

# False Teachers




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## SABBATH AFTERNOON

**Read for This Week's Study:** *2 Pet. 2:1–22, John 8:34–36, Matt. 12:43–45, Jude 4–19, Gen. 18:16–33.*

**Memory Text:** “They promise them freedom, but they themselves are slaves of corruption; for people are slaves to whatever masters them” (*2 Peter 2:19, NRSV*).

In his first epistle, Peter, with great pastoral concern, sought to encourage readers in regard to the perils of persecution. Though we don't know exactly what form of persecution he was specifically addressing, we do know that the church would face terrible trials as the pagan Roman Empire sought to extinguish the growing movement of people called “Christians.”

Satan launched a two-pronged attack. Certainly, persecution from the outside—that is, brute force and violence—was a powerful tool. But the church faced another threat, one perhaps even more dangerous than outside persecution. And that was the threat from inside. Just as the Jewish nation in the past had to deal with false prophets, the follower of Jesus in Peter's day had to deal with false teachers who would “secretly introduce destructive heresies” (*2 Pet. 2:1, NIV*) into the church itself. And, even worse, Peter warned that many would follow these “destructive ways” (*2 Pet. 2:2, NKJV*).

What were some of these teachings that Peter was warning about? How did Peter react to them, and what lessons can we take from his warnings for ourselves today, as we also face threats from within?

\* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, June 10.

## False Prophets and Teachers

It's sometimes easy to idealize the early church, to think of it as a time of great peace and harmony among the earliest believers in Jesus.

That would be a mistake. Even from the days of Jesus the church faced struggles, often from within (think of Judas). As the New Testament epistles show, many of the problems came from false teachings in their midst. The early church struggled, not just with persecution from the outside but from problems within, as well. In this letter Peter deals with some of those internal challenges. What are they? "But there were also false prophets among the people, even as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Lord who bought them, and bring on themselves swift destruction. And many will follow their destructive ways, because of whom the way of truth will be blasphemed. By covetousness they will exploit you with deceptive words; for a long time their judgment has not been idle, and their destruction does not slumber" (*2 Pet. 2:1–3, NKJV*). It hardly sounds like a time of great peace and internal harmony among the brothers and sisters.

**Read** 2 Peter 2:1–3, 10–22. What is Peter warning about here? What are some of the false things that were being promoted in the churches?

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Second Peter 2:1 most likely reveals the reason the Lord inspired Peter to write the letter. He was warning them that just as there had been false prophets in the past, there will be false teachers in the future. Peter outlines quite a litany of charges against these teachers, everything from "destructive heresies" (*2 Pet. 2:1, NKJV*) to leading the unwary into bondage (*2 Pet. 2:19*) and a host of other errors, as well. From what he wrote, we can see that these were indeed very dangerous teachings, which explains why he reacted so strongly against them. Peter knew nothing of the idea that doctrine doesn't matter.

**Look at how strongly Peter reacts to these false teachings. What should this tell us about how important truth is? How can we protect ourselves against any and all attempts to bring false doctrine into the church?**

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## Freedom in Christ?

“For they mouth empty, boastful words and, by appealing to the lustful desires of the flesh, they entice people who are just escaping from those who live in error” (2 Pet. 2:18, NIV).

**What** is Peter warning about in this verse? What does he say in 2 Peter 2:19 that helps explain his concern? What is the importance of the word *freedom* (NIV) or *liberty* (NKJV) in verse 19?

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In the strongest possible language, Peter was giving his readers a warning against the dangers of false teachers. In 2 Peter 2:18–21 he warned that these false teachers, while promising liberty and freedom, would actually lead people into bondage.

What a complete perversion of the gospel! Freedom in Christ should mean freedom from the slavery of sin (Rom. 6:4–6). Any concept of freedom in Christ that leaves a person in the bondage of sin is the kind of error that Peter is warning about. Though scholars have debated the precise heresy that he was dealing with here, it’s clearly linked to the whole question of sin and one’s being a slave to it.

