

# FRAUDULENT FAITH

by Ray C. Stedman

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Chapter four of First Timothy begins with dramatic and intriguing words. The apostle says:

**Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by giving heed to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons, {1 Tim 4:1RSV}**

As a young Christian, in my early 20's, I remember reading that verse in the King James version, which uses the phrase, "the latter times," rather than, "the later times," was taught that this meant that before the Lord's return, in the last days, there was to be a departure from the faith, a great apostasy within the church. That was the time of the fundamentalist-modernist controversy. The fact that so many were then turning toward a liberal Christianity was regarded as fulfillment of the great apostasy that is predicted by the Spirit, and many church leaders at that time were saying so.

As we draw near to the end, before the return of the Lord, there may come an increasing departure from the faith, but I do not think this passage is talking about any one great departure. In fact, other Scriptures suggest that the departure from the faith will occur at the time of the appearance of the man whom Paul, in Second Thessalonians, calls "the man of sin" {2 Th 2:3 KJV}, the so-called "antichrist" {1 Jn 2:18}, who will lead this great departure from the faith.

This verse in First Timothy, however, is more properly understood when it is translated, "in succeeding seasons there will be many departing from the faith" -- i.e., this is something that is going to go on, the apostle is suggesting, throughout the whole course of Christian history, in succeeding seasons of time. Just as there are several seasons in a calendar year, so in the calendar of history God has seasons for human events -- seasons of war, seasons of peace, seasons of unrest in society, when everything seems to be torn apart (we are going through such a season now); seasons of discovery, when the human mind breaks through into new vistas of truth, geographical discoveries, scientific discoveries; seasons of retrenchment, when everything seems to quiet down; and, as the apostle clearly says here, "seasons of deceit," when error breaks forth afresh; like a fountain, it seems to gush out a whole new spectrum of untruth. I have lived long enough to have seen several such seasons.

These seasons of deceit were predicted by the Holy Spirit, we do not know how. Perhaps Paul learned this in some of those direct visions and visits from Jesus himself. Perhaps it came through the prophetic ministry of some of the New Testament prophets. At any rate, the Spirit had precisely stated that there would be succeeding seasons of deceit.

Many of you may welcome the view of Archbishop Trench, one of the great teachers of the church. He explains this word as it appears in the original Greek, in this way:

The seasons are the joints or articulations in the times, the critical, epoch-making periods, foreordained of God, when all that has been slowly, and often without observation, ripening through long ages, is mature and comes to the birth in grand, decisive events which constitute at once the close of one period and the commencement of another.

In the last part of the 19th century, there was a pronounced season of deceit, when new cults that have occupied the scene ever since emerged here in America. Mormonism was born then; Jehovah's Witnesses came into being during that latter part of the 19th century; Christian Science emerged. All of these claimed to be Christian, yet they distorted biblical Christianity. That period in the 19th century was followed by a period of quiet, when no new cults emerged. Error was being taught but no new organizations were formed.

Suddenly, in the mid-60's, it all broke loose again. A torrent of error began to flood our churches and the

media. The Moonies came into existence under the Korean leader, Sun Myung Moon; the Hare Krishna, those young people in saffron robes with shaved heads, started appearing in airports, passing out literature and pinning flowers to lapels; Scientology, with its strange and cruel doctrines, was born; Transcendental Meditation came into popularity then.

Here the apostle is explaining that strange phenomenon to us. He says these things will occur in successive seasons of time. During those times, Paul says, many will depart from the truth, depart from the faith as it is presented in the apostolic Scriptures.

These groups make their appeal in various ways: some appeal to the emotions, some to the intellect, some to the will, to the pride of mankind. But they all have one common characteristic. This characteristic is indicated in this passage by the way the apostle moves from the central truth of Christianity, "the mystery of wholeness" (the person of our Lord and his work) expressed in Chapter 3, Verse 16, to the sharp and stark contrast of this "departure from the faith." Thus Paul seems strongly to suggest that the central focus of all error is to present a different Jesus; that is the key mark of deceit.

If you want to know whether a group you are listening to, or are in touch with, is preaching and teaching true Christianity, ask yourself: "What do they say about Jesus? Who is he? Is he God appearing as man? Did he come in the flesh? Is he the Savior who has in himself accomplished all that God requires for the redemption of humanity?" Ask yourself, "What part does the blood of Jesus play in this teaching? What is said about his Person?"

