

Peter's Epistles #39

False Teachers, False Teaching, and False Organizations

A Preface to 2nd Peter Chapter Two

(also available on-line at ichthys.com)

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Introduction:

To begin, we saw that the first chapter of this epistle was all about reminding the recipients of the absolute and primary importance of the Word of God in every aspect of our spiritual and earthly lives. An important corollary to that first principle is the necessity of avoiding false teaching and false teachers, and being able to identify both so as to be able to do so. This is a topic of critical importance for believers of every era, because falling away from Jesus Christ is always a possibility here in the devil's world for any Christian who becomes lackadaisical about the truth of the Word of God (2Chron.15:2; Matt.7:24-27; 10:33; 13:20-21; 24:9-13; Mk.4:16-17; Lk.6:46-49; 8:13; 14:34-35; Jn.15:1-6; Rom.11:17-23; 1Cor.6:9-10; 10:6-12; 15:2; 2Cor.13:5; Gal.5:19-21; 6:7-8; Eph.5:3-7; Col.1:21-23; 1Thes.3:2-5; 1Tim.1:5-6; 1:18-19; 4:1; 6:9; 2Tim.2:11-13; Heb.2:1-3; 3:6; 3:12-19; 10:35-39; 12:25; Jas.1:14-16; 2Pet.2:18-22; 1Jn.2:18-23; 5:16-18; 2Jn.1:8-9; Rev.3:15-16; 14:9-13; cf. Dan.8:10-12; Lk.22:32; Jn.3:18-19; 6:47; Acts 20:29-31; Rom.2:7; 13:11; 1Cor.5:4-5; 13:5; Phil.2:12; 3:11-14; 3:18; 2Thes.2:3; 1Tim.4:16; 6:20-21; Heb.6:9; 1Pet.1:3-5; 1:9; 2:2; 2Pet.1:10-11; Jude 1:12; 1:19; Rev.3:10; 12:4).¹ Lack of attention to the truth taught in a substantive way inevitably opens an individual believer up to what is false – for the heart abhors a vacuum (Rom.1:18-32).

(17) So I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord, that you no longer live as the gentiles do in futility of mind, (18) darkened in thought and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the hardening of their hearts. (19) Having lost all sensitivity [to God's truth], they have given themselves over to sensuality to indulge in every kind of impurity, with a continual lust for more.
Ephesians 4:17-19

Given that the subtlety, ubiquity and power of false teaching will expand exponentially once the Tribulation begins, leading to the Great Apostasy where fully one third of lukewarm believers alive at the time will fall away from the truth to follow antichrist as being *the* Christ, the importance of being able to recognize false teachers and false teaching so as to reject them vigorously has never been greater. Since Peter also devotes a large measure of space and zeal in this second chapter to warning us against false teachers and false teaching, placing it directly alongside the importance of taking in the Word of God covered in chapter one, it seems fitting

¹ See [Peter #27](#) under "Positional Security", and [Coming Tribulation 4](#), under "The Perseverance of the Holy Ones".

here, before beginning chapter two, to make a brief foray into this corollary principle: the problem of false teaching and false teachers.²

1. Key Passages on False Teaching and False Teachers

(1b) Now [the serpent] said to the woman, "Did God *really* tell you not to eat from any tree in the garden?" (2) Then the woman said to the serpent, "We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden. (3) But from the fruit of the tree which is in the middle of the garden, God has said that we must not eat from it, and that we must not touch it, lest we die". (4) "You will surely *not* die," the serpent said to the woman. (5) "For God knows that when you eat of it, your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God (or "gods"), knowing good and evil."

Genesis 3:1b-5

Comment: We have covered this important passage in great detail elsewhere, and the reader is encouraged to consult those links.³ We shall note here only that the devil's system of false teaching and his empowerment of false teachers are on full display in this passage, right from the beginning of the human race. In terms of the chosen vehicle for his lies, Satan selected the most familiar possible vessel, the serpent, who seems to have been a particularly well-loved pet of our first parents. Similarly, false teachers always present themselves as "angels of light" even though they serve the prince of darkness (2Cor.11:14-15). In terms of the mode of attack, the devil is always keen to "open a dialogue" as he did with Eve, suggesting by its very nature that the truth is somehow open to interpretation and therefore negotiable. Once the dialogue begins, Satan and his agents are then quick to undermine and contradict the truth, often in very subtle ways. In this instance, the devil, possessing the hapless serpent, directly refuted the Lord God's warning about the consequences of disobedience in such a deliberate and authoritative way, that Eve could not believe he might be lying to her. This tactic, the so-called "big lie", is well-enough known today, but believers still should not underestimate the inherent power of it. That is particularly the case where, as here, there may be a semblance of truth to the bold statement: Adam and Eve did not physically die at once upon eating the fruit of the tree of knowing good and evil – but they did die spiritually, and indeed they also did in due course die physically as a result (an eventuality which would have sealed their fate unto eternal damnation, absent the gracious sacrifice of Jesus Christ). And one other important thing to note about this passage: the devil always makes promises he never intends to keep. Eve thought to become "like a god" by heeding this false teaching, but all she received along with Adam was spiritual death (leading to physical death resulting in eternal death absent salvation) and expulsion from paradise in the bargain.

"Beware of the false prophets who are going to come in among you in sheep's clothing,

² Readers of this ministry will be aware that an entire installment of the Basics Series has already been devoted to the subject of Peter's first chapter of this letter, namely, the nature and importance of the Word of God: BB 7: Bibliology.

³ In Read Your Bible, under "Cult Characteristics"; and in BB 3A: Anthropology, section IV.2, "The Fall".

but underneath they are ravenous wolves."

Matthew 7:15

Comment: Our Lord sums up the character and methodology of these sorts in a most pithy and penetrating way. False teachers insert themselves into the group surreptitiously by pretending to be "of the flock". They mask their true character by donning in rank hypocrisy the appearance and outward behavior of genuine believers. The truth is that they have only stolen into the fellowship in order to exploit the sheep in horrible and malicious ways. Such men pose a serious danger especially to the naturally more vulnerable of the flock (who are so on account of their youth or spiritual immaturity as new believers), but also to any believer who has not given due diligence to their personal spiritual growth over the years. Any and all who perceive this threat should take care not only for themselves but also for other members of the congregation, a duty which falls most heavily upon the pastor-teacher whose job it is to protect the flock.

The danger coming from such individuals must not be minimized. Wolves kill and eat sheep. False teachers likewise exploit believers who fall under their sway and ultimately destroy them by taking all they have – even their eternal life, if the believers in question are foolish enough to continue with their false teaching all the way unto its logical end: rejection of all that is true, including Jesus Christ, our very life (e.g., 1Jn.2:23).

(29) "For I know that after my departure fierce wolves will enter in among you who will not spare the flock. (30) And even from among your own number [of elders] men will rise up and speak twisted things in order to entice the disciples (i.e., believers) to follow them. (31) So be alert, remembering that for three years I did not stop warning each of you [about these dangers] day and night with my tears."

Acts 20:29-31

Comment: Paul makes use of the same analogy in the verses above as our Lord did in the previous passage. Here we likewise find false teachers infiltrating the churches, fierce individuals who care not at all about the flock and have come merely to exploit believers foolish enough to give them a hearing. Equally disturbing is the revelation that some of these false teachers will actually spring from the churches themselves, either nominal believers who fall away from Christ to pursue their own fantasies, or individuals who were never believers in the first place, disciples of Satan who joined in fellowship for the sake of some perceived advantage, and who at length styled themselves as "teachers" in their own right, seeking to lead away members of the fellowship to follow themselves, the better to exploit them after ripping them from the safety of a genuine Christian church or ministry.

It should also not be overlooked that Paul saw these dangers coming from the very beginning, and had been warning the believers in Ephesus of them continually "for three years" (compare Moses' testimony to the Israelites: Deut.31:14-29). The fact that Paul anticipates these threats – and intimates that they will have some devious success – is a testament to the power of the lie when it falls on fertile ground, namely, the hearts of believers who are weak in faith on account of a lack of commitment to spiritual growth and a lack of respect for the truth of the Word of God and those who teach it truthfully.

(17) I entreat you, brothers, to mark those who are creating conflicts and pitfalls contrary to the doctrine you have learned, and stay away from them. (18) For such men do not serve our Lord Christ, but their own stomachs, deceiving innocent hearts with their fancy sermons.

Romans 16:17-18

Comment: A key characteristic of false teachers is their tendency to disturb the harmony between believers which should be the rule in any local church or Christian group. People being people, of course there will inevitably be disagreements and personality conflicts, but Christians genuinely committed to the Lord and to the mission of spiritual growth, progress and production He has given us, will subordinate a good portion of our own egos and personal likes and dislikes in Christian love for the sake of unity – not going to the point of compromising with the truth or of allowing themselves to be bullied into things they are not comfortable with or know are wrong, but putting up with the weak and immature as best they can in order to avoid placing stumbling blocks in the way of weaker believers when it comes to "disputable matters" (Rom.14:1; cf. 1Cor.13:4-7). Deliberately and recklessly producing divisions between brethren and placing "pitfalls" in their way as a result of introducing teachings which are divisive (because they are untrue even if attractive) is a hallmark of false teachers who are to be avoided outside of the fellowship and ejected from it if they have managed to insinuate their way into it – even if (or perhaps especially if) their teaching and speaking is very attractive (1Cor.5:9-13).

(13) For men of this sort are false apostles, workers of guile, masquerading as apostles of Christ. (14) And it is no wonder, for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light. (15) So it comes as no surprise that his servants also masquerade as servants of righteousness. Their end will be according to their deeds.

2nd Corinthians 11:13-15

Comment: The men "of this sort" referred to by Paul in the passage above were "teachers of the Law" who came to Corinth and attempted to take over the community of believers there by teaching all manner of false things, the supposed need for gentile Christians to be circumcised, for one, going so far as to claim that this was necessary for salvation. This is essentially "preaching a different Jesus" as Paul points out to the Corinthians (2Cor.11:4), because it constitutes a different "gospel" from the true one proclaimed to them by Paul through the Holy Spirit (cf. Gal.1:6). We see from this passage and the chapter as a whole that anyone who teaches what is false does so out of selfish personal interest in order to benefit financially, whereas Paul, a true apostle of Christ, refused to take any support from the Corinthians so as to make the contrast between the truth and the lie as crystal clear as possible (2Cor.11:7-12). Compromising the truth for money is the epitome of selling out the gospel. Doing so only advantages the devil and his plans even as it leads believers into spiritual shipwreck. False teachers may be wonderfully persuasive and may ooze charisma – these men for example appeared to some in Corinth as superior to Paul in many ways – but though they appear even as "angels of light", in fact they are devils and they serve the devil. True teachers serve Jesus Christ, are committed to the truth and would never do anything to compromise the truth. False teachers serve Satan, are committed to evil and would do anything for the sake of their personal well-being in service to their master the devil. And that is true even if their sermons are inspiring, their persons are impressive, and they have attracted a large following which meets in

some impressive building. But the truth of the Word of God cuts through all such masquerades like the sharpest two-edged sword – for everyone who desires the truth before all else.

[Let us grow spiritually] . . . that we may no longer be immature, swept off-course and carried headlong by every breeze of so-called teaching that emanates from the trickery of men in their readiness to do anything to cunningly work their deceit.

Ephesians 4:14

Comment: We have studied this passage and its broader context many times before in explaining spiritual growth. This verse sets that growth process against the backdrop of the alternative: for those who are *not* growing, dangerous rocks and shoals abound. The world is full of false teachers all too eager to lead believers "off course". This they accomplish through the blustery ill-wind of false teaching, a forceful wind for those who are not solidly set on the right course, and the shipwreck of their faith is often the result (1Tim.1:19). Scripture assures us here that such false teaching, deliberately designed to be appealing (for reasons we shall rehearse below) to those who are drifting, is in fact nothing but trickery, deceit skillfully plied by cunning agents of the devil who have absolutely no scruples when it comes to leading believers astray for their own gain in Satan's service. Only serious attention to the truth will suffice to avoid being distracted and led off course by false teachers and their false doctrine – a fact all the more pressing given how close to the end we find ourselves today. For during the Tribulation deception will reach the highest levels of effectiveness in human history – for any and all who have not built their spiritual house solidly on the Rock of Jesus Christ (Matt.7:24-29; Lk.6:47-49).

(1) The Spirit explicitly says that in the end times certain men will rebel from the faith, giving their allegiance [instead] to deceitful spirits and demonic doctrines. (2) With their own consciences seared away and speaking with the hypocrisy of men [who peddle] lies, (3) they will [instruct their victims] to refrain from marriage, and to keep away from certain foods – which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and fully understand the truth. (4) For everything God has created is good, and nothing is to be rejected [out of hand if it is] received with thanksgiving, (5) because it is sanctified [for our use] through God's Word and [our] prayers.

1st Timothy 4:1-5

Comment: As many of the passages above and below indicate, and as we shall see when we begin our verse by verse treatment of 2nd Peter chapter 2 in the next installment of this series, one of the largest draws false teachers employ is the license they grant to and even their encouragement of illicit behavior, especially of a sexual nature (cf. Jude 1:4). Being given permission by "clergy" to behave as one's sin nature desires to behave – in regard to food and drink, sexual activity, illicit substances and all manner of other disreputable activity – has always been an enticement in pagan cults. During the early days of the Church Age, those proffering this avenue of false spirituality were known collectively as "Nicolaitans" (Rev.2:6; 2:15), a name which, similarly to the name Laodicean ("the [self]-justifying crowd"), places human desires over divine will (literally meaning "the people conquer"). And although the name is only used in the two instances cited, this strategy on the part of Satan's ambassadors to corrupt believers and lead them away from the true teachings of Christ through *aselgeia*, "licentiousness", is one against

which all of the apostles were forced to struggle (e.g., Rom.13:13; 2Cor.12:21; Gal.5:19; Eph.4:19; 1Pet.4:3; 2Pet.2:2; 2:7), being particularly effective in that day and age because it essentially put the Christian name upon pagan practices with which many new converts were familiar and from which they had only recently escaped (cf. 2Pet.2:18-22), similar in principle to the growing secular culture of antinomianism in our own day.

In the passage cited above, however, we see the other main thrust of false teaching, namely, legalistic asceticism. As with the antinomianism of the Nicolaitans, while this seemingly contrary branch of the devil's doctrine has many manifestations, it focuses on arbitrary restriction of actually lawful human behavior (as opposed to proclaiming lawlessness acceptable). That proclaiming clearly sinful behavior as godly may easily be seen to be false teaching (without the hidden "liberating" power of such a proclamation being immediately obvious), prohibiting otherwise lawful and decent behavior is equally problematic (even if it is perhaps not as easy to see why this is so). For in either case, the truth has been upended. And once the devil divorces believers from the truth, spiritual decline and eventual apostasy (or the sin unto death) will not be far behind. Satan has "something for everyone", and it is highly likely that antichrist's false religion will incorporate both essential branches of false teaching in order to appeal to the secret desires and inclinations of all people, whatever these may be. For believers preparing to avoid his traps, the passage just cited will suffice to demonstrate that taking legitimate scriptural prohibitions too far (e.g., demanding celibacy *within* marriage) is just as much an indication of false teaching by false teachers, "deceitful spirits and demonic doctrines", as is ignoring them.

(1) So be aware of this, that in the last days there will be difficult times. (2) For [in those times] there will be men (i.e., false teachers; cf. chap.2) concerned only for themselves, devoted to money, egotistic, arrogant, blasphemous, not concerned for their parents, ungrateful, irreverent, (3) implacable, slanderers, uninhibited, savage, despising the good, (4) betrayers, impetuous, megalomaniacal, devotees of pleasure rather than lovers of God, (5) possessing an [outward] appearance of godliness, but [in reality] having rejected its [true] power. From such men turn away. (6) Of this sort are those who [even in our own day] worm their way into households and take captive the [spiritually] weak who are loaded down with sins, leading them astray with various lusts, (7) [victims who consequently,] though always learning, are never able to accept the truth. (8) In the same way that [Pharaoh's court magicians] Jannes and Jambres opposed Moses, so these men also oppose the truth, for their minds have been corrupted and they have been found wanting concerning the faith. (9) But they will not keep on striding forward forever. Their folly will become obvious to all, just as in the case of those two.

2nd Timothy 3:1-9

Comment: "Difficult times" is a reference to the Tribulation. The key thing to note about this passage is that the "men" here are not merely adherents of false doctrines but the purveyors of them. No doubt a large number of those who follow their wicked ways will exhibit many of the same characteristics, but these descriptors apply here to the teachers themselves. While it may seem that identifying such individuals from their egregious behavior spelled out above will be an easy matter, the fact that these false teachers are said to possess "an appearance of godliness" means that the phenomenon we have seen throughout the Church Age, and most especially in the late days of Laodicea, of purportedly "Christian" leaders using that name along with an outward

appearance of sanctity to veil all manner of despicable behavior and evil motives, will only intensify as we draw closer to the end. Paul's advice is as unyielding as it is pithy: "From such men turn away".

Significant here too is the disclosure that these false teachers will not merely deploy their bait and await victims to fall into their trap; rather, they will be aggressive in seeking out their prey with a sort of missionary zeal. And the means they will utilize to ensnare them will be a crafty appeal to whatever "lusts" the objects of their attention are most inclined. Those who are only lukewarm about the truth, "always learning, are never able" to accept it, will be most vulnerable to this satanic approach.

Paul ends by assuring us of the ultimate futility of all those who oppose God and His truth, and that is a welcome encouragement for believers who are fighting the good fight of faith. However, the passage itself also provides a sober warning about the dangers emanating from Satan's agents down here in the devil's world for any and all who are not walking closely with Jesus Christ, dangers which are on the rise and predicted to reach their crescendo during the soon to come Tribulation.

(1) [Timothy], I [give] you [this] charge before God and Christ Jesus, the One who is about to judge the living and the dead, [charging you] by His appearance [at His Second Advent] and by His Kingdom: (2) Proclaim the Word! Keep at it, whether circumstances are favorable or not! Reprove, rebuke, [and] encourage with all patience [in your] teaching! (3) For the time will come when they will not put up with sound teaching, but will [instead], desiring to have their ears scratched, heap up by their own [devices] teachers to match their specific lusts. (4) And they will turn their ears from the truth and resort instead to fictions (i.e., made up by these false teachers).

2nd Timothy 4:1-4

Comment: We see from the above one of the reasons for the prevalence of false teaching today and for the success of so many false teachers, whether the connection claimed to true Christianity be seemingly close or obviously tenuous, namely, the "demand side". Were there no ready desire for false teaching, false teachers would have a much harder time of it. There is no telling just how long Satan had to observe Eve before he came up with the specific appeal capable of convincing her and trapping Adam too in the bargain. Most human false teachers would likely founder before garnering enough success to even keep themselves alive were there not a ready-to-hand market for their vile wares.

As things stand at present, six millennia removed from the garden and on the cusp of the Tribulation, not only a huge number of unbelievers but also a distressingly large majority of Laodicean believers have shown themselves all too eager for "teaching" that suits what they *wish* to believe in preference to what is actually true. Outside of the church-militant, there can be no other explanation for the topsy-like growth of anti-nationalism along with insane policies and humanistic creeds which amount to a secular religion, destructive by its very nature to national survival. Within the church-militant, the growth of super churches devoid of spiritual content, fascination with emotional excess on the one hand or works rituals on the other, the discipleship and spiritual formation movements, the reduction of missions to recreational trips, "new age"

teachings taught as Christian doctrine, along with a variety of other noxious trends antithetical by nature to teaching and learning the truth of the Word likewise bear witness to this same trend among lukewarm believers desirous of alternatives to what the Bible actually has to say – alternatives which are more in line with what is lusted after, whether prosperity or leeway in sexual matters and the allowance of promiscuity in all other matters a person's individual sin nature might prefer, rather than with scripture.

In between rank secularism *cum* religion on the one hand and "easy-listening Christianity" on the other, we have the rapid expansion of all manner of cults which have a foot in both camps. Free market religion has never been so successful, whatever name one wishes to place on it. False teachers need only to adapt their false teachings to the "specific lusts" of the moment and they will find no shortage of people willing to follow them, only too eager to "turn their ears from the truth" and to have their ears scratched by "fictions" instead – just as long as the packaging is attractive, and what these false teachers tell them grants them permission to act as they please and feel sanctified, even sanctimonious, in so doing.

These [false teachers] must be silenced – they are the sort who disrupt entire households by teaching things they should not, for the sake of disreputable gain.

Titus 1:11

Comment: The first thing to notice here is that Paul's command to Titus to silence false teachers can only be carried out by opposing them with the truth, that is, by teaching what is true and not by means of any sort of direct confrontation. Believers who, upon receiving correct teaching, are personally forced to confront the truth will have to choose between that truth and more comfortable lies (such as in the case of the false pre-Tribulation "rapture" or feel-good "once saved, always saved" deceit); the truth will not abide the lie with the result that the lie will be silenced and rejected – on behalf of any and all who in their heart of hearts really do love the truth. Otherwise, spiritual degeneration is inevitable.

Secondly, we see that the efforts of false teachers are divisive, disrupting the harmony of households which had previously at least given lip-service to the truth throughout. Once given the opportunity to believe something preferable (to the desires of the individual in question), lukewarm and nominal faith generally evaporates. That often causes heartache on the part of genuine believers who had assumed that their loved ones so affected had been if not strong believers at least "part of the team". We may expect this sort of disruption to accelerate, the closer we get to the end. For we know that it will reach a fever pitch in the Tribulation (Micah 7:5-6; Jer.9:4-6; Matt.10:34-35; Lk.12:51-53).

Lastly, it is good never to forget that however successful the false teacher in question may be, however seemingly sanctified, however well-presented, however many his followers, in the end he is interested only in himself and in his personal gain (cf. Jn.10:12). Little is as despicable as twisting the truth for profit.

Who is the liar if not the one who claims that Jesus is not the Christ? This is the antichrist, the one who denies the Father and the Son.

1st John 2:22

(1) Beloved, don't believe every spirit [of every so-called prophet], but test the spirits [of these "prophets" to see] whether [or not] they are from God. For many false prophets have gone out into the world. (2) By this [test] you [will] know [whether or not a person has] the Spirit of God. Any spirit (i.e., a person or organization) which professes that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, (3) but any spirit which does not profess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not from God. And this [latter] is the [spirit] of the antichrist, which you have heard about, that he is coming, and [even] now [his spirit] is already in the world.

1st John 4:1-3

Comment: One sure fire way of ferreting out false teachers and false teaching is the "Christ test" (cf. Jude 1:4). Since the devil opposes salvation and the gospel, false teachers inevitably profess a "different gospel" (2Cor.11:4; Gal.1:6) from the true one of salvation by grace through faith in Christ (Eph.2:8-9). Denying Jesus Christ, either His perfect person, undiminished deity and true humanity in one person forever, or His work, His death on the cross for the sins of all humanity, is always lurking at the core of the deceptive web false teachers are wont to weave. Such denial of Christ is allegiance to antichrist in principle – and will be so in actual fact once the soon to come Tribulation commences.

2. False Teaching

"You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies."

John 8:44 NIV

Our Lord's words above directed towards the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem, exemplified by the Pharisees, the preeminent false teachers of His day, laid out the essence of false teaching: the lie. Genuine, biblical teaching is all about the truth, God's truth. False teaching is at its core based on lies. The reason for this is easy to see. Godly teachers seek to do God's work for God's glory (Jn.5:44; 7:18), and therefore are greatly concerned to teach His full counsel (Acts 20:20; 20:27; cf. Rom.10:14), taking all possible pains to ensure that what they teach is the truth, His truth (1Tim.4:13; 4:16; Tit.2:1; 2:7). False teachers, on the other hand, have no concern for God at all (2Tim.3:4-5), but are motivated entirely by their own self-interest (Jn.10:12-13), gladly offering themselves up as instruments to Satan for the sake of personal gain (Tit.1:11). Lies, as our Lord assures us in the passage quoted above, are their stock and trade because lies are the devil's stock and trade, and, in the end, they work for him, not for the Lord.

Satan can only make progress in deceiving others, whether angels (originally) or our first parents in the garden, or unbelievers – and sadly also believers ever since – by his use of the lie. God tells us what is true, first, through the essential calculus of life writ large in the universe He has made and restored, that natural revelation which proclaims not only our essential mortality so that we can clearly see both our absolute need of some solution to our "ultimate concern" about death and also that God has to be the One to save us if we are going to be saved. For "His invisible attributes" are "clearly seen, being understood by the things He has made, even His eternal power and Godhead" (Rom.1:20) so that we can also easily perceive that God exists and

that He is the only possible solution to our fundamental problem: absent deliverance from Him, our impending physical death.

(7) Surely, no one can redeem a man[^s life from God's hand], no one can pay a ransom to God for him. (8) For the redemption price of a life is too precious for Him to relent forever, (9) that one should live on forever, and not see corruption. (10) For everyone sees that [even] the wise die. They [too] perish along with fools and those who lack common sense, and they leave their wealth behind to others.

Psalm 49:7-10

What man can live and not see death, or save himself from the power of the grave?

Psalm 89:48 NIV

Anyone who draws the obvious and necessary conclusions from these basic observations about life and the world, truths which early on impress themselves upon the hearts of all human beings, resonating within our spirits which God has created to be naturally receptive to these truths (Eccl.3:11), ought to immediately begin to search for help – and all who do will find it (Matt.7:7; Lk.11:9).

However, the sin nature which infests the flesh of us all by virtue of our natural birth descending from Adam (Rom.5:12; 1Cor.15:22), coupled with the free will we all possess which allows us to reject as well as to accept the truth as the truth, presents Satan with an opportunity. Just as in his arrogance he chose to reject the truth of God's goodness and sovereignty, placing himself above God, so also he finds many a human heart receptive to the same arrogant notion that rejecting the authority of God without eternal consequences is possible. Given the terrifying nature of the lake of fire, no lie could be more horrific. But it nevertheless often finds fertile ground in the hearts of human beings disposed to prefer their own will to the Will of God – just as Satan and his demons did.

It is not too much to say then that Satan's entire world system, his *cosmos diabolicus*, is founded upon rejecting God's truth at every point, replacing it with the lie, actually, a system of lies which appeal to creature arrogance so as to induce rebellion from God.⁴ Everyone who accepts the existence of God along with His essential goodness and absolute power (evident from His creation) and determines to seek His solution to sin and death will find God's truth richly provided: the gospel of Jesus Christ leading to salvation and spiritual growth for all who receive and pursue that body of truth. Absent an alternative to those truths, given through natural revelation and expanded through special revelation for all who respond⁵, we may well wonder how many more human beings might be saved than is presently the case without the devil's opposition. Of course, in that hypothetical, Adam and Eve would never have eaten the forbidden fruit in the first place.

Satan desires to oppose God's plan to save the human race – as many as are willing to be saved

⁴ See SR 4: Satan's World System.

⁵ See BB 4B: Soteriology, section II.2, "Natural Revelation and Accountability".

(for Christ died for all) – by every possible means, and the fundamental means he uses is the lie, his system of lies for enslaving as much of humanity as possible.

