

***When Is Religion Evil?
II Corinthians 11:13-20***

INTRODUCTION

When is religion evil? Our inclination is to answer "never". If religion is built on ethical principles and is man's attempt to reach out for God, is not any religion better than none at all? In a day when religious tolerance is a virtue, this might be your answer. But you would get very little support from the Apostle Paul for such a position. We must not mistake or confuse political freedom for men to practice any religion with an acceptance or approval for all religions. We Baptists have always been contenders for religious freedom, but this has never meant that we are indifferent to the difference between religious teachers.

Throughout this Corinthian letter there have been these false teachers in the background. While Paul has alluded to them frequently, he has never really confronted them. Now, in our text, he takes the gloves off. He declares himself so that none can mistake him. He is totally convinced that the teachers who have come to Corinth are evil, that which they teach is evil, and they should be treated accordingly.

It should help us if we can discover what it was that made this little band of teachers evil. What made their message evil while the religious declarations of Paul would be considered good and worthwhile? I believe that there are at least three points at which the contrast can be seen clearly. These three things help us identify an evil religion when we are confronted by it. Since it is likely that you will meet such before another week has run its course, let us see what we can learn from this text.

I. RELIGION IS EVIL WHEN IT MAKES FALSE CLAIMS.

These teachers who were such a concern to Paul had been making bold claims. The teachers had been claiming to be Apostles of Jesus Christ. Paul immediately labels them as "false apostles". Now Paul does not label them as false apostles simply because they claimed the position of apostle. There were others in the New Testament, including himself, who rightly claimed this title of Apostle. They were considered "false" by Paul because there was nothing to back up their claim.

They were claiming the authority of the Apostles without the commission of the Apostles. The Apostles were personally and directly sent by the Risen Lord Himself. With the commission the Lord bestowed authority. These had received no such commission by the Lord so consequently their claim to authority was without merit. They had no right to exercise authority over the people of God. This is common with false teachers. They make unusual claims to authority.

It will be helpful if you will just survey the history of the religious movements around us today. Many, many of them are built on the ministry of a man or woman who made false claims to religious authority. They either put their teachings above the revealed Word of God, or added their teachings to the

revealed Word, or replaced the Word with their teachings. They will not allow their teachings to be changed or challenged. You can go down the list - Jim Jones, Herbert W. Armstrong, Joseph Smith, Mary Baker Eddy, and all of the now varieties. Reverend Moon surely falls into this category. They make claims that cannot be supported by dependable spiritual evidence.

These Apostles were also making false claims to power. They claimed to have the power of the Apostles. But there was no evidence to back it up.

Any teacher or any movement that makes claims for itself that are not supported by the Word of God and their character, is evil. It should be avoided by the person who wants to walk in the ways of the Lord. So this is the first evidence of religion that is evil.

II. RELIGION IS EVIL WHEN IT PRACTICES DECEPTION

This is the heart of the message of this passage. Paul calls them "deceitful work men, masquerading as apostles of Christ". He indicates that we should-not be surprised by such deception "for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light".

They were very religious, and hyperactive, but their message was deceptive. They came to Corinth claiming to be Christian Apostles, but they were actually more committed to Judaism than they were to Jesus Christ. They were only using the Christian vocabulary as a guise to deceive people into becoming disciples within their movement. Their message was deceptive. This is true of all false teachers. They use familiar Christian words as a coating, but they fill them with different meanings. They do not make their motive or their message clear from the beginning. It is hidden for a while.

While talking about Jesus Christ, they usually give off an uncertain sound about either His person or His work. They will sometimes be uncertain about both. The messages that do not openly affirm Jesus to be the incarnation of the living God, the only begotten Son of the Father, fully God and fully man, is a false and deceptive message. You will rarely ever be able to get them to give you a yes or no answer. They will always answer in ambiguities. You will never be sure just which Jesus they are referring to. It is the common mark of these false teachers that they present Jesus Christ as something less than Savior, an inadequate Savior. These whom Paul was confronting were adding circumcision and good works. They were making parts of the law essential if you were to be just before God. They were not ready to declare that Christ is the end of the law. Some of them make submission to their authority as essential. Others make works of one kind or another essential. A religion that does not declare Jesus Christ as the only true Savior is an evil religion. A man who would deliberately mislead someone on such an important issue is no good man, he is evil - regardless of how kind and ethical he may seem to be. He is a deceiver.

But not only is their message deceptive, their ministry is deceptive as well. They will employ deceptive means to accomplish their goal. I suppose every spiritual leader has been faced with this temptation at some point in his ministry. The

good that he can accomplish just seems to make a little deception acceptable. Not so! Our God is a god of light, and his ministers are ministers of light and truth. The man whose ministry is characterized by deception is Satanic in inspiration. He is a follower of the arch deceiver of men, not of the Lord of glory.

The reference here to Satan is very interesting. We do not know of a specific instance in which Satan presented himself as an angel of light, but we do know that he never presents himself as Satan. Have you ever faced a temptation that was clearly labeled, "temptation to do wrong"? The temptation is always cloaked in a seeming opportunity to do good. This was true of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. He did not try to entice them to knowingly commit an act of sin. He rather enticed them to do something that would make them as knowledgeable as gods. Surely it would be a good thing. He forgot to mention that it was necessary to deliberately disobey God in order to do it. This is the way that all false teachers and false religionists work. They practice deception. Any religion that is built on deception is evil. It may do some good things, and have some worthwhile characteristics, but it is essentially evil. It should be avoided by all of the people of God.

III. RELIGION IS EVIL WHEN IT EXPLOITS PEOPLE.

The faith of our Lord helps people. It saves them and blesses them. It enriches and delivers them. It bestows upon them spiritual freedom as a blood bought gift from the Lord Himself. It Sets them free to become what God might want: them to become. Not so with these false teachers!

Listen to Paul's description of them. "In fact, you even put up with anyone who enslaves you or exploits you or takes advantage of you or pushes himself forward or slaps you in the face." This is Paul's way of describing the behavior and methods of these false teachers.

Such teachers exploit people spiritually. Instead of bringing people into the freedom which is in Christ, they enslave them. They make spiritual pawns out of them. They use them to feed their own selfish purposes or ego.

Such teachers usually exploit people financially. They believe in receiving, but not giving. It is a regular part of such schemes that the teachers benefit greatly financially. Paul went to Corinth and labored freely that these Corinthians might know the message of salvation. He did not even receive an offering of any kind from them. The first things these now teachers wanted to do was to take an offering. They were insisting upon their right to look to the Corinthians for financial support. They were making financial demands upon the church. While Paul had every right to receive such remuneration for his service, he wanted to be free from any obligation to the church. How a teacher handles the money matters can be a good indicator of where he is coming from.

The financial picture of many of the popular religionists of our day will not stand close scrutiny. They are guilty of exploiting the people.

They also exploit the people emotionally. Paul is referring to some of this in this descriptive statement about their actions. They would take advantage of the people in every way. They would use guilt to manipulate people into doing their will.

CONCLUSION

Since Satan is still very much at work In the world, and since he has his ministers in every community and since they do not identify themselves as being his agents, what are we to do? How can we avoid falling Into religious traps? How can we avoid becoming a part of evil under the guise of religion? We have some advantage over those early Christians.

I would suggest that you be like the navigator at sea. You determine that Christ will be the guiding star of your life, and that the holy scriptures will be the only map you will use, and that you give place to the Spirit of truth, the Holy Spirit, who dwells in your life. If you will always measure your position by Christ, and follow the guidance of the Scriptures, and the promptings of the inner Spirit, you will avoid the spiritual shipwreck that comes to those who follow false teachers.