

1. True Gospel Ministry: Recognising the fake

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 06 January 2008

Preacher: Bob Fyall

[0 : 00] Now, if we could have our Bibles open, please, at page 1025, and we'll have a moment of prayer before we look together at the Word of God. Lord God, what a privilege it is that you have revealed yourself to us.

You have revealed yourself in flesh, in Jesus Christ, one with you, who became one of us. And you have given to us that written Word, which so fully and faithfully and finally points to him.

So I pray now that you will take my words in all their weakness, that you will use them faithfully to unfold that written Word. And so lead us to the living Word, Christ Jesus, in whose name we pray. Amen.

And as Willie said, we're going to have two weeks on these little letters of 2nd and 3rd John. And the title for this mini-series is True Gospel Ministry.

A man went to an evening class to study precious stones. And he imagined, no doubt, that the first evening he would be given a lecture, a talk on precious stones, and given examples of various types of these.

[1 : 18] But instead, they were given a tray full of jade pieces. And they were told simply to study it. And that's all that happened during the hour. It must have been very easy for the lecturer, but that's what happened.

The man was somewhat nonplussed, but he thought, well, this guy knows what he's doing. But he went back the next week, and the same thing happened again. A tray of jade pieces. Study this. Note everything you can.

And the following week, it happened again. They were given a tray of pieces. He came home in annoyance and said to his wife, I'm not going back there again.

All he's done is given us a tray of jade pieces. And tonight, he gave us a fake. You see the point? Unremitting exposure to the genuine had made him able to recognize the fake when he saw it.

Now, I'm not necessarily recommending that as a way of teaching. Nevertheless, it makes the point very powerfully. And that's what these two little letters of 2 and 3 John are concerned with.

[2 : 23] And in particular, the second letter, recognizing the fake. Next week, we're going to look at 3 John, the opposite side of the coin, if you like, welcoming the genuine.

So just a word or two about these little letters. Seldom read, seldom preached on, seldom talked of, and yet they are so important because they're about priorities.

What is an authentic gospel ministry? What is a genuine gospel church? Now, a gospel church is not simply a church where the Bible is read and commented on.

Most churches do that, more or less. A gospel church is a church that is totally committed to the gospel. Not just in its services, but in its whole life.

Its whole life, its agenda is driven by the gospel. And when we say the gospel, I don't just mean a few texts which summarize the gospel.

[3 : 23] They're important. I mean the whole revelation. And if you read through the New Testament, you'll find the apostles talk about that. John typically calls it the truth.

And you can see that here in verse 1. All who know the truth. Verse 2, because of the truth that abides in us and will be in us forever. When John says the truth, he means the gospel.

Jude describes it as the faith once delivered to the saints. Paul in Romans simply calls it the gospel. The gospel, he says, is the power of God for the salvation of all who believe.

And later on, in his last letter to Timothy, he calls it the deposit that's passed down. But perhaps Peter in his second letter makes it clearest of all.

He says the gospel is the words of the prophets and the apostles. In other words, a gospel church is a church which takes seriously, preaches, lives by the whole biblical revelation.

[4 : 28] Which centers around, as Peter says, the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. So that's what we're talking about. The gospel, the truth, the sacred deposit, passed down, handed on from age to age, non-negotiable, and keeping the church apostolic until the Lord returns.

A church, verse 1, who knows the truth, and a church, verse 4, who walks in the truth. We're almost at the end of the New Testament period.

John, as you know, had written his first letter, and that's been looked at various times over the last years. Peter, Paul, and James have gone.

Possibly the other apostles as well. John is probably the last apostle alive on earth. And therefore, he's concerned that when he goes, the church will remain gospel.

The church will remain apostolic. And he calls himself here the elder or the presbyter. The relation of his apostolic authority and pastoral care.

[5 : 36] It's likely that John had particular care for some of the churches in the Roman province of Asia, what we call Turkey. Perhaps even the seven churches mentioned in the book of Revelation in chapters 2 and 3.

Now, the first letter warns these churches against Antichrist. Warns them against his teachings.

Warns them against his behavior. And these two letters, they seem very slight.

