



**Talmid תלמיד** a Hebrew word that means “a true disciple who desires to be what the Rabbi Jesus is.”

*Whoever claims to live in Him must walk as Jesus did. 1 John 2:6 (NIV)*

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STUDY TO SHEW THYSELF APPROVED UNTO GOD, A WORKMAN THAT NEEDETH NOT TO BE ASHAMED, RIGHTLY  
DIVIDING THE WORD OF TRUTH. 2 TIMOTHY 2:15



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## TODAY'S CULTS: A REVIVAL OF ANCIENT HERESIES (Part 2)

This month's edition of the *The Talmid* takes a look at the historical roots of the false doctrines taught by many of today's modern cults. Although we have seen an explosion of new cults in the last few decades, the cult problem itself is not new at all. Christian cults have been around ever since the first century. Of course, they did not call themselves Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, New Agers, etc. then, but their teachings were surprisingly similar to the cults of the 1990's.

In the first century, Christians dealt with such cults as early Gnosticism, the Galatian Heresy (the sect of circumcision), the Docetism of Cerinthus of Asia Minor, and

the sect of Alexander the coppersmith.

In addition, they also struggled against the teaching of some of the Jewish sects or cults including the Pharisees, who taught salvation by keeping the law, and the Sadducees, who denied the doctrine of resurrection.

After the close of the New Testament, other cult leader arose. These included Montanus, Arius of Alexandria, Marcion of Rome, Noetus of Smyrna, and Sabellius. While these men are long dead, many of their teaching survive to this day in modified or redefined forms.

Today's Christian may see little relevance in learning about dead heretics with strange sounding names who taught false doctrines with hard to pronounce titles like “Modalistic Monarchianism” or “Patripassianism.”

Some *Talmid* readers may see this month's issue “**too difficult to understand**” or “**irrelevant.**” Some may even be tempted to lay this month's issue aside. But voices from the past cry, “**DON'T DO IT!**” While the study it may be challenging, a basic understanding of the major heresies of Church history is essential to understanding cults today. It has been said, “**Those who forget the past... are condemned to repeat it.**”

And truly, today's Christians have largely forgotten the errors of past centuries. No wonder there is a cult epidemic today!

Satan is powerful, deceptive, and seductive.... but he is not very original. The devil takes the same old heresies that have been around for hundreds of years, puts a fresh coat of paint and a new name

on them, and then sells them to the next generation that sees them as *new truths*. However they are neither new nor true! This is why a study in ancient heresies is so important to understanding the cults of today.

A doctor who had never studied the theory of vaccination and had never heard of Jonas Edward Salk would be of little use in an polio epidemic. This doctor would have to research and study the disease from scratch not knowing that the disease had been isolated and cured over thirty years ago.

Likewise, today's Christian who tries to respond to the challenge of the cults with no knowledge of cult history, is poorly prepared and inadequately equipped. Christians should not dread this type of research. A little Church History has never killed anyone yet. In fact, it could be very healthy -- spiritually. (The following is an excerpt of a class that I taught at Fuller Seminary extension in the Southern California area a number of years ago.)

## THE COLOSSIAN HERESY

From the language of St Paul, addressed to the Church of Colossæ, we may infer the presence of two disturbing elements which threatened the purity of Christian faith and practice in this community. These elements are distinguishable in themselves, though it does not follow that they present the teaching of two distinct parties.

1. A mere glance at the epistle suffices to detect the presence of JUDAISM in the teaching which the Apostle combats. The observance of sabbaths and new moons is decisive in this respect. The distinction of meats and drinks points in the same direction.<sup>1</sup> Even the enforcement of the initiatory rite of Judaism may be inferred from the contrast implied in St Paul's recommendation of the spiritual circumcision.<sup>2</sup>

2. On the other hand a closer examination of its language shows that these Judaic features do not exhaust the portraiture of the heresy or heresies against which the epistle is directed. We discern an element of theosophic speculation, which is alien to the spirit of Judaism proper. We are confronted with a shadowy mysticism, which loses itself in the contemplation of the unseen world. We discover a tendency to interpose certain spiritual agencies, intermediate beings, between God and man, as the instruments of communication and the objects of wor-

ship.<sup>3</sup> Anticipating the result which will appear more clearly hereafter, we may say that along with its Judaism there was a GNOSTIC element in the false teaching which prevailed at Colossæ.

Have we then two heresies here, or one only? Were these elements distinct, or were they fused into the same system? In other words, Is St Paul controverting a phase of Judaism on the one hand, and a phase of Gnosticism on the other; or did he find himself in conflict with a Judæo-Gnostic heresy which combined the two?<sup>4</sup>

On closer examination we find ourselves compelled to adopt the latter alternative. The epistle itself contains no hint that the Apostle has more than one set of antagonists in view; and the needless multiplication of persons or events is always to be deprecated in historical criticism. Nor indeed does the hypothesis of a single complex heresy present any real difficulty. If the two elements seem irreconcilable, or at least incongruous, at first sight, the incongruity disappears on further examination. It will be shown in the course of this investigation that some special tendencies of religious thought among the Jews themselves before and about this time prepared the way for such a combination in a Christian community like the Church of Colossæ.<sup>5</sup> Moreover we shall find that the Christian heresies of the next succeeding ages exhibit in a more developed form the same complex type, which here appears in its nascent state;<sup>6</sup> this later development not only showing that the combination was historically possible in itself, but likewise presupposing some earlier stage of its existence such as confronts us at Colossæ.

But in fact the Apostle's language hardly leaves the question open. The two elements are so closely interwoven in his refutation, that it is impossible to separate them. He passes backwards and forwards from the one to the other in such a way as to show that they are only parts of one complex whole. On this point the logical connexion of the sentences is decisive: 'Beware lest any man make spoil of you through philosophy and vain deceit after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world ... Ye were circumcised with a circumcision not made with hands ... And you ... did He quicken, ... blotting out the handwriting of ordinances which was against you ... Let no man therefore judge you in meat or drink, or in respect of a holy day or a new moon or a sabbath ... Let no man beguile you of your prize in a self-imposed humility and service of angels ... If ye died with Christ from the rudiments of the world, why ... are ye subject to ordinances ... which things have a show of wisdom in self-imposed service and humility

and hard treatment of the body, but are of no value against indulgence of the flesh.’<sup>7</sup> Here the superior wisdom, the speculative element which is characteristic of Gnosticism, and the ritual observance, the practical element which was supplied by Judaism, are regarded not only as springing from the same stem, but also as intertwined in their growth. And the more carefully we examine the sequence of the Apostle’s thoughts, the more intimate will the connexion appear.

