

CHAPTER FIVE

Knowing Truth, Showing Love, Using Discernment

Although there is a consistent radio audience of cynics, nonbelievers, agnostics, pagan-worshippers, and atheists listening at anyone time to *Janet Parshall's America*, there are also many who call the show and identify themselves as born-again believers in Jesus Christ. It is a tremendous privilege to daily connect with the vast network of Christians who are walking the same pilgrimage with the Lord. Yet on this road of faith, there seems to be an ever-increasing number of pilgrims who sound utterly confused over doctrinal issues and deceptive teachings.

This particular problem harkens back to the classic story of the Christian pilgrim. It is a story of a follower of Jesus heading toward God's kingdom through the journey of life, but having to deal with spiritual tricksters and deceptive counterfeits on the way. Next to the Bible itself, the second most widely read Christian book of all time is John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*. Why has it been so popular? Perhaps because Bunyan was able to distill the great and profound issues of the Christian faith to the level of our common experience. He took the spiritual walk of the Christian and put skin on it. He took the heavenly pursuit of the believer and translated it into earthly terms we all could understand.

The Christian walk is portrayed in Bunyan's book as a literal walk over the ever-changing terrain of life—some smooth, much of it rugged and up hill. Yet one of the recurring dangers that the main character, appropriately named "Christian", encounters on his journey is the peril of deception. Toward the end of the story, Christian learns to look past the superficial appearance of places and people he meets on the way, and develops a sense of spiritual discernment that is more critical for believers now than ever before.

As a new follower of Christ, just starting out on his faith walk, Christian and his fellow traveler, Hopeful, soon find themselves discouraged by the rough ground underfoot. However, they discover what appears to be a shortcut to the Celestial City, their ultimate destination. Their decision to take the easy and inviting bypass is influenced by another pilgrim, "Vain-confidence," who is heading in the same direction. He is taking this shortcut which, by all appearances, will avoid the dangers and challenges of the proscribed road of faith. They follow his lead, not realizing that the decision-making of Vain-confidence is based on an over reliance in his own human reasoning. The three friends depart from the mapped-out pilgrim's route at that has been given to the beginning them at the beginning of the journey—a disastrous mistake that Christian should heed in the new millennium.

It is not long before the Christian threesome, after being deceived into departing from God's charred path, meet one catastrophe after another; Vain-confidence falls into a pit. Then Hopeful and Christian lose their way and make the mistake of sleeping on the grounds of a forbidding place called "Doubting Castle."

Bunyan powerfully portrays the consequences of the believer straying from the narrow, straight path of God's Word. Hopeful and Christian are caught unguarded by the hulking, hateful lord of this dismal place—the Giant Despair. He tosses them into a "dark dungeon, nasty and stinking to the spirit of these two men."

Having thus captured them, the Giant Despair entices them to end their miserable condition by suggesting they commit suicide. Thus trapped, Christian and Hopeful are the painful but accurate picture of believers who have been deceived by a world system that promises quick and appealing answers but, in the end, makes us slaves to doubt and despair. Their final escape from the wretched dungeon comes only when Christian remembers to use the key, which symbolizes the promises of God found in Scripture, that hangs around his neck. The key is used to unlock the prison door and represents the victory that belongs to the believer who turns to God's unchanging guarantees in his Word. Later in the journey, we see Christian with a more attuned sense of spiritual discernment. By the end of the story, he has gained spiritual maturity and has mastered the habit of relying on and skillfully using God's principles and promises.

Approaching the Celestial City, Christian encounters a fellow named Ignorance. Christian questions this man's basis for what he believes about the path he is taking and his motivations for taking it. Ignorance's answers, which are based entirely on inward feelings of the heart, sound embarrassingly modern. In fact, from time to time we all may have used this kind of faulty perspective on our Christian walk:

Christian: But why or by what art thou persuaded that thou hast left all for God and Heaven?

Ignorance: My heart tells me so.

Christian: The wise man says, he that trusts his own heart is a fool.

Ignorance: That is spoken of an evil heart, but mine is a good one.

Christian: But how dost thou prove that?

Ignorance: It comforts me in the hopes of Heaven.

Christian: That may be through its deceitfulness, for a man's heart may minister comfort to him in the hopes of that thing for which he yet has no ground to hope.

Ignorance: But my heart and life agree together, and therefore my hope is well grounded.

Christian: Who told thee that thy heart and life agree together?

Ignorance: My heart tells me so.

Christian: Ask my fellow if I be a thief; thy heart tells thee so! Except the Word of God beareth witness in this matter, other testimony is of no value.

