

# About Those False Teachers

by Ron R. Ritchie

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Recently I have had the same experience that many of you have had - running into people with different religious persuasions. Sometimes you and I are left in awe of their knowledge of their beliefs. Sometimes we are challenged by what they share with us, and we would like to take them on in a verbal exchange, hoping against hope that we will not lose our temper. We have all faced this in one form or another, either in our hearts or openly.

Perhaps they meet you at an airport and say, "Excuse me, what is your profession?", You say, "Oh, I'm a teacher," or "I'm an engineer," or "I'm a doctor." They say, "Oh, great! Just the type of people we want to talk to!" You think to yourself, "Gosh, I really like these people. They know quality when they see it!" They come at you in such a way that your defenses are down immediately. Then they hand you this beautiful book, free! And all they want you to do (because you are one of those people who will appreciate what is in the book) is read it. The book is very expensive, very elaborate, very well-written, and you are in a dilemma: What to do? Or perhaps you meet similar people on a street corner and they talk to you about their concept of reality, their definition of the supreme being. Or they come to your door, or send tracts through the mail. You are constantly harassed, constantly challenged on a day-to-day basis about your beliefs in Jesus Christ.

I would like you to know that the problem is not new, that Moses was under the same pressure. In Deuteronomy 13, it is recorded that he told his people,

**If a prophet or a dreamer of dreams arises among you, and gives you a sign or a wonder, and the sign or wonder comes true, concerning which he spoke to you, saying, 'Let us go after other gods (whom you have not known) and let us serve them,' you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams; for the Lord your God is testing you to find out if you love the Lord God with all your heart and with all your soul.**

This is a very clear message, very black and white. Moses was faced with this problem of false teachers. Every true prophet who ever spoke was faced with false teachers. Jesus was confronted with the Pharisees, Paul with the Judaizers, John with the Gnostics. Everyone who has ever taught the Word has been faced with false teachers. Anyone who loves Jesus Christ is faced with the problem of how to tell the true from the false. John and all the other apostles constantly tell us what is the difference. In 2 John, that small letter tucked near the end of your Bible, probably written right after lunch one day to a woman he loved, John shares with us some insights about those false prophets. He is going to give us two keys to look for in their teaching.

Greetings, 1-3

**The elder to the chosen lady and her children, whom I love in truth; and not only 1, but also all who know the truth, for the sake of the truth which abides in us and will be with us forever: Grace, mercy, and peace will be with us, from God the Father and from Jesus Christ, the Son of the Father, in truth and love.**

John calls himself "the elder." In the Old Testament and the New, the word "elder" denotes those men who were given by God to the nation and tribes of Israel, and to the churches, as spiritual leaders. This particular elder is the John who first followed Jesus by the Sea of Galilee. This is the John whom, along with his brother James, Jesus nicknamed "sons of thunder," i. e., "noisy ones". This is the same John, however, who was in the upper room at the last supper, the one whom Jesus loved. Isn't it encouraging that when Jesus Christ enters our life, he can start to change us and can weed out the linings even we ourselves do not enjoy? This is the John who started to grow, in this love relationship with Jesus, Christ.

This same disciple now sits down, in A.D. 85 or 90, to write a letter to a faithful woman who was seeking to do those things that are pleasing to the Lord. She was having some problems, and the elder shared with her some insights about reality. This is some 60 years after the resurrection of Jesus Christ. John is in the city of Ephesus involved in a ministry to people, and this particular afternoon is involved in the problems of a "chosen" woman. He calls her "chosen," I think, simply because of the fact that we are all chosen in Christ.

He is writing to her as "the elder"--not as one appointed a spiritual leader in a local church, but as one who is 75 or 80 years old; not as "John the elder", but as "the elder John". We read the Gospels and see the young John, and we think him forever the youth. But this is "the aged one," the elder John who is faithfully ministering, the white-haired granddaddy. As an apostle, he had the right to speak to anyone, anywhere, on spiritual matters So he writes to this chosen lady and her children.

