

The Alternative to Truth

By David H. Roper

When I arrived at church this morning there was a letter for me from a local disc jockey. I have been corresponding with him during the past month. He claims to be a Christian, but I feel that, in terms of what he is doing to our young people, he is a morally destructive man. In his letter to me, he said basically that he intended to tell people what they wanted to hear as long as they wanted to hear it. And he quoted scripture to justify this decision. I say this because it is apropos of what we want to talk about this morning--the false prophets in the early church and the false prophets in our age.

I would like you to turn to 2 Peter. In studying this book we have been talking about human potential and how to achieve it. We have seen that 2 Peter deals with this issue, as does almost all of Scripture. Our potential as human beings is limitless. We have infinite potential because it is God's intention that we do the works of God. Now, that is a very high and lofty calling, but that is actually what we have been called to as believers. Jesus said we will do God's works, and not only that, we will do greater works than he did. That is a destiny that ought to excite anyone.

I think we know intuitively that God intended us for more than sitting around the house, watching television, and drinking beer. There just has to be more to life than that. Or, for that matter, God has more in mind for us than making money, or buying cars or houses, or educating people. As good as those things may be, they are not our ultimate destiny. We do not realize our potential fully in doing those things. It is God's intention that we be godlike, that we live in the world and display the character of God. All of Scripture presents that as the potential to live up to.

In this book Peter is telling us how to live up to this potential. He begins in chapter 1 by describing the process by which we achieve it. What he tells us, essentially, is that we have a divine nature if we know Jesus Christ in a personal way. And that makes sense. The only one who can do the works of God is God. If we are going to act like God in the world, then we have to have the power of God to so act. Peter describes the process by which that divine nature comes to reside in us. What we need is not merely a new lease on life, but life itself. I have talked to men who have told me that secretly, in their hearts, they have often thought of starting over, of leaving their families, their children, their jobs, and going someplace else, changing their names, and starting all over again. I suppose for some people who are discontent with their lives that could be very appealing. But, somehow, we also know that if we started all over again we would botch it up again. Perhaps that is the only thing that keeps some men where they are. They know that they really don't have the potential to live life as they know it ought to be lived.

But we do in Christ. We have not a new lease of life, but a new life. You can stay in the very situation you are in--your vocation, your family, your neighborhood--and be what God intends you to be. That is the gospel; that is the Good News. That is what God has called us to do. Peter says that the apostles first came to know Jesus Christ in that way. The Lord called them into a relationship with him, and he imparted to them--as they submitted themselves to him--his divine nature, so that they had the capacity to face life and its demands. But the process did not stop there. It was not merely the apostles who had the divine nature: they proclaimed the Good News to others, who then could have the same relationship to Jesus Christ that the apostles had.

This is Peter's concern in verses 3 and 4 of chapter 1. He describes the process by which the Good News came to the apostles; the apostles proclaimed it to the world, both by their preaching and their writing, so that we also can have the divine nature. But it is not enough merely to have the apostolic writings, the apostolic preaching. It is not enough to possess it. It has to lay hold of our lives, and that is the process Peter describes in verse 5 and the

following.

We need to submit ourselves to the message of the apostles, to let it possess our lives and let it begin to change our lives. Then, because we have the divine nature, because we have the power of Christ residing within us, we can begin to act on the basis of the gospel. We can begin to live out in the world the life of our Lord. Then, in verses 12 through 19, Peter makes an appeal for action. He says (verse 19):

And so we have the prophetic word made more sure, to which you do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star arises in your hearts.

Peter is saying that the apostolic word in the New Testament and the prophetic word in the Old Testament tell you how to come into a relationship with Jesus Christ and grow in that relationship. But you must give heed to that word; take it seriously. Begin to read and study it and learn it, let it lay hold of your life.

The reason Peter feels so strongly about this message is given in verses 12 through 18. I will merely summarize this information for you so we can get into a short section in chapter 2.

In verses 12 through 18, Peter is saying that the Old Testament prophesied the coming of Jesus Christ, the coming of Messiah. It was predicted his would be a glorious coming, when he would establish his kingdom over the universe. Peter says that is the prophetic word, the sure prophetic word. But he goes on to say, "We have the prophetic word made more certain in our own experience because we saw what the Old Testament predicted." Peter is referring to the time when three of the apostles-- Peter, James, and John--were taken by the Lord to the top of the mountain, and there, on the mount of transfiguration, the Lord was changed before their eyes. They saw him in his glory. Peter says they were eyewitnesses to this fact; they saw what the Old Testament prophets predicted. That is what he means in verse 16 when he says:

We did not follow cleverly devised tales when we made known to you the power and coming of the Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of His majesty. For when He received honor and glory from God the Father, such an utterance as this was made to Him by the Majestic Glory, "This is My beloved Son with whom I am well pleased"-and we ourselves heard this utterance from heaven when we were with Him on the holy mountain. And so we have the prophetic word made more sure...