Considering the army of spiritual counterfeits that are marching into the 21st century, it would be easy to conclude that this threat to the Church is a particularly modern problem. In fact, just the opposite is true. The early Church in the first century was faced with a considerable number of false teachers, heretical doctrines, and twisted interpretations of the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth.

The Apostle Paul recognized this as a serious problem. After planting the church at Ephesus during the course of his three years there, Paul addressed the critical threat from false teachers in his closing message to the elders of that church. Paul was setting off on a missionary journey that he believed would separate him from his Ephesian brothers and sisters for the rest of his life. His last Words to the church leadership reflect an intense

and emotional appeal. Baring his heart, Paul shared his greatest burdens for the assembly of young Christians.

He warned of the "savage wolves" that would seek to ravage the flock of believers in his absence. Even worse, he warned that these false teachers who would attempt to draw their own disciples out of the ranks of the church would not appear as outside agitators. Rather, they would come from within the fellowship of the church itself (Acts 20:29-30).

In his letter to Timothy, one of his disciples, the Apostle Paul warned that in "later times some will fall away from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons ..." (1Timothy 4:1). Even John, one of Jesus' original 12 disciples, admonished believers to "test the spirits" in order to avoid "false prophets" (1John 4:1). With these clear signposts for us in Scripture, we should know how to avoid getting caught in the clever snares of spiritual deception.

Knowing the Truth: The Central Role of Scripture

Deception-proofing our faith requires us to concentrate on the doctrines of the faith, and unfortunately to many of us this is a dry, confusing, and irrelevant pursuit. Studying the foundations be what we believe, and why we believe it, may seem to some to be lifeless and unrewarding. If we are looking for the emotional highs of the Christian walk, "theology" comes across as a real low. If we think that our greatest need is for a faith that will solve our newest set of problems or remedy the pain in our current life dilemma, then coming to grips with the meaning of sanctification or meditating on the relationship between grace and works may strike us as very much beside the point.

We would be well advised to remember the illustration of the train. The Christian faith is like one of those old-fashioned steam locomotives. The locomotive engine stands for *faith*. Our practice of faith, our personal belief in and commitment to Jesus Christ, is the dynamic force that energizes and directs our walk with God. The coal car represents facts—historical and doctrinal truths of Christianity—and they are the fuel, the energy behind what we believe. Last comes the caboose, which represents *feelings*. Our emotional life and physical circumstances are behind everything else because they cannot be relied upon to determine the direction of our faith. Instead, feelings are the byproducts of our spiritual walks. If this were not true, when we experience a sterile "desert" phase emotionally, the truth of Scripture would cease to be true. When we make our inward spiritual feelings the guide for all things, our Christian theology begins to look more like a roller-coaster ride than a pathway of faith. But God continues to be God regardless of how we feel about him. Our task is to focus on who He is, how he has communicated his truth to us, and what it means to be his children.

The famous evangelist and preacher Moody used to say that the best way to see if your measurement of spiritual doctrine is crooked is to line it up next to the "straight stick of truth." An architect cannot design a great building with a T-square that is crooked. The scientists at NASA could not plan a successful space launch if they could not project a straight trajectory for the rocket. How can we expect to stand firm against the lies of the great deceiver without a command of the truth that is "straight and narrow"? The Bible, the straight stick of God's revealed Word to us, must play the central role in our battle with deception.

This, is also important because false teachers can present heresy in a way that looks and sounds convincing to the biblically naive believer. Paul warned that such theological fakes can make very "confident assertions" even though they have no understanding for what they are talking about (1Timothy 1:7). Our primary role model in dealing with spiritual deception, as in everything else, must be the Lord Jesus. Notice how he handled deception when Satan pulled out all the stops in an effort to tempt him. In Matthew 4, Satan presents three temptations. All three were clever because they had a superficial kind of reasonableness to them. They were also particularly devious because his arguments were based on half-truths built on the misuse of Scripture.

Our Lord responded to all three arguments by reciting the Bible in context and rightly applied. But let us not forget the big picture: Jesus had been without food and water, and had been spending days in one of the harshest, hottest deserts in the world. Yet despite this, his response to the deceptive strategies of the enemy were not based on his comfort level, they were based on the Word of God, which is the only infallible guide when faced with lies cloaked in half-truths. God is not interested in our comfort; he is interested in our character.

