

The world is full of bad theology. On television a preacher of prosperity says, “Be healed! Jesus died for your disease on the cross!” In certain articles, leading evangelicals are confused about whether justification comes by faith alone or not. Then add all the errors of non-Christian religions such as the fanciful speculations of the New Age or the dangerous views about Jesus in the cults. The world is full of untrue, unsound, unbiblical theology. Where does it all come from?

1. Apostasy Ahead

Having explained the mystery of godliness at the end of chapter 3, Paul goes on in chapter 4 to explain the mystery of ungodliness, telling Timothy and the church to expect bad theology: “The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith” (4:1a). Notice that this is not simply Paul’s analysis of the church – it is a prophecy of the Holy Spirit. It may refer to a private revelation given to Paul himself or to a pronouncement made by a prophet in the early church, which had become common knowledge around the churches (e.g. Acts 11:27f; 21:10-14). Paul may even have been recalling the words of Jesus Christ: “At that time many will turn away from the faith and will betray and hate each other, and many false prophets will appear and deceive many people” (Matthew 24:10-11). The living voice of the Holy Spirit testifies in no uncertain terms that although Christians may be saddened by false theology, they should never be surprised by it.

The technical theological term for abandoning or departing from the faith is “apostasy” from the Greek word, “apostasia”. One scholar has defined such apostasy as “the serious situation of becoming separated from the living God after a previous turning towards him, by falling away from the faith”. Apostasy does not mean that believers who have saving faith can lose it. This would be an impossibility since every sinner who receives the gift of saving faith is preserved by the Holy Spirit until the day of Christ (John 10:28; Philippians 1:6). What apostasy does mean, however, is that someone who once claimed to be a Christian has renounced the gospel. One of the distinguishing marks of the later times is that people who call themselves Christians will forsake the Christ of authentic Christianity.

When will these later times be? Well, they must include Paul’s own day, since he is writing about these things in explanation of the false teachers at work in Ephesus. We are living in the last days. These are the later times. These are the last days, which, as John Wesley said, “extend from our Lord’s ascension till His coming to judgment”. If these are the later times, then apostasy is to be expected. When someone abandons orthodox Christianity it should not throw our faith into question. Rather, it proves the truth of Scripture “that in later times some will depart from the faith” (4:1)

2. Deceiving Spirits and Hypocritical Liars

Paul goes on to explain that such apostasy comes from bad theology. And bad theology has 2 sources, the first of which is positively diabolical. Those who abandon the faith do so by following “deceiving spirits and things taught by demons” (4:1b). There are two errors to avoid when thinking about demons. The first is to give the devil more than his due. Some Christians think that there are demons lurking behind every door. On occasion, God may allow fallen angels to manipulate the physical universe or to tempt human beings to commit sin. But demons do not and cannot have control over anyone who is filled with the Holy Spirit. The truth is that Jesus Christ has defeated the devil and all his helpers on the cross of Calvary. The opposite error, however, is to deny that demons exist. The devil and demons do exist. Spiritual warfare is as real today as it was in the day when Jesus was on earth. Paul speaks of that warfare in Ephesians 6. Behind all anti-Christian systems demonic forces are actively engaged. This struggle will continue until the Day of Judgment, which is why the Lord Jesus instructs his disciples to pray every day for deliverance from the evil one (Matthew 6:13).

The main reason Christians need daily spiritual protection is the deceitfulness of the devil. Jesus called Satan “a liar and the father of lies” (John 8:44). Believers are thus warned not to believe every spirit, but to test the spirits “to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world” (1John 4:1). Satan was a deceiver from the very beginning. We see that as he

came to Eve in the form of a serpent in the Garden of Eden – hinting to her that God was stingy, thus denying God’s goodness and then telling her that she would not die if she ate the fruit of the tree, thus denying God’s justice. If Satan’s favourite strategy is deception, it follows that the church is in real danger of being fooled by false doctrine. Most false doctrines contain enough truth to resist detection. The most dangerous heresies often sound the most like authentic Christianity. For example, the distortions of Roman Catholicism hide behind the truth of the value of good works. The lies of Mormonism hide behind the truth of family values. Every false doctrine tries to find some truth to hide behind. The deceptiveness of false doctrine teaches every Christian to be wary. The discerning Christian does not read every so-called Christian book, listen to every so-called Christian radio program or online sermon, or enter every so-called Christian church, but is wary enough to be on guard against deceptions of Satan and his henchmen.

