

THE RIGHT WAY TO HANDLE WRONG DOCTRINE

BY PENN CLARK

Whenever I talk to disciples about healthy and unhealthy doctrine, the main difficulty they have with this subject is how to deal with false teaching. I will often begin by having them make a distinction between flaky teaching and false teaching. By false teachers, I am not talking about those who have imperfect doctrine or whose theology is not fully developed. That would include all of us, at one time or another. Our doctrine goes through changes at different phases of our lives, maturing and becoming purer, more practical, and more balanced. There is a big difference between those whose doctrine is imperfect yet are teachable or those who may not have it right but are sincerely searching for understanding and those whose doctrine is dangerous or deviant and who refuse to be taught or corrected.

We will find that most people in our churches are more like Apollos, whose theology went to the extent of his experience. He had a passion and a zeal for the Lord, but his theology was not complete. Luke described Apollos as an on-fire teacher based at Ephesus, who was powerful in his handling of the Scriptures. His theology, on the other hand, may not have been fully developed, but when he was approached by Priscilla and Aquila, he was open and teachable. As a result, he grew both in his experience and his theology. He quickly adapted his message, becoming even more effective in refuting the Jews (Acts 18:24-28).

Then, there are teachers like the ones Paul wrote about to the Philippians, who had the right teaching but the wrong motives. About these, Paul simply said he rejoiced that the gospel was being preached. This attitude helped him cope:

Some indeed preach Christ even from envy and strife, and some also from goodwill: The former preach Christ from selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing to add affliction to my chains; but the latter out of love, knowing that I am appointed for the defense of the gospel. What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is preached; and in this I rejoice, yes, and will rejoice. For I know that this will turn out for my deliverance through your prayer and the supply of the Spirit of Jesus Christ (Philippians 1:15-19).

Paul judged that they were driven by selfish ambition. He also believed some of them taught what they did intentionally, knowing it would add to his discomfort while he was in prison. He does not seem to do much more than expose them to the Church, comparing them to good teachers who taught from good will and love, leaving it to the brethren to discern between the two.

How did Paul cope with this? If your motives are pure, the impure motives of others can eat you alive. If you are completely sold out for the gospel, those loafing around can drive you mad.

If you are careful to cherish the meaning of every word, then the sloppy theology of others can drive you crazy. The way Paul coped with this was to rejoice that at least Christ was being preached. He must have gotten to this place of peace by revelation. No doubt he went to the Lord with this frustration, learning that it would lead to his deliverance from such exasperation.

There are lots of people out there preaching basically good stuff, but who have less than honorable motives. As disconcerting as this is, these are not false teachers. We will meet many more teachers and preachers who are in this category than we will encounter false teachers.

A couple of chapters later, the apostle Paul focused on teachers of a different kind. He called them dogs, evil workers, or mutilators. It is clear that these were false teachers trying to influence the Church:

Finally, my brethren, rejoice in the Lord. For me to write the same things to you is not tedious, but for you it is safe. Beware of dogs, beware of evil workers, beware of the mutilation! For we are the circumcision, who worship God in the Spirit, rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh, though I also might have confidence in the flesh (Philippians 3:1-3).

I believe these were Jewish Christians who were teaching that believers must become circumcised in order to become fully saved. It is likely that the following statement pertains to the same “dogs” that he warned the Church about:

Brethren, join in following my example, and note those who so walk, as you have us for a pattern. For many walk, of whom I have told you often, and now tell you even weeping, that they are the enemies of the cross of Christ: whose end is destruction, whose god is their belly, and whose glory is in their shame—who set their mind on earthly things (Philippians 3:17-19).

It is surprising to see this happening so early in the history of the Church; it has been a problem right from the start, fulfilling what Jesus taught about the wheat and the tares (Matthew 13:24-30). These Christians had become enemies of the cross. Think of that! Their legalistic theology could undo the work of salvation, making it null and void, by adding stipulations to it. Paul was certain that it would lead to their destruction, both in this life and the life to come. He judged their motives as being selfish, shameful, and carnal.

