

Christ's Warning Concerning False Teachers

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Introduction

At the present time a number of “conservative” Reformed denominations are drifting theologically toward a dark and uncertain future. The decline is not primarily due to syncretism with culture or blatant ethical violations but rather is rooted in theological subversion from within. This subversion is coming from pastors, writers, popular speakers, seminary professors, and publishers all of whom claim to adhere to the Reformed faith. This situation makes our topic very relevant: Christ's warning against false teachers. This warning is found in Matthew 16:6: “Then Jesus said to them, ‘Take heed and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the Sadducees.’” If we are to avoid making a shipwreck of the faith we must carefully heed this solemn warning from the lips of our Lord. As we study this warning we will consider: (a) the context and preliminary comments; (b) the dangers of false teaching; (c) the nature and manner of doctrinal subversion and (d) ways to stop doctrinal subversion. May God protect us from the leaven of false doctrine and help us to warn others regarding false teachings in religion.

Context and Preliminary Comments

There are a number of things that we need to discuss before we consider the command itself.

First, our Lord's warning came after a confrontation with His chief enemies, the Pharisees and Sadducees (Mt. 16:1-4). Interestingly, the warning was not immediate but occurred after the disciples had gone to the other side of Galilee (Mt. 16:5). This delay indicates that our Lord's warning was the result of contemplating what had occurred earlier in the day. Our Lord's emphatic statement was premeditated. It shows a very strong pastoral concern for the disciples. The disciples were concerned about how to get their next meal while the Lord of glory is contemplating the doctrinal integrity of the teachers in His church. Our Lord's concern stands in sharp contrast to the lack of concern for doctrinal integrity that exists in many churches today. In modern evangelical churches the primary concern is on having a wonderful experience or on making worship relevant to our post-modern culture.

Secondly, our Lord's warning is directed to the twelve apostles. It is not directed to backsliders, new believers, unreliable professors or ungodly persons but to the cream of the crop. The twelve apostles had forsaken all to follow Jesus. These were men who were dedicated to the Savior; who had been under His personal care and training for quite some time. These were men who had absolutely no sympathy for the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees. There is no indication whatsoever that the disciples were being influenced by any false teachers. Yet, it is the apostles who receive this strong warning.

The fact that our Lord's admonition is directed to the apostles tells us that no one should consider himself to be immune to the influence of false doctrine. There is never a

time in our walk with Christ when we can let down our guard. There is not one person who can claim a level of knowledge, sanctification or theological maturity that protects him from the doctrinal assaults of Satan. Even the most godly and knowledgeable believers are able to err in doctrine. In fact, the more we understand about God, Christ, faith and life, the more we realize how feeble our knowledge really is. Therefore, regarding doctrinal matters we must be very humble. We must be very prayerful and careful regarding the doctrinal achievements on which we stand. “Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall” (Prov. 16:18). And it is often pride and arrogance regarding one’s own knowledge, abilities and genius that has caused many a theologian and pastor to be seduced by Satan.

It is not an accident of history that many dangerous heresies originated with pastors or teachers who were the brightest, most creative minds in seminaries or colleges. Indeed, the greatest heresies that have caused severe havoc in Christ’s church have all come from respected ministers of the gospel; from men notable for their teaching ability or intellectual skills.

We can see the need for humility and watchfulness just by recalling the notable shipwrecks of the faith in our own day. A number of Reformed families, pastors and teachers (e.g., Scott Hahn, Franky Schaeffer, Gerry Metatics) have succumbed to the leaven of Roman Catholicism and the Eastern Orthodox Church. When we hear of people who were thoroughly Reformed in doctrine embracing soul-damning heresies we scratch our heads and wonder how? How could people depart from the purity of doctrine and worship of the Reformed faith and embrace works salvation and rank idolatry? The sad reality is that such departures happen more often than we think. Being Reformed or Presbyterian does not make a person immune to doctrinal apostasy. The fact that Jesus saw the need to warn His closest disciples coupled with the reality that doctrinal departures are common in our own day ought to humble and sober us. Let us not trust in our own hearts, or doctrinal attainments, or theological superiority to sloppy modern evangelicalism, for Reformed people can and do embrace false doctrines. If Jesus’ warning applies to the apostles, the leaders of the church, then it certainly applies to us.

The Dangers of False Teaching

Having noted the context and audience let us examine Christ’s exhortation to His disciples. Jesus said, “Take heed and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees” (Mt. 16:6). In verse 12, the leaven is identified as the teaching of Pharisees and Sadducees. Of all the things that could have threatened the apostles, such as political and religious persecution or threats to life and limb, our Lord concerns Himself with doctrine. Why is the Savior so troubled about doctrine? Such a concern is certainly not in vogue today. The attitude among most contemporary evangelicals is that doctrine is not practical. Doctrine doesn’t grow the church. Doctrine doesn’t meet people’s needs; it doesn’t feed the hungry or clothe the poor. Today we are even told that doctrine is bad because it divides rather than unites professing Christians. Also, we are told that in a post-modern culture people are not accustomed to words or doctrines but rather with visual images and experiences. Thus, to meet people where they are, teaching, preaching and doctrine must be placed on the back burner and replaced with drama, music, film, art and dance.

While most of modern Christendom has rejected the importance of doctrine and the centrality of preaching in public worship, correct doctrine was an obsession for both Christ and the apostles (cf. Ac. 20:28-31; Rom. 16:17; 1 Tim. 1:3-4; 6:3-4; 2 Tim. 4:2-4; Tit. 1:9; Mt. 1:9; Mt. 5:21-48; 7:15-27; 2 Jn. 9-11). There are many reasons why our Lord regarded doctrine so highly. (a) Correct doctrine is foundational to biblical Christianity. The system of doctrine taught by Scripture defines God, Christ, salvation, ethics, sin and *everything* a person needs for faith and life (2 Tim. 3:15-17). Without correct doctrine the object of our faith is false and all is lost. (b) Correct doctrine is crucial because false and man-made doctrine drives out, replaces and nullifies true teaching (Mt. 15:1-9; Col. 2:8, 20-23). The apostles had the responsibility to lay the foundation of the church by organizing congregations and by delivering their inspired teachings and writings. If the shepherds became corrupted, so would their followers. Therefore, we can understand Jesus' very strong concern with purity of doctrine. We hope and pray that some day many of the modern evangelical churches will share that concern.

