

The Importance of Healthy Doctrine in the Local Church

Intro:

In Matthew 16:18, Jesus promises that He will most certainly build His church. However, the *context* and *climate* in which He will build His church is in the face of opposition.

In the NT, Satan carries out his attacks against the church primarily in one of three ways:

1. Physical persecution

- This is most clearly seen in the book of Revelation, as those who “belong” to Satan act as his messengers and agents to physically harm God’s people, as well as hinder the church’s influence.

2. Spiritual opposition

- Just as Satan opposed the Lord Jesus during His earthly ministry, so he continues to do to the Lord’s bride.
 - As in Zechariah 3, the Satan loves to tempt God’s people to doubt God’s goodness towards, as well as love for them. One of his most effective strategies to stymie God’s people is to condemn them and rob them of their assurance of salvation.

3. Doctrinal confusion

- This seems to be the most prevalent form of attack that the church must endure.
- The reason why this is Satan’s favorite form of attack is because it is the most effective tool in his kit.

Though Jesus has many warnings for His followers will have to endure in the “last days,”¹ much of His teaching has to do with being on their guard against false teachers who will seek to lead them astray:

- Matthew 24:4 – The very *first* thing Jesus says about the last days is, “See² that no one leads you astray. For many will come in My name, saying, ‘I am the Christ,’ and they will lead many astray.”
- Matthew 24:11 – “And many false prophets will arise and lead many astray.”
- Matthew 24:24 – “For false christs and false prophets will arise and perform great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect.”

Since this is so, Jesus’ disciples are repeatedly commanded to “stay awake.”³

Part of God’s plan to protect His church is the provision of faithful pastors who will shepherd the sheep with the crook of God’s Word:

- **Titus 1:9** – “[Elders] must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that [they] might be able to give instruction in sound [literally “healthy”] doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it.”
 - The Greek word for “rebuke” (ἐλέγχω) is related to word for shedding light upon something, and often carries the nuance “to expose.”
 - The best way to spot a counterfeit is to so know the original that any deviation from it is immediately spotted. In addition, a special UV light is often used to test counterfeit money.

¹ This is commonly referred to as “The Olivet Discourse” (cf. Matthew 24; cf. Mark 13; Luke 21).

² The verb “to see” (βλέπετε, *blepete*) is in the present, highlighting the ongoing nature of the command. In Mark 13:9, Jesus says, literally, “As for you, keep watching yourselves” (ESV = “But be on your guard”).

³ Again, the verb (γρηγορέω) is in the present tense. Mark uses this verb 3X in chapter 13 and 3X in chapter 14 to highlight the importance and necessity of making sure we don’t doze off in spiritual complacency, as such persons are easy prey for false teachers.

→ Regarding this metaphor, we might say, then, that the Word of God is that standard by which all teaching is tested, as well as the light by which all counterfeits are exposed.

Why is Paul so adamant that Titus make establishing a biblical plurality of elders in the church his first priority in Crete?

- We are told in the very next verses: “For there are many who are insubordinate, empty talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision party. They must be silenced, since they are upsetting whole families by teaching for shameful gain what they ought not to teach” (Titus 1:10-11).
 - It seems that some false teachers had “crept in” to the Cretian congregation, and rather than focusing on the preaching the gospel, were instead “devoting themselves to Jewish myths and the commands of people who turn away from the truth” (1:14).
 - This is dangerous stuff. Not only were entire households being “upset,” but this teaching was turning its adherents away from the truth of the gospel.
- And as Paul repeatedly teaches in Titus, what we believe affects how we live. Those who were believing a false gospel inevitably began to bring shame upon the name of Christ by their lifestyle: they had become lazy, gluttonous, liars (1:12) who lives were not being characterized by purity, but impurity (1:15). Sadly, any profession of belonging to Christ was undermined by their Christless lifestyle (1:16), which, sadly, brought not honor to Christ and His gospel, but reproach (cf. 2:5, 10, 11-14; 3:1-11).

Sadly, in almost every letter in the NT, the issue of false teachers not only comes up, but is often emphasized because of its destructive nature in and upon the church.

