

Identifying False Teachers

A Biblical Checklist for Identifying False Teachers in the Church

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by

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Introduction: Worms and Wildebeests

One of the most common animals in the game parks of Africa is the wildebeest. A guide once told me this bit of "game-ranger lore" regarding the naming of the wildebeest. The sinus passages of the wildebeest are the favourite home of a certain parasitic worm. For healthy animals, this uninvited guest is not a problem. They are able to expel the parasite by snorting powerfully.

An old, diseased animal, however, can't do that. Eventually the worm grows, eating its way through the sinus passages into the wildebeest's brain. In pain and terror, the animal runs heedlessly, falling, stumbling, and wildly crashing into trees. Seeing such behaviour, the early settlers called them "wild beasts."

What those worms do to a wildebeest is an excellent illustration of what false teachers do to the church of Jesus Christ. False teachers worm their way into the "brain" of the church (i.e., her teaching and doctrine), spreading their lies and errors. As her brain is destroyed, the church runs wild.

She runs wild after gold dust on the floor or the palms of the hands. She runs heedlessly through the thorn bushes of humanistic psychology, evolution, situation ethics, and ancestor worship. She rolls in the dust in fits of uncontrollable laughter. She drinks the poisonous waters of a false gospel. So distracted is she by her frenzy, she forgets to eat the nourishing grass of God's word and ends up dying of starvation. That's what false teachers do to the church.

Jesus warned His followers against such false teachers in Matthew 7:15-16.

Beware of the false prophets,¹ who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits.

The purpose of this booklet is simple: to give you a checklist so that you can identify and avoid Christian leaders whom God would call false. In spite of their deceiving tactics—a cloak of sheep's clothing—Jesus indicated that identifying false teachers would be easier than you might think.

You will know them by their fruits. Grapes are not gathered from thorn bushes nor figs from thistles, are they? Matt 7:16

I'm no botanist, but I think I know the difference between a grapevine and a thorn bush, between a fig tree and a thistle. So do you. False teachers are deceptive, but Jesus said their fruits—doctrine, character, and practices—unfailingly prove what they are.

¹See 2 Peter 2:1, where the Apostle Peter equated Jesus' Old Testament terminology "false prophets" with the New Testament terminology "false teachers."

So every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot produce bad fruit, nor can a bad tree produce good fruit.

(Matt 7:17-18)

That's surprisingly simple, isn't it. A tree is proven good or bad by the fruit it produces. And false teacher "trees" produce rotten, smelly, easily identifiable, bad fruit. The evidence is there for those who look. Typically, our problem in identifying false teachers is not that the evidence is too obscure. Our problem is that we don't know *what evidence to look for*.

This booklet was written to help you know what to look for. As a bird enthusiast uses his bird book to distinguish between an eagle and a vulture, so this booklet will give you a biblical checklist for distinguishing between true and false teachers.

The Need to Identify False Teachers

Jesus' warnings about end times suggest that the most distinguishing mark of the final days will not be earthquakes, wars, or famines, although there will be those in abundance. The most distinguishing mark of the last days will be the increase and popularity of false teachers. Not only will false teachers multiply faster than rabbits, they will also perfect their power to deceive.

Many false prophets will arise and will mislead many.

(Matt 24:11)

False Christs and false prophets will arise and will show great signs and wonders, so as to mislead, if possible, even the elect.

(Matt 24:24)

To avoid the deceitful, deadly teachings of false teachers, Christians will have to cling to God's word like Cape Town pedestrians cling to light poles when the Cape winds blow.

The New Testament authors echoed Jesus' warnings against false teachers. First, regarding their *number*:

For we are not like many [many!], peddling the word of God.

(2 Cor 2:17)

Their *success*:

False prophets also arose among the people, just as there will also be false teachers among you...*Many* will follow their sensuality.

(2 Peter 2:1-2, emphasis added)

Their *scandals*:

Many will follow their sensuality, and because of them *the way of the truth will be maligned*.
(2 Peter 2:2, emphasis added)

Their *savagery*:

Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers...I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock.

(Acts 20:28-29)

Their *deceitfulness*:

There will also be false teachers among you, who will secretly introduce destructive heresies...

(2 Peter 2:1)

Contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all handed down to the saints. For certain persons have crept in unnoticed...

(Jude 3-4)

The New Testament warns us that false teachers will come—hordes of smooth-talking, sharp-dressing, error-teaching deceivers. For personal gain they will teach things they shouldn't, disrupting families (Titus 1:11), captivating women (2 Tim 3:6), advocating doctrines that have their source in demons (1 Tim 4:1), and widening the already wide way that leads to destruction (Matt 7:13).

