

False Teachers

David Koresh of Waco, Texas, infamy, self-proclaimed prophet and messiah of the Branch Davidians, was a charismatic leader who mixed a lethal brew of biblical teaching, sexual license, and apocalyptic predictions that erupted into a fiery and violent showdown with the government. The tragic result was one of the more dramatic examples of what happens when false teachers seduce sincere and vulnerable believers into “immorality,” and a denial of “Jesus Christ our only Sovereign and Lord” (Jude, v. 4).

Clearly, the people to whom Jude wrote represented believers under siege. Unlike the churches to which Peter’s letters were addressed, the attack was coming not from without but from within. Before we explore Jude’s words against false teachers, we need to see the precarious position of the churches in his day, and why their very survival was at stake. This will help us understand why he is so intolerant of those “shepherds who feed only themselves,” and who “boast about themselves and flatter others for their own advantage” (vv. 12, 16).

Most of the things we take for granted today in the life of the church simply did not exist in Jude’s day. There were no church buildings, worship teams, or pastoral staffs. There were no Bibles, as we know them. They may have had access to individual scrolls of the Hebrew Scriptures, but it is unlikely that they had access to many of the Christian writings that comprise our New Testament. All that they knew about Jesus they learned from Jude, and perhaps other Christian teachers.

Furthermore, the notion that there was one true “faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints” (v. 3) would have been very strange to them. In their world, populated with tens of thousands of differing ideas about spiritual things, open-minded tolerance prevailed. The idea of one true religion and one correct truth would have seemed absurd, even arrogant. Consequently, the “certain individuals” who had “secretly slipped in among them” would not have seen themselves as “godless,” much less as “blemishes at [their] love feasts” (v. 4, 12). To the contrary, they would have viewed themselves as liberal-minded teachers, blending Christian doctrine with the best of other religions toward the goal of a more enlightened believer. Consequently, with no New Testament or church constitution to guide them, it is easy to see how they could have been swept away by teachers who beguiled them with fresh revelations and seemingly exciting ideas.

We, too, live in a pluralistic society where every imaginable sort of religious doctrine, from the plausible to the bizarre, competes for our attention.

The Marks of False Teachers

False teachers, then as now, did not come into Christian congregations with warning placards hanging around their necks. To the

contrary, they must have impressed the people with their friendliness, sincerity, and theological erudition; otherwise, no one would have given them the time of day. It was precisely because of their winsome personalities and sensible ideas that they were able to draw believers into their net.

So, how do we recognize the wolf masquerading in sheep’s clothing? Jude gives us some clear markers. *First*, they are “godless” (v. 4b). Though they may look great, possess scintillating personalities, and talk a good line, there is a shallowness, a superficiality about their talk of God that sends up red flags.

Second, false teachers turn the marvelous “grace of our God into a license for immorality” (v. 4c). Since we are saved by grace and not by works, they say, it doesn’t really matter what we do. This line of rationalization has led many a believer to ruin.

Third, false teachers elevate themselves as final authorities, answerable to no one. Jude identifies them as “dreamers . . . [who] reject authority,” and who “speak abusively against whatever they do not understand” (vv. 8, 10). These false teachers grounded their moral license in special revelations. In a church culture enamored by the “independent ministry,” we need to be wary of charismatic leaders who keep their devotees spellbound with all sorts of dreams and visions, but who are accountable to no one.

Fourth, false teachers enrich themselves at the expense of their followers. “Woe to them,” says Jude, for “they have rushed for profit into Balaam’s error.” They are “shepherds who feed only themselves” (vv. 11-12). Balaam, a Moabite prophet, agreed to curse the Israelites for a reward. Being repeatedly warned against it by God, who even spoke to him through his donkey, Balaam blessed Israel instead of cursing them, and thus forfeited the reward. Nevertheless, there was larceny in his heart, and Jewish tradition has it that he did find a way to collect the money after all. In the end, Balaam met with an unhappy fate, for when the Israelites took vengeance against the Midianites, “they also killed Balaam son of Beor with the sword” (Numbers 31:8). In many ways Balaam represents the believer, who on the one hand is sensitive to the voice of God, but who on the other hand is slowly eaten up by lust and greed.

