

How Serious is it to Stray From God's Directions?

You shall walk after the LORD your God and fear Him, and keep His commandments and obey His voice, and you shall serve Him and hold fast to Him. Deut 13:4

Very often we are told today that great leeway is allowed in our way of worship, our daily walk or what we believe. We are mollified by the assurance that God loves us, therefore, we do not have to bother about seeking to strictly follow God's directions. It matters little if we introduce unbiblical things into our worship like: dubious doctrines, unorthodox songs, flag waving, marching, crystal gazing, dancing, screaming and falling over because God tolerates everything we do as sons. 'It is wrong to be dogmatic and too Biblical', we are warned; 'We can never be perfect'. Or, 'It is Phariseeistic to try to obey everything in the Bible'. [Actually Phariseeism is about hypocrisy not dogmatism.] What are Biblical Christians to say to all this?

The Old Testament is a rich vein of light on New Testament truth. It documents the historic narrative about God's dealings with his covenant people whom he repeatedly called 'sons'. Although we live in a day of greater privilege and revelation, we still learn much from the lessons of Old Testament saints. Essential principles do not change. God expects us to obey his word just as much as he expected David, Samuel, Saul or Aaron to. Straying from God's directions was treated with the utmost seriousness in their day. We do well to learn from this.

Warnings not to stray

Abraham is the rock from which we are cut, he is the father of the faithful and the one with whom God established the primary covenant in which we stand. When God called out Abraham, he called out all the elect who were to follow him in faith. It is instructive, therefore, to see why God called him out. God tells us the answer in Gen 18:19, it was that Abraham and his progeny should obey God and follow his directions:

For I have known him, in order that he may command his children and his household after him, that they keep the way of the LORD, to do righteousness and justice.

The calling of the elect, covenant people is so that they do what God says.

The calling out of a people for God was conditional in the Old Testament. They were expected to obey him in order to please him. In fact they were only God's treasure on earth while they obeyed his voice and kept the covenant with all its ordinances and statutes (Ex 19:5). God's mercy was only given to those who obeyed his commandments (Ex 20:6; Deut 5:10; Ps 103:17-18) and sons of God were established by their obedience (Prov 28:7). Obeying God could lengthen your life (1 Kg 3:14), bring liberty (Ps 119:45), bring prosperity (Isa 1:19) or prevent national exile (2 Kg 21:8). It gave a man wisdom and understanding (Ps 111:10) and brought blessing to the obedient (Ps 112:1; 119:2).

At the end of the day, obedience is a question of life and death. Only the elect receive the grace to obey, but although they receive power to live - they must still obey. The obedient will live and the disobedient will die:

He who keeps the commandment keeps his soul, But he who is careless of his ways will die. (Prov 19:6)

Saints cannot play fast and loose with the directions of God. They cannot be reduced, minimised, altered or ignored, let alone repudiated.

Diligence necessary

We have no choice in this matter. God does not ask us to obey his instructions, he demands that we do. He commands us to keep his directions carefully and assiduously. In fact, if we fail to make obedience a priority, we cannot worship him in righteousness:

You have commanded us to keep Your precepts diligently.

Oh, that my ways were directed to keep Your statutes!

Then I would not be ashamed, when I look into all Your commandments.

I will praise You with uprightness of heart, when I learn Your righteous judgments.

(Ps 119:-7)

Israel's folly

Israel is an object lesson for the church. Her history was written that we should learn from her failures. She had set before her a choice - all would be well if she obeyed; rejection and condemnation would follow disobedience. Israel failed to obey God and followed other gods instead. She chose her own wisdom and altered her worship system.

But this is what I commanded them, saying, 'Obey My voice, and I will be your God, and you shall be My people. And walk in all the ways that I have commanded you, that it may be well with you.' Yet they did not obey or incline their ear, but followed the counsels and the dictates of their evil hearts, and went backward and not forward.

