

Do Not Be Deceived!

One of the clearest warnings given in the New Testament concerns the proliferation of false prophets and teachers who will lead many astray. Disguising themselves as trusted Christian brethren - wolves in sheep's clothing - these deceivers secretly introduce destructive heresies. Unnoticed, they skillfully attack, ravage, and eventually scatter the sheep (Acts 20:29). Such deception happened in the early Church era, and it continues today among unsuspecting souls, even on the mission field.

But do we seriously take heed to such warnings? Oh for sure, we have identified the Jehovah Witnesses and the Mormons as being cults, but if that is the extent of what we think the threat of false teachers is, then we have already been deceived. Satan is much more clever in his methods than the obvious errors of the above mentioned cults. Frankly, we probably would be utterly horrified to know how often we have unsuspectingly given the right hand of fellowship to a wolf in sheep's clothing.

Fortunately, our merciful God has not left seekers of truth defenseless in this great spiritual battle. Deception need not happen to any believer as the Word of God is quite specific on the tactics and teachings of false prophets. Let us highlight a few of these below.

1) First of all, the Bible teaches that deception often comes from within.

We are foolish to think that deception usually comes from the outside. That would be just too obvious! Jude warns his readers of this very thing: "For there are certain men crept in unawares, ..." (v4), and they are "spots in your feasts of charity . . ." They may be sitting in the Lord's Supper with you and contribute often in the worship time. I don't know about you, but this sends chills up my spine. Imagine the horror the readers of Jude felt when they learned they were being deceived by some "trusted" brother! Maybe some were so deceived that when Jude blows his trumpet sounding the alarm that so-and-so is a wolf dressed in sheep's clothing some said, "How dare you criticize this brother!"

However, Paul warned of such deception when he wrote, "For I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock" (Acts 20:29).

In other words, one of the main methods of Satan is to infiltrate a church or a mission field from within by the subtle planting of one of his secret agents—a "wolf." Now you might say that a wolf would be easy to detect, but the reality is that on the mission field a wolf could easily hide himself until the opportune time.

For example, on a mission field we usually do not find missionaries that have been sent from the same church and hence know one another well. On the contrary, they usually come from different churches, even from different countries, and are often "thrown together" in a mission field setting without much say in the matter. Being that Christians are in the minority, open hearted, in need of fellow colaborers, and often starved for good fellowship, new workers are eagerly accepted without being asked many questions. Thus a wolf can easily come into the flock. If someone has a doctrinal deficiency it might not be detected for a long time. Eventually, however, a wolf will start to hunt his prey, introduce his doctrinal errors, and consume the sheep. Unfortunately for the other

responsible missionaries, usually by the time the deception of the wolf is manifested, he has already won over the hearts of the unsuspecting. So at the first mention of criticism toward the wolf, it ought not be a surprise that some will say, "How dare you criticize our beloved brother. Leave him alone."

The apostle Paul also told the Ephesian elders, "of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them" (Acts 28:30). It is always a dangerous sign when the sheep begin to follow a personality instead of the Lord. A wolf is one who speaks "perverse things," that is, perverse to the Lord. For the unsuspecting, the words of the false teacher might be very sweet and persuasive. However, the wolf's goal is to draw disciples after himself and away from the Lord, and he will use persuasive speech to accomplish it.

The actions of Absalom in 2 Sam 15:1-6 are a good illustration of this, ". . . so Absalom stole the hearts of the men of Israel." A wolf will often steal sheep from another assembly by first stealing their hearts. A favorite tactic is when there is a discipline problem and those under discipline are not particularly repentant. This is an obvious moment for a wolf to strike. He will present himself as one who sympathizes and "understands" that the discipline was "harsh and unreasonable." Of course, the wolf will rarely ever come to the elders who administered the discipline. Instead he speaks "perverse things" to those who are unrepentant. Then he draws these souls after himself.

A wolf will also find the weak point along the line of defense and then attack. On the mission field this weak point is often through the unwise practices of the missionary. For example, a common practice on the mission field is that excessive money or financial help is offered to people. This might be in the form of humanitarian aid, jobs, or the direct handing out of money. Do this in conjunction with the preaching of the Gospel and immediately one will have many "disciples" and a good size church, although probably of the "rice Christian" flavor. Although I am not saying that everyone that does the above is a wolf, it would be very naive of us to think that a wolf would not utilize such practices. He knows that, particularly in poor countries, this type of missionary strategy utterly blinds the spiritual eyes of people and they will follow after a missionary with no questions asked. For the wolf to then start adding a little doctrinal error flavoring to the soup, be sure that hardly anyone will take notice or be concerned. He then spares not the flock and begins to ravage sheep.

