

IDENTIFYING THE BAD GUYS

Who Are Those Guys? How to Identify False Teachers



For certain men, who were designated for this judgment long ago, have come in by stealth; they are ungodly, turning the grace of our God into promiscuity and denying our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ. (Jude 4)

Jude can't seem to shake the false teachers determined to bring down the infant church. Jude avoids calling them by name, choosing instead to describe them as "certain/some men" (HCSB, NIV, KJV), "certain people" (ESV), or "certain persons" (NASB). In a parallel passage, Peter simply refers to them as "false teachers" (2 Peter 2:1).

Why in the world doesn't Jude name these false teachers?

But who, exactly, are these false teachers? And why doesn't Jude call them out? After all, other New Testament writers have no hesitation naming names:

- Luke records an encounter between Peter and John, and a sorcerer by the name of Simon, who professes faith in Christ and then seeks to purchase the gift of conferring the Holy Spirit on people (Acts 8:9-24).
- Paul writes to Timothy about Hymenaeus and Alexander, who have "suffered the shipwreck of their faith" and whom Paul delivers to Satan (1 Tim. 1:19-20).
- Paul again lists Hymenaeus, this time with Philetus, two men engaged in "irreverent, empty speech" that produces godlessness;

these men have "deviated from the truth, saying that the resurrection has already taken place" (2 Tim. 2:16-18).

- Paul mentions Alexander the coppersmith, who "did great harm to me" and whom "The Lord will repay ... according to his works." He is one who "strongly opposed our words" (2 Tim. 4:14-15).
- The apostle John warns about Diotrephes, "who loves to have first place" among believers, and who engages in "slanderizing us with malicious words," refusing to welcome the brothers, and stopping those who want to do so by expelling them from the church (3 John 9-10).

Other examples could be cited, but the point is that Jude delivers serious warnings about the religious scoundrels who have infiltrated the church - without naming them.

Perhaps this is because there are far too many to name - an indication of how widespread the movement has become. Or maybe it's because no single person is so well known as to have a heretical movement named after him. Perhaps it's because Jude's readers know full well who is being discussed, as Paul's readers in Corinth do when he identifies "super apostles" who are, in fact, "false apostles" proclaiming another Jesus, a different Spirit, and a different gospel (see 2 Corinthians 11-12).

Or perhaps Jude neglects to name the false teachers because he is writing, not only to the church in his day, but to believers throughout the church age. It's even possible he resists the temptation to call them out personally because he is determined not to grant them a taste of the credibility they so ravenously desire.

In any case, we may be able to find clues about the false teachers' identity and their first-century offensive and off-base doctrines. Jude recognizes that a battle is brewing, "a conflict that marked Satan's newest campaign in his long war against the truth," writes John MacArthur. "And that is why Jude writes this letter: to alert his readers to the doctrinal dangers they faced from Satan's covert agents."

The danger within

It's clear these false teachers are in the church, for Jude says they have "come in by stealth (secretly; not wanting people to know)." This makes them especially dangerous. Many false prophets outside the church have

spawned lies about Jesus while conducting anti-Christian campaigns. For example, Muhammad's insistence that Jesus is merely a prophet - not the divine Son of God - has led to 14 centuries of bloody Muslim conquest resulting in the deaths of 270 million people, many of them Christians.

But an even greater threat resides within the church. "The counterfeit pastors, elders, deacons, and teachers within the church are usually far more dangerous than those outside Christianity," MacArthur adds. "Attacks from outside the church often unite God's people, but attacks from inside - coming from false teachers - usually divide and confuse the flock."

Consider just a few of the many apostolic warnings about intruders of the faith within the body of Christ:

- Acts 20:28-31. Paul urges the Ephesian elders to be on guard, because after his departure "savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock." Further, "men from among yourselves will rise up with deviant doctrines and lure the disciples into following them."
- 2 Cor. 11:12-15. Paul writes to the Corinthians about "false apostles, deceitful workers" who disguise themselves as apostles of Christ. He even refers to them, tongue-in-cheek, as "super apostles" (11:5; 12:11). And he urges believers not to be surprised that these intruders disguise themselves as "servants of righteousness" because Satan masquerades as an angel of light.
- 1:6-9. Paul expresses amazement that the Galatians have fallen so quickly under the spell of "some who are troubling you and want to change the gospel of Christ." He singles out the Judaizers, who add traditional Jewish requirements such as circumcision, food laws, and Sabbath-keeping to Christ's finished work on the cross (3:1-3).
- 2:8, 18-19. Paul cautions the Colossians not to be taken captive through "philosophy and empty deceit based on human tradition." Further, he warns about one who could cheat believers of their prize by "insisting on ascetic practices and the worship of angels, claiming access to a visionary realm and inflated without cause by his fleshly mind."
- 1 John 2:18-23. John reminds his readers that "Antichrist is coming." Meanwhile, "many antichrists have come." They are known by their denial of Jesus as Messiah, and their denial of the Father and the Son, a clear reference to a skewed Christology.