(34) "I am telling you the very truth: Everyone who is committing sin is sin's *slave*. (35) And the *slave* does not abide in the household forever, but the Son does abide [in the household] forever. (36) Therefore if the Son *frees* you, you will genuinely be *free*."
John 8:34-36

(25) [The servant of the Lord must] in humility be correcting those who oppose him, in the hope that God may grant them to repent and acknowledge the truth, (26) and that they may come to their senses, [*escaping*] from the devil's *trap*, though they have now been *taken captive* by him to do his will.
2nd Timothy 2:25-26

(14) Since the children have flesh and blood, [Christ] too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death – that is, the devil – (15) and *free* those who all their lives were held in *slavery* by their fear of death.
Hebrews 2:14-15 NIV

(7) Children, let no one deceive you. The one who performs righteousness is righteous, just as He is righteous. (8) The one who continues in [a life of] sin is of the devil, since the devil has been sinning from the beginning. For this purpose the Son of God appeared, to destroy the works of the devil.
1st John 3:7-8

We can see the devil's essential methodology in opposing the truth of the gospel from our Lord's description of it in the parable of the sower who sows the seed of the Word of God (set out by Him at Matt.13:1-9; Mk.4:1-9; Lk.8.4-8; and explained at Matt.13:18-23; Mk.4:13-20; Lk.8:11-15).

Step one: obscure, challenge, remove the truth from the unbeliever's heart at first contact with the gospel.

"And these are the ones by the wayside where the word is sown. When they hear, Satan comes immediately and takes away the word that was sown in their hearts."
Mark 4:16 NKJV

"When anyone hears the word of the kingdom, and does not understand it (lit., "does not let it in"), then the wicked one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart. This is he who received seed by the wayside."
Matthew 13:19 NKJV

"Those by the wayside are the ones who hear; then the devil comes and takes away the word out of their hearts, lest they should believe and be saved."
Luke 8:12 NKJV

How does the devil "take away" the seed of the Word? Satan has many ways of countering the

truth, all of which essentially come down to sowing doubt in the heart of those who hear, doubt which leads them to turn away from the good news without receiving it (and, apropos of our study, the devil uses false teachers, false teaching and false groups to do so). Then there is also the fact that responding to God requires turning away from the world and from one's own self as well, and few in the history of the world have been willing to subordinate their own will to the Will of God.

The devil understands this very well (since his entire rebellion is predicated on his own unwillingness to serve God) and has thus designed his entire world system to provide substitutes for the truth of the gospel, substitutes which appeal in one way or another to the inherent arrogance in mankind, promoted by all manner of false teachers, false teaching, and false, often "religious" groups. So that when the gospel is heard, many who hear it have already hardened their hearts against the truth, having rejected the natural revelation which makes crystal clear to them that death and damnation await all who are not cleansed by the blood of Christ, and having done so by accepting one of the devil's many substitute "truths", such as atheism, materialism, one religion or another – substitutes which have in common the fact that they are decidedly *not* the truth, just the opposite, but which offer a more comfortable (false) reality to the truth of what awaits those who reject the gospel after death. As Matthew 3:19 above states, these types do not "let the gospel in" in the first place, having been preconditioned by their prior rejection of the truth of natural revelation and acceptance in its place of one or more of the myriad lies that abound in the devil's world, making it an easy matter for the devil to "snatch away" the truth when it is heard.

Step Two: attack, tempt and persecute those who have believed before the seed of truth has a chance to take root.

(20) But he who received the seed on stony places, this is he who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; (21) yet he has no root in himself, but endures only for a while. For when tribulation or persecution arises because of the word, immediately he stumbles.

Matthew 3:20-21 NKJV

(16) "These likewise are the ones sown on stony ground who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with gladness; (17) and they have no root in themselves, and so endure only for a time. Afterward, when tribulation or persecution arises for the word's sake, immediately they stumble."

Mark 4:16-17 NKJV

"But the ones on the rock are those who, when they hear, receive the word with joy; and these have no root, who believe for a while and in time of temptation fall away."

Luke 8:13 NKJV

Becoming a Christian means following Jesus Christ, and there is a cost to being a disciple. There are many who are happy to be freed from sin, death and condemnation through a price paid by someone else, but are yet unwilling to endure any sort of trouble for the sake of the Lord who bought them. Temptation, persecution, general trouble which comes every believer's way – to

test and strengthen our faith – is unacceptable to many such fair-weather believers. In times of pressure they "fall away" from Christ, abandoning their faith when Satan attacks and swapping out their eternal life for one of his cheap substitutes instead, substitutes with which the devil's world is replete, trading their eternal inheritance for a "mess of pottage" just like godless Esau did, led astray very often by false teachers and satanic false teaching through a variety of cults which offer compromises to the true faith, cults which do not require the sacrifices of genuine Christianity because they are not genuinely Christian but lead back to the world – and to the loss of everything (2Pet.2:18-22; 2Jn.1:8-9).

All believers know just how persuasive and powerful the temptations of the devil's world can be, and there are few who do not experience ups and downs in this regard, especially in the early days of our faith. But true-hearted believers recover from all lapses and carry on in faith, ultimately submitting to God and resisting the devil, causing him to flee (even if much was suffered in the encounter: Jas.4:7).

Step Three: distract, delay, block the light of the truth, so that even if the believer in question cannot be turned away from Jesus Christ entirely, at least said Christian maybe rendered *hors de combat*, essentially taken out of the fight and left to squander the precious time we have been given (Eph.5:16; Col.4:5).

"Now he who received seed among the thorns is he who hears the word, and the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and he becomes unfruitful."
Matthew 3:22 NKJV

(18) "Now these are the ones sown among thorns; they are the ones who hear the word,
(19) and the cares of this world, the deceitfulness of riches, and the desires for other things entering in choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful."
Mark 4:18-19 NKJV

"Now the ones that fell among thorns are those who, when they have heard, go out and are choked with cares, riches, and pleasures of life, and bring no fruit to maturity."
Luke 8:14 NKJV

Life is distracting enough, considered only from the standpoint of all the necessary things a believer must do in this world, working for a living, taking care of one's family, one's homestead, one's health, etc. So it is easy to understand how simple it is for the devil to attack in any of these areas in hopes of distracting the believer in question from doing due diligence in the one truly important realm of a believer's life: their relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ.

Spiritual growth, spiritual progress, and spiritual progression take effort, and they take time. Given all that it is necessary to do in this life, whenever a believer is foolish enough to allow him or herself to be tempted to indulge overly in any of the very many *unnecessary* distractions Satan and his system provide, the end result is often a total lack of production for the Lord. This is true even if such activities, the pursuit of property and indulging in benign pleasures, are not in and of themselves sinful. But giving up all potential reward for the sake of anything in this world, especially considering that this world and all that is in it is passing away, but that the least reward

for the least act of production in this life will be infinitely better and last forever, is a fool's bargain.

In our own day, this sort of satanic trickery leveled against believers to stunt their production often comes in the form of offering up "comfortable Christianity" provided by lukewarm groups led by lukewarm leaders where compromise with the truth is king, lulling those who give attention to such false teachers and false teachings into spiritual torpor and preventing them from any sort of growth which would reap a good reward.

Even believers who prove themselves to be "good soil" will be opposed by Satan, of course, and, since we are not perfect, he will meet with some success – otherwise there would be no differentiation in the crops which our Lord describes (i.e., "30, 60 and 100-fold"). But reaching this last level of having something significant to put before the Lord on that great day to come is a defeat for the devil and a victory for us, gained in no small part by rejecting him and his world system of lies through embracing the truth and holding it fast instead.

The Devil's Three Lies: Everything Satan says is a lie (Jn.8:44), but inasmuch as he has developed a very specific methodology for opposing the truth and ensnaring others into his web of deceit, it is worth noting that the devil has developed a system of lies which attack the truth in a pattern of ascending depravity. Satan's entire world system as directed towards humanity has as its essential goal to convince human beings that the following three lies, anathema in fact to the truth in every way, are "true":

Lie #1: "I don't need God". In fact, of course, we only exist because of God and for God. We are mortal and destined thereby to die physically. Without God, without the gift of Jesus Christ, our eternal fate would be unimaginable. Only by hardening one's heart against His truth manifest in all He has made (natural revelation), can a person really believe that a saving relationship with God is unnecessary. Many people do not want to have anything to do with God, but realizing that such attitude can lead nowhere but death and condemnation is too uncomfortable for most people to abide. Satan therefore provides an alternative truth – the first lie. God is not needed for any manner of reasons: He doesn't exist. Or He doesn't care about us or what we do. Or everyone will be saved in the end no matter what. Or He can easily be appeased by any manner of religious "insurance policies" and promptly forgotten about – leaving the unbeliever free to live his/her life from that point of hardening forward without any further consideration of the Almighty or their own eternal destiny.

Lie #2: "I am like God". In fact, of course, while we human beings are given the image of God, that gracious provision of free will He has bestowed upon us in order to give us the opportunity to respond to Him in faith so as to be saved through believing in Jesus Christ, it is utter madness for anyone to imagine being "like God" in any other way. Using our free will to resist His Will is a complete abuse of the image of God. Denying that what He tells us is true and substituting our own "truth" for God's truth is the next step in the downward progression after accepting the devil's "truth" of the first lie. When we have the temerity to tell God what is true and what is not, we are in effect making ourselves "like Him", equal to Him. In the first lie, we "merely" want to be left alone to do whatever evil we please, but the second lie takes things significantly farther as we place ourselves up on His level with the same rights that appertain to deity: being able to

decree what is true and what is not true so as not just to go our own way (as acceptance of the devil's first lie allowed us to do), but to justify ourselves in doing so – since we are now equal to God as arbiters of right and wrong, of what is true and what is not.

Lie #3: "God needs me". As is the case of the previous two lies above, the outrageousness, insolence and arrogance of the lying increases here as well, and to the ultimate in this final step. God is God. He exists outside of this creation of His own making. He did not need to create it and He has no "need" of it whatsoever. He is infinite, eternal, and perfect in every way. He is glory and light and love – in every way self-sufficient beyond our understanding to a limitless degree. What could we ever think to "do" for God, imperfect, tiny creatures that we are, creatures of *His* making? It is the height of arrogance for the pot to critique the Potter, but that is just what those who progress to the end in the devil's system end up doing. Not content to be left alone by God, not content to deem themselves His equal, now they have become His superior. For He needs their help – to "fix" the world, to further some religion or some social cause . . . to serve the devil and his machinations in fact.

The truth, of course, is far otherwise. In fact . . .

- 1) We need God: We cannot turn death into life – only He can do that, and we need Him to do so in our cases since we are staring death in the face otherwise.
- 2) We are not God: We cannot expiate our own sin – only the death of Christ could do that, and we need the cross desperately since we are staring the lake of fire in the face otherwise.
- 3) God does not need us: We cannot "do" anything for a Creator who as eternal Spirit is in need of nothing. And as sinful human beings, anything we might think to do would be tainted and unacceptable, even if it were in our power to do something "good" (which it is not – true good can only be done through the Holy Spirit).

The above truths are almost too embarrassingly obvious even to state, and the level of folly necessary to reject them increases proportionally as we move from first to third in the progression of the three satanic lies. That any human being could not see these truths as being existentially clear – so as to reject the three satanic lies – seems extraordinary . . . to a believer. But there is a sinister and seductive power in the lie, like it or not. Being able to redefine the truth to fit one's own desires is in some ways the ultimate aphrodisiac. It appeals mightily to arrogance. For the arrogant in their heart of hearts want to decide everything for themselves without restraint or consequences, want to answer to no one, and want everyone else to have to answer to them (the threefold progression as seen in the hearts of the arrogant). This is insanity in the actual world – and certainly in God's superintendence of it. But if reality, if truth, can be redefined and reshuffled at whim – if the actual truth can be "put to death" and replaced with a pseudo-truth of one's own making – then all such fantasies are possible. God can be ignored; resisted; replaced.

And in the thinking of arrogance, God must be replaced . . . for all rebels to be able to do what their own will desires without any need for reflection, propriety, or restraint in their behavior in any way. That is essentially "conquering God", replacing His Will with their own, and that is precisely what the devil attempted to (and continues to attempt to do); and that is precisely what

those who follow him, his false teaching, and his example are doing as well. This is putting truth to death, His truth, the actual truth, and replacing it with a mess of lies instead, proclaiming them to be true.

If it seems beyond ludicrous that a mere human being should, in their heart of hearts, wish to get rid of God, it is only incrementally more insane than that Satan should have deceived himself on this very score – and taken a third of the angels along with him on the road to hell. But when any human being denies the truth, this is the upshot of what they are doing. For if the truth can be put to death and replaced by any lie of choice, then ultimately the One who is the source of all truth can be replaced as well, leaving the field free for all who reject God to do whatever they want, whenever they want, to whomever they want. The fact that there are degrees of this and many way-stations along the road to perdition (the three lies and the mind-set each embraces are progressive in their descent into evil, after all) does not make such thinking any less despicable – or dangerous – even at its outset. Blessedly, the truth will stand forever, and all lies will be destroyed in the end, along with all liars, in company with him who is the father of lies, the devil (Jn.8:44).

(12) "Behold", [says the Lord], "I am coming quickly, and I bring my wages with me for each to be repaid according to his work. (13) I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End. (14) Happy are they who wash their robes so that their right of access to the gates will also be like their right of access to the tree of life, that they may enter the city. (15) Outside (i.e., in the lake of fire) are the dogs (i.e., the unclean and worthless), and those who indulge in witchcraft, and the sexually immoral, and the murderers, and the idolaters, ***and everyone who loves and makes use of the lie***".

Revelation 22:12-15

The deceitful way Satan employs the three lies – and the way human beings are led to adopt them – can be observed right from the beginning of the devil's engagement with the human race in the case of his attack on Adam and Eve.

Lie #1: "I don't need God" (falsely assuming independence from God): dimming the truth.

The devil said, "You will not die", and Eve listened to and believed the devil instead of God; similarly, Adam listened to and believed Eve instead of God. Eve should have trusted that what God had said was true, but she "didn't need" to consult Him before making this fateful decision, acting indeed as if she had no need of God but was instead completely in the right to do such things as an independent agent with no necessity to consider anyone else, such as her husband – and such as God. Adam, on the other hand, confronted with the potential loss of Eve, likewise failed to consult God, listening exclusively to Eve and to his own heart – as if he were an independent agent with the right to make this decision with no further ado and fully capable of understanding the consequences without God's help. Believing this first lie instead of the truth is the beginning of the trouble.

Lie #2: "I am like God" (falsely assuming equality with God): separating from the truth. The devil said, "You will become like God/gods", and Eve took and ate the fruit to derive this "benefit" for herself and her husband. Adam ate so as not to lose Eve, imagining that, in God's

place, he could in this way help Eve, even though he was not God, and failed to trust in God's ability to help him. For Eve to give Adam the fruit and pressure him to accept the sentence of death was to act in God's place as if she were equal to Him. For Adam to acquiesce and accept the fruit as if he were capable of rescuing the situation himself without God was likewise putting himself on a level with God. Blasphemously asserting your own truth as equal to and even superior to God's truth is always the second step.

Lie #3: "God needs me" (falsely assuming superiority to God): perverting the truth. Aware of their predicament, Adam and Eve determine to "help God" by restoring Eden through making clothes out of leaves to cover their nakedness, and "fig leaves" thus became the symbol for acts of human good ostensibly done to cover up evil ever since. But the real evil is the horrific lie underlying this action, the false notion that God needed their help to solve this problem. Blasphemously placing yourself over God, demanding that He accept your "truth" in place of His own, and "deigning" to help Him as if that were possible or as if He needed help is the final state of insanity brought on by pursuing the same path the devil walked.

This is an evil thing in everything which is being done under the sun, namely that there is one outcome for everyone, and moreover that the hearts of the sons of Man are full of evil, and there is madness in their hearts during their lives, and afterwards they [go to join] the dead.

Ecclesiastes 9:3

Satan is very quick to exploit this common madness inherited by the human race since the fall, an insanity which is the function of our sin natures.⁶ The sin which resides within our flesh as a result of our position "in Adam" naturally lusts for the "promise" beyond each of the three lies: to be able to have and do whatever it wants, whenever it wants, regardless of the desires or rights of others, without any need for God, being His equal, and justifying whatever is done as essentially "good" – because it is desirable – and therefore ultimately "helpful" to Him (e.g., Rom.3:7-8).

The sin nature within us is the devil's natural ally, and he is always keen to exploit it. By pressuring us and by tempting us, the devil is very good at delivering a powerful "one-two punch", frightening us in regard to anything which threatens our security on the one hand, and coaxing us toward things which are sinful and evil but appeal to our lust and desire on the other.

With lie #1, the devil plays upon our need and inherent greed, using the fears and pressures of this life as prods to get us desiring things which go far beyond the true necessities of this life, once we stop looking to God as our help and begin to see this short, miserable life as the be all and end all of our existence.

And I saw that all labor and achievement spring from man's envy of his neighbor. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind.

Ecclesiastes 4:4 NIV 1985

All man's efforts are for his mouth, yet his appetite is never satisfied.

⁶ See BB 3B: Hamartiology, section I.2, "The Sin Nature".

Ecclesiastes 6:7 NIV 1985

(14) Therefore since these children (i.e., of v.13) have a common heritage of flesh and blood, [Christ] too partook of these same [common elements] in a very similar fashion (i.e., not identical only in that He was virgin born and so without sin), in order that through His death He might put an end to the one possessing the power of death, that is, the devil, (15) and might reconcile those who were subject to being slaves their whole lives long **by their fear of death.**

Hebrews 2:14-15

With lie #2, the devil seeks to turn our self-awareness into an arrogant self-esteem which borders on self-worship. It is objectively arrogant to think that we can provide for ourselves without God's help, and even more so to think that we deserve so much more than others do, but it is subjectively arrogant to imagine not only that we do not need God but that we are worthy objects of worship in our own right. Instead of merely wanting nothing to do with God (Job 21:14-15; 22:17-18), those who buy into this second lie lose all fear of God (Ps.36:1; 55:19; Rom.3:18), which is the foundation of all true wisdom (Psalm 111:10; Prov.1:7; 9:10).

Yet because the wicked do not fear God, it will not go well with them, and their days will not lengthen like a shadow.

Ecclesiastes 8:13 NIV

"Leave this way, get off this path, and stop confronting us with the Holy One of Israel!"
Isaiah 30:11 NIV

With lie #3, the devil seeks to overturn our natural desire for God (Eccl.3:11) and transform it into idolatry of one form or another, prompting us to "do things" to "help God". Whatever the ostensible object of the new religion or cult or humanistic endeavor, in reality Satan is at the core of it with the individual who has replaced God in his/her own heart imagining he/she is helping God while actually worshipping the devil. This desire to justify one's greed and one's replacement of the truth with an alternative truth, this desire for "pseudo-good", brings the system of lies to its inevitable, self-righteous conclusion. Having turned one's back on God, having turned towards oneself instead as equal in one's thinking to God, and having gone on from there to embrace some system of "helping God" which in effect replaces Him and His truth with one's own (actually, of course, the devil's), no further restraint of evil exists in the heart of the person concerned, so that all things are now possible in the service of the evil one.

(7) From their callous hearts comes iniquity; their evil imaginations have no limits. (8) They scoff, and speak with malice; with arrogance they threaten oppression. (9) Their mouths lay claim to heaven, and their tongues take possession of the earth.

Psalms 73:7-9 NIV

(18) God's wrath is about to be revealed from heaven upon all ungodliness and unrighteousness – on men who suppress the truth [in their hearts about God] in their unrighteousness. (19) For that which can be known about God [from everyday experience] is obvious to them, because God has made it obvious. (20) His nature, though invisible, is nevertheless plainly apparent, and has been since His foundation of the

world, for it may be clearly inferred from this creation of His – [this is true of] both His eternal power and His divinity – so that they are without any excuse: (21) they knew about God, but they neither honored Him as God nor thanked Him. Instead, they gave themselves over to [the] vanity [of this world] in their speculations, and their senseless hearts were filled with darkness. (22) Claiming to be wise, they became foolish, (23) for they exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for images and likenesses of corruptible men, of birds and beasts and reptiles. (24) For this [very] reason, God abandoned them to corruption in the lusts of their own hearts, that they might mutually defile their bodies (i.e., the very thing they lusted to do). (25) [And so] they ***exchanged the truth of God for the lie*** [of the devil], and worshiped and served the creature [Satan] in place of the Creator who is [worthy to be] blessed forever. Amen. (26) [Yes,] for this [very] reason God abandoned them to defiling passions. For their females exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones, (27) and likewise also the males abandoned natural relations with the female and burned with desire one for another, males for males, acting out their shamefulfulness in full, and in their own [flesh] fully receiving the reward due for their error. (28) And just as they did not see fit to keep God in their hearts, God abandoned them to their unfit minds, to do things which are not fitting, (29) filled up with every [sort of] unrighteousness, wickedness, greed, evil, full of envy, murder, strife, guile, maliciousness, gossips, (30) slanderers, God-forsaken-[and]-forsaking, insolent, arrogant, boasters, devisers of evils, not concerned for their parents, (31) unthinking, unreconcilable, uncaring, unmerciful, (32) men who though they had full knowledge of God's righteous decree, namely, that those who do such things are worthy of death, not only did [such] things themselves, but even commended those who made it their practice [to do them].

Romans 1:18-32

(17) So I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do with their minds emptied [of the truth]. (18) They are darkened in their thinking, separated from the life of God because of this [willful] ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts [against the truth], (19) who, when once they have lost all sensitivity [for what is right], have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, with a continual lust for more.

Ephesians 4:17-19

For every step of this process, Satan employs false teachers and false teaching, offering a veritable Smorgasbord of possibilities to anyone who can be coaxed into turning away from the truth. For there are innumerable variations of the lie, false paths which deceitfully claim to lead to God, but there is only one way of truth.

"I am the Way: the truth and the life. No one can come to the Father except through me."
John 14:6

In contrast to, e.g., Adam and Eve's historic failure, our Lord Jesus Christ's defeat of the devil's attempts to tempt Him provide a primer for us: our Lord rejected all of Satan's attempts to deceive Him with his lies ***by means of the truth of the Word of God.***

1) When the devil tempted Christ to turn stones into bread to assuage His hunger (something well within His power to do but not what the Spirit was demanding of Him), He responded with "It is written: Man does not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God" (Deut.8:3; cf. Matt.4:4; Lk.4:4). Turning stones into bread apart from the Father's Will for Him to do so would have been acting independently of the Father's plan – as if the Father were not necessary. We believers likewise need to resist acting as if we do not need God to solve the problems and troubles that come our way, for we need Him absolutely and we need to learn to trust Him – and He is absolutely faithful.

2) When the devil tempted Christ to worship him, offering Him the kingdoms of the world (which are indeed His and will be ruled by Him anon), He responded with "You shall worship the Lord your God, and Him only you shall serve" (Deut.6:13; cf. Matt.4:10; Lk.4:8). Worshiping the devil for personal advantage would be acting on His own authority – as if God the Father were not the authority. We believers likewise need to resist acting as if we were independent agents in our own right and in any way "equal" to God, for God is our authority absolutely and we need to listen to and obey His Word – for it is through our Master, the Living Word, that we have been redeemed from death.

3) When the devil tempted Christ to throw Himself down from the roof of the temple (something which indeed Jesus could have done with no fear of being harmed because the verse quoted by Satan did indeed apply first and foremost to Him personally), He responded with "It is written again: You shall not tempt the Lord your God" (Deut.6:16; cf. Matt.4:7; Lk.4:12). Putting His humanity in a position to have to be saved just to refute Satan and demonstrate His Messiahship which the devil was questioning would have been acting contrary to the Father's plan as if to further it – as if the plan were not already perfect. We believers likewise need to resist acting as if God needed our help to accomplish His plan, as if He needs us to go beyond what He is calling us to do so as to "help Him". For He is the Potter, and we are merely humble pots who need to learn to follow His Spirit and not turn to our own devices, doing things He never intended, things which "never entered His mind" (Jer.7:31; 19:5; 32:35), ostensibly for His benefit.

In stark contrast to the diabolical three lies, since the fall, three supervening truths have stood out above all others in the human experience, truths that demand – with any measure of humility – conclusions which lead back to God.

1) Universal mortality: the reality of death for all (Gen.3:19b).

Conclusion: We need God because we cannot turn death into life on our own.

2) Universal depravity: the reality of sin in all (Gen.2:17).

Conclusion: Our sin, which we cannot expiate on our own, proves that we are not equal to the one perfect God.

3) Universal insanity: the reality of satanic madness surrounding all (Gen.3:15).

Conclusion: Falling short of God's glory as we do, any fleshly attempt to help Him is of the

devil.

Turning away from these truths necessarily leads to rationalization (the first lie which attacks the first truth above), desensitizing of the conscience (the second lie which attacks the second truth above), and, finally, justification of one's behavior (the third lie which attacks the third truth above). This sequence can be seen in the system of the three satanic lies above, where first the person declares his or her independence from divine standards (rationalization ignoring divine authority), second, the person frees him or herself mentally from feelings of guilt for sinful behavior (re-programming the conscience according to one's own standards on the basis of putative equality with God), and third, the person begins to justify his or her acts by claiming that his or her standards are superior to God's (so that he or she is actually "helping" God through this pattern of godless behavior, doing "good" as defined by him or her, but actually evil in Satan's service).

All three of these progressively devolving behavior patterns produce a web of sin whose effects, individually and collectively, are evil, but there is a clear, qualitative distinction to be found in the quantitative progression described above. For the more decisively a person turns away from God and His truth, the more useful he or she becomes to Satan – even as he or she comes more and more to reflect the devil's perverse thinking and to duplicate his own moral degeneration – and the more measurably and progressively wicked the evil produced becomes as well.⁷

3. Characteristics of False Teachers

Passages dealing with false teachers abound in scripture, no doubt because the problem has always been a pressing one. It is the devil's strategy to oppose God's truth through his lies, and he has need of human beings to promote his deceptions. The devil uses leaders of various religions, cults and philosophies to indoctrinate unbelievers so as to keep their eyes blinded to the truth they have already rejected. But perhaps no false teacher is more despicable – or more dangerous – than a man who styles himself a Christian but is actually in Satan's service.

(13) For men of this sort are false apostles, workers of guile, masquerading as apostles of Christ. (14) And it is no wonder, for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light.

(15) So it comes as no surprise that his servants also masquerade as servants of righteousness. Their end will be according to their deeds.

2nd Corinthians 11:13-15

As this passage reminds us, false teachers are not discernible from the horns growing from their foreheads. In fact, they make it their business to give "an [outward] appearance of godliness" even though in fact they have "rejected its [true] power" (2Tim.3:5). To the undiscerning eye, they may often even appear to be much "holier than thou" (Is.65:5).

⁷ There is much more about this subject at the following links: [SR 4: Satan's World System](#), section IV, "Satan's Tactical Doctrine"; [BB 2A: Angelology](#), section II.7.4, "Satan's System of Propaganda"; and [BB 3B: Hamartiology](#), section II.4, "The Distinction between Sin and Evil".

We have already examined a number of important passages which deal with the issue of false teachers. Attention to the book of Jude, a good portion of whose content is exclusively concerned with the problem of false teachers infecting Christian groups, will be helpful here, especially inasmuch as Jude wrote this letter previously to the same churches addressed by the apostle Peter, demonstrating that many of the same concerns (evident in the passage below) would still be issues a generation later (as seen in our present context of 2nd Peter chapter two).