Having described the speculative element in this complex heresy provisionally as Gnostic, I purpose enquiring in the first place, how far Judaism prior to and independently of Christianity had allied itself with Gnostic modes of thought; and afterwards, whether the description of the Colossian heresy is such as to justify us in thus classing it as a species of Gnosticism. But, as a preliminary to these enquiries, some definition of the word, or at least some conception of the leading ideas which it involves, will be necessary. With its complex varieties and elaborate developments we have no concern here: for, if Gnosticism can be found at all in the records of the Apostolic age, it will obviously appear in a simple and elementary form. Divested of its accessories and presented in its barest outline, it is not difficult of delineation.<sup>8</sup>

1. As the name attests,<sup>9</sup> Gnosticism implies the possession of a superior wisdom, which is hidden from others. It makes a distinction between the select few who have this higher gift, and the vulgar many who are without it. Faith, blind faith, suffices the latter, while knowledge is the exclusive possession of the former. Thus it recognizes a separation of intellectual *caste* in religion, introducing the distinction of an esoteric and an exoteric doctrine, and interposing an initiation of some kind or other between the two classes. In short it is animated by the exclusive *aristocratic* spirit,<sup>10</sup> which distinguishes the ancient religions, and from which it was a main function of Christianity to deliver mankind.

2. This was its spirit; and the intellectual questions, on which its energies were concentrated and to which it professed to hold the key, were mainly twofold. How can the work of creation be explained? and, How are we to account for the existence of evil?<sup>11</sup> To reconcile the creation of the world and the existence of evil with the conception of God as the absolute Being, was the problem which all the Gnostic systems set themselves to

solve. It will be seen that the two questions cannot be treated independently but have a very close and intimate connexion with each other.

The Gnostic argument ran as follows: Did God create the world out of nothing, evolve it from Himself? Then, God being perfectly good and creation having resulted from His sole act without any opposing or modifying influence, evil would have been impossible; for otherwise we are driven to the conclusion that God created evil.

This solution being rejected as impossible, the Gnostic was obliged to postulate some antagonistic principle independent of God, by which His creative energy was thwarted and limited. This opposing principle, the kingdom of evil, he conceived to be the world of matter. The precise idea of its mode of operation varies in different Gnostic systems. It is sometimes regarded as a dead passive resistance, sometimes as a turbulent active power. But, though the exact point of view may shift, the object contemplated is always the same. In some way or other evil is regarded as residing in the material, sensible world. Thus Gnostic speculation on the existence of evil ends in a dualism.

This point being conceded, the ulterior question arises: How then is creation possible? How can the Infinite communicate with the Finite, the Good with the Evil? How can God act upon matter? God is perfect, absolute, incomprehensible.

This, the Gnostic went on to argue, could only have been possible by some self-limitation on the part of God. God must express Himself in some way. There must be some evolution, some effluence, of Deity. Thus the Divine Being germinates, as it were; and the first germination again evolves a second from itself in like manner. In this way we obtain a series of successive emanations, which may be more or fewer, as the requirements of any particular system demand. In each successive evolution the Divine element is feebler. They sink gradually lower and lower in the scale, as they are farther removed from their source; until at length contact with matter is possible, and creation ensues. These are the emanations, æons, spirits, or angels, of Gnosticism, conceived as more or less concrete and personal according to the different aspects in which they are regarded in different systems.

3. Such is the bare outline (and nothing more is needed for my immediate purpose) of the speculative views of Gnosticism. But it is obvious that these views must have exerted a powerful influence on the ethical systems of their advocates, and thus they would involve

important practical consequences. If matter is the principle of evil, it is of infinite moment for a man to know how he can avoid its baneful influence and thus keep his higher nature unclogged and unsullied.

To this practical question two directly opposite answers were given:<sup>12</sup>

(1) On the one hand, it was contended that the desired end might best be attained by a rigorous abstinence. Thus communication with matter, if it could not be entirely avoided, might be reduced to a minimum. Its grosser defilements at all events would be escaped. The material part of man would be subdued and mortified, if it could not be annihilated; and the spirit, thus set free, would be sublimated, and rise to its proper level. Thus the ethics of Gnosticism pointed in the first instance to a strict *asceticism*.

(2) But obviously the results thus attained are very slight and inadequate. Matter is about us everywhere. We do but touch the skirts of the evil, when we endeavour to fence ourselves about by prohibitive ordinances, as, for instance, when we enjoin a spare diet or forbid marriage. Some more comprehensive rule is wanted, which shall apply to every contingency and every moment of our lives. Arguing in this way, other Gnostic teachers arrived at an ethical rule directly opposed to the former.

‘Cultivate an entire indifference,’ they said, ‘to the world of sense. Do not give it a thought one way or the other, but follow your own impulses. The ascetic principle assigns a certain importance to matter. The ascetic fails in consequence to assert his own independence. The true rule of life is to treat matter as something alien to you, towards which you have no duties or obligations and which you can use or leave unused as you like.’<sup>13</sup>

In this way the reaction from rigid asceticism led to the opposite extreme of unrestrained *licentiousness*, both alike springing from the same false conception of matter as the principle of evil.

Gnosticism, as defined by these characteristic features, has obviously no necessary connection with Christianity. Christianity would naturally arouse it to unwonted activity, by leading men to dwell more earnestly on the nature and power of evil, and thus stimulating more systematic thought on the theological questions which had already arrested attention. After no long time Gnosticism would absorb into its system more or fewer Christian elements, or Christianity in some of its forms

would receive a tinge from Gnosticism. But the thing itself had an independent root, and seems to have been prior in time. The probabilities of the case, and the scanty traditions of history, alike point to this independence of the two. If so, it is a matter of little moment at what precise time the name ‘Gnostic’ was adopted, whether before or after contact with Christianity; for we are concerned only with the growth and direction of thought which the name represents.

If then Gnosticism was not an offspring of Christianity, but a direction of religious speculation which existed independently, we are at liberty to entertain the question whether it did not form an alliance with Judaism, contemporaneously with or prior to its alliance with Christianity. There is at least no obstacle which bars such an investigation at the outset. If this should prove to be the case, then we have a combination which prepares the way for the otherwise strange phenomena presented in the Epistle to the Colossians.

Those, who have sought analogies to the three Jewish sects among the philosophical schools of Greece and Rome, have compared the Sadducees to the Epicureans, the Pharisees to the Stoics, and the Essenes to the Pythagoreans. Like all historical parallels, this comparison is open to misapprehension: but, carefully guarded, the illustration is pertinent and instructive.

With the Sadducees we have no concern here. Whatever respect may be due to their attitude in the earlier stages of their history, at the Christian era at least they have ceased to deserve our sympathy; for their position has become mainly *negative*. They take their stand on denials—the denial of the existence of angels, the denial of the resurrection of the dead, the denial of a progressive development in the Jewish Church. In these negative tendencies, in the materialistic teaching of the sect, and in the moral consequences to which it led, a very rough resemblance to the Epicureans will appear.<sup>14</sup>

The two *positive* sects were the Pharisees and the Essenes. Both were strict observers of the ritual law; but, while the Pharisee was essentially *practical*, the tendency of the Essene was to *mysticism*; while the Pharisee was a man of the world, the Essene was a member of a brotherhood. In this respect the Stoic and the Pythagorean were the nearest counterparts which the history of Greek philosophy and social life could offer. These analogies indeed are suggested by Josephus himself.<sup>15</sup>

While the portrait of the Pharisee is distinctly traced and easily recognized, this is not the case with the Essene. The Essene is the great enigma of Hebrew history.