But I must confess, as I was preparing this this week, I thought we could spend at least three weeks on this letter. There is an awful lot in this little letter. It's not, as one of the commentators said, a slight tract.

It's nothing of that sort. It is the living word of God. And as the church moves from the apostolic to the post-apostolic age, the age that we have been living in ever since, he is warning people to stand firm.

And the particular situation is by itinerant preachers who are going round the churches. Now, the apostles did that themselves, as did their associates, people like Titus, people like Timothy, people like Apollos.

[6 : 46] They all did that. And of course, in our day of global travel, in our day of the internet, in our day of the flood of stuff coming across the Atlantic, we have to be careful.

We need to know how to discern the genuine from the fake. So we need to recognize the fake.

That's our subject today. And welcome the genuine. And let me just say a quick word about verses 1 to 6, because we're going to concentrate on verses 7 to 11.

Who is the elect lady and her children? A rather odd address. The elder to the elect lady and her children. Some of the commentators think it's an individual lady whom they call somewhat unimaginatively electa.

That's hardly likely, because if you read verse 13, you discover she has a sister who is also called electa. So I don't think that can be right. Much more likely, it is to be he's addressing a group of churches for which he has particular pastoral care.

Let's say perhaps the seven around the coast of Roman Asia. And he's picking up the Old Testament picture of Israel as the bride of Christ, as the chosen one.

[7 : 58] And the New Testament picture of the church as the bride of Christ. So he's almost certainly talking to a church, indeed to a group of churches.

Perhaps the elect lady is the church, her children, the individual members. Or it may be the elect lady is a church which has planted other churches. So, it's so important then that we know what we are about.

True gospel ministry is the concern of everyone, not just of the leadership. This is addressed to the church, to the churches. Who is concerned that St. George's Tron has a gospel ministry?

The answer is everyone in St. George's Tron and friends of it outside of that. This is a question not of high-flown theology, but of true Christian faith.

The guy I mentioned who went to the Precious Stones class didn't know all about the physical and chemical makeup of jade. But he knew enough to distinguish the genuine from the fake.

[9 : 01] So, let's then look at verses 7 to 11. I want to say three things. How do we recognize the false teacher? I want to suggest three things.

First of all, they proclaim a false Christ. Verse 7. Many deceivers have gone out into the world, those who do not confess the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh.

I'm going to spend most time on that because the second two things are the development of that. They proclaim a false Christ. Secondly, they offer false progress. Verses 8 and 9.

Verse 9. Everyone who goes on ahead and does not abide in the teaching of Christ. And thirdly, they come under false pretenses.

Verses 10 to 11. So, if a fake turns up on our doors, how do we recognize them? And the first thing is they recognize, sorry, they proclaim a false Christ.

[10:04] Now, I want to ask two questions. First of all, what were they actually saying? And then, so what, if you like? What were they saying? And how does it apply to us?

We are told they do not confess the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh. Now, right from the beginning of the Christian church, there was false teaching around.

You read that all through the New Testament. Just as in the Old Testament time, there were false prophets around. But there was a particular cluster of views around which John, in particular, of the New Testament writers, although others refer to it as well, given the name of Gnosticism from the Greek Gnosis.

That's Gnosticism with a G. Of course, some people pronounce it Gnosticism, but that sounds odd. Anyway, these people claimed advanced knowledge.

They claimed there was superior knowledge for the elite, and there was an ordinary knowledge for the punters, so to speak. But especially they argued this, that matter, the created order, was evil, and spirit was good.

[11:18] See, as Lewis had been around then, he would have told them differently, God likes matter, said Lewis. He made it. That's something that's important to remember. Now, a version of this, don't worry about these names.

You're never going to meet Valentinians and Docetists and so on, but you're going to meet their modern equivalents. The Docetists argued that Jesus only appeared to be a man, that the divine word actually was simply a spirit masquerading as a man.

You all know what Docetism is. The cattle are lowing, the baby awakes, but little Lord Jesus, no crying he makes. That's Docetism. Not a real baby. If he'd been a real baby, you'd have cried, wouldn't he?