Now that we understand the importance of biblical doctrine we need to ask the question: Why does our Lord single out the Pharisees and Sadducees? One reason is that these groups were the two dominant religious parties in Israel. The Pharisees were very popular with the people, while the Sadducees held sway in the aristocracy. Another reason for the warning is that in God's providence these two groups are representative of the two main heretical tendencies that are found throughout history.

The Pharisees' doctrine was dangerous because they founded their authority upon oral law or human traditions and as a result were legalistic, self-righteous and formalistic. The Pharisees believed that in addition to the written law there was also an authoritative oral law passed down through history by various leaders, prophets and rabbis. While they formally accepted the authority of the Old Testament, their traditions in practice were more important than the Bible because they were used to interpret the Scriptures. As a result they held to a number of heresies.

They believed in salvation by law-keeping. Consequently, they denied salvation by grace through faith alone. They, in practice, denied the doctrine of original sin and depravity. The Pharisees also redefined the law, externalizing it so that (in their mind) an outward, formal obedience to the law could be achieved. They "fenced" the law with all sorts of silly man-made rules and regulations so that sanctification consisted in ritual observances instead of learning and obeying the law itself. In the New Testament there are many references to the absurd detailed legalism of the Pharisees: the tithing of herbs (Mt. 23:23; Lk. 11:42); the wearing of tassels and phylacteries (Mt. 23:5); the obsession with ritual purity (e.g., Mk. 7:1ff.); frequent fasting (Mt. 9:14); and, silly and arbitrary rules surrounding oaths (Mt. 23:5). As Jesus said they strain out a gnat and swallow a camel (Mt. 23:24). The Pharisees took pride in their Jewish heritage and greatly over-emphasized their privileged status as Jews (Rom. 2:17ff.) at the expense of the necessity of saving faith and conversion. Their religion was very external; good works were placed on display to be seen and praised by men (Mt. 6:1-6, 16; 23:5). Their religious leaders loved pomp, status and power (Mt. 23:6).

Yet for all their talk of the law; love of ceremonies and religiosity, the Pharisees are strongly condemned by Christ. By their traditions they nullified God's law (Mt. 15:3ff; Mk. 7:8-9). The Pharisees and their followers will not enter the kingdom of God (Mt. 23:13). They are blind leaders of the blind (Mt. 15:14), hypocrites (Mk. 7:6), whose

hearts are far from God (Mt. 15:8). They are full of inner corruption (Mt. 23:27ff) and are guilty of persecuting the true people of God (Mt. 23:34-35). Thus, they are designated as “the synagogue of Satan” by Jesus (Rev. 2:9). Our Lord had a good reason to say the apostles, “Look out and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees.”

The Sadducees’ doctrine was also dangerous because of their willingness to subject the Bible to finite reason, pragmatism and skepticism. While the Pharisees added to God’s word, the Sadducees detracted from it. They were the modernists of their day. The Sadducees did not place the Old Testament historical and prophetic books on the same level with the five books of Moses. They did not believe in the resurrection of the body, in the existence of angelic beings, or even that man had a soul or spirit (Ac. 23:8). The Sadducees attempted to sway people to their own position by using clever arguments that made a mockery of the Scriptures. When they tried such skeptical reasoning upon our Lord concerning the resurrection (Mt. 22:23-33; Mk. 12:18-27; Lk. 20:27-28), Christ rebuked them saying that they did not know the power of God or the Scriptures. He even quoted the Pentateuch (Ex. 3:6) which they accepted as authoritative to prove the resurrection. The Sadducees were worldly political pragmatists. Because they rejected the after-life and the rewards or penalties of a final judgment, they had no problem making compromises politically, ethically or pragmatically to keep their present power, pleasure and prestige. John the Baptist calls the Sadducees “a brood of vipers” (Mt. 3:7). While the Sadducees had some strong disagreements with the Pharisees, both groups found a common enemy in Christ and the disciples (Ac. 4:1ff). Of all men who subtract from the Scriptures and who are skeptics, rationalists and pragmatists, our Lord says, “Look out and beware of their teaching.”

The infinite wisdom and omniscience of Jesus is displayed in how suitable the Savior’s words are as a beacon of warning to God’s people throughout all church history. When we examine the history of the church we see these two great corrupting influences at work over and over again. The names of the parties may change and the theological peripheral details may be different, yet the underlying philosophy of corruption is the same.

The general philosophical principles of Phariseeism which consists of a love of human tradition, a secondary yet superior source of authority in an oral tradition, a zealotry for the traditions of the fathers, a large body of authoritative man-made rules and a system of salvation of salvation rooted in human merit are all crucial elements of the Roman Catholic Church. In the papal church the religion of Christ and the apostles has been swallowed up by ritualism, pomp and ceremony. The Word of God is overshadowed by a mountain of human inventions: the priesthood, the mass, the confessional, indulgences, worship of Mary and the saints, etc. The necessity of conversion has been replaced by baptismal regeneration and salvation by works. True spiritual worship has been replaced by outward man-made rituals: candles, surpluses, the crucifix, statues, holy water, the altar, and the sign of the cross—none of which is authorized by the Bible.