We should also consider the Christians at Berea. Luke, the author of Acts, observed that they were "noble minded" because they received the gospel message with "great eagerness," and examined the Scriptures daily" in order to verify that this proclamation of Jesus as Messiah lined up with God's promises in the Old Testament. When Paul was warning the church at Ephesus of the danger of false teachers he had a simple but powerful remedy. After urging them to "be on the alert," he exhorted them to be committed to God's Word: "And now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified" (Acts 20:32).

We will need to understand the importance of the inerrancy, infallibility, and inspiration of the Bible in order to meet the challenges to our faith that will come at us in the next century, cleverly cloaked in reasonable-sounding half-truths. We must leave no room for compromise in accepting the fact that "all Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; that the man of God may be adequate, equipped, for every good work" (2Timothy 3:16-17).

Being armed with a right understanding of, and reliance on, the Word of God is the first step toward preparing for the new deceptions of the new millennium.

Seeking Spiritual Stability and Maturity

Placing too much of an emphasis on getting a "spiritual high" in the Christian walk creates other problems for believers in addition to making us gullible to the lies of the enemy. It also creates a willingness to respond to the invitation of almost all cults and false religions that promise peace, joy, happiness, prosperity, or excitement. Whatever it is that we are craving and feel we are lacking, these false teachers will claim they can provide it.

That does not mean Christianity has to be dour, dull, or joyless. Even though Christ was the "man of sorrows," and lived a life of perfect sacrifice, he lived a life of joy, and promised to share that joy with those who follow him.

It does mean, however, that while joy is the result of living out a true faith grounded in his truth, it is not the defining cause for what we believe, nor is it the motivation for us to believe. Rather, our motivation should issue forth from the amazing recognition that God really has spoken, and that Christianity, which is the content of what he has spoken, is true.

As we confront, in the coming millennium, the strategic deception of the three enemies of the Church—the world, the flesh, and the devil—we should prioritize an often ignored and yet fundamental aspect of the Christian walk: spiritual stability. Being grounded and rooted in what we believe, we will not be moved by the winds of change or enchanted by the newest religious fad.

The Christians at Colossae were praised for the "stability" of their faith in Christ. Paul undoubtedly singled out this aspect of their faith for special recognition because of the great onslaught of false philosophies and religious onslaught that were bombarding the Church in that—area of what today is modern Turkey.

The chief heresy involved variations of Gnosticism¹. This religious philosophy has been difficult to define precisely, but it basically claimed to possess secret and mystical truths about God, placed Jesus on a continuum along with all of the prophets, and led to acts of self-denial as a means of becoming one with the divine. The Gnostics recognized non-canonical writings as inspired the so-called "Gnostic gospels", and their influence would continue to plague the Christian Church for centuries.

In order to resist the deceptive teachings of this philosophy, believers needed to cultivate the commitment to a faith that was stable and rooted in the eternal, unchanging truths of Scripture.

¹ JESUS CHRIST:—The Gnostic gospels did not have a dispensation. What truths in it does not become updated for current generations without a dispensation. There are other gospels not in the King James version of the Bible, they did not have a dispensation, neither the lost texts and dead sea scrolls have a dispensation.

Ascended Masters can be in the physical but they are in the ascended state. My life spoken of, that I lived until 80 years old is likewise not something that is of value for the Christian dispensation, and it is best to end the life of Jesus at the ascension, and thereafter he is the ascended master.

SANAT KUMARA: To introduce the years after Jesus' ascension has diluted the message of the savior and messiah. It would be best that these years not be understood but of the Ascended Master Jesus Christ. He appeared to the apostles in the physical at the supper at Emmaus and Jerusalem, he taught for many years after his ascension in the physical. But it is not to be speculated that he thereafter had children and a family, that has since made Jesus' message and teaching subservient to the human equation when he came with a mission that began with a tenfold portion of John the Baptist's mantle. This mission cannot even be equated with other ascension missions of others. Students are requested to only speak of this teaching as if they spoke of the Ascended Master Jesus Christ today appearing to the disciples of Christ not abstracted and consumed of world matters.

About 100 miles from Colossae was the church at Ephesus. They were likely to have faced the same heresy. And, like the church at Colossae, the Ephesian believers were urged by Paul to cultivate the maturity and stability of their faith: "As a result, we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves, and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming" (Ephesians 4:14).

What we need to establish is a Christian walk that will endure Through a lifetime of service to the Lord and not create a spiritual thirst for more gimmicks, bells, and whistles.

