

## MARKING FALSE TEACHERS

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### *About the author...*

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From the very beginning, the church has been troubled by false teachers. Paul warned the Ephesian elders that false teachers would disrupt unity and would lead souls astray (Acts 20:28-31). Paul made it his practice to warn brethren of the dangers of false prophets. He stated to the Ephesian elders: *"For I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock, also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them"* (vs. 29-30). At this point Paul did not know the exact names of the individuals that would create the problems, but did remind them, *"Therefore watch, and remember, that by the space of three years I ceased not to warn every one night and day with tears"* (Acts 20:31). John informs his readers to be on guard against the numerous false teachers that endangered the spiritual security of the church (1 John 4:1). In Acts 15 we read of false teachers promoting circumcision as a part of the Gospel message of salvation (vs. 1). We must realize that these general warnings about false teachers are still needed today.

Not only did the church need a general warning about false teachers, but it needed a specific warning as well. To the Christians in Rome inspiration states: *"Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them"* (Romans 16:17). This command clearly requires that false teachers be identified. How else could a purveyor of error be avoided? Only those who have been specifically named as false teachers can be avoided in particular. On two different occasions Paul, by inspiration, identified by name teachers who had departed from the faith. In 1 Timothy 1:19-20 he said, *"Holding faith, and a good conscience; which some having put away concerning faith have made shipwreck: Of whom is Hymenaeus and Alexander; whom I have delivered unto Satan, that they may learn not to blaspheme."* Some brethren think it is wrong to publicly name false teachers. Did Paul sin by mentioning the names of these two men who had left the faith? No, certainly not! That conclusion is baseless. Paul is writing by direction of God. Timothy was given specific names of the ones that had departed the faith. All those who read the epistle would also be alerted to these men and the danger of their false doctrines. Since the epistles were inspired documents, they would be widely circulated and Paul was well aware of this.

Names were mentioned also in Paul's second letter to Timothy: *"And their word will eat as doth a canker: of whom is Hymenaeus and Philetus; Who concerning the truth have erred, saying that the resurrection is past already: and overthrow the faith of some"* (2 Timothy 2:17-18). Faithful brethren had a need to know; Paul knew this. The two names alerted Christians not to trust these men as teachers of the truth. They were apparently dependable men at one time, but not any longer. They had begun to spread lethal error that would upset the sound faith of Christians. God is right to have

these men identified (or marked) so that faithful brethren could now avoid them. John also identified Diotrephes as a man that needed to be confronted for the harm he was doing to a local congregation (3 John 12). This is the correct thing to do. A woman called Jezebel was identified in the church of Thyatira as a false prophetess (Revelation 2:20). God did not want anyone else following her, so He marked her by calling her name. Marking those who propagate error is correct procedure because the Bible says so.

There are several scriptural reasons for marking false teachers:

- C First:** A Christian is a spiritual soldier (Ephesians 6:10-18; 2 Timothy 2:3-4). A good soldier will warn his comrades of impending danger, for he is likened to a watchman on the wall (Ezekiel 3:17-21). It has already been noted that both Paul and John both marked those that could not be trusted to teach the truth. These inspired men have set the precedent through their pens and by their actions. The threat that false teachers pose is no less for the church today. If we care about the souls of others we will do what we can to notify members about false teachers and do so by calling their names.
- C Secondly,** those promoting error need to be marked by name because some false teachers were, at one time, men who were sound in the faith. The Bible says, *“For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears; and they shall turn away their ears from the truth and shall be turned unto fables”* (1 Timothy 4:3-4). We do not always understand why some good men turn away from the truth and accept false doctrine, but it happens nonetheless. Remember also that Paul said, *“Also, of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them”* (Acts 20:30). Paul was warning the Ephesian elders that from their own ranks false teachers would develop and cause division among the membership. In our own lifetime we have seen this happen over and over. Respected men, who were once trustworthy and faithful to the truth, are now venturing away from Bible truth. These men do not announce that they will depart from the faith and hold to the truth of the Gospel. They often claim that they are still preaching the same truth that they have always taught. It is imperative that our brethren be notified of those who no longer abide in the doctrine of Christ (2 John 9). Take heed to the following: *“From which some having swerved have turned aside unto vain jangling; desiring to be teachers of the law, understanding neither what they say, nor whereof they affirm”* (1 Timothy 1:6-7). When teachers swerve from the truth, we must then obey Romans 16:17-18 and make them publicly.
- C Thirdly,** much is at stake. The precious souls of men and women, boys and girls hang in the balance. Nothing is more valuable than the souls of men (Matthew 16:26). Not warning people of false teachers results in a tragedy of indescribable proportions; souls will be lost. In the presence of the scribes and the Pharisees, Jesus warned the multitude of these religious hypocrites (Matthew 23). In His rebuke, He pronounced eight woes upon them in their hearing. The Lord told the multitude that when the scribes and the Pharisees successfully converted a soul, that this person would be *“...twofold more the child of hell than...”* the scribes and the Pharisees were (Matthew 23:15). False doctrine condemns souls to hell; it does not save them. If a speeding bus were about to strike an unsuspecting pedestrian, it would be criminal not to warn them immediately. They will surely die or be badly maimed if they are not warned. Jesus sounded out a clear alarm to the multitudes because He did not want them to become

