Falling Away Through False Teaching

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In a race, the organiser doesn't hand out prizes to those leading at the half-way mark. You have to finish the race to receive the prize. Tragically, we all know some who seem to be running well but then drift into indifference or completely shipwreck their faith. The Bible gives us a number of warnings and examples of what causes Christians to fall away, such as persecution (Matthew 13:21,24:9-10), the love of money (1 Timothy 6:10), the love of this world (2 Timothy 4:10) and sinful habits (Hebrews 3:12-13, 12:15-16). But the most deceptive one involves false teaching.

The Deception of False Teaching

False teaching is possibly the most dangerous weapon in the devil's arsenal aimed at Christians, because it seems so spiritual. Paul tells us that believers will leave the faith and devote themselves to 'deceitful spirits and teachings of demons' (1 Timothy 4:1). In other words, those who follow these kinds of teachings are deceived into thinking they are true and good. False doctrines are like strong winds and waves (Ephesians 4:14) that can cause us to be tossed into wrong thinking and ultimately sinful living.

How to Recognise a False Teacher

The question we must ask, then, is how do we recognise a false teacher? Jesus answers this for us in Matthew 7:15-17 in dealing with false prophets. Christ explains that 'they come to you in sheep's clothing… but are ravenous wolves'. So they look like sheep and speak like sheep – they outwardly confess to following Christ as their God, yet by nature are self-serving. This is why false teaching is difficult to discern, especially for an immature believer, since these teachers can use words from the Bible but cause it to mean something very different to historic, orthodox truth.

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Before we go any further, let me add that my aim is not to sniff out every false word or teaching in the church today. Even the best and godliest teachers make mistakes and miss it from time to time. After all, we do see in part and know in part. What this article confronts is the kind of teacher and teaching that at its very foundation is corrupted and faulty.

1) Teachers Who Give License

Jesus tells us how to discern these wolfish teachers: 'you will recognise them by their fruits' (Matthew 7:16). In other words, we can recognise them as false by their inner motives and ultimately the way they live – living in a way contrary to the fruit of the Spirit. Fruit, however, does take time to manifest, so it is over a period of time that we see the results of their teaching in others – a love of this world, a love of money and a lack of holiness.

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False teachers essentially give people a license to sin and blur the boundaries of right and wrong. This is what Jesus possibly means when He speaks about the love of many growing cold because of lawlessness. (Matthew 24:11-13)

The allure of this kind of false teaching is that it offers you a kind of freedom and endorses living in a way that makes you feel good. It is centered on you rather than on the glory of Christ. (1 Timothy 4:3-4)

2) Teachers Who Give Rules

Another sign of false teaching leading some to fall away is seen in the kind of Christian teacher

who puts external rules on people that God doesn't. Paul actually calls this 'the teachings of demons' causing some to leave the faith. (1 Timothy 4:1-3)

> It puts Christians back under the Old Testament law and ends up rejecting the heart of the gospel

Paul highlighting this kind of teaching as demonic is interesting, because it focuses not on license but on a form of legalism. This is why the so-called 'Hebrew Roots Movement' is so concerning and dangerous. It puts Christians back under the Old Testament law and ends up rejecting the heart of the gospel (see Colossians 2:16-23). The allure of this kind of false teaching is that it sounds and looks so spiritual and wise, but it doesn't make much of the cross of Christ and leads you away from the simplicity of devotion to Jesus.

Sound Teaching

Here are some questions that could help to measure the health of what is being taught:

- Does this teaching lead me to **trust and honour Jesus more**?
- Does it lead me **away from self**-trust, self-confidence and making much of me?
- Does this teaching lead me to say **no to sinful habits**?
- Does this teaching enable me to **love and serve others**?
- Is it based on the **clear reading of Scripture**?
- Does it cause me to **love and commit to the church**?

If you can answer 'yes' to these, there is a good chance that the teaching is sound.

Be Careful That You Don't Fall

Now with all these warnings that God gives us, you might say, 'This will never happen to me!' But Paul warns us, 'So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!' (1 Corinthians 10:12 NIV) Naivety and self-confidence is a sure way to set yourself up for a fall, but if our confidence is in God to keep us, we can finish strong.

Over the years, as I've grown to know and love the Lord more, I've also grown to see I'm prone

to drift, to grow cold and lose sight of the wonderful promises of God. But thank God he promises to complete the work he has begun in us! The Lord promises to keep us but we need to remain in Him, loving Him, trusting Him, and rooted within a healthy, local church with godly leaders.

Related Resources:

- The Role of Reason
- Deception & Compromise
- Counterfeit Christianity
- Signs of Immaturity
- The War on Culture

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How to Test False Prophets

Kissing Jesus Goodbye

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