



The Believers Call to Judge part 3 – Naming Names

In part 2 we studied Paul's warning to the elders in Ephesus that wolves would arise in their midst. In this final segment of this series we shall examine Paul's practice and teaching regarding correcting false teachers that arise in the church, including naming them by name.

PAUL'S WARNING COMES TRUE

Timothy became a key church leader in Ephesus where Paul had warned the elders about wolves. Paul's warning came true. We learn from the epistles to Timothy that false teachers did arise, some of them likely were elders themselves. This provides the background for Paul's admonitions in Timothy about correcting error, upholding the standard of sound doctrine, and the qualifications of true elders.

Paul specified to Timothy who the false teachers were by name:

This command I entrust to you, Timothy, my son, in accordance with the prophecies previously made concerning you, that by them you may fight the good fight, keeping faith and a good conscience, which some have rejected and suffered shipwreck in regard to their faith. Among these are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have delivered over to Satan, so that they may be taught not to blaspheme. (1Timothy 1:18 – 20)

The reason false teachers are dealt with publicly is that their teaching is public. One does not need two or three witnesses or a private meeting to determine if a public teaching is Biblical or not. Everyone who heard them knows what they believe and teach. At issue is whether the teaching is Biblical. False teaching damages the church, and it cannot be tolerated. In the Greek, it says they made shipwreck "in regard to **the faith**." The definite article indicates that it was the content of their teaching that was wrong. It was not in accordance with "*the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints*" (**Jude 1:3**).

Paul, after giving instructions about the qualifications of elders, reminds Timothy of the key role of the church: "*but in case I am delayed, I write so that you may know how one ought to conduct himself in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and support of the truth*" (**1Timothy 3:15**). Elders and pastors who disregard sound doctrine cannot be tolerated. When they teach false doctrine, their conduct is unacceptable. They are responsible to make sure the church is the "pillar and support of the truth."

Paul predicts that in the later times people will give heed to "*deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons*" (**1Timothy 4:1**). Paul urges Timothy to instruct the church about this important matter of warning against false teachings and promoting the truth: "*In pointing out these things to the brethren, you will be a good servant of Christ Jesus, constantly nourished on the words of the faith and of the sound doctrine which you have been following*" (**1Timothy 4:6**). Today many despise the very term doctrine and accuse those of being wrongly motivated who think it is important to correct false doctrine and espouse true doctrine. This is not at all what Paul told Timothy: "*Pay close attention to yourself and to your teaching; persevere in these things; for as you do this you will insure*

salvation both for yourself and for those who hear you” (1Timothy 4:16). Teachings have consequences--eternal consequences. If false teaching is allowed into the church, peoples’ salvation is in jeopardy.

The duty of elders and pastors to protect the flock from false teaching, and to nourish the flock with sound teaching always has been foremost. But in the last days, the battle intensifies. We are living in an age of delusion and apostasy. So now, more than ever, we must confront false teaching and not allow it into the church. Paul made this admonition and prediction:

I solemnly charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by His appearing and His kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires; and will turn away their ears from the truth, and will turn aside to myths. (2Timothy 4:1-4)

If people do not want to hear sound doctrine because of end time delusion, preach sound doctrine to them! The ability and willingness to do so is a requirement for elders: “[H]olding fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching, that he may be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict” (Titus 1:9).

The duties of pastors and elders are very clear in Acts 20 and the Pastoral Epistles. They are to teach true doctrine, correct false doctrine, and protect the flock from the wolves. Sadly, those who do so today are often accused of being divisive or sinning because they have “judged” when Jesus told us not to judge. This is a category error. We are not to judge motives or relative degrees of righteousness, but we must judge public teaching.

PAUL PUBLICLY REBUKES PETER

In Galatians 2, Paul recounts an incident where he publicly corrected Peter:

But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. For prior to the coming of certain men from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles; but when they came, he began to withdraw and hold himself aloof, fearing the party of the circumcision. And the rest of the Jews joined him in hypocrisy, with the result that even Barnabas was carried away by their hypocrisy. But when I saw that they were not straightforward about the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas in the presence of all, “If you, being a Jew, live like the Gentiles and not like the Jews, how is it that you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?” (Galatians 2:11-14)

Paul publicly rebuked Peter for publicly denying in action what Paul knew Peter privately believed. Paul called Peter’s actions, “[being] not straightforward about the truth of the gospel.” Peter’s actions implied that Gentile Christians were still “unclean” unless they submitted to Jewish food laws. This is a denial of what was decided at the Jerusalem

council in Acts 15. They had determined there to not require that the Gentiles follow the Law of Moses.

