

HOW TO DEAL WITH FALSE TEACHING IN THE CHURCH

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By the Book™ A Chapter by Chapter Bible Study
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Let's Begin

J. Oswald Sanders often spoke about Christian character and the devil's attempt to destroy a believer's witness through it. One particular strategy Sanders frequently revealed concerned the devil's use of false teachers (Acts 20:30; II Peter 2:1). These false workers in God's Kingdom specialize in "damnable heresies." They "creep in privily" into the churches and subtly mix truth with error. Though they profess a message from God, in reality they draw inspiration from hell. False Christs (Matt. 24:4-5), deceitful workers (II Cor. 11, 13), and false brethren (Gal. 2:4-5) work to undermine God's church.

In chapter two, Peter guides the church through these dangerous waters in dealing with false teaching. Therefore, as we journey along, let's turn attention to the outline below as our guide:

- I. Christians Must Learn how to Detect False Teaching (vv. 1-10a)**
- II. Christians Must Learn how to Reject False Teaching (vv. 10b-17)**
- III. Christians Must Learn how to Correct False Teaching (vv. 18-22)**

I. Christians Must Learn how to Detect False Teaching (vv. 1-10a)

Peter opens this chapter with a section comparable to Jude's epistle in which some of the same phrases are used. With Jude Peter exposes the danger of false teachers. Furthermore, one must remember that there is an important distinction to be made between a false teacher who teaches dangerous heresy and a sincere Christian who is mistaken and/or ignorant concerning a particular doctrine. For example, although Apollos taught only the message and the baptism of John, it is

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hardly correct to conclude he was a false teacher in the sense Peter is suggesting (Acts 18:24-28). Rather, false teachers are professing Christians who know the truth but who selfishly promote themselves through deliberate lies (cp. 2:3, 14).

Thus, Peter begins his answer on how to detect false teaching by describing the *defection* of false teachers. He writes, "But there were false prophets also among the people, even as there shall be false teachers among you, who privily shall bring in damnable heresies, even denying the Lord that bought them, and bring upon themselves swift destruction. And many shall follow their pernicious ways; by reason of whom the way of truth shall be evil spoken of" (vv. 1-2). Of all the descriptors of their defection at Peter's disposal, he chose to speak first of their *condemnation*. Peter calls their teaching "damnable heresies."

False teachers were, therefore, defective in their method. Note the Apostle's use of the term "privily." This term carries the idea of "bringing alongside." The false teachers



brought alongside Biblical truth their clever teachings and twisted sayings. Rather than come through the front door they sneaked in through a back door, concealing themselves and their false doctrine. Indeed they may even use the same language; however, they mean something entirely different with their words.

Second, false teachers were also defective in *message*. They were “denying the Lord that bought them.” A sure key to detecting false teaching pertains to the death of Jesus. Did Jesus die for the sins of the whole world as Scripture maintains (cp. John 3:16; 1 John 2:2; 1 Cor. 6:19-20)? In fact, Peter’s words have Christ dying for the sins of the false teachers themselves!

Not only does Peter describe the *defection* of false teachers, he also describes their *deception* (vv. 2-3a). Their “ways” are “pernicious.” The Greek term translated “pernicious ways” is *apoleia*, and indicates a “loss of well-being” and implies total ruin. In other words, the moral lives of false teachers are totally bankrupt. Following unbridled lust and extreme debauchery they show no shame toward their ways.

Reflection Connection

Do you think the church is too lenient on false teachers or too hard? Explain your answer.

In addition, their “words” are “feigned” (v. 3a), meaning “molded” or “formed” to a particular shape. The Greek word is *plastos*, from which we glean the English term “plastic.” False teachers may use the Christian’s vocabulary but they do not use the Christian’s dictionary. Rather they “make merchandise” of the Gospel message, peddling it to the highest bidder.