The mantle of the Pharisees with their love of human traditions, their love of outward rituals and the rejection of salvation by grace alone through faith alone has sadly fallen upon a good portion of professing Christendom today: not only the Roman Catholic Church but also all the Eastern Orthodox churches, high church Episcopalians,

Coptic, Ethiopian and Latin rite congregations. In some areas these communions have surpassed the Pharisees by their rank idolatry and elaborate priestly garments and rituals.

Given the history of the Christian church, Jesus' warning is just as relevant and important today as it was nearly two thousand years ago. Because of our sinful natures there has been many a professing Christian who has been drawn to tradition, ceremonies, rituals, human merit and the outward shell of a religion. A religion that on the outside is like a white-washed tomb but inside is rotten, corrupt and dead. They hold to a form of religion but deny its power. They profess Jesus with their lips but their hearts are far from Him.

The need to "look out and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees" is a very important warning today for the Reformed community. There are ordained pastors who claim to be Reformed that are spreading Romanizing germs throughout the world. There are those who have rejected the attainments of the Reformation concerning hermeneutics and thus advocate "interpretive maximalism." This "new" hermeneutic is used to circumvent the authority of Scripture (i.e., divine warrant) by giving the interpreter great flexibility in deriving principles of worship and ceremony from the Bible that are *not really there*. A number of ancient fathers and medieval theologians did much the same by their spiritualizing or allegorizing of the text of Scripture. The problem with interpretive maximalism and its ancient counterpart is that the historical-grammatical meaning of the text is set aside and replaced by the presuppositions and artistic impressions of the interpreter. A method of interpretation that is so subjective and flexible tells us more about the interpreter than it does about the text of Scripture itself. With this fluid, subjective methodology, James Jordan, David Chilton, Peter Leithart and their followers are pointing people to Rome, Canterbury and Constantinople while others such as John Frame are pointing people toward Las Vegas and Hollywood.

There are many pastors and popular speakers within the Reformed community that have openly rejected *sola Scriptura* or the regulative principle in matters related to worship (e.g., John Frame, Douglas Wilson, Steve Schlissel, Steve Wilkins, James Jordan, etc.) Once the authority of Scripture is set aside in the area of worship, the leaven of human tradition enters in and fills the void. Thus, in Reformed churches today there is a return to the corruptions of Rome (e.g., the liturgical calendar, robes and vestments, candles, sacramentalism, intricate liturgies and so on). James Jordan even argues for the sign of the cross and the use of cathedrals. There are men who are so in love with popish trash they argue that "Reformed is not enough." They say that we must not be limited by the Reformed symbols but rather go back to classical Christianity (i.e., the corrupt medieval sacramental paradigm).

Have such men been recognized as distributors of the leaven of the Pharisees, as mediums for the germs of Rome? No! They are as popular as ever. In fact, few men in the Reformed community have been willing to fight against this dangerous leaven. Sadly, those who have protested this heresy have suffered great abuse themselves. Tragically, as men strike at the very heart of the Reformed faith, pastors, elders, seminary professors and congregants declare: "I see no danger. I hear nothing contrary to sound doctrine. Quit making a mountain out of a molehill. These are good Reformed men of God." This flight from reality, rejection of the obvious and false application of Christian charity reveals that the leaven has subtly and silently been spreading among the Reformed churches for years. "A wonderful and horrible thing is committed in the land; the prophets prophesy

falsely, and the priests bear rule by their means; and my people love to have it so (Jer. 5:30-31).

One can even find the Pharisaical leaven of human merit as a co-instrument of justification in the Reformed community today. There is the rising popularity of the Romanizing germs of Norman Shepherd who rejects the imputed righteousness of Christ and replaces it with the works of faith, faithful obedience or covenantal perseverance. Has this heretic been excommunicated for sowing the seeds of Phariseeism and Romanism in the body of Christ? No! He is more popular as a speaker than ever. His Romanizing doctrines were published by a Reformed publishing house (Presbyterian and Reformed) and endorsed by Reformed seminary professors (e.g., Richard Gaffin, Jr., Joel Nederhood). His views are being advocated by some of the most popular “Reformed” conference speakers in the country (e.g., Steve Schlissel, Andrew Sandlin, etc.). Once again men who want to eradicate this Pharisaical leaven are told: “Don’t be so harsh and unloving. This new paradigm is not dangerous or heretical. This new teaching is a breath of fresh air.” To this all-too-common kind of remark we ask: “Are we supposed to sit on our hands and do nothing while the gospel is redefined in a Romanizing manner? Are we to sit idly by when the followers of Jordan and Shepherd are leading directly into the apostate and heretical Roman Catholic or Eastern Orthodox communions?” No! We cannot remain silent. We must beware of false prophets (Mt. 7:15). We must try the spirits to see whether they are of God (1 Jn. 4:1). We must sound the same trumpet that Christ sounded: “Take heed and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the Sadducees.” If we warn the church in the same manner as the Great Shepherd, when whole families who are under the sway of these corrupting teachers join the Roman Catholic Church or the Greek Orthodox Church, their blood will not be on our heads.

Church history is also full of examples of the relevancy of our Lord’s warning regarding the leaven of the Sadducees. Throughout history the church has had to deal with religious teachers who were skeptics and rationalists; who in some manner denied the authority of Scripture (e.g., Gnosticism, Marcionism, Arianism, Pelagianism, Socinianism, Unitarianism, Deism, Modernism). Since the 1870s modernism has virtually destroyed the Christian witness of all the old mainline Protestant denominations. All the central tenets of the faith (e.g., the plenary inspiration of the Bible, the vicarious atonement, the resurrection, the doctrine of hell, the necessity of conversion, the virgin birth, miracles, the moral law, etc.) have been rejected, redefined or watered down in order to fit in with an unbelieving secular humanistic worldview. These infidels wear the mantle of the Sadducees with pride.