In other words, Peter says, our experience certifies that what the Old Testament prophets proclaimed is true. The prophets said that the Messiah is coming in glory, and Peter says, "We saw him; and therefore our word can be trusted. "It is the word of an eyewitness. They actually saw what the Old Testament prophets predicted. Peter's point is that his message is, therefore, equal to the Old Testament message. What the Jews considered to be the Bible, our Old Testament, is basically the same message that the apostles preached in the New Testament. And since both are considered to be the oracles of God, Peter says, we need to give heed to them. We need to listen to them. We need to subject ourselves not only to the Old Testament, but to the New Testament as well. It is, he says, "like a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star arises in your hearts."

This is a very colorful figure of speech. Peter describes the Word as a lamp in a darkened world, which illuminates the world until the dawn comes. We wait for the dawn, for 'the coming of Jesus Christ, for the rising of the morning star. These are very colorful and helpful symbols. But right now we live in the world of darkness. Where do we turn for light? How do we learn how to cope with life, to handle life, to live life as God intended us to live it? We have the lamp, the light. All other explanations may illumine the darkness briefly, but they flicker out, and the darkness is even greater than it was before. Transcendental Meditation, or Transactional Analysis, or Erhard Seminars Training (est), and all of their derivatives and all of these other attempts to explain life and help people live up to their potential may have some aspect of truth in them, but ultimately they don't illumine the darkness in any lasting way.

Have you ever tried to work on anything in the dark with only the light of a match? I can remember once having to

fix my car in the dark when all I had was a little book of matches. That is not a very wise thing to do--you could go up in a puff of smoke! I had to light a match, peer over the car, and work away, then light another match and work frantically until it went out. When all the matches were gone, it was utterly dark, because by that time my eyes were no longer accustomed to the darkness and I couldn't see. This is what Peter is saying. There may be attempts to illumine the darkness, but they don't last. Ultimately they lead people into deeper darkness. The only explanation for life that really illuminates the world is the Word of God. It dispels darkness. It gives you the answers to life. What do you do when your husband leaves you? What do you do when your means of livelihood is at stake, when in the next year you very possibly could be laid off, and you have heavy mortgage payments and insurance payments to make and you have to keep your family going? When you live in a constant state of apprehension because you know that at any time you could lose that means of livelihood, what do you do? The Bible talks about situations like that. How do you cope with the darkness? The Bible is the lamp that reveals things as they really are and tells us how to handle the darkness, how to live in it.

When I was in college I went down to the Big Bend country in southern Texas one Christmas. It was too cold to stay up in the mountains, so my friends and I went down on the desert floor and found a huge sycamore tree and camped under it. In the middle of the night another family pulled in and parked their car beside us. They unloaded their gear and settled down for the night. But they had a little dog that they left shut up in the car, and he began to bark. We were all bedded down in the midst of this absolute darkness, and we began to hear movement around us. We got up and poked at the fire, and as the light dispelled the darkness, we saw eyes all around us. I jumped up and pumped up the Coleman lantern and set it on top of the car. Sure enough, there were coyotes sitting all around us, just waiting to get at that little dog. We spent the night taking turns pumping away at that lantern. The guys kept saying that coyotes never hurt anybody, but you couldn't convince me. I kept pumping, and was really glad to have that lantern!

I feel the same way about the Word of God. I'm thankful to have it. It is the lamp that dispels the darkness, that teaches us how to cope with the darkness around. That is what we have until Jesus comes back, "...until the day dawns and the morning star arises in your hearts." We have the word of the prophets and the apostles. And that is why Peter says we are to give heed to it, pay attention to it, subject ourselves to it. We are to resist the temptation to follow other systems of thought. There may be aspects of truth in them, but we are not to subject ourselves to them. We are to subject ourselves to the Word of God. In verses 20 and 21 Peter tells us why the Word is a lamp, why it will dispel darkness:

But know this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation...

The word "interpretation" means explanation or origin and has the idea of knowledge coming out of one's self. Peter is saying that Holy Scripture, the lamp, is not the product of man's own intuition or understanding of things.

...for no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.

