Biblical Literacy as a Defense Against False Teaching
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Introduction

A careful reading of the events of the Bible reveals that combating improper and immoral teaching represented a major part of the teaching ministry of prophets and apostles. This article will make a general survey of the subject of false teaching in both the Old and New Testaments. A further examination of the biblical material will seek to uncover the various reasons for false teaching. Finally, this paper will discuss a proposal for the defense of the truth as revealed by the Lord and how to prevent false teaching from effectively stifling the work of the Gospel.

This article will take the approach that false teaching is generally an intentional effort by persons seeking to change opinion and, therefore, practice. False teachers may have various motivations or they could be acting in ignorance of biblical truth. While some of the biblical examples of false teaching clearly show an evil intent, other biblical examples are harder to classify. Using the scriptural record as a basis for this study means that at times a judgment call must be made between false practice that arises from momentary circumstances and false information promoted as the truth of God. Every example of false teaching in the Bible will not be addressed in this article, but enough examples will be given make a representative case for the conclusions enumerated.

A case in point for illustrating false practice in the face of circumstances would be the moral failure of Aaron and the creation of the golden calf idol in Exodus 32. With the absence of Moses, who was away on Mount Sinai, the Israelite escapees clamored for tangible evidence of God’s protection. The people demanded that a visible idol, an image of a calf covered in gold, be constructed. The Book of Exodus makes no indication that Aaron changed religious allegiances; nor does Exodus state that Aaron advocated a long-term differing approach to oppose the revealed plan of Moses. Aaron, by later confession, was caught up in the fervor of the people and responded to their wish for a visible god. Aaron was not leading the newly freed Israelites to new truths. In this instance, Aaron apparently responded passively to false practice and was not actively promoting false teaching.

This article will make the case that a thorough knowledge of the Bible (biblical literacy) not only prevents false teaching, but also that Bible knowledge corrects false practices. Therefore, biblical literacy is an essential element in the prevention of wrong doctrine and practice.
A Survey of False Teachers in Scripture

A. The Pentateuch and Early False Teaching

1. Satan in the Garden of Eden

At the very beginning of human history, opposition to God became a part of the fabric of history. Into God’s perfect setting, the Garden of Eden, steps an opponent, an antagonist. The antagonist pictured in the beginning of the Bible sought to destroy the perfect creation of God and used what some may consider to be the archetypical approach—doubt about the divine revelation of God. The Genesis creature, later called “The Satan,” had the form of a serpent but showed incredible mental aptitude by its approach to the created couple: Adam and Eve. First, the Satan dialogued with Eve alone and not with Adam (or even with both of them at the same time). This “divide and conquer” strategy ensured that Eve would not be able to rely on the support of Adam at the moment of temptation.

Adam, who had heard directly the instructions of the Lord regarding the “tree prohibitions,” seems to have been absent from Eve at the critical moment of temptation. Later, when Eve informed Adam of the events of the day, Adam ate the forbidden fruit and followed Eve down the rabbit hole of sin and into the known, but undesirable, future of separation from the God of love.

A second part of the devilish strategy of temptation involved an oblique attack on the veracity of the Word of God. Satan’s casting of doubt was not a frontal assault on what God had said, but was strewn with subtlety. The question, “Has God really said” (Genesis 3:1), was an assault that the Word of God has undergone for all of the millennia following the Garden temptation.

Finally, it should be noted that, after the damage had been done by the serpent, he was nowhere to be found. Adam and Eve collapsed into sinful separation and lonely desperation. The Lord appeared and picked up the pieces of this all too human tragedy—a fall from blessing followed by redemption and restoration.

In summary, the first assault on God’s Truth involved isolation of the victim (whether real or imagined—Adam may have been close by). The next step was an attack on the truthfulness of the Lord (and therefore an attack on His character) and, finally, the abandonment of the victims of the wicked one. Since Satan has no regard for the souls of men, he throws them away once he has accomplished his mission of introducing corruption into God’s perfect order.

Trying to understand the motivation of Satan in his dealings with Adam and Eve would be mere speculation. We can see the first step in a pattern that will continue into the New Testament. The approach of Satan is always and
ultimately an attack on the Lord Jesus. The introduction of sin in the Book of Genesis begins the march of devastating consequences through the following pages of the Bible.

2. The Friends of Job

Though the Book of Job cannot easily be dated, the culture of the book implies a very early date in the biblical record. The drama of the book involves a satanic plot, friends who try to help without comfort, and complete personal disaster for the main character of the book.

