

The Face of Departure

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Dear Friends,

As part of his rich instructions to Timothy, Paul confronts specific errors, likely from the ancient gnostic camp, but he also gives us wise instruction regarding the face of error of any kind. Error focuses on the external and minimizes the internal. What a person eats, wears, etc. become the primary mark of his faith. For Paul, true faith begins in the heart and mind. The foundation of Biblical faith is not food that enters the mouth or clothing draped over the body or other more religious rituals. Jesus taught the same lesson by contrasting what goes in the mouth with what comes out of it.

Another mark of error is the obsessive manner in which proponents of error focus on it to the neglect of other truth, as well as their twisting Scriptures or other respected historical writings to support their obsession. To hear the proponent of error you would think that every page in the Bible teaches his ideas and little else. A few months ago I visited a nursery to buy some replacement plants for our backyard. The flowers are very attractive, both in their normal leaves and their blossoms. I had replanted them a couple of times over the years, but they simply didn't seem to grow well. I asked the owner of the nursery how to care for these plants. Did I need a special kind of fertilizer or soil supplement? He responded with a question. "What kind of food do you like? Do you prefer exactly the same thing all the time, or do you prefer variety?" He went on to recommend that I vary the fertilizer used to feed these plants and that I feed them small amounts of fertilizer often instead of large shock doses occasionally. His advice would work well with preachers. Vary your teaching to embrace all Biblical truth. Avoid "hobby-horse" emphasis on a few themes. Don't try to preach the whole gospel to the congregation in one message. Cultivate faithful attendance from your congregation, and feed them a varied spiritual diet in small digestible quantities. Any time a preacher tries to feed someone the whole gospel from A to Z in one sermon his only success will be to confuse his audience and obscure the very truth that he desires to communicate. If you are feeding a baby, you select the appropriate food, and you also select the appropriate utensil, a small baby spoon, not the largest table spoon in your kitchen.

This week's lesson from 1 Timothy warns us that error will surely invade the ranks of the faithful. False teachers and their errors shall form a regular part of the spiritual landscape. Our challenge from Scripture instructs us as to the manner in which we deal with it. The Biblical pattern includes a season of effort to correct and regain those in error. It also requires that we avoid the person who, after repeated efforts to recover him/her from the error, demonstrates an entrenched commitment to the error. Repetition at a point becomes harassment, and harassment will not recover someone; it will only polarize them in their error. Work to regain the person in error. Be loving and patient. By all means be Biblical in your reasoning. If after the person clearly understands your reasoning and refuses to listen or respond, quietly avoid the person. Perhaps the greatest

single error of historical Christianity in its efforts to resist error has been its inclination to trumpet opposition against error, often at the expense of pristine truth. Make no secret of the error, but don't make the error and your opposition of it the centerpiece of your preaching. "Preach the word," Paul urges this same young Timothy.

About fifteen years ago my wife and I were visiting some historical sites during a vacation. On the particular tour of the day we visited an old historical Roman Catholic Church building. We moved slowly through the various areas of the building, hearing the tour-guide's description of the historical background of each piece of furniture. As we stopped near one of several statues, this one of the Virgin Mary, I noticed a young woman from our tour group. She was standing in front of the statue, wringing her hands, tears streaming down her cheeks, as she looked up to the statue's face. That statue was nothing more than stone. This poor woman needed to be pouring her heart out to God, not to a stone statue. One of the Ten Commandments forbids the building and worship of images for worship. The statue didn't hear the woman, nor did it see her tears. The statue couldn't relieve her pain. Regardless of its form, error robs children of God of the joy and comfort of the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.

God bless, Joe Holder

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?Now the Spirit speaketh expressly, that in the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils; Speaking lies in hypocrisy; having their conscience seared with a hot iron; Forbidding to marry, and commanding to abstain from meats, which God hath created to be received with thanksgiving of them which believe and know the truth. For every creature of God is good, and nothing to be refused, if it be received with thanksgiving: For it is sanctified by the word of God and prayer. (1 Timothy 4:1-5)

Error in any field of thought will not simply go away if ignored. It must be confronted and rejected. Christians, both contemporary and historical, have not typically confronted error in a clearly Biblical manner. We must not commit one grievous error while attempting to uproot another. Before exploring acceptable methods of resisting error, Paul identifies the diversity of error that shall appear and its impact on those who fall under its deceptive spell.

"Now the Spirit speaketh expressly..." For Paul and other New Testament apostles and teachers, this term may find its parallel in the Old Testament prophetic introduction, "Thus saith God" or "Thus saith the Lord." The writer or speaker serves as

God's spokesperson, but the words are God's and not man's.

While "latter times" may refer to the final chapter in human history before God intervenes with final judgment and transformation, it appears that these errors have characterized the history of Christianity from the time that Paul wrote them. External ritual seems more convincing to the human mind than internal values and convictions. The problem should be obvious to us. External ritual and effort apart from internal foundations will always fail. It is a house built on quicksand.

What is the character of those who promote error? I suggest that Paul is dealing with the people who create error in their imagination and intentionally promote it among the innocent believers around them. Every deceived believer does not match this description, not even in Scripture, so we should avoid over-extending the passage beyond its intent.