Do not be deceived. False teachers will arise from within. Be on your guard!

2) It is also important to recognize that deceivers promote human wisdom and tradition.

Paul warned the Colossian believers, "Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ." (Col. 2:8).

The Bible states very explicitly that the Scriptures contain everything we need for life and godliness (2 Tim. 3:16-17, 2 Pet. 1:3). Absolute dependence on the Holy Spirit, prayer, and obedience to the Word of God are the keys to victory over sin. However, pulpits, radio shows, television ministries, and Christian bookstores are filled with material promoting empty human tradition. Today, the teachings of self esteem and secular psychology are cloaked as "Christian" and promoted as the solutions to man's problems. No longer is the Bible regarded as sufficient for our

needs. Sadly, the evidence brings into light the fact that the majority of professing Christianity is terribly deceived. Don't allow yourself to be deceived as well!

3) Deceivers pervert the grace of God in regards to salvation.

In fact, the heart of the New Testament teachings on deception pertain to the Gospel message. Paul wrote an urgent message to the Galatians on this very topic. He said, "I marvel that ye are so soon removed from him that called you into the grace of Christ unto another gospel: Which is not another; but there be some that trouble you, and would pervert the gospel of Christ." (Gal 1:6-7)

In other words, false teachers do not uphold the doctrine of salvation by grace, but pervert it. However, in saying this we must realize that virtually every group and every missionary within the broad definition of Christianity will say that they believe in salvation by grace, for to say otherwise is to be immediately identified as false. However, if we would only open our eyes we would see that many groups and individuals subtly pervert the Gospel by changing definitions of Scriptural terms or by adding works to their salvation formula.

Be sure that any Lutheran will say that they believe in salvation by grace, but their doctrine is otherwise. A recent report in the September 2002 issue of the The Berean Call Newsletter woke up many people as to what the Lutheran Church believes. We quote, "Every Lutheran church follows Luther's Small Catechism, published by Concordia Publishing House of the Missouri Synod. Here is what it says:

242....By a Sacrament we mean a sacred act-A. Instituted by God Himself; B. In which there are certain visible means connected with His word; and C. By which God offers, gives, and seals unto us the forgiveness of sins which Christ has earned for us....243....There are only two such Sacraments, Holy Baptism and the Lord's Supper....251. How do you prove that infants, too, are to be baptized...? A. Because they are included in the words 'all nations'....B. Because Holy Baptism is the only means whereby infants, who, too, must be born again, can ordinarily be regenerated and brought to faith....253. What...does Baptism give or work? A. It works forgiveness of sins....B. It delivers from death and the devil....C. It gives eternal salvation.... "

Another example is the Church of Christ which is quite active in Albania. I remember that one of their missionaries came to my house one day and introduced himself. Oh, what a charming fellow he was. He was very interested in spiritual things and even quoted from the Bible. However, when the topic of baptism came up, well, let us say this, that we departed company. Although he declared quite loudly that he believed totally in salvation by grace, he added "Unless one is baptized, he cannot be saved.

The American Indians used to say that such people speak with a "forked tongue." You know, one who says one thing to one audience and another thing to another audience. False teachers have such a tongue. When pressed for their position, oh for sure they'll say that they believe in eternal salvation, but when the pressure of the spotlight is taken away, their practice is

quite different. Be on your guard against such "forked tongues." Listen to their preaching, read their writings, notice what books they distribute or don't distribute. Is their preaching Christ-centered? Does their teaching have a solid emphasis on the work of Christ and his offer of complete forgiveness of sins to those who come to Him by faith? Or is it man-centered with an overemphasis on the outward things while leaving the impression that salvation is performance based? You know, "live holy, or else" type of preaching. Needless to say, the sheep who sit under a "forked-tongue" teacher will usually be quite confused about salvation.

Another indication that someone is "playing" with the Gospel is in relation to eternal salvation, that is, once a person has received Christ, he is saved forever. His salvation isn't conditional on his performance since Christ has forgiven that sinner of all his sins (in the judicial sense); those of the past, present and future. However, many teach otherwise.

Quoting a well-known Mennonite teacher we see how persuasively error can be introduced into the mind's of the listeners.

"...It is a great error that some teach that if we are once in grace, we are sure finally to be saved, and that one's standing or acceptance cannot be forfeited and that it is not necessary to salvation that we are faithful in obedience to the Word.... 'Once a son, always a son' is a false doctrine." [1]

To the unsuspecting soul, this all sounds very reasonable, but it is simply a perversion of the Gospel of grace. Anyone with a clear understanding of the Gospel and the complete forgiveness of sins will understand that a denial of it leads to 'another gospel.' Listen to our brother R.E. Harlow,

"Eternal Security is one of the most cherished doctrines of Scripture....Without eternal security, you have to add works to keep yourself saved. This subtly, but profoundly, modifies the Gospel of God's grace. You are saying that the work of Christ was not and is not adequate to save entirely. In this way people are getting "another gospel" which is not another. The preacher, even an apostle or angel, is under the curse of God, repeat, the curse of God (Gal. 1:8-9)." [2]

But error concerning the Gospel is very wide-spread in the Christian community. Listen to this very popular 'evangelical' preacher.