Now, be careful what we, we have to be careful what we sing, because what we sing shapes what we, what we think. You see, above all, they wanted to avoid the scandal of the incarnation.

That God became a man. That God took flesh. That the incarnation was rooted in time and space. Not just a beautiful idea.

[12:24] They denied, in fact, what we've been celebrating in recent weeks, didn't they? God was man in Palestine, as Betjeman said. Or as John himself says in his gospel, the word became flesh and lived among us.

You see what's happening. These teachers are coming around, pretending to be super spiritual, pretending to have beautiful ideas about some truth that is out there and is for the elite.

And if you listen to us, you can become one of the elite as well. We have a gospel to proclaim. But it's not good news for all the earth. It's good news for the elite, if you're one of the false teachers.

Now, that's the kind of thing that they were saying. And of course, at this point, let's deal with the so what. Is this just an argument for theologians?

Is this the kind of thing to be discussed by those who study theology and comment on scripture?

And I want to suggest it's something far, far more dangerous than that.

[13:28] This destroys the very heart of the gospel itself. The gospel, Paul tells us in Romans 1, verse 16, is the power of God for salvation.

And this destroys that. People sometimes talk about the three tenses of salvation. We were saved. Saved in eternity when God chose us before the foundation of the world.

And saved in the past of our own lives when we responded to his grace. We are being saved in the present. As his power sustains us and keeps us and leads us to glory.

And we will finally be saved when the Lord returns. What I'm going to suggest is that what these teachers were saying then, as they are saying now, is destroying every part of that gospel.

If Jesus Christ did not come in the flesh, then none of us here have been saved. We are still in our sins. God did not become one of us.

[14:32] He did not die and rise again. And God's anger still burns against us. We have no... We have to... In other words, we have to deal with the anger of God ourselves.

Because there is not one who is one with God who became one of us and stands between us and that anger. There is no sacrifice for sins.

Much of the Old Testament becomes a meaningless charade. Book of Leviticus and other books which describe the sacrificial system. These active parables. These visual aids of the gospel. They were all simply charades. Because they were very earthly things. They happened in time and space. And they pointed forward to the Lamb of God who was the Savior from all eternity, but once suffered for us under Pontius Pilate.

So you see, these people are destroying our salvation. We are not saved if Jesus Christ did not come in the flesh. And as Paul said much earlier, if he did not rise bodily from the dead, then our faith is vain.

[15:40] It's empty. But also we are not being saved. See, on the rock solid foundation that Christ died, that Christ rose again, that Christ ascended into heaven, that is the only basis we have for believing that he can answer our prayers now and strengthen us now.

The letter to the Hebrews says, We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses. Well, if Jesus Christ did not come in the flesh, we just don't have a high priest who can sympathize with our weaknesses.

If it was all some kind of spiritual cosmic drama played away in a never-never land, we might as well stop praying. We might as well become Stoics.

We might as well say, what will be, will be. So we are not saved in the past. We are not being saved. But we are not going to be finally saved either.

When the New Testament writers, particularly in the later part of the New Testament, talk about the coming of Jesus Christ, Peter talks about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, they are not only talking about the coming to Bethlehem, they are talking about the coming again.

[17:03] Indeed, they use the phrase coming rather than second coming, because they see it all as part of one great act by which God acted for us and for our salvation.

Not only did he visit us in great humility, but on the last day he will come again in his glorious majesty to judge the living and the dead.

The first time he came, veiled in flesh the Godhead see. He landed incognito behind the enemy lines. He met the serpent dragon and gave him a blow from which he will never recover.

Some of you may remember a few weeks ago, we looked at the great drama in Revelation 12, where John, in his great vision, sees how that happened, how the death of Christ caused the death blow to Satan, although Satan is still alive and dangerous.

When you realize that, you can see now what John means at the end of verse 7. This strong language, such a one is the deceiver and the antichrist.

[18:09] What lies behind Gnosticism and its modern varieties? Those who tell us that Jesus is simply the man for others, that he is the nearest likeness to God, that he stands at the head of humanity.

