

Bread of life – or microwave dinner?

Deception is an ever-present danger. **Colin Wilson** warns that our 'de-skilled culture' has stunted our discernment



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*Are they **all** real? If something is 'nearly genuine', it's false!*

I was advised when delivering teaching to students: 'First tell them what you are going to tell them; then tell them; and then tell them what you've told them' – reinforcement by repetition. Two thousand years ago this 'threefold' emphasis was employed by Jesus to stress a particular theme of His teaching: that of 'deception'.

From the Garden of Eden ('Did God really say? Gen 3:1) to these end-times, deception has been one of the principal tools in the enemy's armoury. So when Jesus' disciples asked 'what will be the sign of your coming and the end of the age?' the first thing He said was: 'Watch out that no one deceives you. For many will come in my name, claiming, "I am the Christ," and will deceive many' (Mt 24:4-5).

It is surely significant that the Son of God

saw deception as the primary hallmark of the end times. And yet, in the first instance, deception is a personal and invisible process; it is difficult to spot. We might have expected that Jesus' would have focused His first words on the global and extremely obvious upheavals on the earth – earthquakes, wars, famine and death. Of course, He went on to do so (Matt 24:6-7), but even then He returned to His first theme: 'many false prophets will appear and deceive many people' (Matt 24:11). So the second mention even took precedence over His dire forecast of 'great distress, unequalled from the beginning of the world until now – and never to be equalled again' (Matt 24:21). Even before mention of cosmic upheavals involving the sun and stars (Matt 24:29) the problem of deception was given a third highlighting by God's Son: 'For false Christs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and miracles to deceive even the elect' (Matt 24:24). So it seems the 'three times' approach was used by the greatest Teacher of all time.

The dangers of deception are also reinforced to us by the New Testament writers. Paul encourages us to emulate his awareness 'lest Satan should get an advantage of us: for we are not ignorant of his devices' (2 Cor 2:11 KJV). The apostle wrote to his

young companion Timothy: 'evil men and impostors will go from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived' (2 Tim 3:13). And he urges the believers at Ephesus to maturity so that they will no longer be 'blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming' (Eph 4:14). John tells us that 'many deceivers...have gone out into the world' (2 Jn 1:7) and that those characteristics are of the Anti [alternative] christ. Indeed, during the Millennial reign of Christ, Satan the ultimate liar and sponsor of 'false apostles, deceitful workmen (2 Co 11:13), who 'masquerades as an angel of light' (2 Cor. 11:14) is thrown into the Abyss 'to keep him from deceiving the nations any more' (Rev. 20:3).

Dumbed-down abilities

So how does this increase in deception fit into our post-modern society and contemporary church? Apart from robbing our nation of basic cookery skills, our microwave culture has both stripped out the need to put thought and effort into a task whilst also creating a need for easy and instant results. (Lord give me patience, but give it to me now.)

Aiding and abetting this 'cultural enfee-

Ps12:6



things have gone too far when the Bible becomes merely an 'add-on'

bling' is the extent to which our attention spans have reduced to fit the sound bite or video clip. (Even national governments are disseminating their most important messages via 5-minute YouTube videos on the internet.) Meanwhile the written word is often reduced to a phonetically-spelt text message.

Now I don't want to come across as a self-righteous stone-age Luddite who sees every innovation and change as a threat, but my great concern is for a society which, increasingly, is being stripped of both the ability and incentives to listen, concentrate, read, write, spell or think. And Christians are not immune.

In the hyper-active busyness of life, pew-sitting can become merely a chance for a rest. And the practice permits churchgoers to forego the study of God's Word for themselves. It's easier just to 'turn up' every Sunday to be spoon-fed by a preacher who has done the work for us. It's not good.

Whose word?

It gets worse. Twenty years ago Bible study groups studied, well... the Bible! The teaching could be from one from the prophets, the synoptic gospels or the pastoral epistles. But, no matter which, it was from the Bible.

