

## Early Church and New Age Error

(January 3, 2024)

You shall know them by their fruits is something Jesus said to alert us to imposters within Christianity who were in it only for what they could get out of it. Many New Testament letters clarify the threat level that these imposters tried to bring into the early church.

15 "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves. 16 You will know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes from thornbushes or figs from thistles? 17 Even so, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. 18 A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. 19 Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. 20 Therefore by their fruits you will know them. (Matthew 7:15-20)

Jesus warned that these pastoral impostors would come dressed in sheep's clothing. Obviously, though I take Scripture *literally* - in its most plain and ordinary sense - Jesus is *not* saying that we would see certain pastors *cosplaying* as sheep, right? He's using a figure of speech that we take to mean what they portray on the *outside* is not what lies *within* them. What they are on the *inside* are "ravenous wolves."

The first/second century church fathers constantly warned about these fake sheep. Those imposters gained access to pulpits and began teaching their heresies from the start and that was roughly 2,000 years ago, not many years after Jesus lived, died, rose and ascended.

It seems not much has changed and our job is to be on the lookout for these same type of pastoral imposters, call them out and warn others. In fact, if we take the time to read the writings of the early church fathers of the first and second century (those who were either direct disciples of the original apostles or disciples of those who were), we quickly conclude that addressing error in the early church was a full-time job. They dealt with everything from women as pastors, adultery and pederasty, homosexuality, baptism, whether Jesus was just a "sinless" man or if He was God in the flesh and many, many other areas of Scriptural truth. Yet, many today do not even take into consideration their testimony and efforts to keep the doctrine of the early church pure. We'd rather listen to our own opinions or opinions of others who have made a name for themselves *today*.

There were many cults and false notions being espoused during the first and second centuries that often made it very difficult for early Christians then to sift through it all. This is why the writings of the early church fathers were and remain very important because in those first several centuries, the battle seemed ferocious as Satan raised up purveyors of false doctrine in efforts to remove the fledgling church from its firm foundation.

We have the benefit of complete Scripture today, unlike the first few centuries, but even with that, many Christians fail to grasp the truth contained in it. I wonder if it has something to do with the fact that so many Christians do not even open His Word to read it, much less study and memorize it?

And so, warnings like the one Jesus gives us in the above **Matthew** passage can only work if we pay attention to His Word in order to see what is going on in society and within the visible church. Jesus' point is that if we *know* what to look for, the fruits of the fake pastors will out them. In other words, we will come to see them for who they are because many to most of them go into the ministry or pastorate because it gives them authority over others and creates a way for them to amass notoriety and even wealth. These two things are their motivating factors. Their egos push them to do things that make them stand out so that others will see them as "honest," "loving," "committed," "above board," etc.

The apostle Peter refers to them like this though:

They have eyes full of adultery, insatiable for sin. They entice unsteady souls. They have hearts trained in greed. Accursed children! Forsaking the right way, they have gone astray. (2 Peter 2:14-15 ESV)

Because they are trained in greed (v **14**), everything flows from that. They see wealth and money as things to be chased after because they *love* money. Paul told Timothy that a *love* of money is the very root of all evil (**2 Timothy 6:10**).

I find it fascinating how often the early church fathers provided additional information on a few of the people Paul and others mentioned very briefly in specific letters, which gives us an expanded picture of them. For instance, Paul mentions Alexander the coppersmith in **2 Timothy 4:14-15**.

Alexander the coppersmith did me much harm. May the Lord repay him according to his works. You also must beware of him, for he has greatly resisted our words.

That's pretty much it. We know nothing about Alexander from Paul and specifically what Alexander did to cause harm. However, it is interesting that early church father Tertulian expands on the problem of Alexander.

...Alexander became violent in temper, left the faith and joined a subgroup of the Ebionites. Alexander believed that Jesus was just a man with a sin nature, that there was no resurrection in the flesh, and that we can become sinless by obtaining the Christ consciousness. Hippolytus says Demas left the faith to become a priest of idols. [1]

This additional information provides more clarity about Alexander and that the forerunner to what has become known as the New Age movement (Christ consciousness), was very much alive and well not long after the ascension of Jesus. The Ebionites rejected the virgin birth of Jesus and claimed He *became* Messiah because He obeyed the Law perfectly, among other things. The early church fathers did what they could to educate average Christians on problems of the Ebionites because Satan wasted no time in creating havoc.