**Read** John 8:34–36. How do Christ’s words here help us to understand what Peter is saying?

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Whatever these false teachers were presenting, they were leading their victims—people who had recently found the Lord Jesus—back to their old sinful way of life. It’s easy to imagine some kind of cheap grace gospel that downplayed the need for purity and holiness, something that caused them to be caught up again in the very “corruption” (2 Pet. 2:19) of the world they had just escaped from. No wonder Peter spoke so sharply and strongly against these teachings and warned about what the result of following them would be.

**What do you understand freedom in Christ to be? From what has Christ freed you?**

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## A Dog Returns to Its Vomit

**Read** 2 Peter 2:17–22 and Matthew 12:43–45. What are the dangers when a convert to Christianity returns to his or her former lifestyle?

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Peter was particularly concerned about the fate of those whom the false teachers entice back into their former sins (2 Pet. 2:18). The false teachers promise freedom, but as Peter points out, the freedom that they promise is radically different from the kind of freedom that Jesus promised those who followed Him.

Look at the powerful warning Peter gave. It would have been better never to have “known the way of righteousness” (2 Pet. 2:21) than to have known it and then turned back to their old ways.

Of course, this doesn’t mean their case is hopeless. We all know stories of those who have turned away from the Lord and later have come back. And we know that the Lord is very glad when they do and happy to take them back. (See Luke 15:11–32.) It means only that turning away is a very dangerous course to take, nor is it a pleasant one either. A dog returning to its own vomit is a crude and harsh way to describe it, but Peter makes his point with that image.

Perhaps the echo of the words of Jesus in 2 Peter 2:20 is intentional (see Matt. 12:45, Luke 11:26). Jesus tells the parable of a man who has been freed from an unclean spirit. The spirit wanders without a place of his own, and then returns to see “‘my house from which I came’” (Matt. 12:44, NKJV). He arrives and finds it empty and put in order. He then moves back in, but he brings with him several other spirits more wicked than he is. As Jesus says, “‘The last state of that man is worse than the first’ ” (Matt. 12:45, NKJV). The danger Jesus illustrates and Peter describes is real. The new believer needs to ensure that the things of the Spirit replace the things that used to dominate his or her life. If involvement in church and the sharing of the new faith do not replace the earlier secular activities, it is too easy to revert to one’s old ways.

**What are ways we as a church family can better nurture and disciple all our members, especially newer ones?**

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## Peter and Jude

Many people have observed that Jude 4–19 largely repeats the message of 2 Peter 2:1–3:7. Whenever Scripture repeats a message, we should be aware that God wants to convey something important. In these similar passages, Peter and Jude take great lengths to notify us of an important truth: God is in control of the destinies of the wicked. Both Peter and Jude leave us with no doubt that God is closely monitoring evil. Whether unrighteous humanity or the fallen angels, God has taken special note of their evil and has planned their punishment on the day of judgment (*2 Pet. 2:9, 17; Jude 6*).

**Read 2 Peter 2:1–3:7 and Jude 4–19. What examples of God’s earlier vengeance do Peter and Jude give to punctuate the fact that God means business in dealing with sin?**

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Peter and Jude record three examples of God’s vengeance in the past. They include the destruction of the antediluvian world by the Flood, the incineration of Sodom and Gomorrah, and the chaining of angelic beings for destruction (*2 Pet. 2:4–6; 3:7; Jude 6, 7*). All of these episodes are laced with a lingering sense of finality. Though Scripture speaks a great deal about God’s mercy and grace, God’s justice also plays an important role in the final destruction of sin.

What were the sins that engendered such severe punishment? They include introducing destructive heresies; despising authority; enslavement to whatever has mastered them; perverting the grace of God into a license for immorality; denying Jesus Christ as the only Sovereign and Lord; polluting their own bodies; speaking empty, boastful words; and slandering (*2 Pet. 2:1, 10, 19; Jude 4; Jude 8; 2 Pet. 2:18; Jude 10, NIV*).

Interestingly, these descriptions do not include violent acts and other wicked atrocities that often outrage us. Instead, they describe more subtle sins that have one commonality. They are sins that are sometimes excused within the church community itself. This fact should awaken us to the great need for sincere repentance and reformation in the church.