(Jer 7:23-24)

Close obedience required throughout the Bible

The theme of carefully obeying God's commands is continued throughout the Bible and is a key instruction in the New Testament. God saves us in order to make something of his investment of grace - he expects fruit from his planting (Matt 13:23). Good works are the duties which God has prescribed for us. We have no excuse to fail in these since he gives us what grace is necessary to perform them (2 Cor 9:8). OT saints did not have this measure of grace.

- * We are called out to do the good works God chose for us (Eph 2:10).
- * We are to walk worthy of the Lord, pleasing him by doing his good works (Col 1:10).
- * Jesus redeemed us in order to perform good works (Titus 2:14).
- * We are made complete by doing good works which are the will of God and which please him (Heb 13:21).
- * Our obedience to God in doing good is what glorifies God at the last judgment (1 Pt 2:12).

Good deeds are the result of saints obeying God's word and implementing his instructions. Saints are not just to do unspecified good deeds throughout their lives, but must obey the smallest detail of God's law:

For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled. Whoever therefore breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I say to you, that unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven.
(Matt 5:18-20).

In fact, New Testament saints are stated to only be those who do God's will (Matt 12:50).

Power to serve in obedience

Grace works

All of this must surely be obvious. If we are saved by our heavenly Father, given grace to obey him and called to represent him, we will do all his will. God's will is pre-eminently revealed in his law. The commands, testimonies, statutes and ordinances reveal what God's mind is on all the subjects of life. If we live righteously we will fulfil the law. We cannot live as righteous believers and walk contrary to God's revealed will in the law.

But are we not free from the external law? Does not Paul say that we are dead to it? Yes he does. Christians must not seek to build up their own righteousness by striving to be holy in the power of their flesh. Legalism is where believers struggle to obey mere rules and regulations without grace. These rules may be God's law or the traditions of men. In either case, trying to serve God by human effort without the Spirit is doomed to failure. The Spirit establishes God's law and enables believers to fulfil it.

Christ's law - fulfil the law of Christ, (Gal 6:2)

Now those who say that the OT contains no grace and that the NT contains no law are totally wrong. Time after time grace was operative in the lives of OT saints, especially when they committed heinous sins like David. Without grace they would have been cut off. Furthermore, law is everywhere in the NT, in fact, Jesus and the apostles repeatedly mention New Testament law (commandments); here are a few examples:

- * We are to keep Christ's word to avoid death: *Most assuredly, I say to you, if anyone keeps My word he shall never see death.* (Jn 8:51)
- * *If you love Me, keep My commandments.* (Jn 14:15)
- * *If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word.* (Jn 14:23)
- * *If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love.* (Jn 15:10)
- * *You are My friends if you do whatever I command you.* (Jn 15:14)
- * *These things I command you, that you love one another....* (Jn 15:17)
- * *Blessed are those who hear the word of God and keep it!* (Lk 11:28)
- * *Now by this we know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments. He who says, "I know Him," and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But whoever keeps His word, truly the love of God is perfected in him. By this we know that we are in Him.* (1 Jn 2:3-5)
- * *And whatever we ask we receive from Him, because we keep His commandments and do those things that are pleasing in His sight.* (1 Jn 3:22)
- * *For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are*

not burdensome. (1 Jn 5:3)

The apostles served this law of Christ: *So then, with the mind I myself serve the law of God* (Rm 7:25) and stated that believers are: *under law toward Christ* (1 Cor 9:21). This literally means 'in-lawed' to Christ. Christ fulfilled the law totally and we are in Him. By union with his life, we can also fulfil the law. If we live in the good of his life by the Spirit, we can be righteous; if we live in our old nature, we will be sinful.

Believers should not strive to obey the OT law in their flesh, in their own strength. They must not seek to establish their own righteousness by obedience. They fled to Christ for mercy and he has justified them as righteous as a result of their faith in him. In seeking to follow him as disciples, they now obey his law. Christ's law is deeper and greater than the OT law. Believers must not simply avoid murder, they must avoid hate and anger. Believers must not simply keep marriage chaste, but they must keep their thoughts pure from lust (Matt 5:21ff).