Admired alike by Jew, by Heathen, and by Christian, he yet remains a dim vague outline, on which the highest subtlety of successive critics has been employed to supply a substantial form and an adequate coloring. An ascetic mystical dreamy recluse, he seems too far removed from the hard experience of life to be capable of realization.

And yet by careful use of the existing materials the portrait of this sect may be so far restored, as to establish with a reasonable amount of probability the point with which alone we are here concerned. It will appear from the delineations of ancient writers, more especially of Philo and Josephus, that the characteristic feature of Essenism was a particular direction of mystic speculation, involving a rigid asceticism as its practical consequence. Following the definition of Gnosticism which has been already given, we may not unfitly call this tendency *Gnostic*.

Having in this statement anticipated the results, I shall now endeavour to develop the main features of Essenism; and, while doing so, I will ask my readers to bear in mind the portrait of the Colossian heresy in St Paul, and to mark the resemblances, as the enquiry proceeds.

The Judaic element is especially prominent in the life and teaching of the sect. The Essene was exceptionally rigorous in his observance of the Mosaic ritual. In his strict abstinence from work on the sabbath he far surpassed all the other Jews. He would not light a fire, would not move a vessel, would not perform even the most ordinary functions of life. The whole day was given up to religious exercises and to exposition of the Scriptures. His respect for the law extended also to the lawgiver. After God, the name of Moses was held in the highest reverence. He who blasphemed his name was punished with death<sup>2</sup>. In all these points the Essene was an exaggeration, almost a caricature, of the Pharisee.

So far the Essene has not departed from the principles of normal Judaism; but here the divergence begins. In three main points we trace the working of influences which must have been derived from external sources.

1. To the legalism of the Pharisee, the Essene added an asceticism, which was peculiarly his own, and which in many respects contradicted the tenets of the other sect. The honourable, and even exaggerated, estimate of marriage, which was characteristic of the Jew, and of the Pharisee as the typical Jew,

found no favour with the Essene. Marriage was to him an abomination. Those Essenes who lived together as members of an order, and in whom the principles of the sect were carried to their logical consequences, eschewed it altogether. To secure the continuance of their brotherhood they adopted children, whom they brought up in the doctrines and practices of the community. There were others however who took a different view. They accepted marriage, as necessary for the preservation of the race. Yet even with them it seems to have been regarded only as an inevitable evil. They fenced it off by stringent rules, demanding a three years' probation and enjoining various purificatory rites. The conception of marriage, as quickening and educating the affections and thus exalting and refining human life, was wholly foreign to their minds. Woman was a mere instrument of temptation in their eyes, deceitful, faithless, selfish, jealous, misled and misleading by her passions.

But their ascetic tendencies did not stop here. The Pharisee was very careful to observe the distinction of meats lawful and unlawful, as laid down by the Mosaic code, and even rendered these ordinances vexatious by minute definitions of his own. But the Essene went far beyond him. He drank no wine, he did not touch animal food. His meal consisted of a piece of bread and a single mess of vegetables. Even this simple fare was prepared for him by special officers consecrated for the purpose, that it might be free from all contamination.<sup>16</sup> Nay, so stringent were the rules of the order on this point, that when an Essene was excommunicated, he often died of starvation, being bound by his oath not to take food prepared by defiled hands, and thus being reduced to eat the very grass of the field.

Again, in hot climates oil for anointing the body is almost a necessary of life. From this too the Essenes strictly abstained. Even if they were accidentally smeared, they were careful at once to wash themselves, holding the mere touch to be a contamination.

From these facts it seems clear that Essene abstinence was something more than the mere exaggeration of Pharisaic principles. The rigor of the Pharisee was based on his obligation of obedience to an absolute external law. The Essene introduced a new principle. He condemned in any form the gratification of the natural cravings, nor would he consent to regard it as moral or immoral only according to the motive which suggested it or the consequences which flowed from it. It was in itself an absolute evil. He sought to disengage himself, as far as possible, from the conditions of physical life.

In short, in the asceticism of the Essene we seem to see the germ of that Gnostic dualism which regards matter as the principle, or at least the abode, of evil.

2. And, when we come to investigate the speculative tenets of the sect, we shall find that the Essenes have diverged appreciably from the common type of Jewish orthodoxy.

(1) Attention was directed above to their respect for Moses and the Mosaic law, which they shared in common with the Pharisee. But there was another side to their theological teaching. Though our information is somewhat defective, still in the scanty notices which are preserved we find sufficient indications that they had absorbed some foreign elements of religious thought into their system. Thus at day-break they addressed certain prayers, which had been handed down from their forefathers, to the Sun, 'as if entreating him to rise.'<sup>17</sup> They were careful also to conceal and bury all polluting substances, so as not 'to insult the rays of the god.'<sup>18</sup> We cannot indeed suppose that they regarded the sun as more than a symbol of the unseen power who gives light and life; but their outward demonstrations of reverence were sufficiently prominent to attach to them, or to a sect derived from them, the epithet of 'Sun-worshippers,'<sup>19</sup> and some connection with the characteristic feature of Parsee devotion at once suggests itself. The practice at all events stands in strong contrast to the denunciations of worship paid to the 'hosts of heaven' in the Hebrew prophets.

(2) Nor again is it an insignificant fact that, while the Pharisee maintained the resurrection of the body as a cardinal article of his faith, the Essene restricted himself to a belief in the immortality of the soul. The soul, he maintained, was confined in the flesh, as in a prison-house. Only when disengaged from these fetters would it be truly free. Then it would soar aloft, rejoicing in its newly attained liberty.<sup>20</sup> This doctrine accords with the fundamental conception of the malignity of matter. To those who held this conception a resurrection of the body would be repulsive, as involving a perpetuation of evil.

(3) But they also separated themselves from the religious belief of the orthodox Jew in another respect, which would provoke more notice. While they sent gifts to the temple at Jerusalem, they refused to offer sacrifices there. It would appear that the slaughter of animals was altogether forbidden by their creed<sup>2</sup>. It is certain that they were afraid of

contracting some ceremonial impurity by offering victims in the temple. Meanwhile they had sacrifices, bloodless sacrifices, of their own. They regarded their simple meals with their accompanying prayers and thanksgiving, not only as devotional but even as sacrificial rites. Those who prepared and presided over these meals were their consecrated priests.<sup>21</sup>

(4) In what other respects they may have departed from, or added to, the normal creed of Judaism, we do not know. But it is expressly stated that, when a novice after passing through the probationary stages was admitted to the full privileges of the order, the oath of admission bound him 'to conceal nothing from the members of the sect, and to report nothing concerning them to others, even though threatened with death; not to communicate any of their doctrines to anyone otherwise than as he himself had received them; but to abstain from robbery, and in like manner to guard carefully the books of their sect, and *the names of the angels*.' It may be reasonably supposed that more lurks under this last expression than meets the ear. This esoteric doctrine, relating to angelic beings, may have been another link which attached Essenism to the religion of Zoroaster<sup>2</sup>. At all events we seem to be justified in connecting it with the self-imposed service and worshipping of angels at Colossæ: and we may well suspect that we have here a germ which was developed into the Gnostic doctrine of æons or emanations.