(3) Beloved, while I was already very eager to write to you to encourage you regarding our common salvation, I have [now also] found it necessary to do so in order to [direct you to] fight fervently for our faith, [that faith in Christ] which has been received once and for all by all His holy ones (i.e., sanctified believers). (4) For certain men have slipped in among you unawares, men who long ago were destined for this very doom, ungodly men who substitute lasciviousness for the grace of our God and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ. (5) While you [already] know all these things, I want to remind you that although the Lord saved [all] His people from the land of Egypt at the start, in the end He destroyed those who proved unfaithful, (6) and the angels who did not keep to their own realm but deserted their proper habitation, He has imprisoned with everlasting chains in the gloom below (i.e., in the Abyss) in anticipation of the judgment of that great day, (7) just as He did with Sodom and Gomorrah and their neighboring cities; for they all prostituted themselves in the same manner as these [angels] did, having pursued sexual relations [lit. "flesh"] inappropriate for them (i.e., outside of the natural order). [And so it is that] they have been appointed an example and incurred the penalty of eternal fire. (8) In the same way these [false teachers], deluding themselves with false visions, defile their flesh, reject all authority, and bring slander against angels (i.e., Gnostic "combat" with aeons). (9) But [even] the archangel Michael, when he was contending and disputing with the devil over Moses' body, did not dare to pronounce a slanderous judgment against him, but said [instead], "May the Lord rebuke you!" (10) But *these* men blaspheme about things of which they know nothing! And what they understand by virtue of their sinful natures, by these things they are corrupted. (11) Woe to them! For they have gone the way of Cain. They have been undone by the deception of Balaam's wages. They have been destroyed in Korah's rebellion. (12) They are stains on your communion services. They choose their own ways without godly fear. They are clouds of false promise, driven off course by every wind. They are trees which bear no fruit in season, doubly dead and uprooted. (13) They are wild waves of the sea, belching forth their own shame. They are stars which refuse to follow any fixed course for whom the gloom of darkness has been reserved forever. (14) Enoch, the seventh descendent of Adam also prophesied about these sorts, saying, "Behold! The Lord has come with His holy multitudes, (15) to render judgment against [them] all, to convict everyone of all their ungodly deeds which they have committed and of all the harsh words [these] ungodly sinners have spoken against Him". (16) These men are grumblers, complainers, pursuing their own desires. Their mouths spew forth the most outrageous things as they engage in flattery for personal benefit. (17) But you, beloved, remember the words of the apostles of our Lord, spoken to you before, (18) that at the end of the age there will be mockers who will behave after the manner of their own unholy lusts. (19) These men are dividers – men of this natural world who lack the Holy Spirit.

Jude 1:3-19 [INDEX]

Verse 3:

(3) Beloved, while I was already very eager to write to you to encourage you regarding our common salvation, I have [now also] found it necessary to do so in order to [direct you to] fight fervently for our faith, [that faith in Christ] which has been received once and for all by all His holy ones (i.e., sanctified believers).

Jude 1:3

We are not told the specifics of the report or reports Jude must have received in Jerusalem from the churches in Asia minor who were the recipients of this letter, but it obviously had to do with a disturbing rise in false teaching and false teachers infiltrating the churches there (cf. Jude 1:4). We do know from the description in Revelation 2:1-7 of the Ephesian era of the Church that the efforts of the apostles and those associated with them (such as Jude here and also Peter in our present study) was largely effective in warding off this incipient threat to these young churches – at least partially. Our Lord tells the believers of this era that they have it in their favor that they "hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate" (Rev.2:6), but also that "I have against you [the fact] that you have abandoned [that] love you had at first" (Rev.2:4). This "previous love" is the love for the Word of God. Following the apostolic era, the church-visible coasted on the great depth of teaching they had received from the apostles and their associates (along with the ministrations of the Word initially provided by the miraculous though temporary teaching gifts such as prophecy), and while this momentum allowed them to resist the worst aspects of false teaching, and while this era of the Church did indeed do due diligence in assembling the canon of the New Testament (for which we are all eternally grateful), the study and teaching of the Word of God by the next generation of gifted men fell to a disastrously low level from which the church-visible has yet to completely recover, even today.

We can see a hint of this dichotomy in Jude's opening in verse three above. He had, before he began to receive those disturbing reports, already been "very eager" to write to the churches with whom he was in contact to promote their edification in the Word of God. The crisis of which he was made aware, however, necessarily shifted his focus from a broad exposition of the truth to a very narrow defense of the faith by way of refuting the false teachers who were troubling these churches. This then is the pattern which developed over the next several generations: excellent defense against the false, but with insufficient attention to the truth. We note that Jude was inspired by the Holy Spirit to write what he did, the way he did, so no fault falls at his feet for this change of emphasis: if these churches were not endangered and endangering themselves by giving these false teachers a hearing, this epistle (and the one we are covering, 2nd Peter), might have been much different. And in any case, it was the responsibility of the local pastor-teachers (and those with special gifts during this interim time) to provide the daily helping of truth taken broadly and comprehensively from the Bible (the Old Testament complete and widely available; and the New being gradually filled in, book by book). All was well as long as the apostles and their associates were on the scene, but we do see in Jude's comments here the incipient trend which would grow into a disturbing status quo in the next several generations. Concentrating on rejecting and refuting the false to the exclusion of learning the truth is always a poor bargain – because without the truth, everything will eventually fall apart, regardless of the effectiveness of any attack and in spite of prodigious efforts in defense.

Verse 4:

(4) For certain men have slipped in among you unawares, men who long ago were destined for this very doom, ungodly men who substitute lasciviousness for the grace of our God and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ.

Jude 1:4

The "certain men" here are the false teachers who are the subject of all of Jude's comments in the section we are covering (and the main focus of Peter's comments in the bulk of 2nd Peter chapter two, our present context, to which we shall return in the next installment). Jude's choice of vocabulary here, describing these false teachers as having "slipped in" or "snuck in" deliberately does not directly indict the recipients of this letter, neither the leaders of the churches nor their members. But of course there is hint of malfeasance and dissatisfaction with it on Jude's part here: if everyone had been doing their job (of learning and applying the truth so as to easily recognize and reject everything false) this letter and its subject matter would not have been necessary (or at the very least might have been focused on positive teaching more directed towards spiritual edification).

In the Plan of God, we believers are all predestined to life eternal (e.g., Rom.8:29-30; Eph.1:5; 1:11-14), based upon our faith in Jesus Christ. The word used here and translated "destined" is, literally, "having been written ahead of time", terminology which purposely avoids placing these men in the same category as believers. From this we may conclude that these individuals were not believers, so that what we have to do with here is not some "early controversy" about interpreting the Bible and its doctrines (*pace* many secular historians of "Church History"), but a deliberate attack by Satan on these early churches. These men are not merely disgruntled or "misunderstood". They work for the devil and are intent on doing his will, which in these circumstances involves attempting to destroy these churches – and these believers – through the introduction of toxic false teaching.

Jude's account manifests the two basic characteristics of the particular threat, Gnosticism (see on verse eight below), which was sweeping through Asia Minor at the time: 1) the Nicolaitan heresy; and 2) various attacks on Jesus Christ, His person and His work. In terms of the former, this particular false teaching was aimed at Christian behavior: if Christians can be induced to abandon sanctification and the quest for it, then they will likely return to the world and its ways altogether. That was as true in the first century – when virtually all of the gentile believers in these churches came out of pagan backgrounds where immorality was part and parcel of pagan "worship" – as it is today (where popular culture is increasingly immoral as well). Teaching Christians that there was "no problem" with drunkenness and sexual immorality, e.g., was no doubt just what many marginal believers of that time wanted to hear, especially gentile believers who had not yet fully separated in their heart of hearts from their previous illicit manner of life – and who also were no doubt made uncomfortable by "the reproach of Christ" (Heb.11:26; 13:13), being lampooned, ostracized and even persecuted by their former pagan associates.

The latter thrust of the false teaching abroad at this time was aimed more at the Jewish believers of these early churches. The Trinity is clear enough from the Old Testament, and, after the first advent of Christ and the teachings of the New Testament, is put beyond all argument. But for

individuals who had been brought up in such a way as to make it hard to accept that God's Son was God, that God took on a human body to die for our sins, all false doctrines which called into question the exact nature of Christ and of the incarnation offered these false teachers an opportunity to sow doubt about the truth (cf. John's reproof of these Gnostic teachings: Jn.1:1-14; 19:31-35; 1Jn.1:1; 4:2-3; 5:6-8).⁸ In later years, all of the different varieties of these false teachings which questioned Christ's humanity, or His deity, or His sacrifice, etc. would receive technical names (of which anyone who has studied the Christological controversies of the early church-visible is aware).⁹ The important thing to note here is that these false teachers did not accept Jesus Christ – they were unbelievers, after all. And that they made it their mission in Satan's service to introduce as much uncertainty and confusion as possible regarding the Person of Christ (His two natures, human and divine) and His work (in actually being judged for the sins of the world). Pretending to introduce important "knowledge" about our Savior, their true goal was to undermine faith in the most important truths believers cherish in their heart of hearts: absolute faith in Jesus Christ, the God-man who died for our sins to save us from the lake of fire. Just as the devil coaxed Eve away from the tree of life for the sake of "knowledge", so these false teachers sought to undermine faith in Him whom the tree of life represented, our dear Lord and Savior Jesus Christ who is life itself.¹⁰

Verse 5-7:

(5) While you [already] know all these things, I want to remind you that although the Lord saved [all] His people from the land of Egypt at the start, in the end He destroyed those who proved unfaithful, (6) and the angels who did not keep to their own realm but deserted their proper habitation, He has imprisoned with everlasting chains in the gloom below (i.e., in the Abyss) in anticipation of the judgment of that great day, (7) just as He did with Sodom and Gomorrah and their neighboring cities; for they all prostituted themselves in the same manner as these [angels] did, having pursued sexual relations [lit. "flesh"] inappropriate for them (i.e., outside of the natural order). [And so it is that] they have been appointed an example and incurred the penalty of eternal fire.

Jude 1:5-7

In this section, Jude, somewhat apologetically (no doubt to do his best to avoid offending his readers who do in fact need to hear what he is about to say), reminds his charges of the consequences of listening to lies and liars. In verse five, we are reminded that the exodus generation was never willing to give up the deceitful idolatry to which they had become addicted in Egypt (e.g., Ex.32:1-8; Deut.9:16; Neh.9:18; Amos 5:25-27; Acts 7:43; cf. Num.25:1-3). This resulted in their "lack of faith" or unfaithfulness, by which we understand if not outright apostasy

⁸ The truth about all these issues may be found in BB 4A: Christology; and BB 4B: Soteriology.

⁹ E.g., the Cerinthian and Docetic Gnostic heresies. See, for example, P. Shaff, *A History of the Christian Church*, part 2, topics 4-5, "Christological controversies".

¹⁰ For the symbolism generally, see in SR 1, section II.5.b., "The Illustration of the Tabernacle".

at the very least the sin unto death (cf. Heb.3:7-19).¹¹

A large draw of pagan idolatry then as in Jude's time was the promiscuousness of its foul rites (cf. Ex.32:6; 1Cor.10:7; cf. Num.25:1-3). In verse six, we are reminded that a third of angelic kind likewise fell away from the Lord through following Satan's false promises, resulting in the imprisonment of those who indulged themselves in illicit relations with human women (to spawn the nephilim).¹² And in verse seven, we are reminded that the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah and the neighboring environs were destroyed for their illicit behavior which in their case was not only sinful but constituted "going after strange flesh", that is, inappropriate in the extreme since this behavior was unnatural, following far outside God's "natural order". As a result, they received not only temporal destruction but also the penalty of "eternal fire", making it clear that in this case we are talking about the fate awaiting unbelievers.

These three examples all have in common gross sinfulness of a sexual nature, resulting from giving heed to demonic influence. Thus Jude, in a none too subtle way, reminds his readers of the consequences of following any and all "teaching" or influence that so clearly defies God's prohibitions for His creation – exactly the sort of bait that these false teachers were dangling in front of the believers of that time, telling them, in effect, that by doing evil, good would come. As Paul remarks about those using this wicked argument, "their condemnation is just" (Rom.3:8).

Verse 8:

(8) In the same way these [false teachers], deluding themselves with false visions, defile their flesh, reject all authority, and bring slander against angels (i.e., Gnostic "combat" with aeons).

Jude 1:8

Having reminded the recipients of his letter of the personal consequences of submitting to false teaching, Jude returns to the subject of the false teachers themselves. Key to understanding this verse and what follows – as well as to what we find in Peter's second epistle – is some appreciation of the heresy of Gnosticism. Gnosticism has a long and convoluted history. It is important to recognize that later works on the subject (by the church fathers and also some Gnostic writings which have survived) can be misleading, both because of the centuries-long gap in time between them and the New Testament and also because of the diverse nature of these later witnesses.¹³ For that reason, the Gnosticism with which the apostles and their associates were having to cope is often termed "incipient Gnosticism".

¹¹ For the distinction, see BB 3B: Hamartiology: section IV.6, "Apostasy and the Sin unto Death".

¹² See SR 5, section III.1, "Satan's antediluvian attack on the purity of the human line (the Nephilim)".

¹³ E.g., the Nag Hammadi group of Gnostic writings dates to circa the 3rd to 4th centuries A.D.

Our direct evidence for the early Gnostics who were infiltrating the churches at this time, while informed by the later material, comes mostly from the New Testament itself. What we can say about this movement is that it was a combination of religion and philosophy, and that it incorporated both gentile and Jewish speculations. Akin to the excesses of the so-called "charismatic movement" troubling the church-visible today, the experiences people "enjoyed" were the real motive force behind the movement rather than its theoretical underpinning. To develop that analogy a bit, if a person spent a good deal of time in the library attempting to understand modern day "charismatics" through attention to their putative theology, he/she would miss the point entirely: the charismatic movement is popular because many people find it exciting to speak in tongues, prophesy, engage in healing, exorcize demons (for example). Trying to understand that through investigating their theology is wrongheaded, both because it is the emotional thrill provided by these heretical activities that is actually the grounds for that movement's success, and also because there are in fact no legitimate theological underpinnings whatsoever: just as with Gnosticism, all of these activities are biblically unfounded.¹⁴

Similarly, first century Gnosticism was comprised of a loose set of "doctrines" being taught by a very disparate group of both gentile and Jewish practitioners. It may be the case that the Jewish Gnostics focused upon mystical interpretations of the Law while the gentiles applied themselves more to pagan philosophy, but Gnosticism was nothing if not highly eclectic, and all of these individuals seemed to have had no trouble adopting and incorporating any and all "truth" which allowed them to persuade their contemporaries to become their dedicated followers. Anything that lent itself to the excesses which in turn served as the bait to lure others into their trap was welcome (just as in the case of comparable modern day cult movements). Paul warned about the danger of being deceived by these charlatans and their false teachings:

Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles of the world, and not according to Christ.

Colossians 2:8

The main distinction Paul draws when speaking of these issues here is between "philosophy" (specifically, incipient Gnosticism) and legalism ("the traditions of men"). Both stemmed mainly from Jewish sources, and, specifically, from false interpretations of the Law (the latter more obviously than the former), but the two are distinctive enough to differentiate. Here, while Paul is speaking mostly of the former, it is clear, when one considers all of his comments on the subject, that Gnosticism too was rooted in Jewish tradition as applied (or misapplied) to natural phenomena (i.e., in the passage above, the "elemental principles" or *stoicheia*; cf. Gal.4:3; 4:9; Col.2:20; 2Pet.3:10; 3:12).

(20) O Timothy! Guard what was committed to your trust, avoiding the profane and idle

¹⁴ During the apostolic era, speaking in tongues, healing and prophesying were legitimate – when based upon the proper functioning of the actual spiritual gifts – but only those directly commissioned by our Lord are ever said to have been able to cast out demons. See BB 5: Pneumatology, section II.B.3.d.c, "Temporary Gifts".

babblings and contradictions of what is falsely called knowledge (literally, *gnosis*) – (21)
by professing it some have strayed concerning the faith.
1st Timothy 6:20-21a

Gnosticism thus straddled Jewish and pagan false teaching, a fact which contributed to broadening its appeal (with each group being "initiated" thereby into secrets which were generally the province of the other group). It was a very dangerous mix of lies which could lead to apostasy, "straying from the faith" as in the passage above. Imagine astrology, "angel numbers", exorcism-based "spiritual warfare", mysticism, justified licentiousness (for any manner of debauched behavior, since matter was deemed evil and illusory so that it was unimportant to the enlightened) all wrapped up in a supposedly biblical and spiritual cover, and you will see Gnosticism's appeal to unbelievers – and to those who were following Christ carelessly and lackadaisically. The appearance of learned "teachers of the Law" and "professors of secular philosophy" on the doorsteps of these early churches, heralding mysterious revelations which were "from God" – so they said – and which promised an end to the strictures and restrictions of true biblically Christianity . . . along with deliverance from the boredom of mere Bible study, had enough of an immediate impact to prompt Jude to write this "emergency epistle" (Jude 1:3), and also enough staying power to prompt Peter to address the same issue in detail a generation later (our present context in this epistle, 2nd Peter chapter two).

Gnosticism paraded as a means for "helping God" through combat with unseen evil forces, and said combat frequently involving illicit sexual behavior – which of course required the participant to turn scripture on its head. Herein we see all three satanic lies on full display: turning away from the truth to a substitute, alternative "truth", then indulging oneself with no thought of God's authority, then finally justifying oneself by replacing God in one's heart with "another god" who needed help in fighting this fight against Satan. Revelation even calls the enigmatic, shadowy and constantly shifting principles upon which this movement was based "the deep things of Satan" (Rev.2:24) – because they are actually the devil's lies, not in any way hostile to him in fact. Secret knowledge has always been appealing – to the naive. Otherwise there would be no explanation for Scientology – or of Eve's fascination with the idea of becoming "like God" (or "gods") through eating of the tree of knowledge. And it is easy to claim such knowledge, especially if it is only grudgingly given out and at a high price. The fact of such stinginess and demand for great compensation for its dispersal and great sacrifice in order to be enlightened has historically always seemed to have piqued the interest of many victims (cf. 2Ki.10:5-13).

In essence, Gnosticism promised the thrill of "spiritual combat" with the forces of the devil (while in actual fact serving Satan). It posited cosmic powers called "aeons", demons, essentially, which could be neutralized through various means (thus prompting its new acolytes to open themselves up to demon influence and even possession in the case of unbelievers). Taking part in various sorts of odd, arcane, and often also scurrilous behavior was one of the primary means of contacting, engaging with, and ostensibly subduing these evil entities. Gnosticism thus had the advantage of legitimizing all manner of sinful activities committed by pagans in the course of their religious ceremonies – but *now* in the "good cause" of *helping* God! In short, it is not difficult to see the appeal of this movement which had something for everyone: it revealed mystic, secret knowledge, opened up the unseen world of angels and angelic combat,

and turned gross sin into a holy pursuit. When wrapped in a cloak of biblical "teaching" proffered by distinguished persons, it is no doubt a testimony to those early generations of Church Age believers that more did not fall under Gnosticism's spell.

"But you do have this [in your favor], [the fact] that you hate the works of the Nicolaitans (i.e., Gnostics and other false teachers of the time), which I also hate."
Revelation 2:6

All of the above is more than merely historical or loosely applicable to us today. During the Tribulation, Satan and his antichrist will launch the ultimate religion which will differ from Gnosticism only in its greatly expanded and all-inclusive nature. That religion, being on the one hand equally seductive (in its clever appeal to all manner of secret desires), will also add the pressure of being compulsory on the other. Faced with the prospect of absolute ostracism – even from buying and selling – and possible martyrdom for refusing to join (by taking the mark of the beast), many will find the inclusivity of the beast's pseudo-church appealing, especially since it will be coupled with all manner of alluring "benefits" in the manner of Gnosticism, albeit taking these excesses to never before seen levels. We see the early stages of this development today, of course. Believers who recognize the present dangers should keep in mind that they are mild compared to what will soon be unleashed – and do their best to start preparing spiritually here and now so as to be able to meet the challenge when it comes.

(8) And all the inhabitants of the earth will worship [the beast], [that is, all] whose names are not [still] written in the book of life [where they were written] from the beginning of the world, [even the book] which belongs to the Lamb who was slain. (9) "If anyone has an ear, let him hear. (10) If anyone is [destined] for captivity [to captivity he will go]. If it is necessary for anyone to be put to death by the sword, by the sword he must be put to death. ***Herein lies the perseverance and the faithfulness of the holy ones.***"
Revelation 13:8-10

While not meant to be exhaustive, the following terms often refer to Gnostics and Gnostic teaching in the New Testament:

Gnosis (*gnosis*), literally "knowledge" (Lk.11:52; Rom.2:22; 1Cor.8:1). Later Gnostics taught that salvation came through knowledge which allowed the practitioner to escape the hold of the evil physical body through asceticism or licentiousness (or a combination of both in alternation). Informed by "knowledge", the initiate sought enlightenment and deliverance from material existence into the spiritual plane by means of denigrating the body. Gnosis is the word from which this movement later derived its name, falsely so, as Paul assures us.

(20) O Timothy! Guard what was committed to your trust, avoiding the profane and idle babblings and contradictions of what is falsely called knowledge (literally, *gnosis*) – (21) by professing it some have strayed concerning the faith.
1st Timothy 6:20-21a

Pleroma (*pleroma*), literally "fullness". Gnosticism was fixated on the idea of achieving spiritual fullness, and there are a number of words used in the New Testament which deliberately allude to

this false concept, mostly through contrasting it to the true "fullness" that is to be found in God and in His truth (Rom.15:4; Eph.1:10; 1:21-23; 3:19; 4:10; 4:13; 5:18; Col.1:9; 1:19; 1:25; 2:2; 2:9-10; 4:12; 4:17).

For in Him (i.e., Jesus Christ), dwells all of the *fullness* (*pleroma*) of deity in bodily form.

Colossians 2:9

The above verse demonstrates that in contrast to the Gnostic concept of the *pleroma* being only spiritual (so as to denigrate all that is physical), in the case of our Savior, deity and humanity, spirit and body, were united: Christ is both God and man, and His human nature possesses a human spirit and a genuine, *physical* body – yet without sin.

Wisdom (*sophia, sophos*).

(1) When I came to you, brothers and sisters, announcing the *mystery* of God to you, I did not come with brilliance of speech or *wisdom*. (2) I decided to *know nothing* among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. (3) I came to you in weakness, in fear, and in much trembling. (4) My speech and my preaching were not with persuasive words of *[human] wisdom* but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, (5) so that your faith might not be based on *human wisdom* but on God's power. (6) We do, however, speak a *wisdom* among the mature, but not a *wisdom of this age*, or of the rulers of this age, who are coming to nothing. (7) On the contrary, we speak *God's hidden wisdom in a mystery*, a *wisdom* God predestined before the ages for our glory. (8) None of the rulers of this age *knew* this *wisdom*, because if they had *known* it, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.

1st Corinthians 2:1-8 CSB

Whether or not we would want to characterize the opposition to the truth faced by the Corinthian church in Paul's absence as "Gnostic", Paul's insistent contrast in this passage of God's wisdom with the wisdom of men demonstrates that Satan's attacks are always of a piece. Just as he promised Eve wisdom which turned out to be the wisdom of regret, so we see that the wisdom of this world, Gnostic and otherwise, merely makes those who embrace it the enemies of God – and the servants of the devil. The New Testament is replete with passages such as the above which contrast the two, true wisdom with satanic lies (e.g., Rom.1:22; 1Cor.1:26-29; 2Cor.1:12; Eph.3:10), and which sometimes clearly reference Gnosticism specifically (e.g., 1Cor.2:4-5; 3:19; Col.2:23; 2Pet.1:16).

(1) I want you to know what a great struggle I am engaging in on your behalf and on behalf of those in Laodicea and [on behalf of] as many as have not seen my face in the flesh, (2) [struggling] that your hearts may be encouraged, being instructed in love and [led] into the entire treasury of the *full-confidence* [which comes from] *understanding*, so as to [possess] the *full-knowledge* (*epignosis*) of the *mystery* of God the Father, [namely] Christ, (3) in whom all the [true] *treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden*.

Colossians 2:1-3

Philosophy (*philosophia*). This word is a combination of the Greek words meaning "love" and "wisdom", so in some respects is a subcategory of the above. However, since the late fifth century B.C., the word came to have the more specialized sense we think of today, and that is how it is sometimes used in scripture (Gnosticism being a type of "philosophy", as it were).

Beware lest anyone cheat you through *philosophy* and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles of the world, and not according to Christ.

Colossians 2:8

Genealogy (*genealogia*). Jewish mysticism and Gnosticism overlapped in their hyper-concern for genealogy as these were important for tracing the supposed ancestry not only of human beings but also of demigods so that this practice was an "entry gate" to further false teaching.

(3) Remain in Ephesus as I instructed you to do on my way to Macedonia, so that you may command certain individuals not to engage in contrary teaching. (4) Command them also not to pursue *myths* and endless *genealogies*, things which provoke controversies rather than the dispensing [of] the [truth] of God by faith. (5) The objective of this command [to refrain from false teaching and cleave to the truth] is love from a pure heart, a good conscience, and an un-hypocritical faith. (6) It is by rejecting these things that some have missed the mark and turned aside to worthless babbling, (7) wanting to be "teachers of the Law", though neither knowing what they are saying or what they profess to be so confident about.

1st Timothy 1:3-7 [INDEX]

Godless Chatter (*bebeloi kenophonai*; cf. 2Tim.2:16).

Timothy, guard what has been entrusted to your care. Turn away from godless chatter and the opposing ideas of what is falsely called knowledge.

1st Timothy 6:20 NIV

Myths (*mythoi*; cf. 1Tim.1:4; 4:7; Tit.1:14; 2Pet.1:16)

For the time will come when they will not put up with sound teaching, but will [instead], desiring to have their ears scratched, heap up by their own [devices] teachers to match their specific lusts. And they will turn their ears from the truth and resort instead to fictions (*mythoi*).

2nd Timothy 4:3-4

Mystery (*mysterion*): In Greek, a "mystery" is most commonly a cryptic rite, a ritual or arcane piece of information connected to it which only the initiates of certain cults (the Eleusian mysteries, for example) were permitted to know, a secret, in other words, that was generally hidden from all but the select few. In New Testament usage, the word refers to Jesus Christ and His Church (e.g., Matt.13:11; 1Cor.2:7; 4:1), "mysteries" which were largely veiled to Old Testament eyes (cf. Rom.16:25; 1Pet.1:11-12), but which have now been fully revealed with the coming of our Savior into the world as a human being, His death and resurrection, and the advent of the Holy Spirit. While scripture does not use this word to describe Gnosticism per se, it does

occasionally employ it when referencing such false teaching as a means of demonstrating that it is God's truth revealed which is genuine (cf. in particular Paul's opposing of the word mystery to Gnostic teachings at Eph.1:9-10; 3:3-4; 3:9; 5:32; 6:19; Col.1:26-27; 2:2; 4:3). The irony in this term's reference to Gnostic and related false movements is that through appealing to "secret wisdom" (e.g., Rev.2:24), these false teachers were attempting to turn the revelation of *the* mystery of God back into something cryptic once again – in order to tempt their victims with the promise of "special knowledge" whose actual purpose was only to distort, cover and obliterate the real truth.

