

Beware Counterfeit Spirituality

In May of 2005, filmmaker Alex Matter announced that, among his family's possessions on Long Island, he had discovered 32 paintings from his deceased father's friend, Jackson Pollock. The collection's value was thought to be near \$40 million. Alex had the collection authenticated by a well-known Pollock scholar, Ellen Landau. Then he went a step further, offering to let several other outside experts study the paintings more closely.

Among the investigators was James Martin, whose company specializes in using new technology to study art. Martin's Raman Microscope spotted evidence invisible to Ellen Landau's highly trained eye. He discovered that five of the paintings included pigments that didn't exist in 1949 when the paintings allegedly were created.

Most interesting of all, this evidence did not convince Alex Matter. He said, "I trust what my dad wrote on the package." He said further that he didn't dispute the microscopes findings, but he doubted that the patent records of the years the paint was available must be flawed.¹

We come now in Peter's last letter to words of warning. He's warning the believers in Jesus Christ about a very old problem: purveyors of counterfeit spirituality. Trusting a forged piece of art will cost you some money. Trusting a forged spirituality could cost you your soul! We need to pay close attention to Peter's warning. First, he diagnoses the disease. Then he describes the prognosis. And finally, he dispenses the remedy. So let's begin by seeing his...

I. Diagnosis of the Disease

In chapter one, Peter had been talking about the validity of the Word of God based partially on the confirming evidence of Old Testament prophecy. Now, in chapter two he says:

But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing upon themselves swift destruction. (2 Peter 2:1)

There are three distinguishing marks of a false prophet or false teacher.² First, in Deut. 13 and 28 God says that if a prophet ever predicts something and it doesn't come to pass, he's a fake. Don't listen to them and don't worry about them. They must be 100% correct. However, is it possible for a false prophet to sometimes get it right? Yes! In Deut. 13 again, God acknowledges that what they predict might sometimes come to pass. Then God says:

"If a prophet... gives you a sign or a wonder, and the sign or wonder that he tells you comes to pass, and if he says, 'Let us go after other gods,' ...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." (Deut. 13:1-3)

A prophecy coming true isn't the final seal of its authenticity.

The second mark of a false prophet or false teacher is that they will try to persuade you to pursue other gods. Now, this is more tricky than it sounds. For example, a classic trick of false teachers and false religions is to use the same names for God as we use, but to infuse them with new meanings. Warren Wiersbe says, "They use the same vocabulary but a different dictionary."

For example, both Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses say they believe Jesus is the Son of God. However, what Mormons mean by that is that Jesus is the Son of God as we are sons and

daughters because they believe God has a body like us. In fact, they believe we can be gods like Him! They also believe that Satan is Jesus' brother – but that's another story.

Jehovah's Witnesses believe Jesus is "a" son of God, not "the" Son of God. Actually, they believe that Jesus is Michael the archangel reincarnated in the flesh (who knew?). They also don't believe that Jesus was resurrected but that a new Jesus was created three days after the old Jesus died.

So, do you see how this works? It's not enough to ask someone from a cult or other religion if he believes in Jesus. You have to ask: which Jesus do you believe in? And it's not just that they have an unbiblical definition of Jesus. They also have different definitions of other Bible words like salvation, heaven, hell, sin, baptism and authority of Scripture. The bottom line is this: false teachers and false religions will try to persuade you to worship a god that does not fit the definition of the God of the Christian Bible.

The **third** mark of a false teacher is that their teaching will contradict the Word of God. Now, this necessitates an agreement upon what constitutes the Word of God. Here's as simple a definition as I can offer. It's Jesus' definition. In Matt. 5 He said:

"Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets (that's the Old Testament); I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished." (Matt. 5:17-18)

And in Rev. 22, the last chapter of the last book to be written of the New Testament, Jesus said:

I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book, and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book. (Rev. 22:18-19)

So, that pretty much closes the New Testament, not allowing for any "new" revelations to be added. For me, Jesus defined the canon of Scripture. It's what we have today. Anyone that edits this or disregards this and teaches others to do the same, is a false teacher.

Next, Peter...

II. Describes the Prognosis (for those who follow the deception of false teachers.)

Beginning at verse two, Peter says: (2 Peter 2:2-3)

And many will follow their sensuality, and because of them the way of truth will be blasphemed. And in their greed they will exploit you with false words...