(5) If so, it is not unconnected with another notice relating to Essene peculiarities. The Gnostic doctrine of intermediate beings between God and the world, as we have seen, was intimately connected with speculations respecting creation. Now we are specially informed that the Essenes, while leaving physical studies in general to speculative idlers (μετεωρολόεσταις), as being beyond the reach of human nature, yet excepted from their general condemnation that philosophy which treats of the existence of God and the generation of the universe.<sup>22</sup>

(6) Mention has been made incidentally of certain secret books peculiar to the sect. The existence of such an apocryphal literature was a sure token of some abnormal development in doctrine. In the passage quoted it is mentioned in relation to some form of angelology. Elsewhere their skill in prediction, for which they were especially famous, is connected with the perusal of certain 'sacred books,' which however are not described. But more especially, we are told that the Essenes studied with extraordinary diligence the writings of the ancients, selecting those especially which could be turned to profit for soul and body, and that from these they

learnt the Qualities of roots and the properties of stones. This expression, as illustrated by other notices, points clearly to the study of occult sciences, and recalls the alliance with the practice of magical arts, which was a distinguishing feature of Gnosticism, and is condemned by Christian teachers even in the heresies of the Apostolic age.

#### ENDNOTES:

<sup>1</sup>Colossians 2:16-17

<sup>2</sup>Colossians 2:11

<sup>3</sup>Colossians 2:4, 8, 18, 23

<sup>4</sup>NEANDER *Planting of the Christian Church* 1. p. 319 sq. (Eng. Trans.);

<sup>5</sup>Saint Paul's Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon, Lightfoot, Joseph Barber p.83

<sup>6</sup>Saint Paul's Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon, Lightfoot, Joseph Barber p.107

<sup>7</sup>Colossians 2:8–2:23. Hilgenfeld (*Der Gnosticismus* etc. p. 250 sq.)

<sup>8</sup>NEANDER *Church History* 11. p. 1 sq.;

<sup>9</sup>See esp. Iren. 1.6.1 sq., Clem. Alex. *Strom.* 2. p. 433 sq. (Potter). On the words **τέλειοι, πνευματικοί**, by which they designated the possessors of this higher *gnosis*, see the notes on Col. 1:28, and Phil. 3:15.

<sup>10</sup>See Neander l.c. p. 1 sq., from whom the epithet is borrowed.

<sup>11</sup>The fathers speak of this as the main question about which the Gnostics busy themselves; *Unde malum? πόθεν ἡ κακία*; Tertull. de Præscr. 7, *adv. Marc.* 1.2, Eus. *H. E.* 5.27; passages quoted by Baur *Christliche Gnosis* p. 19. On the leading conceptions of Gnosticism see especially Neander, l.c. p. 9 sq.

<sup>12</sup>On this point see Clem. *Strom.* 3.5 (p. 529) **εἰς δύο διελόντες πράγματα ἀπάσας τὰς αἱρέσεις ἀποκρινώμεθα αὐτοῖς· ἢ γὰρ τοι ἀδιαφόρως ζῆν διδάσκουσιν, ἢ τὸ ὑπέρτονον ἄγουσαι ἐγκράτειαν διὰ δυσσεβείας καὶ φιλαπεχθημοσύνης καταγγέλλουσι**, with the whole passage which follows. As examples of the one extreme may be instanced the Carpocratians and Cainites: of the other the Encratites.

<sup>13</sup>See for instance the description of the Carpocratians in Iren. 1.25.3 sq., 2.32.1 sq., Hippol. *Hær.* 7.32, Epiphan. *Hær.* 27.2 sq.; from which passages it appears that they justified

their moral profligacy on the principle that the highest perfection consists in the most complete contempt of mundane things.

<sup>14</sup>The name *Epicureans* seems to be applied to them even in the Talmud; see Eisenmenger's *Entdecktes Judenthum* 1. pp. 95, 694 sq.; comp. Keim *Geschichte Jesu von Nazara* 1. p. 281.

<sup>15</sup>For the Pharisees see *Vit.* 2 **παραπλήσιός ἐστι τῆ παρ' Ἑλλησι Στωϊκῆ λεγομένη**: for the Essenes, *Ant.* 15.10.4 **διαίτη χρώμενον τῆ παρ' Ἑλληνισιν ὑπὸ Πυθαγόρου καταδεδειγμένη**.

<sup>16</sup>*B. J.* l.c. § 5; see Philo's account of the Therapeutes, *Vit. Cont.* 4

<sup>17</sup>*B. J.* l.c. § 5 **πρὸς γε μὴν τὸ θεῖον ἰδίως εὐσεβεῖς· πρὶν γὰρ ἀνασχεῖν τὸν ἥλιον οὐδὲν φθέγγονται τῶν βεβήλων, πατρίους δέ τινας εἰς αὐτὸν εὐχάς, ὥσπερ ἰκετεύοντες ἀνατεῖλαι**. Compare what Philo says of the Therapeutes, *Vit. Cont.* 3

<sup>18</sup>*B. J.* l.c. § 9 **ὡς μὴ τὰς αὐγὰς ὑβρίζοιεν τοῦ θεοῦ**. There can be no doubt, I think, that by **τοῦ θεοῦ** is meant the 'sun-god'; comp. Eur. *Heracl.* 749 **θεοῦ φαεσίμβροτοι αὐγαί**, *Alc.* 722 **τὸ φέγγος τοῦτο τοῦ θεοῦ**, Appian *Præf* 9

<sup>19</sup>Epiphan. *Hær.* 19.2, 20.3 **Ὅσσηνοὶ δὲ μετέστησαν ἀπὸ Ἰουδαϊσμοῦ εἰς τὴν τῶν Σαμψαίων αἵρεσιν, 53.1, 2 Σαμψαῖοι γὰρ ἐρμηνεύονται Ἑλλιακοί**, from the Hebrew **שמש** the sun.' The historical connexion of the Sampsæans with the Essenes is evident from these passages: though it is difficult to say what their precise relations to each other were. See below, p. 372.

<sup>20</sup>*B. J.* l.c. § 11 **καὶ γὰρ ἔρρωται παρ' αὐτοῖς ἡδε ἡ δόξα, φθαρτὰ μὲν εἶναι τὰ σώματα καὶ τὴν ὕλην οὐ μόνιμον αὐτοῖς, τὰς δὲ ψυχὰς ἀθανάτους ἀεὶ διαμένειν ... ἐπειδὴν δὲ ἀνεθῶσι τῶν κατὰ σάρκα δεσμῶν, οἷα δὲ μακρᾶς δουλείας ἀπηλλαγμένους, τότε χαίρειν καὶ μετεώρους φέρεσθαι κ.τ.λ..** To this doctrine the teaching of the Pharisees stands in direct contrast; *ib.* § 13: comp. also *Ant.* 18.1.3, 5.