Finally, Peter describes the *destruction* awaiting false teachers (vv. 3b-10a). Peter writes, “... whose judgment now of a long time lingereth not, and their damnation slumbereth not. For if God spared not the angels that sinned... And spared not the old world... but saved Noah... And delivered just Lot... The Lord knoweth how to deliver the godly out of temptations, and to reserve the unjust unto the day of judgment to be punished” (vv. 3b-9). According to Peter, chains await the fallen angels who rebelled against God (v. 4; cp. 1 Pet. 3:19; Jude 6). Hence, neither human sinners nor angelic sinners escape judgment upon sin. What is more, while catastrophe came upon the old world in the form of flood (v. 5) and fire (vv. 6-9), God delivered His righteous ones from His wrath for He “knoweth how to deliver the godly out of temptations, and to reserve the unjust unto the day of judgment to be punished.”

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II. Christians Must Learn how to Reject False Teaching (vv. 10b-17)

Second Peter tells us we must inspect the teaching of false prophets if we are to expose their dangerous error. Observe Peter’s words, “... Presumptuous *are they*, selfwilled... not afraid to speak evil of dignities... as natural brute beasts... shall utterly perish... shall receive the reward of unrighteousness... Spots *they are*



and blemishes... Having eyes full of adultery, and that cannot cease from sin; beguiling unstable souls: an heart they have exercised with covetous practices; cursed children: Which have forsaken the right way, and are gone astray, following the way of Balaam... These are wells without water, clouds that are carried with a tempest; to whom the mist of darkness is reserved for ever" (vv. 10-17).

The Apostle painfully explains how believers are to inspect doctrine to discern its truth or error. Three areas present themselves to the Christian for examination. *First, note the intellectual area and ask, is there intellectual daring?* Peter insists that false teachers *abuse* their intellect, holding "presumptuous" attitudes which inevitably lead to "selfwilled" actions (see below). They portray neither reverence for God nor the sacred in general. Openly mocking the holy, they caricature spiritual things as only for the superstitious. In addition, they are "selfwilled" and arrogant holding concern only for themselves and the goals they have in life. In short, they dethrone God and sit proudly upon the top of life. Indeed they are not even reluctant to "speak evil" of the good and right. Rather they attack both the things of God and the church for which Jesus died.

Moreover, not only do they *abuse* the intellect, they *abandon* it as well. Peter places these characters in the same category as "brute beasts" which were not made in the image of God. Instead the beasts follow only raw instinct and uncontrollable natures. False teachers similarly follow their unchecked passions not allowing their unique human faculties to prohibit barbarian behavior. Peter pronounces their destiny without fear—they shall "utterly perish" and "shall receive the reward of unrighteousness."

Second, note the moral area and ask, are there actions which are morally disturbing? (vv. 13-16). While Peter's emphasis is primarily on doctrinal error, when detecting false teaching, the moral lives of the teachers cannot be skirted. Why should moral lives of teachers matter? Have you never heard the response when inviting someone to church, "The church is full of hypocrites!"? The fact remains that what we do speaks far louder than what we say. Hence, Peter insists immoral living *dissipates* the church. It breaks down the moral strength of the whole. In addition, moral laxity *disgraces* the church. Peter calls these men "spots" and "blemishes" on God's people. While some people come to church, sit at the Lord's Table, serve on ministry teams, they nonetheless sport a lifestyle which is a reproach to the body of Christ.

Third, note the spiritual area and ask, is there spiritual deception? Peter gives two graphic illustrations (v. 17). He speaks of being "wells without water." Imagine living in the hot middle-eastern climate, crossing a desert, and coming upon a well. The relief one experiences comes to a sudden halt when the bucket is lowered into a dry cistern. What disappointment; what deception! False

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Reflection Connection

Do you think the church today adequately prepares Christians to deal with intellectual issues? Explain. What are some ways the church might deal with a lack of intellectual preparation?



teachers are dry wells; while they seem to have answers, when they are examined in light of the Word of God, they are quickly exposed as cracked cisterns. The second illustration Peter offers is “clouds carried about.” The picture is during the midst of drought, thick, heavy clouds are spotted over the horizon. People rejoice and celebrate because soon the drought will be gone. However, the clouds keep on moving until they are out of sight. False teachers can no more quench our spiritual thirst than clouds without rain can soak a parched land.

