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## THE ANTIDOTE TO FALSE TEACHING

Hebrews 13:7-14

By

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## The Antidote to False Teaching Hebrews 13:7-14

I confess that the first twenty or so times that I read our text, it seemed to me to be a disjointed, random bunch of verses. I could not see any unified theme. But the more I meditated on these verses, I came to see that there is a common theme, namely, the danger of false teaching and the true antidote to it, namely, the person and work of Jesus Christ.

The author was concerned that his readers would be “carried away by varied and strange teachings” (13:9), including returning to Judaism. So he calls them to remember the godly teachers who had spoken the word of God to them (13:7). Even though these men had now died, Jesus Christ, whom they preached, is the same yesterday, today, and forever (13:8). His grace (13:9) and His sacrificial death on the cross (13:10-12) are at the center of sound doctrine. Jesus and His death on the cross have become our altar, which supersedes and replaces the Jewish altar in the temple. Therefore, we must turn our backs on Judaism and every other religion and hold firmly to Christ and the cross (13:13). If such faith leads to hardship, rejection, persecution, or even death, keep in mind that we are not living for rewards in this life, but for the reward He has promised us in heaven (13:14). That is the flow of thought here, as I understand it. He is saying,

To avoid being carried away by false teaching, imitate the faith of godly leaders and hold firmly to the centrality of Jesus Christ, His sacrificial death, and the promise of heaven.

1. False teaching is a perpetual danger for God’s people.

The author warns, “Do not be carried away by varied and strange teachings” (13:9). We live in a day when evangelical Christians minimize the importance of sound doctrine and even speak against it as something that divides us and goes against Christ’s commands to love one another. The emphasis today is on coming together where we can agree, rather than dividing over doctrines where we disagree. To say, “I’m right and you’re wrong” over doc-

trinal matters smacks of pride and intolerance. It will earn you the unwelcome labels of “fundamentalist” or “separatist.” The concept that any religious teaching may be universally true or false runs counter to the modern mindset.

We view religious or spiritual views as a matter of preference, not of truth. Pastor Leith Anderson told of a visitor to his church who said that he liked Reformed Theology, the inerrancy of Scripture—and *reincarnation*. Although Anderson explained that reincarnation is unbiblical, the man didn’t alter his theology (cited in Gene Edward Veith, *Postmodern Times: A Christian Guide to Contemporary Thought and Culture* [Crossway Books], pp. 175-176). Truth was reduced to personal preference: “I like vanilla, you like chocolate. But neither is right or wrong.”

A 1991 George Barna survey found that only 23 percent of evangelical Christians expressed a strong belief in absolute truth. Among the American public the number jumped to 28 percent! (Cited by James Dobson, Dec., 1991 newsletter.) If only one-fourth of evangelicals hold a strong belief in absolute truth, then the idea of avoiding false teaching is not going to be of much concern.

But the New Testament is filled with warnings against false doctrine. Jesus warned, “Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves” (Matt. 7:15). Paul warned the Ephesian elders to be on guard for savage wolves, and then added (Acts 20:30), “and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them.” He warned the Galatians about men who were preaching a false gospel (Gal. 1:6-9). In Colossians, he warned against being taken captive by philosophy and those who imposed rules about food and drink and the observance of certain days (Col. 2:8, 16). His pastoral letters frequently mention sound doctrine and warn against false teaching (1 Tim. 1:6-7; 4:1-3; 6:3-5; 2 Tim. 2:16-18, 25; 3:6-9; 4:3-4; Titus 1:10-16). (See also, 2 Pet. 2-3; 1 John 2:18-26; 3:7; 4:1-6; 2 John 7-11; Jude; Rev. 2-3.)

Although the Hebrews knew exactly what the author was referring to in our text, we do not. It may have been Jewish regulations about clean or unclean foods, or some Jewish sacrificial ceremony, such as eating the Passover lamb, that was supposed to have benefited the partakers. The force of the imperative indicates

that some were already being carried away with this teaching and needed to stop. Perhaps it was the same thing that the author referred to in Hebrews 9:9-10, where he said that various sacrifices offered could not make the worshiper perfect in conscience, "since they relate only to food and drink and various washings, regulations for the body imposed until a time of reformation."