Is such leaven still a danger among Reformed churches today? Yes, it certainly is! The Christian Reformed Church of North America has largely apostatized in only the last thirty years. Almost everyone who has attended a conservative Reformed seminary knows at least a few students who started out thoroughly orthodox but at some time were seduced by the lies of someone like Karl Barth. Doctrines that were immediately rejected only a generation ago such as process theology and annihilationism are growing in popularity in neo-evangelical circles. Crucial doctrines such as six-day creationism are commonly denied today in so-called conservative Presbyterian seminaries (e.g., Westminster Seminary near Philadelphia). Some seminaries that were once strongly committed to biblical inerrancy have denied the plenary inspiration of Scripture (e.g., Fuller Seminary). The leaven of the Sadducees is as much a threat to Bible-believing

Christians today as it ever was. “Take heed, and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the Sadducees.”

The Nature and Manner of Doctrinal Subversion

When Jesus warned the apostles regarding the teaching of the Pharisees and the Sadducees, he used the word “leaven”. Why did our Lord say “leaven” when the word “doctrine” would have been much easier for the disciples to understand? Christ used the word “leaven” for a particular reason. He wanted His people to understand why false doctrine is so dangerous. He does this by comparing false teaching to leaven.

What is it about leaven or yeast that makes it the appropriate word to describe what false doctrine can do to the church? Leaven does two things that make it the perfect choice to describe how false teaching operates. First, leaven works insidiously. Its influence on the lump of dough is subtle. It works quietly as it penetrates the whole loaf. Secondly, leaven’s nature is to grow and spread. Once it is introduced into the lump of dough, if left alone, it will change the character of the whole lump. These aspects of leaven as descriptions of how false doctrine operates are true in individuals and especially in corporate bodies such as individual churches or denominations.

Many of us have known men who have apostatized doctrinally. What usually occurs in such situations is that a person is introduced to false doctrine and some point of that false system will be accepted. It can be anything from a Romanizing concept of justification to a sacramental view of baptism to some aspect of full preterism. What occurs after a false doctrine is firmly planted in a person’s mind is that it slowly, imperceptibly penetrates that person’s entire theological outlook and worldview. The man who has accepted some aspect of full preterism in the long run ends up denying several crucial Christian doctrines such as the resurrection of the body, the rapture, the final judgment and the second bodily coming of Christ. These doctrines are not openly denied but are denied through heretical redefinition. A person may adopt baptismal regeneration. After a time such a person often will end up adopting several interrelated heretical views. As a result crucial doctrines such as election, regeneration, the atonement, conversion and perseverance are heretically redefined. False doctrine works like leaven penetrating and perverting a person’s entire theological system. Then tragically, we may discover that an acquaintance or close friend has converted to Romanism or has simply stopped attending church. Beloved, be on guard: “Look out and beware.”

Throughout history the truth and urgency of our Lord’s warning is observable in how false doctrine has worked as leaven in churches. There are several important things to note regarding this topic.

First, the leaven almost always comes from teachers within the church. The Pharisees and Sadducees were leaders among the covenant people. Historically, the men who have done the most damage to Christ’s church have not been wicked political rulers but rather pastors, seminary professors and Christian scholars. Jesus said, “Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravaging wolves” (Mt. 7:15). Paul warned the Corinthians of such men when he wrote: “For such are false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into the apostles of Christ.

And do not marvel for Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light” (2 Cor. 11:13-14).

The most effective way to leaven the church is to use men who are respected religious leaders. Historically the men who have been used by the devil to corrupt the church have often been very articulate, intelligent and morally upright (at least outwardly). False doctrine has not come from dullards but from shining intellects, from men who are very popular and “pious”. In recent years, Satan has used men that have been well known for teaching solid, orthodox doctrine for many years. Thus, when these men introduce subtle but dangerous heresies, their views are readily accepted by many. And when these men are challenged by orthodox teachers, many come to their defense, saying, “How could pastor so and so be teaching false doctrine when we know he has championed the Reformed faith for years? How dare you accuse our dear brother of heresy!” This tactic has been very effective. It has resulted in the orthodox party (who are simply defending the Reformed faith) being accused of being unloving, obsessed, obnoxious and deluded.

Secondly, the men who have introduced false doctrines have done so in a subtle, insidious manner. They do not openly proclaim that their new doctrine is unorthodox or unconfessional. They do not admit that their teaching is a radical departure from the truth. They do not voluntarily resign their position as pastor-teacher or elder but rather maintain their positions of authority in order to leaven the church. Their books, tracts and lectures are written in a way to disarm people’s suspicions and give their supporters enough quotes to throw off guard the people who see something is wrong. Those who spread false teaching almost never show their true colors unless they have already gained a large following and sense victory or unless they know that church authorities do not have the guts to discipline heterodox ministers.

How do the false teachers work subtly or insidiously on the flock? They do a number of deceitful things. (1) They often will proclaim their complete faithfulness to the church’s standards. One author who has done much to destroy biblical worship in Presbyterian churches begins his book by proclaiming his hearty acceptance of the Westminster Standards and the regulative principle of worship. Then he almost immediately sets forth several arguments against the regulative principle. The men who are spreading the Auburn Avenue theology and the so-called objectivity of the covenant will say that they adhere to the five points of Calvinism and believe that those who are elect cannot fall away. However, they also teach that people who have been regenerated, who have had their sins washed away by Jesus’ blood and are truly united to the Savior, can apostatize and go to hell. These men can be selectively quoted to appear completely orthodox or quoted to appear heretical. Heresy is hidden between statements of true doctrine. No Presbyterian session would invite a Roman Catholic priest to speak on justification. However, they very well may ignorantly invite someone like Norman Shepherd or Steve Schlissel. “Look out, beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the Sadducees.”

