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NAMING NAMES: A BIBLICAL APPROACH

by Kevin Reeves, 2/02

In these last days the proliferation of false teachings assaulting both the Church and Scriptural integrity requires a closer look at how those promoting such doctrines should be dealt with. While no one with a genuine desire to follow Christ should eagerly want to accuse another of error in ministry, the prophets of the Old Testament, our Lord Jesus Himself, and the apostles make it clear that many will come in the name of the Lord who profess to follow Him, yet by their teachings actually deny or present a different image of God than what is demonstrated in the Scriptures. Paul said of these that, “many walk, of whom I often told you, and now tell you even weeping, that they are enemies of the cross of Christ” (Philippians 3:18).

False teachers, false apostles, false brethren, etc., have the ability to damage or even destroy the simple faith in Christ delivered once for all to the saints (Jude 3). Jesus said that many would be deceived by those claiming to be from God (Matthew 24:5, 10-11, 24). As one who has been in the forefront of false movements and unknowingly promoted error for twelve years, I well know the danger to one's faith because of the redefinition of Christianity and the presentation of a different “Jesus”. Heresy is not a plaything--it is a lie set forth that destroys the relationship between the Savior and the saved, and leads trusting sheep into a wilderness filled with a multitude of violent predators.

Naming people specifically involved with promoting heresy or extrabiblical doctrine is, and should be, an uncomfortable last step, taken only after all other reasonable avenues at reconciliation have taken place. Anyone can make a mistake; it is the unrepentant attitude, elitist mentality, or the single-minded unwillingness of the brother in error to heed the truth that makes coming out into the open with damaging evidence at times an absolute necessity. If a thief, vandal, or worse lived in your neighborhood, ask yourself if you would not want to know the man's name and where he lived, that you could guard both yourself and your family from harm. How much more, then, in dealing with spiritual issues--things of eternal significance--do we need to guard both our own souls and the souls of those entrusted to us by the Lord?

The inherent danger of co-habitation with heresy cannot be overstated. Error unmolested will always eat away at the flesh of Christ's body, the Church (2 Timothy 2:17-18). That is its nature. To deny this is to disavow the very history of ancient Israel, whose repeated dalliances with false gods and their prophets reaped for them a wide

destruction of their faith in God and certain retribution from Him. We have forgotten the admonition of Romans 15:4:

“For whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.”

While Israel’s spiritual failings were recorded to serve as a warning, many Christians believe themselves above the same kind of deception. False prophets have always been the bane of God’s people, making crooked the right way of the LORD and leading the people to follow a depravity “...in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures” (Romans 1:23).

While current sophistication among our own false prophets and false teachers now precludes the use of stone and wood idols, they yet paint their images of God with words that stir the imagination of man--and redefine the object of his worship. Even those who unwittingly teach contrary to the Gospel of Christ, believing their teachings to be genuine revelation, are leading multitudes down the dark path leading ever further from the truth. Their sincerity notwithstanding, they have made themselves enemies of the faith and unless there is wholesale repentance they will suffer shipwreck and take many others with them (1 Timothy 1:19).

In this age of “tolerance”, even many Christians have fallen prey to the temptation to make evil somewhat less than it is. Sprinkled with a bit of honest-to-goodness Bible teaching, heresy often becomes palatable, especially if it caters to the listener’s self-importance or desire for power. The tickling of ears (2 Timothy 4:3-4) has become a national religious pastime. Many would rather listen to fantastic myths given a Christian veneer, than hard truth that requires Biblical death to self.

Yet our God is not inactive. The least Christian can know the voice of his Shepherd, and those with sensitivity of heart can sense the grieving of the Spirit when the fraudulent is presented as the genuine article. But it is the route of least resistance to simply maintain the status quo, regardless of the violence done to the Scriptures. Coupled with repeated threats from local and national pulpits of “Do not touch the Lord’s anointed”, the desire to not rock the boat can silence even a sincere believer in Christ. But then the easy way out inevitably becomes a dictator, supplanting the true knowledge of God with a false piety that decries sin yet looks the other way when it is committed in one’s very presence. The knee once bowed to compromise will stay locked in that position until repentance unbends it.

The simple fact is that no amount of glazing false theology with sugar-coated euphemisms will negate its poison. It is in vogue to say of a popular false teacher, “He missed it,” and pass over a glaring doctrinal error. But it is much more Biblical to call that which is false, both man and teaching, by its proper title. And none of the descriptions laid on the backs of false teachers are pretty. They shouldn’t be. A man who deliberately infects others with his own consuming leprosy should be confronted

with the fact of his disease and quarantined for his own good and that of his followers. To do less is to assist the spread of this doctrinal contagion.