EVEN GOOD CHURCHES HAD FALSE TEACHERS

No matter who starts a church, or how good the teachers are, no church is exempt from false teaching. Paul started the church at Ephesus and warned them night and day for three years that false teachers would come. This eventually happened because of the vacuum Paul’s absence created, emboldening false apostles to come out of the woodwork to fill the void (Acts 20:29-31;

Revelation 2:2). What was especially disconcerting about all of this was that these men would have been converts of Paul's and were likely released into the ministry by him or by those he had put into leadership. They were not itinerating teachers coming from the outside, but men who were part of the citywide church he had started. The apostles John, Peter, and Jude all worked tirelessly against false teaching which in their minds confirmed that they were in the end times, and they believed that it would only increase.

WHAT THEY DID AND DID NOT DO

When I began working on this chapter, I was surprised to learn how much was mentioned in the New Testament about false teaching. There was a lot more information than I expected. The subject is addressed often, in almost every epistle, several times. I was also surprised how much effort was put into describing the behavior and motives of false teachers, rather than what they taught. It is interesting to note that none of the New Testament writers took much time to break down the false beliefs they were contending against. For example, we can see from the letters to the Seven Churches that the Nicolaitans were a real concern to the Lord. He said He hated their doctrine, but He did not outline exactly what it was they taught.

I was also surprised to see how often they named names. False teachers were compared to Cain, Balaam, and Korah, but some men like Jannes, Jambres, Hymenaeus, Philetus, and Alexander were singled out by name (Jude 11; 1 Timothy 1:18-20; 2 Timothy 2:15-18; 2 Timothy 3:8), yet their doctrine was never fully explained. Paul did the same thing at Corinth. False teachers taught that the resurrection had already happened, which had huge implications, but he did not use much space to describe what was actually taught. Instead, he took the opportunity to present his arguments for why we need to believe in the resurrection. We do not need to spend much time going from point to point about what false teachers teach. We need to keep people focused on the truth.

HOW TO RECOGNIZE A FALSE TEACHER

The apostle Peter warned that just as false prophets in the Old Testament abounded, so false teachers would arise in these days. False prophets and teachers are similar in a number of ways:

- Not everything they believe, teach, or do will be wrong. There is usually a mixture of error and truth. All error has a basis of truth to it, just taken to an extreme or is self-serving. They tend to pass over the great truths laying on the surface of Scripture to major on things that are speculative and hard to prove.
- It is not only about what they teach, but also how they behave. False teachers caused divisions, they rejected authority, and they were greedy for gain. Balaam

was a false prophet, not because he had a false gift, or could not hear from God, or that what he said was wrong, but because his motivation was wrong and he led God's people into immorality (2 Peter 2:15; Jude 11; Revelation 2:14).

- They have issues with authority.
- They are often immoral.
- Their goal is to win people to their persuasion and to themselves rather than to win people closer to Christ.

THE SCALPEL

What makes false teachers difficult to discern is that they do not all have pitchforks, horns, and long tails. They look like people we all know, who go to church with us, or are part of our families. This makes it difficult to discipline them or extract them from our lives.

The most common way the apostles dealt with the disease of false teaching was by taking a scalpel to it and cutting it off. They did this by isolating those who were teaching it, so as to stop it from spreading:

*Now I urge you, brethren, note those who cause divisions and offenses, contrary to the doctrine which you learned, **and avoid them**. For those who are such do not serve our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly, and by smooth words and flattering speech deceive the hearts of the simple. For your obedience has become known to all. Therefore I am glad on your behalf; but I want you to be wise in what is good, and simple concerning evil. And the God of peace will crush Satan under your feet shortly (Romans 16:17-20, emphasis added).*