The Reality of False Teachers

Most of us never feel comfortable when we find ourselves accused of "judging" others who are talking about the things of God. There is a good reason for that. We are all sinners. We feel there is nothing quite so dishonest as a hypocrite who denounces others while practicing the very same sin. A stream of Hollywood films over the decades has developed the role of the religious hypocrite into a special art form.

Yet there is a risk that the current culture can intimidate us into silence about the differences between those who speak God's Word and those who speak man's word but claim it is from God. To tell the difference is not hypocrisy; it is simply applying God's Slide rule to the modern formulas of distortion. If those formulas are found wanting, It is not our Judgment that condemns them, it is God's Scripture is very clear about the fact that we must expect false teachers. It is also clear about some of the major warning signs of religious charlatans.

False teachers very often lack the spiritual stability that Christians are to cultivate. The book of Jude was written by a man who identifies himself as the brother of James, the leader of the Jerusalem church. He was, therefore, also the half-brother of Jesus. Jude's indictment of false religious teachers is one of the most: forceful in all of the Bible. We are told that false teachers are "carried along by winds" and are like "wandering stars" (Jude 12,13). They lack grounding in the unchanging truth of God, yet they give the appearance of being as fixed as the stars in the sky! If we navigate our ship of faith by looking to moving and untrustworthy points of light, no matter how bright and fixed they may look, we will end up crashing on their hidden reefs.

The teachings of false prophets are "worldly-minded," according to Jude, rather than based on God's heavenly view of the inadequacy of the world. False teachers can also be detected by their lack of spiritual growth. They are "autumn trees without fruit" in contrast to believers who manifest the fruit of the Spirit. In Jude, such teachers are likened to Cain, Balaam and Korah. All three of those men give us examples of those who advocated false religions and the consequences of their actions.

Cain insisted on his own type of religious sacrifice. When it was rejected by God, Cain gave into self-will instead of conforming his actions to the desires of God. He ignored the clear warnings from God that sin was "crouching by the door."

Balaam was a prophet-for-hire whose main concern was collecting his wages rather than dispensing God's truth, and Korah rejected the spiritual leadership established by God through his ordained servants and tried to launch a rebellion among God's people (Numbers 16:1-33). Korah is the classic form of a false spiritual leader who goes among the

people and "causes divisions." Whether we want to admit it or not, as the spiritual confusion of our age increases, false teachers will abound.

Showing love: A Positive Alternative

Being able to recognize false teachers and deceptive doctrines is critical. But if all we have is the ability to target the spiritual liar without truth arrows, it will not be enough. We have to go to the next step. Doctrine without love is as dead as the bones in a forgotten and weed-infested cemetery.

The world, which has a woeful ignorance of the message of the Bible, loves to quote 1Corinthians 13, the famous section on love. We have heard it preached and proclaimed by liberals in a number of situations, perhaps because it can be made to sound nonjudgmental and fuzzy and warm. But there is nothing "fuzzy and warm" about 1Corinthians 13.

In fact, the subject of love that we are given in that chapter is downright revolutionary. It is an idea that could topple tyrannies, change the hearts of world leaders and alter the course of history. In fact, it did just that in the ministry of Christ, in the lives of his disciples and in the history of the Christian Church. This kind of love was no mere cozy emotional feeling. The kind of love staked out through the history of the Church was tough, unyielding, sacrificial, and focused on the truth of Christ. This kind of love "bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things" (1Corinthians 13:7).

Love is also practical when it comes to doctrinal truth. The men and women who serve in our churches, Sunday school programs, and church ministries, and who faithfully share the gospel of Jesus Christ, deserve the real-life expression of our love and our support. If they have stood for the truth of God's Word, they need your encouragement. The pastor who faithfully lays down the straight stick of God's truth needs to hear the expression of our appreciation, not just our complaints that the Sunday service is too long or the air-conditioning is set too high. If the Church has placed a high premium on truth, have we, in love for the Church, placed a high premium on financial giving to it?

Our prayer life should reflect this attitude of love. We must pray for and support Bible schools and seminaries that will continue to train Christian leaders who will teach the Bible without apology or compromise in the coming age. We need to pray for such leaders because we may well be heading into an age that will be quicker than ever to avoid, and apologize for, the often uncomfortable but always life-changing message of Jesus Christ.

This kind of love should lead us to rejoice. We have been called into a time when the land around us is spiritually impoverished. But the Bible tells us that as disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ we are bearers of a great treasure: We have been entrusted with the treasure of the gospel of good news.

What a great privilege to share that immense and eternal wealth whenever and wherever we can. What an honor to bear his love, in our bodies and through our lives, for his kingdom!