However, Paul is far from laying all the blame for these false teachings on the evil spirits and demons, for he goes on “such teachings come through hypocritical liars, whose consciences have been seared as with a hot iron” (v.2). The evil spirits that are active in the propagation of false teachings and evil practices could gain nothing without the willing co-operation of human agents. Hypocrisy explains why heresy is so deceptive. Many false teachers are good actors. They know how to play the part of a Christian. The human teachers are hypocrites because they proclaim one message and live another, and liars because they propagate teachings they know to be untrue. Eventually, liars start to live their own lies. They do not even realize they are lying any more, for their “consciences are seared”. Because conscience functions along with the moral law, it has a restraining effect on human behaviour under normal circumstances. Sometimes when skin is burned or seared it becomes insensitive, almost as if anaesthetized. Once the nerves have been deadened, the skin is no longer able to feel pain. The same thing can happen to the human conscience. It can become cauterized by sin. The more a person sins, the less painful it seems, until through repeated and wilful acts of sinning, the conscience can become deadened to such an extent that it virtually ceases to function.

Now you can see why Paul so frequently reminds Timothy to keep his conscience clear. His goal is for Timothy to have love which comes from “a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith” (1:5). He urges him to keep “holding on to faith and a good conscience” (1:19). Paul wants every Christian to be as conscientious as he was himself for in his second letter to Timothy he testified that he served God “with a clear conscience” (2Timothy 1:3). I exhort you to guard your conscience so that it remains sensitive to the least offence against the holiness of God.

3. The Ascetic Life

As we come to verse 3, Paul starts to get specific by telling us that the false teachers in Ephesus believed that celibacy and vegetarianism were necessary for salvation: they “forbid people to marry and order them to abstain from certain foods, which God created...” (v.3a). There is nothing wrong, in principle, with being single or a vegetarian or both. God calls some individual Christians to remain unmarried or to refrain from certain foods for a time. The trouble comes when these or other matters of relative indifference are treated as essentials of the gospel. This legalistic mindset is often a problem in the church – as became the case with the false teachers in Ephesus. They had committed themselves to one particular diet and one particular lifestyle. Now there is nothing wrong with remaining single or with fasting. Nor is there anything wrong in principle with private vegetarianism. The trouble came when the false teachers decided that what was good for them was good for everyone. They tried to require every Christian to adopt their practices for abstaining from sex and food.

Apparently, these false teachers taught that meat and marriage were inherently sinful. This passage mentions “certain foods” without specifying what they were. Perhaps this is a reference to Jewish dietary customs which came from the Mosaic law. Yet elsewhere – especially in Rome (Romans 14:2, 21) and in Corinth (1Corinthians 8:13) – the controversy in the church concerned eating meat. Whatever the precise practices may have been, the single best word to describe this kind of theology is

“ascetic”. An ascetic is a person who practices severe self-discipline and abstains from all forms of pleasure, especially for religious or spiritual reasons. By forbidding marriage and changing their diet, some members of the Ephesian church were denying the pleasures of sex and food, and at the same time saying that physical self-denial was essential to a person’s standing before God. In his commentary, John Stott explains the ascetic mindset like this: “From the beginning of church history some teachers..... have argued that sex and hunger are themselves unclean appetites, that the body itself is a nasty encumbrance (if not actually vile), and that the only way to holiness is abstinence, the voluntary renunciation of sex and marriage, and, since eating cannot be given up altogether, then at least the renunciation of meat”. There has, for example, long been an ascetic tendency in Roman Catholicism. This explains the existence of monasteries and why Catholic priests are forbidden to marry. It is also the reason why orthodox Catholics refuse to eat meat during Lent.