Here's the question: what should you look for when determining whether someone is an eagle or a vulture, a sheep-eater or a true shepherd? What are the characteristics the Bible associates with false teachers? What are their typical doctrines, typical moral failings, typical tactics of deception? If you are familiar with those things, then you will be able to "Know them by their fruits" (Matt 7:16), and "Avoid such men as these" (2 Tim 3:5).

A Biblical Act of Christian Love

Someone might glance at a booklet like this and consider it an exercise in division, the product of spiteful, unchristian love—"Us four, no more, close the door." And, to be honest, I've read material like that. But does that mean that identifying false doctrine and those who teach it is unbiblical, unchristian, and unloving? No. Identifying false teachers by their fruits is biblical, Christian, and loving.

First, it is *biblical*. The Apostle Paul taught that there were times when error in the church had to be pointed out, and the erring person silenced or removed.

Reject a factious man [one who causes division by teaching false doctrine] after a first and second warning, knowing that such a man is perverted and is sinning, being self-condemned.

(Titus 3:10-11)

There are many rebellious men, empty talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision, who must be silenced because they are upsetting whole families, teaching things they should not teach for the sake of sordid gain.

(Titus 1:10-11)

In fact, Paul said that one of the determining qualifications of an elder was that he be able to wield the two-edged sword of God's word to teach truth *and* refute error. An elder was to be a man who was "holding fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching, so that he will be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict" (Titus 1:9). Generally speaking, teaching truth is the most effective way to combat error in the church. However, there are times when spiritual leaders must specifically point out and refute false teaching and those who teach it.

In 1 Timothy 4, Paul warned Timothy that demon-produced doctrine would infiltrate the church, carried in by liars unburdened by the normal restraints of conscience.

But the Spirit explicitly says that in later times some will fall away from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons, by means of the hypocrisy of liars seared in their own conscience as with a branding iron.

(1 Tim 4:1-2)

To encourage Timothy to stand against the infiltration of false doctrine, Paul added this in verse 6, "In pointing out these things to the brethren, you will be a good servant of Christ Jesus." Identifying false teachers and their errant doctrine is *biblical*.²

Identifying false teachers is also *Christian*. To be a Christian is to be Christ-like. Is it Christ-like to point out false teachers? Yes, it is. Jesus publicly warned His followers against the false teaching of the Pharisees.

And Jesus said to them, "Watch out and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees" ... Then they understood that He did not say to beware of the leaven of bread, but of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees.

(Matt 16:6, 12³)

² And, in fact, identifying false teachers by *name* when necessary is also biblical. Paul did it twice (1 Tim 1:20; 2 Tim 2:17); John did it in 3 John 9-10, naming Diotrophes as a trouble-causer worthy of rebuke.

³ See Matt 23:13-33 for Jesus' most scalding public rebuke of false religious leaders.

It is *biblical* and *Christian* (i.e., Christ-like) to point out error when necessary. It is also *loving*. In what way is it loving to identify false teachers in the church? Consider some of the things false teachers do to unwary Christians. They deceitfully devour the unsuspecting (Matt 7:15; Acts 20:29-30); they throw families into confusion by teaching things they should not (Titus 1:11); they prey on defenceless women (2 Tim 3:6); they teach destructive heresy (2 Peter 2:1); they lead many into sin and defame the Christian faith with their behaviour (2 Peter 2:2); they greedily exploit people (2 Peter 2:3); and so on. Is it loving to allow *that* to happen to other Christians? False teachers must be identified and warned against out of love for their exploited, bewildered, devoured victims.

Although a pointed identification of false teachers and their doctrine might be considered dishonourable by some, it is biblical, Christian, and loving. It's not a task I or any other preacher enjoys, but it is a God-appointed task: "In pointing out these things to the brethren, you will be a good servant of Christ Jesus" (1 Tim 4:6).

Hungry Wolves

Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits.

(Matt 7:15-16a)

These words of Jesus were part of His evangelistic conclusion to the Sermon on the Mount. They warn that false teachers will come—it is naïve to expect otherwise. In verse 15, Jesus specifically warned of two characteristics of false teachers: their *deceit* and their *devouring*.

False teachers don't walk into your church wearing a sign around their neck that says, "I am a false teacher, stay away." To prey on God's flock, they dress like sheep, they talk like sheep, they act like sheep.⁴ They do that long enough to build up trust. Only when they have built up a following do they show their true colours.

The Sioux Indians of the Great Plains of North America, before they acquired horses, used to hunt the American buffalo in a similar way. If they approached a buffalo herd directly, the herd would just move out of range of their spears and arrows. Therefore, the hunters would wrap themselves in the skin of an animal the buffalo did not fear, such as a pronghorn antelope. Closer and closer they would edge to the unsuspecting herd. When close enough, they would throw off the antelope skin and spear a surprised buffalo cow through the heart.