First, they give "heed to seducing spirits." They turn their minds to evil spirits just as a ship's captain turns his ship into the harbor of his destination port. Having previously rejected Biblical truth and authority, they readily respond to the magnetic attraction of error's siren song. They become imitators of the deceptive demons who influence their false teaching. Rather than honoring the doctrine of Scripture that God has revealed, they pursue the doctrines of demons. How can a person fall for such obvious error? I answer the question with a question. How could Eve fall for the same kind of error in the Garden? Both she and the serpent readily add to and misinterpret God's simple law repeatedly during their conversation. Try talking with someone who is devoted to a severely strained view of Biblical teaching. You will quickly get the sense of dedication to error. Words are easily and regularly redefined to mean whatever this person wishes them to mean. Bible authority and reliable Christian history are avoided or so severely misinterpreted as to leave the faithful Bible student aghast at the unbridled imagination that leads this person's mind.

They speak lies in hypocrisy. This point forms a major part of the passage that convinces me that Paul is focusing on the instigators of false teaching, not those who are deceived. These people know that they are promoting error, but they do it anyway. Another passage refers to such people as both loving and making lies (Revelation 22:15). They love the idea of lying and getting away with it.

We typically interpret the reference to the conscience being seared with a hot iron as meaning that these people have lost their sense of conscience; that they are beyond feeling. This may be the case with such people, but the analogy fails the interpretation. The words indicate the administration of a branding iron, as cowboys in our own Western pioneer days would apply to their cattle before turning them loose on the open range. The brand signifies ownership. This idea matches the passage far better than the idea of lost sensitivity. These people have fallen under the influence of the demonic to such an extent that they appear to be "owned" by the wicked spirit that promotes their error. They become obsessed with their error. In fact a major evidence that a person has fallen prey to error is this precise behavior. They can hardly discuss any other Bible teaching. Every discussion will lead to this idea. They often

shamelessly misinterpret passages that have nothing to do with their ideas so as to make them appear to support their error. Obsession is never healthy, not even when a person is obsessed with a good thing.

Rather than limiting the face of error to the two issues mentioned, Paul seems to be giving us the flavor of error. The proponents of error will shamelessly ignore God's way of living in favor of their error.

1. Forbidding to marry. Whether applied to ministers (as with the Roman Catholic prohibition against priests being married), or in other circumstances, these people violate the fundamental premise of God's creating man and woman. An individual may occasionally choose to remain single. This choice does not violate any Biblical principle. The error that Paul confronts is quite different. It has to do with the forbidding of marriage. In a true Biblical marriage Jesus described the bond as having a divine origin, "whom God hath joined together" (Matthew 19:6; Mark 10:9). To forbid marriage as part of a false teaching is to reject God's joining of people in marriage.
2. They command people to abstain from meats. Paul adds further emphasis. God made various plants and animals for food consumption. Advocates of a vegetarian diet as a religious mandate are the focus of Paul's concern. (Again I have no problem with anyone for dietary, taste, or other personal reasons choosing to be a vegetarian. The problem appears when a false teacher imposes the rule on others under the guise that it is a divine rule to be followed.)

Both issues deal with imposing external demands on people without a Biblical, moral, or rational basis. This ritual religion is rules-based, not God-based. It measures religious accomplishment by the hurdles one jumps through, by the external rites one performs, instead of by the conforming of one's heart and conduct to God's heart. We know the heart of God, not by our own sentimental disposition, but by the clear teaching of Scripture.

Some commentators suggest that Paul was opposing ancient gnosticism that started to invade Christianity before the death of the apostles. Read Colossians or 1 John as clear examples. This may be the case for these ancient teachers rejected material things altogether. It stands to reason that they would reject food and put a low esteem on marriage. Although ancient gnosticism seems to have planted the seeds of the modern New Age religion (Yes, it is a religion.), the modern error has added Eastern Hinduism to ancient gnosticism as part of its teaching.

"For every creature of God is good, and nothing to be refused, if it be received with thanksgiving: For it is sanctified by the word of God and prayer." "Creature" can hardly be rationally interpreted as referring only to vegetarian plant life. No doubt most of us refrain from certain "creatures" on our tables because we dislike them as food, but Paul's point is that any animal may be eaten with thanksgiving to God as the giver of it for our needs. Given the clarity of this lesson, it seems a bit incredible that any

professing Christian group can object to meat in one's diet on supposed Biblical or religious grounds.

The major point that Paul seems to make here is that the proponents of error focus on the external and reject God's clear revelation in Scripture. On any given occasion in which a false teacher introduces error, it may take on a different form, but it will always substitute private opinion for God's way as revealed in Scripture. It will also in some way or another emphasize the external and the ritual at the expense of personal and individual devotion to God, Biblical faith that translates into faithfulness to God and to His revealed teaching in Scripture. They worship the creature more than the Creator (Romans 1:25).

Little Zion Primitive Baptist Church
16434 Woodruff
Bellflower, California

Worship service each Sunday 10:30 A. M.
Joseph
Holder

R.
Pastor