

The Characteristics of Error and its Correction

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In this paper we will *first* briefly consider in the Introduction: 1) the role of the Bible as the foundation for rationality, 2) a novel error that undermines the Bible, 3) the doctrine of the preservation of the Scriptures, and 4) the theological presuppositions behind this novel belief that undermines the Bible. And *second*, we will then consider seven characteristics of error and its correction from Paul's first letter to Timothy and apply them to this new error.

The Bible: foundation for rationality

“If the foundations be destroyed, what can the righteous do?” (Ps 11:3). With the so-called Enlightenment the Western church and culture gave itself over initially to *rationalism*, on one hand, but in time, to *irrationalism* on the other. This is now where we find ourselves. In fact, ironically, rationalism by its very nature is irrational. Because it rejects God as the Creator of all things, including rationality (i.e. man's capacity for reason and logic), it renders itself irrational. Similarly, the church having forsaken “sound doctrine” – that is to say, Scripture as a rational, propositional truth-statement – has given itself (and the culture) over to rampant subjectivism. In other words, our culture has lost the ability to think. So goes the church, so goes the world. In fact, the father of the modern existentialist movement, Kierkegaard, was a Christian minister and philosopher. Therefore as Johannes Kepler said, we must learn “To think the thoughts of God after Him”. And this demands the recovery of the Bible as the foundation for rationality in both church and culture.

The Bible: destroyed by the Devil

Having had occasion to recently interact with a novel teaching, I am constrained to release this *very* basic teaching on the preservation of the Scriptures and the characteristics of error. This new error fantastically claims that the times are so dark that the Devil is literally altering the printed text of our Bibles, not through (as one would suspect) the human agency of translators, but without any agency—mysteriously and supernaturally. In other words, they claim the ink on the pages of one's Bible is being mysteriously reconfigured to read something other than the original print-text. To supposedly prove this phenomenon one's imperfect memory of certain texts is used to trump the certainty of the printed word. For example, if asked to recall Isa 11:6 more often than not it is remembered as the “lion and lamb” lying together. However, the text actually reads the “wolf and lamb”. This is claimed as proof that the text has been changed! The presumption that our memory is superior to the printed page is breath-taking in its arrogance and a spurious proof that the text has been supernaturally changed. However, the second half of the verse *does* reference the lion. Because memory seeks to form patterns or systems for the coherence of data it is only natural that it pairs up two distinctly contrasting animals as the lion and the lamb, one representing the king of the beasts and the other the meekest. Other examples that involve Elizabethan equivalents (e.g. *bottles* instead of *wineskins* or *candlesticks* instead of *lampstands*) are easily proven as the correct text if an original 1611 KJV printing is viewed. Unless of course the Devil has performed another miraculous rewrite of the original edition as well! If that is the case, their argument is unfalsifiable, and no reasonable discussion may be had. As a student and teacher of the Scriptures for over 50 years, my KJV has always read “candlesticks” and “bottles”. Every other claimed change was easily explained as either a misunderstanding of Elizabethan archaisms or as a text taken out of context. Clearly, however, if this novel idea were true, our Bibles are no longer reliable, which is the diabolical effect of this delusion. Therefore, so I was told, “we can only depend on the word of God in our hearts”.

The Bible: preserved by God

What is the result of this novel idea?—our Christianity reduces to pure subjectivism and hence to personal opinion. Despite God's sovereign and supervening providence guaranteeing the accurate transmission and preservation of the biblical text for thousands of years, such that we now have, for example, over 5,000 extant Greek papyri of the NT compared to Plato's 9, we are expected to believe that the God who declares that He is “the same yesterday, today and forever” (Heb 13:8) has suddenly reneged on His preservation of the Scriptures! Through this new devilry we are thus also expected to believe that He has allowed the Bible to be suddenly and inexplicably rendered unreliable! And to believe that God would leave the world and the church deprived of a trustworthy, divinely revealed, objective standard of what is true! The Gospel and its proclamation is effectively stopped. As I posed to this person, “How does the word of God get into ones heart in the first place if not by

reading the reliable text of Scripture?”