It appears that she is a widow that is just conjecture, but it seems likely--and he is delighted that she and her children are walking in truth. He says, "I love you in truth." Love and truth are the two pillars of his ministry to her. We are not sure how John learned about her problem, but it is obvious that some false teachers had come into her life, and perhaps into her home, and started to teach. Suddenly she began to recognize that there was something strange about them.

We have all had that experience. We hear someone; we like their personality, like the way they dress; they use "God-words"; they have a Bible; the music they use is great. But when they leave town, we think, "What was that all about? Something is missing. I feel hollow, empty." I took my family to the circus this past week. It was the first time I had ever been to the circus. It really is a three-ring circus, isn't it? Everything is moving, and it is exciting and delightful. While we were sitting there, my young son said, "Dad, can I have some cotton candy?" I supposed that is what fathers do at circuses, so I bought him some cotton candy. Then the intermission came, the bright lights went off, everything was cleared out of the ring, the audience was milling around, and it was back to the dull life for about fifteen minutes. My son turned to me and said, "Daddy, I don't want you to buy me any more cotton candy." I asked him why, and he said, "Because you no sooner put it to your mouth, and it isn't!" That is what has happened to this lady. The false teachers have come, she has tasted of them, and they "aren't"! They have no substance in their life or message.

So she turns to the apostle for help. "Tell me what to do. How do I treat these people? How do I work with them?" I sense that she is angry, that she feels she has been "conned". She had opened her home, given hospitality, but they had left behind them so much confusion. She is saying, "John, help me. I thought I was doing what the Lord wanted me to do, but it's not working. There are tares among the wheat. What am I to do?"

John approaches the matter gently. He is going to answer her question, but first he wants to share with her some basic principles. He says, "You are one whom I love in truth." That is, in the Greek, "I have an *agape* love for you." This is that love which is self-sacrificing, which is willing to love its enemies, the love which holds another in high esteem. It is the love which can be produced only by Jesus Christ in our lives. There is no other way.

And, notice, John loves her in truth. Truth is reality, the way things really are, not the way you hope they will be. Jesus Christ said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life." Someone has said, "Without Jesus Christ being the way, there is no going; without Jesus Christ being the truth, there is no knowing; and without Jesus Christ being the life, there is no living." Jesus said, "Do you want to know about reality? Do you want to know how to live? Do you want guidelines for your love? Listen to the truth."

We have a struggle with this, because we want either to love too much, or to tell too much truth. We have problems attaining the balance. We want to love everybody. We do not want to offend anybody. We hear this all the time: "We let anybody in this group. It doesn't matter about your religious convictions. We're all going up the same mountain toward God. We'll all meet at the top. We love you - come." And we hear from the other kind of group: "No way! We're going to tell you the truth before we start up the mountain, and you're not moving before we give you the truth! And after we give you the truth, we're thoroughly convinced you won't have the dedication to go up that mountain."

John says, "...whom I love in truth." As Paul puts it in Ephesians, "trusting in love" is the balance. Love is seeing people as real people whom God loves. Truth is waiting for an opportunity to set them free into the ways of Jesus Christ. It is waiting for the right opportunity--waiting because you love them so much--but not diverting yourself from telling the truth. John says, "I love you in the truth. I want to share some principles with you, and then I want to tell you the truth. I want to share some of God's heart with you, and then share how to work this out." So we find that truth gives the guidelines for love.

I love what Jesus said in John 17:26, in his prayer to the Father, when he asked concerning his disciples, "... that the love wherewith Thou didst love Me may be in them, and I in them." What a beautiful prayer! "May the same love, Father, that you have for me, be in my disciples, and may I be in them, so that they will be able to be free and to be truthful, to walk in truth."

John says, "I love you in truth; and not only I, but also all who know the truth, for the sake of the truth which abides in us and will be with us forever." This truth which comes from God makes itself at home in our lives forever. I always appreciate Dave Roper's love for C. S. Lewis. I never seem to finish anything of Lewis' that I start, so I keep waiting for Dave to quote him, so that I will have something to quote to you! He told me that Lewis wrote that when we get to heaven, our first words will be, "But, of course!" This truth, John says, will abide forever. The truth we are involved in is everlasting truth. It comes from the everlasting One who said, "I am the truth."

