

TEXARKANA REFORMED BAPTIST CHURCH

SERIES TITLE: DEUT 13:1-3 | SERMON TITLE: THE PROBLEM OF HERESY

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Jesus gave us a mission; that mission is to make disciples of all the nations. In order to do this we have to teach the nations. And here we have a problem. We make disciples by teaching people the truth. The problem is that there are so many people out there teaching, not the truth, but falsehood, or heresy ("heresy" refers to teaching which claims to be true and Christian but which is seriously wrong, to the point of endangering the soul of one who believes it).

This makes teaching the truth difficult since The Truth isn't the only game in town; if people want, they can go to a church down the street and get as much false teaching as they like. The sheer volume and accessibility of false teaching seems to retard the process of teaching truth to the nations.

And this is frustrating. We'd like to be able to get our job done without so much interference. We might wonder why there is so much false teaching; if God is good and powerful, why doesn't he stop it? Is it out of his control? If not, why does he allow it to continue?

The Bible has answers for us. Here they are: First, God is in control of false teachers, and false teaching, and those who believe it, and all the consequences. Second, God's purpose in false teaching and heresy is to punish sinners and purify his church. Let me start by proving God is in control of false teaching, and then I'll show you more about his purpose in heresy and false teaching.

God Controls and Uses Heresy

Deuteronomy 13:1-3 "If a prophet or a dreamer of dreams arises among you and gives you a sign or a wonder, ² and the sign or wonder that he tells you comes to pass, and if he says, 'Let us go after other gods,' which you have not known, 'and let us serve them,' ³ you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams. For the LORD your God is testing you, to know whether you love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul.

Here the Scripture prepares Israel for what to do at the coming of a false prophet. The important point for our purpose is in v3, where the coming of the false prophet is interpreted as God testing Israel. The Scripture sees false prophets as, in a sense, from God, for the purpose of testing

whether his people love Him or not. This shows both that the false prophet is not outside of God's control, and that God has a purpose in his coming and preaching of falsehood.

1 Kings 22:19-22 ¹⁹ And Micaiah said, "Therefore hear the word of the LORD: I saw the LORD sitting on his throne, and all the host of heaven standing beside him on his right hand and on his left; ²⁰ and the LORD said, 'Who will entice Ahab, that he may go up and fall at Ramoth-gilead?' And one said one thing, and another said another. ²¹ Then a spirit came forward and stood before the LORD, saying, 'I will entice him.' ²² And the LORD said to him, 'By what means?' And he said, 'I will go out, and will be a lying spirit in the mouth of all his prophets.' And he said, 'You are to entice him, and you shall succeed; go out and do so.'

In this passage Ahab, a wicked king of Israel, has been consulting his false prophets about whether he should go to war. All of them have encouraged him and promised victory. When Ahab consults a true prophet, Micaiah, the message is different; Micaiah says Ahab will be defeated and then he reveals a scene in the heavenly throne room. In the throne room there are numerous spirits standing before God and God asks them who will cause Ahab to be destroyed. A lying spirit responds with the suggestion that he fill the mouths of Ahab's prophets with a lie. God approves this plan and sends the lying spirit to succeed. We see God's control over false prophets, and their falsehood, and those like Ahab who believe the falsehood and suffer for it.

2 Thessalonians 2:9-12 ⁹ The coming of the lawless one is by the activity of Satan with all power and false signs and wonders, ¹⁰ and with all wicked deception for those who are perishing, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. ¹¹ Therefore God sends them a strong delusion, so that they may believe what is false, ¹² in order that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness.

Paul describes here the coming of an evil man under the power of Satan, who comes to oppose God and the truth. The important point is v11, where Paul says God himself will aid the evil man, and Satan, by sending strong delusion upon those who do not believe the truth (of the Gospel, presumably) and who love unrighteousness. This strong delusion causes these people to believe the falsehood and perish. This doesn't mean God is in partnership with Satan, but that God and Satan sometimes agree in bringing about a certain event, though for different purposes. Satan's purpose is to destroy men because he hates them and loves evil; God's purpose is to righteously punish those who refused to live according to his truth and holiness. But the point here is that God is in control of the deception believed by the wicked men in this text.