As noted previously, the first several centuries highlight the fact that the church was overwhelmingly Pre-Millennial and PreTrib. They also believed in a coming seven-year period of severe Tribulation leading to Great Tribulation during the second half (or second 3 and a half years). The early church

fathers were also largely *dispensational* in their understanding of Scripture. Dispensationalism simply means that "...there are periods of time when God worked differently with man. Most dispensationalists see seven ages of man. The ancient church fathers supported this belief."<sup>[2]</sup> The erroneous belief that Dispensationalism teaches another way of salvation has no basis in fact, yet this is what people cling to in order to defame Dispensationalism. Author Ken Johnson goes into detail quoting from a variety of early church fathers.

Pre-Millennialism espouses the idea that a future one-thousand year physical reign of Jesus over the entire earth will occur following the seven year Tribulation period. Essentially, this belief comes from **Daniel 5** and **Revelation 20**, as well as other areas of Scripture that allude to it.

By and large, the early church fathers were confident that the Rapture would occur and *then*, the Tribulation would begin. As Gnosticism and other errors began to creep into the visible Church, the Council of Constantinople (AD 381), allegedly condemned and abandoned Pre-Millennialism and began moving toward Amillennialism, even though church fathers had taken the time to warn their flocks against this error. It is fascinating that regardless of how well the ancient church fathers fought against error, many errors eventually became part and parcel of the official doctrine of the church by the third and fourth centuries. It makes sense that Satan would do whatever he could to create this problem.

The more I study the writings of the early church fathers, the more I realize they had their hands full educating those under their care about the many errors and problems facing the Church during their lives. Of course, we realize that Satan would not have remained inactive, but would have done everything he could to introduce error that would cause major division.

However, this was to be allowed by God Himself for His winnowing purposes. Johnson notes, "*If Premillennialism was so clearly taught, complete with eyewitness testimony and warnings that wolves would arise in the church and change these teachings, then how did the change take place?*"<sup>[3]</sup>

Ultimately, Johnson notes that the *schism of Nepos* was the driving factor. Johnson explains that the specific 1,000 years is only mentioned in the book of **Revelation**, the argument became how best to interpret the entire book of **Revelation**? This is in spite of the fact that one particular early church father - Papias - was taught directly by the apostle John and told him that "*Jesus would literally come back in the flesh and reign for one thousand years.*"<sup>[4]</sup> Yet today, we have the Amillennialist who believes that the 1,000 year reign of Jesus is a *spiritual* not *physical* reign as He rules from the heavens. They have no concept of the fact that God has *never* abdicated His throne over Creation. That Jesus will rule for 1,000 years *physically* will occur for several reasons, not least of which is to prove to all Creation that He and He alone is the rightful heir and ruler over this earth. His visible rule over the earth so that every eye will see Him will offer proof of that ownership.

Satan wasted no time in his attempts to dilute God's truth with error and too many jumped on that bandwagon. Yet, here we are in 2024 and many within the visible Church continue to embrace Pre-Millennialism, including the PreTrib Rapture. This is in spite of what the Roman Catholic Church managed to deep six and replace with their allegorical methods of interpreting prophesy in God's Word.

The main argument against the PreTrib Rapture is that it is a "new" doctrine. The people espousing that have clearly never read the early church fathers.

Satan raised up many enemies of the original apostles during the first several centuries. In the apostle John case, his most virulent was a man named Cerinthus who was deep into Gnosticism. While many to most within the visible Church at that time ignored the ramblings of that madman, he was successful in pushing some Christians to completely reject the book of **Revelation**. It wasn't until around AD 290 that the allegorical method of interpretation began to take off and essentially the writings of an Egyptian bishop named Nepos, in *Refutation of the Allegorists*. While the book no longer exists, it was quoted by others like Eusebius.

It was after the publication of that particular book that Amillennialism gained momentum. It also caused fear within some Christians that the book was actually an attempt to "*revive the heretical teaching of Cerinthus*" [5], which caused many other Christians to switch to Amillennialism while others began to ignore the book of **Revelation** completely. Tragically, we have too many Christians today who also avoid the book of **Revelation**, thinking it's way too difficult to comprehend so why bother? They have fallen prey to Satan's schemes.

In reality, Satan has been busy introducing error into Christianity since the inception of the Church. If we look back to the first several centuries, we can clearly not only what was believed and espoused by the early church fathers, but we can also see the beginnings of Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormonism, the present New Age movement and many other cults created through introduced error. It's all there in the writings of the early church fathers who diligently fought against the constant stream of errors being introduced.

Reading the early church fathers is something that every Christian should do because they literally spell out the accepted doctrines of the early Church, as taught to them by the original apostles. Read the Bible. Read the early church fathers.

[1] Ancient Church Fathers, Ken Johnson, ThD, p 17

[2] Ibid, p82

[3] Ibid, p99

[4] Ibid, p99

[5] Ibid, pp99-100