**Read 2 Peter 2:12 and Jude 10. Here Peter and Jude describe those who are facing destruction as having degraded into “unreasoning” (*2 Pet. 2:12, NIV*) or “irrational” animals (*Jude 10, NIV*) ruled by instinct. How does that description compare to how God originally created humanity, and how can you prevent that from happening in your life?**

## More Old Testament Lessons

**Read** 2 Peter 2:6–16. What other examples does Peter use to give his warning about what wickedness will lead to?

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The first substantive reference to Sodom in the Bible is Genesis 13:12, 13. Lot and Abraham decided to separate for “financial” reasons. Lot chose the Jordan Valley and “pitched his tent toward Sodom” (*Gen. 13:12*). The Bible then comments, “Now the people of Sodom were wicked, great sinners against the LORD” (*Gen. 13:13, NRSV*). Later, when God warned Abraham that He was planning to destroy Sodom, Abraham negotiated an agreement that God would not destroy it if ten righteous people were found there (*Gen. 18:16–33*). The unlikelihood of finding even ten righteous people in Sodom was amply demonstrated by what happened to the messengers sent to visit Lot. The city was duly destroyed; only Lot and his two daughters escaped (*Gen. 19:12–25*).

Peter derives two lessons from this story. First, the two cities provide an example of the punishment coming to the ungodly (*2 Pet. 2:6*). Second, it shows that the Lord knows how to rescue the righteous from trial (*2 Pet. 2:7–9*). Peter then notes some of the characteristics of those who were destroyed at Sodom and Gomorrah: they indulge their flesh in depraved lust, despise authority, are bold and willful, and do not hesitate to slander the angels (*2 Pet. 2:10, 11*). These characteristics have similarities to how Peter describes the false teachers and their followers.

The story of Balaam is found in Numbers 22:1–24:25. He had been hired by Balak, king of Moab, to curse the Israelites. At first reluctant, he was eventually persuaded to take on this task by the offer of a larger sum of money (*Num. 22:7–21*). On his way he was confronted by an “angel of the LORD” and was saved from death only when his donkey turned aside. Balaam then beat his donkey and realized his mistake only when his eyes were opened and he saw the “angel of the LORD” himself (*Num. 22:22–35*). In the end, Balaam ended up blessing Israel (*Num. 23:4–24:24*). Peter used Balaam as an example of those enticed by adultery and greed (*2 Pet. 2:14, 15*). Such people are like Balaam. They have left the path that they should follow.

**Think about all that we have been given, both in the Bible and in the writings of Ellen G. White. Thus, why can we as Seventh-day Adventists never say that we haven’t been warned?**

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**Further Thought:** So often we hear Christians talk about “freedom in Christ.” And, of course, this is a valid concept. To be free from the condemnation of the law and to have assurance of salvation because of what Christ has done for us and not from our own works is indeed to be free. The story of Martin Luther and the bondage from which he suffered before he understood grace is a great example of what this freedom can mean. However, as we saw in Peter, the wonderful truth can be twisted. “The great truth of our entire dependence upon Christ for salvation lies close to the error of presumption. Freedom in Christ is by thousands mistaken for lawlessness; and because Christ came to release us from the condemnation of the law, many declare that the law itself is done away, and that those who keep it are fallen from grace. And thus, as truth and error appear so near akin, minds that are not guided by the Holy Spirit will be led to accept the error and, in so doing, place themselves under the power of Satan’s deceptions. In thus leading people to receive error for truth, Satan is working to secure the homage of the Protestant world.”—Ellen G. White, *Christ Triumphant*, p. 324.