In other words, the reason this is a lamp is because it is God's Word. God understands life--he made it. And since he has spoken, we can with confidence give heed to his Word.

The prophets of Israel were unique. All these ancient nations had prophets, and centers where oracles were given, but their oracles were always the result of discovery. They divined their forecasts by examining the entrails of animals, or casting sticks, or through various other means, such as magic or narcotics. They were able to induce visions, and that was their prophecy. They discovered, or attempted to discover, the truth. But the prophets of Israel had the truth disclosed to them. God revealed truth to them directly. In the case of Moses, God said, "I will speak to him face-to-face, or mouth-to-mouth." These men had the truth given to them and, in turn, they passed the truth on to the people of their time. They were spokesmen for God. That is why Paul could say that to the Jews were given the oracles of God. No other nation had the oracles of God. They did not originate with men, they were not the result of some uncanny perception of life that the Jewish people had. God revealed himself to the Jews.

Their prophets preached, their proclamations were written, and this is what we have both in the Old Testament and in the New Testament, in the apostolic word. That is why Peter says it is a lamp. It is God's word on the subject. But, Peter says in chapter 2, there are always going to be alternative messages. God has spoken, but there will always be men who will speak for themselves (verses 1-3):

But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will also be false teachers among you, who will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing swift destruction upon themselves. And many will follow their sensuality, and because of them the way of the truth will be maligned. And in their greed they will exploit you with false words; their judgment from long ago is not idle, and their destruction is not asleep.

In these three verses Peter is describing the ministry of these false prophets, or their deeds. In the following verses, 4 through 10, he describes their destiny, or their doom. We will look at these two aspects of the life and ministry of these false prophets: their deeds and their doom.

First we are told something about their method in verse 1. Peter says, "They will arise among you," i.e., they will call themselves Christians. In Acts 20 Paul, in preparing the elders of the church in Ephesus for the coming apostasy, tells them there will be attacks from two quarters. There will be wolves who will attack from the outside, and there will be wolves in sheep's clothing who will come in among them. The attacks from the outside are much easier to pick up because they are obviously in opposition to the gospel. The most insidious attack is from the inside. Peter says there will be people who will look good, they will say all the right things, they will call themselves Christians, but they are false prophets.

He goes on to say that they will "secretly introduce destructive heresies," i.e., they will bring these heresies in alongside of the truth. Their message will not appear as an alternative message, it will not be set in opposition to the gospel; it will appear to be the gospel and it will be presented that way. These false prophets will say, "This is the latest product of scholarly thinking. This is the most recent theological discovery." It will appear to be good, it will appear to be in line with the rest of Scripture, but it will be heresy, Peter says.

The term "heresy," as it was used in Peter's day everywhere except within the church, simply meant to make a choice. There were people who were called "the heretics of Plato" because they had chosen to follow Plato. The New Testament writers used this term because to them any choice other than the gospel was heresy. It goes back to what Peter said earlier. The only people who can call themselves Christians are the people who believe what the apostles believed. We really are not free to choose some other system of belief and call ourselves Christians. We are free to choose any other system of belief-God always gives us the right to choose any other belief-but we can't call ourselves Christians because, by definition, a Christian is someone who has submitted himself to Jesus Christ. He has placed himself under the discipline of Christ, and therefore he is not at liberty to question Jesus' teachings. If he chooses anything else, he is by definition a heretic. And as Peter is going to tell us in many different ways in this book, such a choice is ultimately destructive. Although the choice does not appear to be destructive at first, the inevitable result of that choice will be a steady deterioration of life.

So, these people will have come from within, and they will secretly introduce destructive heresies, and, Peter tells us in verse 1, "they will deny the Master who bought them, bringing swift destruction upon themselves." Now, that is really the issue. Though they call themselves Christians, and though they will often talk about Jesus' teachings, they deny the Master because they will not subject themselves to his teachings. Peter says these people are going to arise in your midst, you can expect it to come, and they are going to look like every other Christian you ever heard. They are not going to be obviously evil; their lives may be basically stable, they may appear to have the answers to life; but they deny the very basis of the capacity that we have to face life, which is submission to Jesus Christ. They will deny the Master who bought them.

That is always the basic issue in every cult. There are many, many cults in our day that call themselves Christian. The key question that we ought to ask is "What do you believe about Jesus Christ? Is he the Master who bought

you? In other words, what do you believe about the cross? Is that the basis of our forgiveness and our redemption? Is he Master, is he Lord, are you subject to his teachings as the apostles actually presented his teachings, not as they are interpreted by someone else? Are you subject to him?" If you are, then you are a Christian. If you are not subject to Jesus' teachings, then you are not a Christian. It is that simple.