Now this standard of behaviour is impossible for men, which is why the Spirit of Christ enables believers to put on Christ, put off the old man (Adamic human nature) and live by the power of God. This is walking in the Spirit. God gives grace within and we work that grace out:

Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure.

(Phil 2:12-13)

The Gospel ensures that people can live a quality of life far greater than is possible in their own human resources. As believers walk in Christ by the Spirit, they fulfil all God's law in an organic way. Even thoughts can be taken captive (2 Cor 10:5). Gospel saints are people who obey God's law by living the life of Christ in the power of the Spirit. This is why our works prove our faith (Jm 2:14ff). God even supplies the will, as well as the power, to obey his commands, so they are not burdensome to those who have grace. True believers can obey faithfully, unregenerate, professing church-goers cannot.

God calls us as individuals to perfection whether we like it or not (1 Pt 1:15). Although we fail, we are called to put on Christ every day and live obedient lives. What is certain is that we cannot water down any of God's commands. His directions must be obeyed diligently. There is no pragmatic escape clause here -'I can't fully obey because I am weak'. All true believers will gradually grow and grow in obedience to God if they are walking by the Spirit. God's true sons will reveal who they are by their works as well as by their beliefs.

Corporate obedience

Now these same principles are at work in the church. Just as individuals are called to perfection, so the church is called to perfection. The local church must seek to diligently apply all God's principles, commands and directives in corporate body life. There can be no excuse and no watering down what God has demanded.

When Jesus evaluated the seven churches in Revelation 2-3, he was scathing in his denunciation of the errors in 71.5% of them. He chastised them because they were not perfect and should have been (Rev 3:2). It is valuable to look at what Jesus actually says to them:

- * *Repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place -- unless you repent. (Rev 2:5)*
- * *Repent, or else I will come to you quickly and will fight against them (false teachers) with the sword of My mouth. (Rev 2:16)*
- * *I will kill her children with death, [judge those who followed a false prophetess] and all the churches shall know that I am He who searches the minds and hearts. And I will give to each one of you according to your works. (Rev 2:23)*
- * *Therefore if you will not watch, I will come upon you as a thief, [what they worked for will be stolen and disappear] and you will not know what hour I will come upon you. (Rev 3:3)*
- * *"So then, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will vomit you out of My mouth. (Rev 3:16)*
- * *"As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten. Therefore be zealous and repent. (Rev 3:19)*

In these churches the risen Lord condemned: false practices, sexual immorality, wrong doctrines, a lack of love, toleration of false teachers, apostles and prophets, ungodly affluence, a 'sitting on the fence' mentality, a lack of effort, and idolatry.

Of the two churches which Jesus did not condemn, Philadelphia was praised for keeping God's word and keeping God's command (Rev 3:8,10). The other church (Smyrna) was praised for faithful suffering. In today's church climate such outwardly 'ineffective', weak, suffering, dogmatic churches are criticised. The church has lost its moorings and many actively seek the very opposite of what Jesus looks for in the church - not money, numbers, notoriety, organisation, efficiency, professionalism etc. - just simple obedience to God's commands and a preparedness to suffer for them.

Corporate directives

There is no difficulty in understanding what God desires in church life. Large portions of the pastoral letters are given over to this subject and long tracts of other letters (like 1 Cor and Eph) also explain what God requires in church - both in terms of meetings and lifestyle. To summarise a few items drawn from 1 Corinthians 11-14 and the pastorals:

- * A continual focus upon Christ in everything.
- * Government is by a group of equal, male, elders only. These teach and shepherd the flock God gives them. Church numbers should be small enough for elders to cope.
- * Practical arrangements (especially the relief of the poor) by deacons.

- * Sunday meetings have a key focus upon breaking of bread.
- * Sunday meetings are conducted on the basis of fellowship - mutual edification being the prime service in the meeting. This means the sharing of several gifted people, not the domination of one man.
- * Teaching has strong support in church life but does not predominate in the main meeting. It is done instructively and in an interactive manner, as per the Lord's example.
- * Worship is not the prime reason for gathering together (edification is, see 1 Cor 14). Worship is not fleshly but spiritual, not depending upon human manipulation (like excessive music, leadership directions). Worship is not an emotion but willing submission.
- * Prayer and thanksgiving feature strongly.

