

## "FALSE TEACHERS THEN AND NOW"

(Romans 16:17-20)

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The truth of Christianity is, of course, formally opposed by adherents of other religions, philosophies, and worldviews. Buddhists, Muslims, animists, Marxists, atheists, and so forth propagate worldviews that are explicitly set in contrast to Christianity. The battle lines are drawn, and we understand the need to oppose these worldviews with a vigorous and reasoned defense of our own.

But Christians must also deal with false teachers—people within the church who claim to be Christians but who deviate in some way from an essential truth of the gospel. False teachers have always plagued the church, and they are not going away. What Paul says in verses 17-19 may help us spot these false teachers and deal with them once we have identified them.

Paul's message about the false teachers reiterates what is said almost everywhere in the New Testament on such people. What we have is a stock profile of typical false teachers. In addition to errors in doctrine, Paul says three things about them: (1) They serve themselves rather than Christ; (2) they are crafty and effective speakers, and (3) they create divisions in the church. Paul, in other words, describes the motives, the means, and the results of their ministry.

False teachers often go wrong at the level of motivation. Instead of focusing on the glory of God and the good of the church, they become preoccupied with themselves. Pride is often their root sin. More status, prestige, and publicity come to people who teach new or strange things than to those who plod along, following the lines of truth laid down in Scripture and in the history of the church. *Time* magazine does not run articles on orthodox theologians. Only what is new and different is newsworthy. Thus, people can drift into false teaching out of a concern to stand out from others around them. And once a teacher has gone public with a new view, it is humiliating to back down in the face of opposition. One gets a vested interest in the view. Each of us needs, then, to make sure that we teach and minister for the right reasons. We need to

evaluate, as best we can, what it is that motivates those who teach us.

By definition, the views that false teachers propagate are contrary to biblical teaching. They are often illogical as well. They will mask these problems in a flurry of rhetoric. False teachers are usually glib and convincing. They pull out every rhetorical trick in the book to try to win converts. Paul himself often faced these kinds of people, and some of his converts compared his own rhetorical abilities rather unfavorably with those of his opponents (see esp. 1 Cor. 1-2; 2 Cor. 10-13). But Paul prided himself on being a plain speaker, seeking to convey the truth of the gospel as clearly and



straightforwardly as he could. He wanted people to be convicted by the truth of what he said, not moved for the moment by a slick presentation.

Which methods do we use? Carefully crafted sermons are certainly not wrong, but the preacher must always be careful not to substitute fancy words or illustrations or rhetorical devices for truth. The old adage about the preachers notes—"weak point, speak more loudly"—is too often close to the truth. Those of us who listen to Christian teaching and preaching—in our churches, Sunday school classes, on the radio, and on TV—need to evaluate what is being said on the basis of its content, not just its style. False teachers often gain a hearing because they can be so engaging and so much fun to listen to. They disguise a lack of truth with smooth words.

Divisions, of course, can be created by people who proclaim the truth of the gospel in situations where that truth has not been carefully preserved. The zealous evangelical pastor who comes into a church that has drifted from orthodoxy over the years is bound to stir up dissension. Some people are not going to like the "new" ideas, and they will resist them. Factions in the church, and even permanent divisions, may result.

But false teachers are especially prone to create divisions. They are often guilty of singling out one point of doctrine, distorting it and then exaggerating it until it stands out from others. In their zeal for their "new" idea, they make converts who are equally zealous. The upshot is a group within the church who follow the lead of these false teachers and try to force their view on everyone else. We ought, therefore, to be suspicious of teachers in the church who encourage such devoted followings and who focus exclusively on one doctrine.