**False Teachers-motives and dangers.**

Before I start I’ll give a recap of what has been said already about Peter’s “letter of encouragement when church teaching is confusing”. Paul Mileham reminded us that Peter urged his readers to know Jesus by faith, so that as their trust grew, they would add one solid virtue to another 2 Pet. 1: 5-7. Keith Croxton spoke of the Gospel being authenticated for Peter by the Transfiguration and the call to-remember the truths of the faith -trust Jesus -accept God’s Word in Scripture. All this should set up the Christians to cope with False Teachers.

Intro-I wonder what you made of the colourful attacks on false teachers or prophets and on the dangers of destructive heresies-did you think it rather over the top? As we saw in the Gospel Jesus took false prophets very seriously, describing them as “ferocious wolves” (Matt. 7: 15) out to destroy our faith and our fellowships. Prophets and teachers are much the same. In the Old Testament the fundamentals of the Jewish faith were based on the Law and Covenant, which Moses, the prophet, had outlined and taught. The fundamentals of the Christian faith come from Jesus’ teaching as amplified, under the Holy Spirit’s guidance, by Paul and the other apostles in their writings in the New Testament. In both cases, false prophets or teachers can divert believers from the fundamentals of their faith-sometimes with dangerous and tragic consequences-almost like a shipwreck.

We need to define what false teaching or “heresy” 2 Pet. 2: 1 really means-in short it covers doctrinal error. In the early church this could mean insisting on Jewish ‘add ons’ like the suggestion that circumcision was vital for the true Christian. Indeed, in 2 Pet. 2: 2 these teachers denied “the Sovereign Lord who bought them”-they denied that Jesus was divine and the Redeemer. No wonder in v. 12 we read that “they blasphemed in matters they did not understand.” “They have left the straight way” v15. Moreover, their behaviour was such that they ”brought the truth into disrepute.” v2. This might prevent the spread of the Gospel.

How did these false teachings come about-what were their origin? The teachers were influenced by the ideas of the ‘world’ meaning those cultural mindsets, thoughts and theories that were opposed to and rebelling against God. As Paul suggested it’s easy for Christians to be “conformed to the pattern of this world” or be squeezed into the world’s mould instead of being “transformed by the renewing of your mind.” Rom. 12: 2. Gospel truths are countercultural. In the Old Testament, it was the surrounding Baal worship that infiltrated into Jewish practice; in the first century AD Greek ideas-material things like the body were of lesser worth than the spiritual-seeped in or, likewise, Jewish ideas-meaning that circumcision was needed by true Christians-clouded the truth or a misinterpretation of God’s grace leading some to say sin did not matter, since they would be forgiven did likewise. What worldly ideas threaten us? The notion that humans are basically good–better education would help rather than the faith in Jesus that transforms us-or that we can earn our salvation by doing good works, or the confusion over sexual and gender identity. Also, Peter does suggest the false teaching and the motives of its proponents come from ”the corrupt desires of the sinful nature” v10 like their love of pleasure and “eyes full of adultery” v14-“they are experts in greed” and their despising of authority v10. Their life style hardly have enhanced their credibility as teachers!

The danger from false teaching is highlighted by Jesus, when he told those, who did not obey God’s words that He “never knew” them Mk. 7:33-their friendship with him would be damaged and broken. Peter makes clear doctrinal error can destroy a fellowship-some would say the US Episcopal Church has slipped its moorings from Scripture so badly that it is much weakened. In Galatians, Paul tries to deal with the strife between the two parties-those from a Jewish background urging circumcision as well as faith and those relying on God’s grace by faith. There is danger for the false teachers, too, for they are “condemned” 2 Pet. 2:3 and, most tellingly, “If they have escaped the corruption of the world by knowing our Lord Jesus Christ and are again entangled in it and overcome, they are worse off…. than they were at the beginning. It would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than to have known it and then turned their backs on the sacred command..” vv20-21. On the other hand, there is hope “the Lord knows how to rescue godly men (and women) from trials”-Peter quotes Noah being “protected” v 5 and Lot being “rescued” v7. How can false teaching be discerned? Old Testament prophets were called into God’s presence, heard His’ take’ on a current situation and then proclaimed that. Hence, in Moses’ case the Law and the Covenant were the gold standard of Jewish faith and practice. In Deut. 13: 2-3 we read, if the prophet ‘says “Let us follow other gods” (gods you have not known) “and let us worship them”, you must not listen to the words of that prophet…’ The yardstick against which to test this teaching was the Law and the Covenant-“you shall have no other god before Me.” Ex. 20:3. For the Christian, it is the Word of God revealed in the Scriptures. Besides this test, Jeremiah (23: 10) suggests assessing the prophets’ life style-for him the false ‘“prophets follow an evil course..Both prophets and priests are godless; even in my temple I find their wickedness”, declares the Lord.’ This agrees with Jesus’ comment that “by their fruit you will recognise them” Matt. 7:16. Indeed, He suggests that, if their teaching encourages a life style opposed to the “will of my Father who is in heaven” vv21-23 that teaching must be false. Lastly, Peter criticises the false teachers’ manner-they are “bold and arrogant” v10 and their teaching promises much, but delivers little-“These men are springs without water..” v17.

What are we to learn from all of this? We must be alert to all the pressures encouraging false teaching that can divert us from the Truth. The spirit of this age stresses, amongst other things, ‘virtue signalling’ rather than decisive action and individual self gratification rather than community endeavours or moral behaviour. It down plays the lethal power of sin-‘we’re not all that bad are we?’ This forgets that sin cuts us off from God. It suggests all roads lead to God, whereas Jesus said “no one comes to the Father except through Me.” Jn. 14:6. There is the confusion over sexual identity, which is, I think, based on our DNA and gender identity, which seems to depend on what we feel we would like to be; this confusion spills over into teaching about same sex attraction and relationships, so that standards, moral or otherwise, are relative rather than absolute. These issues need compassion not compromise.

The answer Jesus Christ and Peter give to these pressures and confusions is to ask whether the teaching involved helps us to do “the will of my Father who is in Heaven” Matt. 7:21 or, put another way, squares with the overall sense of Scripture. Sometimes, teaching can overemphasise one point in Scripture-for instance, ‘the health, wealth and prosperity’ gospel from America ignores the view that this life is “a vale of tears” and that the Christian is bound to meet with persecution and tribulations “in this world you will have trouble, but take heart I have overcome the world.” Jn. 16:33. Besides checking whether the teaching squares with Scripture, we should ask whether the teachers and their ideas promote Christlike behaviour. If the pressures from the world and the need to check the two points above seem very daunting, there is the promise to hang on to “the Lord knows how to rescue godly men (and women) from trials…” 2 Pet. 2:9.