John Owen (*An Exposition of Hebrews* [The National Foundation for Christian Education], p. 436) points out that the Jews put so much weight on these foods because they were associated with the Jewish altar. Taking them away declared that their altar, which was the center of their religion, was of no more use. The Judaizing Christians thought that somehow the use of such food had a place in establishing or confirming the heart, perhaps even in the matter of salvation. But such practices were of no benefit because they pulled the Jews away from the only means of salvation, namely, God's grace in Christ.

The main point to note here is that Satan has always infiltrated the church with false teaching that invariably dilutes or digresses from God's grace in Jesus Christ. If we buy into the modern idea that doctrinal truth is a personal preference of minimal importance, we join these early Hebrews, in danger of being "carried away by varied and strange teaching." To deny the vital importance of sound doctrine makes us prime targets for the enemy's attacks.

2. To avoid being carried away by false teaching, imitate the faith of godly leaders.

"Remember those who led you, who spoke the word of God to you; and considering the result of their conduct, imitate their faith" (13:7). Scholars agree that the author here is referring to past leaders who have already died. In 13:17 & 24, he refers to current leaders. But in 13:7, they are told to consider (Greek = "to look at again and again") the result or outcome of these past leaders' way of life, implying that they successfully finished their course. Considering how well these men lived, we are to imitate their faith, which implies both their faith and conduct. But the author wants us to see that faith in Christ (chapter 11) is the basis for Christian conduct, so that our behavior is not just outward conformity to rules or rituals. As Paul puts it (Gal. 5:6), "For in Christ Jesus nei-

ther circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything, but faith working through love.”

These men “spoke the word of God” to the Hebrews. God’s Word is the only source for sound teaching. Yet we live in a day when very few pastors devote themselves to teaching God’s Word in a systematic way. Many evangelical churches, in an attempt to reach the unchurched (“seekers”), have abandoned teaching through the Bible verse by verse, for fear that some of the difficult doctrines may offend people. They aim the church service at giving the “customers” what they want: topical messages on how to have a happy life. They avoid talking about sin or judgment or anything controversial. In many cases, their messages could have come out of *Reader’s Digest* rather than the Bible! You should evaluate any teaching by the criteria, “Does it explain the text of Scripture in its context and apply it to my life?”

One other application comes out of verse 7: *Read the biographies of godly Christians*. I’m not talking about the biography of some sports hero or movie star who claims to be a Christian. Read about the Reformers or other great preachers, who proclaimed God’s truth in previous times. Read about missionaries who braved all sorts of difficult conditions to take the gospel to remote places. I have gained more from reading such biographies than from any other source outside of the Bible. (I have a bibliography, “Reading Christian Biographies,” in print or on the church web site. There is also on the web site an article I wrote on the benefits of reading biographies, “Mining for Gold.”) But we must move on to the main antidote to false teaching:

3. To avoid being carried away by false teaching, hold firmly to the centrality of Jesus Christ and His sacrificial death.

Verse 8 seems out of context, but I believe the author put it here in a somewhat abrupt manner to make a point:

- A. Godly teachers come and go, but Jesus Christ remains the same forever (13:8).

That is the point when the verse is joined to the previous context. Sometimes people become so enamored with some godly man or his teaching that they are devastated when that man dies. The author is not diminishing the value of sound teachers, but he is

saying that after the teachers die, Jesus Christ remains solid, steady, and unchanging. Verse 8 also relates to the following context, in the sense that the unchanging Jesus Christ and His sacrifice for our sins is the perpetual antidote to false teaching. "Jesus Christ, and Him crucified" (1 Cor. 2:2) was the sum and substance of Paul's teaching. That must be our focus, also.

In chapter 1, the author cited from Psalm 102 some verses that referred to God, but he applies them to Jesus Christ. In contrast to the earth and the heavens, he states (1:11-12),

"They will perish, but You remain; and they all will become old like a garment, and like a mantle You will roll them up; like a garment they will also be changed, but You are the same, and Your years will not come to an end."