God's Purpose in Heresy

We saw already that one of God's purposes in allowing and controlling false teaching in the world is to punish sinners. There is another important purpose we need to see from two NT passages:

1 Corinthians 11:19 ¹⁹ for there must be factions among you in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognized.

Here Paul is dealing with the Corinthian church, which was troubled by divisions. Paul makes an important statement here which shows, first, that churches must experience divisions, and second, that the purpose of divisions is to show who among the church are really God's people.

1 John 2:19 ¹⁹ They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us.

John writes to his churches on an issue which is a little different from Corinth above. In John's case, his church has experienced the departure of men who used to be members in good standing, who have come to embrace false teachings about Jesus and the Christian life. First John explains that their departure from the true church reveals that they were not true Christians. Second, John describes the situation in terms of a purpose: The purpose of these men departing was that it would be shown they were not genuine Christians, but imposters. Notice the similarity to Paul's comment above.

The takeaway here is that church divisions and the false teachings which cause them are a necessary feature of the mission of Jesus. God himself seems to be using them in order to continually purify his church, to make a distinction between the clean (Christians) and the unclean (imposters). This is important since the church draws those who believe themselves to be born again, or who make others believe so, and yet they are not genuine. To the degree that a church becomes filled with these people it ceases to be a church. In order for the church to remain a true church and fulfill its mission, it must continually be purged of such people. God uses heresy and church divisions to accomplish this task. We might envision heresy as a screen through which God causes people to pass. Those who are genuine pass through; those who are false are caught in the net of the screen.

Application

First, Christians ought to have peace despite the volume and proliferation of false teaching. It is true that there are many more false or mistaken teachers than true and competent ones. But in light of the above truth, Christians can rest peacefully in God, knowing this, too, is an important part of his plan in order to punish sinners and purify his church. Christians should not get too worked up about false teaching and heresy. There is a place for grief and anger, of course, such as Paul showed in his Galatian letter. But I suggest grief and anger ought not to be the normal

condition of the Christian; rather peace, calm, content and trust that God is working out his purposes even in false teaching.

Second, since heresy and divisions must occur, Christians ought to expect these things and be ready for them. We can pray ahead of time God would protect his universal church, and restrain false teaching as much as possible. Then when false teaching arises, we can pray God would protect his true people and remove all imposters through the false teaching.

Third, we should see false teaching as a test from God, both of our love for Scripture and our love for personal righteousness. False teaching tempts us in both areas, that is, it tempts us in our commitment to truth and righteousness. We should know that if we let ourselves drift from love of the truth and love of holiness we will be more susceptible to false teaching.

Fourth, we must guard against an unhealthy interest in false teaching. Paul warns Timothy about wasting words on useless speculations and worthless arguments. Some people have a real fascination with the absurd, the perverted, the corrupt, the heretical; this is a bad thing. Christians should love truth, not error. They should seek to immerse their minds in truth, not error. Of course we have some duty to understand what errors we're facing, but only as far as necessary to do the job. We should handle error like we handle a poisonous snake: Only as much as absolutely necessary.

Fifth, and last, heresy and error flow from the evil condition of man. A perfect man would never be enticed with error, nor find it attractive. We are not perfect men; not yet, anyway. What this means is that the evil within man makes him very susceptible to heresy and error. What to do? Christ. If our evil condition leaves us vulnerable to error than the only real solution is to believe in Christ for salvation.

Christ is our Wisdom; in Him we find true Wisdom from God to replace the false, worldly wisdom we used to believe, which is really error. Christ is our righteousness; he gives us right standing before God, washing away our guilt from the countless errors we have believed. Christ is our sanctification; he is washing us from the pollution of our fallen nature which is attracted by error. And he is our glorification; in Jesus we will one day be made wholly invincible to error of any kind. The day is coming for those in Christ when heresy, error, and false teaching will never touch us again, nor ever be heard again anymore. As always, the real solution is faith in Christ.