I ask therefore, will not the God who exalts His Word above His name (Ps 138:2) continue to preserve that Word? (see Ps 12:6-7 [KJV]; Prov 22:12; Isa 40:8 [cited 1 Pet 1:24-25]; 45:23; 55:12; Mt 5:18; 24:35; Rom 15:4; 1 Cor 15:3-4). And as the sovereign and omnipotent God of the Bible, does He not have the ability to do so? This new teaching, therefore, brazenly defies historic biblical orthodoxy and specifically the doctrine of the preservation of the Scriptures.

That otherwise intelligent people are being duped by this teaching beggars belief. It is nothing less than “superstition”, which originally and etymologically refers to the fear of demons or the gods (*deisidaimonia*). This was the case among the pagan cultures of antiquity and is increasingly the case in our neo-pagan world, and it would seem the church. “My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge” (Hos 4:6). Without a revelation of the ultimacy and victory of God in Christ in history, grounded in the objectivity of Scripture, we are lost. The Devil and his minions accordingly loom threateningly large. As J B Phillips famously said, “Your God is too small!” Rather than God being magnified in our eyes, it is the Devil. Because we have not been immersed in the *biblical* revelation of the nature and attributes of God, of which *sovereignty* is key, we fall prey to the enemy’s tactics of deception and fear. The Devil purports to be something more than he is so as to strike fear in the hearts of God’s elect. He “prowls around *like* a roaring lion” (1 Pet 5:8). Rather, it is Christ who is king of the beasts, the lion of the tribe of Judah. He rules supreme and will not allow His word to be tampered with. While respect must be paid to the Devil’s power and intelligence, he is, however, merely a created and fallen being. But with this particular error the objective word of Scripture is no longer reliable, rendering it void. Our knowledge of God is therefore curtailed. Moreover, this error is nothing less than the Devil’s original stratagem in the Garden: that is, to undermine the reliability and authority of God’s verbal communication to man: “Has God said?” (Gen 3:1); and to set ourselves up as would-be Gods (Gen 3:5). If God’s word is not sure, we then become the authority.

As a result, with the foundation of the Scriptures – of objective truth – destroyed, the church has no footing for its prophetic role in the world, its confrontation of the *zeitgeist* and its popular cultural myths (e.g. “social justice”, “inclusivity”, evolution, gender fluidity, the neutrality of the secular state etc.). Without the authority of God’s *inscripturated* word, Christians must therefore retreat into a pietistic spirituality while the world goes to hell. And so, the enemy chalks up another victory over God’s people!

Theological presuppositions

The key to fully appreciating the agenda of this new teaching, however, is to understand its theological underpinning. It must be understood that there is a certain theological presupposition behind it. Its underlying assumption is one of premillennial Dispensationalism, which builds on a futurist interpretation of NT prophecy; that is, that the prophecies of the “great falling away” and the rise of “Antichrist” are fulfilled in a future compressed period immediately prior to the second coming. The *dispensational* vocabulary of these teachers, such as “church age” and “end of days”, are indicators of their underlying premise.

In brief, this system of interpreting Scripture divides history into various dispensations of which the two primary ones are the “church age” and the “kingdom age”; the former spanning the period of time from Pentecost to the second coming, the latter extending for 1,000 years from the second coming to the “Great White Throne Judgement” and the eternal state. When the Jews rejected Christ God’s “prophetic clock” stopped and the “church age” began with the “kingdom age” put on hold awaiting the Jews’ conversion at the second coming. The “church age” is thus rendered a *parenthesis* – a stop-gap measure – between Christ’s first and second comings, through which He comes to the Jews—the first time to be rejected but the second time to be received in their national conversion. For this school, the future momentous events of the “end of days” then usher in the millennial kingdom with Christ ruling from Jerusalem. We are therefore not to expect the Kingdom of God *in* history.

