

Should We Call Out False Teachers or Ignore Them?

Beware the Wolves

So let's begin with Jesus. Matthew 7:15: "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves." And the word beware means all of us should be alert, but especially shepherds, to identify not just false teaching, but false teachers, whose ways are subtle. They're clothing themselves with lamb's wool while they're wolves.

And Paul used the same Greek word for beware in Acts 20:28–29 when he said, "Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. . . . I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the."

Jesus used the same word again in Matthew 16:6, but he got more specific: "Watch and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees." Paul had the same kind of group in mind and the same kind of error in mind in Philippians 3:2 and 3:18: "Look out for the dogs, look out for the evildoers, look out for those who mutilate the flesh." And then verse 18: "For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ." Then in Romans 16:17, he warned, "Watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught; avoid them."

Avoid, Rebuke, Call Out

To avoid them, you have to know who they are. You can't avoid somebody if you don't know who they are. This idea of identifying and avoiding shows up in 1 Corinthians 5:11; 2 Thessalonians 3:6, 14; 2 Timothy 3:5; 2 John 10. In other words, Christians, and shepherds in particular, should be discerning and alert to behavior and teaching that dishonors Christ and destroys people — and not treat it in a casual or harmless way.

And then in 1 Timothy 5:19–20, Paul went beyond just “avoid them” to “rebuke them publicly.” So, speaking of elders who persist in error, he said, “Do not admit a charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses. As for those who persist in sin” — and that can be sin of false doctrine or sin of evil behavior, anyone who does not accept correction — “rebuke them in the presence of all, so that the rest may stand in fear..”

And then Paul went on and actually named destructive false teachers:

- “Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me” (2 Timothy 4:10).
- “You are aware that all who are in Asia turned away from me, among whom are Phygelus and Hermogenes” (2 Timothy 1:15).
- “By rejecting this [faith and a good conscience], some have made shipwreck of their faith, among whom are Hymenaeus and Alexander” (1 Timothy 1:19–20).
- “Their talk will spread like gangrene. Among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus” (2 Timothy 2:17).

Paul names at least six false teachers that the church should watch out for.

So, I infer from Jesus and Paul and Luke and John that false teaching and destructive behavior are present dangers in this fallen world for the church. And all of us — especially shepherds, pastors — should be alert and discerning to identify and, in appropriate ways, expose. In order to protect the flock, we should expose them and minimize the spread of the gangrene (as Paul calls it).

Expose Evil

Now, in 1 Corinthians 4:5, Paul is talking about how the Corinthians should assess Paul and Cephas and Apollos, because the people are choosing sides and boasting in their favorite teacher. He says,

I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me. Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one [Paul, Cephas, Apollos] will receive his commendation from God. (1 Corinthians 4:4–5)

So Caden is asking whether the words “do not pronounce judgment before the time” should keep us from identifying false teachers or from naming them. I don’t think so. “Don’t pronounce judgment before the time” means “Don’t do what only Christ can do at that last day — on the day of judgment.” Don’t presume to know the heart like Jesus will know the heart on that day. Only Christ “will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart.”

But for now, our job is indeed to do mouth judgment, writing judgment, behavior judgment — not a heart judgment, but mouth and writing and behavior judgment. When a mouth speaks unbiblical, destructive teaching, when a blog or an article or a book publishes unbiblical and destructive teaching, when a body — a human body, a physical body — behaves with unbiblical and destructive behavior, in all these cases, we are to be discerning. And according to Ephesians 5:11, we are to expose the error. “Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them.” “Censure them; show them to be wrong” is what the word *elegchō* means.

Five Factors for Calling Out False Teachers

So the question is how and when — not if. And here I think the Bible calls for wisdom, rather than telling us who and when and how. The question we ask is this: How can we best — in our situation, with our gifts and our responsibilities — help the most people believe and live the most truth, and how can we protect the most people from destructive beliefs and behaviors?

And here are five factors perhaps to consider when deciding whether to name a false teacher publicly.

The seriousness and deceitfulness of the error.

The size of the audience. Is it growing?

The duration of their ministry. Did they make one blunder or are they constantly doing it?

The vulnerability of the people for whom you are responsible.

The role you have in influencing shepherds who really need to be discerning for who the false teachers are.

When you do name a false teacher, it's best to do it in a setting where you do more than name-drop. You explain the error, you give reasons for rejecting it, you communicate complexities, you set a tone of longing for truth and love — you're not just slinging mud.

The last thing I would say is to let your teaching be so powerful in clarifying the greatness and the beauty and the worth of God's truth that your people will smell error before it infects their lives. The shape of error is always changing. You can't preach enough negative sermons to stay ahead of it. And you don't have to. The best protection against the darkness of error is the light of truth.