

Heresy vs. False Doctrine

by David A. Huston

This article is presented to explain the difference between a heresy and a false teaching.

FROM A BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE, to be characterized as a false teacher and a heretic requires more than merely teaching something that is not entirely true. It is not just the teaching that is false; it is also the teacher. He is false. For example, Peter wrote, “There will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies....” This verse equates false teachers with heresies. He went on to say, “By covetousness they will exploit you with deceptive words...” (2 Peter 2:1,3). He then described these false teachers this way, “Having eyes full of adultery and that cannot cease from sin, beguiling unstable souls. They have a heart trained in covetous practices, and are accursed children. They have forsaken the right way and gone astray, following the way of Balaam the son of Beor, who loved the wages of unrighteousness” (2 Peter 2:14-15).

These verses indicate that false teachers are greedy and exploitive at their core. They exploit people with deceptive words. They beguile those who are unstable (double-minded, see James 1:8). They are covetous and love receiving wages for their unrighteous practices.

In his description of the same kinds of false teachers, Jude wrote, “They mouth great swelling words, flattering people to gain advantage. But you, beloved, remember the words which were spoken before by the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ: how they told you that there would be mockers in the last time who would walk according to their own ungodly lusts. These are sensual persons, who cause divisions, not having the Spirit” (Jude 16-19). These teachers are sensual, not spiritual, not walking after the Spirit but after their own ungodly lusts.

Paul told Titus that those who serve as the elders-overseers (bishops) of an assembly must be “able, by sound doctrine, both to exhort and convict those who contradict” (Titus 1:9). He explained that the reason this was important was because “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”

(v.10-11). Again the idea of greed is brought out. These men taught purely for the sake of dishonest gain. In other words, they taught under false pretenses. It wasn't just their teachings that were false; they were false!

Paul later instructed Titus, "Reject a divisive man [literally a heretic] after the first and second admonition, knowing that such a person is warped and sinning, being self-condemned" (Titus 3:10-11).

To teach something that does not square 100% with the Scriptures does not necessarily make a person a false teacher or a heretic. Anyone can be mistaken. We are all learning and growing, or so we hope. I know that I believe things today that I was unaware of or mistaken about just a few years back. But I am not trying to take advantage of other people's weaknesses or enrich myself at their expense. This is not to say that the dissemination of error is a minor matter. Every believer ought to have a Berean spirit, searching the Scriptures daily to see whether the things he is being taught are true. Teachings which are false must be corrected for the sake of maintaining the apostles' doctrine.

A teacher who is sincerely mistaken can be distinguished from one who is a genuine false teacher by whether or not he has an *Apollos spirit*. Even though this teacher was "an eloquent man and mighty in the Scriptures...being fervent in spirit," his doctrine was incomplete. But when Aquila and Priscilla "took him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately," he immediately corrected his message (Acts 18:24-26). This demonstrated the sincerity and humility of his heart.

Putting this all together from the Scriptures, I believe we can say that the key characteristics of a false teacher-heretic are:

He is warped, which means twisted or misguided.

He is sinning and cannot cease from sin.

He has eyes full of adultery and is self-condemned.

He teaches for the sake of dishonest gain.

He uses covetousness to exploit people with deceptive words.

He flatters people to gain advantage.

He walks according to his own ungodly lusts.

He is sensual (carnal, psychological, out of touch with the Spirit).

He is insubordinate (unwilling to operate under godly authority)

He cause divisions (this is what heretics do).

He does not have the Spirit (though he may claim to be highly anointed).

In contrast, Paul warned the elders of Ephesus, saying, “For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves. Therefore watch, and remember that for three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears. So now, brethren, I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified. I have coveted no one’s silver or gold or apparel” (Acts 20:29-33).

The hallmark of the false teacher is that he is teaching for what he can get out of it. He covets what others have and does not hesitate to deceive and exploit in order to obtain it. In contrast, the true teacher teaches to enlighten and build up the church. He covets no one’s silver or gold or apparel, but instead trusts in God to supply his needs.

Paul summed up the spirit of the true teacher when he wrote, “Now for the third time I am ready to come to you. And I will not be burdensome to you; for I do not seek yours, but you. For the children ought not to lay up for the parents, but the parents for the children. And I will very gladly spend and be spent for your souls; though the more abundantly I love you, the less I am loved. But be that as it may, I did not burden you. Nevertheless, being crafty, I caught you by cunning! Did I take advantage of you by any of those whom I sent to you? I urged Titus, and sent our brother with him. Did Titus take advantage of you? Did we not walk in the same spirit? Did we not walk in the same steps? Again, do you think that we excuse ourselves to you? We speak before God in Christ. But we do all things, beloved, for your edification” (2 Corinthians 12:14-19).

What an awesome example to model our lives and ministries after. We cannot serve both God and mammon!

Note to the reader:

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Published by

Rosh Pinnah Publications

PO Box 337, Carlisle, PA 17013 717-249-2059

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Rosh Pinnah means 'Chief Cornerstone' in Hebrew.