(25) Now to Him who is able to establish you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of *the mystery kept secret* since the world began (26) but now made manifest, and by the prophetic Scriptures made known to all nations, according to the commandment of the everlasting God, for obedience to the faith – (27) to God, *alone wise*, be glory through Jesus Christ forever. Amen
Romans 16:25-27 NKJV

The Nicolaitans:

"But this you [Ephesian era believers] have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate."
Revelation 2:6 NKJV

"Thus you [Pergamum era believers] also have those who hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, which thing I hate."
Revelation 2:15 NKJV

In both cases above, the Nicolaitans represent the false church with its false teachers attempting to infiltrate the true Church of Jesus Christ. Their "deeds" as each context indicates were licentious and lascivious activities which were common in the pagan religion of the time (in the case of the era of Ephesus) or only recently abandoned (in the case of Pergamum). No doubt many if not most of these individuals were conversant with Gnostic teachings, if not outright proponents of them, since their evil practices had to be veiled with some fig leaf of justification in order to seduce believers (the true purpose of Gnosticism).

Verse 9:

(9) But [even] the archangel Michael, when he was contending and disputing with the devil over Moses' body, did not dare to pronounce a slanderous judgment against him, but said [instead], "May the Lord rebuke you!"
Jude 1:9

The incident referred to in this verse is important for future prophecy and we have covered it before.¹⁵ In order to be resuscitated in their original bodies for service in the Tribulation as the "two witnesses", both Moses and Elijah had to have special exits from this life along with special

¹⁵ See CT 3A, section 5, "The Two Witnesses".

supernatural preservation of their physical bodies. Germane to the context and to our discussion is the important point Jude makes by referring to this event: even the likes of the archangel Michael did not on that occasion deign to do what Gnostic teachers professed to be able to perform, namely, engagement in spiritual combat with evil aeons. One can hardly imagine a stronger proof to show the folly – and the danger – of attempting to engage in supernatural battle with demons by any other name. Michael is the chief of the archangels, that complement of angelic officers in charge of those responsible for combating Satan and his demon armies. At the mid-point of the Tribulation, Michael and his force of elect angels will throw the devil and his followers to earth after a pitched battle in heaven (Rev.12:7-9), but until that time, Satan and his henchmen are being allowed – as part of the perfect plan of God – to have free access to the third heaven in order to accuse believers (and also to be confronted with the developments of God's plan which is moving inexorably forward despite the devil's best efforts).¹⁶ Until that future day, "even Michael" does not venture to pronounce any judgment on Satan, not even when the devil was striving to frustrate this important operation upon which God's plan for the Jewish people during the Tribulation significantly depended. The temerity of these false teachers in daring to attempt what even the highest ranking elect angelic warrior would not is breathtaking – and that is precisely Jude's point.

Verse 10:

(10) But *these* men blaspheme about things of which they know nothing! And what they understand by virtue of their sinful natures, by these things they are corrupted.

Jude 1:10

In spite of the horrific foolhardiness of going where angels fear to tread, these false teachers of Gnosticism proceed boldly and hurl outrageous insults at the aeons (demons) with whom they think to do battle – when in reality they are doing Satan's bidding all along. They also engage in horrendously lawless and lascivious activities, things they *do* understand "naturally" (Greek *phyikos*), or more specifically, by virtue of the lusts of their sin natures to which they give full vent and through which they entice their victims to pursue their "secret knowledge". This is the "philosophy" or even theosophy characterized by "empty deceit" and "human tradition" which focused on the movements of the stars and planets, against which Paul inveighs, and to which he opposes the truth:

(8) Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles of the world, and not according to Christ. (9) For in Him (i.e., Jesus Christ), dwells all of the *fullness* (*pleroma*) of *deity* in *bodily* form.

Colossians 2:8-9

The Gnostics spoke of the *pleroma*, divine "fullness", as an entirely spiritual thing which could only be approached through their secret knowledge and scurrilous practices which demeaned the physical body. By using the phrase "the fullness of God-ness", Paul demonstrates that God's true fulfilling of all things required that His fullness "dwell" in the physical human body of Jesus

¹⁶ See SR 5, section 5, "An Historical Overview of God's Disposition of Satan".

Christ. These verses proclaim that Jesus is God because He possesses all the qualities, characteristics, "essence" of God, to the full – but as a genuine human being in a genuine human body as well (precisely the opposite of what the Gnostics claimed). The term *pleroma* or "fullness" was, as we have already seen, a Gnostic "buzz word" used to describe the "magic" they preached as attainable by resorting to their secret "wisdom" and cultic worship. During Paul's day, there was very little distance between many of his Jewish opponents who were hyper-legalistic as in the case of the Pharisees and those who were mystics. Gnosticism grew out of the teachings and fantasies of the latter, with angel worship (a problem very evident in the book of Hebrews) transmogrifying into aeon worship. By combining the terms "fullness", "deity" and "bodily" here in reference to our Lord Jesus Christ in His humanity, Paul not only divorces these words from any possible Gnostic allusions, but also sets the record straight about what the actual truth is: our Lord Jesus is neither a created being, mere human or aeon or angel, nor some sort of phantom, but is both genuine "deity" in all His "fullness", and in truly human "bodily form" at the same time.¹⁷

Verse 11:

(11) Woe to them! For they have gone the way of Cain. They have been undone by the deception of Balaam's wages. They have been destroyed in Korah's rebellion.
Jude 1:11

Jude selects three of the most notorious unbelievers of the Bible to demonstrate God's impending judgment upon these false teachers who are leading believers astray. All three came to notably unpleasant ends. Cain was forced to depart from the presence of the Lord and bear a mark which, while it protected him from human vengeance, also proclaimed God's great displeasure with his crime of murder (Gen.4:13-16). Balaam was killed by the Israelites after prostituting himself on behalf of the king of Moab so that he did not live to enjoy the proceeds of his egregious behavior (Josh.13:22; Neh.13:2). Korah was devoured alive with his entire family and all he owned when the earth opened up and swallowed them for his rebellion against and attempt to supplant Moses, God's anointed (Num.16:1-33). Jude also uses these three to underscore the methodology of false teachers: they are murderers like Cain, attempting to deprive believers of eternal life by leading them down the devil's path; they are mercenaries like Balaam, willing to lie and deceive and seduce – and anything else that might prove effective – to win over believers to their teaching for the sake of personal gain; and they are rebels like Korah, blatantly opposing teachers of the actual truth in order to replace them and steal their legitimate authority so as to rule over the congregation in their own stead. Praise be to God that all such false teachers will soon suffer similar divine rebukes when the Lord metes out the punishment they so richly deserve!

Verse 12:

(12) They are stains on your communion services. They choose their own ways without godly fear. They are clouds of false promise, driven off course by every wind. They are

¹⁷ See BB 4A: Christology, section I, "The Person of Jesus Christ".

trees which bear no fruit in season, doubly dead and uprooted.
Jude 1:12

Communion: It is of the utmost importance for believers to confess their sins before engaging in "the body and blood of Christ", that is, the remembering of Him in what we call communion, celebrating our fellowship of "commonness" and "union" with Him.

(27) Therefore whoever eats the [communion] bread or drinks the [communion] cup of the Lord in an unworthy way is guilty [of offense against] the body and the blood of the Lord. (28) So let [each] person evaluate himself and in this manner (i.e., following confession of all sins remembered in such reflection) let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup. (29) For the person who eats and drinks eats and drinks judgment for himself if he does not evaluate his body [aright] (i.e., refusing first to repent and confess). (30) It is for this [very] reason that many among you are sick and infirm – and not a few have passed away (i.e., have suffered the sin unto death). (31) But if we were evaluating ourselves [so as to repent and confess], we would not be falling under judgment. (32) And when we are being judged [for this offense], it is by the Lord that we are being disciplined, to the end that we might not be condemned (lit., "terminally judged") along with the world.

1st Corinthians 11:27-32

We can see from the statement in Jude 1:12 above that these false teachers had effectively infiltrated the local churches to which Jude was writing. They are participating in communion ("love feasts" in the Greek, but the communion service is meant), just as if they were believers in Jesus Christ and worthy constituents of those local churches. Instead, in a ceremony that is supposed to represent the spotless Bride of Christ bought by His precious blood, these deceivers are foul stains which pollute the entire undertaking. Any church then or now harboring such dangerous reptiles would do well to follow the apostle Paul's direction:

(12) What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside? (13) God will judge those outside. "Expel the wicked person from among you."

1st Corinthians 5:12-13 NIV

Their Own Ways: Rather than flowing from the divine source (the Bible illuminated by the Spirit), their teaching stems from arbitrary "personal choice". Simply put, instead of subordinating themselves to the Lord and accepting the truth He has given us through His Word, they "decide for themselves" what they will believe, what they will do, and what they will teach. Instead of the truth, their "teaching", their "secret knowledge" is made up out of whole cloth. They teach whatever will best attract followers and bend them to their own evil will. There are many such "ways", but for believers, there is only *one* Way, the truth of Jesus Christ.

"I am the Way: the truth and the life. No one can come to the Father except through Me."

John 14:6

Clouds:

Therefore they [i.e., false teachers and those who follow them] will be like the morning mist, like the early dew that disappears, like chaff swirling from a threshing floor, like smoke escaping through a window.

Hosea 13:3 NIV

Mists and clouds are proverbially insubstantial and impermanent (e.g., Jas.4:14). They melt away in the sunshine and are easily blown away by the breezes. Such are these false teachers and the supposed substance of their teaching. It will not abide or endure the bright sunshine of the light of truth – and neither will they nor anyone foolish enough to believe their words and follow them. For these "clouds" are also clouds of "false promise" – instead of hoped for rain, they bring only darkness and continual drought.

Barren Trees:

And [Jesus] seeing a fig tree by the road, He came to it and found nothing on it but leaves, and said to it, "Let no fruit grow on you ever again." Immediately the fig tree withered away.

Matthew 21:19 NKJV (cf. Mk.11:12-14; Lk.13:6-9)

False teachers and their teaching may present an attractive front, but in fact they bear no edible fruit – only poison fruit. They are inveterate unbelievers with no thought of repentance. Unlike a good tree which, even if cut down, at the scent of water may spring up again, "bud and put out branches like a young plant" (Job 14:9 ESV), they are "doubly dead", uprooted from the soil of the truth, with no chance – and no intention – of ever producing anything good.

Verse 13:

(13) They are wild waves of the sea, belching forth their own shame. They are stars which refuse to follow any fixed course for whom the gloom of darkness has been reserved forever.

Jude 1:13

Wild Waves:

Be ashamed, O Sidon;
For the sea has spoken,
The strength of the sea, saying,
"I do not labor, nor bring forth children;
Neither do I rear young men,
Nor bring up virgins."

Isaiah 23:4 NKJV

The sea and its swells are hostile by nature to mankind.¹⁸ They provide no place for home or

¹⁸ The sea is always viewed in negative terms in scripture; see SR 2: The Genesis Gap, section II.3, "The Sea".

hearth, and danger abounds for anyone venturing upon them. And they produce no fruit in the way fertile land does. Rather, the sea when stirred up disgorges all manner of flotsam and jetsam, unuseful and unhealthy for mankind. In a similar manner, these false teachers belch forth dangerous and malevolent material whenever the evil spirit moves them. Believers should therefore view any intercourse with them as being equally dangerous to setting out to sea when the waves are wildly crashing against the shore, for this description highlights the instability, dangerous ferocity, and inherent foulness of these false teachers.

Wandering Stars: The Greek actually says "planets", all celestial bodies being of the same essential sort to the Greek way of thinking (i.e., an asteroid, a planet and a star are not three completely different things to them but rather belong to the same category of anything visible in the heavens). As anyone who knows even a little bit about astronomy understands, the other stars are very regular and orderly in their (perceived) movements, but the planets are much less predictable (to the naked eye). That is, in fact, why in distinction to other celestial bodies they are called "planets" (from the Greek *planetai*: "wandering ones"). Significantly, the root of that word also means "to deceive", so that this is a very apt metaphor for the false teachers of Gnosticism Jude warns against here. The good news (for us), is that along with the fallen angels whom the Gnostic false teachers are alternatively worshiping and "condemning", their fate will be what they deserve: the darkness of the lake of fire (which is what "for whom is reserved the blackness of darkness forever" refers to).

But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world, (Gr. *ta stoicheia*, a term which includes the stars; cf. Deut.4:19) whose slaves you want to be once more?

Galatians 4:9 NASB

Gnosticism and related Jewish mystery cults put great stock in the stars (as is the case with many new age false teachings today), and this led many to perdition as a result. The stars and the planets, the sun and the moon, and their predictable movements are not bad things per se. God gave them to us not only to provide us with the light we need but also to mark off the seasons et al. (Gen.1:14). God has clearly put the stars in place to show us that there is a Creator who has organized all things according to a precise plan, so that men might seek Him out and be saved through Jesus Christ (Acts 17:24-29), i.e., for "natural revelation". But as to specific details or predictions along the lines of the things astrology "preaches", that is, anything beyond the revelatory knowledge of Him, His existence as the Creator and His just and all powerful nature, there is nothing to be had from the stars (and it is very dangerous to seek such things out). Such over-reliance upon or giving inordinate attention to these "elementary principles" was precisely what Gnosticism did, finding "gods" or "demons" or "aeons" behind these natural phenomenon and attempting to treat with them and even to engage in combat with them.

(16) So don't let anyone judge you in regard to food or drink, or in the category of festival observances, be it of new moons or Sabbaths. (17) All these things are shadows of what was to come, but the reality has to do with Christ. (18) Let no one gain control over your life, desiring to [enslave you to himself] through a show of false humility and the **adoration of angels**, basing his approach on what he has [allegedly] seen while puffed up

by his own fleshly thoughts, (19) yet not embracing the Head [Christ]. For it is from this Source that the entire body [the Church] is [truly] supplied and instructed through [all] its joints and sinews, and [thus] produces the growth that God has given. (20) If you have died with Christ to these *false [pagan] principles [belonging to] this world (ta stoicheia)*, why are you letting yourselves be [wrongly] indoctrinated as if your life were of this world? In accordance with the commandments and teaching of [mere] men [these false teachers tell you] (21) "Don't handle! Don't taste! Don't touch!", (22) even though [we know] that all these [are only] things [which] decay with use. (23) Such teachings have a [false] reputation for *wisdom*, but [only] in concocted religion, [false] humility, and [legalistic] harsh treatment of the body – they have no actual power to neutralize the [sinful] flesh (i.e., the sin nature is not to be controlled by these legalistic approaches).
Colossians 2:16-23

Paul (and Peter too) uses the term, *ta stoicheia*, "elemental principles", more than once (sometimes with slightly different emphases: Gal.4:3; 4:9; Col.2:20; 2Pet.3:10; 3:12; cf. Deut.4:19). What is being referred to with the term *ta stoicheia* are the celestial bodies and the natural physical principles of the world they represent and help to keep track of (i.e., times and seasons were tracked by these natural means before the invention of mechanical clocks). The Law relied on "festivals, new moons and Sabbaths" which are of necessity linked to these "principles", *ta stoicheia*, since these are the physical, celestial sign-posts which demarcate them. While these heavenly phenomena are things that God placed in the world for our benefit (Gen.1:14), paganism, and later Gnosticism and Jewish mysticism, wrongly impute demigod status to them. The Law makes use of these things for a sacred calendar which foreshadows much later-to-be-revealed truth, and the celestial bodies et al. also serve as powerful witnesses of natural revelation (e.g., Ps.19:1ff.). But they do not give us anything more than such elemental truths (astrology is a pernicious evil, e.g.), and will never bring anyone to spiritual maturity, even when used correctly to glean the existence, power and righteousness of God from what He has made (Rom.1:20).

So the "times and seasons" that the constellations help us to track are just that: we navigate by the stars and we chart the seasons by them. But they do not contain any secret information, and all such theories and "mysterious teachings", whether pagan, or Jewish mysticism or Gnosticism or present day "new age" false teachings are dangerous and to be avoided by believers wishing to walk close to the Lord. That was true in Jude's day, and that is why he is so concerned for the spiritual safety of the congregations to which he is writing in this regard.

Verse 14-15:

(14) Enoch, the seventh descendent of Adam also previously prophesied about these sorts, saying, "Behold! The Lord has come with His holy multitudes, (15) to render judgment against [them] all, to convict everyone of all their ungodly deeds which they have committed and of all the harsh words [these] ungodly sinners have spoken against Him".

Jude 1:14-15

Enoch's prophecy was made known to Jude by the Holy Spirit. This is not a quotation from the

so-called "book of Enoch" (which may be found in English translation today). That is an apocryphal work of unknown provenance and of unknown development. Most English translations derive from the Ethiopic version (the only "complete" one), and these mss. do not date back to before circa the 16th century A.D. There is evidence of such a book in ancient reports, and there are Greek, Aramaic, and Hebrew fragments of the book itself found at Qumran (it is claimed, at least). Given the sketchy nature of the other evidence (n.b., the Qumran community was still in existence *after* the New Testament had been completed), it is far from certain that these fragments of the Dead Sea scrolls ever contained precisely the same text as the Ethiopic version of the book now bearing this name. And *that* is the *only* place that this supposed source of Jude's "quotation" is to be found. We may actually have to do with three pseudepigraphical "books of Enoch", and the most likely scenario is that the Ethiopian "Enoch" or "Enoch I" is a much later composition which reworked much of the older material, working this passage, Jude 1:14-15, into its text as a false "proof" of authenticity.

It is the sentiment expressed by the prophecy Jude records which is important for our purposes here. We are assured by the Spirit that when the Lord returns, all of His enemies will be duly recompensed – with all liars (false teachers no doubt in particular) to be punished for "the harsh words [these] ungodly sinners have spoken against Him". Given the success which many false teachers are presently enjoying – and always have – it is a considerable comfort to know that "these sorts" will not always prosper.

(8) Now as Jannes and Jambres resisted Moses, so do these also resist the truth: men of corrupt minds, disapproved concerning the faith; (9) but they will progress no further, for their folly will be manifest to all, as theirs also was.
2nd Timothy 3:8-9 NKJV

Wicked men and tricksters (i.e., false teachers) will continue to "make progress" for the worse, [both] deceiving [others] and deceiving themselves [as well].
2nd Timothy 3:13

It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.
Hebrews 10:31 NKJV

Verse 16:

(16) These men are grumblers, complainers, pursuing their own desires. Their mouths spew forth the most outrageous things as they engage in flattery for personal benefit.
Jude 1:16

In this verse, Jude sums up some of the most obvious and despicable characteristics of these false teachers, both to disabuse his readers of any thought that there might be something worthy of redemption in them and their teaching and also to give some clear identifying features to prevent such persons from continuing to interact with these churches unawares.

Grumblers: This recalls the stiff-necked, stubborn exodus generation who were notoriously dissatisfied with the Lord's miraculous provisions to them, and ungratefully expressed and gave

vent to that dissatisfaction repeatedly (Ex.15:24; 16:2; 16:7-9; 16:12; 17:3; Num.14:2; 14:27; 14:29; 14:36; 16:11; 16:41).

And do not grumble, as some of them did—and were killed by the destroying angel.
1st Corinthians 10:10 NIV

No believer's life is perfect or without troubles, trials and difficulties. When things really get dark – as they will on occasion do for us all – it is tempting to say like the exodus generation did "We were better off in Egypt!" (Num.11:18). But that is to forget all of the Lord's prior deliverances of us and all of His great blessings to us. That is to forget that testing has a purpose in His perfect plan. That is to substitute selfish arrogance and lack of trust in Him for the humble obedience of faith which has brought us very far forward in spiritual terms (regardless of whatever material hardships we are currently facing). The false teachers of that day, men who were quick to despise any sort of adversity since they had no faith in God whatsoever, found a ready audience in those believers who were suffering one trial or another. By "sympathizing" with them and offering a louder voice and a "theological" justification for their grumbling, they won over the foolish in the same way that false teachers and false teaching always do, namely, by offering them an attractive lie in place of the truth: "The teaching you are receiving is not true, so why are you so willing to suffer on account of it?" Or as the devil said, "You will *not* die!" (Gen.3:4). But those who love the Lord more than this miserable life will never return to Egypt (Num.14:4); we have our sights fixed on New Jerusalem.

(13) These all died [while still walking] in faith, though they had not received the [fulfillment of their] promises. But [while they lived] they did catch sight of [these promises] from a distance and salute them, [so to speak], thus making it plain [to all the world] that they were [in effect] strangers and sojourners on the earth. (14) For people who express [their faith] in this way make it quite evident that they are eagerly in search of a homeland [other than the place they now occupy]. (15) Indeed, if these [believers'] hearts had yearned for the [land] from which they had departed, they would have had [ample] opportunity to turn back. (16) But they were zealous for a better place, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God. He has, in fact, prepared a city for them (i.e., the New Jerusalem).
Hebrews 11:13-16

Complainers: The Greek word here means, literally, "lot-blamers", that is, those who are dissatisfied with what the Lord has given them and make that dissatisfaction known. This characteristic is very similar to the above but takes the vociferousness of the complaining up to a higher level, blaming God outright for whatever disadvantage or trouble one is laboring under. Once grumbling is enabled by these false teachers, it is a seemingly small though in actuality a very deadly step to move on to placing the blame squarely at God's feet.

On the contrary, who are you, O man, who answers back to God? The thing molded will not say to the molder, "Why did you make me like this," will it?
Romans 9:20 NASB95

Pursuing their Own Desires: Once dissatisfaction has been overtly expressed, aided and

abetted and then directed at God, the next step is to turn away from Him entirely, ignoring the very clear "ways" laid down by Him in scripture, and turning to one's own ways in pursuit of one's own desires instead. Christians ought to trust God that whatever trouble we face is for our good in the perfect plan of God (Rom.8:28), that our "lot" from Him is good in every way (Ps.16:5-6), so that even hardships are having their perfect effect if we but trust Him to see us through them (Jas.1:2-4), and that His ways are the only safe ways – because He is the "one way", the very life and the very truth by which we live (Jn.14:6). Behaving contrary to this is an abomination to the Lord.

They have chosen their own ways, and they delight in their abominations.
Isaiah 66:3b NIV

Spewing forth Outrages: In the above sequence, we can easily see how these false teachers were able to make inroads into the churches of Jude's day. Giving voice to the frustrations which are natural enough when we are suffering, offering a scapegoat and providing an alternative escape is a progression all cults employ. This next feature of false teachers and false teaching is somewhat counterintuitive in its effectiveness at furthering the devil's goals. One would think that the more outrageous the statements and the assertions made by such individuals and groups, the more temerity and arrogance employed in their profession, and the more demanding and presumption the claims made of their new followers, the less attractive and the less persuasive they would be. But it is a curious feature of human nature to find exceptional boldness disarming. The confidence exuded by the serpent towards Eve and by all satanic liars ever since towards their victims has always proven seductive – for any and all whose hearts have not been sufficiently committed to and grounded in the truth.

But I am afraid that just as Eve was deceived by the serpent's cunning, your minds may somehow be led astray from your sincere and pure devotion to Christ.
2nd Corinthians 11:3 NIV

In fact, you even put up with anyone who enslaves you or exploits you or takes advantage of you or puts on airs or slaps you in the face.
2nd Corinthians 11:20 NIV

(6) I am amazed that you have had such a rapid change of mind away from the One who called you by the grace of Christ – to a different gospel (7) which is [really] not another [gospel at all]. Rather [the case really is that] there are certain men [there] who are throwing you into disorder, men who desire to pervert the gospel of Christ. (8) But [even] if I myself – or even an angel out of heaven – should preach to you something out of keeping with what I have preached to you, let him be cursed!
Galatians 1:6-8

Flattery for Personal Benefit: Through progression of the process described above, these false teachers gained an (undeserved) reputation for stardom (2Cor.11:5; 12:11; cf. 2Cor.10:12; 11:13-15). Many people are attracted to celebrities – as the Latin derived word suggests, they "throng around them". Our Lord avoided the negative aspects of celebrity as much as possible, being true to His mission at all times (e.g., Mk.1:45), for He knew full well that human popularity was at

best fleeting and absolutely worthless (Jn.2:24-25). False teachers and cult leaders who attain notoriety often use that appeal in deadly, deceptive ways. Attention from "a celebrity", being thought to be lifted up to their level because of attention from them, is often all that is needed to make someone their slave through such flattery. But God "is no respecter of persons" (Acts 10:34; Rom.2:11; Eph.6:9; Col.3:25; Jas.2:1-9).

(17) I urge you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them. (18) For such people are not serving our Lord Christ, but their own appetites. By smooth talk and flattery they deceive the minds of naive people.
Romans 16:17-18 NIV

Those people are zealous to win you over, but for no good. What they want is to alienate you from us, so that you may have zeal for them.
Galatians 4:17 NIV

And while such behavior may seem pointless to us – as human celebrity is indeed pointless – those who employ it in Satan's service always have the ulterior motive in engaging in this sort of flattery of profiting personally through the exploitation of those who respond and follow them.

(4) They are conceited and understand nothing. They have an unhealthy interest in controversies and quarrels about words that result in envy, strife, malicious talk, evil suspicions (5) and constant friction between people of corrupt mind, who have been robbed of the truth and who think that godliness is *a means to financial gain*.
1st Timothy 6:4-5 NIV

Verse 17-18:

(17) But you, beloved, remember the words of the apostles of our Lord, spoken to you before, (18) that at the end of the age there will be mockers who will behave after the manner of their own unholy lusts.
Jude 1:17-18

The godless character of men "in the last days", and especially of false teachers, is a common enough prophecy in the New Testament (e.g., 1Tim.4:1-5; 2Tim.3:1-9), and one that is already being fulfilled, inasmuch as the entire Church Age stands on the threshold of those end times and in that sense forms a part of them (which is why "the end" has been in that sense "imminent" since the days of the apostles: e.g., Matt.3:2; 4:17; Rom.13:11-12; 1Cor.7:29; Phil.4:5; Heb.10:25; Jas.5:8; 1Pet.4:7; 1Jn.2:18; Rev.1:3; 3:11; 22:7; 22:12; 22:20).

This particular passage also shows beyond argument that Peter was following Jude's lead in ministering to the same churches wherein the same problems would still be at issue a generation later:

(3) Keep this foremost in your mind: in the end times mockers will come [on the scene], ridiculing [the truth] and acting out of their own selfish lusts, (4) saying, "Where is that 'return' He promised? Everything is the same now as it was since the beginning of the

world, since the time our forefathers passed on."
2nd Peter 3:3-4

For Jude, rather than the question of the second advent in the passage above, the issue which the Spirit gives him to emphasize is the principle of ridiculing scripture itself and those who teach it (true Bible teaching from legitimate teachers is what and whom these Gnostics are mocking). Anything true is merely an impediment to the lusts which actually motivate these false teachers' every thought, word and deed. Teaching the truth is thus to be mocked since anyone hearkening to it will of necessity be dissuaded from following these men and their satanic teachings.

Verse 19:

(19) These men are dividers – men of this natural world who lack the Holy Spirit.
Jude 1:19

While the truth is, of course, divisive (Matt.10:34-39; Lk.12:51-53; 2Thes.3:14; 2Jn.1:9-11), the goal of all true Christian ministry is the unity of believers achieved *through* believing the truth (Rom.15:5-6; 1Cor.1:10; Eph.4:3). False teachers divide otherwise united believers by seducing some to follow lies instead.

[Let us grow spiritually] . . . that we may no longer be immature, swept off-course and carried headlong by every breeze of so-called teaching that emanates from the trickery of men in their readiness to do anything to cunningly work their deceit.
Ephesians 4:14

Thus these individuals make it abundantly clear that the Holy Spirit has not sent them. While pretending to possess special supernatural knowledge, by rejecting the actual things of the Spirit they only prove – to any and all with even small spiritual discernment – that they have no part in Him at all. To sum up, false teachers have no concern for God at all (2Tim.3:4-5), are motivated entirely by their own self-interest (Jn.10:12-13), and are more than happy to offer themselves up as instruments of Satan for the sake of personal gain (Tit.1:11; cf. Mic.3:11). As mentioned before, the Bible is filled with passages on this subject, precisely because it has always been such a serious problem throughout human history. In many ways, false teachers are the devil's shock troops. And the only good way to resist them is by giving our undivided attention to the truth instead (Eph.6:11).