- For example, in Paul’s introduction in his letter to the **Galatians**, he foregoes the common formalities of greeting his audience and immediately

begins to chide the believers for their acceptance – and even promotion – of false teachers:

- “I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel.”
- What is the source propagating this false gospel? Who is it who is “bewitching” (3:1) the church and deceiving into returning back to the weak and worthless elementary principles of religion and legalism? False teachers:
 - “Yet because of false brothers secretly brought in – who slipped in to spy out our freedom that we have in Christ Jesus, so that they might bring us into slavery – to them we did not yield in submission even for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might be preserved for you” (2:4-5).
- Whenever we see Paul addressing himself as “an apostle” in his letters, it is because he needs to “pull rank” over the false teachers who are undermining him and the gospel he has preached.
 - This is because, in the words of the apostle Peter, false teachers despise biblical and apostolic authority (2 Peter 2:10; cf. Jude 6, 8).
- So dangerous are these false teachers that Jude foregoes not only epistolary formalities, he even has to postpone gospel exhortations to highlight the dangers these wolves in sheep’s clothing pose to the believers:
 - “Beloved, although I was very eager to write to you about our common salvation, I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints. For certain people have crept in unnoticed who long ago were designated for this condemnation, ungodly people, who pervert the grace of our God into sensuality and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ” (Jude 3-4).
- The believers ought not to be surprised, for, as Jude reminds them, one of the primary messages of the apostles was to forewarn the saints that false

teachers would continually be bombarding the church with her pernicious teachings:

- “But you must remember, beloved, the predictions of the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ. They said to you, ‘In the last time there will be scoffers, following their own ungodly passions.’ It is these who cause divisions, worldly people, devoid of the Spirit” (Jude 17-19).
- The apostles were simply reteaching what our Lord Himself taught:
 - “Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will recognize them by their fruits” (Matthew 7:15-20).

In addition to their aberrant (and abhorrent) teachings being exposed by those who are “noble Bereans” (cf. Acts 17:11), false teachers can be recognized by their “fruit.”

- The most common explanation of “fruit” is simply their lifestyle. That is, their actions are inconsistent with who the God of the Bible is, and what He demands of His Spirit-empowered people.
 - For example, false teachers “pervert” God’s **grace** (Jude 4). This grotesque perversion of grace manifests itself in one of two ways:
 1. Godless **licentiousness**. Or, as Jude says, “sensuality.”
 - That is, because God is so loving, sin isn’t really a big deal to Him.
 - False teachers not only teach greasy grace; they live it out.

→ Which is why holiness is an absolute, non-negotiable for those who are entrusted with the teaching and shepherding of God's people (1 Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1:6-9).

2. Christless **legalism**.

- In Galatia, the perversion of grace meant "adding" to Christ's gospel the prerequisite keeping of rules and regulations (e.g. circumcision) necessary for salvation.

→ This was no small issue for the apostle. Those who teach that God's sovereign grace in Christ for salvation is insufficient are "anathema," that is under God's curse (Galatians 1:8, 9).

- Three evident fruits that flow out of the unregenerate hearts of false teachers are **the love of money, sex, and power**.⁴

1. Money

- For some reason, leaders, generally speaking, seem to have a peculiar temptation to be "greedy for gain" (Titus 1:7; cf. 1 Peter) and "a lover of money" (1 Timothy 3:3).

- "But false 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. And many will follow their sensuality, and because of them the way of truth will be blasphemed. And in their greed they will exploit you with false words" (2 Peter 2:1-3).

- "Yet in like manner these people also, relying on their dreams, defile the flesh, reject authority, and blaspheme the glorious ones...and are destroyed by all that they, like unreasoning animals, understand instinctively. Woe to them! For they walked in the way of Cain and abandoned themselves for the sake of

⁴ Though, as we will see, there is much overlap between the three.

gain to Balaam's error and perished in Korah's rebellion" (Jude 8-11).

- "Teach and urge thee things. If anyone teaches a different doctrine and does not agree with the sound [lit. "healthy"] words of our Lord Jesus Christ and the teaching that accords with godliness [cf. Titus 1:2], he is puffed up with conceit and understands nothing. He has an unhealthy craving for controversy and for quarrels about words, which produce envy, dissension, slander, evil suspicions, and constant friction among people who are depraved in mind and deprived of truth, imagining that religion⁵ is a means of gain. But godliness with contentment is great gain" (1 Timothy 6:2-6).
- "No servant can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money. Now⁶ the Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all these things, and they ridiculed Him. So He said to them, 'You are those who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts. For what is exalted among men is an abomination in the sight of God'" (Luke 16:13-15).

2. Sex

- "But understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty. For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money,

⁵ The ESV, with most other English versions, translates the Greek word (εὐσέβειαν, *eusebeian*) as "godliness." BDAG says this word connotes "reverence towards God" [e.g. "piety"], but the context of 1 and 2 Timothy, along with the rest of the Bible, shows that this "reverence" shown is merely a façade before people (e.g. Isaiah 1:10-20; 29:13-21; etc.). Though they may "whitewash" their outsides (Matthew 23:2-3, 25, 27, 29), their deeds are performed only "to be seen by others" (23:5; cf. 6:1, 5, 16). Though they may appear gentle like sheep on the outside, they are in actuality ravenous wolves on the inside (7:15).