All of the people of the book acted on incomplete information. No one knew of the meeting where Satan asked God if He would allow Job to be tested. All that the earthly participant knew was the resulting family crisis and personal calamity of Job. Job’s wife and the counselors all took the approach that evil and suffering were always the direct result of sin and, therefore, the disastrous events of the book must be related to the actions and/or attitudes of Job.

The counselors of Job preached the letter of the law without the spirit of it. They were not trying to subvert the Word of God directly, but they did so by their lack of knowledge of divine events and because they discount the workings of God that were beyond their understanding. A fine line lies between prophet and judge.

In one sense, the examples from the Book of Job show that religion is no substitute for the Word of God and for complete submission to the will of God. The Lord never intended to tell us everything He knows; He only intended to tell us that He knows everything.

3. The Prophet Balaam

The Apostle John, in the Book of Revelation, leveled a charge on behalf of the Lord to the church of Pergamum (Rev. 2:14). Some people in the church held to the “teaching of Balaam.” This indictment refers back to the prophet Balaam who appears in Scripture in Numbers 22 as a prophet for hire. Balaam went about in the name of God, but his interest was not in the truth of God. He was a prophet for hire. As such, Balaam became a very picture of the false prophet. He was not an uniformed or misguided person, but he had an ulterior motive. For Balaam, the things of God were tools to be used to accomplish his own ends. They were manipulative divine means to a sinful, human end.

The donkey of Balaam stopped the false prophet when the Lord opened the mouth of the brute beast. After Balaam dialoged with his donkey, the Lord opened the eyes of Balaam to see an angel with a drawn sword standing before
him (Numbers 22). Judgment was imminent and the prophet was blind to it. He was off course both literally and theologically.

The Balaam incident shows that false teaching should be met with true revelation. The use of the donkey as the true prophet becomes a source of amusement and certainly could be taken as a divine sense of humor. The Lord did not have a human prophet deliver His message, but rather the Lord showed that the messenger is not the essential point in the debate, but the message—God’s revelation trumps all.

4. The Rebellion of Korah and Moses

In Numbers 16 Moses faced yet another crisis of leadership. With this situation, Korah, a son of Levi, appeared as a spokesman for those Israelites who wanted to challenge the authority of Moses and Aaron. Moses rightly recognized the challenge as a spiritual attack and sought divine intervention to solve the challenge. The Lord did intervene and called for a separation from the offending parties and their families. Judgment fell on the rebels and the rebellion was crushed.

As often occurs in the Old Testament, the Lord was sought for an active and immediate solution. A gradual transition can be seen as the people of God have more Scripture available to them. Spiritual problem solving will move to a more prophetic response. The system of sin-intervention will migrate to sin-prophecy-intervention.

B. False Teaching in the Writings

1. Young Daniel—food and meat sacrificed to idols

False teaching does not always come in the context of a twisting or perversion of the Bible. Sometimes it comes in the form of another religion entirely. The challenges faced by Daniel provide just such an example.

Daniel was possibly a teenager at the time of his deportation from the Kingdom of Judah to the empire of Babylon. As a part of his training to serve the king of Babylon, Daniel and the other Hebrew exiles with him were to be fed with food from the king’s table (Daniel 1).

Daniel’s point of conviction stemmed from the fact that the meat he was to eat came from animals that had been offered as sacrifices to the gods of the Babylonians. Since the animals had been dedicated in such a way, Daniel felt that as a matter of conscience he could not eat that food without dishonoring his God. Daniel’s solution was impressive considering he was basically a captive and had little or no control over his life.
Daniel and his fellow Hebrew’s did not want to be seen as participating in any part of the Babylonian religion. Daniel, as spokesman, voiced their concern, but also shared a plan of action that allowed them to keep their personal convictions and still accomplish the ends for which they had been chosen. In one sense, Daniel asked their overseer to join him in a test to see if the Hebrew God will take care of His children (the Hebrews) while they honor their God. This approach represents an amazing statement of faith considering that the Lord had allowed the Babylonians to capture and exact tribute from the kingdom of Judah.

C. False Teaching in the Prophets

1. Michaiah before Kings Ahab and Jehoshaphat

The loneliness of standing for the Lord leaps off of the pages of Scripture in the 1 Kings 22 account of the prophet Micaiah. The dual kingdoms of Judah and Israel formed a political alliance before an upcoming military campaign. The two kings illustrate the nationalized state of religion in their day. Prophets were trotted out before the king to validate the desires of the rulers and not to seek the will of God.

