

"My People Are Destroyed"

Lack of Discernment in Modern Christianity

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To Old Covenant Israel, God wrote, "Hear the word of the LORD, ye children of Israel: for the LORD hath a controversy with the inhabitants of the land, because there is no truth, nor mercy, nor knowledge of God in the land.... My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge: because thou hast rejected knowledge, I will also reject thee, that thou shalt be no priest to me: seeing thou hast forgotten the law of thy God, I will also forget thy children" (Hosea 4:1, 6). A lack of knowledge was destroying the people of God's physical nation, Israel; and because they neglected to teach the people, God rejected Israel's leaders. Could something similar be happening among God's spiritual people today?

If you read Ezekiel 34, you will see that God issues a scathing indictment against the neglectful and self-centered leaders of Israel whom He refers to as shepherds (in Hebrew, as in the Greek of the New Testament, the word translated as "shepherds" is the same as the word translated "pastors"). Certainly, what God says here pertained to the time in which it was written. And, as you read it, you can see how it also applied to the Jewish leaders during the time of Jesus' ministry. But might the principle of these Scriptures also have a relevance for Christian leaders now?

Looking at Ezekiel 34 a little more closely, we see that in verses 18-19 God says, "Seemeth it a small thing unto you to have eaten up the good pasture, but ye must tread down with your feet the residue of your pastures? and to have drunk of the deep waters, but ye must foul the residue with your feet? And as for my flock, they eat that which ye have trodden with your feet; and they drink that which ye have fouled with your feet." Notice that there is a cause and effect relationship here. The shepherds or pastors ruin the grass that the sheep feed on by stomping it down with their feet. And they pollute the water that the sheep drink by stirring mud into it with their feet, muddying the waters. Those are the causes. The effect is that the sheep eat what remains of the damaged grass and drink the impure water. Verse 21 implies other effects: the flock becomes diseased and scattered.

Have Christians today become spiritually diseased and scattered because they have been feeding on Scripture that has been trampled

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on and distorted by their teachers? Have they been drinking what has been muddied by human doctrine?

In his comments on verse 18, John Gill, after explaining the immediate meaning for Ezekiel's day and the application to the scribes and Pharisees during Jesus' ministry, says this: "...and such are heretical persons, who sometimes arise out of the churches, are a part of the flock, that corrupt the word of God, pervert the Scriptures, and handle them deceitfully; and may be said to tread down and trample upon the wholesome truths of the Gospel, and to muddy the clear doctrines of grace; so that the children of God cannot, as they desire, have the pure, unmixed, sincere milk of the word." My only disagreement with what Gill says here is his use of the word "cannot." There are steps Christians can take to feed upon the pure Word, and I will discuss this later. But first, let's look at some examples of lack of discernment and discuss its causes.

Examples of Lack of Discernment

It has become commonplace for today's moguls of Christian media to air programs and print books that their predecessors of only a generation ago would have had the discernment to reject. Herbert W. Armstrong and his son, Garner Ted Armstrong, had to print their own books and buy airtime on secular radio and television stations to broadcast their heresies in the twentieth century. But now, programs that carry on the crooked baton of Armstrongism can also be heard and seen on many Christian radio and television networks. This is a public shame upon those who are responsible for determining what can be aired on Christian networks. These people are openly displaying their ignorance and lack of discernment.

Yet, there is hardly any reason to single these Armstrong programs out when the schedules of these networks also contain shows by Joel Osteen, Benny Hinn, T. D. Jakes, Joyce Meyer, Creflo Dollar, Robert Schuller, and others whose teachings are also far removed from sound biblical doctrine.

One need only walk into a Christian bookstore, browse through a Christian bookseller catalog, or look online to become appalled by the rubbish that Christian publishers are willing to print. From the authors who write these books to the editors who accept them to the bookstores who sell them to the readers who buy them, there is apparently an almost complete lack of ability to discern between biblical truth and glaring error.

Tyndale House publishes a book about the supposed near-death experience of a child called *The Boy Who Came Back from Heaven: A Remarkable Account of Miracles, Angels, and Life beyond This World* by Kevin and Alex Malarkey (yes, that's apparently their real name) and it is immediately a huge success. Within months, Thomas Nelson publishes the claimed near-death experience of another child in a book called *Heaven is for Real* by Todd Burpo with Lynn Vincent and it becomes an enormous best seller. Certainly, one feels sorry for what these children went through, especially Kevin Malarkey who is still physically impaired. But readers are either unaware of or are willing to ignore that the near death experiences in these books plainly contradict the Bible and are thus the records of the imaginations of children.