### Discussion Questions:

- 1 Meditate on 2 Peter 2:19 and the other things Peter says about the results of the false teaching. Why must we be sure to learn for ourselves the crucial truths we believe? How important is it that we all agree exactly on what we should believe? When does it become “dangerous” to think ideas that are different from the rest of our fellow believers?
- 2 Look at some of the strong language of Peter in regard to the whole question of punishment and judgment: “bring upon themselves swift destruction” (2 Pet. 2:1); “shall utterly perish in their own corruption” (2 Pet. 2:12); “to reserve the unjust unto the day of judgment to be punished” (2 Pet. 2:9); “and their destruction does not slumber” (2 Pet. 2:3, NKJV). What should these texts tell us about not only the reality of judgment but about how strongly God condemns those who will lead His people into error?
- 3 What do you think it means when those who talk about “freedom in Christ” generally do so, not in the context of the law in general (though some do) but in the context of keeping the fourth commandment, the Sabbath commandment? How does this argument help us to see another way that the idea of “freedom in Christ” can be twisted?

## Mother of Many: Part 1

I'm a Bible worker, and my heart is in evangelism. One day God impressed me to work with an unusual group of people.

On my way to work, I paused at the gate to the church office and glanced at the boys standing nearby. I knew that most of them were homeless, either by choice or by circumstances they couldn't control. Some had run away from abusive homes or from unending poverty. I wondered if they missed their mothers. I turned and walked nervously over to them.

"Hello," I greeted them with a smile.

They looked at me strangely, wondering what I was going to do next.

I knew that many of these boys were addicted to drugs and alcohol. And I was sure that they all were hungry. They needed a family, at least a mother, to look out for them and teach them right from wrong. God had impressed me to get to know these young boys and share His love with them. "I'm your mother," I said bravely. "I'd like to get to know you."

But the boys were shy, and I was nervous. I knew that, even though they were young, they far outnumbered me and could easily steal my bag or hurt me if they wanted to. But I kept smiling and talking. I talked to them for a few minutes until we all felt more at ease. Then I invited them to come and sit under a tree with me so we could talk some more.

The boys hesitated, but eventually they came and sat down. I told them a little about myself; then, I told them how God loves each one of them. They warmed up to me and began to tell me a little bit about themselves. I invited the boys to return the following week.

The next Monday I brought food with me. I knew that boys are always hungry, especially homeless boys who probably hadn't had a home-cooked meal for a very long time. Most of them survived on handouts they received from begging and leftovers from the bakeries.

I made foo-foo (a starchy paste made from potato, plantain, or cassava) and some soup. When the boys arrived, they smelled the food, and I could see the smiles on their faces. They ate hungrily, and again we talked. Some boys even trusted me enough to tell me that foo-foo wasn't one of their favorite foods and asked if I could make something different. I tried to vary the food each week to please everyone's taste at least sometimes. And the boys loved it.

*To be continued in next week's Inside Story.*



## *The Lesson in Brief*

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► **Key Text:** *2 Peter 2:1–3*

► **The Student Will:**

**Know:** Recognize that while we have eyewitness testimonies and God’s prophetic Word, false teachers will arise, introducing destructive heresies based on fabricated messages.

**Feel:** Fear the destruction that these false teachers are bringing upon themselves.

**Do:** Be alert to distinguish the true from the false.

► **Learning Outline:**

**I. Know: Satan’s Strategy Against Truth**

**A** For every truth there is a counterfeit. In our day, what are the counterfeits for the key truths of God’s Word?

**B** What are the signs by which we can recognize the characteristics of the deceivers?

**II. Feel: God’s Activity in the Face of Evil**

**A** What earlier examples does Peter cite to show how greed and lust lead to destruction?

**B** What examples does he cite to show how God is able to rescue the godly?

**III. Do: Know Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.**

**A** How can we escape the corruption of the world by knowing Jesus Christ?

**B** How can we avoid being deceived, entangled in sin, and overcome by it?

► **Summary:** In a world characterized by sin, lust, greed, deception, and detestation of authority, God knows how to rescue the godly from these temptations and to hold the ungodly under condemnation for the day of judgment. Our salvation is in knowing our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

## Learning Cycle

### ►STEP 1—Motivate

**Spotlight on Scripture:** *2 Peter 2:1–3, 20, 21*

**Key Concept for Spiritual Growth:** Just as true prophets exist (*2 Pet. 1:21*), false prophets and false teachers abound in every age (*2 Pet. 2:1*). For every truth there is a counterfeit. Those who have known the Lord Jesus Christ but have become entangled again by the corruption of the world are worse off than if they had never known the way of righteousness (*2 Pet. 2:20*). The false teachers who Peter warns against have been believers, but for material gain they have left the straight way (*2 Pet. 2:3, 15*) and introduced destructive heresies, even denying the Lord who redeemed them (*2 Pet. 2:1*). Their judgment is certain (*2 Pet. 2:3, 9, 10, 12*). Yet the Lord knows how to deliver the godly from these temptations (*2 Pet. 2:9*), and Peter appeals to his readers to shun the deceptions offered by these false teachers.