F. F. Bruce (*Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* [Eerdmans], p. 395) points out other instances of words that were originally addressed to the God of Israel, but are "taken over and applied to Jesus without any sense of incongruity." He adds (pp. 395-396),

*Yesterday* Jesus "offered up prayers and supplications with strong crying and tears unto him that was able to save him from death" (5:7); *today* He represents His people in the presence of God, a high priest who is able to sympathize with them in their weakness, because He was "in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin" (4:15); *for ever* He lives, this same Jesus, "to make intercession for them" (7:25). His help, His grace, His power, His guidance are permanently at His people's disposal; why then should they lose heart?

Many sermons have been preached on this wonderful verse, but we must move on:

B. God's grace through Jesus Christ is at the heart of sound doctrine (13:9).

"... it is good for the heart to be strengthened by grace..." Invariably, false teaching goes astray on the doctrine of God's grace. The error of the Judaizers, whom Paul confronted in Galatians, was to add the need to be circumcised to the doctrine of salvation by grace through faith alone. They could have argued that circumcision was a God-given command that predated the law. But Paul said that to add circumcision or anything else to the gospel of

God's grace is to incur eternal damnation (Gal. 1:6-9)! To add human works or merit or indulgences or penance to Christ's death on the cross as necessary for salvation is to commit the Galatian heresy. As the Reformers clearly taught, we are saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. We dare not add human works to God's all-sufficient grace.

But this idea of works salvation is ingrained in the fallen human heart. I've talked with people who have sat under my preaching for months, and when I ask them why God should let them into heaven, they reply, "Well, I've always tried to be a good person and not hurt anyone." God's grace means that He chose us totally *apart from* and *in spite of* anything in us (Rom. 11:5-6). Even saving faith is His gift (Phil. 1:29). As Paul wrote (Eph. 2:8-9), "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast." So *all* of our salvation, including our faith, is God's gift according to His *unmerited* favor.

Thus the author shows the centrality of Jesus Christ and His sacrificial death by showing that He is unchanged and that His grace is at the heart of sound doctrine. He goes on to show a third aspect of the centrality of Christ:

- C. The Christian faith centers on Jesus Christ and His death on the cross (13:10-12).

These verses are not easy to understand, although the overall point is fairly clear. He is repeating the truth that he has emphasized before, that Christ is superior to the Jewish sacrificial system, because He fulfilled it. Probably the Jews that were trying to draw the Hebrew Christians back to Judaism were saying, "We still have the altar in the temple where we offer sacrifices as our people have done since the days of Moses. But, you Christians have no such altar. So how can you say that Christianity is superior to Judaism when you abandon such a central thing as the altar?"

To answer this taunt, the author replies, "We have an altar from which those who serve the tabernacle have no right to eat." "Serve" means "worshipful service" and could refer to the priests, who offered the sacrifices, or to the Jewish worshipers who brought sacrifices to the temple. The author is saying that as long

as the Jews brought their sacrifices to the temple, they were missing God's true altar, namely, His Son who gave Himself as the complete and final sacrifice for our sins. We who have trusted in Him for salvation feed on Him by faith as our true food and true drink (as Jesus taught in John 6:48-58).

Then (13:11), he takes an analogy from the Jewish sin offering, particularly on the Day of Atonement. The worshipers were allowed to eat some sacrifices, but they were not permitted to eat the sin offering. After the blood was sprinkled on the altar, the carcass had to be taken outside of the camp and burned. The author then (13:12) applies this to Jesus, who "suffered outside the gate," shedding His blood "that He might sanctify the people." (Sanctify here is used, as it was in 9:13 and 10:10, 14, to refer to cleansing us from sin at the time of our salvation.)

Thus his point is that Jesus Christ and His death on the cross is our altar, far superior to the Jewish altar, because He fulfilled it. In a spiritual, not material, way we feed on Him by faith, even as the Jewish priests used to feed on some of the sacrifices. But unless a person abandoned Judaism and its literal sacrifices and trusted in Christ as God's supreme and final sacrifice, he had no right to come to the Christian "altar," which is Christ.

It is a perversion of these verses to construct physical "altars" in Christian churches and to offer the body and blood of Christ as a perpetual sacrifice, as is done in the Roman Catholic mass. Communion is a commemoration of the once-and-for-all sacrifice of Christ on the cross (Heb. 10:10, 14). He does not need to be offered again. Our altar and our feeding on Him are spiritual, not physical, and are by faith in His finished work on the cross.