William Paul Young writes a book called *The Shack* that depicts God the Father as an African-American woman called "Papa," Jesus as a Jewish carpenter with a large nose, and the Holy Spirit as an Asian woman, fills the book with outrageous twists of biblical teachings (the universal salvation of everyone whatever their beliefs, the Father bearing crucifixion scars, the claim that God doesn't punish people for sin), and it sells tens of millions of copies. Albert Mohler has rightly said that the failure of readers to see how this book conflicts with the Bible "reveals a disastrous failure of evangelical discernment. It is hard not to conclude that theological discernment is now a lost art among American evangelicals — and this loss can only lead to theological catastrophe" ("*The Shack*—The Missing Art of Evangelical Discernment" <http://www.albertmohler.com/2010/01/27/the-shack-the-missing-art-of-evangelical-discernment/>).

Rob Bell claims to be an evangelical.
He has written a book called *Love Wins*.
He writes this book
the way I am now writing
—as if we are all seven years old.
He touts universalism
and the chance for salvation after death.
He does this by twisting Scriptures into pretzels
and cutting off the bits he doesn't like.
Thousands of Christians buy his book.
Then, instead of throwing the book into the trash,
they write reviews calling it a "masterpiece,"
"A book of hope," "A Must Read For All Christians."

These programs and books are not anomalies. Biblical heresy is so much the standard fare that we must conclude that popular Christian publishing, radio, and television is now largely not really Christian at all.

Causes for Lack of Discernment

I submit that there are three primary causes of the lack of discernment we now see among Christians. They are: 1) The influence of false brethren, 2) Dependence on poor pastors and other leaders, including writers and broadcasters, and, 3) Lack of serious personal Bible study among Christians. Let's look at these in just a little more detail.

1. The Influence of False Brethren: Immediately after exhorting his readers to "earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints," Jude writes in verse 4, "For there are certain men crept in unawares, who were before of old ordained to this condemnation, ungodly men, turning the grace of our God into lasciviousness, and denying the only Lord God, and our Lord Jesus Christ." Paul also speaks of "false brethren unawares brought in, who came in privily to spy out our liberty which we have in Christ Jesus, that they might bring us into bondage" (Galatians 2:4).

False brethren have always been a threat to the purity of the Christian message. They enter churches through the baptizing of non-elect infants, bogus conversions instigated by emotion-stirring altar calls or testimonies of music, unfocused evangelistic messages that cause people to convert to some peripheral topic (such as politics) rather than the Gospel itself, and fleshly but temporary reactions to even the true Gospel. Jesus spoke of false conversions in the Parable of the Sower (see <http://www.wordofhisgrace.org/par1sower.htm>). They are never completely avoidable.

Once associated with a church, false brethren will water it down in what they speak about, what they recommend, what they desire, and what they oppose. Many will go on to responsible positions, having a more direct influence on the church's focus. Some will become pastors, writers, and broadcasters, spreading false doctrine to their congregations, and to thousands and even millions of readers and listeners.

What can we do? We should not start "witch hunts" judging who is true and who is false before they have openly exposed themselves by

their fruit, their words (see "What is the fruit by which we are to know people?" <http://www.wordofhisgrace.org/matthew7qa.htm>). Even then, we must be careful not to hastily condemn—we all occasionally make mistakes. Be we can always oppose wrong doctrine and practice. Unfortunately, when it happens, such opposition is often from the minority of brethren. The fact is, even many true Christians are so weak in their understanding of doctrine that they don't even discern the problem, or, if they do, they don't know how to win a battle against it. Their "swords" (Ephesians 6:17) are dull from disuse. They are not studying their Bibles.

2. Depending on Poor Leaders: Jesus told His followers that they were not to lord it over each other—rule one over the other the way worldly leaders rule nations—but that they were to humbly serve one another: "But He said to them, 'The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those who exercise authority over them are called "benefactors." But you shall not be thus; but let the greatest among you, let him be as the youngest, and he who leads as he who serves'" (Luke 22:25-26—*English Majority Text Version, EMTV*). Paul, even as an apostle, affirmed this, denying that he was lording over his brethren: "Not that we lord it over your faith, but are fellow workers for your joy; for by faith you stand" (2 Corinthians 1:24—*EMTV*).