Micaiah the prophet found himself in conflict with the political leadership of his kingdom and also at odds with the religious majority of his people. In spite of all of this Micaiah’s approach was “What the LORD says to me, that I shall speak.” (1 Kings 22:14).

The story of Micaiah is yet another example of isolation and challenge. Micaiah was opposed by the political leadership—the kings of Judah and Israel. Micaiah was opposed by the religious leadership—the prophets who criticize him. Finally, Micaiah may have been opposed by the people, though this conjecture is not as clear from the text.

2. False Religion and The High Places

With the growing prominence of prophetic ministry in the Old Testament, the counterweight of false religion represented an ongoing problem. It is possible that the decline in the spiritual authority among the kings of Israel and Judah made the role of prophetic voices even more paramount among the Hebrew people.

One example of the struggle between prophet and king occurs in 2 Kings 1 when the ruler of Israel, Ahaziah, reached out to Baal-zebub, the god of Ekron to learn of his future fate. Elijah the Tishbite was sent by the angel of the Lord to proclaim judgment on the king because the king forsook the true faith of Israel.
Throughout the historical books of the Old Testament, kings are evaluated on the basis of their dealings with the high places or centers of pagan worship. It is possible that some of the high places were syncretized Yahweh worship. This syncretized worship would place the name of the Lord on the practices of the ancient Canaanite religions. Other high places were the holdovers where pagan religions continued to be practiced. In each case, the ongoing battle with idolatry was met with the Word of God, which was increasingly delivered by prophets.

Some of these prophetic voices had a long ministry of delivering the Word of the Lord, while others spoke for a brief time as the situation demanded. The prophet Haggai illustrated a message and mission that was very specific and occurred over a relatively brief period of time. The prophet Isaiah ministered over the course of several decades and spoke to the people of his day, but also laid the foundation for the messianic ministry of the Lord Jesus.

In these Old Testament examples, false teaching was considered wrong and dealt with in a serious matter. The ultimate answer was sought in the Lord Himself. It can also be noted that false teaching appears throughout the Old Testament and was not a later development. Extreme measures were used when repentance was not forthcoming. The true followers of the Lord never allowed false religion or false doctrine to exist and prosper alongside the true teachings of the Lord.

D. False Teaching in the Gospels

With the coming of the Messiah, challenges to the true revelation of God occurred both within and without the framework of the Old Testament faith. Considering the pivotal nature of the earthly ministry of the Lord Jesus, it is not surprising that the opposition came from every conceivable direction. Even the birth of Jesus brought conflict as the political ruler of the land of Israel ordered the extermination of the young boys of Bethlehem in an attempt to rid the world of the newborn Jesus.

1. Pharisees

The Pharisees of Jesus’ day placed a great emphasis on obedience to the law of God. Even with their emphasis on scriptural principles they received some of the harshest criticisms given out during the teaching ministry of Jesus. The pharisaic group became an illustration of using the law as a means to an end, not as a means to glorifying God. Jesus exposed their hypocrisy as they institutionalized laws that granted them exceptions to biblical principles (for example: declaring that assets were devoted to God and therefore not available to help needy parents—Mark 7:11-12)

2. Sadducees
This branch of priestly descendants did not emphasize the teachings of the law, but used the rituals of the Old Testament as their source of authority and power. Their power came from domination of the Temple of Jerusalem and the requirements to worship exclusively at that location.

3. Herodians

Though the Herodians are not as identifiable as the Pharisees and Sadducees in the New Testament, they were a part of the political atmosphere. This political, but messianic movement, represented yet another deviation from the biblical understanding of the role of the Messiah. The Herodians shifted the concepts of salvation and redemption, making them nationalistic ideas. In other words, they defined salvation as freedom from Roman rule.

E. False Teachers and Their Teaching in the Writings of Peter

The New Testament letters of Peter and Paul are replete with instructions for dealing with false teachers. Whether these teachers were individuals or a part of deviant groups is a matter of conjecture in some cases.

Peter warned his readers in 2 Peter 2:1-2 about teachers who “deny the Master who bought them.” Peter went on to state that these teachers may be characterized by such wantonness that they discredit the faithful.

F. False Teachers and Their Teaching in the Writings of Paul

Paul combated several deviant groups in his letters. One of the groups, identified in the Book of Galatians, apparently tried to mix the law with the Gospel of grace that Paul had taught his new congregations. Other variant groups seem to imply that extra or hidden knowledge was required for holiness and spiritual living. Examples of this problem can be found in the Book of Colossians (Col. 2:8-23). This conflict seemed to presage the later Gnostic heresies that afflicted the early Christian churches.