Behind all this stands the deceiver himself, the arch enemy. Behind this false gospel stands the one who tried to destroy the child, used Herod to try to destroy him, thought he had destroyed him at Calvary, and who now tries to destroy the church.

Do you see why the devil doesn't want this gospel to be proclaimed? He doesn't want it to be proclaimed because it talks about his own defeat. He wants to keep people in ignorance of this great story, that Christ died, Christ has risen, Christ will come again.

Do you really imagine the devil wants that to be preached? That's why he sends emissaries into the world to preach a false gospel. He knows if he can destroy the big story, he's destroyed every part of it.

Because if the big story is not true, not any part of it is true. We can't build anything on it. So they proclaim a false Christ, a Gnostic Christ who exists in a kind of spiritual realm far away, but one who never actually took flesh, one who never was little, weak, and helpless like us, one who never actually died physically and rose physically and ascended into heaven.

[19:46] That is what they are. You see, it's not a case of differences of opinion. There are areas where godly believers reading the Bible and trying to live by it differ.

Things like baptism, things like the gifts of the Spirit, things like the exact sequence of events at the second coming. Christians, evangelical Christians, legitimately disagree on these matters.

This is not that. This is attacking the very heart of the gospel. If what they say is true, we do not have a gospel to proclaim. We have no good news for all in the earth.

And as well, forget about Christianity, Explored, and all these other things, because we don't have a gospel if these people are true. So that's the first thing and the most important thing.

More briefly, in verses 8 and 9, they offer false progress. Watch yourselves, so that you may not lose what we have worked for, but may win a full reward.

[20 : 44] Everyone who goes on ahead and does not abide in the teaching of Christ does not have God. Whoever abides in the teaching has both the Father and the Son.

Now, verse 8, John is not talking about losing our salvation. He is talking about the reward for diligent and faithful service, it seems to me. Watch yourselves, so you may win a full reward.

Faithfulness to the gospel and to the Lord in this world. And notice he contrasts, goes on ahead, and abiding in the teaching. These are the two contrasts here.

John in his gospel talks about abiding in Christ. You remember the image of the fruit in the vine, which withers if it's not on the vine. And we so often hear these voices today, don't we?

I've lost count of the number of people whom I've talked to over the years who said, I used to be an evangelical, but I've moved on. I used to believe these things, but I find they're unsatisfactory now.

[21 : 50] And when that happens, you find there is a whole weakening of the gospel. The resurrection becomes a spiritual event. Christ rose again in the faith of his followers.

We have an attack on penal substitution, the biblical view that Jesus stood and stands between us and the anger of God. We are weakening on the whole area of lifestyle and sexuality and all these kind of matters.

So they offer false progress. Now let me just make a couple of comments on that. That is not saying that we must not keep on learning. Indeed, we always need to be learning until the last moment of our lives on earth.

We will always be learning new things. But the point is we learn these things by digging more deeply and growing more deeply in our roots.

That's where we will learn them from, not flying off into the stratosphere. The Bible will never be exhausted. This is one of the great things that anyone who preaches Scripture knows.

[23 : 01] You will never run out of material. Why is it that people still want to hear Dick Lucas at the age of 82? Because he keeps on saying things like I've never understood this passage before.

And he's not talking about 2 Chronicles. He's talking about Romans 8 when he says that kind of thing. This is the sign of somebody who is growing, still growing. And I think that's an example to us all.

But I think the second thing is a more personal thing. If somebody says to you, I used to believe the way you do, but I've moved on.

I want to ask you this. Do you know a better Christ than the one who saved you? Do you have a more authentic Bible than the one you read now?

Do you have something else that offers you the living God and is the power of God to salvation? That's the question we need to ask when someone tells us, well, you've got to move on.

[23 : 59] You see, running ahead here is not progress. It's what Jude calls apostasy. This is, in fact, falling away. So they proclaim a false Christ.

They offer false progress. And finally, in verses 10 to 11, they come under false pretenses. It would be terribly easy, wouldn't it, if all false teachers were to come into our meetings wearing a T-shirt saying, I am a wolf.

And if they were to be nasty and unpleasant individuals. Truth of the matter is, that's not the case at all. Most false teachers are charming individuals, well-spoken, eloquent, kind of people you'd like to spend time with.