Pastors who follow Paul's example try to empower their congregations by encouraging them to study the Bible and think for themselves. Their pleasure is to see believers growing. They know that helping Christians to become proficient Bible scholars is the best way to ensure that they are not waylaid by erroneous teachings. They allow people to question them, and they converse with them as brethren as they search the Scriptures together to find the answers. These pastors are a rare and endangered species.

What seems to be the more common type of pastor is the one who "plays his cards close to his chest." Please forgive the expression from gambling, but it well describes what I mean. This pastor has what he believes to be some knowledge of the Bible, and he doesn't want it to leak out to others. In his sermons and so-called Bible studies (really lectures), he doles out crumbs and tidbits here and there. But he is always careful not to so educate anyone in his congregation as to empower that person. He is afraid of creating what he, in his mistrustful thinking, believes will be a rival or threat to his position in the congregation as the sole purveyor of biblical wisdom. The only people he delegates any responsibilities to are yes men who simply do his bidding. At least partly because this pastor never allows himself to

be seriously questioned, his understanding of the Bible becomes defective. Thus, even the knowledge he gives out in paltry rations is flawed, but, because they put their trust in him, his congregation doesn't even know it. By keeping his congregation in a perpetual state of ignorance, this pastor promotes poor discernment.

Here are just two examples among many I could cite from my own experience and the reports of others. I chose these because they could be told simply, in one paragraph. But they are actually quite typical.

My family and I visited a church in which the pastor gave a sermon about angels. During the sermon, he gave several anecdotes of supposed encounters with angels that he had read about. He cited these stories in a positive way, indicating that he believed them to be inspiring stories that we should find uplifting. The problem was that in each of the stories, there was an incident in which the supposed angel of God lied to accomplish his ends. Do God's angels lie? Anyone with even a child's understanding of Scripture should know that God's holy, righteous angels do not lie. But that pastor didn't know something even that rudimentary. And no one in his congregation challenged him. All seemed to accept what he said with a disturbing naivety.

On another occasion, my family and I visited a church in a region we had never been to before. When we walked in, the pastor, instead of greeting us with a smile, acted suspicious toward us. Typical of most standard church meetings, the pastor was the only person who taught from the Bible. After his sermon, he did not ask for questions. Afterward, his wife kindly invited us as visitors from afar to their house for lunch. The pastor stayed behind for awhile for some church business. We enjoyed conversing with the pastor's wife until the pastor arrived home. Almost as soon as he sat down, without any apparent reason, he began saying how he would not tolerate anyone trying to steal his congregation. He said that someone had recently tried to steal his congregation but he had gotten it back. But now he was going to keep a sharp watch and make sure it didn't happen again. It was his congregation, and he was going to make sure he kept control of it. This, expanded in great detail, was almost his entire conversation during the meal. I smiled and listened politely and afterward we thanked his wife for her hospitality and left, never to return, but feeling sorry for the people in this man's congregation, living under the thumb of this little dictator.

Has your pastor ever said that it is the Christian's duty to submit to his teaching or that it is prideful to question what he says? Don't believe

it. A literal translation of 1 Corinthians 14:29 says, "And prophets let speak two or three and the others scrutinize!" Today, instead of having two or three speakers, we often see pastors dominate the entire assembly. When was the last time your pastor allowed you to scrutinize what he said? (I will have more to say about what the Bible says a pastor is supposed to do and whether God wants His assemblies to be led by one man in a future article.) And, how many people in your congregation have the biblical discernment and competence to even begin such a scrutiny?

3. Lack of Serious Personal Bible Study: How do art experts know a real from a counterfeit Rembrandt? They know what to look for. And how do they know? They learn from careful study. That's why they're called experts.

Don't you think that we Christians should be experts on the message God has left with us? Shouldn't we be such experts that we can spot a counterfeit message when we see or hear it?

Since the invention of the printing press, Bibles have been readily available. And now there are Bibles for computers, various devices running Android and other platforms, and e-book readers. Plus there are programs and apps to assist our study of the Bible. And some of the Bibles and Bible helps are free. Christians CAN have the pure Word, but they are instead choosing the damaged and infected secondhand word coming from corrupt teachers.