(2) A Survey of the Tactics/Methods/Motives of False Teachers

A. Motivations of False Teaching

Since almost all of the information about the false teachers comes from Scripture, which did not give the temporal driving concerns of the false teachers, a judgment call must be made when making conclusions. The New Testament did not systematize the doctrine of the teachers of error.
1. Motivated by political and national concerns

Based on a brief biblical survey, it can be noted that some false teachers used biblical truth to further what they thought to be high-minded goals. Freedom from oppression and throwing off the yoke of a foreign power might have been worthy objectives in context, but was not the purpose of God's revelation. In one sense, using the Gospel for earthly outcomes is just as damaging as outright heresy because it changes the only hope for humanity, salvation in Jesus Christ, into something that will not provide for eternity.

2. Motivated by Temporal Gain

Whenever religion becomes profitable, danger arises. Some modern Balaams have found that the quest for eternal riches by the people can result in temporal riches for themselves. In the Book of Acts, Ananias and Sapphira sold their property to give the money to their church, but lied about the details in a way that grieved the Holy Spirit and resulted in their deaths (Acts 5). In Acts 16:16-23, a girl was said to be profitable for her masters because of her fortune-telling abilities. When Paul cast the demon of divination out of her, she ceased being profitable and Paul and Silas were beaten and imprisoned.

3. Motivated by a Controlling Evil

Ultimately, Paul identified the controlling evil of the world as the “prince of the power of the air” (Ephesians 2:2). This understanding perfectly complements the temptation narrative of the Book of Genesis. The approach to Eve and Adam in the Garden of Eden was the opening salvo in an attack on the work and will of God.

(3) A Biblical Defense/Response to False Teaching

One of the most telling incidents of the Bible occurs when Satan tried to dissuade the Lord Jesus Himself of His messianic mission. Matthew 4 records three attempts by the devil to tempt Jesus to do wrong. In each case not only did Jesus resist the devil, but he did so by quoting Scripture. He used the Word of God for each answer.

A. Apologetics

The very existence of truth implies that error also exists. Defending truth from error is commonly called apologetics. Apologetics seeks to provide systematized and logical arguments in favor of truth. The intent is to convince the audience that the truth is the only valid point of view.

B. Doctrinal Teaching
The teachings of the Bible are properly called doctrine. Through the centuries, pastors and theologians have attempted to categorize the teachings of the Bible in an attempt to provide a comprehensive look at Bible truth. The hope is that a better understanding of the truths of Scripture will equip the believer in Jesus to resist false teaching.

C. Pragmatic Concerns

The idea that God is a God of love means that His guidelines and restrictions are intended to benefit His followers and not harm them. Thus, ethical living will bring about more joy and unethical living. Believing the Truth of Scripture is not enough, the Truth must be lived out, expressed, and embraced for God's perfect will to be done.

(4) A Plan for the Prevention of False Teaching

Since the Bible warns that false teachers are as much a part of the future as of the past (2 Peter 2:1, “There will also be false teachers among you.”), some steps must be taken to equip born-again believers to resist wrong doctrine.

A. Implementation of Regular Bible Study

One step to prepare believers to resist error is the regular study of the Bible. Because of the supernatural nature of Scripture, Bible study represents the essential starting place over all of the other methodologies. Even theological seminaries sometimes emphasize many important matters to the exclusion of scriptural knowledge. Nothing can or will substitute for a thorough working knowledge of the Bible as a guide for living.

B. Doctrinal Supplement

Though the Bible was not inspired in a systematic or topical format, these rearrangements of Scripture can assist believers in their daily walk before the Lord.

C. Practical Supplement (godly living)

Since faithful living is a part of a community of believers, it is essential that any believer be a part of a local Bible-believing congregation. The structure and accountability of a local congregation is an intent spelled out in Scripture for every believer. Congregational involvement helps the believer to resist false teaching and evil living.

Conclusion:
Biblical literacy, i.e. “knowing the Bible,” is an essential part of protecting one’s heart as well as defending the faith. Biblical literacy is a saturated understanding of the Bible and its claims. This concept means the Christian faith must be lived out on a daily basis. Biblical literacy prevents a rapid acceptance of false teaching and, therefore, false practice.

A plan of regular Bible reading may sound simplistic, but such an approach is the foundation of the life of every believer. Regular reading of the Bible is also foundational to all other studies, whether apologetics or theology. The believer in Christ should never substitute the tools for the truth. Immersion in Scripture, coupled with a thorough training in the message of Scripture, will strengthen churches as they proclaim the Gospel to the nations in truth without any mixture of error.

Selected Bibliography