Our problems start when we introduce things alien to what God commands and take away things God prescribes.

Sins of omission

Some churches rarely break bread, yet this is a crucial element of church gatherings which no one can deny; it is crystal clear. How will the leaders explain this to the Lord at judgment day? Some churches refuse to baptise disciples, yet this is an obvious Gospel command. Some churches refuse to establish elders or deacons, again this is an unequivocal instruction of the Lord.

Sins of commission

The errors of the modern church in adding unbiblical elements to services is simply too staggering and voluminous to go into. Some feel that adding a few minor things pose no danger. There is no slippery slope. Well history belays that argument. It is a simple fact that churches which introduced small rogue elements or doctrines without repentance, gradually became more and more deceived over time until they lost their lampstand completely. The lie of the devil's temptation is that just a small bite of the fruit will do no harm - the fall of man resulted. 'Just a small alteration to God's pattern is OK', he whispers; and a thin wedge is driven into simple obedience to God.

The first problem is: by what authority does any man bring in new ideas to church life? Is not this the same as the sins of Nadab and Abihu in offering strange fire unto the Lord (Lev 10:1-2)? They were the eldest sons of Aaron and were consecrated priests, but they died for their folly in bringing in human wisdom and foreign elements into worship and thus stand as a lesson for all time. What right have we to say that God's existing instructions are not enough, we now need this and that to appeal to modern people.

Secondly we are told not to bring human wisdom into church affairs (1 Cor 1:17-24, 2:1-4, 3:19; 2 Cor 1:12; Col 2:20-23). Our ideas are not good enough, even if well meant. Thirdly, recent history shows that despite thousands of churches devoting themselves to various new ideas, conversions and church membership has plummeted. Man's ideas simply don't work.

Finally, the reason things are going badly for the church, especially in the UK, is that we are not implementing God's instructions. If we want success, we must start obeying God. His commands are 'not burdensome', church principles are not difficult - they just cut across our pride.

The nature of sin

We need to understand what is at stake here. Ignoring, or watering down God's instructions is not a mild problem. It is never right to put the demands of pragmatism or people above God's word. This is exactly what sin is.

There are very many words for sin. In the New Testament alone there are at least 15 words which describe and delineate sin. They are translated as: transgression, sin, error, law-breaking, disobedience and so on, and they all have the basic meaning of failing to obey what God commanded. The essence of sin is disobedience.

One of the most common words for sin, appearing in 150 NT verses, is the Greek word hamartia [a`marti,a, Strong's number 266]. It means, a departure, to miss the mark, to err, be mistaken, to wander from the path of uprightness and honour, to do or go wrong, to wander from the law of God, violate God's law, sin. It is drawn from the picture of an arrow being shot at the target (called a 'mark') but it falls short and misses. Missing the mark is sin.

When someone sins by missing the target, they will not be able to stand before God on the day of judgment and say, 'I'm sorry, but I tried my best. The practicalities of life made it difficult for me to achieve your will'. No Christian leader would teach such a thing. The soul that sins will die, only in Jesus is there forgiveness because he hit the mark for the elect. Sin is failing to obey God's direction and sinners will give an account of every target (command) of God's which they missed..

When a church deliberately fails to apply Biblical teaching about doctrine or church practice it is sin, the leaders failed to reach the mark. It is not OK for elders to do the best they can and yield to pragmatic demands or give into peer pressure to institute unbiblical practices. God calls us to perfection, and even though we make many mistakes we must aim at the target. Mistakes can be rectified and forgiven; setting up church policy contrary to God's word is not a mistake, it is sin.

When a church knows that it must establish breaking of bread according to the Lord's command, and then deliberately avoids doing so because the large congregation makes it difficult to organise - this is sin, pure and simple. When a church knows that scripture teaches that all church members must be allowed to participate in meetings as God gives ability, and then only lets one man do everything - this is sin.

