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## Pastoral Letter, March, 2018

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Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Last month, I began writing about two prominent dangers to the church which the New Testament addresses repeatedly. Recent studies in 2 Timothy brought them to mind, and a seeming lack of the seriousness of these two threats in the evangelical church of our day led me to write about them. I addressed the first danger last month: *being ashamed of the gospel*. I noted that shame for the gospel is most commonly expressed through 1) a watering down of the depth and seriousness of sin, 2) a man-centered approach to understanding God's purposes, and 3) an approach to evangelism that focuses on man's desires and God's temporal blessings, rather than salvation from man's sinful condition and God's coming judgment. Scripture warns—and church history testifies—that if a church fails to guard against shame for the gospel (and thus, adopts worldly ways to attract unbelievers), she eventually ceases to be a true church.

The other prevalent danger that God warns His church to guard against is *false teaching and false teachers*. This threat to the church is so real and deadly that it is addressed in some way in almost every book of the New Testament. Yet again, the church in our era seems to think that we have moved beyond this danger.

Perhaps modern readers of the Bible assume the apostles in the first century were mainly concerned about error because the New Testament was not yet complete, and feel that our era is different because we have a complete revelation of God's will for His church in the whole Bible. Certainly the early church faced numerous challenges that the New Testament was written to address, but we must also note that Jesus addressed the dangers of false teachers in the church before they even existed. In fact, He addresses the danger as both a present (Matt. 23) and future reality (Matt. 7:15-23; Matt. 24:11,24; John 10:7-14). Likewise, the warnings of the apostles dealt with the present and the future (Acts 20; 2 Cor. 11; 1 Tim. 4, 6; 2 Tim. 3; 2 Pet. 2). Since God has warned us with such clarity and urgency, we must be careful to watch our doctrine with great care.

In the internet age, while we are blessed to have access to many good teachers and helpful teaching, we must realize that there is an even greater threat of false teachers and false teaching. We must be on guard for false teaching and watch for the common errors they use to promote themselves and abuse their hearers:

- 1) False teachers advance an unbiblical view of man that exalts man's goodness and denies the depth of man's sinfulness. False teaching focuses on man's ability to do good. Though they may not deny that man has a sin problem, their attention draws their hearers to focus on their own works. We see this in false religions that make man partly or wholly responsible for their own salvation whether through religious duties, good deeds, social justice, etc. We also see it in teaching that speaks of man's responsibility to bring in God's kingdom or a new earth by their good works.
- 2) False teaching focuses on the present quality of life. False teachers appeal to the natural desires of fallen man. All people in their flesh desire to be healthy, have more than they do at present, and be successful and esteemed by others. They appeal to man's desire for power and offer power for personal glory rather than the exaltation of Christ. False teaching uses these desires of the flesh to gain a following. By taking biblical promises out of context, ignoring the original meaning of the passages, and denying the biblical conditions attached to those promises, false teachers seek to recreate God so that He exists to fulfill man's desires, rather than to fulfill His own sovereign purposes.
- 3) False teachers misrepresent the Person and work of Jesus Christ. This should probably be listed first, but it usually flows out of the errors already listed. To achieve their ends, false religionists must misrepresent who Christ is and what He has accomplished. They do this by confusing His identity as the fully divine and fully human Son of God, and by calling attention to His good works and compassion while ignoring His teaching on sin and His substitutionary atonement through His death and resurrection.

False teaching mishandles God's Word to manipulate its audience. While claiming to be Bible teachers, false teachers merely use the Bible to confuse their hearers and promote their own unbiblical beliefs. By taking verses out of context, redefining biblical terms, and focusing on obscure verses, they hide the clear meaning of Scripture. They talk about things in the Bible without teaching what the Bible really says, and so, they practice the worst form of deception and lead many astray.

We must make every effort to know and walk in the truth so that we may protect ourselves and Christ's church. First, we must know God's Word. More than merely knowing what a particular passage means, we must learn how to handle God's Word correctly; only then will we be able to discern the true meaning of a passage of Scripture, and know when we are being misled by false teaching. Second, we must know our own hearts and know where we are most vulnerable to false teaching; then we must humbly seek God to protect us from the desires of our flesh, and we must submit to the Scripture as God plainly reveals it. Third, we must be wise to guard against relationships with false teachers and those who follow them. When we know others who follow false teaching, we should know that our role is to teach them and hold out the truth to them; we will seek to do so with love, yet we will understand that we cannot allow a friendship to weaken our commitment to the truth of Scripture. May God be gracious to us and protect us from the curse of false teaching.

Let's be vigilant for the truth,

PASTOR HOUSE