<sup>21</sup>*Ant.* 18.1.5 **ἱερεῖς τε [χειροτονοῦσι] διὰ ποιήσιν σίτου τε καὶ βρωμάτων**, *B. J.* 2.8.5 **προκατεύχεται δὲ ὁ ἱερεὺς τῆς τροφῆς κ.τ.λ..**; see Ritschl p.181.

<sup>22</sup>Philo *Omn. prob. lib.* 12 § (p. 458) **τὸ δὲ φυσικὸν ὡς μεῖζον ἢ κατὰ ἀνθρωπίνην φύσιν μετεωρολέσχαις ἀπολιπόντες, πλὴν ὅσον αὐτοῦ περι ὑπάρξεως Θεοῦ καὶ τῆς τοῦ παντὸς γενέσεως φιλοσοφεῖται**.



**HERE-**

**SY (Part**

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2)

Men who are called on to preach and teach the Word of God are fully responsible to be diligent, thorough, and meticulous in their handling of the truth. John MacArthur, remarking on this verse, says,

*“The truth is the divine revelation, including the truth of the gospel, the content of the Christian faith. It is the solemn responsibility of every church to solidly, immovably, unshakably uphold the truth of God’s Word. The church does not invent the truth, and alters it only at the cost of judgment. It is to support and safeguard it. It is the sacred, saving treasure given to sinners for their forgiveness, and to believers for their sanctification and edification, that they might live for the glory of God. The church has the stewardship of Scripture, the duty to guard it as the most precious possession on earth. Churches that tamper with, misrepresent, depreciate, relegate to secondary place, or abandon biblical truth destroy their only reason for existing and*

*experience impotence and judgment.*

**II Timothy 2:15** boldly declares,

**<sup>15</sup>Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.**

**James 5:19-20** further declares the solemn responsibility that is associated with those who know the Word of God.

<sup>19</sup>Brethren, if anyone among you wanders from the truth, and someone turns him back, <sup>20</sup>**let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save a soul from death and cover a multitude of sins.**

**I John 2:4** states that obeying the commandments of God is a clear indication of whether an individual even truly knows God or not.

**“He who says, “I know Him,” and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him.**

It is clear from just a small sampling of the word “**truth**” as used in the New Testament that its bearing and impact on life is more than monumental. Once the truth is lost, then the ability to live a godly life is also lost simply because truth is foundational to the Christian life. In reality, a man’s relation to the truth determines his eternal destiny and his eternal rewards. Everyone is engaged in a spiritual warfare and in a war fought with unseen principalities and powers in heavenly places (**Ephesians 6:12**), but it must be understood that at every level of this war that it is a war for the truth. Charles Spurgeon once said that,

*“The spotless purity of truth must always be at war with the blackness of heresy and lies.”*

Satan deals in lies. In fact, the Bible declares that he is actually the father of lies (**John 8:44**). So, whereas God only operates in the realm of truth, Satan only functions in lies and half-truths. His goal is to distort and to discredit the truth in every way imaginable. It has been well stated that the spiritual battle in which everyone is engaged is not a power battle, but a truth battle – and the battlefield is the mind. So, the only way to effectively wage war against error is with truth. It is the one



area in which there cannot be any compromise or any concession. There is no valid substitute for the truth that is even available. The only option is error, and in essence, satanically driven error and falsehood. However, it must be remembered that error and heresy feed off of the truth. It is the actual distortion and exaggeration of the actual truth that makes heresy so blatantly denigrating and slanderous. J. C. Ryle aptly stated,

*“Let us never forget that truth, distorted and exaggerated, can become the mother of the most dangerous heresies.”*

The word “heresies” is only found in Scripture twice. [Galatians 5:20](#) declares “heresies” to be one of the “works of the flesh”. And then [II Peter 2:1-3](#) gives the results of heresies when it states,

**<sup>1</sup>But there were also false prophets among the people, even as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Lord who bought them, and bring on themselves swift destruction. <sup>2</sup>And many will follow their destructive ways, because of whom the way of truth will be blasphemed. <sup>3</sup>By covetousness they will exploit you with deceptive words; for a long time their judgment has not been idle, and their destruction does not slumber.**

An expression that has always been a foundational element of the author’s personal perspective regarding the idea of heresy or false teaching is the principle that there is no new truth. It has been said that if it is true, then it is not new, and if it is new, then it is not true. Heresy has always existed – and with many different names. For instance, there have been Ebionites, Judaizers, and Nicodemites. There was Montanism, Docetism, Marcionism, Modalism, Adoptionism, Manicheanism, Valentinism, Arianism, Apollinarianism, Macedonism, Donatism, Pelagianism, Nestorianism, and Gnosticism. There has been Unitarianism, transubstantiation, and false doctrines of the Atonement. There have been many different forms of mysticism. There is humanism,

synergism, antinomianism, and the marrow controversy. Today we have evolution, a social gospel, higher criticism, and Federal Vision theology. There are cults in abundance on the Christian landscape. The charismatic wave of television evangelists and entrepreneurs has provided an indelible mark of false teaching exported to all parts of the world. It is certainly not the intent of this article to try and define and address all of the various false teachings and heresies that have been placed upon the church, but simply to recognize that they not only exist, but are fully engaged in undermining the faith of many. It could rightly be characterized as the ongoing development of a “different gospel” as Paul characterized in [Galatians 1:6-9](#).

The above listing is just a small sampling of the varied controversies and debates that have raged over the centuries. However, a very important observation that must be appreciated is that the heresies of today are not new. The falsehoods and lies of the past have simply been repackaged into an acceptable and appealing sales tool for the present. For instance, the New Age philosophy that everyone can be a god was really the first temptation in the Garden of Eden – so there is nothing new in what they propose.

The word “heresy” is defined in the [Encarta Dictionary](#) as to simply be “an opinion or belief that contradicts established religious teaching, and especially one that is officially condemned by a religious authority”. This is the way the world defines “heresy”. However, the obvious problem with this definition as it relates to the Scriptures is that the only true “religious authority” is God Himself. He is the author of all truth, and everything outside of His revealed truth is false and condemning. From an obvious perspective, every religion refutes the teachings of other religions, but the defining attribute of what needs to be defined as “**biblical** heresy” is that it is teaching that is in clear denial and opposition to the Word of God. There is a great deal of Scripture to actually validate this perspective. For instance, [Matthew 15:9](#), quoting from the Old Testament, declares,

**<sup>9</sup> And in vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.”**

**I Timothy 4:1** says,

**Now the Spirit expressly says that in latter times some will depart from the faith, giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons,**

**II Peter 3:17** says,

**You therefore, beloved, since you know this beforehand, beware lest you also fall from your own steadfastness, being led away with the error of the wicked;**

So, heresy as it applies to the Christian faith is a simple departure from the truth. But unfortunately it is something that leads people into both error and potential damnation and therefore is what Scripture declares to be “**destructive**”. The Wycliffe Bible Dictionary defines “heresy” as “a doctrinal departure from biblically revealed truth”. It must be appreciated that sacred conflict is not a negative issue relative to the truth. In reality, it has the capacity to actually highlight and underscore the truth in a way that at times may not be apparent. Every age will be characterized by individuals who, whether consciously or unconsciously, will marginalize the truth to suit their personal and cultural whims. Therefore the personal importance of maintaining an attitude that is not only willing to define the truth, but also to defend the truth is critical. It certainly is not something that will always be pleasant, but it is still a defining element essential for the integrity of the Christian faith.