The irony is that Peter himself was the spokesman who convinced the church that this was right:

And after there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, 'Brethren, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He also did to us; and He made no distinction between us and them, cleansing their hearts by faith. Now therefore why do you put God to the test by placing upon the neck of the disciples a yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? But we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they also are.' (Acts 15:7-11)

Paul knew that he and Peter believed the same thing; they had both agreed to the decision of the council. There was no reason to go to Peter privately to correct his belief. Paul immediately dealt with the issue publicly, *"in the presence of all."* Peter's public practice negated his private confession. Being "straightforward about the gospel" means that what we preach and practice in public must be the same as the beliefs we hold privately. The New Testament calls any disjuncture between the two, "hypocrisy."

What happens often today is that public teachers proclaim false doctrines. When confronted about this, they point to an orthodox statement of faith. But what they teach publicly is damaging to those who hear them. Whatever they may claim to believe, their public false teaching needs to be publicly confronted.

WHAT WE CAN AND CANNOT JUDGE

We have seen that we are not to judge motives. We are not to judge relative degrees of personal piety. What these have in common is the factor that they are unknown. Motives are hidden. Only God knows the heart. We do not know who is more righteous or pious than whom.

We are not to accuse someone of sin without two or three witnesses. The criterion for two or three witnesses exists to keep one person from bringing false witness against another and having them wrongly come under church discipline. But if there are witnesses, the facts are considered "known" and judgment can be made. In every situation, the hope is for repentance and restoration of the individual. Paul wrote, *"This is the third time I am coming to you. Every fact is to be confirmed by the testimony of two or three witnesses"* (2Corinthians 13:1). As verse 2 of this passage shows, the issue was about "those who have sinned."

There is another issue about wrong judgment. According to Romans 14 we are not to judge matters of conscience that are not universal commands. Here is what Paul wrote:

Now accept the one who is weak in faith, but not for the purpose of passing judgment on his opinions. One man has faith that he may eat all things, but he who

is weak eats vegetables only. Let not him who eats regard with contempt him who does not eat, and let not him who does not eat judge him who eats, for God has accepted him. Who are you to judge the servant of another? To his own master he stands or falls; and stand he will, for the Lord is able to make him stand. (Romans 14:1-4)

Later in this chapter of Romans Paul warns against judging one's brother on matters that fall under the category of Christian liberty—food and the observance of certain days (**Romans 14:4-10**). It would be wrong to exclude a weaker brother from fellowship because he has a more active conscience in certain areas where the Bible legitimately allows liberty. But, if that weaker brother demanded that his scruples be followed by everyone else as a condition of fellowship, he would become an illegitimate lawgiver and should be withstood and ultimately, if he remained unrepentant, expelled from fellowship.

What is wrong with illegitimate law-givers is that they are claiming to know that someone is sinning when they are not. This is tantamount to making one's self God's lawgiver. To judge like this is to claim to know (that some certain action of another person is sin) what one does not know.

However we can judge what is true or false, sinful or righteous, based on what has been revealed in Scripture. Publicly proclaimed teachings can be judged to be false and should be publicly refuted. Paul did this. Paul told Timothy to do this. Paul gave all elders the responsibility to do this. The church must be warned about wolves when they arise, whether from inside the church or without. Likewise prophecy must be judged by the objective criteria of the Bible (**1Corinthians 14:29; 1Thessalonians 5:21**).

There is important action to be taken: We can and we must judge what we can know objectively, but we must not judge what we cannot know objectively. Ask yourself when you make a judgment, "can I know this with certainty"? If the answer is no, we cannot judge. If the answer is yes and the issue concerns Biblical doctrine or sin, we not only may judge; we must judge. Publicly proclaimed teaching falls into this category.

CONCLUSION

Too often people wrongly claim that if an author writes a book, or a preacher preaches a sermon, that no one is permitted to make judgments about the contents of these teachings without first asking the author's or preacher's permission. Paul did not ask Peter's permission to publicly rebuke him nor did he ask Hymenaeus' and Alexander's permission to rebuke them for teaching false doctrine. Claiming that false teachers have the right to spread their teachings throughout the body of Christ until such time that a Matthew 18 procedure is set up and implemented is a category error. Matthew 18 concerns the accusation of sin brought by one member of a congregation against another. This requires two or three witness if personal confrontation is ineffective.

Teachings that are published far and wide do not need two or three witnesses; everyone can see what is being taught for themselves. These teachings must be judged to be biblical or unbiblical. Those who bring false teaching should be publicly corrected. If they continue to bring false teaching and disregard the faith once for all delivered to the saints, they should be considered wolves and the flock must be guarded from them.

Critical Issues Commentary

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