"Grace, mercy, and peace will be with us, from God the Father and from Jesus Christ, the Son of the Father, in truth and love." There are three qualities of life which are going to come to us from God the Father and from God the Son, who are one. (He is leading this woman very gently, in this beautifully designed letter, very casually introducing the necessary truth.) They are: grace--unmerited favor, that *agape* love which is expressed to us; it sets us free from our guilt, brings us into a relationship with the living God -- and mercy--which heals the suffering because of sin; it is the compassion of God's heart--and peace -- which binds us together with the Father and the Son; it is the peace which stops the war, that restlessness we had is over.

Time, the weekly news magazine, is featuring a new section in which they will keep you up-to-date on what people in the United States are worrying about. Jesus says, "Come to me and there will be peace - no worry, no anxiety--you won't have to read *Time* to know what's happening. I'll tell you what's happening. Read the Word, then read *Time* ; not the other way around.

Review of the basics, 4-6

In the next section John simply (I say "simply" because it is so simple that it is difficult.) takes her back to the very basic principles of Jesus Christ:

**I was very glad to find some of your children walking in truth** [not that some were and some were not, but that the ones he encountered were], **just as we have received commandment to do from the Father. And now I ask you, lady, not as writing to you a new commandment, but the one which we have had from the beginning, that we love one another.** [Do you want to know what love is? Here is the definition.] **And this is love, that we walk according to His commandments.** [Whose commandments? The Lord's. What was his commandment? "Love one another, as I have loved you."] **This is the commandment, just as you have heard from the beginning, that you should walk in it.**

John is saying, "This is what I heard when I was with our Lord, and what I have passed on to you. It has always been the same." Moses wrote it from the Father, in Deuteronomy 6:5: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might." And Leviticus 19:18 adds, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Jesus said the same thing. And just before he left this earth, he said, "The world will know that you are my disciples because you will win every argument, since you know the truth!" Isn't that right? No! He said, "By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." That is how the world will know. And that love is balanced in truth.

Beware, 7-1 1

Now John handles the two questions she must have asked: 1) How do I discern whether teachers are true or false? and 2) Once I find out they are false, how do I relate to them? What is my responsibility?

**For many deceivers have gone out into the world, those who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh. This is the deceiver and the antichrist. Watch yourselves, that you may not lose what we have accomplished, but that you may receive a full reward. Any one who goes too far and does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God; the one who abides in the teaching, he has both the Father and the Son. If any one comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your house, and do not give him a greeting, for the one who gives him a greeting participates in his evil deeds.**

A deceiver is an imposter, one who tries to lead you astray. Apparently, in the context of this letter, there was a group of teachers who had been in the church and then had walked away, had gone into the world system and devised another gospel, made up their own system of thought, and taught something that was not from God's heart. There were no suitable inns or motels in those days, and so it was common, when apparently Christian teachers came to town, for someone to open their home to them and allow them to teach in a home Bible class or a home church. They would teach and then go away, and others would come. This was their style of life. Peter and John did this, Paul and Barnabas, Timothy and Silas, all these men taught in this way. Lucian, a first-century Greek writer, made an interesting comment on some of these itinerant teachers. He was not a Christian, but he observed that if a person wanted to live off the fat of the land he could work up a pseudo-Christian performance which would enable him to get into these Christian communities and live in luxury at their expense. Even this pagan writer saw how his fellow countrymen were abusing the hospitality of Christians. For these Christians were seeking to obey God, and hospitality means loving strangers. They were doing this, but with some of these strangers, strange things were happening that were creating hassles and confusion.

There is a writing from the early second-century called "The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles" ("Didache"). I want to read to you three little items out of much that they wrote in order to help fellow Christians live within their society:

Let every apostle that comes be received in the Lord. If he should stay one day and, if need be, the next day, that is fine. But if he stays three days, he is a false prophet.

Now be careful. If your father-in-law is staying with you, don't read this to him! But these people who arrived saying they were teachers of the Word, but kept staying on and on, were basically stealing from the Christian community.

