

Watch out for false teachers

From God's point of view, the issue of spiritual teachers (John calls them spirits in 1 John 4:1-6) is of enormous importance. The Father sent His Son to our doomed and dying planet to rescue its inhabitants. The spiritual power from heaven that connects lost sinners with their Saviour is invested in Word and sacrament. He decided to entrust His church with these powerful means of grace and commissioned believers to be His agents in the business of rescuing people. "Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptising them... and teaching them," said the risen Lord. These means are sufficient for the task: "The holy Scriptures... are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus," said Paul (2 Timothy 3:15). Jesus said, "Whoever believes and is baptised will be saved," (Mark 16:16).

Word and sacrament need to be brought to people, since no one is born with them. Since all Christians begin their spiritual lives as spiritual babies, they need spiritual leadership and sound teaching to help them grow. And so, Jesus raised up a team of spiritual leaders, trained them carefully, and then sent them out to recruit and train other leaders who will teach. Alas, Satan sees the Word of God for what it is - a deadly blow to his control of the people of the world, and so he recruits and trains a counterforce of spiritual liars who seek to infiltrate the church and, knowingly or unknowingly, unravel God's truth. So subtle and crafty is the evil one that many of his agents actually think they are working for God.

It is fashionable today to be tolerant. After all, who wants to be called intolerant? And yet, some spiritual teachings are deadly, for they lead away from Christ and His cross. If some doctors today were treating people with leeches and bloodletting to rid the body of foul "humors,"¹ they would be a health menace. The state would deny them a license to practice medicine. If an engineering team were designing a huge new bridge that was to be built of concrete without reinforcing rods, it would be too dangerous to use. The state would never grant a construction permit.

Here, then, is the dilemma for believers. They wish simply to tune in to God, but when they listen for Him, they hear a babble of voices all claiming to speak for Him. Every believer in all times has to confront the same terrible problem - who is telling me the truth? How can I tell? Whom do I listen to? Here the state cannot and should not get involved. Each believer has the heavy responsibility to choose whom he or she will listen to.

¹ In the Middle Ages it was believed that a person's health and disposition were the result of a balance of four fluids in the body. These fluids were called humors, from the Latin word humor, meaning "moisture." The fluids were blood, phlegm, yellow bile, and black bile.

It was happening already at John's time. Spirits (spiritual teachers) were drawing people away from their Saviour. John's advice to the believers: test them. How? Since you can't read their minds or look into their hearts, listen to what they say. Evaluate their confession, that is, their position, their teachings. Their appearance, style, buildings, personalities, and number of adherents are all irrelevant. What are they teaching people? They may have charm, pizzazz, connections, and charisma, but what matters is their confession.

John gives two touchstones of truth. Every true spiritual teacher confesses Jesus Christ as having come in the flesh. This is not the entire Christian message, of course, but it is at the heart of the Christian message and thus is the prime target of Satan and his antichrists. This confession involves the doctrine of the Holy Trinity, which expresses God's very identity, and it involves the doctrines of the two natures of Christ, that He is true God and true man in one person.

Every true teacher places this sacred truth at the centre. All non-Christian cults deny it, and thus they betray themselves as carriers of the disease of the spirit of antichrist. As bad as it was in John's time, things got much worse for the Christians in Asia Minor. In the 300s and 400s, most of Christendom was plunged into terrible conflict. A strain of anti-Christian virus called Arianism, which denied Jesus' full divine nature, swept through many of the eastern churches. It was to combat this virus that heroes of faith composed the Nicene and Athanasian Creeds, which exist for one great purpose: to confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh.

The religious scene today is overrun with false spirits that deny the Trinity, the two natures of Christ, and the incarnation. Obviously, the non-Christian philosophies of Buddhism and Hinduism want nothing to do with the biblical Christ, and neither do Judaism, Islam, the Unitarian/Universalists, Mormons, and Jehovah's Witnesses. Most university theology and philosophy departments are hostile to the idea that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh. John's point is that there is great risk if we let these people teach us about God. We must therefore recognise them and avoid them as our spiritual teachers.