Nothing in the Bible says that an understanding of God's Word can only be gained by certain "holy men" called clergy. Immediately after speaking of those who twist the Scriptures to their own destruction, Peter writes to the brethren, "Ye therefore, beloved, seeing ye know these things before, beware lest ye also, being led away with the error of the wicked, fall from your own stedfastness. But grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and for ever. Amen" (2 Peter 3:17-18). All Christians are expected to grow in both grace and the knowledge of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. This is a reference to coming to understand His mind as expressed in the Bible.

So we have not only the scandal of the leaders becoming corrupt and corrupting those who listen to them, but also the shame of Christians being unwilling to take up the forkful of food for themselves and lift it to their mouths. As a result, as we have seen in Ezekiel 34:21, the flock has become diseased—spiritually perverted, doctrinally unsound,

lame in their walk with God—and scattered—weakened by not being of one spirit and one mind as the Scriptures say we ought to be (Philippians 1:27; 2:2; 1 Peter 3:8). The result is a general lack of discernment of truth from error in what is taught from the pulpit, published in Christian books and articles, broadcast on Christian radio and television, and believed by the average Christian.

To Timothy, Paul wrote, "But evil men and seducers shall wax worse and worse, deceiving, and being deceived. But continue thou in the things which thou hast learned and hast been assured of, knowing of whom thou hast learned them" (2 Timothy 3:13-14). Timothy had learned from Paul. Today, we cannot sit as disciples at the feet of Paul and the other apostles or of Jesus. But we can still learn from them, directly from their inspired writings.

Word of His Grace takes its name from Acts 20:32. When the apostle Paul suspected that his arrest and eventual execution were drawing near, he called for the elders of the church in Ephesus. His farewell address to them is recorded in Acts 20. In verse 32, knowing that he would no longer be able to be their overseer and shepherd, he told them, "And now, brethren, I commend you to God, and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up, and to give you an inheritance among all them which are sanctified." The Bible is what is able to build us up. Paul did not delegate his authority to any man, but set the Bible as the brethren's authority.

Again, Paul wrote to Timothy, "Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth. But shun profane and vain babblings: for they will increase unto more ungodliness. And their word will eat as doth a canker: of whom is Hymenaeus and Philetus" (2 Timothy 2:15-17). Yes, and today, too, we should shun the profane and vain babblings of popular Christian writers and television and radio evangelists and, yes, even local pastors when they are unbiblical in their teachings, stifling in their control, and not open to serious questioning.

Why don't we do this? Because a general apathy has settled over many Christians. Shouldn't we just leave these things to the experts we pay to study the Bible and preach? Aren't we too busy with work and other cares to delve deeply into the Word of God? No, it is time to get our priorities straight.

Cures for Lack of Discernment

As someone has said, if we allow it, the immediate will always try to get in the way of the important. But understanding the Bible so that we are not led astray and so that we can help others is too important to allow this to happen. Because Christians are not taking seriously their responsibility to know the Bible, false teachers are growing in influence, distorting the Gospel, and giving Christianity a bad name. Several times, the Bible calls us priests and a priesthood (see 1 Peter 2:5, 9; Revelation 1:6; 5:10; 20:6). In 1 Timothy 4:1, Paul says, "Now the Spirit speaketh expressly, that in the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils." But the responsibility to "earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints" (Jude 3) is ours.

Are we letting the immediate get in the way of the important? Are we being distracted by work, family other responsibilities, or entertainment? These things have their place, but we must organize our days so that we have time for Bible study.

Another way to cure lack of discernment is to begin holding church leaders accountable. Absolutely nothing in the Bible says that anyone is to have the power of a despot over God's people. As I have already pointed out, 1 Corinthians 14:29 allows for two or three men speaking in a meeting and, after they have spoken, other men are to thoroughly judge (*diakrinetōsan*) or scrutinize what they have said. If your church refuses to follow this biblical directive, maybe it is time to find the exit.

In this article, I'm calling on the reader to take responsibility for his or her own spiritual life. Wake up spiritually and be willing to make hard choices where necessary. May the Lord give each of us true, biblical discernment from this day forward.