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Counterfeits in Fundamental Baptist Christianity

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The purity of the Word of God as reflected in Psalm 12:6 is a source of assurance and confidence to the believer. It is as "silver tried in a furnace of earth, purified seven times." Unlike the masses of literature of this world, its integrity is assured because it did not come "by the will of man, but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost" (II Peter 1:21). In like manner it is imperative that Bible doctrine be pure and grow out of an intense loyalty to the text of Scripture. It must be void of human reasoning and improper handling.

II Peter 1:19-2:3 gives a cogent warning concerning false prophets who come and counterfeit the truth and mishandle the precious Word of God. Fundamental Baptists have long been involved in identification of these false prophets and in separation from them. They frequently warn against various theological liberals and numerous cultists who have corrupted the truth and brought in "damnable heresies" (2:1). At the same time they have not been as careful to note Biblical teaching concerning the methods of these counterfeiters and have subsequently become involved in their own counterfeits of Biblical truth. There is thus a need for a close look at the subject of false prophets and false teaching from within Fundamental Baptist Christianity in order to identify the counterfeits that may exist.

Fundamental Baptists need to ask, "Am I using the methods of false prophets?" While condemning the doctrines of others, also asking, "Have I allowed myself to teach my own series of counterfeit doctrines?"

In just this brief examination of the Biblical data it seems clear that Fundamental Baptists are guilty of such counterfeits, and it is time to address the issue and deal with this grave inconsistency. This study will look first at Biblical teaching concerning counterfeiters, second, at counterfeit teachings among Fundamental Baptists and third, at some principles for those who would handle God's Word correctly.

Biblical Teaching Concerning Counterfeiters

Few passages in Scripture contribute more to one's understanding of false prophets than II Peter 2:1-3. The passage suggests a number of important facts about these prophets that should be considered by the discerning Christian.

The first is simply that false prophets do exist (v 1). From early on there have always been those who prophesied without a commission (Deut 18:20). Such prophets existed in New Testament times (Matt 24:24; I John 4:1) as well as throughout history.

Such a truth is so often applied to cultists that the force of the passage has been lost. These ones are **AMONG** the people. Believers are naive in thinking that all counterfeiters are without and should honestly remember that false doctrine can exist within. Fundamental Baptists should examine their own teachings to be sure they have not brought in false doctrines of their own.

Second, two distinct kinds of counterfeiters are included in verse one. There are those on the one hand who are known to be false teachers and are thus easy to avoid (Rom 16:17). On the other hand there are those who are approved among the believers and are not recognized to be false teachers. Sometimes fear, respect, or loyalty does not allow one to exercise necessary Biblical discernment with regard to these.

A third fact about counterfeiters is the increasing threat that they pose to the church. The tenses used are both past and future, and the thrust of the chapter is the increasing intensity in which these will appear (see also II Tim 3:5,6). Fundamental Baptists are often resting having dealt with some form of false teaching rather than watching out for another counterfeit which Satan has in store.

Fourthly, the method of counterfeiters should be noted. The meaning of privily (v 1) is to "bring in along side, underhandedly, covertly" and conveys the idea that counterfeiters do not announce their presence (Jude 4) or their activity. Furthermore, they mix the error with the truth so that it is unrecognizable at first glance. It is important for Christians to be discerning and learn how to identify the subtle methods of false prophets.

A fifth fact concerns the message of false prophets. The text says they "bring in damnable heresies." Heresy is mentioned elsewhere in Scripture (I Cor 11:19) and basically means "to

Counterfeiters do not announce their presence, their activity, or their deviation from the truth.

choose an opinion." One who believes or teaches heresy chooses a substitute for the truth. That is to say the "Bible" is still being preached and men are still being moved to conviction but the content of the message is a counterfeit. It could be extensive or slight, but in either case men have been corrupted.

The meaning of damnable supports this thought as it means "ruinous" but not "extinction." Counterfeit doctrines do not drive men out of the church but they ruin them nevertheless. While this certainly can be applied to antichrists, cultists, and liberals, the question still needs to be asked; how many people have been ruined in Fundamental Baptist Churches by subtle forms of counterfeit doctrine? There needs to be an inward examination.

A sixth fact concerning counterfeiters is their rate of success. Verse two states "many shall follow" their ways. Counterfeits are usually highly successful and often popular. The preacher of the Word of God is frequently faced with the choice between being popular and being right. Furthermore, results do not necessarily prove a doctrine to be true. The one that handles the Word correctly must seek Scriptural integrity over popularity and faithfulness over fast results.