This contrasts to Amillennialism and Postmillennialism which both interpret the 1,000 years of Rev 20:1-3 – the millennial reign of Christ – as *symbolically* representing an extensive period of real-time history. This period extends either from Pentecost to the second coming for Amillennialists or for Postmillennialists represents an extensive period of history in which Christ and His church progressively prevail through the harvest of the nations and their Christianization. Nevertheless, Amillennialism views history as a state of flux between defeat and victory for the church, with defeat ultimately prevailing in the final rebellion. Whereas Postmillennialism views history as the progressive advance of Christ’s victory through the church and its proclamation of the Gospel, despite momentary declensions, culminating in an expansive period of history where Christ’s enemies are defeated, and all nations and their kings bow to the lordship of Christ. Postmillennialism often also entails

the preterist (from Latin *praeter*, meaning past) interpretation of NT prophecy. This argues that the prophesied judgements of Jesus' Mount of Olives discourse (Mt 24), Paul's prophecy concerning the "man of lawlessness" (2 Thes 2; cf. 1 Jn 2:18, 22; 4:3; 2 Jn 7) and the apostasy of the "last days" (1 Tim 4:1-5; 2 Tim 3:1), Peter's prophecy concerning false teachers (2 Pet 2-3), and the Book of Revelation (Rev 1:1; 22:6) are not future but rather were fulfilled in the past—specifically the cataclysm of the Jewish-Roman wars of AD 66-70 and the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70. And so, when the NT writers speak of the "last days" or "last times" they refer not to a distant future but their own time as the "last days" of the old dispensation and God's judgement on Israel. This climaxed in the destruction of the Temple and the cessation of the OT economy, with the concomitant inauguration of the NT economy—Christ's reign through His Church (Eph 1:17-23; 3:10).

This new error, therefore, has emerged from a premillennial futurist eschatology that envisages the imminent rise of the Antichrist, a great falling away, and of cataclysmic worldwide judgements and general darkness. This eschatology is particularly virulent during times of social and political upheaval (e.g. the world wars etc.), with each generation believing that they are *the* terminal generation that will witness the return of Christ. It is not surprising then, that the current cultural crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic are hotbeds for these types of errors.

In conclusion, this novel belief – that the print-text of the Bible is being demonically altered – betrays a low view of Scripture and of God Himself. God in Christ is clearly not the sovereign and victorious King who rules history and all that is in it. Undergirded by a premillennial dispensationalist eschatology, it is inevitably pietistic and defeatist. It engenders a "bunker mentality"—a fear of the Devil and an expectation of prevailing darkness and deception that drives the church into escape mode. Doomed to fail, it must be "raptured" from the world for survival. The Kingdom of God is, therefore, not for history – for now – but for the Millennium. In the meantime demonic dominance and deception is our lot. Hence, the Devil may even change the print-text of the Bible.

We will now outline seven characteristics of error and its correction from Paul's first letter to Timothy (1 Tim 1:3-7 ESV) that apply to all false teachings, including the one considered above.

1.ERROR'S CORRECTION—APOSTOLICALLY MANDATED

I urged you when I was going to Macedonia, remain at Ephesus **so that you may charge certain persons** not to teach any different doctrine, (v. 3).

Timothy, as Paul's apostolic delegate, was mandated to exercise God's authority in the church by *correcting* error. Those called by God to the ministry of the Word and recognized by the church carry the same mandate today. And this is achieved through the positive presentation of the truth of Scripture (i.e. through the teaching ministry) and espousal of historic biblical orthodoxy (i.e. the historic faith of the church).

2.ERROR'S PROMULGATION—APOSTOLICALLY PROHIBITED

I urged you when I was going to Macedonia, remain at Ephesus so that you may charge certain persons **not to teach any different doctrine**, (v. 3).

Timothy, as an apostolic delegate, was mandated to exercise God's authority in the church by *prohibiting* those who teach error. This demands that God's ministers exercise disciplinary government in today's church (i.e. the excommunication of false teachers).

3.THE TEACHING OFFICE—APOSTOLICALLY DELIMITED

I urged you when I was going to Macedonia, remain at Ephesus **so that you may charge certain persons not to teach** any different doctrine, (v. 3; also v. 7 - *desiring to be teachers*).

The corollary of the previous point is that the teacher of God's word is divinely called and, moreover, that the call is recognized and affirmed by the church. God appoints teaching authorities in His church. This demands that the teacher of God's Word is accountable to church government (i.e. they have submitted to the disciplines of ordination).