- 1 John 4:1-6. John further addresses the Docetists, who deny the full humanity of Jesus. "Every spirit [person claiming divine gifting for service] who confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God. But every spirit who does not confess Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist." (See also 2 John 7-11.)

Many of these first-century false teachers are itinerant "evangelists" who settle in communities that welcome and support them. John is adamant about such people: "Do not receive him into your home, and don't say, 'Welcome,' to him; for the one who says, 'Welcome,' to him shares in his evil works" (2 John 10b-11).

Modern travel and technology have changed the tactics, but not the stripes, of 21st century false teachers. They hold services in cavernous venues originally designed for sports. They produce self-help books that ride atop the best-seller lists in Christian bookstores. They peddle everything from anointing oil to survival kits on Christian television stations that are barely distinguishable from satellite shopping networks. They glean followers on Twitter and friends on Facebook, and parlay them into a frenzied army of loyal soldiers. All the while they fleece the flock rather than feed it (see 1 Peter 5:1-4). Satan always sows tares among the wheat and never fails to produce an odious bumper crop.

Who might these false teachers be?

Still, the question persists: Who might these "certain persons" be? A few possibilities:

Gnostics. Although Gnosticism did not blossom fully until the second century, these interlopers may have fired "the opening shots in the fateful struggle between the Church and Gnosticism," according to J.N.D. Kelly, who sees "Gnostic coloring" in their libertinism and suspects they embraced Christological heresy.

"Gnosticism was perhaps the most dangerous heresy that threatened the early church during the first three centuries," according to the popular Christian website gotquestions.org. Influenced by such philosophers as Plato, Gnosticism is based on two false premises:

(1) A dualism of spirit (good) and matter (evil); therefore, anything done in the body, even the grossest sin, bears no true consequences because real

life exists in the spirit realm only.

(2) An elevated knowledge, a "higher truth" known only to select individuals. "Gnostics see themselves as a privileged class elevated above everybody else by their higher, deeper knowledge."

No doubt this "secret knowledge" denies either the deity of Jesus or His full humanity, undermining His finished work on the cross and changing the gospel message.

Jude's reference to dreaming (v. 8) perhaps suggests that the false teachers claim to receive Gnostic dreams and visions. By reviling angelic powers, they demonstrate their rejection of the material world created by the Demiurge (a lesser god often seen as malevolent) since, in Gnostic thinking, angelic powers helped created the physical world.

Finally, Jude's mention of Cain (v. 11) may indicate the false teachers are part of the Gnostic Cainite sect that lived immorally.

Libertines. These sexually immoral people bow to no authority and recognize no moral absolutes. Jude exposes them as ungodly, promiscuous, doctrinally unstable, dreamers, defilers of the flesh, despisers of authority, blasphemers, brute beasts, and the list goes on. These false teachers, while offering little evidence of Gnostic Christology, nevertheless deny Christ's Lordship by the way they live. It's likely they revile angels, not because they feel superior to them, but because angels, as mediators of the law, uphold moral standards that confront their antinomian lifestyles.

They are, in some respects, the life of the church party. They show kindness to gain an edge, flatter to reduce opposition, and ply false humility to marshal support. They are all smoke and mirrors, writing checks no one may cash. Jude calls them waterless clouds, fruitless trees, wild waves of the sea, and wandering stars. When some discerning folk catch wind of their game, they quickly turn into discontented grumblers. Like the enemies of the cross Paul describes to the Philippians, "their god is their stomach; their glory is in their shame. They are focused on earthly things ... " (Phil. 3:19).

Pneumatics. These ecstatic seers claim to receive heavenly visions, thus they despise angels because they fancy themselves above them as spiritual elites. Just as the angels who sinned (v.6) breached their

created boundaries to inhabit earth, the pneumatists, through ecstatic visions, try to transcend their created sphere of the physical realm to participate in the heavenly world. With a strong emphasis on grace and the Holy Spirit - but little spiritual maturity to match - they see themselves as exalted above angelic beings.