Therefore let us pursue the things which make for peace (i.e., the truth) and the things by which one may edify another (i.e., the truth).
Romans 14:19 NKJV

4. Characteristics of False Groups

Where false teachers and false teaching come together in a way which attracts a critical mass of dedicated followers, the result is a false group. These false groups go by many names: religion, cult, church, denomination, etc. What all false groups have in common is their underlying allegiance to Satan and their absolute opposition to the truth and to those who teach and follow

the truth. For while true, biblical Christianity follows Jesus Christ, religion, in whatever form, is the devil's primary method for controlling the human race. It is his means, combining false teachers and false teaching in an organizational structure, of deluding and enslaving the human race to do his bidding while at the same time keeping as many as possible from coming to the knowledge of the truth so as to be saved (contrast 1Tim.2:4 with 2Tim.3:7).

(25) [The servant of the Lord must] in humility be correcting those who oppose him, in the hope that God may grant them to repent and acknowledge the truth, (26) and that they may come to their senses, [escaping] from the devil's trap, though they have now been taken captive by him to do his will.

2nd Timothy 2:25-26

As the passage above indicates, even believers are often waylaid by false groups, especially those which purport to be Christian or even perhaps are nominally so: the devil is happy to use any group which neutralizes believers if he is not able to lead them completely astray. This being the case, a short consideration of false groups seems in order here, inasmuch as it is far better to gain some perspective on such organizations theoretically and from a distance rather than personally and through direct encounters.¹⁹

Organization is one of the keys to satanic false religion. The devil knows well that people will do things in a group that they would never do on their own. Corollary to this and equally important is the principle that if enough people are doing something in a highly organized manner, then an air of legitimacy will be lent to the enterprise, a false patina of orthodoxy, in effect, that will help to blind initiates new and old to the fact that God and Christ may in reality be entirely absent and the organization subtly evil in every way. Once enough people become involved in such religious organizations, a momentum and critical mass is achieved that allows pseudo-groups to present to the world a false picture of spirituality (even though in truth God is not in their midst at all).

It is also a common human failing that once we become involved in something, once we have "thrown good money after bad" long enough, we come to have a vested interest in believing the lie we have been sold. For if we admit we have "been had", we not only look foolish, but all of our sacrifices will have been made in vain. For these reasons, not only does Satan take pains to help any successful false teacher organize but also is ever on the lookout for any putatively Christian organization vulnerable to being taken captive.²⁰ Even legitimate, originally

¹⁹ Time and space do not permit here a listing out and critique of the plethora of false groups currently in operation (let alone those of the past), such as, e.g., various religions and different cults along with supposedly or nominally "Christian" groups which are either actually not worthy of the name or at least not accomplishing their true Christian purpose. The reader is directed to 1) the Ichthys email archive, and 2) the Ichthys subject index for information about particular false groups. See also especially in SR 4, section IV.4.a, "Religion and the Occult"; in Peter #13, "Selecting a Cook"; and in Read Your Bible, "Ignorance of the Bible = Recipe for a Cult".

²⁰ In many ways, this is the history of the Church Age, at least when viewed from the standpoint of the devil's reaction to the growth of the Church, and his efforts to insinuate himself,

God-fearing Christian groups can and have historically succumbed to Satan's infiltration: succeeding generations of followers and leaders alike are almost never as dedicated and clear in their thinking as the original founders, and when tradition and organization come to be as or even more important than the Word of God, it becomes an easy matter for the devil to gain a foothold.

There are a number of common factors, present in varying combinations, which connect religions, paganism, cults, the occult, and organized pseudo-Christianity. First and foremost is the fact that by denying the power of the gospel of Jesus Christ, they are fellow participants with the devil in the process of "blinding the minds" of potential believers (2Cor.4:4), and "stealing the seed" of the gospel out of hearts which are seeking God before they can turn to God in Christ and thus be saved (Lk.8:12). Some other derivative characteristics one often finds in Satan's substitutes for the true worship of God through Jesus Christ include:

- Emphasizing "secret doctrines", mysteries, and esoteric materials.
- Seeking to minimize the sting of death, denial of final judgment, denial of hell.
- Substitution of another god or gods, whether of the same or a different name, or so perverting what the Bible says about the one true God that it amounts to the same thing.
- Promises of "becoming a god" or "like God" or otherwise transcending the mortal plane.
- Denial of the need for a Savior, substituting works or reincarnation.
- Focus on ritual and rote worship instead of true communion with God.
- Emphasis on feelings or ecstatic behavior over scripture.
- Odd, alienating, isolating behavior.
- Intolerance of other opinions and dogmatism not based upon true biblical authority.

While it is not practical to go into detail here about all the various false groups currently in existence, let alone the historical ones as well, it will be useful to give a synopsis of the predominant "styles" of such groups so as to better recognize them, an important skill to have, given the devious deceptiveness many of them manifest:

Groups that emphasize other writings over the Bible: There is great appeal to the idea of some "secret knowledge" contained in extra-biblical writings or doctrines (this attraction goes back to the Gnostic heresies of the early Church as we have seen), but whether these be additional "authoritative" books ("The Book of Mormon"), books appended to the true canon of scripture (The "Apocrypha"), or the writings or teachings of any teacher or commentator when these have

his followers and his false teaching therein. Compare the developments in the trends of the seven Church Age eras: see Coming Tribulation 2A: "The Seven Churches".

begun to assume a weight of authority commensurate with or surpassing the scriptures they purport to interpret, these should be avoided along with the groups that disseminate them. The Bible must be our one true standard of faith (2Tim.3:16).

Groups that emphasize a charismatic leader over the Bible: There is natural desire to follow a "special" leader who knows all and is somehow specially "anointed" or ordained by God such as a Moses or an Elijah. That status is easy enough to claim, but it is not in accordance with the manner in which the Spirit is organizing local churches during the Church Age to raise up such individuals in fact.²¹ As Christians, we are to focus upon and to emulate Jesus Christ, and not to make idols of mortal men (1Cor.3:21; Gal.4:17).

Groups that emphasize religious experience over the Bible: The growth of the so-called charismatic movement in Protestant, Roman Catholic, new age and other circles is not difficult to understand. We would all love to see the power of God miraculously exhibited right here and now. Our Lord's contemporaries repeatedly demanded signs from Him in spite of His many genuine miracles, and that is proof enough that such experiences mean nothing when not mixed with faith. While miracles and miraculous "sign gifts" were being given and empowered during the early part of the apostolic era, for the rest of the Church Age, God has chosen to emphasize His completed Word – the Holy Bible.²² It is not therefore to signs or prophecies or visions or miracles or speaking in tongues or the like that we are to attend as we await the glorious return of our Lord, but to Him through His Word. Obsessing about tongues, healing and other "charismatic" preoccupations is, at best, a distraction from the process of spiritual growth (Matt.16:4). It is also incredibly dangerous. When we seek to force such personal religious experiences to happen, we weaken our own conscience, and the illegitimate behavior which seemed wrong to us in the first place, begins to appear normal and acceptable (Eph.4:17-18). The net effect of this process is to isolate us from friends, family and normal Christian circles (a common characteristic of all cult activity), thus making us even more vulnerable to the exploitation and manipulation common in all cults.

The ability to identify – so as to shun – false groups has never been more important. During the Tribulation, a massive falling away from the Christian faith will occur (the Great Apostasy: Matt.24:12; 2Thes.2:3), and at that time, many Christians will be taken in by just such false and non-Biblical teaching (1Tim.4:1ff.; 2Tim.3:1ff.; 2Pet.2:1ff.). But it is not only at that future time when it will be important for believers to have a firm grasp of the scriptures and the principles of truth they contain. Ignorance of what the Bible really says has played a large role in making many Christians vulnerable to the teachings and the tactics of the ever dangerous and ever more numerous false groups at work in these final years of Laodicea, whenever Christians make the mistake of getting involved in one of them.

Successful cults are always highly proficient at "mind control" techniques, and while most of us feel that we are impervious to such things, there are enough case studies to show that relentless

²¹ See BB 6B: Ecclesiology, section II, "The Local Church".

²² See BB 7: Bibliology: the Study of the Bible.

group pressure preying upon our most basic fears, needs – and especially guilt – can be extremely effective. Such pressure can cause even the most self-confident of people to surrender their will to such organizations, especially in times of intense grief or loss, or when being crushed by guilt from some failure or another. Cults and their leaders are very good at appearing to be "angels of light", when in reality they are agents of the devil (2Cor.11:14), and that is particularly the case for those which style themselves as "Christian". Our first line of defense against such persons and organizations must be the Bible, for it is with the Bible that they will often attempt to win us over. So beware of any person or group that:

- downplays the importance of reading the Bible for yourself.
- wants to supervise or take control of your reading of the Bible.
- suggests you read only their "special version" of the Bible (proclaiming other versions "wrong").
- tells you not to read the Bible for yourself at all.

From any false group's point of view, the Bible is a dangerous weapon in your hands, because if it is read with even the tiniest bit of openness of mind, it will eventually contradict their tenets. All false groups inevitably share certain features that a firm grounding in scripture will condemn every time. But for those whose grasp of scripture is less than adequate, false doctrine and cult-like methodology is frequently effective. While often proclaiming the Bible and Christianity at first, false groups are in fact anti-Bible and anti-Christian. Despite their disparate origin, these groups all have nearly identical essential characteristics as might be expected when we take into account that they are all at their base dedicated to furthering Satan's plan (only the degree is at issue). We are reminded of the similarity of the devil's original anti-Biblical ploy in paradise when we examine these four basic characteristics, professing . . .

a. A Separate Society:

Did God really say, "You must not eat from any tree in the garden?"
Genesis 3:1

In Genesis chapter three we find Eve alone in the garden conversing, strange as it may seem, with a snake. Perhaps the novelty of a talking creature should have set off an alarm, but we should not be too surprised at the lapse of judgment. Failing to pay attention to God and His Word makes us all vulnerable to lies. The oddity of the source of the lie (cf. religious rites that seem strange to the uninitiated) is easily overcome by the devil when there is no barrier of truth to block the way. Notice in the passage above that the serpent began his attack by twisting the truth (God had actually only forbidden eating from the tree of knowledge). The devil often starts his attack by misquoting God's truth. Perverting the truth is an important first step for false evangelists, because getting people to accept distortions of the truth is a good way to start divorcing them from the reality they know. This, in turn, makes them increasingly dependent upon the new leader and the new society into which they are being initiated, a separate society that will ultimately alienate them from the normality of their past, until finally they become completely

dependent upon their new masters. The new, "separate" society to which the victim now belongs thrives upon isolation from the real world, and not only because the light of truth and reality exposes the lies upon which it is based: all false groups draw their main strength from separating and isolating their members from normal society, to one degree or another (i.e., the difference between Roman Catholicism, Mormonism, and the Branch Davidians in this regard is merely a matter of magnitude).

Once the resistance of Biblical truth is overcome, it is a central part of the strategy of false groups to isolate their victims and new recruits from their friends, family members, support systems and from the normal world in general. Isolation of the new recruit is achieved by:

Intolerant Dogmatism: Beware of groups which claim to have a monopoly on the truth and will not tolerate any deviation from their doctrines or any discussion of their tenets. People who are positively certain of the truth of what they say do have a definite appeal, but their certainty and dogmatism do not necessarily make what they say true. False groups will often put the matter to the potential recruit in this way: They are the "only ones" with the truth and it cannot be found anywhere else; this is your "last chance" to be saved, and unless you grab it, then hell awaits you (a version of pressure salesmanship that is all too often effective). Once within the group, however, there is no real seeking of truth, since they have already found it. Yet somehow it is impossible to get a full exposition of this truth of theirs immediately so that it cannot be fully examined or tested (all things will be revealed "later"). And if one dares to question or challenge the dogma, then that person becomes the enemy. These tactics are isolating, because they force the initiate to "go along in order to get along". And it generally is not long until he/she surrenders their will as a result.

Odd Customs: Beware of groups that sport unusual dress, exhibit strange behavior, and affect an odd vocabulary or manner of speaking (including chants, for example). Besides appearing exotic and therefore strangely intriguing to some potential members, these patterns of behavior serve another important function in the strategy of the false group: they serve to isolate the individual from the rest of society which does not dress, act or speak in the same way. As the new recruit begins to adopt the manners of the group, people outside are alienated from him (or at least tend to keep a greater distance). Now the other members (who dress, act and talk as he has begun to) are the only ones like him and the only ones who fully accept him, and the process of isolation moves forward.

Emotional Excess: Beware of any emphasis on feelings over facts. False groups are masters at using feelings of loneliness, guilt, inadequacy – even an honest desire for truth and self-improvement – as levers to pry the potential recruit out of his normal environment. Experiencing emotional turmoil does not mean that those who have managed to bring it to the surface are therefore honest, or righteous or in possession of the truth. It only means that they are skilled at emotional manipulation. In the same way, the expression of emotion in an effusive or excessive way does not necessarily mean that one has found the truth or the "right way". Displays of emotional ecstasy, besides being enjoyed by many people and tending to reinforce the sense that they "have found the truth", have this additional effect: they tend to isolate the person from main-stream society, as friends, acquaintances and sometimes even family members have a tendency to withdraw from these extremes of behavior which they understandably consider

bizarre.

Physical Separation: Beware of any group that demands you sell your possessions and move to another state. This may seem laughably obvious, but it is amazing how many people have succumbed to such tactics to the point of embarking upon just such tragic courses of action. Certainly, this is not usually the first step of cult-like indoctrination, and many false groups do not take things quite so far, but many poor souls are brought to this point with much greater alacrity than we or they would have imagined. When one is not standing firm upon the Rock of truth, when one does not put what the Bible says above what man says, then it is not a far stretch to see how the group leader (or leadership) and his word can easily become "the truth" in the minds of their victims. The process often starts with the leader demanding that he approve the new follower's decisions (even the most minute ones), until the time comes when almost all independent decision-making has been done away with. Once a person has been spiritually isolated (from the truth of scripture), it is no great task to isolate him emotionally, and, eventually, effect a complete physical isolation from family, friends, and the world he once knew.

When we lose our anchor of truth – what God says to us in the Bible – it is inevitable that we will drift into other currents of influence, the end of which may possibly be the shipwreck of our faith in a separate society whose end and intent is evil (1Tim.1:19; Heb.2:1).

b. A Self-Righteousness:

"You will surely not die," the serpent said to the woman.
Genesis 3:4

A central part of false doctrine concerns the issue of God's judgment upon sin and sinners. The immutable righteousness of God and the inevitability of judgment is an indispensable part of the gospel (cf. Acts 10:42; 24:25), because it explains why Christ had to die in our place (to satisfy, or propitiate God's perfect justice: Rom.3:22-26). As Christians, we are saved from the judgment due our sins by relying on Christ and His work on our behalf. To deny that there is a final judgment (and no hell), is, in effect, to deny that God is a just God (He can overlook sin if He chooses, would be the implication). It is also to deny that mankind has any need for a Savior (if sin can be dismissed so easily). Our God is a loving God and a forgiving God, but His forgiveness is based upon Christ's payment of the penalty for our sins. To reject this aspect of the gospel is to reject the gospel itself. Groups that promise righteousness and eternal life apart from belief in Christ – usually through "good" works of some sort – are essentially denying the existence of a truly righteous God, just as the serpent did when he called God a liar in the passage above. To attain eternal life (or whatever their equivalent may be) anti-biblical groups universally substitute some system of self-righteousness. Their version of heaven or paradise can only be achieved through an onerous system of works (rituals, good deeds, self-sacrifice, etc.), works that are ultimately an insult to God who offered His Son that we might possess true righteousness by faith in Him (Rom.4:1ff.).

c. A Secret Doctrine:

"For God knows that when you eat of it, your eyes will be opened."

Genesis 3:5a

It is a common quirk of our human nature that the prospect of knowing something few others know is a tempting one. Satan promised Eve what all cults promise their prospects: initiation into the mysteries of the universe, the "secret doctrines" available only to the select, enlightened few (cf. Rev.2:24). This aspect of the modus operandi of false groups was particularly prominent in antiquity in Gnosticism, a movement, as we have seen above, which claimed possession of such secret knowledge as the means of attaining spirituality and spiritual advancement.

It is well to remember that while the lies of all false groups may seem manifestly ridiculous when viewed from a safe and sanitary academic perspective, for the potential victim, the hidden and forbidden nature of the secret doctrines enhances the temptation, as does the committed and dogmatic adherence of the society of "believers" who are doling them out cautiously and selectively. In such carefully constructed situations, the very dogmatism of the group's members can impress and command allegiance. The problem, of course, is that such dogmatism comes without the authority of the truth and always also without documentation. The Bible does not change and can be read and checked "to see if these things are so" (Acts 17:11). The doctrines of false groups, on the other hand, so far from being open to scrutiny, are usually difficult to pin down, are almost always changeable, and ever open to fresh "revelation" from the infallible leader or leadership. The Bible, being the very Word of God, is *the* authority for biblical Christianity, not any single person or group of people or their writings or "visions". If it really is the Bible that is being taught, this can be checked, this can be verified. When such is not the case, we can be sure that it is a matter of a false group intent on blinding the eyes of their followers rather than opening them up to the actual truth.

d. A Substitute for God:

"and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."

Genesis 3:5b

The Hebrew word for God in Genesis 3:5b here is *Elohim*, a plural of majesty of the word *El*, meaning "mighty one" or "god". *Elohim* is the most common word in the Hebrew Bible for God, and stresses the preeminence of our God as well as the plurality of the persons of the Godhead (the Father, Son and Holy Spirit) in His single, unique essence. Occasionally, however, *Elohim* is used as a true plural for "gods" (as in the gods of the heathen nations: Ex.20:3), and it is likely that this is what Satan was implying to Eve: "you will be *gods*".

To be like God, or even to become a god or a god-like being, or to become a "saint" worthy of supplication seems a fairly unbelievable offer to make, yet the offer to Eve was just the first and by far not the only time that Satan has used this ploy. There are any number of groups operating in the United States today which really do make this promise in no uncertain terms – not, it is true, to non-members whose pliability has not yet been determined, but eventually, as the victim is sucked deeper and deeper into their vortex.

Analogous to being promised divine status is the relatively new twist of becoming part of an extra-terrestrial civilization. And occasionally, the transcendence of humanity by evolving

consciousness is promised. But whatever form "becoming like gods" takes, implicit in such an ambition is the effective replacement or supplanting of God. For if man can become God's equal in every way, then, of course, God would no longer be God relative to the new "man-god". It would be hard to find a single page of the Bible which would not contradict (in tone or in text) such a blasphemous notion, and even the basic common sense human beings are born with cries out against such an unbelievable claim (Rom.2:1-16). Yet Eve has not been alone in succumbing to the temptation. Nor was she the first in the realm of creatures to lust after such an impossible object, for the desire to be "like God" and ultimately to replace Him is the arrogant essence of the sin that corrupted the heart of Satan (Is.14:12-15; Ezek.28:12-19).

Therefore in this final point, we see a principal that we have been building up to from the start: false groups, cults and anti-Biblical religions are always, in their starkest fundamentals, embodiments of Satan's essential philosophy, of his essential religion: at its base all false religion is idolatry and standing behind the idol, craving our worship, is the devil. After all, if one is not worshiping the one, true God, who is being worshiped? Christ said, "He who is not with Me is against Me (Matt.12:30)," and He said this while responding to those who were accusing Him of using the devil's help to cast out demons. Satan, Paul tells us, masquerades as an angel of light (2Cor.11:14), and what, after all, would the devil wish to be called by his worshipers if not God? If he must falsely promise a share of divinity to his potential prey, why not? Was he not so bold as to even offer our Lord all the kingdoms of this world, an offer he would not and could not honor in any case (Matt.4:9)?

Examination of the idolatrous religions of antiquity yields similar results. At the top of the pantheon is almost always a bright, shining "sky-god" (e.g. Zeus/Jupiter) who has replaced an older "crooked" god (e.g. Chronos). It is easy to promise goodness, light, knowledge, brotherhood, no judgment and no judgmental condemnation of wrong, but behind such cult-systems past and present is a dark and sinister reality. Instead of sharing in divinity and becoming God, those who wed themselves to such evil only succeed in becoming the servants of a condemned creature of the one and only true God, and ultimately sharing in the devil's condemnation:

(18) For by pouring forth [statements] of outrageous folly, [by appealing to] fleshly lusts, and by making use of every [sort of] sensuality, [these false teachers] entice those who [previously] had truly escaped from those who live [such] lives of deception (i.e., the false teachers). (19) [These false teachers] promise [weak believers] freedom [from a disciplined life], though they themselves are truly slaves of corruption. For by what[ever] one is mastered, to this is he enslaved.

2nd Peter 2:18-19

So why do people begin to follow false groups? Often it is because they are given the sense that they are missing out on "the truth" (an impression which organized, apparently righteous and blissful members are practiced at creating). In fact, it takes a strong and solid grasp of what the Bible actually says to resist religious and cult proselytism on its own ground when operating according to its own tactics. "Wolves in sheep's clothing" are indeed plentiful in our day. They may seem nice and even spiritual at first, but the end result of believing their lies instead of the Bible leads only to spiritual disaster.

5. False Teachers and False Teaching throughout the Church Age

Having considered the problem of false teaching and false teachers in general terms (i.e., the issue of "religion" generally), a word is necessary here about the development of false teaching diachronically over the course of the Church Age as it has affected the church-visible specifically (i.e., groups which are at least putatively "Christian"). The first thing to note is that enthusiasm for the truth among believers has been on a long-term trend downward ever since the apostles left the scene. While there have been notable exceptions to this rule (the courageous response of believers to the Roman era persecutions and the Reformation, e.g.), from the era of Ephesus which followed the apostolic period to the era of Laodicea today, zeal for God's truth has been on the wane, generally and collectively speaking.

The true problem in the church-visible today, therefore, is really not false teaching at all, but a lack of desire on the part of most believers for genuine, solid, orthodox, in-depth teaching of the truth. So in practical terms, a believer today who is intent on bucking the Laodicean trend faces two immediate issues: 1) finding a genuine source of truth; 2) keeping lukewarmness on the part of others at arms length so as not to let it negatively affect one's own positive approach. The two go hand in hand, because if a believer settles for aligning him or herself with a mediocre church, for example, then of necessity such believers will find themselves in close contact with others who do not share the same zeal for spiritual growth, progress and production. And it is very rare for the good to influence the bad rather than the other way around. In such circumstances, the good tends to become watered down and reach the same level of insipidness with which it is associating. On the other hand, separating from compromise and pursuing the truth in the right way which may require sacrifices will of its own accord result in less contact with those who have chosen to squander the precious time and resources we have in this life which ought to be focused on the Lord and what pleases Him – if we have hopes for a good report from Him and a correspondingly bountiful reward on that great day to come.

If a liar and deceiver comes and says, "I will prophesy for you plenty of wine and beer," he would be just the prophet for this people!

Micah 2:11 NIV

Do not be deceived: bad associations corrupt good morals.

1st Corinthians 15:33

(6) Of this sort are those who [even in our own day] worm their way into households and take captive the [spiritually] weak who are loaded down with sins, leading them astray with various lusts, (7) [victims who consequently,] though always learning, are never able to accept the truth.

2nd Timothy 3:6-7

(3) For the time will come when they will not put up with sound teaching, but will [instead], desiring to have their ears scratched, heap up by their own [devices] teachers to match their specific lusts. (4) And they will turn their ears from the truth and resort instead to fictions.

2nd Timothy 4:3-4

Without fuel, fires burn out. Without a demand for false teaching, it would likewise soon disappear. But there is much demand for all manner of falsity in Laodicea, making the twofold problem mentioned above all that much more significant for those believers who are determined to do what the Lord wants us to do. On the one hand, finding a good source of truth, a good place where spiritual growth is possible, is becoming increasingly difficult – especially since so many "ministries" are in fact doing more harm than good (1Cor.11:17; cf. Is.1:11-12; Amos 5:21, Mal.1:10). On the other hand, the danger stemming from associating with lukewarm and wrongly motivated believers is also on the rise – especially as these individuals understandably tend to gravitate to false teaching of one sort or another, seeking out what they want to hear as opposed to what the Lord wants them learn.

In chapters two and three of the book of Revelation, our Lord gives specific messages to the "seven churches" which, as we have seen, represent the seven eras of the Church Age from the departure of the apostles to the return of our Lord.²³ Within those seven eras, we find chronicled the progress of Satan's efforts to attack, infiltrate and neutralize Christ's Church, with the devil's instruments variously described (i.e., Nicolaitans, Jezebel, synagogue of Satan, false apostles, etc.). This particular thrust of Satan's efforts against believers is to be distinguished from his worldwide efforts to ensnare unbelieving mankind through a whole host of false religions, cults, and philosophies. The devil takes special care in directing his attacks on the church-visible in hopes of undermining the true Church of Jesus Christ.

The true Church, after all, cannot be seen with our eyes.²⁴ The true Church is composed of those who are genuinely believers in Jesus Christ, His true disciples who have dedicated their lives to following Him. The true Church is not a building, nor can it be defined in terms of physical structures. It is not an organization, nor can it be defined in terms of specific associations or bureaucracies. The true Church is not for man to define or even to be able to perceive with complete certainty, for only the Lord knows who are truly His, and who are really false (2Tim.2:19; cf. Jn.10:14; 1Cor.8:3; Gal.4:9). Even within the elite circle of the original twelve apostles, one "was a devil" (Jn.6:70-71), and our Lord's implied admonition to us with that reference constitutes an important lesson for all who genuinely believe in Him: be careful of assuming what only God can know for sure. For within even the most seemingly orthodox of organizations, and even in the most zealous of Church eras there have been false teachers, false doctrines, and false Christians. And we can say of a certainty that our adversary has made the infiltration, perversion, and destruction of every true Christian group and organization a very high priority. This has been the case throughout Church history as can be seen from this synopsis of our Lord's descriptions of "the false" during the seven Church eras:

Ephesus: ca. 70 to 82 A.D. "The Era of Transition" (Rev.2:1-7): False apostles rejected; Nicolaitans hated: the false kept out of the Church (incipient Gnosticism rejected by true believers, but attention to the truth begins to atrophy).

²³ See Coming Tribulation 2B: The Seven Churches.

²⁴ See BB 6B: Ecclesiology.

Smyrna: ca. 82 to 442 A.D. "The Era of Persecution" (Rev.2:8-11): Slandered by the Synagogue of Satan: the false attacking from outside of the Church (in issues of life or death, believers prefer the latter to compromise, but overall attention to the truth continues to decline).

Pergamum: ca. 442 to 802 A.D. "The Era of Accommodation" (Rev.2:12-17): You have Balaam and Balak: the false accommodated within the Church (as Christianity becomes the "official religion", compromises with the truth are made across the board with pagan elements within for the sake of expansion and false unity).

Thyatira: ca. 802 to 1162 A.D. "The Era of Compromise" (Rev.2:18-29): Jezebel: the false acquiesced to and in turn compromises the Church from within (the church-visible rots from within through lack of attention to the truth and through false teaching now being promulgated by its unbelieving leadership).

