

## **Beware of False Teaching!**

Various authors in the New Testament wrote about false teaching in the church. False ministers, false Christians, and a false gospel are all addressed (For instance, see Matt. 13:38; 2 Cor. 4:2; 6:7; 11:12-13, 26; Gal. 1:6-9; and Col. 2:2-4, 8, just to name a few!). More than a fifth of the content in 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus (the pastoral letters) deals with both false teachers and false doctrine. Peter makes it clear that false teachers will be in the church (2 Pet. 2:1). These false teachers follow bodily desires (v. 10) and are often sneaky (v. 1). They deny the Lord and bring destruction on themselves (v. 1). They will feast with the true believers (v. 13), and they are like “springs without water and mists driven by a storm” (v. 17).

## **Why Did Paul Write? Encouragement Rather Than Condemnation**

In Ephesians 4:1-16, Paul was likely not condemning the people. There is no evidence that the book of Ephesians addresses any particular crisis or failure in the church to believe or live out the truth of the gospel. Paul does address particular situations elsewhere (e.g., 1 Cor. 2--3), but does not use the same language in this letter. Paul is using *paraenesis*, a term that refers to offering moral advice; this was a technique used by Greco-Roman philosophers in Paul's time. The purpose of such speech was to remind a people of something they already know to be true in the hopes that such truth would continue to shape their words, thoughts, and actions. An important way of teaching in the first century was by modeling moral behavior.

Paul's urging (Eph. 4:1), therefore, is not necessarily directed at his readers in order to change their ways because of failure and false teaching. Instead, he was likely encouraging the

members of the church to continue in the way they had already been going; to continue to be humble, gentle, patient, peaceful, united in the Holy Spirit, and bearing with each other in love (vv. 1-3). Paul was restating to the already obedient recipients that there is one hope, one baptism, one Lord, one faith, one God and Father of all, one body, and one Spirit (vv. 4-6). The church was to speak the truth in love and continue to grow, becoming a unified, mature body (v. 15).

Rather than living as infants, blown around by false teachings, the readers of Ephesians were encouraged to hold on to, live by, and proclaim the gospel truth they already knew. This means that there were false teachings being spread at the time Paul was writing--otherwise why caution against it? Paul found value in cautioning the church despite the lack of a specific situation triggering his letter. He found value in affirming the church in the midst of the spread of false doctrine.

### **Paul's Message to Us**

We may wrestle with understanding complex ideas of faith such as the Trinity, the resurrection, the incarnation, and a Christ who was both fully God and fully human. We must be careful to wrestle without it leading to heretical views of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Heresies are false doctrines that speak of God, Scripture, salvation, and other doctrinal truths in ways that are not aligned with God's revelation and the apostolic teaching that has been passed down for 2,000 years. This problem is not new: Paul warned against false teaching in every letter he wrote. It continued to affect the church of the second and third centuries, when heresies,

mainly about Christ, caused division. Some writers in the early church dedicated entire works to addressing the issues of false doctrine (see Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, around AD 180).

While warnings are important, it is clear that Paul and other authors encouraged the church to keep their eyes fixed on Christ. There will be “savage wolves” among us (Acts 20:28-30), but our minds are to be set on Christ and the things above rather than earthly things (Col. 3:1-4). We do not need to dwell on the wolves or search them out; rather, Paul prayed that the body of Christ would remain rooted in love, and that our hearts would dwell on Christ (Eph. 3:17). When we keep our eyes on Christ, we can put aside false teachings in our midst; we can build each other up and speak truth to our neighbors instead of tearing each other down with falsehood.

Sometimes we long for things that are inconsistent with the way demonstrated by Christ. One example would be striving after comfortable living; we want financial ease. It is not ungodly to be financially stable, but our hearts should long for the richness of fellowship, reconciliation to each other and to God, and the alleviation of injustices first and foremost. Sometimes we think we are loving as Christ did, but we may actually be judging those who do not have a relationship with God. Christ’s love shows no boundaries. We must be on our guard and acknowledge that it is possible for us to be tossed about by false gospels (Eph. 4:14).

Ultimately, however, our focus should be on Christ, whose life was defined by justice and serving others. In all things, we are called to think and act in ways consistent with the gospel of Christ (Phil. 1:27).

### **Revelation in Repetition**

Just as Paul observed that the Ephesians might have needed some encouragement and a reminder of the truth of the gospel of Christ, we also can mature in our faith as God continues to speak through the repetition of gospel truth. Constantly journeying through the story of God in scripture can be a beautiful way to keep our eyes on Jesus. Rather than turning to scripture only when we are struggling with something, we can continually engage in God's word. Rather than focusing on the false voices pulling us in worldly directions, we can grow and mature as the body of Christ by focusing on God's voice instead. Rather than reading the story once and thinking we know it, we can continue to pray for God's will to be revealed as we focus on Christ. Having our vision firmly fixed on Christ will help us identify other paths that lead to destruction.

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Think about it . . .

How have you found encouragement in focusing on the true gospel of Christ?

Do you spend time daily in God's word, or only when you are struggling? When has your time in God's word helped you discern what is true?

What desires should we be cautious of having that may not be aligned with the good news of Jesus Christ?

What concepts of the Christian faith have you struggled with grasping the most? Where can you find trustworthy guidance when struggling with these concepts?