God’s Judgment upon False Teachers

What Jude gives us in these “wake-up call” verses is a long exposition of a short Pauline verse, “For the wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23a). *First*, Jude reminds them of what happened to the rebellious and unbelieving generation of Israelites that came out of Egypt: they were all “destroyed” except for Joshua and Caleb (v. 5). Those who “pollute their own bodies” and “reject authority” (v. 8) will likewise be judged the same way by God.

Second, Jude refers to the sin of angels “who did not keep their positions of authority but abandoned their own home” (v. 6). This refers to the story in Genesis 6:1-5, where “the sons of God saw that the daughters of men were beautiful, and they married any of them they chose” (6:2). Not only were giants born to the women but “every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time” (6:5). This produced a race of people so corrupt that God resolved to “wipe from the face of the earth the human race” (6:7). Those who commit immorality, and teach others to do the same, will suffer the same fate.

Third, Jude cites the well-known fiery destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah as a warning of what happened to those who “gave themselves up to sexual immorality and perversion.” *Fourth*, Jude quotes Enoch’s prophecy, found in the apocryphal First Book of Enoch, in which he warns Noah’s generation of God’s holy judgment upon “all the ungodly” and all their “ungodly acts,” along with “all the harsh words ungodly sinners have spoken against [the Lord]” (Jude 1:15).

This portrait of God’s judgment and destruction troubles some Christians. Jude, however, says, “these are the very things that destroy them” (v. 10b). This would be in accord with Paul’s portrayal of God’s wrath upon human godlessness and wickedness as “God gave them over” (Romans 1:24, 26, 28) to suffering the consequences of their own sin. It is God allowing the self-destructiveness intrinsic in sin to work itself out in the lives of those who reject the truth of God’s Word and chose to live as they choose to live, rather than living God’s way.

Either we say to God, “Your will be done,” or He says to us, “your will be done.” Our will, pursued to the end, can only lead to destruction, death, and eternal loss.

The Antidote to False Teachers

It is important to see that Jude does not fire up Christians to

become full-time “heresy-hunters,” nor does he incite them to conduct Inquisitions. Rather, he encourages them to keep their focus on Christ in several ways. *First*, he reminds them that they should not be surprised over the presence of “scoffers who will follow their own ungodly desires” (v. 18), because such attacks had been foretold by “the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ” (v. 17). *Second*, Jude encourages them to build “yourselves up in your most holy faith and pray in the Holy Spirit” (v. 20).

Third, Jude counsels believers to “keep yourselves in God’s love as you wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to bring you to eternal life” (v. 21). We must remember that nobody has a greater interest in bringing us to eternal life than God. We can rest in the confidence that He is always at work in us by “the Holy Spirit” to do everything necessary, without compromising our freedom, to bring us into eternal salvation. “If God be for us,” asks Paul, “who can be against us?” (Romans 8:31).

Fourth, Jude urges the church not to be harsh and judgmental toward those who have been drawn into the web of false teaching, but rather “Be merciful to those who doubt; save others by snatching them from the fire; to others show mercy, mixed with fear—hating even the clothing stained by corrupted flesh” (vv. 22-23). This is a cautionary word for those whose first response to real or perceived heretics is to demonize them and drive them from the church. If we lovingly and carefully reach out to them in mercy rather than contempt, there is always the possibility that their eyes will be opened and that they will repent and embrace the gospel.

Finally, Jude concludes with one of the most eloquent doxologies—an offering of praise that affirms God’s power to keep us “from falling and to present [us] before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy” (v. 24). When we resist false teaching and turn our eyes toward Jesus, we, too, will ascribe glory, majesty, power and authority to “the only God our Savior . . . Jesus Christ our Lord . . . now and forevermore! Amen” (v. 25).