions (as was the case of the birth of Ishmael) or from malicious intentions (as was the case of the rejection of Christ)? Yes, it does matter and, yet, damage can happen regardless of the motivation. Peter was dealing with a situation in the early church of malicious intentioned false teachers.

### False Teachers – 2:1-3

<sup>1</sup> But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly

bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing upon themselves swift destruction.<sup>2</sup> And many will follow their sensuality, and because of them the way of truth will be blasphemed.<sup>3</sup> And in their greed they will exploit you with false words. Their condemnation from long ago is not idle, and their destruction is not asleep. 2 Peter 2:1-3 (ESV)

Again, we see a reminder that those to whom Peter was writing were familiar with the history of Israel. Just as Israel (the people of verse one) had false prophets and suffered the consequences of choosing to follow those rather than the true prophets of God, the church will have counterfeit teachers who will try to lead the people of God in a wrong direction. Peter was obviously making a distinction between prophets and teachers. Many times, we tend to think of these two ministries as being the same, however, there are differences.

A good summary statement of the difference is “Prophets are those through whom God reveals truth, while teachers are those who explain the truths of God’s Word.” A real prophet declares a doctrine that is true while a counterfeit prophet declares a doctrine that is a facsimile of truth. On the other hand, a teacher takes a life principle or doctrine and applies it to the way we live. A legitimate teacher starts with a doctrine of truth and applies it properly to life. A subtle counterfeit teacher may also start with a truth and apply it in a counterfeit or incomplete way to life. An overtly counterfeit teacher will start with a false doctrine and apply it in a way that harms people.

What are the characteristics of false teachers? The first characteristic is being “secretive” or as stated in verse four of Jude “they creep in unawares.” These people would become part of a local church group and they would have a hidden agenda of introducing a different doctrine or what Peter called destructive or damnable heresies.

The origin of the word heresies is related to making choices. The idea of “secretly or hidden” could also be thought of as a “subtle” suggestion. The false ideas get introduced in subtle ways such as the person suggesting that an alternate choice of a way of thinking about various ideas is an interpretation that they are ready to share. It is usually not a total frontal attack on the truth because people (who are familiar with the truth) would quickly recognize and reject the change. Once an idea has been accepted and several generations of Christians go by, then the new idea becomes generally regarded as the “gospel truth.” Any attempt to return to the original meaning of the Scriptures is then treated as heresy.

How does this happen? As in the Parable of the Tares, it happens while people are asleep. In that parable, the tares were pictured as people whom the enemy had used to contaminate the congregation of God’s people. The same idea would apply to tares being false ideas and doctrines that appear to be innocent when they are just developing but (in the end) are seen to be counterfeit.

In Israel, there were openly pagan prophets which lead people astray. These were like the prophets of Baal which Elijah encountered. We should be able to recognize and effectively counter such blatant error. This would be like people who promote Islam or Eastern religions and their practice. You would think that a nation with our Christian background would not be easily fooled by such false teachings. However, as we know, many are taken in by such lies.

What sometimes happens in today’s environment is that we will find churches who call a pastor who has been influenced by liberal theologians who question such things as the virgin birth, the resurrection and the reality of being born again. This can happen if the congregation is made of members who are not aware of what’s going on in such areas. You can also find situations in which people will be eager to teach so they can introduce a particular idea on end-time prophecies or to change the thinking of people in the church to adopt a greater tolerance to alternate lifestyles or other religions. It is not too unusual to hear preachers who have new age

terminology interspersed in their sermon material.

A more subtle danger comes from those who seem to be close to the truth but they have a really different understanding of the nature of God and Who Jesus is and that which is commonly believed by most who profess to be Christians.

One particular concern that Peter had was the error that was being introduced concerning the person of Jesus. The error was related to at least four areas regarding Jesus: His uniqueness, His absolute ownership and unlimited power over all creation, His Divinity, and His Supremacy. These errors are still problematic today.

Those errors are related to the situation Peter mentioned as “denying the Master Who bought them.” When Peter said that these pseudo teachers were “bought by the Master” does that mean they were saved? Apparently, this was not the case, since as we read in 1 John 2:2 “He is the offering for our sins; and not for ours only, but for all the world.” The price that Jesus paid on the Cross was effective and sufficient enough to purchase every human being in the entire world. However, the application of the atonement is limited those who believe and put their trust in what Christ did.

The extent of “ownership” is captured in the Greek word that is translated as either Lord or Master in most Bible versions. The Greek word used is “despotes” which conveys the meaning of absolute ownership and uncontrolled power when applied to an owner-slave relationship. So, we could say that “denial of the One who bought” is as simple as a person who will not submit to the Lordship of Christ in their conduct of life. How many times have we heard a person say something to the effect, “I am my own man, nobody is going tell me what to do.”