**II Peter 2:1** indicates that false teachers “**secretly**” introduce or bring in destructive heresies. Their method of teaching destructive heresies is to do it deceptively. It is generally never blatant until a congregation or group of people have accepted previous false teaching and embraced the false teacher personally. But it must be noted that the location of this introduction of false teaching is generally the local church and among believers where people have gained positions of leadership from which they can teach their destructive heresies.

It is the author’s opinion that many of the home groups or cell groups that operate outside of the local church setting are the actual seedbed for false teaching. Very often a home fellowship group lacks sub-

stance in their discussions and dialogue, and much too often the discussion is centered on what people “think” about a certain passage and not so much about what the passage actually teaches. There is no place in the accurate teaching and handling of the Word of God for personal opinions, and especially those that are theologically clouded by private goals and cultural values. Anyone who pastors is responsible for those things that are being taught within their church, and therefore it greatly behooves them to ensure that whatever is presented in a home group setting is carefully regulated and synchronized with what is being presented from the pulpit. If that oversight is not exercised, then eventually the truth will be marginalized by those who may not even be gifted to teach, but still have the ability to exercise an influence on other individuals.

In the present culture, there have been many examples of false teachings being introduced at the seminary levels, and then that teaching being perpetuated in the local churches. That is certainly not in any way to discredit reputable and godly institutions, but simply to observe that anywhere the Word of God is taught has the potential for the development of heresies and false teachings. Heresy is never something that develops quickly, but rather is devised and articulated over an extended period of time. And without question, it is as John MacArthur describes “...*the deadliest and most abhorrent of evils...*”

Lost humanity has never been content with the truth, and in that lack of contentment have developed an insatiable hunger for both challenging and subverting biblical dogma. They find the truth and the exercise of that truth to be dull and boring, to be invasive to their personal freedoms, and to be a contradiction to what they believe life should be. Spiritual creativity and imagination are much more appealing to the fallen mind than that which is fixed and eternal. Being Christian is seen as that which is intellectually debilitating and ultimately demeaning. What is important to the cultural thinker is that he can be and become whatever his mind and heart believe. But in reality, he becomes the creative author of his own destruction and demise, and unfortunately pulls others into his theological quagmire. It is the irony of man’s dilemma that he will believe anything but the truth.

Peter Berger aptly states the more encompassing issue with this perceptive observation,

*“Thus heresy, once the occupation of marginal and eccentric types, has become a much more general condition; indeed heresy has become universalized.”*

The flaw of heresy is simple – men create their own doctrines to pacify their reasoning as to how life should be lived, and they do so for the purpose of expelling and exorcising the limitations imposed on them by Scripture. So, at the very core of heresy is the false dogma of being anti-authoritarian and becoming the master of one’s own fate. The tragedy and the eternal catastrophe of such a position is indescribable. To believe that one is free in regard to biblical truth is the greatest of delusions with the severest of penalties. What is perceived as ultimately liberating and invigorating has absolutely no redemptive value whatsoever and leaves the individual incarcerated in a fate that is eternally inescapable.

John Hannah has once again defined what life is like in a postmodern world that does not respect doctrine, dogma, or biblical truth,

*“We find ourselves in a world where pleasures are embraced without moral norms or a sense of social responsibility. Christian truth is attacked not so much for its particular assertions as for its fundamental claim that there is such a thing as binding, objective truth. The quest for truth has been replaced by the preoccupation with pleasure and entertainment. Thus, we live in a world of therapeutic and the psychological, where people are engaged in an endless pursuit of self-fulfillment and entitlement. Sin has become little more than the infringement of personal rights and privileges; there is little thought of defining it by the standard of the holiness of God.”*

The implications of losing perspective relative to the truth are greater than tragic because they are eternal in nature. The modern church is obsessed and consumed with being culturally relevant, but they are so at the expense of being biblically relevant. The church has become more than adept at substituting

relevancy for truth and their ability to focus on doctrinal integrity and accuracy has been replaced by a man centered theology that is aimed at meeting personal needs in preference to faithful obedience to the Word of God.

For those men who both preach and teach the Word of God, the implications and consequences of this shift from being biblically relevant to being culturally relevant cannot be ignored. There is within this shift a deep, moral, intellectual, and spiritual crisis that must be addressed. At stake is a fundamental lack of confidence in the Word of God, and that lack of confidence becomes reflected in a very humanistic and self-gratifying approach to life. Sin is minimized and marginalized with the ultimate consequence being that of God and His glory being demeaned and the death of Christ minimized. These are the spiritual aftermaths of not holding to the truth and defending it in a pluralistic, postmodern world. The problem with postmodern thought is that it leaves people permanently in the dark about virtually everything that is important and critical to life. History itself can be noted as one of the ongoing evidences of the damaging effects of heresy. Rudolf Bultmann, for instance, systematically distorted many of the major doctrines of Scripture. He denied the fundamental elements of the gospel, the vicarious nature of the cross, and the bodily resurrection of Christ from the dead. And his heretical theology carried immense weight in its impact on various parts of the evangelical world.

Truth and the defense of the truth is not something that is ambiguous, vague, uncertain, or confusing. The Word of God as a whole is never presented as being difficult to understand. What impinges itself on the truth is personal sin and personal preference over the Word of God. And it is for this very reason that the upholding, clarification, and vindication of biblical doctrine is so vital. And it takes courage and confidence in the face of false teaching to combat it. Athanasius was engaged in a nearly lifelong battle with the Arians. They claimed that Christ was a created being thus demeaning His divine nature and ultimately His divine authority. To this conflict Athanasius made this declaration,

*“Considering that this struggle is for our all...let us also make it our earnest care and aim to guard what we have received.”*

That is the unmistakable attitude of those called on to contend earnestly for the truth. It is an unwavering allegiance to God's Word as the sole authority of divine truth. In the light of that, however, there must be a reasonable balance of understanding what is important in the conflict. Without question there are what might be called "peripheral" issues. That is not in any way to denigrate any of Scripture, but simply to recognize that within Scripture that there are certainly non-negotiable cardinal doctrines and there are matters of lesser weight. For instance, forms of church government are important and vital to a healthy church, but they are not salvific in their nature. John MacArthur has stated the issue this way,