Obviously, when God's clear instructions are ignored, the church sins. It is also clear that when sinful factors emerge in corporate life, the church sins: if elders commit immorality or if leaders defraud the flock. However, it is also sin to indulge gross, public behaviour, exhibitionism, indecent practices and aberrant rituals. Such would include: screaming, exotic dancing, falling over and such-like. But what about well-meant modernisation? Surely it cannot be wrong to adapt church strategy to comply with today's trends?

An example of well-meant error

A classic case of well-meant error in church practice is when meetings are devoted to unbelievers instead of to God. It is now very common to establish 'seeker services' often based upon the Bill Hybel's Willow Creek Church pattern in America. This is when services are geared to be as worldly as possible in order to make outsiders feel welcome and at home. Various items are staged and organised which will be familiar to outsiders: the music, the presentation, the accessible chatty talk, the dramas and so on. No demands are made, no provocation is offered and the Gospel is made as superficial as possible with no mention of sin or the need to get right with an offended God. The emphasis is to make sinners feel relaxed.

Such a system is sinful on many levels.

- * The system is focused upon man and not God.
- * It has strayed from the directions God gives in scripture showing us how to do church.
- * Services are focused upon a small percentage of unchurched people instead of the Biblical demand to edify the majority of church members.
- * Its procedures are totally contrary to those modelled by Jesus who frequently provoked his hearers and made great demands of them.
- * In Willow Creek, the majority of the membership attend the entertaining week-end services only and show no commitment to church life, fellowship with others or attend meetings in the week.
- * The continual focus on accommodating non-Christians tends to evangelise the church towards the world over time. One church-wide survey showed that large percentages of members had lied, stolen, committed adultery, and watched pornography. Bill Hybel's reaction to this was to compliment the members for honesty, but no one repented.
- * It weakens Biblical teaching by dumbing it down in Gospel presentations and overturns it in the reliance upon the erroneous ethics of pop-psychology (like the use of Melody Beattie's *Codependent No More* - very influential at Willow Creek, a book dedicated to the author herself!).
- * It introduces pagan elements into worship (the use of drama, dances, presentations, vivid colour, powerful music etc. originated in pagan worship systems like Baalism).
- * It majors on human elements in worship (e.g. the totally scripted performances and meetings with cues for stage lights and music, just as in a concert or TV show).
- * Gospel communication is determined and shaped by marketing methods and the expectations of the unsaved. Truth is not the determining factor.
- * The use of marketing techniques focuses the message upon man's felt needs rather than his breaking of God's law. Personal fulfilment, soul satisfaction, happiness and self-esteem are presented as prime goals for seekers.
- * God's attribute of love is presented to people time after time (over 70% of one year's talks) with little emphasis on any other attribute. There is a distinct lack of teaching on God's holiness. The focus upon love should be contrasted with the fact that the apostles never evangelised on this basis. The word 'love' is not found in the Acts of the Apostles.
- * There is a large element of psychological and emotional manipulation in services, especially from musical, humorous and, especially, dramatic entertainment. These are enhanced by state of the art lighting, sound systems and planning - even the colour of performers clothes and props are carefully prepared. Image is everything.

- * Manipulation by the use of emotional programming is pervasive. Visual stimulation is prioritised over thought, conceptual complexity is avoided and simplicity valued. In modern terms, more spin and style than content. The Bible, on the other hand, applies truth to men's minds. Jesus sometimes deliberately spoke things which were very hard to understand in order to let grace work (Jn 6).
- * Psychological techniques and worldview, and psychotherapy practices are hugely important to maintaining this church style. Many of the Willow Creek staff are dependent on regular therapy and a portion of staff salaries is targeted for therapy costs.
- * Hybel's key psychological theory is pragmatism - if it works, use it. The tools used to promote this are business management techniques.
- * Hybels is ecumenical, advocates closer ties with Roman Catholicism and has had Catholics preach serious errors in his church like: baptismal regeneration, erroneous ideas about regeneration and calling God, 'Mother of us all'.
- * The synthesis (syncretism) of the church with the world is condemned in both the Old and New Testaments.