People outside of Christ ought to be loved and cared for and ministered to, but they are not Christian. Peter looks at things that way, as all the apostles did--in black and white. There are no shades of gray. You either believe that Jesus Christ died on the cross for our sins and he is therefore our risen and living Lord and we subject ourselves to his lordship, or we believe something else and we are not Christian. These men will deny that Jesus is the Master who bought them. This is their method. In verse 2 Peter tells us what the morality of these false prophets is.

And many will follow their sensuality, and because of them the way of the truth will be maligned.

This term "sensuality" does not refer to sexuality, because Peter is not concerned about sex here. "Sensual" refers to anything that has to do with the senses. That is, sensual people base their lives on the here and now. What tastes good, what looks good, what feels good, what you wear, what you buy, what you hang on your wall, what you drive, what you sit in, what you watch--these things in themselves are not wrong, but for sensual people that is the sum and substance of their lives. Peter is saying that the man who is bad morally is the man who has just one world. He doesn't live in the realm of the spirit. He is not concerned about spiritual things--they are not the ultimate values. What matters is now--money, cars, clothes, prestige, power. Peter says THAT will be the focus of the sensual person's thinking. And many will follow these people because they have a very attractive philosophy of life. Many will be turned on to what they believe, and what is worse, many will be turned off to authentic Christianity.

See what Peter says in verse 2? "Many will follow their sensuality, and because of them the way of the truth will be maligned." Have you seen all the bumper stickers that correspond to the "I Found It" stickers? "Who Needs It?" "I Lost It." I wonder where those things come from? Whether you agree with the idea of the bumper-sticker campaign or not, what you see coming back from people is a real antipathy toward the gospel which sometimes finds its source in their rejection of the cross. But sometimes the source of their rejection of Christianity is what they have seen in so-called Christians they have been around. They see a man who calls himself a Christian, and he is just as greedy and acquisitive, just as quick to climb on other people's backs to get to the top, just as brash and unloving as everyone else, and they say, "Who needs it? I could have that with a lot less strain!"

Peter is saying there are many people who call themselves Christians who will lead other people who are hungry for spiritual truth into a lifestyle that will turn many away from the gospel. There is a Christian magazine that has an ad that appears almost every month, of a man standing by a Mercedes-Benz, dressed very nicely, with a lovely house behind him. The caption says, "I bet you never thought that a Christian could make lots of money!" Well, frankly, that thought never entered my mind. Of course Christians can make lots of money. What's the big deal? Christians can also be poverty-stricken. That may be God's call, as well as the ability to make money. That is not the issue. The issue is, "What do you put before people as a goal to pursue? Is it to have a Mercedes-Benz and a house and to dress fashionably? If it is, then we are doing what these false prophets were doing. We are presenting sensuality to people as the end-all and the be-all of life and saying that this is what men ought to pursue. If that is what we are doing, we are false prophets. Many will follow that sort of preaching--who wouldn't follow it? It is basically in line with our nature. But popularity in itself doesn't mean that a thing is right. People are going to follow it, but it is a false message. In verse 3 Peter goes on to explore the motives of the false prophets:

...and in their greed they will exploit you with false words; their judgment from long ago is not idle, and their destruction is not asleep.

These false prophets will exploit people's hunger for God. Every person has a hunger to know God. And because they know that people have that desire, these false prophets will exploit it. They will spiritually rip them off with

plastic words. Our word "plastic" comes from the Greek word which is translated here as "false." That is, they will shape their words to fit the person. They will tell people what they want to hear. They will manufacture words in order to appeal to them, and they will exploit them. But Peter says, "Their judgment from long ago is not idle, and their destruction is not asleep."

Long ago, long before these words were written, Moses wrote in Deuteronomy 13 that it was decreed that a false prophet would be judged. Do you know what they did to false prophets in those days? They stoned them. Peter is not advocating stoning false prophets today; God takes care of that issue. What Peter is saying (and this ought to make us sad, not gleeful) is that God will judge people who live out that sort of lifestyle, who teach others to live sensually. Their judgment is not idle.

In verses 4 through 10 Peter documents that principle. He gathers some Old Testament illustrations which to us may seem very strange, but they would be terrifying to the people of that day, people who knew their Old Testament. He uses an illustration, first, of the angels who sinned (verse 4); the ancient world that was destroyed by flood (verse 5); and the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, which God reduced to ashes (verse 6).