*"Now, obviously, we cannot righteously be dogmatic about every peripheral belief or matter of personal preference. Virtually no one believes every opinion is worth fighting about. Scripture draws the line with ample clarity; we're commanded to defend the faith once delivered to the saints; but we're forbidden to pick fights with another over secondary issues (Romans 14:1)."*

Everyone who accurately handles the Word of God often times has to decide what hill or what sword they are willing to die on. Every doctrinal issue is important, but not every issue is critical to the Christian faith. For instance, Romans 14 is devoted to the principle of spiritual liberty and [Romans 14:1-6](#) clearly and lucidly states the issue in this way,

**<sup>1</sup>Receive one who is weak in the faith, but not to disputes over doubtful things. <sup>2</sup>For one believes he may eat all things, but he who is weak eats *only* vegetables. <sup>3</sup>Let not him who eats despise him who does not eat, and let not him who does not eat judge him who eats; for God has received him. <sup>4</sup>Who are you to judge another's servant? To his own master he stands or falls. Indeed, he will be made to stand, for God is able to make him stand. <sup>5</sup>One person esteems *one* day above another; another esteems every day *alike*. Let each be fully convinced in his own mind. <sup>6</sup>He who ob-**

**serves the day, observes *it* to the Lord; and he who does not observe the day, to the Lord he does not observe *it*. He who eats, eats to the Lord, for he gives God thanks; and he who does not eat, to the Lord he does not eat, and gives God thanks.**

What this passage clearly allows for is someone who is "**weak in the faith**". Some are stronger than others and it certainly is not the issue to destroy a brother's faith over issues that are not critical. Allowance must be maintained for growing in the grace and knowledge of Christ.

What must be understood, however, is that when the church does not adequately deal with actual false teaching and heresy, it ultimately minimizes doctrine and eventually creates a theological environment that is much more prone to acquiescing to error. John Piper rightly states that biblical truth is "*what gives foundation and duration to all things*". Within the church there is the constant need and demand for a meaningful theological vigilance. It allows biblical doctrine to be preserved and developed as needed and it provides the Church the occasion to guard the theological doctrines that are inherent in and essential for the Christian faith.

History is replete with theological debates and controversies that strengthened the church and gave it a renewed spiritual vitality. The Great Awakening in the eighteenth century certainly confirms and validates this observation. It is apparent to anyone who follows current theology that the reformed and non-reformed debate rages on today in conservative, evangelical circles. Lines are being drawn and often the differences become unresolvable and relationships dissolved. But even in the midst of those conflicts, history continues to identify that it is in the very midst of the controversy that spiritual growth and further understanding are gleaned, and at times the debate and conflict become the seedbed for genuine revival within the church. Parker Williamson has aptly stated this when he wrote,

*"Historically, controversies that have swirled around the meaning and implications of the Gospel, far from damaging the Church, have contributed to its vitality. Like a refiner's fire, intense theological*

*debate has resulted in clarified belief, common vision, and invigorated ministry.”*

J. Gresham Machen came to the same conclusion and declared that *“every true revival is born in controversy, and leads to more controversy.”*

The point in all of this is simple – a true awakening of God’s people through spiritual conflict and controversy is what God often uses to bring about the revitalization of a stagnant church era. It is what causes individuals to come face to face with the glories of Scripture that reveal the triune God to them. Spiritual vagueness and indifference have no value except to demoralize and deflate spiritual life out of the church, so there must be definition and clarity. There must be impulses of divine duty and calling in the defense of the gospel. There must be a high level of passion and integrity in contending faithfully for what God has provided.

What are the spiritual responsibilities relative to heresy and false teaching within the church? That is a very encompassing question that certainly cannot be fully treated in a short article as this, but it must be noted that the conflict must be seen as a spiritual conflict that will always be present. Whether it is an individual, a denomination, a certain prevalent teaching being espoused, or a particular anti-Christian culture, it must be appreciated that the truth is not something that can be compromised. There has to be diligence in defending the faith. Obviously, [II Timothy 2:15-17\(a\)](#) is one of the classic passages dealing with this issue that provides the spiritual responsibility of everyone who teaches the Word of God.

**<sup>15</sup>Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth. <sup>16</sup>But shun profane and idle babblings, for they will increase to more ungodliness. <sup>17</sup>And their message will spread like cancer.**

The spiritual conflict in defending the truth is always one against ideas, not people. [II Corinthians](#)

[10:4-5](#) calls them “**strongholds**”, “**arguments**”, and “**every high thing**”.

**“For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, <sup>5</sup>casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ,**

The greatest of issues are at stake in this warfare simply because people become trapped by satanic arguments and lies and then spiritually imprisoned by false doctrines and man-made philosophies. So, the ultimate goal of the spiritual battle with heresy is to not only defend the truth of God, but to help liberate people from the spiritual fortresses that the enemy has inflicted on their lives. It must be clearly understood that sound, biblical doctrine is something that very often divides. It is the clarity and dogmatic nature of the truth that is simply offensive, provoking, and odious to people. The more clearly Scripture is preached and taught, the more convicting and reproofing the message will be – and very often that conviction and reproof simply are not appreciated. It is stunning how ignorant many professing Christians are of the Word of God, but much of that has been fostered on them by weak preaching and teaching of the Scriptures, or by an infatuation with new and novel ideas related to how church is to be implemented in a pluralistic culture. The church has replaced doctrinal integrity with storytelling and with preaching that is non-threatening and non-confrontational. And in the process, people’s knowledge and understanding of the Word of God has been greatly diminished and minimized as the life-transforming element that it actually is. And unfortunately for some people, the minimization of the Word of God in the local church has most likely caused irreparable damage to their lives. There are many Christians today who live under the notion that faithfulness and obedience to the Word of God is somehow optional and discretionary on their part. They sense no compulsion relative to the demanding lordship of Christ on their life.

Those who are pastors do not have the option to be shallow in their approach to Scripture. To be a teacher of the Word of God is a critical endeavor to say the least. It demands a level of diligence and perseverance that is not optional. Words must be contextualized and their original meaning must be understood. The grammatical

nature of a passage must be fully understood. There must be an understanding of the historical and cultural setting of Scripture, as well as a competence in doctrine and theology. A man must be familiar with the whole of Scripture. None of this is easy, but demanding. It requires long hours of study, diligence, endurance, and faithfulness. It requires sacrifice and foregoing personal pleasures and pursuits and cannot be taken lightly. Discipline is essential. And even with that kind of effort, there will still be areas of personal misunderstanding. Augustine, for instance, viewed the sacrament of baptism as regenerative, and unfortunately that view was maintained by the church until the time of the Reformation. We would be hard-pressed to call Augustine a heretic, but we at least should recognize the far ranging effect that even the error of great theologians can have on the overall health of the church. These are not minor issues.