At Corinth, there were some who taught that the resurrection of the dead had passed. To this, Paul wrote in verses 33 and 34 that they should not keep company with such:

*Do not be deceived: **Evil company** corrupts good habits. Awake to righteousness, and do not sin; for some do not have the knowledge of God. I speak this to your shame (see 1 Corinthians 15, emphasis added).*

The apostle Paul also put forth the need to remove those from fellowship who were troubling the Galatians with their teaching:

I marvel that you are turning away so soon from Him who called you in the grace of Christ, to a different gospel, which is not another; but there are some who trouble you

*and want to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, **let him be accursed**. As we have said before, so now I say again, if anyone preaches any other gospel to you than what you have received, let him be accursed (Galatians 1:6-9, emphasis added).*

He said that they should be *accursed* which meant to be banned or excommunicated:

ACCURSED GK. 331 *anathema*, from GK. 349; a (religious) ban or (concretely) excommunicated (thing or person):— accursed, anathema, curse, great.

The church is not like a public library, where anyone can enter. It is more like a sheepfold that should have a shepherd at the door, deciding who is allowed to affect the health of the flock.

Notice in all the things that Paul taught concerning false teachers, he did not deal with it as a matter of forgiveness.

Surely someone will ask, “Doesn’t God accept everyone just the way they are?”

Certainly, in terms of our sinful condition and our spiritual need when we first come into the faith, but something more was expected of mature Christians and teachers. While He accepts us, He does not approve of everything we do and believe. As I studied more about the subject of false teachers, I began to see how they were treated differently than those struggling but sincere sinners we find in our churches.

When we distance ourselves from people who hold false teaching, we open ourselves up to being accused of being intolerant or unloving. However, the apostle Paul instructed Titus to warn a divisive person, clearly put limits on his or her influence, and then reject them if they refused his admonishment:

But avoid foolish disputes, genealogies, contentions, and strivings about the law; for they are unprofitable and useless. Reject a divisive man after the first and second admonition, knowing that such a person is warped and sinning, being self-condemned (Titus 3:9-11).

REJECT GK. 3868 *paraiteomai*, from GK. 3844 and the middle of GK. 151; to beg off, that is, deprecate, decline, shun:— avoid, (make) excuse, intreat, refuse, reject.

Today, it is almost intolerable to reject someone within the Church, but Paul’s clear-cut counsel to Titus was to reject such a one. While this may be difficult to accept, Paul also gave a general judgment of such cases. He believed that if a person was perverted in his doctrine, was caught in the clutches of sin, and was under self-imposed condemnation, it would be nearly impossible to restore them to the truth. Being in leadership requires that we have discernment

about people, their motives and doctrine, making serious judgments about them. To prevent their influence from spreading further through the Church, we are not to fellowship with them.

My book, *Koinonia Killers* takes an in-depth look at the difference between judging and discerning, as well as the need for those in leadership to make judgments.

Here is what the Scripture explicitly tells us:

- **Do not invite them in:**

If anyone comes to you and does not bring this doctrine, do not receive him into your house nor greet him; for he who greets him shares in his evil deeds (2 John 1:10-11).

- **Avoid and reject them:**

But avoid foolish disputes, genealogies, contentions, and strivings about the law; for they are unprofitable and useless. Reject a divisive man after the first and second admonition, knowing that such a person is warped and sinning, being self-condemned (Titus 3:9-11).

- **Deliver them to Satan:**

This charge I commit to you, son Timothy, according to the prophecies previously made concerning you, that by them you may wage the good warfare, having faith and a good conscience, which some having rejected, concerning the faith have suffered shipwreck, of whom are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I delivered to Satan that they may learn not to blaspheme (1 Timothy 1:18-20).

- **Excommunicate them:**

As we have said before, so now I say again, if anyone preaches any other gospel to you than what you have received, let him be accursed (Galatians 1:9).