⁴ Or "like a shepherd." Either interpretation of Matthew 7:15 is possible, and it makes no real difference which is chosen.

Jesus said false teachers use the same tactic. To approach the herd, they wear a sheepskin. They master Christian catchphrases. They speak with passion. They convince the unsuspecting. They look like sheep, smell like sheep, and feel like sheep.

But inwardly [they] are ravenous wolves.

(Matt 7:15)

The word translated "ravenous" meant to be savage, grasping, or greedy. It would be a perfect word to describe hyenas on a kill or varsity students on a pizza. False teachers have an insatiable appetite for things like power, wealth, prestige, and sex, and they turn church members into lunch to feed those lusts.

However, the hungry heart of a false teacher can't be hidden forever. There are certain typical attitudes, actions, and teachings that betray them. Jesus said, "You will know them by their fruits." As deceitful, smooth, and tricky as false teachers are, Jesus expected that His followers could and would be able to pick them out. The wolf cannot forever pretend to be Grandma. Eventually Little Red Riding Hood will see his long nose, big ears, and sharp teeth.

What's the Test?

You will know them by their fruits.

(Matt 7:16a)

Jesus gave no detailed list in Matthew 7 of the fruits that identify false teachers. However, other authors of Scripture did. The Apostle Paul, for example, in writing to Titus identified false teachers in Crete with two tests. The *first* test was *doctrine*.

For there are many rebellious men, empty talkers and deceivers...who must be silenced because they are upsetting whole families, *teaching things they should not* teach for the sake of sordid gain.

(Titus 1:10-11, emphasis added)

The *second* test was *lifestyle* or *character*.

They profess to know God, but by their *deeds* they deny Him, being *detestable* and *disobedient* and *worthless for any good deed*.

(Titus 1:16, emphasis added)

A *third* category can be added by studying other passages. It was the test of *practices*. Peter spoke of practices like exploitation and enticing the unstable (2 Peter 2:3, 14). Paul mentioned lying and ear-tickling preaching (1 Tim 4:1-2; 2 Tim 4:3-4). Such things aren't specifically doctrine, and they go beyond personal character. They are practices or techniques that false teachers often use.

Those three—practices, doctrine, and character—are the areas of testing the New Testament indicates will expose a false teacher for what he is. They are what Jesus had in mind when He said, "Beware of the false prophets...You will know them by their fruits."

Three Invalid Tests of a Teacher

Some who fail the tests of practice, doctrine, and character say, "How can you call me a false teacher? Look at the *fruits* of my ministry! I have the largest church in the city, people give huge amounts of money to support my work, and God regularly blesses my ministry with miracles. I can't be a false teacher." However, the Bible shows that those three tests (popularity, money received, and a claim to do miracles) are invalid tests of a false teacher.

1) *Popularity*. 2 Peter 2:2 says of false teachers, "*Many* will follow their sensuality" (emphasis added). Popularity is no test of a teacher; many will follow the false. In contrast, some of God's most faithful servants, the Old Testament prophets, had few if any followers.

2) *Money received.* 2 Peter 2:3 says of false teachers, "In their greed they will exploit you." The fact that a Christian leader gets large sums of money is no evidence of his trueness or falseness. Fleecing the sheep is a favourite pastime of false teachers.

3) *A claim to do miracles.* In Matthew 7:21-22 Jesus said this:

Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness.'

Jesus said He will reject many on the day of judgement who will claim to have done miracles in His name. It is obvious, then, that such a claim is no evidence that one is a true teacher.⁵ The tests of popularity, money received, and a claim to do miracles are not biblical tests of a false teacher. The true tests are practices, doctrine, and character.

A Necessary Distinction

Before we begin to look at the actual characteristics or fruits of false teachers, we must make a necessary distinction. It is in regard to the term *false teacher*. That term can be used in both a technical and non-technical way.

Technically, a false teacher is *an ungodly person who, for personal gain, knowingly deceives people with unbiblical teaching and a façade of godly living*. Sometimes such a one teaches truth, but only to sweeten his deception. He is a deceiver, the kind of person mentioned in 2 Peter 2:1-3.

There will also be false teachers among you, who will secretly introduce destructive heresies [*they knowingly deceive*]. . . Many will follow their sensuality, and because of them the way of the truth will be maligned [*an ungodly person*]; and in their greed [*for personal gain*] they will exploit you with false words.

Such teachers knowingly deceive people for personal gain. They are *sheep-eaters*, hiding a ravenous appetite behind a pious front (Matt 7:15). I call them False teachers with a capital "F."