The central deviation of all religious error is a negative testimony to the centrality of Christ in the universe. Even the unseen forces of life know that Jesus is central. Jesus is truly Lord, so the thrust of error is to attack him.

This is why in a university like Stanford it is possible to teach Buddhism, or some other teaching, and find it widely approved and supported by the faculty and the administration. Someone told me this morning that he took a course at Stanford University on Druids and Druidism and the religion of King Arthur. It became evident through the course that the teacher believed these things and was actively propagating a belief in Druidism -- and nobody objected. But when Jesus, when true Christianity, is presented, there immediately is sharp and subtle opposition against it. This is what the apostle is pointing out.

Paul reveals the ultimate origin of these cults as coming from "deceitful spirits." Men do not invent errors like this. They come through men (Paul is going to say something about that in a moment) but the actual origin of these distortions of reality about our Lord are coming from deceitful spirits, lying spirits, whose very nature is to lie.

When we compare this teaching with other parts of Scripture we learn that these are fallen angels. At a time even before the world was created, these angels followed their leader, Lucifer (Son of the Morning), highest of the angels of God, into a rebellion against the will and purposes of God. Thus they became identified with Lucifer's nature, which Jesus himself informs us is that of a "liar and a murderer," {John 8:44}.

Yet that being, that strange, malevolent, being who is by nature a liar and by intent a murderer, is called everywhere in Scripture, "the god of this world" {2 Cor 4:4}. That is a frightening thought. The god which the world ignorantly, and innocently, in many ways, follows blindly, like an animal being led to the slaughter, is a murderer and a liar. These hosts of spiritual beings, which Paul recognizes in Ephesians 6 as the ones with whom we Christians wrestle -- "Not flesh and blood but principalities and powers, wicked spirits in high places, the rulers of the darkness of this world" {cf, Eph 6:12 KJV} -- are the very ones who originate these false and twisted ideas about Jesus.

We learn from Scripture that these spirits have access to the inner thoughts and feelings of men, including Christians. We are all affected by strange urges, feelings, and desires that arise within us. But those desires do not always originate with us. We need to learn that all the thoughts that cross our minds are not necessarily coming from us. Those thoughts are what Paul calls, "fiery darts of the wicked one" {Eph 6:16 KJV}, against which faith must continually wrestle. These strange, sinister, unseen beings who have access to the minds and

hearts of men, mislead and misdirect by what seems to us and to many to be logical and essential things that human nature should accept and even require. All that becomes expanded and supported by intricate arguments and rationalizations until it takes the form of what Paul calls, doctrines, i.e., formally reasoned presentations. But Paul clearly calls these, "doctrines of demons."

These doctrines are not always overtly religious either. What Paul is talking about in that 1st century day is clearly religious, and he is warning Timothy about it, but these "doctrines of demons" oftentimes come cleverly disguised as scientific theories, psychological approaches, or even economic theories. But the result of them is always the same: they confuse, they mislead, they distort reality; and they end, ultimately, in the destruction of human life. One way or another, that is the devil's aim.

- Take, for instance, humanism. This is probably the most widespread philosophy of our day. All the great institutions of our country, such as Stanford University, are almost visibly dedicated to the propagation of secular humanism. Humanism says that man is his own god, there is no being greater than man, we are able by our intellect and by our technological abilities to control the universe to our purposes, that this is the whole purpose of life and nothing is greater, etc. This exaltation of man, this worshipping at the shrine of human wisdom and human knowledge is a "doctrine of demons." It is not reality; it denies reality. It denies the greatest fact of the universe, that there is a Creator from whom we came and to whom we are ultimately accountable. It is a doctrine that is widespread, propagated by lying spirits.
- I believe evolution also to be such a doctrine. Evolution finds recognition and honor in the scientific community, yet hardly a shred of evidence links evolution to empirical facts of the material universe. Yet evolution has been accepted, propagated widely, and taught in all our schools as though it were truth. When compared to the actual findings of scientific endeavor it can never find support. It is a doctrine of demons.
- Some thirty or forty years ago the idea that we could spend our way out of poverty into prosperity -- deficit spending -- took root in our nation. That too is a doctrine of demons. It ought to be recognized immediately as false. We ought to laugh it out of court, but it is widely accepted; political movements and parties have it in their platforms. Yet the end result of this philosophy is that we are burdened with a terrible load of debt that crushes and destroys us. It sets one family against another, resulting in violence and disturbance, and ultimately death, in society. That is a doctrine of demons.