First, Peter points out that '*many will follow.*' Does that surprise you? It shouldn't. As people, we are so easily deceived. We'd like to think we aren't, but we are! Did you hear about the fake web site that a guy set up to show new iPhone 7 owners how to drill a hole in their phones to plug their earbuds into because Apple "forgot" to put in the receptacle? And people were doing it!! We're easily deceived. '*...many will follow...*'

The motivation of many false teachers is identified by Peter as being "sensuality" or greed, sex or money, or all of these. When Christian preachers are arrested for illicit sex or illegal financial dealings, friends, stop listening to them! What they're teaching is false and unhealthy!

And then he adds that it's about exploitation. The literal Greek says it this way:

*...with fabricated words, they will make merchandise of you...*³

You're just a dollar sign to them. Friends, we're easily deceived. Even within churches, people can be victimized. That's why we've put in place some preventative measures here at Valley to address these issues and hopefully prevent these problems. You'll notice that every office where

counseling is done has a window in the door. We also have policies regarding how money is raised or even solicited. Pastors or staff can't raise money on their own or for their own ministry. Why? Because we want to stay a thousand miles away from any form of exploitation. We take seriously Peter's warning.

But the second part of his prognosis describes how God will deal with the exploiters. He gives three historical examples: the incarceration of rebellious angels, the judgment of Noah's flood, and the judgment of Sodom and Gomorrah. Are you familiar with each of these?

Let's review: first Noah and the ark. What was the reason for the flood? Gen. 6:11-12:
Now the earth was corrupt in God's sight, and the earth was filled with violence... for all flesh had corrupted their way on the earth.

"...*the earth was corrupt in God's sight...*" That's the issue, isn't it? We don't make the rules. We don't make the definitions. God is the definition of what is right and good. If what you believe and do isn't synced with who God is and what He does and what He defines as right and good, then your ways are corrupt. And where will that lead? To violence.

Second, (actually first on Peter's list) is this murky story of the rebellious angels who sinned and because of that were:

...cast... into hell and committed to chains of gloomy darkness to be kept until the judgment... (2 Peter 2:4)

Some of you are thinking, "Wait! Where is that talked about in the Bible?" Well, in Isaiah 14 and Rev. 12. Many conservative commentators believe Isaiah 14:12-15 is the description of Satan's expulsion from heaven and Rev. 12:4 a description of as many as 1/3 of the angels of heaven being expelled with him. Isaiah 14:15 says:

**But you are brought down to Sheol,
to the far reaches of the pit.** (Is. 14:15)

Satan is still free to roam and recruit more followers on this earth, but his future home will be the deepest pit in hell, where already, according to Peter, many dark angels live.

The third historical example of how God dealt with exploiters is the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. This story used to be common knowledge among Christians but today it's seldom spoken of, probably because of its condemnation of homosexual behavior, identifying it as sin and a target for God's judgment. If you're not familiar with that story, the people in both Sodom and Gomorrah were practicing various forms of what Peter here calls '*lawless deeds*' but what Jude called '*sexual immorality*' and '*unnatural desire.*' The original story is told in Genesis 19 and clearly identifies these '*lawless deeds*' as homosexual behavior. Peter reminds the churches that God... (2 Pet. 2:6)

...by turning the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah to ashes... condemned them to extinction, making them an example of what is going to happen to the ungodly...

Now, these are not pleasant stories. Why is Peter reminding us of them? Because he doesn't want us to forget where the road of sin leads. In Noah and Sodom and Gomorrah's case, the judgment came quickly, in this life. In Satan's case, it will come in the afterlife. But unless we turn from our sin, unless we repent and reject our sin and accept His forgiveness, we'll face judgment. There is just not going to be any exception. Trying to convince ourselves that God's law either doesn't apply to us or doesn't really mean what it says, isn't going to work. God is the Maker of the rules and the Definer of what is good or evil. Not us. We must repent.

And if we do, then what? That's what Peter shows us here as well. He's shown us the Diagnosis of the Disease, he's Described the Prognosis, where it leads and now, he shows us...

III. The Dispensing of the Remedy

Technically, the judgment that Peter is describing is what the false teachers will receive for their aiding and abetting the Enemy of God. Those who twist or edit or carelessly handle the Word of God will face judgment.

...Their condemnation from long ago is not idle, and their destruction is not asleep.
(2 Peter 2:3b)

It's an enormous privilege to teach the Word of God, but handle it 'rightly' with holy fear!