Judaizers. The term "Judaizer" is used in a theological sense to describe the opponents of Paul and Barnabus at the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15), as well as "false brothers smuggled in" to preach "another gospel" in the churches of Galatia (see Gal. 2:4, 12; 6:12). In this sense, the term refers to Jewish Christians who seek to induce Gentiles to observe Jewish religious customs, limiting the admission of Gentiles into the covenant people of God through circumcision and keeping the ceremonial law. Insisting that "Unless you are circumcised ... you cannot be saved!" (Acts 15:1), these professing believers, who belong to the party of the Pharisees (Acts 15:5), pose a serious threat to the gospel of grace and the universality of the Christian mission.

As R. David Rightmire explains, "Paul's Galatian epistle portrays the Judaizers as having come from the Jerusalem church to his churches in Galatia, stressing the need for Gentiles to be circumcised and keep the law, both for full acceptance by God (legalism) and as the basis for Christian living (nomism). They understood keeping the law not only as the means by which the blessings of the Abrahamic covenant could be appropriated, but also as the regulative guide for Christian life within that covenant relationship."

Nicolaitans. Very little is known of this group apart from what we read in Rev. 2:6, 15. Jesus affirms the believers at Ephesus because they "hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans," which He also hates (miso - to abhor or find utterly repulsive), although no further details are given. Meanwhile, Christ calls the church at Pergamum to repentance because some "hold fast to the teaching of the Nicolaitans." Here, an association with Balaam (Rev. 2:14) seems to connect the Nicolaitans with those who eat food sacrificed to idols and practice sexual immorality. These same behaviors reflect Jezebel's false teachings, described later in the letter to Thyatira (Rev. 2:20).

There are two main views concerning the Nicolaitans, according to Rick Renner. The first view holds that they are an early Christian cult that either follows or perverts the teachings of Nicolas, one of the seven men chosen as deacons by the congregation in Acts 6:5. The second view

understands the designation "Nicolaitan" as denoting the error of creating an unnatural distinction between the clergy and the laity. Those who hold the second view point out that the name "Nicolaitans" is derived from the Greek word nikolaos, a compound word that means "one who conquers and subdues the people."

In any case, evidence from Scripture and early-church leaders indicates that the Nicolaitans teach a doctrine of compromise; that is, total separation between Christianity and paganism is not essential. "It is significant that the 'deeds' and 'doctrines' of the Nicolaitans are only mentioned in connection with the churches in these two occultic and pagan cities [Ephesus and Pergamum]," writes Renner. "It seems that the 'doctrine' of the Nicolaitans was that it was alright to have one foot in both worlds and that one needn't be so strict about separation from the world in order to be a Christian. This, in fact, was the 'doctrine' of the Nicolaitans that Jesus 'hated.' It led to a weak version of Christianity that was without power and without conviction - a defeated, worldly type of Christianity."

Wandering prophets or teachers. Jude describes the false teachers as having come in by stealth, implying they have hidden their true character and motives. It also indicates they are outsiders, perhaps wandering prophets or teachers. "They are surreptitious and crafty, pretending to be godly members of the Christian church," says Thomas Schreiner. "Paul, similarly, criticized the Judaizers who had infiltrated the ranks of the church to spy out and destroy the liberty of those committed to the gospel (Gal. 2:3-5)."

We may never know with certainty which of these errant groups - Gnostics, libertines, pneumatics, Judaizers, Nicolaitans, or wandering prophets - Jude is describing. But the text gives us a clear picture of their attitudes, demeanors, lifestyles, and tactics. They are ungodly, sneaky, promiscuous, dismissive of authority, blasphemers, profiteers, self-centered, grumblers, arrogant, flatterers - and clearly unbelievers (v. 19).

This takes us back to the words of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount as He warns of false prophets, whom He describes as wolves in sheep's clothing. They may fool people for a while, but ultimately are known by their fruit - their doctrines and lifestyles. "Are grapes gathered from thornbushes or figs from thistles?" He asks. "In the same way, every good tree produces good fruit, but a bad tree produces bad fruit. A good tree

can't produce bad fruit; neither can a bad tree produce good fruit. Every tree that doesn't produce good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. So you'll recognize them by their fruit" (Matt. 7:16-20).

"Be careful little ears what you hear... Be careful little eyes what you see... for the Father up above is looking down in love; Be careful little one... what you believe!"