We are not engaged in a Sunday School party. We are in a deep and abiding war that is being fought with spiritual weapons. We are up against these spiritual "principalities and powers," these "rulers of the darkness of this world."

Paul narrows this discussion to religious error particularly. He says the doctrines of demons in Ephesus were making their appearance through human beings whom he says, in Verse 2, are:

**... pretentious liars whose consciences are seared, {1 Tim 4:2 RSV}**

Ultimately these errors come into human knowledge through human beings. It looks like people thought them up, but the apostle tells us they did not. People themselves are deceived victims of a propaganda that has been placed in their minds by these invisible beings.

The apostle suggests two things about these human propagators of error that are always identifying marks:

1. First, they deal in pretensions. These people come to us with lofty-sounding claims. They appear to offer something extremely attractive and alluring, something that everybody would want. They make claims for themselves as having special prerogatives as teachers of truth. They have access to information that is denied the rest of us, they say; they have a special pipeline, a privileged relationship to deity, that the rest of us do not have. These are pretensions, the apostle says. They are merely claims people make.

2. Along with this these people are always characterized by some degree of a "seared conscience." That means they no longer have moral scruples; they no longer can be restrained by appeals to their conscience. They will stop at nothing to accomplish their end; they are without compassion or mercy. They become cruel, voracious, impossible to stop. Though they may veil it with a velvet glove, behind their teaching is an iron fist.

Yet the word "seared" clearly suggests that there was a time, perhaps, when these people's consciences were active. When they began they probably were simply egotists, men and women who were convinced they had abilities and powers beyond what they really possessed. They were out to get ahead. This is a widespread phenomenon in human society; we all suffer from it to some degree.

If you read the life of Adolph Hitler you discover that, as a young man, there were many admirable things about him. He was intelligent, knowledgeable about life; he had good morals, respect for the church, all these things, but he was an egotist. He always had to be dominant; he had to be in charge of everything he had anything to do with. Gradually, feeding that insatiable maw of egoism, he dropped his moral scruples, until at last his egoism climaxed in the killing of six million Jews, just because they were in his way.

A seared conscience is what the apostle says becomes characteristic of men who give themselves to religious error. What a tremendous revelation along this line was given to us here in this area just a few years ago in the story of Jim Jones and the People's Temple! This was the story of a man who began with certain restraints and moral scruples. Nevertheless, by feeding his own ego he soon lost all those scruples, and ended up in that terrible scene in the jungles of Guyana.

Paul says the specific methods of these 1st century cultists are that (Verse 3):

**... [they] forbid marriage and enjoin abstinence from foods which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth. {1 Tim 4:3 RSV}**

One of the strange marks of religious error is that it is so often accompanied by ascetic practices, i.e., denial of certain normal, natural human enjoyments. One of them is marriage. A number of groups have been characterized through the years as forbidding marriage to their adherents, with the idea that sex is unclean, and those who indulge in it are certainly less dedicated than those who refrain.

Foods come under this heading too. I do not mean to imply at all that there is anything wrong with diets. It is obvious that some people need dieting. There is nothing wrong with studies on nutrition, proper eating, etc. Nevertheless, through the course of human history there has been a strange affinity between food restrictions, food fads, and religious error.

The reason is that at the heart of asceticism is a conviction that self-denial somehow pleases God. It can be very earnest, very sincere. Often Christians fall into this error in their early Christian days, thinking that if they deny themselves in some way God is going to be pleased, and their status in his sight will be advanced. That is why some Christians love to get up early in the morning, or memorize hundreds of verses of Scripture, or pray on their knees for long periods of time, etc. These practices, which in themselves are not wrong, nevertheless become wrong because their motive (that of gaining God's favor by self-denial) is wrong.

This is a good example of the subtlety by which error begins. When a deviation enters a stream of truth, at the first point of deviation, error looks like truth; it is very hard to see it as error. This is what has misled so many people. They never recognize error until they became engrossed in it. Down the line they begin to suspect that it is error, but by that time they are already hooked. This is what many cultists use today to gain followers, and hold them in bondage.