the victims of these wolves in sheep's clothing (Matthew 7:15). Jesus understood that when souls were in jeopardy, action is needed. Jesus did what was right, and we can only be right if we follow His example.

False teachers are often loved and given great devotion by those who have been fooled by the sheep's clothing they wear. When the name of the false teacher is announced, often the ignorant quickly come to his defense. It is not unusual for these men to be loyally defended by those who have no idea of the false doctrines they espouse. The false teacher often seems too kind, too respected and too popular to be guilty of teaching erroneous doctrines. To the masses the Pope seems too quaint, elderly, pious and revered to be leading souls astray. In the eyes of the public Billy Graham has shaken the hand of too many presidents to be capable of espousing false doctrines. Heaven's mandate requiring teachers to be tested is habitually ignored by the public and many of our own brethren (1 John 4:1). They just accept their popularity as proof that they are promoting sound doctrine.

Exposing false teachers does not enhance one's popularity. Jesus was crucified for being such an outspoken critic of hypocritical teachers. These false teachers did not like Jesus marking them. The same is true of the prophets. Instead of being commended for exposing false teachers, Jeremiah was made a mockery (Jeremiah 20:7-10). Moses also became very unpopular. He was blamed for the death of those that actually caused division among the children of Israel (when it was actually God who had destroyed the rebellious—Numbers 16:41-50). The record shows that Moses withstood them to their face and before the whole congregation. Stephen did not gain popularity for exposing the error of those in his audience (Acts 7:1-60). From these few examples we can see that identifying false teachers is often a dangerous undertaking. The sheep's clothing worn by false prophets has many fooled. Thus when faithful brethren have the courage to mark teachers of error, they will often be attacked and treated as wrongdoers. Defending false teachers will only mean that more souls will be affected by their error. As did the noble Bereans, you and I should always intelligently check the doctrines of all teachers against what the Bible says (Acts 17:11; 1 John 4:1). In other words, are teachers teaching exactly what God's word says? Never should we allow our emotions, love for an individual or sympathies for them dominate our rationality. Let no feelings hinder us from complying with the scriptures.

The elders of the church should take the lead in handling these matters. God has designated them as the spiritual overseers of the local congregation (Acts 20:28-31; 1 Peter 5:1-4). Titus was told to appoint men as elders who were *"holding fast the faithful word as he hath been taught, that he may be able by sound doctrine both to exhort and to convince the gainsayers"* (Titus 1:9). A gainsayer is one who speaks against the truth. Elders must have the ability to identify false doctrine when they hear it and then have the courage to confront the purveyors of error immediately. Entire families can be lost to the error that false teachers bring, therefore the elders must not delay in taking action. Mouths of false teachers must be stopped (Titus 1:10-11). Since elders are watching for the souls of the men, members of the congregation should follow them in any marking procedures (Hebrews 13:17). Understand that there are some cases where the elders feel it unnecessary to disclose all of the facts; we should follow them nonetheless. Members should do their best to trust the wisdom and judgement of the elders.

The Lord made it clear that we will, without doubt, have encounters with false teachers. Peter wrote, *"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”* (2 Peter 2:1). He made it equally plain that these men or women must be identified and avoided. We live at a time when a soft, easy religion is desired. Marking false teachers is not an easy thing for us to always do, but it is the true religion of the Bible. We must be courageous and brave and do what the Lord requires. Hesitation is not obedience. Complete obedience will ensure salvation for us and certainly for others as well.