If the messenger goes forth, and takes nothing but bread, that is fine. But if he asks for money, that is a false prophet.

And another,

If he intends to settle among you and be a craftsman, let him work and eat. But if he has no trade, provide that he should not live idle among you, being a Christian. But if he will not do this, he is a Christ-monger: of such men beware.

So already they were having this problem in the first century. But John is not so much concerned with these external problems as he is with the internal. He is very concerned that this woman be able to spot a false teacher quickly - by what he says, without having to wait to see how he lives. There are two dead giveaways. The first: "... those who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh." That is, those teachers who say, "Christ is a 'spirit'; he never really walked among us. But we like his ethics, we like his ideals, we like his teachings - only he never walked among us."

In the context of this letter, again, John faced a group called the "Gnostics" who held a form of teaching called Gnosticism. This was a doctrine of certain early pseudo-Christian sects that valued inquiry into spiritual

knowledge above faith. They thought salvation was attainable only by those few whose knowledge enabled them to transcend matter. Part of their teaching was that all matter was evil. Well, all matter includes bodies. And if Jesus Christ came in the flesh, since his body was evil he therefore could not be of God, they said. So when John wrote in his Gospel, "The word became flesh and dwelt among us," they said, "Never! A pure God would never take on an evil body." They attacked the incarnation directly. They sought to eliminate it.

But when you eliminate the incarnation, you are left with nothing, really, except vain imaginings as to how you can get to God - and each one is a little different. If you do not accept the incarnation, the fact that Jesus Christ came and lived among us, died for our sins, and rose again if these things are not true - then, as Paul says, we are of all people most to be pitied. But because Christ did come in the flesh, because he did "tent" among us, walked among us and felt our pain, understood where we are; because he was constantly depending on the Father, and left us an example of how to live; and because he was willing to go to the cross and die, to shed blood so that you and I could live forever; therefore we have a merciful High Priest who understands our prayers, understands our agony, understands our hopes and dreams, and who lives with us and in us, expressing his life through us. And if he was not raised from the dead, then there is no one to defeat the works of the devil. We are left to fight the spiritual battle on our own. If he did not come in the flesh, then immediately we have to eliminate not only all of the New Testament, but all of the prophetic statements in the Old Testament, which would leave many, many gaps in the whole record of Scripture.

"He came in the flesh and dwelt among us," says John. "Don't let anybody tell you anything else, because anyone who does is a deceiver, an imposter who leads others astray. And he is the antichrist. That is, when the antichrist comes, he will say exactly what such false teachers say, for they are of the same mind and spirit."

Then John gives her a warning: "Watch yourselves, that you might not lose what we have accomplished, but that you may receive a full reward." That is, "Watch out! You started well. Don't let someone come and take away--not your salvation, but your reward." You see, the race is between you and yourself. It is between the flesh and the spirit. It is God's idea that he wants to bless us with rewards. His loving heart wants to give us a crown of righteousness, to give us rule and authority and responsibility. It is his idea, not ours. As the God who created us, he has the right to gift us, to bless us, and to reward us. Don't fight it. Sometimes I share with people that they are going to have rewards, and they say, "I don't want any." That is a strange attitude. I understand their humble intention, but the point is, God has said he wants to do it. So I'm going to let him do it--in the right frame of reference. And I am going to praise his name for eternity that, though I know who I am in the flesh, I also know who I am in the Spirit: I'm his son. I thank the Father that he set up such things as rewards. He is really more gracious than I can comprehend. So John says, "Watch yourselves, be careful. Don't lose any reward."

Let's look at verse 9: "Any one who goes too far and does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God; the one who abides in the teaching, he has both the Father and the Son." These false teachers would take the Scriptures and go beyond, adding extra views. The Gnostics certainly did that. Such men do not abide in the teaching of Christ. They do not make themselves.. at home in the Word. That is what "abide" means - "make yourself at home", i.e., be so familiar with the Word that when a false teacher comes to town, you don't have a problem with his teaching. You see right through it. I love what Hebrews 5:14 says: "But solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil."