"...I believe that I finished two weeks ago by saying that I don't believe that you can lose your salvation. And I want to reaffirm that this morning. I do not believe that you can lose your salvation. Many times people ask me that especially because my background is Baptist. And people often ask me, "brother Denny, do you believe that you can lose your salvation?" And I tell them "no." That puts their heart at ease right away. But I do also finish by saying "But I believe that you can throw it away."" [3]

Clever words - You can't lose your salvation, but you can throw it away! But the end result is the same - a denial of complete forgiveness and the eternal security of the believer. It also

becomes a system of salvation by works. Now perhaps you think that these types of errors would be identified quickly and refused instantly. However, I have personally known people who have criticized me for pointing out the doctrinal error of the above teacher. Why? Because, they say, he has a very encouraging tape series on the Christian family and so can't be all that bad! Oh, how eager we are to be deceived!

4) Finally, false teachers will turn the grace of our God into lasciviousness.

Jude writes, "For there are certain men crept in unawares, ...ungodly men, turning the grace of our God into lasciviousness, and denying the only Lord God, and our Lord Jesus Christ."

That is, they will preach a defective Gospel message that lays a foundation of doctrine which gives the listeners a license to sin. Typical of today is where the preacher calls upon people to just say a prayer and accept Jesus as their Savior for the forgiveness of sins with no mention of sin and repentance. As a result, many professing believers live lives that are little different from the world. They continue in sinful practices with the confidence that their souls are prepared for heaven - when in truth they are still on the broad road leading to destruction.

In defense of such preaching, many well-known teachers will boldly state that one's lifestyle has no connection with one's eternal welfare. On one hand, as we discussed in section 3 of this article, we know that this is true. That is, when a repentant sinner does come to Christ, he is forgiven and born again. In other words, salvation is not conditional.

However a good teacher of the Word of God must add that when a person is truly born again, he experiences a life change from the inside out. Through the work of the Holy Spirit his life begins to change and continually is changed to be more like Christ's. In short, the absence of a life change brings into question whether a person is truly converted or not. Please note that we are not talking of losing one's salvation, but rather whether a person is genuinely converted or not. This is an important distinction.

The above position is fully supported by the multitude of Scriptural warnings to those who think they are saved, but are not; to those who have made a superficial profession, but inwardly they are unconverted.

Listen to the warning of the Apostle John against false teachers in his first epistle, "Little children, let no man deceive you: he that doeth righteousness is righteous, even as he is righteous. He that committeth sin is of the devil; ...Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin; for his seed remaineth in him: and he cannot sin, because he is born of God. In this the children of God are manifest, and the children of the devil ..." (1 John 3:7-10).

Without question, the Apostle teaches that practical righteousness is intimately connected with conversion. The one born of God practices righteousness. The one who continues practicing sin is of the devil. Who is a Christian and who is not is made manifest by this criterion.

The Apostle Paul likewise warned against those who taught that salvation and sinful living are consistent, "For this ye know, that no whoremonger, nor unclean person, nor covetous man' who is an idolater, hath any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God. Let no man deceive you with vain words: for because of these things cometh the wrath of God upon the children of disobedience." (Eph. 5:5-6).

Due to the comfort and assurance that false teachers give, all too many believe that they are gloriously saved when, in reality, they are not. The proof to their own souls is that their lives are characterized by unrighteousness and lukewarmness towards the things of God. Do not be deceived!

Someone once said, "If you think you can't be deceived, you are deceived already!" Satan is out to deceive the whole world (Rev. 12:9), and this includes you! Yet God repeatedly cries out in the Word of God, ..DO NOT BE DECEIVED" (1 Cor. 6:9; 15: 33; Gal. 6:7; James 1:16). Fortunately, God has given us guidelines for protection against deception. By God's grace and power, let us follow them zealously.

[1]. Rightly Dividing the Scriptures, George R. Brunk I, Christian Light Publications, Inc., Harrisonburg, VA, p. 46-47.

[2]. The Right to Die, R.E. Harlow, Missions Magazine, January 1999.

[3]. Warnings from Hebrews on Perseverance (Part 2), Denny Kenaston, Cassette tape #1556, Charity Gospel Tape Ministry, Leola, PA, USA.