The point of this series of illustrations is that these people were destroyed; therefore the same will happen to these false prophets and teachers. If the angels who sinned were not spared, then certainly men will not escape. If the entire ancient world was destroyed, certainly men will not escape. The cities of Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed, two of the greatest trade centers of that day. (By the way, for the first time we have documentation outside the Scriptures that the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah actually existed. Some tablets have been found in Tell-Mardikh in Syria which say that the Eblaites were trading with the people of Sodom and Gomorrah.) These were vast and powerful cities at that time. Today they simply do not exist. They are under the Dead Sea. There is no question that they once existed. but they are not there any more. Peter says in verse 6:

And if He condemned the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah to destruction by reducing them to ashes, having made them an example to those who would live ungodly thereafter...

In other words, those cities are established as an everlasting example of God's way of dealing with injustice and with false teaching. If you stand today by the Dead Sea you will see no cities. They are gone. Peter is saying that if they were destroyed, the same will happen to these false teachers. That is the great tragedy. Verse 9:

...then the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from temptation and to keep the unrighteous under punishment for the day of judgment, and especially those who indulge the flesh in its corrupt desires and despise authority.

I will have to comment on these verses next week. I just want to say that the fundamental error of false prophets is that they go after the flesh. They live for sensual things and they have no concern whatsoever about spiritual issues. They despise authority and will not subject themselves to the lordship of Jesus Christ. This is their two-fold error. They live in one world and they reject spiritual authority in their lives.

This is true, Peter says (I am sure with sorrow in his heart) and therefore God will act in judgment toward them.

What Peter is doing in chapters 1 and 2 is contrasting two lifestyles. In chapter 2 he says there is the false word which we must not subject ourselves to, because the result is certain judgment. We cannot escape. In view of this message it seems to me there are three things we have to say about this chapter. One, we must not teach evil. Even with the best of intentions, I think, most of us do that. And when we do, if our intentions are right, I am sure that the grace of God covers it over. We have all made mistakes. Peter is not talking about teaching evil things and doing so with honesty of heart; he is talking about deliberately seducing others to sin. That, Peter says, is a serious thing. That will call down the wrath of God upon them. And if we have done that, we need to repent of it.

You may be a teacher in a school some place, and you have knowingly portrayed some secular teaching that is

contrary to the Scriptures as a way of life to your kids--don't do it, don't do it. I stood yesterday in a hospital and listened to a person there give counsel to a friend of mine who was in real distress. The counsel was nonsense, absolute nonsense. My friend very wisely and graciously rejected it. But when the person uttered those words of counsel, I thought, 'Maybe he really thinks that is the way to go. I don't know if he is a Christian or not. If he is, and is giving that sort of counsel, then he is culpable, liable to judgment.' We all are.

We must not teach error knowingly. As the hymn writer put it,

All the evil we have wrought,
All forbidden things we've sought,
All the sin to others taught,
Forgive us, Lord, for Jesus' sake.

The second thing I would say is, don't learn evil. You can't help being taught evil. I hear it almost every day on the radio, on television. in the newspaper and in classes that I am in. You hear it every day: it comes to you from every quarter. You cannot help but hear it--but do not learn it. Do not submit yourself to it. Learn through your knowledge of the Word to screen out error, to recognize it when you see it. Do not reject the person who is teaching it. but reject the error. And lovingly but very forthrightly. challenge error wherever you see it.

Finally, I would say, subject yourself to the apostolic word. Do not teach error; do not learn error; subject yourself to the apostolic word. It is a good exercise, I think, to ask yourself how much time you spend watching television or reading the paper or reading books--which on certain occasions are certainly worthwhile things to do. But how much time do you spend in the Word of God by contrast? Most of us give it a lick and a promise and away we go, instead of planning to read deeply in the Word, blocking out time to nourish our souls in the Word of God. We block our time for practically everything else that we think of as a priority. Can we do it when we approach the Scriptures? This is the lamp that illuminates the dark place. We need to subject ourselves to it. In the words of John Fischer's song, Read the Bible; the words inside are true and reliable."

Father, we are glad that though we live in a dark world, we have a lamp, a sure word, something we can count upon. What a foolish thing it is to reject that message and to spend our time looking elsewhere for answers when answers simply do not exist anywhere else--at least not in terms of ultimate things. So give us a love for your Word, and give us the courage to let the Word sit in judgment on our lives, and give us the vision to establish the Word as the priority in our lives. And through our subjection to it, Father, teach us how to grow into your likeness. We ask all these things in Jesus' name, Amen.

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