D. Jesus Christ demands exclusive allegiance (13:13).

The author applies this by saying, "Let us go out to Him outside the camp, bearing His reproach." To the original readers the message was clear: You must leave Judaism to follow Jesus Christ. You can't hang onto your old religion and just "add Jesus" to the mix. You must leave the old and turn exclusively to Jesus, even if it means suffering reproach.

Paul wrote (1 Cor. 1:18), "For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it

is the power of God." A few verses later (1:23-24), he added, "but we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block and to Gentiles foolishness, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God."

People are not offended if you remove the cross from Christianity. It's a good system of morals. Everyone can get behind good works and loving others. But the cross confronts and offends human pride. Sinners don't like to hear about the necessity of shed blood. But without Christ's shed blood, without the cross outside the camp of man's religion of works, there is no salvation.

Thus the author has shown that false teaching is a perpetual danger for God's people. Imitating the faith of godly leaders is one safeguard against it. The main antidote, though, is to hold firmly to the centrality of Jesus Christ and His sacrificial death. But he adds a final antidote, which is also a reminder of earlier lessons:

4. To avoid being carried away by false teaching, hold firmly to the promise of heaven.

The connection with 13:13 is, "If you should bear reproach for the sake of Christ, remember that it is *His* reproach. Our reward is not here, but in heaven." So he continues, "For here we do not have a lasting city, but we are seeking the city which is to come." The Jews boasted in Jerusalem as the center of the earth as far as worshiping God went. Perhaps the Jews were trying to entice the Hebrew Christians back into the Jewish fold by saying, "We have Jerusalem, but you have no such glorious city!" The author says, "Oh, but we do have a city! Ours is the same city that Abraham and the patriarchs were seeking, that heavenly city that God prepared for them and us" (11:13-16).

Much false teaching puts the focus on the present, or on false claims about heaven. Islam, for example, promises suicide martyrs a better life in heaven, with beautiful virgins to satisfy the man's lusts. Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons also have false views about heaven. Other false teachers say, in effect, "Forget about heaven. What good is religion if it doesn't give you the good life here and now?" The "health and wealth" heresy is of this sort.

Biblical Christianity clearly offers the peace and joy of knowing God here and now. We can rejoice that our sins are forgiven

and we can enjoy all of the good things that God provides in this life (1 Tim. 6:17). As believers, all things belong to us (1 Cor. 3:22; 2 Cor. 6:10). And yet Paul also wrote, "If we have hoped in Christ in this life only, we are of all men most to be pitied" (1 Cor. 15:19). Hold firmly to the hope of being with the risen Christ Himself in heaven, and you will keep yourself from many errors.

### Conclusion

To recap: Sound doctrine always is founded on the word of God (13:7). It centers on and exalts the unchanging Christ (13:8). It revels in God's grace, not in any human works for salvation (13:9). It feeds on the death of Christ on behalf of our sins (13:10-12). It separates from all that do not exalt Christ and it glories in the reproach of the cross (13:13). It puts all its hopes in the rewards of heaven, not of this life (13:14).

As editor of the *Emporia Gazette*, William White received many articles from aspiring writers, but he returned most of them to their authors with rejection slips. One disappointed and bitter author wrote to White, "Sir, you sent back a story of mine, but I know that you did not read it. As a test, I pasted together pages 19 and 20, but the manuscript came back with those pages still stuck together. So I know that you turned down my article without even reading it."

White sent a brief reply: "Dear Madam, At breakfast when I open an egg, I don't have to eat it all to determine if it's bad." (From, "Our Daily Bread," [3/93].)

You don't have to wade through all of the religious writings in the world to tell if they're good or bad. What does it say about Jesus Christ? What does it teach about the way of salvation? If it proclaims Jesus as eternal God in human flesh and faith in His sacrifice as the only way of salvation, it is sound. Don't be carried away by anything else. Let your heart be established in God's grace.

## Discussion Questions

1. How can we know which doctrines are essential and which doctrines we can allow different views of?
2. How can we know which Christian groups or denominations to work with? Where do we draw lines of separation?
3. What is the biblical relationship between faith and good works? Why is it essential to insist on salvation by grace through faith alone, apart from works?
4. Why does the message of the cross cause offense? Should we in any way try to soften this offense? If so, how? If not, why not?

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