**Just for Teachers:** There is a very close relationship between *2 Peter 2:1–3:3* and *Jude 3–19*. The standard edition of the *Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide* has indicated a few of the parallels between these two passages. There are many more. It would be helpful to study these parallels in order to gain a broader picture of the situation in the church during the time of Peter and Jude. While there are striking parallels, there are also some significant differences that enrich the understanding of their situations—much as reading the four Gospels helps one to gain a fuller portrait of the life and ministry of Jesus. Thus far, it has proven impossible to know the nature of the relationship between *2 Peter* and *Jude*, but the parallels are undeniable.

**Opening Activity and Discussion:** Have the class read together *2 Peter 2:1–19* and *Jude 3–16*. Compare the two passages for similarities and differences and discuss the situation in the early Christian church that called for this level of concern by both authors. To what extent do these passages describe an endemic situation in the Christian church?

### ►STEP 2—Explore

**Just for Teachers:** Forces surround us that deplete our spiritual energies and destroy spiritual life. We either give in to these forces and are overcome by them, or we seek God's grace and power to overcome them. Peter says that if these forces overcome us we are worse off than if we had never known the way of righteousness.

## Bible Commentary

### I. The True and the False (Review 2 Peter 2:1–3 with your class.)

Peter contrasts the true prophets of 1:21 with false prophets and false teachers who have arisen within the church. They introduce destructive heresies, including a denial of Jesus and His atonement for sin, but in doing so, they bring swift destruction on themselves (2 Pet. 2:1). Unfortunately, “many will follow their depraved conduct and will bring the way of truth into disrepute” (2 Pet. 2:2, *NIV*). These individuals are motivated by greed, exploiting innocent souls in the hope of material gain (2 Pet. 2:3, 15). They are actively standing under the judgment of God (2 Pet. 2:3).

**Consider This:** What forms do false prophets take in the church and in the world today? How can we be sure to recognize them?

### II. Examples of Godliness Amid Ungodliness (Review together 2 Peter 2:4–10.)

Peter provides several examples to illustrate his statement in verse 3 about the judgment of the false teachers not being idle and their destruction not slumbering. First, he cites the angels who were cast out of heaven and placed “in chains of darkness to be held for judgment” (2 Pet. 2:4, *NIV*). Then he cites the ancient world—upon which God sent a destructive Flood to consume the ungodly while sparing Noah, a preacher of righteousness, and seven others (2 Pet. 2:5). Next, he cites Sodom and Gomorrah, which were burned to ashes, as examples of what is going to happen to the ungodly (2 Pet. 2:6) in contrast to God’s act of sparing Lot, “a righteous man, who was distressed by the depraved conduct of the lawless” and “was tormented in his righteous soul by the lawless deeds he saw and heard” (2 Pet. 2:7, 8, *NIV*).

If God could rescue Noah and Lot from the midst of ungodly situations, destined for destruction, then, Peter asserts, God also knows how to rescue godly people from trials and temptations (*peirasmos*) and to hold the unrighteous for the day of judgment (2 Pet. 2:9). Peter adds that God’s ability to do the latter “is especially true of those who follow the corrupt desire of the flesh and despise authority” (2 Pet. 2:10, *NIV*). Such corruption and scorn are the root of the problem for those who become false teachers.

**Consider This:** Compare 1 Corinthians 10:13 and Matthew 6:13. What provisions has God made to deliver us from temptation?