WHEN TO CONFRONT

While I don't like flaky teaching either, I am not as concerned about it. Here are some of my "rules of thumb" for handling it:

- I understand that most of the new emphasis that comes down the pike is not always balanced at first. It is my job as a pastor to do this as I relate to my sheep.

- If individuals espouse a misguided concept that only embarrasses themselves, I tend to leave it alone. If it is hurting or unsettling others, then it needs to be addressed head on.
- If they believe something that is only complicating their own lives, I usually won't say anything unless they ask for my opinion.
- If they refuse to believe something that I think would help them reach their potential in Christ, or if they are believing something that is keeping them from enjoying the benefits of the Kingdom, then I might say something to them, but I will not try to compel them to see things differently.
- When I see people being aggressive, imposing their bad theology on others, then I will also become aggressive in coming against it.
- I am willing to expose our people to a range of guest speakers as we put on conferences and special meetings. I don't feel I have to agree with everything everyone teaches in order for us to invite them to teach. If they have a certain grace we need, or an emphasis on a truth that I want our people to become exposed to, yet they teach other things we disagree with, I would still bring them in. Part of my goal as a pastor is help our people become more mature. If I shield them from every flaky thing that comes along, they will never grow in love or discernment, as they ought. Doing this always gives me an opportunity to have some very interesting theological discussions with our people long after the speaker has left.

NO PUSSYFOOTING AROUND

The apostle Paul's advice to Timothy and Titus in dealing with flaky teaching and faulty behavior was to use their pulpit to confront it head on. He used powerful words to describe this effort, such as:

CONVINCE GK. 1651 *elegcho*. Of uncertain affinity; to confute, admonish:— convict, convince, tell a fault, rebuke, reprove.

The King James Version uses the word *reprove*. Today, we would use the word *convict*.

REBUKE 2008 *epitimaō*, from GK. 1909 and GK. 5091; to tax upon, that is, censure or admonish; by implication forbid:— (straitly) charge, rebuke.

EXHORT GK. 3870 *parakaleō*, from GK.3844 and GK. 3564; to call near, that is, invite, invoke (by imploration, hortation or consolation):— beseech, call for, (be of good) comfort, desire, (give) exhort (-ation), intreat, pray.

WITH ALL LONGSUFFERING GK. 3115 *makrothumia*, from the same as GK. 3116; longanimity, that is, (objectively) forbearance or (subjectively) fortitude:— longsuffering, patience.

Titus was the bishop over the island of Crete, just as Timothy was bishop over Ephesus. The Cretans had false teachers among them who ruined entire churches. Paul said that their mouths needed to be stopped. To do this, he told Titus to rebuke them sharply:

For there are many insubordinate, both idle talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision, whose mouths must be stopped, who subvert whole households, teaching things which they ought not, for the sake of dishonest gain. One of them, a prophet of their own, said, "Cretans are always liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons." This testimony is true. Therefore rebuke them sharply, that they may be sound in the faith, not giving heed to Jewish fables and commandments of men who turn from the truth. To the pure all things are pure, but to those who are defiled and unbelieving nothing is pure; but even their mind and conscience are defiled. They profess to know God, but in works they deny Him, being abominable, disobedient, and disqualified for every good work (Titus 1:10-16).

*I charge you therefore before God and the Lord Jesus Christ, who will judge the living and the dead at His appearing and His kingdom: Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. **Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching.** For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables (2 Timothy 4:1-4, emphasis added).*

I understand that there will always be people who hold different doctrinal positions than I, which I don't have to like, but I can still like them as people. Being different is not the same as being devious. I believe it can be healthy to be in fellowship with those who are different than us. It forces us to have to sort out what we believe and why we believe it. It can also give us an opportunity to learn from another person's perspective.

WHY WE MUST DEAL WITH IT

I believe we can lose our salvation because of false teaching. This seemed to be Paul's greatest concern. He said as much in 1 Corinthians 15:1-2, when he corrected the teaching by someone in the church that there was no resurrection.