Sardis: ca. 1162 to 1522 A.D. "The Era of Corruption" (Rev.3:1-6): No group mentioned: the true excluded by the false from the visible, apparent "church" (during the Reformation, believers leave dead Roman Catholicism behind, which has been completely coopted by the devil).

Philadelphia: ca. 1522 to 1882 A.D. "The Era of Revival" (Rev.3:7-13): Acknowledged by the Synagogue of Satan: the true has now separated from the false (reformed denominations solidify in separation from the false church, but return to doctrinal purity is narrow and incremental, and creedal sclerosis quickly sets in).

Laodicea: ca. 1882 to 2026 A.D. "The Era of Degeneration" (Rev.3:14-22): No group mentioned: the false has now once more infiltrated and blunted the true Church throughout the church-visible to such a degree that false and true have mostly melted into one indistinguishable, lukewarm mass (conditions grow increasingly ripe for the Tribulation and the Great Apostasy).

The synopsis above should be sufficient to show that in every era of the Church there has been a struggle between the false (satanic infiltration of organized Christianity) and the true (genuine believers in and followers of Jesus Christ, irrespective of organization). Not everyone who has applied the name "Christian" to himself has been so in fact (a principle which still applies today), and, on the other hand, not everyone who has found himself outside of what is seen by the world as "legitimate Christianity" has for that reason been excluded from the true Body of Christ, His genuine Church. Throughout every generation and every Church era there have been Christians who have run counter to the trend and have placed the Lord and His truth ever before them (Ps.16:8). The fact that today it is difficult to discover anything not lukewarm and therefore to distinguish between the truly good (which is nigh on impossible to find) and the great mass of indifference to truth (though it goes by a myriad of names and occurs in a plethora of forms) is thus merely the end result of the centuries-long trend which Revelation chapters two and three chronicle.

6. False Teachers and False Teaching in the Tribulation

As a result of the process described in the previous section, the church-visible, not to mention the world, is primed for Satan's final offensive. That offensive will hinge in no small part on the

worldwide religion which the devil will institute during the Tribulation, a syncretic organization which will accept all manner of worship and worshipers – except for true Christians and true, biblical Christianity. Antichrist, the pseudo-Christ (as his name indicates in addition to being opposed to Christ), will easily coopt lukewarm institutional Christianity into his own religious movement – in fact it is likely that it will take the lead since the beast will falsely proclaim himself to be "the true Christ" (cf. Jn.5:43). Only those solid in their faith are likely to be able to resist the pressures, ignore the miracles, and refrain from the enormous wave of enthusiasm and popularity which will attend antichrist and his movement. But without attention to the truth now, resistance to the powerful forces of deceit about to be unleashed at that time will be all that much more difficult. Hence the importance of resisting the trend to lukewarmness today and insisting on determined dedication to learning, believing and applying the truth of the Word of God *now* – while there is still opportunity to do so.

And when He sat down on the Mount of Olives, His disciples came to Him privately, saying, "Tell us when these things will be, and what the sign is of your return and of the end of the age?" And Jesus answered and said, "See to it that no one *deceives* you. For many will come in my Name, saying, 'I am the Christ', and they will deceive many people."

Matthew 24:3-5

"For [during the Tribulation] false Christs and false prophets will arise and will perform great miracles (lit., "signs") and wonders [sufficient] to *deceive* even the elect, if [that were] possible."

Matthew 24:24

(9) [Antichrist's] appearance [will come about] through Satan's empowerment [and will be] accompanied by every [sort of] false miracle, both signs and portents, (10) and by every [sort of] unrighteous *deception* [designed] for those who are perishing, [namely those who will believe these lies] because they did not open themselves up to the love of the truth so as to be saved.

2nd Thessalonians 2:9-10

And the great dragon, the ancient serpent, the one called Devil and Satan, was thrown down; even he who *deceives* the entire world was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him.

Revelation 12:9

(13) And [the beast's false prophet] [will] perform great miracles (lit., "signs"), even making fire come down from heaven to the earth in front of everyone. (14) And he [will] *deceive* those who dwell upon the earth on account of the miracles (lit., "signs") which have been given to him to perform in the presence of the beast, even commanding the inhabitants of the earth to make an image of the beast, [that is] of him who received the [deadly] stroke of the sword and [yet] came [back] to life. (15) And it was given to him to provide a spirit for the image of the beast so that the image might speak, and [it was also given to him] to bring it about that as many as refused to worship the image of the beast might be put to death.

Revelation 13:13-15

And the beast was seized and the false prophet with him (the one who had performed the signs before him with which he had *deceived* those who took the sign of the beast and worshiped his image). The two were thrown alive into the lake of fire which burns with sulphur.

Revelation 19:20

[The angel with the key to the Abyss] threw [Satan] into the Abyss and closed it, putting his seal upon it, so that [the devil] might not *deceive* the nations any longer until the thousand years had elapsed. After this, he must be released for a short while.

Revelation 20:3

And when the thousand years were completed, Satan was released from his prison, and he came forth to *deceive* the nations which [reside] in the four regions (lit., "corners") of the earth, Gog and Magog (whose number is as the sand of the sea) in order to marshal them together for war.

Revelation 20:7-8

Some of the factors which will contribute to the ease with which the devil's regent, antichrist, will be able to coopt organized Christianity (along with all other established religions) include:

- a. The Complacency of the present-day "Church-visible": In addition to the fact that many Christians today are not particularly interested in the Word of God and that many are not carrying on their Christian lives in a particularly sanctified way, a large proportion of those who belong to "Christian" organizations are not believers at all. These twin dangers of complacency and pseudo-Christianity will contribute in no small measure to furthering the beast's efforts at removing the organized church-visible as any sort of impediment to the establishment of his one-world religion.
- b. The Sclerotic Nature of the present-day "Church-visible": Most of organized Christianity today very much resembles the spiritually dead Judaism of our Lord's day, likewise teaching salvation by works whether overtly or subtly, thus denigrating faith in Christ alone (Matt.23:23; cf. Eph.2:8-9); adding false strictures to the truth and thereby obscuring that truth (cf. Is.29:13; Matt.15:9; Mk.7:7; Col.2:22b); presenting a superficial "holiness" which is in fact devoid of all true spirituality (Matt.23:5; 23:27; cf. 2Tim.3:5).
- c. The Lukewarmness of Believers within Organized Christianity: As we have observed many times now, the supply problems when it comes to truth in the church-visible go hand in hand with an equally problematic demand problem. While it is easy to blame churches for not providing any substantive teaching, to some degree they are providing the Laodicean believers attending them with what they really want. They must be. Otherwise these believers would "vote with their feet" and find some venue where they can be fed spiritually. Complacency regarding the truth is complacency about God and His grace to us in the gift of His Son. This is not only the height of ingratitude to the One who paid the ultimate price to rescue us from the lake of fire; it is also a highly dangerous thing because spiritual lukewarmness makes any

Christian weak in faith. At no time will such spiritual deficiency put believers at greater risk than during the soon to come Tribulation.

d. The Full Unleashing of the Mystery of Lawlessness:

(6) Even now you know what it is that restrains [antichrist's arrival] so that he will be revealed [only] in his own time. (7) For *the mystery of lawlessness* is already at work – [and] it is only the Restraint [who keeps things in check, and will] until He moves out of the way. (8) And then the lawless one will be revealed . . .
2nd Thessalonians 2:6-8a (cf. Jn.8:36)

The Tribulation will be much more difficult for believers than the present time for a variety of reasons, but one of the key reasons for that higher level of difficulty will be the abeyance of the Holy Spirit's restraining ministry which has, hitherto, kept many satanic trends in check. This is not to say that the devil has not enjoyed success in stirring up war, violence and political upheaval in the past. One only has to open any history book to see it. But, up until the beginning of the Tribulation, God has protected mankind from absolute worldwide tyranny and any universal removal of human freedom. History is filled with examples of where such tyranny and slavery has been able to oppress entire countries or regions, but God has never previously allowed this lawlessness – contrary to God's laws of nationalism and basic legal rights meant to ensure the freedom of the human race to choose for or against Him – to reach absolute levels simultaneously around the globe. The Tribulation will be different. Antichrist will be allowed to impose a worldwide satanic regime which by fiat will make worshiping the one, true God illegal even as it makes worshiping the devil through his son obligatory. This level of evil, the fulfillment of the "mystery of lawlessness" which is already at work but still being kept in check, will only be possible because the Spirit allows it. Believers will not lose the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. But the world will be, for the first time, without His blessed restraining ministry, and this fact will contribute in no small measure to making the Tribulation the terrible period it will be.

For at that time there will be a great tribulation such as has never occurred from the beginning of the world until now, and [such as] will never again occur thereafter.
Matthew 24:21 (cf. Dan.12:1; Mk.13:19)

Indeed, in order to demonstrate in the most perspicuous possible way the distinction between those who belong to Him and those who do not, God will facilitate the rush towards allegiance to antichrist on the part of all who in their heart of hearts prefer the devil to Himself, just as He did in the case of the Pharaoh of the exodus).

(8) And then the lawless one (i.e., antichrist) will be revealed, [that same one] whom the Lord Jesus will slay with the breath of His mouth and destroy when He appears at His [glorious] return (9) – [that same lawless one] whose appearance [will come about] through Satan's empowerment [and will be] accompanied by every [sort of] false miracle, both signs and portents, (10) and by every [sort of] unrighteous deception [designed] for those who are perishing, [namely those who will believe these lies] because they did not open themselves up to the love for the truth so as to be saved. (11) And for this [very]

reason God is going to send upon them an *empowerment of error* (i.e., facilitating it; cf. Ex.14:4) so that they may believe the lie, (12) in order that they may be condemned, [even all those] who have not believed the truth but have [instead] approved of unrighteousness.

2nd Thessalonians 2:8-12

e. The dearth of Orthodox Bible teaching: While the unleashing of lawlessness and the consequent degeneration of the behavior of unbelievers will only affect believers indirectly (by increasing the external pressures on faith), the coming dearth of genuine Bible teaching anticipated during the Tribulation will have a direct, negative impact contributing to apostasy. We may expect that the presently lukewarm members of the Body of Christ will be the most adversely affected by this coming famine of spiritual food. Having been complacent about solid spiritual nutrition in good times, they will find turning to substantive Bible teaching in hard times a difficult transition, especially considering that it will be very hard to find (cf. 1Sam.3:1; 28:6; Prov.29:18; Mic.3:4-7).

"Behold, days are coming", says the Lord, "when I shall send a famine upon the earth. Not a famine of bread nor a drought of water but [a dearth] of hearing the words of the Lord. [Men] will stagger from sea to sea, and will wander from the north to the east to seek the Word of the Lord, but they will not find [it]".

Amos 8:11

It is also the case that antichrist's worldwide religion will make it very difficult for those Christians who truly follow and worship God to survive physically (Rev.13:11-15). Therefore it is not amiss to assume that the beast and his false prophet will add to this physical persecution a spiritual one as well, making it illegal and next to impossible for believers to assemble or share with each other the fruits of their spiritual gifts. Nothing, of course, is impossible for God, and so we can be confident that we will never lack the essential spiritual food we need for our spiritual well-being. That does not mean that we will have it as good then as we have it now, however, and this is certainly something to keep in mind when we forgo opportunities to take in the Word of God, opportunities which are going to be much rarer in that future day.

f. The Exponential Rise in False Teaching: False teaching, the subject of this extended supplement, has, as we have seen, always been a problem for the Church. But this problem will be exponentially more severe during the Tribulation. Our Lord's teachings in particular are filled with warnings about the danger of deception and the need for alertness during that troubling period ahead (Matt.24:5-6; 24:11; 24:24-27; 24:42; 25:13; Mk.13:5-6; 13:9; 13:23; 13:33; 13:35; 13:37; Lk.12:40; 17:23; 21:8; 21:36; cf. 2Thes.2:3-12; 1Tim.4:1-5; 2Tim.3:1-13).

1) The False Teaching of the Tribulation will be Exceptionally Persuasive:

While the pressure of rampant lawless behavior will push believers toward apostasy and the famine of spiritual sustenance will reduce their resistance to apostasy, the false teaching of the Tribulation will exert a tremendous pull on believers who are not solidly grounded in the truth. The devil has always gone to great lengths to make his false doctrines attractive, and all who buy into them are said to be caught in his snare (2Tim.2:25-26). However, the conditions which will

exist during the Tribulation (lawlessness, empowerment of error, shortage of Bible teaching, general hardships of an unprecedented nature, etc.) will definitely contribute to the receptiveness of the world to Satan's grand offensive against the truth of God, and will help to create the complete spiritual polarization which is destined to strip away any middle ground so that the Lord's "sword" may clearly divide the world into two main camps (Lk.12:49-53): believers and those committed to the devil's pseudo-Messiah.

In conceptual terms, satanic false teaching is, as we have seen, a progression. First, the devil undermines God's authority, convincing his victims that God is untruthful, unable or unwilling to help, and, in general unnecessary and irrelevant in the face of "more important" issues (cf. the assurances given to Eve, "You will not die"; Gen.3:4). Next, Satan advances the idea that we are, can be, or will be like God if only we follow his program instead of God's (cf. the tempting of Eve, "You will be like God"; Gen.3:5). Finally, in the case of those who buy into the devil's first two lies, Satan attempts to convince them that by carrying out their desires (and the devil's will) they are actually helping God (cf. Eve's participation in the temptation of Adam; Gen.3:6).

The first lie, motivated by greed and fear, focuses our attention upon attaining temporal security here and now (instead of on the issue of eternal life), thus ignoring the key fact of our mortality and the need to find a solution from God alone. The second lie, motivated by subjective pride, focuses our attention upon ourselves, seeking to establish and affirm our own glory (instead of on our need for forgiveness), thus ignoring the issue of our essential sinfulness and the need for a Savior. The third lie, motivated by objective arrogance, focuses our attention upon our own deeds and accomplishments, seeking to demonstrate our ability to "do good" apart from God (instead of realizing that there is nothing we can do to help God), thus ignoring the issue of our own flawed character and our need for rebirth through Jesus Christ.

The devil tells us that it is this short life and this world which are important, not the triumph over death in eternal life in the world to come through Jesus Christ. The devil tells us to esteem ourselves, instead of realizing that we are sinful and in need of someone to wash away our sins. The devil tells us that what we do is good, while in truth our efforts to "better the world" apart from God are serving Satan's cause. This three-fold system of deception has many aspects, but it should be noted that Satan's ministers inevitably come back to these same three themes in all of their craftily concocted false teachings, preaching the material instead of the spiritual, self-worth instead of total depravity, and doing good as they define it instead of truly serving God by (1) forswearing any love for the world; (2) embracing salvation through the cross of Christ; and (3) following after Jesus Christ in spiritual growth, progress and production.

(24) Then Jesus said to His disciples, "If anyone wants to follow Me, let him [first] abandon his own aspirations, [then] pick up his cross and follow Me."
Matthew 16:24 (cf. Mk.8:34; Lk.9:23)

We can expect Satan's false religion of the Tribulation to make full use of the above discussed progression as never before. The activities of antichrist, his success and pseudo-miracles, will persuade many that he and his worldly system are the hope for the troubled world of that time and that God's promises are untrue and His prohibitions of no account ("You will not die"; cf. 2Pet.3:1-18). The promises made by this false religion will be as enormous as they are egregious

– offering life from the dead and semi-divine status in the same way that the beast will appear to have been "resurrected" ("You will be like God"; cf. 2Thes.2:9-12). Finally, in turning the fury, frustration and blood-lust of the world against the family of God, Satan will have fully convinced his followers that they are "doing good" (willing participation in the destruction of others with self-righteous satisfaction; cf. Jn.16:2).

A further common element in all three phases of the progression of the satanic system of lies, both conceptually and specifically in its tribulational manifestations, is the fact that the devil is always careful to proffer things that people actually want (whether their desire is an open one or well-hidden from the world's eyes):

a) A tangible and visible solution to the political and economic problems of the day, especially if such a solution promises benefits for each individual in a personal way, is a common aspect of all strongman totalitarian movements, and we can expect this to be even more so the case during the Tribulation to the extent that the problems and discomfort of that time will be more acute than ever before: God promises to take care of His people forever as well as providing for our essential needs day by day; Satan promises abundance in this world for those who forsake God and follow Him (of course the devil is lying and will never keep his promises of provision whereas God is ever faithful and ever true, but following God takes faith).

b) A promise of immortality and/or promotion to demigod status has long been a feature in many religions which operate on a salvation by works basis, and we can expect during the Tribulation when the incidence of death and terror will be higher than ever before that this appeal will be all the more persuasive, especially since on the one hand failure to join the beast's religion will lead to persecution, and, on the other hand, antichrist's apparent resuscitation from the dead and performance of miraculous signs will seem to give credence to this message: God promises an eternal life with Himself and His Son for His people who wait patiently for that day; Satan promises longevity in this world for those who forsake God and follow him (of course the devil is lying and could never keep his promise of deliverance from death whereas God is ever faithful and His promises of eternal life absolutely true, but following God takes hope).

c) A scapegoat whose destruction is to be considered an act of good is a very appealing prospect for the unbelieving world and a common element in political and religious movements that have sought world-domination, and we can expect it to be all the more so during the Tribulation when there will be both a more integrated and universal world-order than ever before and when the horrific nature of the events of that time will seem to cry out for an appropriate victim to blame: God commands us to love even our enemies; the devil claims that we are doing good when we destroy those who oppose him (of course the devil is lying and has no true concern for those who forsake God and destroy themselves by helping him, whereas God has shown us the true way to live, but following God in this way takes love).

2) Antichrist's Tribulational False Religion will be Exceptionally Persuasive:

Attractiveness will be a second feature of the beast's religion which will lend momentum to the persuasiveness of the false teaching destined to be endemic during the Tribulation. There are any number of close analogies today to the phenomenon of this future religious movement

prophesied to mimic true, biblical Christianity in many persuasive ways. Nearly all non-Christian religions share common characteristics which present parallels carefully designed by Satan to lure human beings away from the one true God. Almost all call upon "God" or gods; almost all have a "sanctified place of worship", a collection of holy writings, a cadre of trained priests (or teachers, or administrators, etc.), and a colorful collection of religious rituals and paraphernalia; almost all claim to be a way to God, and almost all promise some sort of solution or answer to the ultimate concern of human mortality. Such spin-offs from the true, biblical worship of God, both cults and spiritually dead denominations alike, are particularly dangerous for new or as yet immature believers who are in the process of seeking God. For in many cases it takes wisdom, discernment, diligent reading of the scriptures, and often much digging into the real beliefs of such groups to be able to see clearly that what they are worshiping is in fact not really God – for the true worship of God requires a genuine and unpolluted faith in His Son, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ (Jn.14:6).

What is true today we can expect to be even more so the case with the antichrist's religion during the Tribulation. It will not spring forth out of nowhere, but will be preceded instead by a worldwide ecumenical movement in which most "Christian" denominations will doubtless participate. We can expect both the precursor religious movement and the beast's religion proper (which will visibly take over this movement in the middle of the Tribulation) to be highly syncretic. That is to say, both the prototype and the revealed satanic final form (wherein the mark of the beast will identify the participants) will in all probability include, tolerate, and encourage virtually all religious practices and beliefs as being a part of "the holy", with exclusivity and dogmatism (e.g., claiming that faith in Jesus is the only way of salvation and that the Bible is the only inspired Word of God) being just about the only views not tolerated. In this way, those who are determined to follow the truth wherever it leads will be relegated to the fringes of society, while, on the other hand, the magnetic draw of being part of this all-inclusive and exciting new development will be tremendously powerful.

We can, of course, see the same trend already at work in our own day in a very similar way. But during the Tribulation this trend will accelerate, and the ecumenical movement will gel to a degree and with a speed difficult for us to envision or anticipate at present (especially in the absence of Holy Spirit's ministry of restraint: 2Thes.2:6-7). During the second phase of the tribulational false religion's development, that is, the establishment of antichrist (and Satan) as the overt object of worship, intense persecution of those who resist will produce the final installment of apostasy, driving into the arms of the beast those whose faith is not strong enough to endure the challenge of potential martyrdom.

A brief perusal of some of the salient characteristics of this future religion should suffice to demonstrate its potential for persuasiveness:

a) It will mimic Christianity: A very large part of the deceptive element of the tribulational false religion will be the deliberate lengths to which it will go to give the appearance of being "true Christianity". This is nothing new, of course. One can easily point to half a dozen major denominations and many cults today which claim to be the only true Church of Christ (even though Christ's true Church is composed of all who have faith in and are faithful to Him, quite apart from any organizational affiliation at all). However, two major points will mark out the

beast's tribulational religion as significantly different. First, during its ecumenical opening phase this false religion will coopt and incorporate many groups and denominations that do include Christians (at least at that point). Only after the Tribulation's mid-point, when antichrist takes his seat in the rebuilt temple in Jerusalem and unveils his new religion in all its sordid particulars will the practice of true Christianity within this polyglot accretion of ecumenicalism become completely impossible.

Secondly, during that second phase, with the help of his false prophet (and of Satan's power) antichrist will portray himself as the fulfillment of all world religion, and of Christianity and Judaism in particular. For he will be the devil's "Messiah" (hence the name "anti-Christ", the prefix conveying the meaning of a substitute as well as an opponent: cf. 1Jn.2:18-23; 4:3; 2Jn.1:7), taking his seat in God's own temple in his new world-capital of Jerusalem (2Thes.2:4), and proclaiming himself to be "the Christ" (Matt.24:5; 24:23-24; Lk.21:8). The parallelisms do not end here, but suffice it to say that the level of deceit which the false trinity of Satan, antichrist, and the false prophet will employ against the inhabitants of the earth at that time will be so intense and effective that it will even put pressure upon the faith of "the elect" (cf. Matt.24:24; Mk.13:22).

b) It will go to great lengths to be attractive and appealing: This point is often misunderstood. Conventional wisdom about the tribulational false religion has it as forbidding in aspect and terrifying in operation. Nothing could be further from the truth, especially during its first phase. For, on the contrary, the ecumenical world-religion which will morph into outright worship of the beast will go to great lengths to welcome, engage, and assure anyone and everyone with whom it has contact. It will put on a friendly face and stop at nothing to appear attractive, entertaining and wholesome. Just as Satan made use of a friendly agent to deceive Eve (i.e., her pet serpent), so he always has endeavored to enclose his lies and deceit in packages which look as attractive as possible. As in all the other aspects of the false religion of the Tribulation, so also in its projection of apparent benevolence, sincerity, and affability, it will represent the pinnacle of Satan's efforts in this regard. Those of us who experience these pressures first hand may also expect to have our friends and relatives "evangelizing" aggressively for it. They will certainly have plenty of incentive to do so, and not only in respect to rewards promised for such activities. There will unquestionably be penalties to pay for having close associations with true Christians who refuse to "convert", and this is a trend which will intensify in bloody earnest when the Great Persecution of the Tribulation's second half begins.

c) It will utilize classic satanic methodology: In order to optimize its persuasiveness, the tribulational false religion will employ all the techniques of propaganda the devil has utilized since the beginning. These classic tactics of persuasion will be (as they have always been) focused upon gaining a hearing, then acceptance in principle, and then lead to a full embracing of the lie. The evangelistic "pitch" of the tribulational religion's false gospel will rely upon all the familiar methods which have always been used by Satan and his subordinates to win human beings over to falsehood:

Its "gospel" appeal will include an element of truth: Half-truths are a notoriously effective way of undermining the real truth, and we know for a fact that this common deception will figure large in the beast's religion. To take the two most salient examples, there will be a world kingdom

established by God, but that will be Christ's kingdom, not antichrist's regime (though the false religion will claim divine favor for the kingdom of the beast), and there will be a world ruler anointed and appointed by God, but that will be Jesus Christ our Lord at His return, not antichrist (though the false religion will proclaim him as the true Messiah). In both examples there will be superficial similarities which support these lies (a united world rule and a world ruler with seemingly miraculous powers respectively), and we should be prepared to see this pattern of half-truths repeated in the superficial mimicking of virtually every aspect of true Christianity by the tribulational religion of antichrist.

Its "gospel" appeal will be highly syncretic: This point is the converse or "flip-side" of the above. In addition to containing some elements of truth to cloak the larger lie, the institutions, practices, and doctrines of the false religion of the tribulation will also embrace widely disparate approaches and beliefs, including, so far as is possible, almost every organization's pet ideas and customs. "Swearing by God . . . yet also by Malcom" will be a hallmark of this syncretic faith (Zeph.1:5). But compromise of the truth in principle is just as deadly for believers as accepting a lie covered in a veneer of truth.

Its "gospel" appeal will be delivered by a friendly agent: The ministers, evangelists, and spokesmen for this new religion will be among the world's most powerful, influential, and popular people (cf. Is.23:8; Rev.18:3). The power celebrities wield in influencing the weak-willed and weak-minded into various bizarre, cult-like, and anti-Christian activities should be clear to anyone who casually browses the news. The difference between contemporary practice and what will occur during the Tribulation will be both qualitative and quantitative. For it will not only be fringe celebrities involved in evangelizing for the beast's religion, but very nearly the entire complement of "Who's Who", including those with good and solid reputations.

Its "gospel" appeal will exude a familiarity with God: The words "God" and even "Jesus" will be salted liberally into the conversations of everyone involved in both phases of the tribulational religion. From those who are its formal representatives in particular we can expect a very polished evangelical appeal that suggests a deep intimacy and familiarity with God and all things divine. Though the truth will be exactly the opposite, giving the appearance of being "close to God" is a classic way for agents of the devil to allay the fears of their intended victims, portraying themselves as "ministers of righteousness" (2Cor.11:14-15).

Its "gospel" appeal will contain a legitimizing of secret desires: Just as the saying "you can't cheat an honest man" has much merit, so in the case of satanic deception it is the lack of love for the truth that makes human beings vulnerable to the devil's lies in the first place. And, inevitably, when one is lackadaisical about the truth and lazy about following God diligently (or entirely disinterested in either), one fleshly desire or another will generally rise to fill the void. Whether subtly or obviously, the devil never fishes without bait. Behind every cult, every satanic lie, and, without question, behind the coming false religion, one finds an offer from the devil to fulfill and to justify some sinful desire hidden in the heart. Whether it is to offer as a reward for service and participation something one does not yet have but lusts for, or to justify some current behavior or past deed about which one feels guilty, all organizations of which the devil approves, and certainly this future one which will be most directly under his control, offer something of value to potential participants. This is not, of course, to suggest that the devil actually "delivers" on

these promises, for he and his have no true interest in justice for or in the welfare of their victims.

Its "gospel" appeal will be extra-biblical: The quickest and best way to "smoke out" any cult or demon-influenced group is to examine their attitude toward the scriptures. Any group that claims to be "of God" which downplays the importance of reading the Bible for oneself is inevitably and invariably headed in the wrong direction, at the very least. And when mere discouraging of independent consultation advances to prohibition or denigration of the Bible, one can rest assured that God is not present in that group. The tribulation false religion, syncretic as it will be, will in all likelihood hold the Bible in low esteem, granting equal or greater weight to other "great books", and placing its own doctrines and new "sacred writings" in the place of honor.

d) It will be inclusive and exclusive at the same time: This dual character of the false religion will also contribute to its persuasiveness. The fact that it will be a "big tent" organization will encourage individuals from all walks of life to join, and we should also not underestimate the persuasive appeal of the band-wagon effect that will occur once its ecumenical phase has begun. With seemingly everyone everywhere being pulled into its orbit, the power of the group and the desire to belong to something that virtually everyone else is joining will prove too much for most people to resist. But even as the majority of the world's population is being sucked in, the fact that those who choose to take their stand with the Word of God are not included will also make this new organization exclusive, containing only those who have embraced this "one true church", and this "one true religion" (creating a sort of "crusade" effect which will later be directed against genuine believers during the Great Persecution).

