

## HOW TO PREVENT HERESY IN THE CHURCH

### I. The situation at Ephesus: Paul's early warning

Paul had picked up Timothy early in the 2<sup>nd</sup> missionary journey (49 AD) and Timothy was then with Paul throughout much of his 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> journeys. The church at Ephesus was established on Paul's 3<sup>rd</sup> missionary journey, (53 AD). As was his custom, Paul went into the synagogue when he first arrived and preached Christ for the first three months in the synagogues. But due to pressure by some of the Jews who spoke evil of the Christian movement, Paul then left the synagogue and continued teaching in the school of Tyrannus for 2 more years. Ephesus is the longest that Paul ever stayed in one place. And despite great success, the city nearly erupted into a riot due to opposition the gospel because many did not like the idea of disruption of the worship of their goddess Artemis (Latin, "Diana"). Paul ended up leaving Ephesus (55 or 56 AD) and continued on his missionary journey throughout Macedonia and Greece.

At least a year later (Acts 20), as Paul was passing through the region, he called for "the elders" (*presbuteros*) of the Ephesian church to come to him at the seaport town of Miletus some 28 miles away, so that he may encourage them to stand firm in the faith (Acts 20:17). They came and here is, in part, what Paul said to them:

***Acts 20:18 "You yourselves know, from the first day that I set foot in Asia, how I was with you the whole time, (19) serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials which came upon me through the plots of the Jews; [Ephesus was no picnic for Paul] (20) how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you publicly and from house to house... (22) And now, behold, bound by the Spirit, I am on my way to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there, (23) except that the Holy Spirit solemnly testifies to me in every city, saying that bonds and afflictions await me..."***

Paul continues by telling them that he is likely no longer to see them again and reminds them of the fact that he never shrunk from declaring to them the whole counsel of God. Then he says to the church elders:

***Acts 20:28 Be on guard* ["Be attentive to the dangers"; here he is truly concerned about heretics coming into the church] *for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers [episcopos], to shepherd [pastor] the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.***

Here we find that the “elder,” “overseer” and “pastor” are one and the same office. The term, “elder,” stresses authority (based on Jewish background); the “overseer” points to purpose; and “shepherd” emphasizes “function.”

He next explains why pastors must be attentive:

***Acts 20:29 I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; (30) and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them.***

Following the analogy of sheep, false teachers are wolves who take advantage when there is no shepherd to guard the flock. In that Paul describes them as “savage wolves” (lit., “heavy wolves”; and therefore easily able to take down sheep), Paul is aware that without a shepherd who instructs the people in the word, that the sheep will certainly fall to the heresy of the wolves.

***Acts 20:31 Therefore be on the alert [gregorio, “be awake”], remembering that night and day for a period of three years I did not cease to admonish [noutheteó, “counselling” “reasoning,” “warning,” in order to persuade; present part., “continually actively admonishing] each one with tears.***

Notice how often Paul says he was admonishing. He did this “night and day” and “continually reasoning out with each one with tears for three years!” For Paul the teaching and admonishing was non-stop. As he stated in verse 20, “***how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you publicly and from house to house.***” Then he says to the elders:

***Acts 20:32 And now I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able [dunamai, “empowers”] to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified.***

Paul’s concern about false teachers at Ephesus turned out to be correct. Both 1 and 2 Timothy reflect a constant danger of false teachers attempting to mislead the church.

## **II. Examples of the danger**

Let me go through the examples in these letters.

### **Example #1 “Inventing things out of Scripture”**

***1 Tim 1:3 As I urged you upon my departure for Macedonia, remain on at Ephesus so that you may instruct certain men not to teach strange doctrines [doctrines that are different than the apostolic doctrines], (4) nor to pay attention to myths and endless genealogies, which give rise to mere speculation rather than furthering the administration of God which is by faith. [Do not pay attention to stuff that is made up from Scripture that has not been taught by me or the apostles or our Lord; people were make stuff up, that the Bible taught what it did not teach]... (6) For some men, straying from these things [love and sincere faith], have turned aside to fruitless discussion, (7) wanting to be teachers of the Law, even though they do not understand either what they are saying or the matters about which they make confident assertions.***

As is often the case of heresy, false teachers claim their teaching is biblical, ***“wanting to be teachers of the Law.”***