When the whole world says, "Good," having read the Word you can say, "Evil." When the whole world says, "Evil," having read the Word you can say, "Good." Or at times you can agree with what the world says: "You see it as evil; the Word sees it as evil." It is abiding in the Word that will set you free from the false teacher. "The one who does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God; the one who abides (makes himself at home) in the teaching, he has both the Father and the Son." John is saying, "You can't have the Father without the Son, and you can't have the Son without having the Father. You cannot make up your own system of thought. The truth has already been revealed."

I love Ray Stedman's new book, taken from the *Hebrews* series of pastoral messages (Catalog numbers 84-97). It has the most fascinating title: "What More Can God Say?" What a title! Because Hebrews 1:3 says, "He [Jesus] is... the exact representation of his [God's] nature." If you have God the Father, you also have the Son; if you have the Son, you have the Father. You can't separate them. I hear people say, "I really like the

God of the New Testament, Jesus loving, kind, gentle. But that God of the Old Testament scares me to death!" The news is out that they are the same! You can't divide them. Love people who say such things; someone has deceived them.

Then just this in closing: "If any one comes to you and does not bring this teaching [of the incarnation], do not receive him into your house [... as a teacher. You may receive him into your house as a friend or neighbor. What is the context here? John has just spent six verses sharing with us how to walk in love and truth. But sometimes we tend to get frightened when teachers don't agree with us, so we slam doors], and do not give him a greeting; for the one who gives him a greeting participates in his evil deeds." The word translated "greeting" does not mean merely saying, "Hello" ("I'm sorry, I can't say hello to you. Goodbye!") It is not that. It means greetings like "Godspeed! I wish you (God's best. May God be with you. God bless you." Don't give them that kind of greeting. But don't say, "May the devil take your soul!" either. Because in the context, we are talking about love. We are to see their worth as people, see that they have been deceived, look for an opportunity to give them the truth in love.

Yet it is important to realize that "... the one who gives him a greeting participates in his evil deeds," i.e., becomes his partner, becomes linked with the antichrist. Do you see that? This is one who gives a greeting as we have defined it, not one who opens his home. I do not know how to work all this out, and I know you have many questions. I have to do the same thing you must do. I have to go before the Lord every time one of these opportunities arises. I have to ask the Lord to stop me from being argumentative, to enable me to give truth with love, not just truth.

About a month ago some teachers came by, knocked on the door, and handed me a pamphlet. I said, "Thank you very much." They asked if they could come in and talk to me about it. I said, "Well, I'm a follower of Jesus Christ and I just don't appreciate your teachings." One of them said, "Really? What is wrong?" I flashed back to something I had heard twenty years ago in a class on cults. I said, "You don't deal correctly with the Greek in the first chapter of John." I couldn't remember exactly what it was they were supposed to have messed up - I just knew it was a great argument which would frighten these two little ladies right off my porch! But they merely said, "Oh, okay. Could we come back again?" They were the gracious ones.

And what happened? They sent back two teachers of the Greek New Testament! God quietly took me over his knee and spanked me. He showed me I was arrogant, that I didn't express love, that I had ridiculed them and put them down. Then the Lord reminded me that his ministry is so true that I don't have to put anybody down. I don't have to apologize to anyone. I can love them, share my life with them, and ask him to give me an opportunity to share the truth with them, so they will no longer be deceived." It was a hard lesson. It is not worth winning the argument, and losing the person for eternity. Do you see where we all are? We are to love our enemies, care for them, reach out, and hope that God will give us an opportunity to tell them the truth\_ because we were patient enough, with God's patience, to get through the difficulties of the introductions.

In Closing, 12-13

John closes with these words:

**Having many things to write to you, I do not want to do so with paper and ink, but I hope to come to you and speak face to face, that your joy may be made full. The children of your chosen sister greet you.**

**Our heavenly Father, we praise your name for who you are. Father, we desire to submit to your love and your truth. We pray, Lord, that you would teach us what we need to know in order not to be deceived. And as we think through the price you paid to love your enemies, may we be willing to love those who confront us. In Jesus' name, Amen.**

Ron R. Ritchie  
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