(2) False teachers use stealth, ambiguity and deceit in setting forth their new theories. They hide behind equivocations and redefinitions of old theological terms. Modernists, for example, would proclaim belief in the resurrection of Christ. They simply redefine the resurrection in a non-miraculous, secular humanistic manner. Norman Shepherd will insist that he completely rejects any role for works or human merit in

salvation. But, he defines faith as “faithful obedience,” which is just a subtle way of saying that faith and good works are co-instruments in a person’s justification. A sloppy, difficult, ambiguous and even contradictory use of language gives false teachers plausible deniability. If they are called on the carpet, they can always plead innocence based on a misunderstanding of their use of terms.

(3) False teachers will often argue that they are not denying anything essential to the faith but are merely clarifying peripheral unsettled matters of the faith. They will argue that there is a sense in which their teaching is a new paradigm or a new perspective; however, it certainly does not rise to the level of heresy. This tactic worked for Pelagius when he appeared before a synod in Palestine (AD 415). Pelagius was very evasive at this synod; he gave very ambiguous answers as a deliberate tactic and was even willing to condemn the teachings of his disciple Celestius as foolishness even though their doctrines were identical. Augustine said of this synod: “It was not heresy, that was there acquitted, but the man who denied the heresy.”¹ When the new “paradigm” of the Auburn Avenue theology came upon the scene, some of its advocates said that it was taking Reformed churches back to the original intent of the Westminster Standards, which have been perverted over time by a Greek mindset. Then, we were told that there were some differences with the Standards, but they were of no consequence. Then, we were told that “Reformed is not enough”—that is, we need to fine tune and improve the Standards. The tactics of equivocation, of emphasizing points of agreement, of speaking out of both sides of one’s mouth, or emphasizing that nothing of consequence is being changed, are all means by which the false teacher clothes himself with sheepskin. Tragically, many people who are untrained in theology and even a few who are knowledgeable are deceived by such tactics.

(4) False teachers speak the language of love, peace, cooperation and the need for Christian unity. They label those who oppose this teaching as unloving and unkind, as disturbers of the peace of the church, as men who twist things all out of proportion. They will argue that there is a world of sin, evil and poverty out there and that Christians fighting against other Christians is counterproductive and foolish. In order to fight the real enemies of the church (we are told) we must be tolerant of minor, inconsequential, difficult doctrines.

This tactic was very effective in the modernist takeovers of the mainline denominations in the early part of the twentieth century. The modernists argued that fighting over doctrine slowed the missionary endeavors of the church and was a bad witness to the world. The modernist pleas were very effective in lulling the vast majority of people in the pews who were doctrinally conservative into doing nothing or even siding with the liberals. The liberals were successful in labeling men who were fighting for the truth of the gospel as unloving, fanatical, angry, deluded men. Men who were conservative such as Dr. Charles Erdman at Princeton Seminary sided with the modernists against Dr. J. Gresham Machen because he believed that Machen was the one who was guilty of harming the denomination (the P.C.U.S.A.). After the liberals neutralized the moderates, gained a lot of adherents and got the votes they needed on seminary boards and ecclesiastical courts, they revealed their true colors by persecuting orthodox, confessional men of God.

¹ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989 [1910]) 3:796.

The men of the modern Auburn Avenue heresy and their defenders have used similar tactics. They argue that we should not fight against one another when the real enemy is secular humanism and its fruits in society; that it is uncharitable to accuse other ministers of heresy when they are simply clarifying and advancing certain doctrines; that these men have been outstanding defenders of Christianity for years; that attacking their teachings is hurting the body of Christ and is a bad witness to the world. These false teachers are very clever. They want their teachings to leaven the church quietly and insidiously. They do not want anyone to raise suspicions or expose their teachings for what they are. These men and their apologists have been very effective at raising a smoke screen to obscure their real intentions. Beloved, “take heed and beware”. The man who converts to Roman Catholicism, leaves the Reformed church and worships the virgin Mary is not the greatest threat. It is the men who depart from the faith, yet who hide their intentions and remain in the church, who are dangerous. Their doctrine works like yeast in the body corrupting this man here, that family there, this elder over here and that seminary student over there. It is our biblical duty to refute those who contradict (Titus 1:9); to contend earnestly for the faith once delivered to the saints (Jude 3); to exhort men to teach no other doctrine (1 Tim. 1:3) than the one received from Christ and the apostles.

Leaven has a natural tendency to leaven the whole loaf. The historical pattern is quite clear. False teaching moves from bad to worse and false teaching if left unchecked eventually penetrates the whole body. The corrupt Pharisaical church in Jesus’ day did not arise overnight. The process of apostasy took centuries; false teachers brought in their human innovations slowly. A human tradition was added here and a ritual was added there until the true religion was obscured under a large edifice of human theological ideas, rules and regulations. Some of these human traditions can be seen in the Babylonian Talmud which consists of thirty-four large volumes of fine print. The Pharisees did not purposely set out to destroy biblical religion. They simply wanted to improve upon it and protect it with their own ideas. They did not ask the people to abandon the Old Testament or their cherished doctrines. They just wanted the people to accept a few “minor improvements” to fence the law, to make religion better. Their perversion of the church was slow, virtually imperceptible and progressive, until eventually it permeated the whole lump.