Another false teaching that was a problem in the early church and one which is still around today and that is a “disconnect” between belief and behavior. Those who separate belief and behavior will argue that it does not matter how Christians behave, since grace could forgive every sin, no matter how great. This is what the Bible calls presumptuous sins. Some deliberately go on sinning rather than walking in the way of repentance and this is evidence that they discredit or think little of the high price that Christ paid to deliver them from a life of sin. He did not save us from sin so that we could go on sinning.

Such practices may go on and those who do such things seem to not suffer any consequences for it. However, Peter warned his readers that God pronounced judgment on such false teaching a long time ago and that judgment is still in effect and they will eventually experience the consequences or wages of their wrong doing. Sometimes such “judgment” will come upon people as a direct consequence of the behavior or lifestyle they chose to adopt.

### Empty Promises – 2:17-19

<sup>17</sup> These are waterless springs and mists driven by a storm. For them the gloom of utter darkness has been reserved.

<sup>18</sup> For, speaking loud boasts of folly, they entice by sensual passions of the flesh those who are barely escaping from those who live in error. <sup>19</sup> They promise them freedom, but they themselves are slaves of corruption. For whatever overcomes a person, to that he is enslaved. 2 Peter 2:17–19 (ESV)

What Peter described could very well apply to some situations we see today in what we would call liberal denominations (falsely called churches). He had observed that these “false teachers” did not even try to hide the sin in which they indulged. In the past, people who practiced immorality had the decency to be discrete about it. Now we are beginning to see those who practice immorality being proud of their lifestyle and bragging about it. While they are doing that, they have the gall to show up at church and blatantly participate in the Lord’s Supper. Some even go to the point of ordaining people who are open or overt practitioners of perverted behavior. Apparently, this kind of thing was also going on in the first century.

Peter's admonition to the church was to be watchful and be able to recognize these situations when they happen and to not let the negative influences of false teachers distract them from their calling to grow in grace, to become more like Christ and to take God's message of salvation to the world in which they lived.

#### Division – Jude 17-19

<sup>17</sup> But you must remember, beloved, the predictions of the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>18</sup> They said to you, "In the last time there will be scoffers, following their own ungodly passions." <sup>19</sup> It is these who cause divisions, worldly people, devoid of the Spirit. Jude 17–19 (ESV)

Jude saw the same kinds of things among false teachers who were disruptive in the churches he knew about. Some in leadership positions in our churches today are there only because they have chosen church work as a vocation rather than having been called into the work. These have no spiritual substance and, consequently, are not able to benefit others in the church. The way they operate is to cultivate a close following of certain people who will support them regardless of what they do or how unsound their judgments are. Many will be in the ministry to make money or to build their reputation or to advance their careers. They use their position in the pulpit to mock or ridicule anyone who might oppose their bad decisions and even go so far as stating that anyone who does not agree with them must be inspired by the devil.

#### Respond – Jude 20-23

<sup>20</sup> But you, beloved, building yourselves up in your most holy faith and praying in the Holy Spirit, <sup>21</sup> keep yourselves in the love of God, waiting for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life. <sup>22</sup> And have mercy on those who doubt; <sup>23</sup> save others by snatching them out of the fire; to others show mercy with fear, hating even the garment stained by the flesh. Jude 20–23 (ESV)

We are in a spiritual battle; therefore, we must approach it with a spiritual solution. To do this we must be in good spiritual condition. We are to build ourselves up in our faith. The "how" of doing this is through prayer in the Spirit. Paul wrote about the Holy Spirit praying through us when we don't know what to ask in his letter to the church in Rome. The Holy Spirit, through us, prays the will of God because He knows the mind of God.

This spiritual battle is being waged on at least two fronts. The first and most difficult is on an individual personal level of looking out for our own welfare. When we are confronted with opposition and attacks by the enemy, we may have a tendency to fight fire with fire. The challenge is to keep ourselves functioning "in the love of God." Very few people are ever won over from an entrenched position of error by strong arguments contrary to their position. Presenting the truth in love is the only thing that will work to bring about a real change in such people. To operate this way, we have to keep focused on the ultimate victory we have in Christ.

The second front where the spiritual battle is fought is with regard to reaching out to the lost. We must show compassion that will lead others to salvation. For some, this will be a real rescue operation because they are so deeply involved in sin and the consequences of sin. When we approach people who are deeply involved in sin, we must do so on the basis of loving the people who are trapped in sin and hating the sin.

The benediction of Jude's brief letter puts the situations those early Christians were undergoing into proper perspective. The world around us may be falling apart, there may be liars and false teachers and people with hidden agendas that would seek to bring harm rather than benefit to the world, nevertheless, God is still on His throne and has all dominion and authority from eternity past though all eternity future. The best news of all is that this all powerful, all knowing, eternal God has provided for our eternal deliverance and salvation from all the evils that we will ever encounter.