



"Factions are a sign of illness in a party."
—Ernest Mandel

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The Fifth Teacher (Part One)

Near the end of the [Sermon on the Mount](#), Jesus warns about false prophets, who appear one way yet conceal something spiritually deadly ([Matthew 7:15-20](#)). Despite not providing many specifics about what false prophets are like, He does stipulate an iron-clad rule we can use to recognize them: False prophets are discernable by what their teachings produce. If a teaching is not biblical, its fruit will not be spiritually positive.

We may not have considered another facet of this principle. Consistently bad fruit indicates the presence of false teaching and thus a false teacher. Belief—true or false—will always produce corresponding conduct, so if we observe ungodly behavior, it stems from incorrect belief, communicated by a false teacher.

Matthew 7 does not tell us what sort of fruit to look for, only that every teaching—every belief—will produce something, and it is incumbent upon us to evaluate the product to know whether to accept or reject the teaching. Throughout His Word, however, [God](#) gives us an abundance of specifics. In short, what matters is whether the instruction points to God or away from Him.

The [fruit of the Spirit](#) and the [works of the flesh](#) show this contrast. Where the teaching is good and put into practice, the result—at some point—will be [love](#), [joy](#), [peace](#), and so forth. But, over time, false teaching will produce hatred, contention, jealousy, wrath, selfish ambition, dissensions, envy, and the rest. These are reliable indicators that a thorn bush or a thistle—a false teacher—is present.

We find the foundational warning against false prophets in Deuteronomy 13. Verse 4, in particular, provides godly [wisdom](#) about [false teachers](#): "You shall walk after the Lord your God and fear Him, and keep His commandments and obey His voice; you shall serve Him and hold fast to Him." Since these actions are responses to the false prophet's message, we may infer that the false teaching will in some way be against these godly practices.

In other words, his teaching will guide people away from God, diminish the fear of God, and undermine the need to keep His commandments, obey God's voice, serve Him (in spirit and truth), and hold fast. Those elements may be subtle, at least at first, but they all indicate that a false teacher is influencing belief and leading people from the true worship of God.

Applying this principle—of bad spiritual fruit marking the presence of a false teacher—to a well-known situation in Scripture provides us an especially valuable lesson in these end times:

Now I plead with you, brethren, by the name of our Lord [Jesus Christ](#), that you all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment. For it has been declared to me concerning you, my brethren, by those of Chloe's household, that there are contentions among you. Now I say this, that each of you says, "I am of Paul," or "I am of Apollos," or "I am of Cephas," or "I am of Christ." ([1 Corinthians 1:10-12](#))

In terms of describing the Corinthian congregation's spiritual state, the epistle goes downhill from here. The members were gathering a bumper crop

of bad fruit! The congregation had many and various problems, and in fact, Paul ends up mentioning *all* the works of the flesh in this letter except for murder and sorcery, and even those can be found in their spirit.

Think about that for a moment. Given Christ's warning in Matthew 7, such an abundance of evil fruit would indicate the presence of a false teacher altering the Corinthians' belief and thus influencing their conduct. As we will see, there *was* a false teacher, and we catch glimpses of him, but he is not what we might expect.

I Corinthians is one of the few epistles that does not directly mention false prophets, apostles, ministers, or teachers. Near the end of II Corinthians, Paul finally comments on false apostles ([II Corinthians 11:13](#)), but even here, they seem to be on the periphery, something that might influence the Corinthians in the future. But in I Corinthians, they appear to be absent.

In [I Corinthians 1:12](#), Paul lists four recognized teachers: Paul, Apollos, Cephas (Peter), and Christ. These teachers were part of what the congregation was dividing over, although the teachers themselves were not advocating the division. Paul founded the congregation, and he later calls himself their father in the [faith](#). Certainly, he was not the one leading them astray.

Paul identifies Apollos as the minister doing the watering of the planted seed ([I Corinthians 3:6](#)). [Acts 18:24](#) describes him as an eloquent man and mighty in the Scriptures, while verse 26 states that he could speak with boldness. That gifting, though, had been insufficient to pull the Corinthians from their degenerate spiritual state.

We have no record of Cephas (Peter) serving in Corinth, but we know he was the leader among the apostles. This is significant because the congregation regarded these teachers as champions and mentally—even verbally—pitted them against each other. Some members preferred Paul, and others were impressed by Apollos. Since Peter was chief apostle, perhaps those in his corner were saying they would listen only to what came from the very top. Yet Peter was not bringing a [false gospel](#), nor trying to gather a following to himself.

Finally, we come to the Christ-faction. On the surface, this sounds good, because all Christians will say that they are "of Christ." But Paul includes the Christ-faction in his assertion of carnality, so evidently, they were not nearly as "of Christ" as they claimed. It may be that, just as others in Corinth identified with human servants so strongly that it was causing division, these members were swinging to the other extreme, saying that they needed *no teacher* but Christ Himself.

Of course, one must do some fancy footwork and dodge a multitude of scriptures to arrive at this assertion, but such scriptural acrobatics are not new. In chapter 12, Paul lists some of the offices and gifts that Christ gives to members of His church. It may have been that the Christ-faction had judged that the Body had no need of the apostles, prophets, teachers, etc.—in their warped judgment, all they needed was Christ. But He certainly was not the cause of such belief or the resulting contention.

Paul mentions four outstanding teachers—including the very best Teacher—yet the Corinthians were still carnal. These teachers were not the source of the problems in Corinth. The source was a *fifth* teacher, the one inciting the Corinthians to overemphasize or disregard God's servants. He was the one encouraging the people to be puffed up, to let down in their fear of God, and become lax in obedience, as Deuteronomy 13 warned. He was the one drowning out these godly teachers, such that the very best instruction had not borne the fruit it could have.

In Part Two, we will unmask this fifth teacher.

- David C. Grabbe

From the Archives: Featured Sermon

[Themes of I Corinthians \(Part 2\)](#)

by Richard T. Ritenbaugh

The self-indulgent, immoral culture of Corinth parallels today's America and the current fractured state of the church. Paul, before he gives the

Corinthians a corrective message on factions and party spirit, reminds them that they are sanctified members of Christ's body, which should not be divided by schism. He pleads with them to present a united front, all adhering to the same doctrines. Getting rid of pride and selfish ambition makes attaining unity as genuine Christians very difficult. Ironically, fractures or schisms in the church serve as a litmus test, distinguishing those faithful who really belong to Christ. Our ultimate responsibility is to zig and zag with Christ in faith, and not become deceived or distracted by human reason. A true, godly minister does not draw people to himself, but instead to Jesus Christ and the Father. Not placing Christ at the forefront will lead to carnal-mindedness and retardation of spiritual growth and maturity.

From the Archives: Featured Article

[What Is a False Prophet?](#)

by David C. Grabbe

The Bible warns us that a great False Prophet will soon arise to sway mankind into idolatry. In addition, numerous passages speak of other false prophets and false teachers in the church and in the world. David Grabbe, in exposing the differences between false prophets and true ones, explains what we need to look out for as the end nears.

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