The corruption of the Roman Catholic Church occurred in a similar manner. Small changes were made in the government, worship and doctrine of the church. These little additions were often done for pragmatic yet sincere reasons. Each generation, however, inherits these human traditions, attributes an added sanctity to the practices which are now quite old, and adds some new innovations of its own. If we isolate each addition or change, it may seem minor. It may not look like a big threat to the church at all. But, if we examine how little changes add up over time and accumulate, we can observe how minor, almost imperceptible, changes eventually have disastrous consequences for the church. There is a progressive growth of corruption until the whole lump is leavened. (For example, the full-blown doctrine of the supremacy of the papacy developed over a period of one thousand years). The people are often taken in by the fact that changes are so minor. But, as each change is accepted and becomes an indispensable tradition that people are used to, expect and love, the more difficult it becomes to return the church to its biblical foundation (i.e., doctrine and practice based on Scripture alone). Therefore, when someone bids the church to accept a “minor” addition to Scripture or

some new doctrine, we must not be careless or apathetic. We must understand the nature of leaven. We must understand that even small additions will have disastrous consequences. Because leaven spreads its effect so slowly and imperceptibly, people are often not even aware of what is happening to their church: that the rope of *sola Scriptura* has been cut and the church has begun to drift from its biblical moorings. Thus, once again, we must note the importance of Christ's warning: "Watch out and beware". Small changes and additions to what God has authorized in His word have a trajectory that is deadly. They lead to apostasy and judgment.

The leaven of the Sadducees works like the leaven of the Pharisees but to a different end. Full blown modernism did not arise overnight. The "mainline" denominations took almost two generations to become apostate. The leaven of the Sadducees has small beginnings. In modern times it usually begins with new theories regarding the early chapters of Genesis. A literal Adam and Eve are replaced with poetic metaphor. The six days are said to be billions of years. Evolutionary theories are accepted. People are told that Christianity needs to be harmonized with the findings of modern science. Then scientific theories are applied to textual research. Then miracles are denied and all is lost: the virgin birth, vicarious atonement, the resurrection, etc. Biblical Christianity degenerates to the point where churches are the enemies of every major teaching in the Bible. We must be on guard against even small changes or accommodations to so-called science. We must guard the integrity of the doctrine of Scripture with every fiber of our being. J. C. Ryle writes,

Beware of the very small beginnings of false doctrine. Every heresy began at one time with some little departure from the truth. There is only a little seed of error needed to create a great tree. It is the little stones that make up the mighty building. It was the little timbers that made the great ark that carried Noah and his family over a deluged world. It is the little leaven that leavens the whole lump. It is the little flaw in one link of the chain cable that wrecks the gallant ship, and drowns the crew. It is the omission or addition of one little item in the doctor's prescription that spoils the whole medicine, and turns it into poison. We do not tolerate quietly a little dishonesty, or a little cheating, or a little lying. Just so, let us never allow a little false doctrine to ruin us, by thinking it is but a "little one," and can do no harm. The Galatians seemed to be doing nothing very dangerous when they "observed days and months, and times and years." Yet St. Paul says, "I am afraid of you." (Gal. iv. 10, 11)²

We must be aware of even small additions or detractions from God's word. The church must guard itself against every deviation from the truth. False doctrines have a tendency to progress from bad to worse, from a small departure to an apostate system.

Ways to Avoid Doctrinal Subversion

Jesus' warning was given to the apostles and inscripturated so that His church throughout history would have an understanding of the dangers of false teaching. There are a number of things that we need to consider in order to protect ourselves from theological subversion.

² J. C. Ryle, *Home Truths* (Conrad, Mont.: Triangle Press, no date [c. 1857]), 3:119.

First, believers have a responsibility to study the Scriptures. This involves not only a careful daily, Bible reading program but also the diligent use of study aids. Christians should learn the science of hermeneutics or biblical interpretation. False teachers take advantage of professing Christians' lack of Bible knowledge and a lack of understanding on how to interpret "difficult" passages. Cults, for example, are notorious for taking passages out of context and ignoring the analogy of Scripture. Many heresies have arisen because one or two passages are interpreted in a manner that contradicts many clearer passages. To protect God's people from false teachers, Isaiah declared: "To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, it is because there is no light in them" (8:20). Every teaching or opinion is to be judged by Scripture. Thus, our Lord rebuked the false teaching of the Sadducees saying, "You are mistaken, not knowing the Scriptures . . ." (Mt. 22:29). Paul commended the Bereans because they did not accept Paul's new doctrine simply because he said it was true, but rather "searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so" (Ac. 17:11).

Secondly, believers must stand upon the theological achievements of their spiritual forefathers. Throughout the history of the church, battles have raged over many important doctrines. These battles have produced corporate sanctification, a more careful exegesis of biblical passages, and a clarification of many doctrinal issues. It is our responsibility to learn systematic theology to inoculate ourselves from false teachings. A multiplication of cults and heresies always accompanies times of theological ignorance. Anyone familiar with the history of the church knows that many of the same heresies appear (with minor variations) over and over again to threaten the church. People who do not have a grasp of theology are the most vulnerable to attack. Thus Paul compares new believers to babies because they do not yet possess the spiritual discernment necessary to steer a path through false doctrine and subtle temptations. Because our time is one of great theological ignorance it is also one of declension in which heresy is spreading rapidly.

We must take full advantage of the many wonderful doctrinal books and creeds that have been produced by the Calvinistic wing of the Reformation. Every family should own a copy of the Westminster Standards, the Three Forms of Unity, and the determinations of the first six ecumenical councils of the church.

Thirdly, Christians must place themselves in a church that is Reformed confessionally and *truly* Reformed with regard to its leadership. If a believer is to grow into maturity he must sit under exegetical, theological, applicatory preaching. Paul says that God has appointed some men as pastor-teachers in the church to equip and edify the body of Christ so "that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting . . ." (Eph. 4:14).

The importance and centrality of preaching has been largely lost in our day of church growth gimmicks, rock and roll worship, drama, and story-telling comedian pastors. All of these things may make the "worship" service a lot of fun. But, they do not bring the spiritual maturity that people need to stand up to subtle heresies. Evangelical churches are entering a new dark age of ignorance and superstition because their concept of Christianity rotates around having an experience instead of learning about faith and life through diligent, doctrinal teaching and study.