⁶ The ESV, like most other English versions, unfortunately does not include the "Now" (δὲ, *de*), which highlights the contrast of the Pharisees, who though seemingly pious (*euseibian*) on the outside, nevertheless were Mammon-worshippers on the inside.

proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having the appearance of godliness (εὐσέβειαν, *eusebeian*), but denying its power. Avoid such people. For among them are those who creep into households and capture weak women, burdened with sins and led astray by various passions, always learning but never able to arrive at a knowledge of the truth. Just as Jannes and Jambres opposed Moses, so these men also oppose the truth, men corrupted in mind and disqualified regarding the faith. But they will not get very far, for their folly will be plain (ἔκδηλος) to all,⁷ as was that of those two men” (2 Timothy 3:1-9).

→ Though these verses apply to and characterize unbelievers in general, the context of 1 and 2 Timothy clearly shows that Paul particularly has false teachers in mind in these verses.⁸

- Jesus also addresses – and rebukes – the church for her casual indifference to the proliferation and acceptance of false teachers in her midst, especially those who unashamedly teach and encourage, as well as brazenly practice, sexual immorality.

⁷ Cf. 1 Timothy 5:24-25, where Paul is specifically talking about pastors and teachers, whose “fruit” – whether good or bad – will become conspicuous (πρόδηλος) over time.

⁸ Note the immediately preceding verses: “And the Lord’s servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth, and they may come to their senses and escape the snare of the devil, having been captured by him to do his will (2:24-26). Also note the following context in the next chapter: “For the time is coming when people will not endure sound [lit. “healthy”] teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate [lit. “heap up”] for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths” (4:3-4).

- “But I have a few things against you: you have some there who hold the teaching of Balaam,⁹ who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, so that they might eat food sacrificed to idols and practice sexual immorality. So also you have some who hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans. Therefore repent. If not, I will come to you soon and war against them with the sword of My mouth.” (Revelation 2:14-17).
- “I know your works, your love and faith and service and patient endurance, and that your latter works exceed the first. But I have this against you, that you tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess and is teaching and seducing My servants to practice sexual immorality and to eat food sacrificed to idols.” (Revelation 2:19-20).
- Speaking of false teachers who have garnered a following within the church, the apostle Peter says, “They count it pleasure to revel in the daytime. They are blots and blemishes, reveling in their deceptions, while they feast with you. They have eyes full of adultery, insatiable for sin. They entice unsteady souls. They have hearts trained in greed. Accursed children! Forsaking the right way, they have gone astray...These are waterless springs and mists driven by a storm. For them the gloom of utter darkness has been reserved. 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. They promise them freedom, but they themselves are slaves of corruption” (2 Peter 2:13-15, 17-19).

⁹ Interestingly, the account being referenced shows that though Balaam couldn't bring Israel down through cursing, he could through sexual immorality. Sadly, Israel believed his lie, and engaged in large-scale sexual immorality, infamously known as their “sin at Baal-Peor” (cf. Numbers 25:1-3). Interestingly, those who were held most accountable were the leaders, who were publicly executed to serve as a warning to others of the dangers of idolatry (v.4).

3. Power (and Popularity)

However, “fruit” not only refers to their own lifestyle, but also to their disciples. You can know a lot about what someone is teaching by observing their students.

1 John 4:1; Acts 17:11, etc.

Conclusion:

Perhaps there is not better or fitting way to close than to quote John MacArthur, a man who has committed his life to guarding and defending the Word of God in and for the church:

The dominant strategy of Satan since the creation of the world has been to undermine trust in God’s Word. It started in the Garden of Eden when he asked Eve, “Has God said?” In that devious, highly consequential question he was casting doubt on God’s Word, and he hasn’t stopped doing since.

From that point forward, Satan’s objective has been to lead as many people possible to eternal destruction. And what has been the focal point of his attack on people’s souls? Fomenting unbelief in and rejection of God’s Word. Undermining people’s confidence in the objective truth of Scripture, thereby taking away their only hope of salvation. “Has God said?” has become the battle cry of the entire world system in which we live.¹⁰

¹⁰ Quoted in “John MacArthur: Preaching and Scripture,” in Iain H. Murray, *Seven Leaders* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2017), 214.