Remaining aloof from such pressures will not be an easy matter, and for those who do the situation will not be a simple one with which to cope. For before the first half of the Tribulation has come to an end, the situation will doubtless be much like that faced by Noah and his family, who, being the last remaining remnant of true humanity, were doubtlessly ostracized and ridiculed by the hybrid population of the antediluvian world of that time. And just as it was a very difficult matter to resist the nearly unanimous peer pressure to join in Nimrod's movement to build the tower of Babel, so at this future time dissent will pay a heavy price. Going in the opposite direction from everyone else is never easy. How much more will this not be true during the Tribulation when former Christians, friends and relatives are eagerly beckoning the few hold-outs to turn around? For those who do join, the promise of being "safe" within this near universal organization will seem genuine. For those few who refuse, choosing instead to remain loyal and faithful to Jesus Christ, ostracism and ridicule will soon turn to threats, coercion, and persecution, culminating in the Great Persecution which characterizes the Tribulation's second half, the Great Tribulation.

e) It will be tolerant and intolerant at the same time: Vis-à-vis the behavior and ancillary beliefs of its own members, the tribulation false religion will be extremely tolerant. There will be "many gates" of entry, and "many ways" to pursue its false spirituality. This will be true even in the case of practices which are exact opposites, for example:

It will embrace both hedonism and asceticism: On the one hand, the false religion of the tribulation will profess pleasure and the "godliness" of indulging in it, proclaiming universal forgiveness (apart from faith in Christ or repentance) and denying any divine judgment for any

sort of excess (cf. Col.2:16; 2:20-23; 1Tim.4:3; Heb.13:9). On the other hand, it will also preach an austere self-denial and strict dietary regulations, threatening judgment for violations without any valid reference to Christ or true biblical usage (cf. 2Tim.3:1-5; 2Pet.2:1-2; 2:13-14; Jude 1:18-19). Both of these "ways", though contradictory, will be embraced as acceptable for converts, and it must be noted that about the only common features they do share are that both are, in their very essence, hostile to a grace-based life of faith and obedience to Jesus Christ, and that neither has scriptural legitimacy (cf. Rom.14:17; 1Cor.8:8; 10:30; 1Tim.4:4-5).

It will permit both licentiousness and abstinence: What is true in material matters generally (eating habits being the most common application in the first antithesis immediately above), will also be true in regard to sexual behavior and the use of alcohol and other behavior-altering substances. Idolatry from ancient times has always been known for its licentiousness in these regards. It is also quite common to find a brand of celibacy and self-denial in all such matters in many false religions. The false religion of the Tribulation will allow either "way" as a valid method of serving the beast. Antichrist himself will be non-conventional in his approach to these things, exhibiting behavior that is amoral and "above" normal human conventions (Dan.11:37 in the context of verses 36-39). Neither approach, however, will have any validity in God's eyes.

It will express itself in both emotionalism and rationalism: Both wild ecstasies and dispassionate cerebral "worship" will characterize the followers of this coming false religion. Neither those who prefer a cold, analytical approach, nor those who crave emotional release will be excluded. But in either case, the true worship of God the Father and Jesus Christ in Spirit and in truth will be rejected.

Thus this new religion will have something for everyone, and will legitimize, justify and "bless" excesses of behavior on both extremes of the spectrum. Little wonder then that all those who are not committed to following Jesus wherever He leads will be easily intrigued and seduced by such an all-inclusive, all-forgiving, all-tolerating system that at the same time seems entirely authoritative, embracing all (non-biblical) traditions, and yet manages to be novel in and of itself.

As touching the beliefs and behavior of true Christians, however, the coming false religion will be extremely intolerant. For we know the truth: Jesus is the only gate of entry to the Father (Jn.10:7), and He is the only truth, the only way, and the only life (Jn.14:6). The absolute nature of our faith (and the fact that its elimination is a prime objective of the devil and a major purpose behind this coming false religion) guarantees that this new, most "tolerant" of all religions will be unwilling to abide true Christianity or accept the survival of true Christians. This combination of extreme tolerance and extreme intolerance will also be very persuasive, for it is our nature as human beings to crave complete carte blanche for any behavior when the object is ourselves, and to admire unyielding intolerance of "aberrant" behavior when the object is someone else.

3) The False Signs Performed during the Tribulation will be Exceptionally Persuasive:

One particular aspect of tribulational false teaching that deserves special mention is the effective use to which false signs will be put by antichrist and his false prophet to persuade the world to believe their lies. Scripture is very clear that the signs performed by these two in the power of the devil will be unprecedented in human history and will play no small part in winning over the

majority of the world's population (Mk.13:22; Rev.13:3-4; 16:13-14; 17:8; 17:11; 19:20).(48)

For [during the Tribulation] false Christs and false prophets will arise and will perform great miracles (lit., "signs") and wonders [sufficient] to deceive even the elect, if [that were] possible.

Matthew 24:24

(9) [Antichrist's] appearance [will come about] through Satan's empowerment [and will be] accompanied by every [sort of] false miracle, both signs and portents, (10) and by every [sort of] unrighteous deception [designed] for those who are perishing, [namely those who will believe these lies] because they did not open themselves up to the love of the truth so as to be saved.

2nd Thessalonians 2:9-10

(13) And [the beast's false prophet] [will] perform great miracles (lit., "signs"), even making fire come down from heaven to the earth in front of everyone. (14) And he [will] deceive those who dwell upon the earth on account of the miracles (lit., "signs") which have been given to him to perform in the presence of the beast, even commanding the inhabitants of the earth to make an image of the beast, [that is] of him who received the [deadly] stroke of the sword and [yet] came [back] to life. (15) And it was given to him to provide a spirit for the image of the beast so that the image might speak, and [it was also given to him] to bring it about that as many as refused to worship the image of the beast might be put to death.

Revelation 13:13-15

But no matter how miraculous such signs may appear to unbelievers, we Christians walk by faith, not by sight (2Cor.5:7; cf. Prov.3:5). Therefore as faithful followers of the Living Word, our Lord Jesus Christ (Jn.1:1-14), we must be careful always to put our total faith in the Word of God above anything and everything our eyes may see, and trust in what our Lord has told us through His Bible, even in the face of such overwhelmingly persuasive "miracles" which may seem to contradict what we know from scripture to be true.

(1) If there arises among you a prophet or a dreamer of dreams, and he gives you a sign or a wonder, (2) and the sign or the wonder comes to pass, of which he spoke to you, saying, 'Let us go after other gods' – which you have not known – 'and let us serve them,' (3) you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams, for the Lord your God is testing you to know whether you love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul."

Deuteronomy 13:1-3 NKJV

This is what the Lord says: "Do not learn the ways of the nations or be terrified by signs in the heavens, though the nations are terrified by them."

Jeremiah 10:2 NIV

(25) "And there will be signs in the sun, in the moon, and in the stars; and on the earth distress of nations, with perplexity, the sea and the waves roaring; (26) men's hearts failing them from fear and the expectation of those things which are coming on the earth,

for the powers of the heavens will be shaken."
Luke 21:25-26 NKJV

But even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed.
Galatians 1:8 NKJV

4) Christian Organizations Coopted by Antichrist will be Exceptionally Persuasive:

We have already seen in regard to the persuasiveness of the satanically inspired "miracles" which will characterize the Tribulation that they will be amazingly powerful to the point of putting serious pressure even on the faith of the elect (Matt.24:24; Mk.13:22). In spite of these pressures, dedicated believers in Jesus Christ will continue to follow what the Bible says rather than what their eyes see, no matter how miraculous these things may seem, applying all the appropriate scriptures instead of leaning on experience:

(1) Beloved, don't believe every spirit [of every so-called prophet], but test the spirits [of these "prophets" to see] whether [or not] they are from God. For many false prophets have gone out into the world. (2) By this [test] you [will] know [whether or not a person has] the Spirit of God. Any spirit (i.e., a person or organization) which professes that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, (3) but any spirit which does not profess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not from God. And this [latter] is the [spirit] of the antichrist, which you have heard about, that he is coming, and [even] now [his spirit] is already in the world.

1st John 4:1-3

Sadly, however, many who are weak in faith will cave in to these pressures, and in very many instances they will be led into doing so from the top down. For in all too many individual cases of apostasy, it really will be a matter of lambs being led to the slaughter by the very leaders and organizations whose job it is to shepherd them. Indeed, all those who currently find themselves in denominations which are only marginally Christian or whose leaders and "teachers" are doing a poor job as representatives of Jesus Christ have already been compromised to an extraordinary degree. Based upon the predictions and analogous scriptures covered in the sections above, we should have every expectation that these weak and/or venial leaders will be quick to succumb to antichrist's exploding world-ecumenical movement, and only too willing to drag most of their membership along behind them (even as they have continued to be dragged along into spiritual apathy in our own day). This will be all the more true during the Tribulation's second half when antichrist's "wonders" will be added to this witches' brew of false motivations.

The performance of such unbelievable signs and miracles will endow this coming false religion with a tremendous amount of emotional authority, with only the firm determination to put scripture ahead of what is visible being capable of resistance. It should be noted by way of an aside here that our current world is more vulnerable to such deceptions than was ever the case in the past. To a world that sees itself as sophisticated and knowledgeable to a degree not seen before in history, this statement no doubt will seem ludicrous. But it is true nonetheless. For it is precisely our present preoccupation with materialistic explanations for everything that happens in

the world that will make people all the more vulnerable to the beast's miracles, signs so profound that they cannot easily be denied or explained away in materialistic terms.

For those who know their God, the occurrence of such phenomena will not overly impress. Completely convinced of the power of the immaterial over the material, mature Christians use the Bible as our guide to distinguish between signs and miracles that are of God and those that are not. But to the vast majority of humanity, the experience of undeniably extra-material events will in most cases prove too powerful to resist. And for those leaders and members of putative Christian groups which are spiritually weak or even dead, these wonders will be all that is necessary to "prove" that the beast is "the one", and that his new religion is the only "true way".

What this means in practical terms is that once such organizations and denominations sell out completely to the ecumenical movement of antichrist and thereafter allow themselves to be incorporated into the beast's religion in toto (during the final three and a half years), those believers who have kept fellowship with them up to and into the Tribulation will find it increasingly difficult to escape their grasp. The problem of freeing oneself from an organization which has come to be synonymous in one's mind with faith is somewhat akin to sinking into quicksand while unconscious: even if one "comes to" and recognizes the dire nature of the situation, escaping the terrible pull is still no easy matter.

We can see this same phenomena playing out in many denominations even today, as unbelieving elites continue to move their charges farther and farther away from God and the Bible, while many of the rank and file, though far from happy with these developments, allow themselves to be dragged along – out of misplaced loyalty, tradition and inertia. But regardless of circumstances, every individual believer is responsible to the Lord for remaining faithful to Him. The fact that he or she may have been influenced by his or her leaders and organizations to follow the beast is no excuse:

(1) But there arose among the people false prophets, just as there will also be false teachers among you, who shall introduce destructive false doctrines – even denying the Master who bought them – and bringing swift destruction upon themselves. (2) And many will follow their lascivious ways so that the way of truth will be subject to blasphemy on their account.

2nd Peter 2:1-2

(18) For by pouring forth [statements] of outrageous folly, [by appealing to] fleshly lusts, and by making use of every [sort of] sensuality, [these false teachers] entice those who [previously] had truly escaped from those who live [such] lives of deception (i.e., the false teachers). (19) [These false teachers] promise [weak believers] freedom [from a disciplined life], though they themselves are truly slaves of corruption. For by what[ever] one is mastered, to this is he enslaved. (20) For if after having escaped the defilements of this world by recognizing our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ [these weak believers] should be overcome [spiritually] by becoming involved again in these foul things, then they have become worse off than they were before. (21) For it would have been better for them not to have accepted the Righteous Way in the first place, rather than – once having accepted this holy command [for faith in Christ which was] committed to them – to turn their

backs on it now. (22) And so in their case this proverb is true: "The dog has returned to his vomit, and the sow, though washed, to her muddy sty".

2nd Peter 2:18-22

While it is one thing for pagan religions and dead denominations containing few Christians in their ranks to be pulled into the orbit of the beast's religion, the coopting of groups which are comprised of at least some genuine believers will be yet another powerful factor in aiding and abetting the process of apostasy. In the end, it will make little difference whether it was the band-wagon principle, the continuing authority of the denomination in question, the fear of being shunned, discriminated against, or persecuted, or the outright deceptions discussed above which play the dominant role in pulling believers into apostasy along with the organizations to which they belong. Continuation in a relationship which is spiritually harmful cannot help but compromise and threaten faith:

But now I have written to you not to keep company with anyone named a brother, who is sexually immoral, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or an extortioner—not even to eat with such a person.

1st Corinthians 5:11 NKJV

Do not be deceived: bad associations corrupt good morals.

1st Corinthians 15:33

(10) If anyone comes to you and does not bring this doctrine, do not receive him into your house nor greet him; (11) for he who greets him shares in his evil deeds.

2nd John 1:10-11 NKJV

The current trend in our Laodicean age toward apathy to the truth and a desire for entertaining substitutes which "scratch the ear" will, during the Tribulation, greatly assist the process of assimilation and cooption of Christian groups by Satan and his antichrist into their worldwide religion.

The Spirit explicitly says that in the end times certain men will rebel from the faith, giving their allegiance [instead] to deceitful spirits and demonic doctrines.

1st Timothy 4:1

(3) For the time will come when they will not put up with sound teaching, but will [instead], desiring to have their ears scratched, heap up by their own [devices] teachers to match their specific lusts. (4) And they will turn their ears from the truth and resort instead to fictions.

2nd Timothy 4:3-4

This process, moreover, will not only proceed from top to bottom, but also from bottom to top. For not only will it be a case of leadership subverting membership, but also the other way around. As false teaching and false teachers begin to aggressively infiltrate Christian and erstwhile Christian groups, many of the rank and file in these groups (whether apostate Christians or unbelievers all along) will put pressure on the leadership from the "grass roots" to join in. Under such pressure (and faced with rebellion or expulsion), only the staunchest leaders will be

able or willing to offer any resistance, daring to lose their jobs, reputations, and worse. Given that the groups we are talking about here are already deeply mired in spiritual apathy, we can expect such resistance to be inconsequential, and can further expect most of the leadership of such groups to accommodate to the wishes of the majority of their constituency.

We may call this phenomenon "the golden calf compromise". For just as Aaron was quick to heed the demands of the rebellious mob that confronted him in Moses' absence (even though he was certainly aware of the wrongness of his actions: cf. Ex.32:1-4), so also we can expect the vast majority of spiritual leaders in all but the most dedicated Christians groups to likewise buckle under the internal pressure to compromise with the ecumenical developments of the Tribulation's first half. And just as Aaron may have foolishly thought he could still steer this horrible idolatry in God's direction by calling the golden calf's feast a "feast to the Lord" (compare Ex.32:5 with Ex.32:6), so it may well be that some of the leaders constrained by these pressures may rationalize their actions, convincing themselves that they are sticking with their groups for the sake of their good (analogously to those who remained in the Roman Catholic church during the Reformation).

In reality, however, when the final opportunity for separation comes, failing to avail oneself of it will only mean spiritual disaster. Moreover, in the case of the leadership, by remaining and accommodating they will only be giving false comfort to their truly Christian charges, and in reality will be helping to blind them to the fact that staying with these organizations once they have been fatally compromised can only lead to apostasy.

It is well to note that the Israelites became restless and vulnerable to such outrageous apostasy only when Moses, a well-known type of Christ (cf. Ex.32:1; Acts 7:40: a return as if from the dead), had been away a long time – and just before he returned at that. So also in this case it will be just before Christ's return, and at the lengthiest point of His absence, that the Great Apostasy will claim so many of our fellow believers, with the most prominent leadership of the church-visible (analogous to Aaron) being swept up in their rebellion out of fear. And just as the rebellious Israelites of that time sought another leader other than Moses to "take them back to Egypt" (Neh.9:16-17; cf. Num.14:1-4), so in their apostasy these former Christians will join with unbelievers the world around in embracing a new savior, one who will promise them a worldly heaven on earth, namely, the antichrist.

In this capacity it is at least worth asking whether so-called "Christian" groups may not constitute antichrist's original base for his ecumenical movement (as opposed to being a later target). Since the beast will begin with politics, we may posit that the ecumenical movement (which will only later develop into a universal, idolatrous religion) will be an essentially political formation at its inception. The Tribulation's first half will be a time of exceptional upheaval. Antichrist will doubtless gain much political support by promising political solutions to the horrendous world conditions of that time. Given the propensity of many religious and even Christian groups to become involved in political causes "for good", it is not far from the realm of the possible to suppose that antichrist will make full use of this tendency. Since the initial development of ecumenical cooperation will be political in nature rather than doctrinal (with "cooperation" and coercion in the realm of belief coming only later), it is easy to see how many Christians of poor discernment might be able to embrace this movement and still allow themselves to think they

were doing something "Christian" (even as they were actually falling away from the truth and from Christ). Using Christian and semi-Christian groups as a base would have very clear advantages for antichrist, whose entire false religion will later come to be based upon claiming that he is the Messiah.

g. The Characteristics of Antichrist's New Religion: Despite the inherent horrors of antichrist's universal religion of Satanism and the terrors it will hold for all who refuse to bow down to it, we should not think that it will be for those reasons a system of worship that most people find oppressive and abhorrent but are only embracing out of necessity. As suggested earlier, the situation will be much to the contrary. As in the case of many cults, beyond the obvious mind-control and group coercion, there is always also an element that appeals to and even legitimizes the secret desires of many if not most of its members. Just as we would be mistaken to imagine the devil as some horrible looking creature when in fact he was made beautiful (Ezek.28:12-13) and even now masquerades as "a messenger of light" (2Cor.11:14), so in the case of the worldwide cult designed to worship him, rather than imaging some repulsive collection of odd and onerous rituals, we would do better to understand this new religion as something that most people will find incredibly appealing (cf. Nah.3:4 and the harlot analogy generally: Rev.17:1-5; 17:15-16; 19:2).

Cults often attract new adherents by promising them a welcoming and friendly society, and by offering them a "deeper" spiritual relationship through initiation into "secret doctrines and mysteries" unavailable elsewhere. And if in the process they also appeal to the hidden desires of the new initiate (be they of either an ascetic or licentious nature), then their appeal can seem irresistible. The unique feature of the beast's religion will be, as we have seen, a syncretism of all such elements, allowing virtually every human being to clothe his or her base desires in the mantle of religion, in a friendly and welcoming environment, and with the conviction that the "truth" is thus being sought, and the "true God" thus being served, to the end that "true eternal life" may be earned (such as antichrist seems to exhibit in his feigned rise from the dead).

One of the trends visible in our own day is the increasingly meticulous concern large segments of the population are showing towards their dietary regimes even as they are less and less bothered by sexual indiscretions – as if God were greatly concerned about the former and little about the latter when in fact exactly the opposite is the case. The beast's religion is prophesied to take great advantage of this trend, fulfilling the deep-seated need to "do something" about holiness on the one hand (i.e., practicing a pseudo-holiness of dietary restraint), while having one's true sins and indiscretions excused and even justified on the other (i.e., it is probable that antichrist's religion will, in the manner of pagan cults, include all varieties of sexual practices as "acts of worship", even as the one divinely authorized venue for sexual activity, marriage, is denigrated).

(1) The Spirit explicitly says that in the end times certain men will rebel from the faith, giving their allegiance [instead] to deceitful spirits and demonic doctrines. (2) With their own consciences seared away and speaking with the hypocrisy of men [who peddle] lies, (3) they will [instruct their victims] to refrain from marriage, and to keep away from certain foods . . .

1st Timothy 4:1-3a

Perspicuous in the verses above is the perverse reversal of God's natural order of things as marriage is discouraged – but not sexual practice of all sorts, both natural and unnatural. Inhabitants of 21st century America may well wonder what great change this will represent from contemporary practices. Nevertheless, there will be a decided change for the worse as the incipient trends now visible burst into full flood, are blessed by the state and the state religion, and become mandatory for all loyal citizens of antichrist's world state. And while believers will have as much trouble accepting this degraded and degrading behavior as they do accepting antichrist, the partisans of antichrist will be disposed by the darkness of their minds and the special empowerment of error (2Thes.2:11), to embrace his religious strictures even as they have been drawn to embrace him – a phenomenon which cannot be disentangled from the prior rejection of the truth of God:

"I have come in My Father's Name, and you do not accept Me; but if someone else comes in his own name, you will accept him."

John 5:43

1) Characteristics of Antichrist's Religion deliberately mimicking true Christianity:

In general terms, the religion of the beast will stress the material and the visible over against invisible spirituality of which, of course, it will be completely bereft. And in all of its worldly manifestations it will attempt to mimic the outward appearance of Christian forms (although this will be more in terms of the "traditional" forms of the church-visible as opposed to genuine Christian faith and practice). One thing that will be noticeably missing from antichrist's "church" will be the Bible. For while false religions often have some doctrinal focal point or other, it behooves any organization that is in truth no part of the truth to maintain "flexibility" about the actual truth.

In other words, when an organization or movement is built upon lies, the freedom to continue lying without restraint or fear of contradiction is crucial. For this reason, we may expect that by the time of his "revelation" as the Son of God at the Tribulation's mid-point, antichrist will expect the world to accept his words as fully sufficient and authoritative since they come from "God". What need will the world then have for an outdated, outmoded written Bible when they now have the purported author to worship in person?

It is worth noting in this regard that, in effect, this is already where we find much of contemporary Christianity in our present Laodicean age of spiritual lukewarmness. For while many so-called Christian churches and organizations pay lip service to the Bible (and we imagine that the beast and his religion will do so as well), in terms of practice and application the scriptures often take a distant second place to entertainment, self-help, motivational speaking, emotional appeals, pop-psychology, rituals and "worship". For many groups, therefore, the adoption of the beast's religion in both name and practice will sadly mean very little change in either outward appearance or inward effect.

a) Its Ultimate Object of Worship: Regardless of what the world may initially think, "the dragon and the beast", i.e., Satan and antichrist, will be the ultimate objects of worship in this new religion (Rev.13:4). So while there will be other foci of worship and veneration as well (e.g., the

idolatrous cult statue in the temple court and the false prophet), the world will have no excuse – Satan and his antichrist will replace the Lord God Almighty and His true Christ in the active worship in which the unbelieving world will now orgiastically indulge. The apostasy of one third of the Church, coupled with the removal of Holy Spirit restraint, and the empowerment of error spoken of in 2nd Thessalonians 2:11, will contribute mightily to the rapidity and the totality of the world's rush to embrace the devil and the beast:

(10) And [the little horn] (i.e., antichrist) magnified himself against the host of heaven, and he cast down to the earth some of the host (i.e., believers seduced into apostasy) and some of the stars (i.e., angels seduced into rebellion) and he trampled them underfoot (i.e., destruction by association). (11) He even magnified himself against the Prince of the host (i.e., Christ). The daily sacrifice was abolished by him, and the holy place (i.e., the inner court) was desecrated. (12) And along with the daily sacrifice, the host (i.e., believers) fell into his power on account of [the] rebellion (i.e., the Great Apostasy). And he threw truth to the ground, and was successful in whatever he did.
Daniel 8:10-12

b) Its Ultimate Place of Worship: Just as antichrist proclaims himself to be the true Messiah and makes every attempt to support that claim in ways that would, "if possible", deceive even the elect (Matt.24:24), so Jerusalem and the temple of God are not accidentally chosen as the supreme place of worship. The idea of substitution is clear in everything that the beast and his father the devil will do in this regard, for it has ever been Satan's desire to replace God, so that the installing of his son on the throne of God with himself enshrined as the ultimate object of creature worship is in many respects the fulfillment of a dream which has been millennia in the making.

Indeed, Satan will take pains during this entire period to represent this time as the beginning of "the Millennium". For, after all, the true Millennium begins following the revelation of Jesus Christ, the defeat of His enemies at Armageddon, and His installment in the temple at Jerusalem as the Ruler of the world. To the unbelieving world, antichrist's pseudo-resurrection, conquest of the southern alliance, and usurpation of the temple and Jerusalem for his own use will fit this bill (scripture even calls this his "revelation": 2Thes.2:8). Needless to say, the ensuing three and half years, the time of greatest tribulation in world history, will hardly seem "millennial", but the selection of Jerusalem as the supreme place of worship will contribute to the persuasiveness of the beast's claims and to the acceptance by the unbelieving world of his new universal religion. For not since the tower of Babel will the world be thus so completely "united" in a political sense, or have a single unifying religious center and motivation as it will have at that time as antichrist begins his rule from Jerusalem with the intent of putting all of his enemies under his feet – if they refuse to worship him.

c) Its Ultimate Priest: As with all of the other supreme foci of the beast's religion, so in the case of the "clergy" we can expect to see a deliberate usurpation of both true and traditional Christianity in antichrist's system. There is, of course, nothing biblical about Roman Catholicism's "pope", but the false prophet will indeed be a true "vicar" or substitute for antichrist, serving him in a way that falsely parallels the true Christ but in reality models antichrist and the devil (e.g., the false prophet has "two horns like a lamb", but "speaks like a

dragon": Rev.13:11).

We may expect this to be the case with the other lesser "clergy" as well, especially considering that in all probability antichrist will make use of already existing clergy who are co-opted into his new universal religion, so that any distinction as seen by the world between the beast's church and the "Christian church" will be difficult for the unbelieving mind to draw (since in most cases it will be a question of the same people in the same buildings employing many of the same rituals only now committed to worshiping the beast "as Christ"). In general terms, we can expect antichrist's new clergy to be extremely persuasive as well (cf. Matt.24:23-24; Col.2:16-23; 2Thes.2:3-12; 1Tim.4:1-8; 2Tim.3:1-13; 2Pet.2:1 - 3:18; Jude 1:4-16).

d) Its Ultimate Sign of Membership: Believers in Jesus Christ have as their sign and as their seal of divine ownership the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit (2Cor.1:21-22; Eph.1:13-14; 4:30; cf. Rom.8:9-17; Rev.7:1-3). Antichrist's substitute for this true yet invisible sign will be, once again in keeping with the pattern above, a false, visible sign, the "mark of the beast" (Rev.13:16-17).

e) Its Ultimate Promise: Given that the beast has been "restored to life", it is likely that the promise of a similar reward will be given to those who embrace his religion, especially in the context of antichrist's claim to be the true Messiah. It should be noted in this connection, however, that rather than being a universal good promised to all, as in the case of the true resurrection of the righteous, we may instead expect this false promise of resurrection to be qualified, offered only to the few who distinguish themselves in loyalty, and thus used as a goad to spur the "faithful" on to ever greater degeneracy and fanaticism. Moreover, the type of "eternal life" being offered will be along the same lines of materiality we see in every other aspect of the beast's religion, namely, the continuation (or revivification) of the sordid and (apart from God) pointless temporal life that is humanity's lot, rather than any true transformation. That so many around the world will find this offer appealing is almost a cause for pity, especially considering that antichrist will be incapable of making good on this promise in even a single instance.

f) Its Ultimate Sacrifice: While the common-place in literature of portraying those who make a "deal with the devil" as having "sold their souls" is not biblical, it is true that the unbelieving world of that future time, by their acceptance of the beast's religion, will have indeed embraced their own condemnation, willfully rejecting through the worship of antichrist and his father Satan the grace and mercy in Jesus Christ that God was eager to give them freely (cf. Jonah 2:8). The true nature of the "bargain" is this: they have forsaken eternal life and spiritual riches beyond calculation for the sake of some trifling and, in many cases, totally disgusting short-lived material benefits. In other words, like Esau, the unbelieving world of that time will sell en masse "their birthright for a mess of pottage" (Heb.12:16). To those concerned, the bargain will actually seem reasonable, for it will involve substituting present persecution endured for the sake of intangible advantages (which their hearts blinded by unbelief find incredible; cf. Eph.4:17-19) for tangible "benefits" in the here and now (cf. the pattern of Is.57:3ff.).

g) Its Ultimate Service: As in the case of its ultimate sacrifice, the ultimate service for those who commit themselves to antichrist and his religion will reflect a sick parallelism to genuine

Christianity. After the pattern of our Savior (e.g., Jn.13:1-17), true Christians are committed to service for the sake and the benefit of their fellow believers, seeking their spiritual growth and welfare above all else (Rom.14:19-21). For adherents of the religion of the beast, however, "the ultimate service" will not be edification but destruction, namely, the betrayal of all who refuse to accept antichrist in preference for the true Christ.

