

## ***How To Discern False Teachers and Cults: 7 Characteristics***

### **I. JESUS WARNED ABOUT FALSE PROPHETS AND CULTS**

- A. When Jesus taught on the end times, He warned us to beware of false teachers who could gain a large following, thus starting new cults. A cult is a group with an unusual devotion to one leader and his set of beliefs that are not found in Scripture (as affirmed in historic Christianity).

***<sup>4</sup> Take heed that no one deceives you. 5 For many will come in My name, saying, 'I am the Christ,' and will deceive many...11 Many false prophets will rise up and deceive many...24 False christs and false prophets will rise and show great signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect. (Mt. 24:4-5, 11, 24)***

- B. The conflict in the end times will be a ***battle for truth***. Satan's weapon will be deception and our defense will be love for the truth. This battle will focus on defining who Jesus is and how we are to love Him. We must love God on His terms. Our love for God must be expressed in allegiance to Jesus and the Bible. The Spirit exalts Jesus by guiding us into all truth about Him.

***<sup>13</sup> The Spirit of truth...will guide you into all truth...He will tell you things to come. 14 He will glorify Me, for He will take of what is Mine and declare it to you. (Jn. 16:13-14)***

- C. Truths about Jesus that offend humanists include His right as God to establish absolute standards to which the nations will be held accountable to Him for. Second, Jesus is the only way of salvation. Third, Jesus possesses the wisdom and love to judge sin in time and eternity.

- D. Paul warns us of a falling away in the end times that can be avoided by loving the truth.

***<sup>3</sup> Let no one deceive you by any means; for that Day (Jesus' return) will not come unless the falling away comes first, and the man of sin (Antichrist) is revealed...9 according to the working of Satan, with all power, signs, and lying wonders, 10 and with unrighteous deception among those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth. (2 Thes. 2:3-10)***

- E. Love for the truth is more than adherence to it. We take a firm stand for it regardless of what it costs us. Loving truth requires that we commit to accept any new ideas as long as they are substantiated in the Scripture regardless of how different they are from our religious background.

- F. Some will fall away in the end times as people pay attention to doctrines inspired by demons.

*<sup>1</sup> Now the Spirit expressly says that in latter times some will depart from the faith, giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons, 2 speaking lies in hypocrisy... (1 Tim. 4:1-2)*

- G. Paul spoke about false teaches who would start cults by drawing people after themselves. He admonished the elders to be alert to this (1 Tim. 1:3-11; 4:1-8; 6:2-7, 20-21; 2 Tim. 3:1-17).

*<sup>29</sup> For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. 30 Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves. 31 Therefore watch, and remember that for three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears. (Acts 20:29-31)*

- H. Peter warns of the dangers of false teachers who deny the main tenets of our faith. They can be detected most easily by their covetousness and immorality (2 Pet. 2:9-14; Jude 8-10).

*<sup>1</sup> There will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Lord...2 Many will follow their destructive ways, because of whom the way of truth will be blasphemed (ridiculed). 3 By covetousness they will exploit (manipulate) you with deceptive words...14 having eyes full of adultery and that cannot cease from sin...They have a heart trained in covetous practices...18 For when they speak great swelling words of emptiness, they allure through the lusts of the flesh, through lewdness... (2 Pet. 2:1-18)*

- I. False teachers do not hold to the main and plain doctrines of Scripture. They pervert the teaching about the grace of God by either legalism or lewdness. Legalism seeks to earn the grace of God. Lewdness reduces the message of grace to receiving forgiveness without turning from our sin. The true grace message inspires us to deny lust and empowers us to walk godly (Titus 2:11-12).

*<sup>4</sup> For certain men (false teachers) have crept in unnoticed...ungodly men, who turn the grace of our God into lewdness and deny...our Lord Jesus Christ. (Jude 4)*

- J. We must accept the main historical Christian doctrines which include:  
Jesus as God's only son who is fully God and fully man, born of virgin birth, without sin  
Jesus' death and bodily resurrection and ascension to the Father's right hand  
The one true God exists in three persons (Trinity) as Father, Son and Holy Spirit  
Salvation is by faith alone, through grace alone and in Christ alone  
The infallibility of Scripture as our final authority for all matters of faith and practice  
The unity and diversity of the Body of Christ

- K. See the Apostle's Creed, the Nicene Creed and the Westminster's Confession for more references