III. Christians Must Learn how to Correct False Teaching (vv. 18-22)

This portion of Peter’s letter may represent the strongest language thus far in dealing with false teaching. Hear the Apostle’s stinging indictment, “For when they speak great swelling *words* of vanity, they allure through the lusts of the flesh, *through much* wantonness, those that were clean escaped from them who live in error. While they promise them liberty, they themselves are the servants of corruption: for of whom a man is overcome, of the same is he brought in bondage. For if after they have escaped the pollutions of the world through the knowledge of the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, they are again entangled therein, and overcome, the latter end is worse with them than the beginning. For it had been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than, after they have known *it*, to turn from the holy commandment delivered unto them. But

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it is happened unto them according to the true proverb, The dog is turned to his own vomit again; and the sow that was washed to her wallowing in the mire” (vv. 18-22). As we have already discussed numerous times in the New Testament, a person who is saved at all is saved for eternity. Once one becomes a child of God, one cannot become an “unchild” of God. Hence, the Apostle is not speaking of the loss of salvation (cp. 1:3-5). The horrid portrait Peter paints graphically depicts what sin can and ultimately does do to someone who has never been saved. Several facts about false teachers become clear.

First, their pronouncements are false (v. 18). Do you ever wonder why false teachers are many times so successful? This is amazing since, according to Peter, their words are *empty*. Or, in Peter’s terms, they “speak great swelling *words* of vanity,” speech which “allures” many to their destruction. Almost spell-binding in result, false teachers flatter and amuse while they chip away at a person’s resistance. The longer one sits under a false teacher, the more immune one becomes to fundamental truth. Even more, not only is their speech *empty*, it is also *evil*. By “alluring” hearers, they are merely baiting them for the spiritual kill.

Second, their promises are false (v. 19). False teachers promise “liberty” to their hearers. How easy to get a following by promising liberty (cp. Luke 4:18; John 8:32-36; Gal. 5:1). Some take liberty to mean one may live a morally loose life



Reflection Connection

Reflect for a moment on your church. Has your church ever had to deal with false teaching? Be very careful in discussing this issue not allowing it to become a session where accusations are made. Perhaps your pastor could lead a short discussion on how the church deals with error.

since Jesus has set us free from the law. Indeed it is as if any moral restraint reduces to moral legalism akin to the Pharisees. Presently there is a subtle shift even among some young pastors wherein they have no moral reservations concerning the consumption of intoxicating beverages. Some even boast about it and claim their “Christian liberty” to do so. However, our liberty in Christ was never intended to be a free pass to live loose lives. We cannot confuse liberty with license. There is a bondage which is liberty and a liberty which is bondage. Christian liberty does not mean one does what one wants but does what Christ wants. From Peter’s perspective, these teachers are “servants” of “corruption.”

Third, their professions are false (vv. 20-22). While some take these verses to “prove” a saved person can become unsaved again, we observe from clear references elsewhere in God’s Word such is not possible. Therefore, we must ask toward whom is Peter referencing in these verses? He is referring to false teachers, teachers who have crept into the fellowship of the church and remain unsaved. They are not sheep; according to Peter, hogs and dogs constitute more accurate similes. Why? Peter offers three reasons.

First, they *reform outwardly*. False teachers “escape pollution” of the world. In short, though they have a relatively clean public persona, their inward lives remain morally corrupt. In addition, while they possess certain “knowledge” it is not in their heart but only in their head. Nevertheless, when they do slip, the backward slide into the morass of the world will be worse than ever they expected. Church membership became a cover for them over a period of time but sooner or later they will be exposed for the charlatans they are.

Therefore, secondly, they *return eventually*. Peter recalls Solomon’s words, pulling in the image of the dog and hog (Prov. 26:11). Dogs return to their vomit to sniff while hogs will always return to the wallowing pin even if they have been scrubbed clean. One may only pretend to be a sheep for so long. But since the nature within has not been transformed, eventually the unsaved person will be exposed.

Golden Greek Nugget

Peter opens his warning concerning false teachers by stating they hold “damnable heresies” (v. 1). The Greek term translated “heresies” is *haireisis*, which literally means “a choosing” or “a choice,” and has to do with selecting a position and thus possessing an opinion. However, the term came to be understood as self-willed opinions and therefore views which were deviant and destructive.

Wrap Up

Peter deals with one of the most difficult but nonetheless necessary issues the church faces: how to discern false teaching. By inspecting and rejecting false teaching the church can remain healthy until Jesus comes. In addition, the greatest deterrent to false doctrine is solid Bible study and Biblical preaching.