Interestingly, although Willow Creek has been lauded as an example of church success for many years, it now appears that a large proportion of the big numbers gathered at their services are not really saved people. Hybels himself admits that his converts do not last.¹ Staff leaders even admit that many unsaved people are baptised and are long term church members. This was predicted by opponents, since the Gospel was being perverted, but it is now being openly admitted by former leaders. At least twice, Bill Hybels realised that he had diluted the Gospel message and publicly repented (1979 and 1988). However, the determination to be more Biblical quickly deteriorated as psychology again took over.

A sympathetic author who reviewed the seeker-service phenomenon closes his book with a chapter called: *The Loss Of Truth*. He states; '*Creekers generally do not think with a consistent Christian worldview. ... Creekers do not think critically with the categories and content of Christian theology ... popular American categories and mores ... shape Willow Creek's thought and practice*'²

None of this started out as being rebellious to God. It began by seeking to focus the Gospel more effectively towards the unsaved. However, by ignoring God's clear instructions on how to build the church, Bill Hybel's vision has done serious damage to his church and those who have copied it world-wide. It is not enough to be well-meaning, sincere or desirous to evangelise. We must be true, we must follow God's directions in achieving our objectives. Only God's truth saves lives, delivers from bondage and establishes saints.

¹ G. A. Pritchard, *Willow Creek Seeker Services*, Baker (1996), p277.

² G. A. Pritchard, *ibid.* p272.

Judgment on error

We have established that Christians must obey the commands of God, both as individuals and together as church. It is instructive to see some examples of just how serious this matter is to the Lord. When people ignored his instructions in the Old Testament, they were frequently killed, so great was the affront to God. This should lead to sober consideration on our part.

Judgment on the sources of error

False prophets (Deut 13:1ff)

If a prophet produces a genuine miracle and then leads people to follow a false god or gospel he must be executed. His crime: *that prophet or that dreamer of dreams shall be put to death, because he has spoken in order to turn you away from the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt and redeemed you from the house of bondage, to entice you from the way in which the LORD your God commanded you to walk. So you shall put away the evil from your midst.* (v5)

Deceiving prophets (Deut 18:20-22)

But the prophet who presumes to speak a word in My name, which I have not commanded him to speak, or who speaks in the name of other gods, that prophet shall die. (v20) This even covers a prophet who has previously spoken genuinely but now acts presumptuously, speaking his own words or uttering alien teachings. If someone speaks for God but does not teach according to God's instructions - he must die.

Deceiving friends and relatives (Deut 13:6ff)

If a close relative or bosom friend entices people to serve another god, he must be killed. The closest relative being the first to stone him but *you shall surely kill him; your hand shall be first against him to put him to death, and afterward the hand of all the people*, v6.

A Deceived City (Deut 13:12)

If someone in a city entices the population to follow other gods, the entire city was to be destroyed: all the people, all the livestock, all the plunder was to be burned and the city razed.

Judgment on those who are led astray

Idolaters (Deut 17:2ff)

Those who transgress the covenant (disobey God's instructions) and worship other gods are said to be wicked and are to be executed by all.

Ignoring the instructions and judgments of the priest or ruler (Deut 17:12-13)

Anyone who acts presumptuously and refuses to accept the ruling of the priest (God's teacher of the people) must be killed.

Ignoring God's commandments (Num 15:32-36)

The gathering of sticks for a fire may seem a trivial matter to us but it represented a clear case of disobedience to God's word. If punishment had not been inflicted for profaning the Sabbath in this case, the whole institution would have been jeopardised. The man was killed by

stoning.

Adulterers (Deut 22:20-24; Lev 20:20)

People who ignore God's teaching on the sanctity of marriage are to be judged. Both the adulterer and the adulteress are to be killed.

Murderers (Deut 19:11-13)

Someone who ignores God's law and deliberately kills another person must be executed.

Rebellious sons (Deut 21:18-21)

Sons who resolutely refuse to obey God's commands and disrespect their fathers were to be stoned.