With constant and unapologetic fervor, the early Church waged warfare against those who would pervert the faith of Christ. Any who refused to do so were counted mere mercenaries and guilty of gross cowardice (John 10:12). Those true to the Good Shepherd will not hesitate to use His staff to club the wolves away from a flock which needs protection.

In the personal arena, why make a fuss over the beliefs of a brother who is not a leader in the Christian community? As long as he is not teaching others, the current theological fad of “do not judge” dictates we just leave him alone. Ironically, the Bible counters that kind of thinking from the mouth of the first murderer (Genesis 4:9). Cain’s sarcastic response, reworded into a statement, tells us what he already knew. We are indeed our brother’s keeper. If we love him, not only in tongue but in deed and truth (1 John 2:18), then we must inform him of his error. His beliefs will carve out a path for him to walk on, which, followed far enough, can lead him over the precipice and plunge him into the abyss of heresy. The same holds true for all of us. What we believe in our hearts we will live by, and that will determine our eternal destiny.

While public exposure of a brother in serious error may not be necessary, as long as he is not a leader in the Church assembly, Biblical separation is still mandated as a response to those who call themselves Christian yet live like those who are unregenerate (1 Corinthians 5:9-11).

Through The Eyes Of God

It might be of help to personally see how false teachers, false prophets, and false brethren are portrayed in Scripture. The God of the Bible made certain these specific references were written down for all generations, that none doubt the seriousness with which He views those who pervert His character, ways, or Word.

Wolves--Matthew 7:15

Brood of Vipers--Matthew 23:33

Unreasoning animals--2 Peter 2:12

Wild waves of the sea--Jude 13

Revilers---Jude 8

Spots in the Love Feasts--Jude 12

Twice Dead--Jude 12

Tares--Matthew 13:25

Servants of Satan--2 Corinthians

A Thief--John 10:1

A Hireling (only in it for the pay)--
(John 10:12)

Brutal Shepherds--(Ezekiel 34:1-22)

Licentious--Jude 4

Old Testament

References to false teachers, false brethren, and false prophets especially are legion within the pages of the Old Testament. We will concentrate on only a few, dealing with specific individuals named and dealt with by the LORD.

Leviticus 10:1-2--Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, put strange fire in censers (made up their own worship of God according to their own desire), and were publicly consumed by fire from the LORD. Substitute worship was the same sin for which Cain was rebuked in Genesis 4. When God specifies the way of true worship, He means for us to cleave to that pattern. Any addition, subtraction, or man-made contrivance on our part is an abomination.

Numbers Chapter 16--Dathan, Abiram, and Korah were publicly rebuked by Moses (verse 26) and swallowed by the earth in judgement of God (verses 31-32)

1 Kings 22:11, 24-25--False prophet, Zedekiah, was rebuked and judged by Micaiah

Jeremiah 28:15-17--The false prophet Hananiah dies after rebuke by the LORD through Jeremiah

Jeremiah 29:31-32--false prophet, Shemiah, dies after LORD's rebuke through Jeremiah

Much of the book of Jeremiah is spent rebuking the false prophets that have seduced Israel from following the LORD, and have led the people into idol worship (a false or man-made image of a god) Jeremiah 2:8, 5:30-31

Ezekiel 8:8-11--false elders of Israel exposed by God, including Jaazaniah, the son of Shaphan

Ezekiel 11:1-13--False brethren exposed and one of them, Pelatiah, dies

In addition to these, much of Ezekiel's time is spent prophesying against:

False brethren (Chapter 11:4)

False prophets (Chapter 13:16-17)

False shepherds (Chapter 34)

Much of the book of Isaiah is devoted to the rebuke of the LORD against the false prophets who are leading Israel astray from the true God to idols. Isaiah 9:15, 28:7

There are many more instances, but the pattern is plain--God exposes men publicly who defy Him, preach, teach, or prophesy out of their own hearts, and try to lead His people astray.