However, things have changed. Doctrine, or should I say pseudo-doctrine, is being taken from the pages of the latest Christian best-seller or 'successful' programme. Now please stay with me here. I am not decrying books written by human authors: I have been greatly helped by the many writings on my shelf. However things have gone too far when the Bible becomes merely an 'add-on' to the latest 'new thing' in best-selling format. (Increasingly, some of these publications have become industries in their own right.)

And, if it hasn't already arrived at a house group near you, one of the most influential of recent days has been dubbed 'the Emerging Church'. However, without embarking at this stage on any analysis of this current phenomenon, let me say that the first (and major) problem is that it defies adequate definition. It shares the inexact wooliness of terms like 'The New Age' or 'Charismatic' or 'Post-Modern'. Attempting to define the Emerging Church (just to confuse things further there is a sub-set called the 'Emergent Church') is like trying to pin a jelly to the wall! Proponents will dress up the term in one set of clothes in order to extol its virtues, whilst critics seize upon a different caricature and proceed to denounce it in the most scathing of terms. The trouble is (and leaving terminology aside) the Emerging Church is a mixed bag: a

mixed bag of belief, practices, philosophies and teachings.

And it's when we get to 'mixtures' that deception gets very difficult to spot.

Deadly mix

Some years ago, during a Christian leaders' conference, the speaker for one session covered the topic of discerning truth from falsehood. To illustrate a particular point he asked those present to turn around in their chairs and, from where they were seated, say whether the flowers in the vase at the back corner of the room were real or artificial. The gathering dutifully complied and, after a brief pause while each person formed an opinion, a babble of mixed opinions broke out: 'I think they're real' 'No, they're not.' 'Yes they are!' Confusion reigned. 'Hold it', cried the speaker, 'I have made my point.'

The truth of the matter, as the Bible teacher went on to outline, was that while the vase contained some real flowers, others were completely artificial. So the varied responses of the conference delegates revealed two important points: Each person had made a judgment on the basis of the particular flower on which his or her eyes first fell, whether real or plastic. Each then assumed that all the other flowers were ei-

ther genuine or artificial based on their first observation.

Partial truth is... partial

There is yet another trap into which Christians are inclined to fall. While we might spot false teachings, we are all perhaps less likely to spot *omissions*: our background knowledge subconsciously 'fills in the blanks'. So if one or more parts of an apparently successful evangelistic programme are Biblical, we accept the whole. Yet it is a serious error to preach on the atonement, whilst leaving out the doctrines of sin and repentance. It is grossly misleading for a so-called 'missional' church to emphasise the love of God apart from the righteous judgements of God. In a court of law, witnesses are put on oath to speak 'the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth'. And so it should be. Anything more or less is a lie.

An expert whose job it was to spot counterfeit currency was once asked how he became sufficiently sharp-eyed to identify forgeries. His reply? 'I conscientiously study the real thing'. Whatever teachings, new ideas, apparently successful schemes, or best-selling publications are circulating amongst God's people, every follower of Jesus needs to emulate the Bereans who weighed Paul's new teaching (Acts 17:11). We need to take the time and make the effort to study God's Word for ourselves. We need to become skilled through a personal intimate knowledge of 'the real thing'. But this takes work. Diligent and persistent effort is needed.

My friend's father was of a generation and type such that when he came home from work in the evening he would sit by the fire with the Bible on his knee, and read and meditate on the Word of God for his own life. He would then teach the Scripture's eternal truths to his children and encourage them to think through things for themselves.

Have we lost something in our 'fast food' culture? Has the reduced time, numbed inclinations and reduced literacy of our age given the enemy of God great scope for falsehood and deception? In a fast-moving world there will always be things 'emerging'. (Paradoxically there is nothing new under the sun.) So let's be open to how we best spread the Gospel in our day, but let's also be absolutely certain that it is the *Gospel* we are spreading! Let's be very careful that our message and our understanding are based on the Truth, the whole Truth and nothing but the Truth. This is what we need to do. So help us God.

Ps12:6



7th fire people

one of the biggest perils Christians face is when (some) truth is mixed with error