Fourthly, there must be a restoration of biblical church discipline in “conservative” Reformed denominations to protect the flock from all false prophets and doctrinal deviants. There are a number of things that need to be done in this regard.

(1) Presbyterian churches must return to a strict subscription to the Westminster Standards. In “conservative” Presbyterian denominations, pastors and elders are required to take an ordination vow stating that they “sincerely receive and adopt the Confession of Faith . . . as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures.”³ The purpose of strict confessionalism is threefold. (a) It is necessary to hold onto the corporate doctrinal attainments of the past (e.g., the Trinity, the two natures of Christ in one person, the atonement, justification by faith alone, the new birth, etc.). (b) It is a public confession of who we are, of what we believe as Reformed Presbyterians. It is an organized summary of the doctrines which we believe are fundamental principles of Christianity. It is the system of doctrine by which we unite in church fellowship. (c) It is a doctrinal statement carefully constructed to *exclude* men with certain theological views from the church (e.g., modernism, Sabellianism, Nestorianism, Arianism, theistic evolution, day-age theories, non-sabbatarianism, will-worship, etc.).

Today there is such a loose practice of subscription among most Presbyterian and Reformed churches that pastors and elders are permitted openly to hold non-confessional, heretical opinions on crucial doctrines. For example, instead of creationism, a variety of deviant positions (e.g., day-age, theistic evolution, framework hypothesis) is tolerated. Regarding justification, heretical views (e.g., the imputation of Christ’s righteousness is denied, neo-legalism or the Norman Shepherd heresy; covenant faithfulness as co-instrument of justification) are being promulgated. In terms of the atonement, false theories (e.g., Arminianism, the Auburn Avenue heresy) are being taught. With regard to the sufficiency of Scripture, another standard is accepted: the regulative principle of worship is widely rejected in “Reformed” denominations today; and even the acceptance of so-called modern Charismatic prophecy. False views of the sacraments (e.g., baptismal regeneration, sacramentalism, paedocommunion) are practiced. Fundamental doctrines, such as the covenant of works, the distinction between the visible and invisible church, perseverance, union with Christ, and personal regeneration, are denied. Sabbatarianism is ridiculed. And the plain teaching of the second commandment is perverted, so that, for example, pictures of Jesus are used to instruct children. There are so many examples of pastors and elders who are teaching and practicing things contrary to the Westminster Standards, that one could reasonably conclude that a number of these “conservative” Presbyterian denominations are already on the path toward apostasy. It is a sad and tragic time when presbyteries and general assemblies allow pastors and elders to subvert and overthrow the very doctrines they have sworn to uphold.

Why is this travesty of justice allowed to occur? There are several reasons. (a) Some men have an unbiblical, humanistic, permissive concept of love. (b) Some men do not think doctrine is very important. (c) Some men are “go along to get along” cowards. (d) And some denominations develop “good old boy” networks of bureaucrats who

³ This is the ordination vow of the P.C.U.S.A. in the nineteenth century. It is identical or virtually identical to the vows made in conservative Presbyterian denominations today. For example, vow 2 in the Orthodox Presbyterian *Book of Church Order* (1995) reads: “Do you sincerely receive and adopt the Confession of Faith and Catechism of this Church as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures?” (p. 62).

historically have been incompetent theologically and pragmatic socially. It is time for Presbyterian denominations to stop ordaining and allowing liars and theological perverts into the ministry. If a man has an exception to a minor, non-essential point in the Confession (e.g., the Pope or the papacy being the man of sin in 2 Th. 2:3ff.) then he must plainly state his exception to the Standards and have that exception recorded by Presbytery.

(2) Presbyterian churches must bring ecclesiastic sanctions against those who teach false doctrines and damnable heresies. This point is the logical corollary to the previous consideration. The procedures that lead to sanctions must be biblical, diligent, swift and consistent. A confessional standard that is not backed up by sanctions is over the long run worthless. A modern loose subscription inevitably leads to church courts that are arbitrary and inconsistent in their application of discipline. In other words, judicial decisions end up being based more on the make-up of a commission than on Scriptural or confessional principles. *Sola Scriptura* is replaced with human wisdom, tradition and pragmatism.⁴

(3) Presbyterian churches must speak out publicly and write position papers against all false doctrines that are making inroads in the Reformed community. In our day when theological wolves wander among the flock, many pastors and elders do absolutely nothing to stop them. Even worse, many leaders in various churches are defending the wolves while condemning the shepherds who have sounded a warning against them. Ministers and church governors have a responsibility to nip heresy in the bud. It is unbiblical and foolish to wait until heretical views have a strong foothold in the church before taking action. There is no doctrinal or ethical neutrality. Error must be fought against and stopped or else it will spread like a deadly cancer through the body.

Fifthly, heads of households must train and catechize their children so that they will be able to discern between good and evil; between good doctrine and bad.⁵ When

⁴ In his analysis of the conflicts between modernism and orthodox Christianity in the P.C.U.S.A., Gary North notes that *neutrality* with regard to any standard is impossible. He writes, "In 1901, the leaders on all three sides of the Presbyterian conflict had verbally and publicly professed faith in that historic Confessional position, despite the fact that none of them fully believed it. Having sworn a public oath to defend a standard they did not fully believe the officers of the Presbyterian Church, U.S.A., had little incentive to use the denomination's courts to impose the oath's mandatory negative sanctions. *But without negative sanctions there can be no organization.* Some negative sanctions would eventually be imposed. These sanctions would be imposed in terms of a standard other than the Westminster Confession of Faith and its two catechisms. The institutional question became: *By what other standard?* The quest for this rival standard was the fundamental theme of the final three phases of the Presbyterian conflict, 1901-1936" (*Crossed Fingers: How the Liberals Captured the Presbyterian Church* [Tyler, Tex.: Institute for Christian Economics, 1996], 9).

