

False Doctrines of the Early Church

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Introduction

It is true that Christians are not always going to agree on every Biblical issue. And perhaps we ought indeed be more tolerant of one another's beliefs in regards to those issues that are not essential to salvation. However, this does not mean that we ought to blatantly forego a love for truth and a desire to study and search the Scriptures for such.

In John 14:15, Jesus said, "If you love me, you will keep My commandments." He went on to say that the Holy Spirit would be sent to inspire the writers of Scripture so that we would know those things that are important to our Lord. And if such things are important to Him, then they ought to be important to us as well.

Doctrine that is to be Taught and Obeyed

Scripture itself shows that doctrine is important. There are numerous references to truthful doctrine:

- Sound doctrine (Titus 2:1)
- Sound words and doctrine conforming to godliness (1 Timothy 6:3)
- Words of faith and sound doctrine (1 Timothy 4:6)
- Doctrine of Christ (2 John 9)
- Doctrine of God (Titus 2:10)
- Doctrine of the Lord (Acts 13:12)
- The apostles' doctrine (Acts 2:42)
- The gospel (Romans 1:16)
- The truth (John 17:17)
- The faith (2 Corinthians 13:5)
- The word (2 Timothy 4:2)

And what does the Bible tell us to do with truthful doctrine?

- Read it, meditate upon it (1 Timothy 4:13, 16) "Until I come, give attention to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation and teaching. 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."
- Hold onto it (2 Timothy 1:13-14) "Retain the standard of sound words (KJV: "Hold fast the form of sound words") which you have heard from me, in the faith and love which are in Christ Jesus. Guard, through the Holy Spirit who dwells in us, the treasure which has been entrusted to you."
- Handle it accurately (2 Timothy 2:15) "Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, handling accurately the word of truth."
- Live according to it (Titus 2:10) "Adorn the doctrine of God our Savior in every respect."
- Fight for it (Jude 3) "Earnestly contend for the faith."
- Teach it to others (Titus 2:1) "Speak the things which are fitting for sound doctrine."
- Preach it to everyone (Mark 16:15) "Preach the gospel to every creature."

The Character of False Teachers

As mentioned, Christians are not always going to agree on every Biblical issue. There will be misunderstandings and, as a result, Christians who unknowingly teach things that are erroneous. Acts 18:24-28 tells about Apollos, “an eloquent man” who was “mighty in the Scriptures.”

But he was also misunderstood some things about the way of the Lord. He was not condemned as a false teacher, but rather he was taken aside and taught more fully by loving Christians.

Nevertheless, there are many passages in Scripture condemning false teaching. What is the difference? Apollos was a sincere (albeit misinformed) Christian trying to teach and preach according to his understanding of the truth. His motives were pure; he was obviously preaching out of love for Christ and the lost.

Those who are condemned in Scripture, however, are those who are apparently intentionally misleading and misguiding people by their teaching. Their motives were not pure; their hearts were not committed to God and His truth. And thus they and their teachings were severely condemned.

Jesus Warned Against False Doctrine

Jesus Himself taught that doctrine is indeed important. In Matthew 7:15 He said, “Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves.” In Matthew 15:8-9 Jesus strongly condemned those who were “teaching for doctrines the commandments of men.” He further condemned the false teaching of the scribes, Pharisees, and Sadducees in Matthew 16:6-12 and Matthew 23:15.

He warned in Matthew 24:4-5, 24, “See to it that no one misleads you. For many will come in My name, saying, ‘I am the Christ,’ and will mislead many. For false Christs and false prophets will arise and will show great signs and wonders, so as to mislead, if possible, even the elect.” (See also Mark 13:21-22 and Luke 11:52.)

Paul Warned Against False Doctrine

Paul also gave numerous warnings against false doctrine. Paul warned the Ephesian elders in Acts 20:28-30, “After my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them.” In Romans 16:17-18, Paul said, “Now I urge you, brethren, keep your eye on those who cause dissensions and hindrances contrary to the teaching which you learned, and turn away from them. For such men are slaves, not of our Lord Christ but of their own appetites; and by their smooth and flattering speech they deceive the hearts of the unsuspecting.”