### III. How to Recognize the False Teachers (Review 2 Peter 2:10–19 with your class.)

Several characteristics are typical of the false teachers, as Peter describes them. Besides those already mentioned, this section of the epistle identifies slander and blasphemy (*2 Pet. 2:10–12*), carousing at parties (*2 Pet. 2:13*), seduction and adultery (*2 Pet. 2:14*), greed for material gain (*2 Pet. 2:14, 15*), empty boasting, and enticing people to return to the slavery of sin from which they have just recently escaped (*2 Pet. 2:18*). (Compare *Jude 4, 8, 10–13, 16*.)

**Consider This:** According to Peter and Jude, what are the characteristics of those who put themselves forward as having some new or exciting “truth” to offer?

#### IV. The Dangers of a Return to Corruption (*Review 2 Peter 2:20–22 with your class.*)

Peter declares that those who already escaped the corruption of the world by developing a relationship with Jesus Christ but then become entangled once again in that same corruption and are overcome by it are worse off than before. Brute animals, creatures of instinct (*compare with 2 Pet. 2:12*), they are like dogs and pigs that return to their crude ways (*2 Pet. 2:22*). But God holds rational human beings to a higher standard. He has given them a “sacred command” (*2 Pet. 2:21, NIV*) to follow. It would have been better for those who return to sin never to have known the way of righteousness. Now they are accountable for so much more—and as a result, they will receive a harsher judgment. Compare *Hebrews 6:4–6, 10:26–28*.

**Consider This:** James 3:1 points out that teachers are held to a stricter accounting, so false teachers especially are deserving of harsh judgment. What examples of false teachers in Scripture provide warnings for us today?

#### Discussion Questions:

- ① It has been said that if we do not learn from the past, we are doomed to repeat it. How can we profit from reviewing the examples from the past that Peter and Jude cite? Compare *1 Corinthians 10:6–12*.
- ② How can we be sure to recognize many of the same characteristics in false teachers today?

### ►STEP 3—Apply

**Just for Teachers:** Many televangelist preachers today are wealthy and powerful figures proclaiming a prosperity gospel that does not seem to conform to the gospel of Jesus or to the model of His life and ministry. Often, purported signs and miracles accompany their preaching, intended to give

credence to their claims to be using the power of God and His Holy Spirit. To what extent should these external characteristics become a basis for judging the truth of their teachings? Peter seems to suggest that there is a close connection between the characters of the false teachers and the duplicity of their teachings.

### Thought Questions:

- ❶ Why does Peter take up so much of his letter detailing the characteristics of the false teachers? Why might this imply that maintaining correct doctrine is more important than some may consider it to be?
- ❷ What doctrinal issues especially seem to be at stake in Peter's warnings? In what ways must we be alert to false teachings in these areas?

**Activity:** Have the class read together Acts 20:28–31. Discuss the responsibility of church leaders for carefully guarding the flock of God against false teachers who, like savage wolves, will not spare the flock but will distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after themselves. To what extent are we all accountable for one another?

## ►STEP 4—Create

**Just for Teachers:** Scholars have struggled to account for the similarities between the parallel sections of 2 Peter and Jude. It seems undeniable, in view of the textual evidence, that either one is indebted to the other or both are indebted to another common source. Some have thought that Jude must have been indebted to Peter, because Peter was the better known of the two, and Jude might have used Peter's material to add credibility to his own writing. Others have thought that perhaps Peter used Jude's material (stripping out the noncanonical references that Jude cites) in order to add credibility to Jude's material. However, a close comparison of Jude 17, 18 with 2 Peter 3:2, 3 may suggest that both writers are pointing to an earlier common source, believed to have been inspired, reflecting the teaching of Jesus through the apostles (*compare with Ezek. 12:22, Matt. 24:48*).

**Activity:** Ask the class members to arrange, side by side in blocked columns, the parallels between 2 Peter 2:1–22 and Jude 3–16. Alternately, they can list the parallels aloud. Invite them to note the close parallels between the two chapters and the points on which they differ. How do these Bible passages complement and supplement one another in what they select to mention? How would Peter explain the similarities and differences in light of his view of revelation and inspiration, as found in 2 Peter 1:21?