Moreover, brethren, I declare to you the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received and in which you stand, by which also you are saved, if you hold fast that word which I preached to you—unless you believed in vain.

Here are some other verses that reveal Paul's concern about what could happen to believers who mis-believe:

- **Even if we preach another gospel:** *“But even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed”* (Galatians 1:8).
- **All in vain:** *“Have you suffered so many things in vain—if indeed it was in vain?”* (Galatians 3:4).
- **Becoming estranged:** *“You have become estranged from Christ, you who attempt to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace”* (Galatians 5:4).
- **Departing from the faith:** *“Now the Spirit speaks expressly, that in the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils. . .”* (1 Timothy 4:1, KJV).
- **Straying from the faith:** *“O Timothy! Guard what was committed to your trust, avoiding the profane and idle babblings and contradictions of what is falsely called knowledge—by professing it some have strayed concerning the faith”* (1 Timothy 6:20-21).
- **To our ruin:** *“Remind them of these things, charging them before the Lord not to strive about words to no profit, to the ruin of the hearers”* (2 Timothy 2:14).
- **Overthrowing the faith of some:** *“. . . who have strayed concerning the truth, saying that the resurrection is already past; and they overthrow the faith of some”* (2 Timothy 2:18).
- **Becoming a castaway:** *“But I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection: lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway”* (1 Corinthians 9:27, KJV).

The apostle Paul believed that even he could become a castaway if he taught others but did not do what he taught.

LOSING YOUR INHERITANCE

As a pastor, I am not only concerned that people might not make it to heaven because of faulty beliefs, but that they might, and not have any reward waiting for them when they get there:

- **We could lose our reward:**

Let no one cheat you of your reward, taking delight in false humility and worship of angels, intruding into those things which he has not seen, vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind, and not holding fast to the Head, from whom all the body, nourished and knit together by joints and ligaments, grows with the increase that is from God (Colossians 2:18-19).

REWARD GK. 2603 *katabrabeuō* From GK. 2596 and GK. 1018 (in its original sense); to award the price against, that is, (figuratively) to defraud (of salvation):— beguile of reward.

- **What we do here affects our eternal reward:**

Now if anyone builds on this foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, each one's work will become clear; for the Day will declare it, because it will be revealed by fire; and the fire will test each one's work, of what sort it is. If anyone's work which he has built on it endures, he will receive a reward. If anyone's work is burned, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire (1 Corinthians 3:12-15).

- **We might only have a partial reward:**

For many deceivers have gone out into the world who do not confess Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh. This is a deceiver and an antichrist. Look to yourselves, that we do not lose those things we worked for, but that we may receive a full reward (2 John 1:7-8).

REWARD GK. 3408 *misthos* Apparently a primary word; pay for service (literally or figuratively), good or bad:— hire, reward, wages.

- **What we believe can affect our eternal reward:**

For I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds to these things, God will add to him the plagues that are written in this book; and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part from the Book of Life, from the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book (Revelation 22:18-19).

- **What we do and believe can affect our inheritance:**

For this you know, that no fornicator, unclean person, nor covetous man, who is an idolater, has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God. LET no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. Therefore do not be partakers with them (Ephesians 5:5-7).

All this talk about false teachers and dealing with false teaching is heavy stuff. It is a long way from where we began this study learning to employ five simple keys in order to help us interpret scripture more accurately. The keys may be simple enough but applying them to the range of teaching that has become available is not. I suggest that a good place to begin is to print off the quick review sheet of the five keys provided below. Put it in the back of your Bible or perhaps you can pin it to the wall where you do most of your reading so you can have it on hand. We need to be able to list each of these keys as easy as counting the fingers on our hands.

To read more along this line get my study guide called Five Keys or take the Study Course here.

2016 Copyright by Penn Clark www.pennclark.net Please ask for permission before you publish.