And it's a reminder, as the Old Testament tells us in the book of Proverbs, that wisdom and folly both speak aloud. They utter their voices.

They invite us to their parties. And they sound terribly, terribly alike. That's the thing we've got to remember. And that's why we've got to be continually alert. I remember one, a few years ago, I was at a meeting of ministers, which John Stott was addressing.

[25 : 14] And he was talking about ministry. And someone asked him, how do you tell the difference between a wolf and an awkward sheep? Now that is, of course, a question which every church leader wrestles with from time to time.

And John Stott, from his wisdom of many years, said, it's not always possible, but the way you can tell a wolf is because wolf in Scripture is particularly associated with teaching.

In other words, the wolf in Scripture is not just somebody who believes wrong doctrines, but who actively propagates them. And that's the first thing, I think, that's so important. We need to draw a distinction between false teachers and those who are deceived by them. There's a big difference between going around teaching the kind of doctrines that John talks about in this letter, and simply actually being deceived by them. And Jude emphasizes this as well. Jude says, have mercy on those who doubt. Save others by snatching them out of the fire. See how important it is to recognize the fake? [26 : 27] Because the fake will deceive the immature. Those who are new Christians, when they listen to these false teachers, will probably think it's very plausible. And that's why the task of the true pastor is not simply to feed the sheep.

The hired hand will do that if the pay is good enough. The task of the true pastor is to fight the wolf. And the second thing is this, and some of you may be puzzled by verse 10. Do not receive him into your house or give him any greeting. Now these guys have a truly evangelical zeal. They are enthusiastic. They want to win converts. The you incidental, when it comes to you, is plural. Once again, this is the whole church that's addressed. Remember, first of all, that house here almost certainly refers to the house churches, because all churches in the first Christian centuries met in Christian homes. And therefore, what he's saying is don't bring him into your church. don't invite them to preach. Don't invite them to lead a house group. Don't put them in charge of the education of the youth or anything like that. [27 : 39] That's what he's saying, really. He's not saying, he's not saying be rude to them in the streets and refuse to pass the time of day. That is not what he is saying when he says do not give him any greeting.

What he is saying is don't make complimentary remarks about them. One of the sad things about so much of the contemporary evangelical scene, particularly among evangelical scholars, is the way that they are so ready to praise and to make complimentary references to liberals. And this is something that confuses people. That's what John is saying. John isn't saying be rude. He isn't saying be impolite. He's saying make sure if you're in charge, if you're a leader, that you do not give, as we would say, don't give house room to these people, because they are dangerous. And whoever greets him, whoever goes along with him, takes part in his wicked works. Now two things as we close. The anatomy of the false teacher, presenting a false Christ, offering false progress, and coming under false pretenses. This is not an intellectual exercise. Notice that John says, love in the truth, and walk in the truth. [28 : 59] Because belief governs behavior. What we believe, particularly what we believe, passionate with all our hearts, will determine how we behave. It may not happen immediately, but it will begin to happen.

And you can see that if you read the history of false teaching and bad theology, you'll see that happens. People were saying about 200 years ago, we can still hold on to the gospel, although we deny certain parts of scripture. Now we see all around us that all that happens is that we simply adopt the lifestyle of the world. And finally, in verse 12 and 13, we have the transition to the true teacher. Though I have much to write to you, I would rather not use paper and ink. Instead, I hope to come to you and talk face to face. John is not simply writing to these people. He cares for them. He loves them. He's going to come to protect them and to build them up. Brothers and sisters, we need to recognize the fake. [29 : 59] We must not give them house room. And I'm sorry if that's all sounded rather negative. Next week, we are going to have the more positive side, recognizing the genuine.

So may God bless us and give us the grace to do both. Let's pray. God our Father, how naive we often are. How easily we are impressed by what looks and sounds good. How often we are tempted away by what seems progress. Help us, rather, to take our stand on the rock which is the words of the prophets and the apostles. the light that shines in a dark place until the day dawns and the morning star rises. May that be true both in our individual lives and in our lives together. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.