However, there's also huge reward for those who stand for God even in dark times. Peter says in verse 5 that God '*preserved Noah, a herald of righteousness, with seven others...*' who were on the ark with him. Then he goes into this extended description of how God rescued Lot, Abraham's nephew, who was living in Sodom and Gomorrah. He calls Lot '*righteous*' three times. Actually, I think maybe Peter was trying to convince himself that Lot was righteous because his decision-making wasn't really a sterling example of righteous wisdom.

You see, Abraham took his nephew Lot with him when he left Ur of the Chaldees, modern day Iraq. When he spent some time in Egypt, Lot went too, but going to Egypt for Lot was like a farm boy going to Las Vegas. He had a great education in the wrong school. When he and Abraham returned to Palestine, their flocks were too big to graze close to each other, so Abraham gave Lot the chance to choose where he would go. Gen. 13:10 says that Lot chose the area that was most '*like the land of Egypt.*' Lot chose the area that included Sodom. God tried to move him out with a war, but after the war - Lot went right back to Sodom.

So, Lot ended up being '*rescued,*' as Peter put it, but at a great price. He had four daughters, two of whom married men of Sodom. When the angel gave warning of the coming destruction, Lot's two married daughters and their husbands laughed at him. On their way out of town, Lot's wife ignored the instruction of the angel and longingly looked back. And she died, as the angel said she would if she looked back. So, Lot was rescued but half of his family died, because it wasn't just that they lived in Sodom, but that Sodom had come to live in them.

So, where are you living these days? I don't mean geographically. I mean emotionally, spiritually. Where does your heart live? Abraham lived geographically near Hebron, about 30 miles from Sodom. But his heart was with the LORD and with his nephew in Sodom. God informed Abraham that he was going to destroy Sodom for its out-of-control sexual wickedness. So, Abraham began to pray. He didn't go into Sodom. He stayed outside of Sodom and prayed. He negotiated with the Lord, pleading with Him to rescue his nephew and his family, which God did by sending two angels who offered a way to safety. So, Abraham, living outside of Sodom, but praying for Sodom, had a more positive influence on Sodom than his nephew who was living in Sodom but, as far as we know, wasn't praying for anyone!

Which leads me to point out that our B.L.E.S.S. strategy is a biblical strategy.

[Put up B.L.E.S.S. slide]

Do you see it? Abraham was living this out. He Began with Prayer for his nephew. But he also Listened to him and Ate with him and he certainly Served him by taking him from Iraq to Palestine. And over and over and over again, Abraham shared his life story with Lot, often including Lot in writing that story! And why did Abraham beg God not to destroy Sodom? These were nasty people!! He did that because God was in his heart and Lot and his family were in his heart.

The credit card commercial on TV asks the quintessential American question, "What's in YOUR wallet?" Have our wallets become the center of our being now? I hear Peter ask another question, "Who's in YOUR heart?" First of all, is the loving God of Genesis 18 there? He told

Abraham that He would cancel the judgment on Sodom if there were just five righteous people in the whole city. Unfortunately, there were only four. But is that gracious God in your heart?

And secondly, are there sinners, Sodomizers, rebels shaking their fists at God, are any of those people in your heart? I'm talking about lost people, facing judgment from God and not even aware of it but, because you are praying, pleading with God to "stay His hand" some might be saved. Who cares what's in your wallet! I want to know, Who's in your heart?

Some of us aren't as fortunate as Lot, who had a choice of where he could live. Some of us must live in Sodom. Others of us have been sent by God to Sodom. It's not time to leave just yet. After reminding us of the cultural cesspool that Noah and Lot lived in, Peter assures us with these final words:

...the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trials... (2 Peter 2:9)

Peter's got a message for Christians: "Beware Counterfeit Spirituality." And God's got a message for Satan and his exploiting counterfeiters, "Beware Christians who have Me and a sinner in their heart." So, whether you're in Sodom or the suburbs of Sodom or miles and miles away, follow Abraham's example. Pray for Lot. God is listening and God is still able to rescue. Let's pray...

¹ Stephane Fitch, "How to Spot a Fake," *Forbes Magazine*, 12/03/08

² These marks are found in *The New Bible Dictionary*, J.D. Douglas, editor (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1962), pp. 1041-1042

³ Rev. Alfred Marshall D. Litt., *The Interlinear Greek-English New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1958), p. 699