For those who are serious relative to their calling, it must be understood that when God provides men of great ability to the church during times of heretical crises, that they are men who have been given an immeasurable understanding of the Word of God. The nuances of Scripture are often times subtle and require more than a mere reading of a passage to understand. Maintaining a proper theological and biblical balance is crucial. It would be an understatement to say that the truths of Scripture are profound, but because of that simple understanding, the responsibilities placed on those who preach and teach the Word of God are without comparison. And a vital part of that divine responsibility is for each pastor to protect their flock from any teaching that is contrary to Scripture. No one will accurately understand everything about every doctrine. Everyone is human and prone to sin. It is always possible for the sincerest of men to make a mistake relative to the truth and teach something that is quite inaccurate. As a pastor, dean, and theological professor, this writer is humbled by the simple fact that his position on various fundamental doctrines have changed over the years. Areas previously believed to be doctrinally correct have been revised because of a greater biblical understanding. All Christians grow in the grace and knowledge of Christ, so there has to be that latitude given. Many are still young in the faith and are growing both spiritually and theologically and therefore grace must be continually

extended to them in that growth process.

But nevertheless, there must be a diligence and a spiritual propensity to guard the truth at all cost. On an issue of secondary importance, great care and love must be exercised. But when it comes to the cardinal doctrines of the Christian faith, truth and accuracy must prevail. There is no place for creativity and imagination when teaching the Word of God and when providing the careful exposition that only diligent study can produce. If the truth were fully appreciated, no one is sufficient for these things apart from a deep and abiding work of God in them. In his book entitled [He Is Not Silent: Preaching in a Postmodern World](#), Albert Mohler, Jr. has eloquently defined what the faithful minister is to do. He is to read the text and explain the text. He has to make a passage clear and allow it to reprove and exhort as needed because people's lives depend on accurately hearing the Word of God. He states it this way,

*“In the end, our calling as preachers is really very simple. We study, we stand before our people, we read the text, and we explain it. We reprove, rebuke, exhort, encourage, and teach – and then we do it all again and again and again.”*

Obviously much is at stake in the issue of heresy. It is not a superficial issue within the church. To the contrary, it is always something that threatens the very life of the church and ultimately the individuals within that church. The very nature of heresy is that at its core it is a fundamental misunderstanding of who God is, and therefore will ultimately lead to a misunderstanding of what God has done and what He is going to do. When identifying what is genuinely Christian, it must be appreciated that to be biblical one must place their full confidence in the inspiration, authority, and complete sufficiency of the Scriptures. Almost every Protestant confession of faith since the time of the Reformation has included this cardinal and foundational truth. Unfortunately, when believers resort to what would be called extra-biblical means such as tradition and other revelatory experiences in order to validate the truth of Scripture or to discern the sovereign will of God, what happens is that they dilute and marginalize the Scriptures. [Isaiah 40:8](#) states the priority and sufficiency of Scripture this way,

**<sup>8</sup> The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God stands forever.”**

The New Testament explains it this way in [II Timothy 3:16-17](#),

**<sup>16</sup>All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, <sup>17</sup>that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.**

The task is clear. If the church will remain faithful in dealing with heresy, false teaching, and false teachers within their midst, then the result will inevitably be a spiritual cleansing that includes both spiritual cleansing and reformation. Inevitably in the sovereignty of God, He often uses heresy as a spiritual means of driving the church out of her complacency and spiritual lethargy. Serious doctrinal thinking is at a rare premium in many churches and has become continuously and culturally subordinated to a feeling oriented theology that majors on experience as opposed to majoring on doctrine. The faithful minister of the Word of God simply cannot shrink from his divine calling to “**contend earnestly for the faith**”. Dealing with heresy can be a very agonizing effort for those who embrace it, but defending the cardinal doctrines of the Christian faith is an essential element of teaching the truth. I Peter 3:15 states it this way,

**<sup>15</sup>But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts, and always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear...**

The idea of giving a “**defense**” is a technical legal term that spoke of the attorney for the defense presenting a verbal defense for his client. And the word picture provides a clear and defining delineation of how those who are committed to the Word of God are to handle it - they are to defend it, to guard it, to protect it, to preserve it, and to uphold it continually! Defending the truth against heretical and misleading doctrinal error is a major characterization of the task of the ministry. Teaching and preaching the truth without defending the truth is a form of spiritual cowardice that opens the door for the undermining of fundamental Christian doctrine within the local church. It would be naïve to not

recognize the immense susceptibility that the modern church has fostered for heresy in its midst. Biblical ignorance within the local churches may be deeper and more widespread than at any time since the Protestant Reformation. If someone were to compare a typical sermon of today with one written prior to 1850, they would be shocked at the theological depth that is missing from modern messages designed to appeal to people with short attention spans. Men simply lack confidence in the power that is within the Word of God. And because of that, a kind of cultural heresy has developed that minimizes the Word of God and replaces it with shallow and simplified cultural preferences. The result is a spiritual climate that is comfortable with minimizing and even eliminating absolute truth altogether.

May God be gracious in raising up a generation of faithful men who will be vigilant and faithful in preserving and guarding the truth that has been entrusted to their care. May we fully and passionately embrace Paul’s exhortation to his beloved disciple in [I Timothy 6:20-21](#) and make it the goal of our ministry to do likewise.

**<sup>20</sup>O Timothy! Guard what was committed to your trust, avoiding the profane and idle babblings and contradictions of what is falsely called knowledge—<sup>21</sup>by professing it some have strayed concerning the faith. Grace be with you. Amen.**

#### ENDNOTES:

<sup>1</sup>MacArthur, I Timothy, 136-137.

<sup>2</sup>Hannah, 11.

<sup>3</sup>Precept, webpage.

<sup>4</sup>Precept, webpage.

<sup>5</sup>Precept, webpage.

<sup>6</sup>Galan, 8-9.

<sup>7</sup>McGrath, vi.

<sup>8</sup>Encarta, webpage.

<sup>9</sup>Pfeiffer, 781.

<sup>10</sup>Piper, 18.

<sup>11</sup>Practical, webpage.

<sup>12</sup>MacArthur, Truth, 181.

<sup>13</sup>McGrath, 1-2.

<sup>14</sup>Berger, 30-31.

<sup>15</sup>Hannah, 339-340.

<sup>16</sup>Hannah, 19.

<sup>17</sup>MacArthur, Truth, 158.

<sup>18</sup>Murray, 294.

<sup>19</sup>Piper, 20.

<sup>20</sup>MacArthur, Truth, 155-156.

<sup>21</sup>Piper, 22.

- <sup>22</sup>Piper, 30.  
<sup>23</sup>Piper, 30.  
<sup>24</sup>MacArthur, Truth, 180.  
<sup>25</sup>MacArthur, Truth, 204.  
<sup>26</sup>Hanko, 2.  
<sup>27</sup>Hanko, 171.  
<sup>28</sup>Hanko, 3.  
<sup>29</sup>Mohler, 63-64.  
<sup>30</sup>Galan, 12.  
<sup>31</sup>McGoldrick, 179-180.  
<sup>32</sup>Hanko, 4.  
<sup>33</sup>Lutzer, 242.  
<sup>34</sup>Wuest, 235.  
<sup>35</sup>MacArthur, Truth, 165-166.

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