

Articles and Sermons :: Christ's Mysterious Warning to the Post Modern Church by Steve Gallagher

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The Lord was never shy about cautioning His listeners regarding the spiritual dangers that abound in this world—none more so than the peril represented by false teaching. One such occasion was when He somberly turned to His disciples and told them to “beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees.” (Matthew 16:6)

One might wonder why He even felt the need to express such a word of caution to these faithful men. After all the hypocrisy they had witnessed, they would be the last ones to be taken in by those religious charlatans. So if the disciples were not foremost in the Lord's thinking, who was?

I believe the key to unlocking this enigmatic statement can be found in the fourth chapter of Deuteronomy. The Lord said, “You shall not add to the word which I am commanding you, nor take away from it...” This ancient verse contains two sides to the Lord's commandment that these Jewish teachers were disobeying: the Pharisees had a history of adding to Scripture, while the Sadducees were guilty of taking away from it.

Since both of these Jewish sects ceased to exist when the Romans sacked Jerusalem in 70 A.D., we must conclude that Jesus intended this warning for future generations of Christians. In fact, these two misuses of Scripture are thriving today in the church of the Great Apostasy.

The Pharisees, who emerged in the wake of the Maccabean Revolt during the Second Century B.C., relied heavily upon oral tradition, which was recorded over time in the Mishnah, the Talmud and the Midrash. This “oral Torah,” as it came to be known, was piled onto Scripture over the years until, by the First Century, Judaism was a deformed caricature of the true religion of Old Testament saints.

At one point, Jesus became so exasperated by their propensity to twist the plain meaning of Scripture that He exclaimed, “You are experts at setting aside the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition... thus invalidating the word of God by your tradition which you have handed down.” (Mark 7:9, 13)

This tendency to add to Holy Writ can be illustrated by a graphic artist who wants to enhance a photograph of someone. He overlays it with a filter that slightly skews the image. Later, another graphic artist repeats this process to this man's version. One after another follows suit until the final product no longer even resembles the person in the original picture. This is what the Pharisees did with the Word of God.

In our day and age, this skewing process mostly began during the Reformation, when church leaders began offering needed commentary to Scripture. Doctrines were formulated which were added to by subsequent scholars. Each subsequent generation approached Scripture through the lens created by earlier generations. Over time, doctrinal systems were established that became more pronounced than the actual words of the Bible.

I just experienced this during my Bible study time this morning. A passage of Scripture made a very straightforward statement. In essence, the modern commentator I was reading said, “We know it couldn't mean what it says because it doesn't fit in with our doctrinal understanding of this subject.” This man has become so influenced by the school of thought in which he was trained that he can no longer objectively read the bare words of the Bible.

What is amazing is that the denominations that most vigorously emphasize the need to stay true to Scripture are often the very ones guiltiest of adding their interpretations onto the Word of God. In this sense, they have become the Pharisees of our day.

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Jesus also warned us of the “Sadducees” who would “take away from” the Word of God. The historical Sadducees only recognized the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Bible) and continually called into question the veracity of the rest of the Old Testament. It goes without saying that their cynicism and doubt-mongering can be traced all the way back to the question posed by the Great Liar in the Garden: “Hath God said...?”

We can also see Satan's challenge of the trustworthiness of Scripture in more recent times. One of the worst cases of it was the “school of higher criticism” of the 1800s that began when atheistic Bible scholars (yes, you read that correctly) approached the Scriptures as if they were no more reliable than any other ancient writings. This heretical approach to

the Word of God gained strength when Darwin's "scientific" findings on evolution cast doubt on biblical Creationism. Thankfully, this school of thought was eventually discredited and went the way of other heresies that have attacked the Bible.

Unfortunately, the same satanically-inspired distrust has recently resurfaced through the Emergent Church movement. As I wrote elsewhere, "rather than calling Christians back to the ancient paths where true revival is always birthed, they have appealed to the disenchantment of today's young people by casting doubt on the very foundational truths of Scripture."

Make no mistake about it; the leaders of the Emergent Church are the Sadducees of our time. Most of these men hide behind smooth doubletalk, but occasionally one of them comes forth with what he actually believes. One such example is Rob Bell, whose book "Love Wins" attempts to "take away from" Scripture, by casting doubt on the clear-cut biblical teaching regarding hell.

I must say that of these two groups operating in the Church today, I am far more concerned about these modern day Sadducees. At least modern Pharisees hold to the orthodox teachings of Scripture—even if they do, at times, distort the plain meaning of particular verses.

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I'll wrap up this article by mentioning one more interesting fact. Jesus didn't actually warn His audience about the Pharisees and Sadducees; actually, He warned us about their "leaven." A few verses later in this passage, Matthew clarified to the reader that the leaven was their teachings.

Of course, leaven is the ancient equivalent to yeast. When the baker forms his lump of dough from flour, he includes into it just a tiny portion of yeast. He kneads the lump of dough until the yeast has thoroughly penetrated it.

Jesus used this phenomenon to illustrate the way that false teaching silently works its way through the entire Body of Christ. It has the capacity to alter people's perspectives of the Christian life and the way it should be lived in a very corrupt world. All of this occurs subtly.

J.C. Ryle stated, "False doctrine does not meet men face to face, and proclaim that it is false. It does not blow a trumpet before it, and endeavor openly to turn us away from the truth... It approaches us secretly, quietly, insidiously, plausibly, and in such a way as to disarm man's suspicion and throw him off guard. It is the wolf in sheep's clothing, and Satan in the garb of an angel of light."

Writers of the New Testament urgently warned end times believers to be extremely cautious about being led astray by false teachings. The only way we can be assured of staying on the ancient paths is to know the Bible thoroughly for ourselves. Then we will know if those who are teaching us are "adding to or taking away from" the Word of God.

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