2) Characteristics of Antichrist's Religion deliberately mimicking the Mosaic Law:

In his implementation of the first beast's false religion, we see the second beast following the pattern of counterfeiting true forms and practices, and, specifically after the focus of worship moves to the temple in Jerusalem, of paralleling the Mosaic Law with a series of practices designed to resemble the truth even as they propagate satanic lies:

a) False Pilgrimage: In the law, all males in Israel are commanded to present themselves before the Lord on three occasions every year, i.e., at the Passover, the festival of first fruits, and the feast of Tabernacles (Ex.23:14-17). We may infer from Revelation 13:14 to the effect that the false prophet will "deceive those who dwell upon the earth on account of the miracles which have been given to him to perform *in the presence of the beast*" that many individuals, especially those of any sort of prominence, will be expected to make what amounts to a similar "pilgrimage" to Jerusalem during those 42 months in order to worship at the feet of the beast, paying homage to him and to his idol under the watchful eye of the false prophet (comparable to the behavior of Nebuchadnezzar vis-à-vis the idol of gold which he had erected on the plain of Dura in Babylon: Dan.3:1-12).

b) False Worship: It is likely that the false prophet will represent himself as the high priest of Israel (though scripture does not give him that title, possibly for the very good reason that he is not so in fact), and that much of the ritual carried on in and around Jerusalem at this time, illegitimate though it is, will closely parallel the historical temple rite (i.e., the appointment of divisions of priests, the reconstruction of all the trappings and paraphernalia of the Aaronic priesthood, and the continuation of various rules and regulations; although apparently not the Levitical sacrifices: cf. Dan.9:27). It is the case that this show of historicity will in truth have nothing to do with the original temple worship, or the worship re-instituted by Moses and Elijah, or the millennial temple worship reestablished by the true Messiah. But to those who have been deceived to the point of accepting antichrist as the Christ, restoration of the temple rite at least in some form or other far from being surprising will indeed be expected of this pseudo-Messiah who has now come to Jerusalem to begin his "millennial reign".

c) False Dietary Regime: Dietary regulations play a significant role in the Mosaic Law for the purpose of "distinguishing between the holy and the profane" (Lev.10:10). That is to say, Israel's separation from the practices of the world in diet were to be representative of their far more important spiritual separation (Rom.4:13). Reversing this relationship, that is, claiming holiness or righteousness on the basis of "keeping the Law" in any of its aspects is, as all readers of the New Testament are well aware, diametrically opposed to the true purpose of the Law and the true meaning of grace. Yet a key feature of antichrist's religion as administered by his high priest, the false prophet, will be to take traditional legalism a step farther, instituting a system of aggressive vegetarianism that will give its practitioners a feeling of "holiness" and "purity" on the basis of

diet (i.e., physical, substituting for spiritual, purity), despite whatever truly sinful behavior in which they may be engaged (1Tim.4:1-5; cf. Col.2:16-23; 2Tim.3:5; Heb.13:9).

d) False Communion: Closely tied to these everyday dietary restraints will be the practice of a false "communion" which will follow closely after the pattern of historical pagan practices (cf. Zech.9:7):

Those who sanctify and purify themselves for the gardens following the lead of the one [characterized] by violence, eating the flesh of swine, and of whatever is an abomination, and of rats will be swept away together (i.e., at the Second Advent), says the Lord.
Isaiah 66:17

The context of this verse (both preceding and following, but see especially Is.66:18-24) shows clearly that while the behavior described is not unprecedented in Israel's past (cf. Is.65:3-5), the disgusting communal meal described above will be the one in vogue during the Tribulation. Therefore the "one with violence", clearly an individual acting as a sort of priest officiating over the proceedings, is best taken to be the false prophet, antichrist's own "high priest" and the one responsible for directing his false religion. The fact that meat will be eaten in this "communion" whereas vegetarianism will be the rule otherwise is not contradictory, for this eating of abominations will represent a "sacrifice" and for that reason necessarily includes behavior not otherwise sought out or condoned.

e) False Piety: The "sanctified" behavior of antichrist's religion will go beyond diet including in particular a general prohibition against normal marriage (1Tim.4:3). Genuine Christianity does indeed forbid sexual conduct outside of marriage (e.g., 1Thes.4:3-8), but never forbids legitimate marriage (1Cor.7:8-9). Here once again, therefore, we see the beast's religion turning the truth on its head. While preaching and encouraging sexual licentiousness (cf. 2Pet.2:17-22), the false prophet will lead the charge to forbid the only valid forum for sexual behavior. We may expect many such instances of making virtue out of sin and vice versa. One particularly well documented form of counterfeit piety will be the tattooing of the beast's name (or number) on the forehead and/or right hand of his worshipers (Rev.13:16-18), wherein we see a clear attempt to mimic legitimate biblical practices past and present (Is.44:5; Rev.3:12; cf. Ex.13:9-16; Is.62:2; 65:15; Rev.2:17), even while violating the express commands of scripture (Lev.19:28; Rev.14:9-11; cf. Rev.16:2; 19:20; 20:4).

f) False Millennial Program: During the Great Tribulation, antichrist will represent himself as the Messiah. Therefore it should not be surprising that his religion will attempt to counterfeit and play off of the prophecies regarding Christ's true Millennial Kingdom. One of the key thematic characteristics of the genuine Millennium will be justice, divinely defined and directly administered by the Lord worldwide for the first time in human history since the garden (cf. Ps.2; Ps.9; Ps.24; Ps.45-48; Ps.50; Ps.68; Ps.72; Is.11; Is.24; Is.25-27; Is.32; Is.34-35; Is.49-52; Is.62-66).

But instead of true justice stemming from divine administration of the world (an under-appreciated blessing that is worth far more than many material blessings with which the Millennium will be replete), the beast's religion will offer unprecedented "freedom" from

innumerable legal and societal restraints (Dan.7:25; 2Pet.2:17-22; cf. Is.24:5), a "freedom" which will in fact help to produce the most outrageous violations of the most basic human rights as well as of the most important freedom we as a species possess, namely, the right to choose for Jesus Christ and to follow and serve Him in this life without persecution.

From the believer's perspective, the beast's false millennium is best understood by its divinely assigned name, "The Great Tribulation". Instead of a time of justice and safety, these final forty-two months will be a time of trampling down of all that is just and right and decent in the name of "freedom". For whatever good in principle unbelievers may find in anti-materialistic, new age, vegetarian, libertarian anti-commercialism, in the context of antichrist's pseudo-millennium all such things will be mere fig leaves employed solely for the purpose of covering a campaign of crime, lawlessness, licentiousness, and the judicial murder of all who find themselves in opposition to the beast for whatever reason, and especially those who have determined to stay faithful to Jesus Christ regardless of the consequences. One category of "freedom-blessings" scripture does spell out for this period is a general redistribution of wealth by antichrist on behalf of his supporters (Dan.11:24b; 11:39). Presented no doubt as a "jubilee" along Old Testament lines (Lev.25; 27), this action will instead be motivated out of the beast's desire to firm up his own support rather than any inclination to help the poor.

g) False Service: Finally, the "righteous works" required of the adherents of antichrist's religion as led by his high priest, the false prophet, will entail first and foremost participation in the satanic attempt at universal conversion to the beast. In addition to all the other depravities required of those who choose to serve the beast, this final "crusade" will involve the active destruction of the free will opportunities of others to choose for Christ, even to the point of betraying those they ought to love the most (Matt.10:36; Lk.21:16).

(4) "Everyone take heed to his neighbor, and do not trust any brother; for every brother will utterly supplant, and every neighbor will walk with slanderers. (5) Everyone will deceive his neighbor, and will not speak the truth; they have taught their tongue to speak lies; they weary themselves to commit iniquity. (6) Your dwelling place is in the midst of deceit; through deceit they refuse to know Me," says the Lord.

Jeremiah 9:4-6 NKJV

(5) Do not believe a friend. Do not put your confidence in a companion. Guard the entrances of your mouth from her who lies in your bosom. (6) For a son will treat his father disgracefully, and a daughter will rise up against her mother, and a mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law. A man's enemies will be those of his own household.

Micah 7:5-6

(34) "Do not think that I came to bring peace on earth. I did not come to bring peace but a sword. (35) For I have come to 'set a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law'; (36) "and 'a man's enemies will be those of his own household.' "

Matthew 10:34-36 NKJV

(51) "Do you suppose that I came to give peace on earth? I tell you, not at all, but rather

division. (52) For from now on five in one house will be divided: three against two, and two against three. (53) Father will be divided against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law."

Luke 12:51-53 NKJV

h. Do Not Join or Cooperate with Antichrist's False Religion: Far worse than failure to separate from lukewarm Christian groups caught up in the wave of enthusiasm for antichrist during the Tribulation's first half will be the formal joining of the beast's false religion during the Tribulation's second half. Even if this happens by default, that is, by continuing membership in a church or denomination which formally attaches itself to the beast's religion, the danger of being party to such an arrangement will be as close to spiritually fatal as possible short of outright apostasy. At this point in the Tribulation, antichrist will openly and officially proclaim himself to be Christ, taking his seat in God's temple in Jerusalem, and will then begin the Great Persecution of believers worldwide.

It is certainly understandable on a worldly level that some will want to deflect attention from themselves by continuing fellowship and by seeming to go along with the apostate course their church or denomination has set. However, while there may be some debate as to whether it will really be possible to continue membership in an organization which blasphemously accepts the beast as Jesus Christ and yet at the same time maintain a genuine faith in the true Savior (through the exercise of strenuous mental reservation), there is no doubt whatsoever about the fact that such a course of action will at the very least be incredibly dangerous, risking spiritual security for a very precarious sort of physical security.

Such an approach will not only constitute a very poor bargain, but even if someone inclined to avoid persecution through such dishonest association might theoretically hang onto their faith initially, the compromised spiritual position this policy will put them in coupled with the diminution of courage such a false posture must necessarily engender will make it very difficult not to accept the mark of the beast when the time comes.

Even before that point of no return arrives, it is likely that antichrist and his false prophet will make use of their worldwide religion in particular to identify and help to "process" true believers who are unwilling to compromise in this way. This sort of thing has happened before (in the Roman Catholic persecutions of Protestants during the Reformation and in the rounding up of Europe's Jews by the Nazis, for example), and it is utterly foolish to believe that anyone will be able to continue in membership in a church which has not only been coopted but actually incorporated into antichrist's "universal church" without facing just such grim moral choices. If a person is in effect hiding out in some such organization, what are the chances that when their turn comes to betray another believer that at that point they will miraculously find the spiritual courage to say no?

The above assumes that all believers will fully understand all of these matters ahead of time (and that only the exceptionally cowardly will fall into this trap). However, given the fact that we live in the lukewarm Church era of Laodicea, that assumption is of course not valid. The current level of spiritual immaturity within the Church guarantees that this problem of potential

compromise by association will be compounded exponentially for those who enter the Tribulation unprepared. So while in many respects the problems and dangers facing unprepared believers during the Tribulation will be precisely the same as they are today, the circumstances then will lead to a much increased magnitude of danger and with a much reduced period of germination before spiritual disaster results.

Anticipating these same perils in his final address to the Ephesian elders, the apostle Paul sets out for us the mind-set we should adopt when facing these pressures of attack which emanate both from without and within the church-visible of that day (Acts 20:27-35):

1) Genuine teachers of the gospel proclaim the whole truth of scripture:

"For I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God."
Acts 20:27 NIV (cf. v.20)

2) As legitimate servants of Christ, genuine teachers of the gospel are concerned about the congregation's true spiritual welfare:

"Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood."
Acts 20:28 NIV

3) Even genuine Christian groups will suffer severe infiltration attacks by Satan's servants:

"I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock."
Acts 20:29 NIV

4) Apostates will arise to corrupt and mislead even genuine Christian groups by distorting the truth of the Word:

"Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them."
Acts 20:30 NIV

5) Alertness to these dangers is thus essential and is the proper response to the voluminous scriptural warnings on this subject:

"So be on your guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears."
Acts 20:31 NIV

6) The only true defense against these things is spiritual edification accomplished through hearing, understanding, believing and applying the Word of God:

"Now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified."

Acts 20:32 NIV

7) Since genuine teachers of the gospel set an incorruptible example in all things, false teachers (and by application their false teachings) may be easily recognized by their falling short of the true standard (in case anyone is in doubt about which is which):

(33) "I have not coveted anyone's silver or gold or clothing. (34) You yourselves know that these hands of mine have supplied my own needs and the needs of my companions. (35) In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.' "

Acts 20:33-35 NIV

There is an important sense in which these words of Paul not only apply to us now but especially also to the experiences of the Tribulation. In warning against distorted truth and in emphasizing the importance of telling the whole truth, the apostle brings to mind the three popular false doctrines so prevalent in the church-visible of our own day, each of which will predispose those who wrongfully accept them towards falling into this trap of assimilation and compromise with the beast's religion during the Tribulation:

False belief in a pre-Tribulation resurrection (i.e., "the rapture"): Many Christians will find themselves completely ignorant about the Tribulation once it begins due in no small part to the supposition that they would not have to face it. Not only will the realization that they have been wrong about such a deeply cherished false belief tend to shake their faith generally when it proves not to be true, but this particular false doctrine breeds complacency and worldliness through the false sense of security it provides and is contributing here and now to spiritual immaturity and the foolish notion that lack of spiritual preparation is somehow not dangerous because at least the Tribulation will not have to be endured.

False belief in a state of unconditional eternal security (i.e., "once saved, always saved"): This erroneous belief, dangerous enough during good times, will prove doubly malicious during the Tribulation. Apropos of our current point, those who imagine that they will be saved no matter what they do are likely to see compromising with the beast's religion as at least not risking their eternal future – and may even foolishly assume that this applies also to taking the mark of the beast, despite the very clear warnings of scripture.

False belief in spiritual security through institutional membership (i.e., "salvation through works"): If it is assumed that everyone who maintains fellowship within a Christian church or denomination is automatically protected, the tendency will then be to continue that fellowship at the very point when separation will be necessary for true spiritual safety. Whether membership or tithing or water-baptism or any other tangible ritual, rite or procedure is wrongly invested with magical significance, the net effect is to make the faith of the believer in question more dependent upon those fleshly works than upon the Rock of our salvation, Jesus Christ, and then to make him or her all the more vulnerable to a fatal compromise when the moment of decision comes.

7. Testing for False Teaching, False Teachers and False Groups

The above discussion should leave no doubt about the need to stay far away from any and all putatively Christian teaching, teachers and organizations which are not truly serving Jesus Christ. In accordance with our Lord's guidance that we are to be "wise as serpents", even as we remain "harmless as doves" (Matt.10:16), scripture tells us to test any and all such individuals and groups, along with their doctrines, before committing to fellowship with them.

(1) Beloved, don't believe every spirit [of every so-called prophet], but test the spirits [of these "prophets" to see] whether [or not] they are from God. For many false prophets have gone out into the world. (2) By this [test] you [will] know [whether or not a person has] the Spirit of God. Any spirit (i.e., a person or organization) which professes that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, (3) but any spirit which does not profess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not from God. And this [latter] is the [spirit] of the antichrist, which you have heard about, that he is coming, and [even] now [his spirit] is already in the world.

1st John 4:1-3

Jesus Christ is thus the proper "test" for evaluating any organization or teacher and their teachings. The precise means by which we are to employ this "test" is further delineated by our Lord:

(16) "You will recognize [these false prophets] from their fruit (i.e., their words, teachings, personal behavior and modus operandi). People don't collect grapes from thorn bushes or figs from thistles, do they? (17) Just so every good tree produces good [serviceable] fruit, but the rotten tree produces bad fruit. (18) A good tree cannot produce bad fruit, nor can a rotten tree produce good [appealing] fruit. (19) [For] every good tree which doesn't produce good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. (20) So then, you will recognize [those false prophets] from their fruit."

Matthew 7:16-20

For those who are genuinely trying to follow Jesus Christ and be His disciples, application of this "fruit-test" in the way our Lord has directed is imperative for our spiritual safety. Any teacher or teaching or group which does not truly represent Him, reflect Him and teach the truth about Him must be avoided.

a. Testing the Teacher: Evaluating and judging other people is always a dangerous business and one which is best avoided if unnecessary (Matt.7:1-2; Lk.6:37). However, given that serious spiritual growth is extremely difficult without in-depth teaching of the scriptures, and that this process requires the believer's acceptance of the authority of the teacher in question to some degree, at least an initial evaluation is advisable, therefore, when it comes to the issue of choosing whether or not to accept a particular person's teaching authority in the first place.

This will mean, it is true, that the lifestyle and personal behavior of the teacher in question should be above reproach (cf. 1Tim.3:1-15; Tit.1:5-9), at least, that is, when a fair and accurate judgment is rendered on more than mere appearances (Jn.7:24). After all, many a false teacher

will go to great lengths to try and project an image of sanctity, hiding under a layer of whitewash his true nature, and thus making whatever he wishes to hide often less than obvious (Matt.23:27-28).

On the one hand, while charlatans are often very careful to conceal their faults, genuine teachers may, out of innocence, be less careful about hiding their own shortcomings (none of us, after all, is perfect). So while sanctimonious behavior trumpeted for mass consumption should put anyone on the alert, and while false teachers often have at least one "tell" or glaring fault that burns through the facade and reveals what is really underneath, judging the source is not entirely without its difficulties. This, at least in part, accounts for the acceptance by some (who should know better) of false teachers (based upon their polished deceptions) and the rejection by some (employing an over-legalistic standard) of true teachers (based upon patent peccadillos and minor imperfections).

As in all things, the employment of careful, balanced, and sober judgment, accompanied by prayer and the aid of the Spirit, should be able to avoid both of these extremes.

b. Testing the Teachings: It is surely for just this reason that our Lord in giving us this "fruit test" directs our attention in these matters not to the tree itself (which may give the appearance of being "good"), but rather to its fruit whose goodness and badness it is impossible to conceal. While we may not always be able to discern the nature of the heart from what people choose to show us in their personal appearance and demeanor, judging the quality of their production, their fruit (their teaching), is an easier matter.

The analogy of literal fruit is helpful in this regard. Good fruit is generally obvious upon inspection: it gives a pleasant appearance and smell. With even a small experience of particular types of fruit, it is rare that we are fooled about quality even before tasting (and we often go to great lengths at the market to judge the weight, color, luster, smell, etc.). If we do make a mistake, one bite is usually sufficient to tell us that a piece of fruit is rotten, or unripe, or otherwise deficient in quality (i.e., because of parasites or what have you). And even on those rare occasions when we partake in spite of all these factors, the physical reaction of our bodies will no doubt keep us from making such bad judgment a continuing practice (e.g., an over-indulgence in green apples is seldom repeated).

As obvious as all this is in the realm of literal fruit (and our Lord has made a point of picking an analogy wherein we have no excuse to plead ignorance), is it not amazing that so many continue to persevere in indulging in bad "spiritual fruit", that is, in the lies and dissembling of false or otherwise inadequately or ill-prepared teachers? For while we may not be absolutely sure about the tree (indeed, the false teacher may be charismatic in the extreme, popular, well-spoken, even a model of aestheticism, etc.), if the fruit/teaching is bad, it will stink discernibly, it will taste noticeably bad, and it will produce unmistakable spiritual dyspepsia (to put the issue again in terms of literal fruit). For if the teaching is false, it will arouse our spiritual suspicions immediately (like a banana bruised on the outside), will not square with the Bible upon scrutiny (like an avocado mottled on the inside), and, if we are foolish enough to "take it in" anyway, will cause sudden problems in our spiritual life (like a rotten apple eaten in spite of our better judgment), problems which should immediately warn us of our mistake.

In the realm of real fruit, a person would have to be mad to persevere in eating bad fruit and to continue to endure the predictable and dissipating consequences. In the realm of spiritual fruit, the believer still possessed of his/her spiritual sanity (that is, still committed to following Christ instead of what the flesh, the eyes, and the ego lust for: 1Jn.2:15-17), ought to react in a similar manner, turning away from the source of the problem (suspicious as it was to begin with).

The main difference in this analogy between bad fruit and bad teaching is that, sadly, while few human beings are willing to deliberately skew their perception of physical reality so as to call certifiably bad fruit "good", hardening the heart and distorting spiritual reality to the point of calling teaching which is dangerously inadequate or intentionally deceptive "good" is an all too common occurrence (Eph.4:17-19). This has much to do with the spiritual battle in which we find ourselves. On the one hand, fruit trees have no hidden agenda, but false teachers (and the devil who motivates and uses them) clearly do: the exploitation of potential victims for their own selfish ends. On the other hand, any motivation we would have to eat rotten literal fruit is easily counterbalanced by the painful price to pay, but when it comes to all the hidden desires of our hearts, we human beings have always been most susceptible to those who are willing to tell us that what we know is wrong (but want to do) is really alright. This has been the case since the serpent told Eve that eating that most famous fruit would not only fail to produce the dire effects prophesied by the Lord, but would even have positive benefits as well (Gen.3:4-5).

For by giving voice to unparalleled folly, [these false teachers] entrap by fleshly lusts and sensuality those who did not flee far enough from such habitual deceivers.

2nd Peter 2:18

Choosing the "bad fruit" of false teachers is the result of spiritual myopia in the first place, and, should one persist in such damaging behavior, can result in the end in complete spiritual blindness, returning in apostasy to the hardening of one's heart in unbelief so as to refuse to let in the light of the truth (Matt.6:22-23; 15:14; Mk.4:12; Lk.8:10b; Jn.9:34-41;12:40; Rom.1:21-32; 1Jn.2:11):

(3) And to the degree that our gospel really is covered by a veil, it is obscured in this way only in the case of those who are perishing. (4) For in the case of such persons, the god of this world has blinded the minds of these unbelievers, in order to prevent the shining forth unto them of the light of the gospel of Christ's glory – even Him who is the very image of God.

2nd Corinthians 4:3-4

Truly committed followers of Jesus Christ are seldom ensnared by the lure of "bad fruit" (even if they desire it, they maintain their spiritual "wits" and reject it), while half-hearted and lukewarm individuals are easy targets for false teachers (being all too eager to accept the false version of reality being offered in order to indulge their various lusts, whatever these may be).

c. Testing the Group: No one is perfect, and so perfect behavior cannot be expected from any group, not even from a legitimate Christian church. Nevertheless, it seems obvious to say that wild or weird behavior on a mass scale should be reason enough to doubt the holiness of any would-be "Christian" church (taking into account, of course, that every organization has an

occasional "loose cannon" or two: Tit.1:16). Barring any obvious and dominant trend towards immorality on the one hand or legalistic self-righteousness on the other in the behavior of the membership, there are other factors to consider as well in determining whether or not a particular self-styled group of "believers" is really following our Lord. Certain telltale characteristics of organizations operating for their own ends apart from God and His Word are inevitably present even in groups which (falsely) profess to be Christian. Positive indications that one is dealing with a "false group" may include (but are certainly not limited to) the fact that they . . .

- teach and practice things which are patently and easily refuted by the Bible (cf. 1Cor.15:12-19).
- discourage (or prohibit) individual Bible reading and personal Bible study (cf. Acts 17:11).
- adhere to "secret doctrines" or "oral tradition" available only from and interpreted exclusively by the leadership (cf. Col.2:18-23).
- violate hypocritically (though not openly) whatever good standards they do profess and proclaim (cf. Matt.23:27-32).
- seek to exploit their own membership for money, pleasure, or otherwise take advantage (cf. Acts 20:29-30).
- seek to control the lives and take over the decision-making of their members (cf. 2Pet.2:18-22).
- seek to isolate their members from friends, family, and society at large (cf. Gal.4:17).
- claim a superior righteousness or morality based upon their own deeds instead of on Christ's work (cf. Phil.3:7-9).
- promise eternal life and salvation apart from faith in and faithfulness to Jesus Christ (cf. Gal.1:6-9).
- deny Jesus Christ by their teachings or their actions (cf. 2Jn.1:7).

This last standard of evaluation, the "Christ test", should really be at the heart of any evaluation of groups which purport to be Christian:

(2b) Any spirit (i.e. person, teaching, organization) which professes that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, (3) but any spirit which does not profess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not from God.

1st John 4:2b-3a

To fulfill the requirement of genuinely professing Jesus Christ, there must be acknowledgment of and adherence to the following principles (taught by scripture as natural corollaries to the

proposition that "Jesus Christ has come in the flesh and is God"):

- that Jesus Christ is both undiminished deity and true humanity (Rom.9:5; Col.2:9; 1Jn.5:6-12).
- that He came into the world to die for all mankind (Jn.3:16; 1Pet.2:24).
- that His work was deemed acceptable by the Father (Rom.3:21-26).
- that we are saved on the basis of our faith in Him and in His work alone and not by our own works (Eph.2:8-9).
- that apart from faith in Jesus Christ, there is no way to approach the Father (Jn.14:6).
- that the true believer in Jesus Christ ought to follow Christ and His teachings throughout his life on this earth (Matt.7:20; Jn.8:31; 1Jn.2:4; 2Jn.1:9).

Such "testing" of teachers, teachings and groups may (wrongly) seem disrespectful to some, and many if not most of the so-called "Christian" groups who need just such testing inevitably discourage the practice of checking to see what the Bible says. Such proper "checking", moreover, is not easy. Time, thought and effort may be required in order to determine that specific points of teaching or behavior or modus operandi are unbiblical.

Even more difficult than the process and effort of testing to see if would-be teachers and their pronouncements and organizations are truly "of Christ" is the hard decision to separate when such people fail the test. For without the dogged determination to persistently reject from fellowship (personal or collective) any person, persons or teaching which are patently wrong and dangerously contrary to scripture, all the testing in the world is pointless. Rejecting false teachers, teachings, and individuals has always been and remains today a critical safeguard for the faith and practice of the true Church of Jesus Christ – especially on the cusp of the great deceptions prophesied to occur during the Tribulation.

"I have come in My Father's Name, and you do not accept Me; but if someone else comes in his own name (i.e., antichrist), you will accept him."
John 5:43

Who is the liar if not the one who claims that Jesus is not the Christ? This is the antichrist, the one who denies the Father and the Son.
1st John 2:22