The seventh fact parallels the above and concerns the effect that counterfeits have on other people's lives. Verse two points to those in the church as being led astray and those outside the church as looking on with disgust. One false doctrine, no matter how slight, can have tremendous effect on the lives of others and also bring discredit to the cause of Christ. Often Fundamental Baptists are not careful enough in examining what they teach in light of how it will affect others. Christian doctrine should also be above reproach (I Thess 4:12; I Tim 3:7). What a grave responsibility!

The last fact concerning false prophets is their sure punishment. According to verse three, the price of fabricating the truth is sure damnation. The picture here is of one who uses phoney arguments to exploit the sheep rather than protect them. Such activity is motivated by covetousness or greed. The judgment for this activity is so certain that it is described as impending.

Such a condemnation does not seem appropriate to many because they are no longer sensitive to the dangers of false teaching. This is due to the lack of clear distinction between false and true teaching as well as right and wrong behavior that exists today. Fundamental Baptists find themselves in the midst of this condition and would do well to examine what they teach not only in light of the dangers of falsehood but in light of the certain judgment they will face if they fleece the sheep.

A preacher is frequently faced with the choice between being popular and being right.

Counterfeit Teachings among Fundamental Baptists

As already noted, the facts mentioned above are usually applied to cultists and liberals and thus Bible believers often avoid any careful scrutiny of their doctrine or application of the Biblical principles just mentioned to themselves. Often in the pursuit of doctrinal purity on major issues the smaller but equally important nuances of truth are overlooked. These more subtle distinctions need examination because a number of falsehoods have been substituted for the truth. Some of the most frequent counterfeits have been listed below. It would be well for Fundamental Baptists to examine their teachings and take these matters to heart.

(1) **LEGALISM.** In the Bible, this term describes one who obeys the law to earn his salvation. It is also used of a system of rules and regulations which are kept as a method of progress in the Christian life. Many young people, as well as young Christians, have fallen into this legalistic trap which results in a life of slavish conformity, a judgmental attitude toward others, and an "I'm more holy" posture. Such teachings often appear in the lives and preaching of fundamental Baptist leaders and thus are practiced in the pew. Christians need to turn from legalism (Gal 3:1-3; 5:17, 22-23) and seek that Christ be formed in them (Gal 4:19). Obedience to the law of Christ should grow out of a dedicated heart (Rom 12:1,2; Gal 2:20).

(2) **FORMALISM.** Fundamental Baptists are quick to isolate themselves from the traditions that shroud ritualistic Christianity. The Anabaptists cried against the reformers, "Let us eliminate everything the Bible does not teach." While hierarchy, infant baptism and other traditions have been put aside, Baptists have developed their own traditions and empty ritual. For many, Hiscox's Directory has become a tradition. Worship and church life have lost their life, vitality, and heartfelt joy. Baptists need to heed Mark 7:8,9 and be sure they have not set aside the truth for "this is the way we always did it." Both faith and practice should be examined in light of Scripture and the living Word should become more meaningful with each passing day.

(3) **PROGRAMISM.** Plans and goals are of utmost importance; however, the solution to every need is not another program. For many the program has become a substitute for service, prayer, and individual responsibility. Some churches

Serving Christ is not just participation in programs.

provide so many programs that the believer gets the false idea that applying the principles of Scripture is equal to participation in the programs. Christians need to understand that serving Christ begins with a pure heart (I Tim 1:5; II Tim 1:3).

Leadership and programs have always been necessary to the plan of God (Deut 34:9; I Tim 5:17) but must be balanced with one's individual attitude toward God. Service does not equal spirituality and personal character is more important than service (I Cor 12:31-13:7). Baptists must also slow down the program in order to give the people time to practice what they are taught from the pulpit. Along with church loyalty there must be a willingness to trust the believer to apply what he is taught to every area of life.

(4) **EMOTIONALISM.** So much of the theology in many Christian circles is motivated by experience rather than a careful study of God's Word. This results in shallow preaching. Even among Fundamental Baptists the vocabulary has shifted from "I believe," or "It's my conviction," or "the Bible says," to "I feel," or "How do you feel?" The issue is not "what we feel" but what does the Bible say? While condemning the Pentecostal for his experience motivated theology, fundamentalists are guilty of the same thing. Doctrine should not be based on emotion or personal opinion but the verses and precepts of Scripture (II Tim 3:16).