In 2 Corinthians 11:3-4, 13-15, Paul was greatly concerned that the church in Corinth might be led away and deceived by those who were “false apostles, deceitful workers, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ.” He said in Ephesians 4:14 that some are “children, tossed here and there by waves, and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming.”

He sadly declares in 2 Timothy 4:3-4, “For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate to themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires; and will turn away their ears from the truth, and will turn aside to myths.”

The False Doctrine of Jewish Legalism

Acts 15:1 describes one of the major false doctrines that plagued the early church. “Some men came down from Judea and began teaching the brethren, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.””

The false teachers are sometimes called Judaizers because they taught that Christians also had to submit to certain rites of the Jewish Law in order to be saved. They held circumcision and the Law of Moses to still be binding.

Paul strongly condemns this teaching in many of his letters. In Galatians 1:6-9, he said that some had already begun to pervert the gospel of Christ. The church there was warned not to accept any other gospel than that which they had already been given. Paul reminds them in Galatians 3:1-5 that they are greatly mistaken to think salvation can come through works of the Law. He bluntly tells them in Galatians 5:1-12 that they will indeed fall from grace if they listen to the false Judaizing teachers.

So adamant is Paul about this that he actually calls these false teachers “dogs, ... evil workers, ... [and] the false circumcision” (Philippians 3:2). He appears to be talking about these same false teachers (although he may also touch on the issue of gnosticism) in 1 Timothy 1:3-7 when he says, “Instruct certain men not to teach strange doctrines.” He says in Titus 1:10-16, “[They] must be silenced (KJV: “mouths must be stopped”) because they are upsetting whole families, teaching things they should not teach.” He further says they are “detestable and disobedient, and worthless for any good deed.” (See also Hebrews 13:9.)

The False Doctrine of Gnosticism

The word gnosticism comes from the Greek word *gnosis*, which means knowledge, and is perhaps directly alluded to only one time in 1 Timothy 6:20-21: “O Timothy, guard what has been entrusted to you, avoiding worldly and empty chatter and the opposing arguments of what is falsely called “knowledge”—which some have professed and thus gone astray from the faith.”

The false doctrine of gnosticism had many variations and involved widely diversified sects. The main emphasis, however, as the name implies, was a claim to knowledge that ordinary believers did not have. They regarded their special knowledge and enlightenment as superior to the faith of others.

Paul is likely dealing with this issue in 1 Corinthians chapter 8. Some in the church in Corinth were apparently trying to justify their participation in heathen feasts. They argued, “We all have knowledge,” but Paul responds, “Knowledge makes arrogant” (v1). He also says, “Not all men have this knowledge” (v7). He further explains in v10, “For if someone see you, who have knowledge (is he perhaps being sarcastic?), dining in an idol’s temple, will not his conscience, if he is weak, be strengthened to eat things sacrificed to idols?” He may also have this movement in mind in 1 Corinthians 13:2 when he says, “[Even] if I ... know all mysteries and all knowledge, ... but do not have love, I am nothing.”

In 2 Timothy 2:14-16, Paul tells Timothy to warn others “not to wrangle about words, which is useless, and leads to the ruin of the hearers.... But avoid worldly and empty chatter, for it will lead to further ungodliness.” He rebuts the gnostic teachers in Colossians 2:2-4 when he talks about “a true knowledge of God’s mystery, that is, Christ Himself, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. I say this in order that no one may delude you with persuasive argument.” (See also Revelation 2:24.)

The False Doctrine of Asceticism

One of the offshoots of gnosticism was the erroneous teaching of asceticism. It was contended that sin is inherent in the material substance of the body, and therefore the body must needs be punished in some way. Thus came the practice of extreme self-denial and self-abuse, perhaps in an attempt to reach a higher level of purity and godliness. (The theory and practice of asceticism has appeared throughout the centuries not only in Christian religions, but also in Hinduism, Buddhism, etc.)

Paul clearly condemns this false teaching in Colossians 2:18-23: “Let no one keep defrauding you of your prize by delighting in self-abasement... If you have died with Christ to the elementary principles of the world, why, as if you were living in the world, do you submit yourself to decrees, such as, “Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch!” (which all refer to things destined to perish with the using)—in accordance with the commandments and teachings of men? These are matters which have, to be sure, the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion and self-abasement and severe treatment of the body, but are of no value against fleshly indulgence.”