There is a difference between self-denial and denying self. Jesus said, "If anyone will come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me," {Luke 9:23}. That is denying self. But that is easily confused with self-denial, which says, "I will give up this thing or that thing." "I will not do this or stay out of that, because I want to reveal my dedication." "I want to be admired for my zeal." "I want to gain a special

mark of favor before God." "I want to influence God to do something for me in return." That motivation renders it no longer denying self, but self-denial.

How subtle the differences are! Self-denial is an attempt to earn favor apart from faith in the gift of righteousness which makes us wholly acceptable before God right at the very beginning of our Christian life; while denying self is a refusal to heed those silken arguments of the inner ego that makes its appeal to us to show how good we are by giving up something, or to insist on having some right that we are defending.

"You are not your own," First Corinthians 6 says {1 Cor 6:19b RSV}. To acknowledge that is to deny self in a proper and true Christian way: I do not belong to myself any more. I am not in charge of my life. Another is my Lord, not me. Another has the right to the final word as to whom I marry, where I go, what I do and how I behave. I am not my own. Acknowledging that is to deny that insistent claim of the flesh within: "You are your own. Don't let anybody tell you what to do. Don't let anybody take that position." That is what the Lord Jesus calls us to deny; that is a true denying of self. This other is self-denial, which becomes an expression of the pride and egoism of the flesh.

Paul answers these teachings in very simple, very beautiful words. He goes back to the doctrine of creation, saying that these teachers.

**... enjoin abstinence from foods which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth. For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving; for then it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer. {1 Tim 4:3b-5 RSV}**

Paul says it is simple to handle these strange pressures and urges of the flesh within us, by cultivating the habit of thanksgiving. See everything coming to you as a gift that you have no right to, but it is yours by the grace and mercy of God.

Thanksgiving is a recognition that you do not possess anything in yourself, that everything comes as a gift from a loving God. When you do that you recognize two wonderful things: First, that God gave these things to our race for our enjoyment and enrichment. He did not give them that we might practice denial of them; he wanted us to have them.

But God wanted us to have them in ways that do not feed our ego and minister to our self-importance; and the only way that we can do so is to receive them with thanksgiving. That is what "for then it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer," means. Consecration means to put something to its proper use, and thus to render it safe for you to use.

The habit of giving thanks accomplishes that. When you take everything as a gift of God -- your life, your breath, your family, your friends, your clothing, your food, your circumstances, your trials, your pressures, your problems -- and thank God for them, then they are rendered safe. You no longer are the king on the throne, dictating to the rest of the world how to behave; you are a humble recipient of the gift from the Father's hand.

I love to see families giving thanks around the table before they eat. Food is the basic element of life. We are to give thanks for our daily bread because,

"Back of the bread is the snowy flour,  
and back of the flour the mill.  
Back of the mill is the field of wheat,  
the rain and the Father's will."

That is why we thank God. Everything comes from his hand.

Let me share with you these words from a young man of thirty-two years of age whose wife fell ill. As she slept by his side one morning he mused in these words:

She may die before morning, but I have been with her for four years. Four years! There is no way I can feel cheated if I didn't have her another day. I didn't deserve her for one minute. And I may die before morning! What I must do is die now. I must accept the justice of death and the injustice of life. I have lived a good life, longer than many, better than most. Tony died when he was twenty. I have had thirty-two years. I couldn't ask for another day. What did I do to deserve birth? It was a gift. I am me. That is a miracle. I have no right to a single minute. But some are given a single hour, and yet I have had thirty-two years.

Few can choose when they will die, but I choose to accept death now. As of this moment I give up my right to live and I give up my right to her life. And so it is morning. I have been given another day. another day to hear and breathe and smell and walk and love and glory. I am alive for another day.

On the wall of one of my rooms at home is a little plaque that says:

There is no thought worth thinking  
Unless it is the thought of God.  
There is no sight worth seeing  
Unless it is seen through his eyes.  
There is no breath worth breathing  
Without giving thanks to him  
Whose very breath it is.

What paupers we are in ourselves! What rich people we are by the gift and the grace of God; and what we do to preserve sanity when we utter thanksgiving in God's name!

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Title: Fraudulent Faith  
By: Ray C. Stedman  
Series: Studies in First Timothy  
Scripture: 1 Tim 4:1-5  
Message No: 11  
Catalog No: 3774  
Date: Unknown Date in 1981

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