What is wrong with a little asceticism? One problem with self-denial is that it is often used as a way to become self-righteous. Calvin accuses the false teachers in Ephesus of trying “to acquire righteousness for themselves by abstaining from those things which God has left free”. Another problem with ascetic Christianity is that it rejects God’s good gifts. When they are used in a lawful way, both food and sex are meant for joy. God himself created them “to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth” (v.3b). Consider marriage. The Bible teaches that marriage is a divine gift, a creation ordinance, ordained by God the Father (Genesis 2:24) and blessed by God the Son (Matthew 19:4-6). Therefore, marriage is to be received with thankful joy. The Puritans offer many good examples of how to appreciate the gift of marriage. Contrary to popular opinion, they were not puritanical about sex. They prized marriage, including its sexual aspect. Like marriage, food is one of God’s good gifts. Christians are allowed to eat whatever foods they please. Paul’s reasoning is very straight forward: what God has made, we may eat. This is one very practical consequence of the doctrine of creation: “For everything God created is good” (v.4a).

The proper way to receive the good gifts of creation is “with thanksgiving”, which is Paul’s favourite term to express gratitude to God. Gratitude is so important that you will note that he mentions it twice in vv.3-5. There are two important qualifications here. The first comes from the doctrine of redemption. Followers of Christ must be the most grateful people of all. Christians are here defined as “those who believe and who know the truth” (v.3b). To believe is to believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and the Saviour of the world. It is to trust in his death on the cross and resurrection from the grave for salvation. True gratitude is a response to saving grace. It begins with thanksgiving for the gift of eternal life through Jesus Christ. The other qualification comes from the doctrine of creation. Paul does not say that everything is good. He says that “everything God created is good” (v. 4a). What God made is good, but there is always the danger of corrupting what God has made. Christians are to enjoy life to the fullest, but it is not “anything goes!” One way to test if we are using God’s gifts properly is to ask the question: “Can I thank God for what I am doing right now without being ashamed of myself?” Furthermore, true gratitude leads to generosity. Christians who keep their food to themselves – or keep the benefits of family life to themselves, for that matter – are not receiving God’s gifts with thanksgiving at all.

When Paul speaks about thanksgiving, he may be referring to the practice of saying grace before meals. One way to receive food with thanksgiving is to do what the Lord Jesus did: offer a prayer of thanksgiving before eating it. In Mark’s Gospel we overhear Jesus giving thanks for the loaves and the fish (Mark 6:41, 8:6), as well as for the bread and the wine of the Last Supper (Mark 14:22-23). Paul goes on in v.5 of 1Timothy 4 to describe giving thanks for food as a consecration: “because it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer”. Praying before a meal does not make the food any more holy than it already is, but saying grace is a way of acknowledging that daily bread is a sacred gift. What does Paul mean by “the word of God” in verse 5? The Jews often used Scripture when they said grace. So Paul is telling us that a prayer of thanks, like other prayers, should normally make use of the word of God in Scripture and in the gospel. The everyday acts of eating and drinking should then become for the Christian acts of an enlightened faith, free from anxiety, and enjoyed in

freedom. As Paul wrote to the Corinthians, “So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God” (1Corinthians 10:31). Giving thanks, however, is not just for meal times. Gratitude is a whole way of life. We Christians ought to give thanks to God for every good thing. God is indeed to be praised for everything he has created.

Finally, gratitude is essential to sound theology. Thanksgiving is so important to daily Christian life that anyone who rejects God’s good gifts runs the risk of abandoning the faith. A good example of the way sound theology depends upon a grateful heart comes from the early days of the Swiss Reformation. Shortly before Easter in 1522, several printers scandalized the city of Zurich by eating meat during the traditional Catholic fast for Lent. The printers decided to do this for two reasons. One was practical. They performed such hard physical labour that they felt they needed to eat meat to keep up their strength. But the other reason was theological. The printers wanted to eat meat in order to make a public declaration of their commitment to the doctrines of the Reformation.

To understand this, it helps to know that the Lenten fast in Zurich had become a form of works-righteousness, a way of earning favour with God through self-denial. But the printers knew where bad theology comes from – and where it leads. They believed that they were saved by grace, not by works. They also understood that “everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving” (1Timothy 4:4). Therefore they ate their meat to the glory of God, which, of course, is the way we, who belong to Jesus, ought to do everything.

Amen

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