Paul may also be referring to this in 1 Timothy 4:1-4: “But the Spirit explicitly says that in later times some will fall away from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons, by means of the hypocrisy of liars seared in their own conscience as with a branding iron, men who forbid marriage and advocate abstaining from foods, which God has created to be gratefully shared in by those who believe and know the truth. For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected, if it is received with gratitude.”

The False Doctrine of Antinomianism

At the other extreme was the doctrine of antinomianism. Proponents of this movement advocated a separation of the body and soul so as to allow the body to do whatever it desires while supposedly maintaining a purity of the soul. Thus such false teachers instructed others that they could participate in all kinds of sinful pleasures and still be spotless in their souls before God.

Paul spoke about such people in 2 Timothy 3:2-9. He called them “lovers of self, lovers of money, boastful, arrogant, ... holding to a form of godliness, although they have denied its power; and avoid such men as these.” In v13 he said, “But evil men and impostors will proceed from bad to worse, deceived and being deceived.” It may be these false teachers who persuaded some to “continue in sin that grace might increase” (Romans 6:1-7).

Peter said, “But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will also be false teachers among you, who will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing swift destruction upon themselves. And many will follow their sensuality, and because of them the way of the truth will be maligned; and in their greed they will exploit you with false words; their judgment from long ago is not idle, and their destruction is not asleep” (2 Peter 2:1-3).

He further said, “They count it a pleasure to revel in the daytime. They are stains and blemishes, reveling in their deceptions, as they carouse with you, having eyes full of adultery and that never cease from sin, enticing unstable souls, having a heart trained in greed, accursed children” (2 Peter 2:13-14).

“For speaking out arrogant words of vanity they entice by fleshly desires, by sensuality, those who barely escape from the ones who live in error, promising them freedom while they themselves are slaves of corruption; for by what a man is overcome, by this he is enslaved” (2 Peter 2:18-19).

John makes it clear in 1 John 3:4-10 that a Christian cannot be one who continually abides in sin. A Christian must turn away from sin and continually strive to overcome it (see 1 John 1:7 about walking in the light). He said, “By this the children of God and the children of the devil are obvious: anyone who does not practice righteousness is not of God” (v10).

Finally, the letter of Jude speaks concerning those who advocated this false doctrine. He says, “For certain persons have crept in unnoticed, those who were long beforehand marked out for this condemnation, ungodly persons who turn the grace of our God into licentiousness and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ” (Jude 4). He speaks clearly of their destructive behaviour and condemnation throughout the rest of the letter (see especially v8, v16-19; see also Revelation 2:6, 14-15).

The False Doctrine of Docetism

Another teaching that developed out of gnosticism was that of docetism. It was reasoned that God could have nothing to do with matter; thus it was inconceivable that Christ, as a truly divine being, could actually come in the flesh. Docetism therefore denied the true incarnation of Christ.

The apostle John deals with this considerably in his letters. In 1 John 2:18ff, John reminded his readers of the warning about the coming of the “antichrist.” He says in v18, “Even now many antichrists have arisen.” He describes this false teaching in v22-23: “Who is a liar but the one who denies that Jesus is the Christ? This is the antichrist, the one who denies the Father and the Son. Whoever denies the Son does not have the Father; the one who confesses the Son has the Father also.” He says in v26, “These things I have written to you concerning those who are trying to deceive you.”

John continues in 1 John 4:1-3: "Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world. By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God; and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God."

He writes again of these deceivers in 2 John 8-11: "Anyone who goes too far and does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God; the one who abides in the teaching, he has both the Father and the Son. If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your house, and do not give him a greeting (KJV: "neither bid him God speed")." (See also Colossians 2:8-10.)

Conclusion

As seen, some wrongly espoused such errors as Jewish legalism (do it the way we've always done it), gnosticism (only we know how to do it), asceticism (don't do what we think you shouldn't do), antinomianism (do anything you want to do), and docetism (don't believe the truth about Christ).

It appears that such false teaching was abundant in the days of the early church, but let it clearly be recognized that it was always strongly condemned. May we be committed today to "search the Scriptures daily" (Acts 17:11) to make sure we hold only to the truth.