## II. SEVEN CHARACTERISTICS OF CULTS

- A. If a group embraces one of these characteristics, then they are a cult or have cult tendencies.
- B. **#1 They oppose critical thinking:** Vs. people thinking for themselves
1. ***Cults teach:*** Their members must accept what they believe without challenging their doctrines. They do not want their members to think critically for themselves.
  2. ***The Bible teaches:*** We must all challenge each teaching that we hear by the light of Scripture. Loyalty to a ministry involves challenging it with humility. Do not believe a teaching that you cannot see with your eyes in your Bible. Think for yourself and do not quickly accept ideas. Do not say, “Our leaders say...” but rather say, “The Bible says...”  
**<sup>21</sup> Test all things; hold fast what is good. (1 Thes. 5:21)**  
**<sup>11</sup> They (the Bereans) received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so. (Acts 17:10-11)**
- C. **#2 They penalize people for leaving their cult:** Vs. helping them do God’s will for their life
1. ***Cults teach:*** People will be judged by God or will lose God’s best if they leave. Rejection, shunning and warnings of judgment are given. People are taught to make lifelong commitments to the group and/or to seek permission to join another ministry.
  2. ***The Bible teaches:*** The first concern of a leader is for what is good for the people under them. Therefore, leaders are to help them succeed as they seek to follow God’s will for their life, regardless if it means joining another ministry. The foundational value is that God owns the people, not the leader or the group in which they serve.
- D. **#3 They emphasize special doctrines outside of Scripture:** Vs. loyalty to the Scripture
1. ***Cults teach:*** Cults emphasize the special revelations of their “anointed” leader who presents himself as having unique insights that no one else has.
  2. ***The Bible teaches:*** We must emphasize supremacy and infallibility of Scripture as the final authority of truth. We must emphasize the main and plain themes of Scripture as the love Jesus, the Sermon on the Mount lifestyle, prayer, reading the word, winning the lost, healing the sick and serving others, etc.

- E. **#4 They seek inappropriate loyalty to their leaders:** Vs. seeking to connect people to Jesus
1. ***Cults teach:*** Cults require loyalty to the leaders instead of to Jesus. Faithfulness is defined as supporting the leader instead of obeying Jesus. This loyalty is expressed in forbidding them to correct the leader (who does not freely admit his faults or errors). They warn the people to “not touch God’s anointed”.
  2. ***The Bible teaches:*** Our first loyalty and connection is to Jesus. We serve together with weak and broken leaders who do not have all the answers and who are in need of insight and correction from others.
- F. **#5 They dishonor the family unit:** Vs. insisting on the biblical priority of the family unit
1. ***Cults teach:*** The children are taught to be more loyal to the leaders than to their parents. The women are taught to be more loyal to the leaders than to their husbands and the husbands are taught to accept this as normal behavior.
  2. ***The Bible teaches:*** The first relational priority of commitment is to one’s marriage, children and parents. The sanctity and identity one’s family is far more important than the ministry in which they are involved.
- G. **#6 Lack of biblical boundaries in behavior:** Vs. sexual purity and personal ownership
1. ***Cults teach:*** Cults emphasize special revelations that especially allow their leaders to cross biblical boundaries in areas of immorality. They usually insist on owning the money and property of their members who “join the community”.
  2. ***The Bible teaches:*** Sexual purity and private ownership of finances and property. In Acts 4, the disciples laid their money and property at the apostle’s feet as a one-time free will offering, not as a permanent economic arrangement.
- H. **#7 Separation from the Church:** Vs. promoting a culture of honor towards the whole Church
1. ***Cults teach:*** Cults criticize and exclude the larger Body of Christ and claim to be the only ones truly saved. They separate from the wider Church with an elite spirit.

2. ***The Bible teaches:*** We love God by loving the whole Church that is so dear to Him. We are to cultivate a ***culture of honor*** in our midst that emphasizes blessing other ministries without criticism and a spirit of inclusion without elitism.

### III. HOW TO DISCERN A FALSE PROPHET OR TEACHER

***<sup>15</sup> Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves. <sup>16</sup> You will know them by their fruits....<sup>17</sup> Every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit...<sup>20</sup> Therefore by their fruits you will know them. (Mt. 7:15-20)***

- A. Jesus compared false teachers to wolves because they are dangerous in their effect on people and deceptive in how they influence people. A wolf is a natural enemy of sheep who can not defend themselves. A wolf disguises himself as a sheep by claiming to uphold the Scripture.
- B. Jesus changed his metaphor from wolves among sheep to fruit on trees. We may not immediately discern a wolf, but it is clear if edible fruit is on a tree. We must know or test fruit in a teacher's life. There is a moral and a doctrinal test. Sound doctrine and holy living are the sure fruit of a good leader. It is not possible to examine fruit from a distance. Thus, Jesus is not exhorting us to become critical of others as a self appointed "heresy-hunter".

### IV. HOW TO AVOID DECEPTION

We can all avoid deception by loving the truth (2 Thes. 2:10), by growing in our relationship to Jesus as we regularly read the Bible, set our heart to obey it, stay in relationship with others with a teachable spirit that receives the truth without defensiveness, and by serving the truth by witnessing to unbelievers as well as ministering to the needs of others.

***<sup>19</sup>  Holding fast to the Head, from whom all the body, nourished and knit together by joints and ligaments, grows with the increase that is from God. (Col. 2:19)***