False witnesses (Deut 19:15-21)

The essence of God's word is truth. A lying witness is the epitome of a straying from God's word. In extreme cases, false witnesses were to be stoned.

The reason for these extreme actions is because deviating from God's instructions was 'an accursed thing' resulting in God's fierce anger (Deut 13:17). Departing from God's prescribed will was a serious offence. Put into today's setting, several of these cases equate to preaching a false Gospel; for instance: bearing false witness to God's truth, speaking for God but deceiving people with wrong ideas about God's word, enticing people to follow a false Christ or introducing elements from false religions into church worship. This is why Paul also curses those who adulterate the pure Biblical Gospel:

If anyone preaches any other gospel to you than what you have received, let him be accursed. (Gal 1:9)

The modern church has multitudes of leaders who are actively preaching a false Gospel. Some of their doctrines are wild and bizarre, such as Kenneth Copeland's idea that Satan conquered Jesus on the cross or Kenneth Hagin's that man is born equal with God. Even weak Christians should realise that such is pure heresy. But many preachers are peddling less fantastic notions which are equally erroneous. In Old Testament times, such preachers would be stoned to death.

We should be very careful about what we listen to and even more cautious about what we accept. God will judge false teachers in his own time, but meanwhile, we are responsible to God for what we obey. If we follow wrong teaching we will give an account to God. Instead of acting like Moses and Paul by considering such false teaching as 'an accursed thing', thousands of Christians accept such erroneous notions willingly. God is not mocked and we will reap what we sow (Gal 6:7-9).

Conclusion

Whether we scan the Old or the New Testament we have a clear picture before us of the importance of diligent obedience to God. It is a fearful thing to stray from the path which God lays out for us.

We should also remember that, not only does God give us clear instructions to enable us to be sure what is right and what is wrong, but staying on the path is a fellowship matter. It's not about cleverness but relationship. Jesus and the Holy Spirit walk with us. Walking on the narrow path is simply following the footsteps of the Lord Jesus, after all, he is the word of God. He lights up our path and we simply follow him (Ps 119:105). This means that we do not have to be clever thinkers or mighty theologians to walk right and avoid evil, if we are really communing with Jesus and are prepared to obey him, we will never stray.

The key modern problem is trusting subjective impressions. The world tells you in films, books, TV dramas and magazines that you should, 'Follow your heart'. This is the very last thing anyone should do without qualification. God has given us a mind to evaluate, discriminate and discern what is good for us. We wouldn't trust our feelings and eat attractive but poisonous food, yet how quickly man does this with his life choices. People follow their hearts and committ adultery, leave jobs with no secure future and pursue selfish ends. The consequences in society are seen all around us in a nation that has followed its lusts for decades.

But too many Christians also do this. Their heart tells them that God wants them to do this and that, yet the consequences are evil. It was never God - how could they be certain it was? God never leads people into circumstances opposed to his revealed word; yet the heart frequently directs people into disobedience. This is because it is easily corrupted, deceived (Jer 17:9) and is the ground of Satanic temptation. Moses knew this when he spoke about God's curses to the Israelites: when a man trusts the dictates of his own heart against God's commands, the Lord will spurn him, his anger will burn hot and God will curse him, blotting his name out from under heaven (Deut 29:19-20). Christians must never follow subjective impressions without checking them against the word of God.

Further, the apostles warn us that baby Christians must grow quickly and learn how to distinguish good from evil (Heb 5:12-14). The purpose of developing into maturity is to be able to discern what is right and what is wrong. This is because God desires his children to obey his every word. We have no right to water that down to our level of compromise. Whether it's our personal lives or the way we build our church, we have no choice - we must carefully obey the words of God.

How sweet are Your words to my taste, Sweeter than honey to my mouth! Through Your precepts I get understanding; Therefore I hate every false way. Your word is a lamp to my feet And a light to my path. I have sworn and confirmed That I will keep Your righteous judgments. (Ps 119:103-106)

Scripture quotations are from The New King James Version
© Thomas Nelson 1982

Paul Fahy Copyright © 2001
Understanding Ministries
<http://www.understanding-ministries.com>