***Example #2 “False piety through claims of abstinent living”***

***1 Tim 4:1 But the Spirit explicitly says that in later times some will fall away from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons, (2) by means of the hypocrisy of liars seared in their own conscience as with a branding iron, (3) men who forbid marriage and advocate abstaining from foods which God has created to be gratefully shared in by those who believe and know the truth.***

There are those who will fall away from the faith because they pay attention to ***“deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons.”*** Not that the people think they are following demons, for they, no doubt, think they are following God’s will. Nonetheless, the source of the teaching is demonic. Satan is the “father of lies” and every heresy has as its source Satan.

And how are they misled? By teachers who are hypocritical liars and who don’t have any conscience about deceiving people. The expression, ***“by means of”*** expresses what methods were used to mislead the people. ***“By means of the hypocrisy of liars...”*** In those days a *hypocrisis* was “an actor of the stage”; one who pretended to be what he is not. He has no problem lying to the congregation. Therefore, Paul mentions that their consciences are ***“seared...as with a branding iron.”*** In the place where skin has been branded, that skin has no feeling. So also these have consciences that feel nothing when they lie.

And notice the ascetic life they demand! ***“men who forbid marriage and abstaining from foods.”*** They like to show great spirituality by claiming abstinence from the most natural things in life: marriage and from foods.

***Example #3 “teaching fabricated myths”***

Now there are more concerns that Paul shows concerning the influence of false teachers. Later in chapter 4:7, he warns of those who espouse ***“profane and old wives’ fables”*** (KJV); again, pointing to those who make up myths (muthos) that silly old ladies would speak of; that is, teachings that are fabricated myths and indefensible from the Scriptures.

***Example #4 “godliness is a means of great gain”***

In chapter 6:5 Paul speaks of those who ***“suppose that godliness is a means of great gain,”*** that is, in their teaching they suppose that “godliness brings you financial wealth.” Yes, the prosperity gospel has been around for a long, long time. It did not start with Joel Osteen!

**III. The reality of Timothy’s situation**

Now the next two paragraphs from 2 Timothy, in my opinion, demonstrate the reality of the situation that Timothy must deal with.

**2 Tim 2:24 The Lord’s bond-servant must not be quarrelsome, but be kind to all, able to teach, patient when wronged, (25) with gentleness correcting those who are in opposition, if perhaps God may grant them repentance leading to the knowledge of the truth, (26) and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, having been held captive by him to do his will.**

The word, “But,” which begins chapter 3, connects this passage to what follows.

**2 Tim 3:1 But realize this, that in the last days difficult times will come. (2) For men will be lovers of self, lovers of money, boastful, arrogant, revilers, disobedient to parents, ungrateful, unholy, (3) unloving, irreconcilable, malicious gossips, without self-control, brutal, haters of good, (4) treacherous, reckless, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, (5) holding to a form of godliness, although they have denied its power; Avoid such men as these.**

Timothy must realize why many people may not care to listen to Timothy's instructions, teaching and preaching. It is because Timothy faces people who are motivated by other things. He has come upon a place in time when spiritual values are lost and not sought for by many. Timothy must have that realization.

#### **IV. Paul's final solution to Timothy**

Therefore, Paul writes these letters to encourage Timothy to keep preaching the gospel, even though many will fall away from the faith and not even care what he says. Paul had told this young preacher:

*1 Tim 4:13 Until I come, give attention to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation and teaching. (14) Do not neglect the spiritual gift within you... (15) Take pains with these things; be absorbed in them... (16) Pay close attention to yourself and to your teaching; persevere in these things.*

*2 Tim 2:15 Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth.*

Then Paul tells him, but realize that in "these last days" of which Timothy is now facing, that difficult times will come. People are not going to be as interested in the gospel or in the preaching of the gospel. In fact, they will have different motives and look to other things that they want instead. But Paul does not tell Timothy, "Maybe you need to change your messaging! Maybe you should offer something different to capture their interests." Rather, notice what he commands Timothy to do:

*2 Tim 4:1 I solemnly charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by His appearing and His kingdom: (2) preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction. (3) For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires, (4) and will turn away their ears from the truth and will turn aside to myths. (5) But you, be sober in all things, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry.*