New Testament

Matthew 23--Jesus publicly rebukes the Pharisees for their hypocrisy and man-made worship of God, and the twisting of the Scriptures

1 Timothy 1:19-20--Hymaneus and Alexander delivered to Satan because of blasphemy by Paul the apostle

2 Timothy 4:14-- Paul warns Timothy to beware of Alexander the Coppersmith, who greatly opposed the gospel

Galatians 2:11-13--Though certainly not false brethren, Peter was rebuked by Paul, for, along with Barnabas, Peter was guilty of public hypocrisy--Paul publicly corrected him

3 John 9-10--Diotrophes opposing John and controlling Church members--John said, "I will remember him".

Revelation 2:20--Jezebel--false prophetess in Thyatira congregation--everyone knew who she was, as she was active in the Church

There are many other Scriptures that, while they do not name individuals, the individuals guilty of teaching false doctrine or living in blatant sin were well known among each congregation. In these cases, the Church in a particular area was named, and everyone knew who was being pointed out in Paul's letters.

1 Corinthians 4:18 and all of chapter 5--many puffed up (prideful) in spite of open sinning by congregation member--they are told to get that man out of the church--Paul delivers the man to Satan

2 Corinthians 10:8-11, Chapter 11:1-4, 12-15, 20-23--false apostles exposed as bringing another "Jesus" into the congregation

Revelation 2:14--Pergamos--some hold to the teachings of Baalam, and, verse 15, some who hold to the teachings of the Nicolatians, which Jesus said He hates

Romans 16:17--Church there told to take note of those causing divisions contrary to the doctrine of Christ and avoid them

Galatians 1:8--false brethren bringing circumcision into the Galatian church--presenting another "Jesus"--Paul said, "Let him be accursed!"

Titus 1:9-16--Timothy told to rebuke false teachers--they must be stopped because they are doing great damage to the body of Christ there

1 Timothy 1:3-4--Timothy told to command those teaching wrong doctrine to stop it

1 Timothy 5:19-20--Rebuke in public those who continue to sin

The Church today is nearly overwhelmed with those claiming to bring new revelation, a “fresh word” of the Lord that cannot be validated by the inerrant Scriptures. Men like Rick Joyner, whose visions of angels, vomiting demons, and a Jesus that contradicts what He previously spoke in the pages of the Bible have led a multitude down a path of make-believe wisdom and authority. Or Kenneth Copeland, who denies the blood of Christ atoned for sins, and whose “Jesus” had to be born-again in hell after taking on the very nature of Satan. And Benny Hinn, whose on-stage presence sways many to believe he is a true messenger of God, even as he rages under a contrived anointing, and publicly calls down curses upon his adversaries in a growling, hissing voice.

But these are merely a sampling of the high profile ministries confounding the Biblical record. Their doctrines and demonstrations of false signs and wonders have produced a veritable swarm of imitators, from the local pastor faithfully mimicking his fleshly icons, to the bewildered sheep in the pew hammered by church leadership into proclaiming a “gospel” contrary to the Christ he has grown to know and love.

The time for silence is long past. The “Ananias and Sapphira” threat can no longer be allowed to bully the true believers of the Cross. The “do not touch My anointed” intimidation has grown stale. If the price of speaking the truth be condemnation from the religious community, so be it. If loss of influence, status, or respect, it is a pittance compared to the glory of suffering with our Lord. The voice of Christ speaks out over the ages, as strong now as when they were first inscribed into the pages of the Bible:

“Why have you been standing here idle all day long?” (Matthew 20:6).

To know the truth and withhold speaking it is to become an accomplice to sin.

So much has been touted about the so-called “prophetic voices” of today. Cries of “Peace, peace,” when there is no peace echo through the empty hearts of those who long for the comforting word of truth but can find none among the clamor of the Temple moneychangers. The clink of coin on coin purchases silence at the expense of the multitudes. But the real prophets of God rebuked heresy openly, with their words hewing at the rotten wood of false doctrine. Kings, priests, and false prophets felt the cut of the axe. It is telling that the anointed of God (the true prophets) did indeed “touch” the others anointed of God, as well as those whose feigned allegiance to the Lord had dishonestly earned them a title of respect among their peers.

A plenitude of passages, both in Old and New Testament Scripture, speak of bringing the false out into the light, that it may lose its power over people. Ephesians 5:11 states this clearly, but the choice is ours to obey--or not, and suffer the consequences. Consequences that are even now destroying lives and taking the people of God by the hand into spiritual harlotry.

“And do not participate in the unfruitful deeds of darkness, but instead even expose them.”

It is not a suggestion or challenge but a command. How well we heed it may determine the integrity and Biblical stalwartness of the next generation of Christians.