4.THE DOCTRINE—APOSTOLICALLY DEFINED

I urged you when I was going to Macedonia, remain at Ephesus so that you may charge certain persons not to teach **any different doctrine**, (v. 3; also 1 Tim 6:3; 2 Tim 4:1-4; Gal 1:6, 7; Heb 6:1-3; Acts 2:42).

The corollary of the previous point is that doctrine is apostolically transmitted. It must therefore be grounded in the revelation of Scripture and especially the apostolic writings of the NT. It cannot be a novel, extra-biblical teaching (e.g. the error referred to in the Introduction). The true teacher will be committed to historic biblical orthodoxy (i.e. to the faith of the church and her creeds).

5.ERROR—DEVOTED TO MYTHS (HUMAN IMAGINATIONS)

nor to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies, which promote speculations rather than the stewardship from God that is by faith. (v. 4; also 1 Tim 4:7 - *irreverent, silly myths* i.e. profane old wives tales; 2 Tim 4:4 - *wander off into myths*; Tit 1:14 - *Jewish myths and the commands of people who turn away from the truth*).

Every thought must be brought into the obedience of Christ (2 Cor 10:5). Cultural myths (e.g. "social justice", "inclusivity", evolution, gender fluidity, the neutrality of the secular state etc.) must be exposed and brought under the authority of God's word. Without the primacy of the Word of God, we are subjected to the opinions of men, to human imaginations and diabolically inspired myths.

6.ERROR—PROMOTES SPECULATION (SECRET WISDOM & FALSE SPIRITUALITY)

nor to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies, **which promote speculations** rather than the stewardship from God that is by faith (v. 4; also 1 Tim 6:3 - *if anyone teaches novelties*—Moffatt; 1 Tim 6:4 - *he is puffed up with conceit and understands nothing. He has an unhealthy craving for controversy and for quarrels about words*).

If God's inscripturated word is undermined the alternative is human speculations (i.e. "quarrels about words") and diabolically inspired myths. And these speculations then become the means to the "secret wisdom" that only the initiate holds. This Gnosticism accordingly results in spiritual pride and ignorance.

7.ERROR—DEVIATES FROM DIVINE ORDER (REBELLIOUS)

nor to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies, which promote speculations **rather than the stewardship from God that is by faith** [*rather than acceptance by faith of God's administration*—Berkeley], (v. 4; also v. 6 - *Certain persons, by swerving from these, have wandered away into vain discussion*; v. 7 - *desiring to be teachers of the law, without understanding either what they are saying or the things about which they make confident assertions*; 2 Tim 4:4 - *wander off into myths*; Tit 1:14 - *Jewish myths and the commands of people who turn away from the truth*).

Rather than yielding to divine order, error is a wilful deviation into "vain discussions" (senseless or mischievous wrangling), turning from the path of God's word. Despite their ignorance of God, His word and His ways, these people strongly assert the authority of their false teaching. They therefore render themselves unteachable and unaccountable, stubbornly turning from the truth.

CONCLUSION

The *spirit of error* is consequently distinguished from the *spirit of truth* by its wilful undermining of God's *inscripturated* Word (i.e. its reliability, sufficiency, and authority) through the first-century apostles (whether by addition, subtraction, or twisting):

We are from God. Whoever knows God listens to us [i.e. the apostolic writings]; whoever is not from God does not listen to us. By this we know the Spirit of truth and the spirit of error.

1 John 4:6; also 2 Pet 3:15, 16; Rev 22:18, 19

To the law and to the testimony: if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them.

Isa 8:20

Any teaching that casts a shadow of doubt over the inerrancy and reliability of the Bible, especially its original autographs, must be seen for what it is—an error. This is not to deny the legitimate discipline of textual criticism as integral to translation from the autographs of Scripture. The belief that the Devil, however, can supernaturally change the text of the Bible is, in the light of Scripture, superstitious and a gross mishandling of the sacred text. As an unfalsifiable assertion it is nothing but a myth and undermines the Christian's ability to "think the thoughts of God after Him".

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