Being emotional is not a sin, nor is godly Christian experience; however, neither is the place to turn for truth. Many preachers in Fundamental Baptist circles are substituting whole messages of stories and personal experiences for the simple exposition of God's Word. It is God's Word and God's thoughts that will convict men (Heb 4:12).

(5) **HEROISM.** Christians are called to be saints. This involves costly obedience and sanctification. "Greatness" and being a hero is not a part of being a saint. Christ was not known for his popularity or his greatness but his genuine humility and obedience. In the present day this idea of greatness has crept in among Fundamental Baptists. Either consciously or subconsciously pastors are building ministries around themselves rather than the Lord. Not only are the people vulnerable to being led into error by their leader but they go to pieces when he leaves. Few Christian leaders are truly willing to say with the Apostle Paul, "Be ye followers of me, even as I also am of Christ" (I Cor 11:1; I Thess 1:6).

The allegiance and loyalty of Christians should always be to the Word of God. There are no qualified human substitutes. Fundamental Baptists must be careful in both their teaching and actions to keep the people's mind on Christ and not themselves. The temptation is great but the results are tragic (Isa 26:3; II Peter 2). God's leaders need humility and dependency.

(6) ECLECTICISM. In the area of Christian counseling the problem of mixing error with truth has become acute. The age old attempt of accommodating unbiblical philosophy has surfaced in the effort to blend Biblical principles with secular psychology. Basically the method consists of reading the Bible and then promptly teaching paganism or some combination thereof. Most of the literature of the day falls into this category. What is desperately needed is a willingness to lead out of the Scriptures a completely Biblical answer to the important issues involved. In addition to criticizing those who offer eclectic answers, Fundamental Baptists ought to be offering the right answers and providing direction to those in need.

A new form of eclecticism is found in the counseling emphasis itself. What was intended to be accomplished in the first century by preaching (I Cor 1:21-27; 2:1-6) is now often being relegated to highly trained counselors, and thus most pastors are suddenly disqualified to meet men's needs. In addition to this change in method many are becoming dependent on counselors for solutions they should be obtaining on their own. Trained counselors and their counsel are a necessary part of the ministry but are not a substitute for strong Biblical preaching.

(7) ISOLATIONISM. The Biblical doctrine of separation is one of the most important doctrines in Scripture. There are many clear passages on separation from the lost (II Cor 6:14-17; Eph 5:11), as well as separation from disobedient believers (Rom 16:17; II Thess 3:6-7, 14-15). Among Fundamental Baptists, however, there is a lot of preaching and separation that has no real Biblical basis. It is frequently based on pettiness and gossip rather than on conviction and principle.

In addition it appears that much "separation" is little more than professional jealousy, the quest for power and control, or the zeal to be different. Fundamental Baptists need to evaluate their own motives to be sure that pettiness, pride, or jealousy have not caused isolation from a Christian brother (Matt 7:1-5; I Cor 4:3-5). Many a believer's life has been ruined by dogmatic positions and lifestyles born out of these counterfeit motives. One needs genuine power and control of the Holy Spirit in the area of separation (I Cor 2:10-16; I Pet 1:22).

None of the above counterfeits represent any of the basic doctrines of Scripture. Neither the fundamentals of the faith nor the Baptist distinctives are at stake. Yet the above issues are equally important and rest at the heart of the Christian ministry. Again the question must be asked, are Fundamental Baptists willing to look inward and examine their own teachings and practices in light of the possibility of counterfeits? Do they have the courage to make the changes that this examination may require?

Some Principles for Handling God's Word Properly

There is a lot that could be said at this point and the discerning reader has probably already identified some principles that are in order. The following are prayerfully suggested in an effort to help those who sincerely desire to avoid counterfeit teachings and handle the Word of God correctly.

First, go to the Scriptures and lead out of them a position on the issue involved, rather than taking a position and then looking for Scriptural support.

Second, always be willing to re-examine a position for subtle substitutes and errors that have crept in alongside the truth.

Third, do not be misled by success, acceptance, or popularity. Results do not necessarily prove a doctrine true.

Fourth, determine to represent God's Word accurately and truthfully out of a heart of love, humility, integrity, and conviction.

Fifth, remember the challenge of Proverbs 23:23, "buy the truth and sell it not." (1) There is truth (the Bible); (2) The truth costs something; and (3) The truth can be sold. At what time and for what price will Fundamental Baptists sell the truth?

The Bible teaches separation from the lost as well as separation from disobedient believers.