⁵ Since the nineteenth century the responsibility of fathers or covenant heads to lead the family theologically has increasingly been replaced by church programs (Sunday school, youth groups, vacation Bible schools, etc.). Fathers have a responsibility to know and understand Reformed theology in order to lead, teach, nurture and protect their families from theological perverts and heretics. Today, however, many men have only a little theological knowledge; many men do not have the needed theological sophistication to protect their families from subtle and dangerous heresies. (For example, the Auburn Avenue theological perversions have spread rapidly in some Reformed circles even though this system is a radical departure from Reformed orthodoxy). Reformed denominations must train fathers to be the spiritual leaders they ought to be so that doctrinal deviants will immediately face an army of opposition and be forced from their pulpits. (When the P.C.U.S.A. became apostate in the 1920's and abused the great reformer, J. Gresham Machen, only a tiny handful of people obeyed Scripture and separated themselves from apostasy.) Heads of

prelatical apologists were sent by the Church of England throughout the countryside of Scotland in the seventeenth century to turn the Presbyterians into good Episcopalians, the prelates were amazed at the biblical and theological knowledge of these rather poor Scottish peasants. In town after town, the prelates were soundly refuted and turned away by simple folk who had a solid grasp of Reformed theology. Sadly, today we have a different situation—popular “Reformed” speakers advocate doctrines that are blatantly unscriptural and irrational and unlearned churchgoers accept them willingly.

If heads of households build up a good Reformed library; study; learn as they ought and then teach their children the truth, the false prophets among us would not even receive a hearing. They would be fired and sent packing to Rome or Constantinople where they belong.

Conclusion

We live in a time of great declension for many Presbyterian and Reformed churches, a time of toleration for error and syncretism with the surrounding culture. Therefore, we must carefully note and heed the many warnings and imperatives regarding purity of doctrine and false teachers in Scripture (e.g., “note those who cause divisions and offenses, contrary to the doctrine which you learned and avoid them” [Rom. 16:17]; “charge some that they teach no other doctrine” [1 Tim. 1:3]; “guard what was committed to your trust” [1 Tim. 6:20]; “hold fast the pattern of sound words” [2 Tim. 1:13]; “shun idle and profane babblings” [2 Tim. 2:16]; “exhort and convince those who contradict” [Tit. 1:9]; “beware of false prophets” [Mt. 7:15], etc.). This point is especially important because there are neo-legalists among us who occupy positions of influence, who subvert whole households and churches with carefully crafted heretical doctrines, with simultaneous affirmations of Reformed truth and dangerous heresies.

It is time for every Reformed believer, every pastor, elder and deacon, to take a stand for the gospel and fight for the truth. Does not Paul refer to the church as “the pillar and ground of the truth”?⁶ (1 Tim. 3:15) Doesn’t this mean that the church has a

households must be expected to study their Bibles and theological materials in order to protect the future. One cannot expect to adequately learn theology simply by attending church. One must study to show himself approved (2 Tim. 2:15).

⁶ When Paul speaks of the church as the “ground” (KJV, NKJV), “support” (NASB), “foundation” (NIV, Phillips), “basement” (Fairbairn) or “bulwark” (RSV, NEB) of the truth, he is not saying that the church invents or determines the truth (e.g., Romanism). That position is absurd and impossible since the foundation of all truth is in the ontological triune God of Scripture. Rather, he is saying that the church has a responsibility to believe, teach, uphold and obey what God has revealed unto it. Calvin writes, “The reason why the Church is called the ‘pillar of truth’ is that she defends and spreads it by her agency. God does not himself come down from heaven to us, nor does he daily send angels to make known his truth; but he employs pastors, whom he has appointed for that purpose. To express it in a more holy manner is not the Church the mother of all believers? Does she not regenerate them by the word of God, educate and nourish them through their whole life, strengthen, and bring them at length to absolute perfection? For the same reason, also, she is called ‘the pillar of truth;’ because the office of administering doctrine, which God hath placed in her hands, is the only instrument of preserving the truth, that it may not perish from the remembrance of men.

“Consequently this commendation relates to the ministry of the word; for if that be removed, the truth of God will fall to the ground. Not that it is less strong, if it be not supported by the shoulders of me, as the same Papists idly talk; for it is shocking blasphemy to say, the word of God is uncertain, till it obtain from

responsibility to believe, teach, propagate, uphold and obey what God has revealed (the Bible and the whole truth of Christianity including the whole body of inspired precepts and doctrines). The church has a responsibility to keep as a sacred treasure biblical doctrine. She must not modify, ignore, corrupt, add to or detract from the authoritative, unchanging doctrine of Scripture. “The grand test is, does she hold by the truth of God? Is she in her belief and practice a witness for this? Or does she gainsay and pervert it?”⁷ One of the church’s most important responsibilities in upholding the truth is warning people regarding false teachers and deviant doctrines. We must continually be on guard against the leaven of the Scribes and Pharisees. May God enable us to faithfully carry the banner of truth in order to preserve our precious covenanted reformation unto future generations. Amen.

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men what may be called a borrowed certainty. Paul simply means what he states elsewhere in other words, that since our ‘faith is by hearing,’ there will be no faith, unless there be preaching. (Rom. X. 17) Accordingly in reference to men, the Church maintains the truth, because by preaching the Church proclaims it, because she keeps it pure and entire, because she transmits it to posterity. And if the instruction of the gospel be not proclaimed, if there be no godly ministers who, by their preaching, rescue truth from darkness and forgetfulness, instantly falsehoods, errors, impostures, superstitions, and every kind of corruption, will reign. In short, silence in the Church is the banishment and crushing of the truth” (*Commentaries on the Epistle to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980], 90-91).

⁷ Patrick Fairbairn, *Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1956 [1874]), 157.