

LifeWay Explore the Bible Series for November 18: Living with troublemakers

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One of the key beliefs Baptists always have held as important is the priesthood of the believer—the idea that any individual Christian can read and interpret the Bible without any guide apart from the Holy Spirit.

While this belief (along with the widespread ready access to the Bible) helps to prevent the kind of abuses of power by church leaders common prior to the Reformation, it also can lead to problems as some believers assume any interpretation is valid.

This in turn can and has led to the presence of false teachers who may cause trouble within a local church. Disagreement over interpretations of particular verses within a church is not a problem and often is healthy when handled correctly.

The problem arises when someone seeks to alter the essential Christian beliefs (such as the divinity of Jesus or the significance of the cross) by adding to or twisting them and then disrupting or dividing the church by assuming leadership and teaching others.

Such false teachers certainly are not new to the church. The early apostles found themselves having to combat a variety of false teachings. In their writings, Peter and Jude specifically address these and provide instructions on how believers within the church should deal with them.

Beware of their deception (2 Peter 1-3, 12-13)

The difficulty in identifying false teachers is the fact that most do not necessarily deny key elements in the gospel. In fact, that is how they gain a following. Their message has enough truth to sound correct. Yet when one looks closer, they find these teachers have added unbiblical elements or twisted parts of the truth to fit their own ideas.

Often they will seek to focus on trivial issues and make them central tests for true belief. Verse 3 says they use “stories they have made up.” The Greek text uses the word *plastos* from which we get the word “plastic.”

These teachers substitute the solid rock of truth with their own plastic words. They use the same vocabulary as the biblical message, but alter the meanings of words. In doing so, they seek to exploit the ignorance of those who are younger or weaker in their faith in order to gain positions of authority. And this desire for power divides the church into “us versus them.”

This subtlety in their approach is why Peter urges believers to constantly be on guard and know the truth so as to avoid falling for their deception.

Reject their lifestyle (2 Peter 2:13-14, Jude 16-19)

In addition to their desire for power, the motivation for the deception of these false teachers is a desire to satisfy their physical appetites while still appearing to be religious. They want to have it both ways. They want to have the reputation for being a spiritual leader but also to enjoy the pleasures which the world offers.

2 Peter 2:15 states they have followed the ways of Balaam. It had been the prophet Balaam who enticed the Israelites not to stop worshipping God but to also worship Baal (Numbers 31:16).

This is how they are able to gain a large following. They tell people exactly what they want to hear—that you can have it both ways. Unfortunately, it is

exactly these “good church people” living lives no different from the world that leads to disregard for the church as being full of hypocrites.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer called this “cheap grace”—salvation without repentance or discipleship. In verse 17, Peter appropriately pictures these teachers as “springs without water.” Jesus told us true disciples would be known by their fruit and we should refuse to follow those whose lifestyle does not follow that of Jesus.

Respond in love (Jude 20-23)

In seeking to respond to troublemaking false teachers, we need to do more than watch for deception and avoid certain lifestyles. We need to build up our immunity and resistance to such falsehood by strengthening our personal faith through prayer and responding to others in love.

Jude reminds his readers many who have fallen for the teachings of the false teachers or who have doubts simply lack an understanding of the truth. Because of this, we always should seek to gently and lovingly help and guide those who are younger in their faith and have not developed discernment.

We should do this not by force or harshly criticizing anyone, but by speaking the truth in love. We should not hold back from drawing clear distinctions and explaining the errors, but we should do so as channels of the mercy God has shown to us.

Depend on God (Jude 24-25)

All of this should be done as we fully depend on God’s strength and guidance. Coming across as one who has all the right answers makes us no different than the false teachers. In all things, we should exercise humility understanding our own fallibility.

In our own strength, we simply cannot detect all deception or avoid all false lifestyle choices or respond in love to everyone. It is only through depending on God that we can do these things and remain faithful. Only God is able to keep us from stumbling and to reward us with his presence in the end.