However, that definition is too narrow. Just as deadly to the church is the false teacher with a small "f." He is the person who is genuine in what he does in the church. He doesn't have a hidden lifestyle of sin or greed. He's not a sheep-eater. However, he teaches false, unbiblical, humanly generated doctrine in one or more significant areas. He is (intentionally or unintentionally) a *sheep-poisoner*.⁶

⁵ In fact, texts like Deuteronomy 13:1-5, Matthew 24:24, and 2 Thessalonians 2:8-12 make it clear that some false teachers will display satanic, supernatural powers. Their doctrine, character, and other practices, however, will prove they are not God's men.

⁶ Think of it this way. If someone knowingly gave you a piece of candy laced with strychnine (a deadly poison), you would be dead, and he a murderer. If a friend gave you a piece of candy he didn't know was laced with strychnine, you would still be dead, even though your friend had no intention of killing you. The poison is deadly regardless of the motive of the one giving it.

Sheep-poisoners are genuine, but genuinely deceived. They are not fakers, knowingly teaching false doctrine. However, the false doctrine they teach is no less dangerous for that. In fact, many times their error is more dangerous, exactly because they seem so genuine.⁷

In the following pages, I will use the term *false teacher* to refer both to the sheep-eaters (those who know they are false) and to sheep-poisoners (those who are genuine in their desire to help people, but whose teaching includes deadly error). Those two categories of false teachers have different motives, but are equally deadly to the church.

⁷For example, many Christian psychologists are in this category. They believe they are helping people. They live honourable lives. But they have imported a deadly, man-made teaching into the Church.

The Practices of False Teachers

A baby crawls along the floor and puts anything it finds into its mouth. Adults are more discerning. To be spiritual adults, we must know the biblical fruits of false teachers well enough to avoid being influenced by their doctrines or captured in their webs of exploitation. The Scriptures reveal at least six practices characteristic of false teachers.

1. A lack of preaching against sin.
2. A deceptive claim to do miracles.
3. Prophecies that don't come true.
4. The use of lies to advance themselves and their doctrine.
5. Targeting the unstable and the worldly.
6. Ruling on their own authority rather than the Bible's.

1) A Lack of Preaching Against Sin

A first, biblically identifiable fruit of false teachers is *a lack of preaching against sin*. In contrast, the Apostle Paul commanded this:

Preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction. 2 Tim 4:2

Preaching that is true to the Bible is preaching that both exhorts positively and convicts of sin by shining light on it and calling it to stop (i.e., reproof and rebuke). Although he is to do it "with great patience and instruction," the God-approved preacher must shine the light of God's word on sin and call it to stop.

Jesus gave us an excellent example of this in the Sermon on the Mount. He exhorted or comforted:⁸ "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matt 5:3). However, Jesus spent just as much time (in fact, far more) confronting sin in that sermon. He exposed and rebuked sins like anger, sexual lust, divorce, hypocrisy, self-righteousness, and so on. Christ-like preaching—Christian preaching—both encourages right living and rebukes wrong living.

False teachers, however, prefer a different strategy. Rather than put people off by preaching against sin, false teachers preach smooth, feel-good, non-confrontive sermons. While preaching certainly involves more than pointing out sin, God-approved preaching never excludes reproof

⁸ The word translated "exhort" (*parakaleo*) can mean either to exhort or to comfort.

and rebuking sin. Notice how clearly Scripture says that preachers who don't preach against sin are not God-sent preachers.

I did not send these prophets, but they ran. I did not speak to them, but they prophesied. But if they had stood in My council, then they would have announced My words to My people, and would have *turned them back from their evil way and from the evil of their deeds.*

(Jeremiah 23:21-22, emphasis added)

These (false) prophets were calling "Peace, peace," to Judah (Jer 6:14). They should have been calling "Repent, repent." In Lamentations 2:14, after the axe of judgement had fallen on Judah, God said, "Your prophets have seen for you false and foolish visions; and they *have not exposed your iniquity*" (emphasis added). Such a lack of preaching against sin is typical of false teachers. One well-known television preacher⁹ in the United States has said that he consciously avoids the use of the word "sin" in his preaching. That is a teacher running with a message, but it is a teacher God didn't send.

A member of our congregation tells this story of his early Christian experience. When he was converted, he bought a new Bible. Each Sunday, he dutifully underlined in that Bible the verses from which the minister preached. After two years, he found that the preacher was preaching the same verses again—verses he had already underlined. He calls that Bible his "Happy Bible," because all the verses he had underlined were happy, God-wants-to-bless-you verses.

Was the preacher wrong to preach those verses? No. They're in the Bible. However, that minister was wrong because that's *all* he preached. And after two years he ran out of happy verses, so he started over. I don't know if that preacher was a false teacher, but I do know this: false teachers are typified by a lack of preaching against sin. "I did not send these prophets...if they had stood in My council, then they would have announced My words to My people and would have turned them back from their evil way" (Jer 23:21-22).

In contrast, false teachers usually prefer the preaching strategy disowned by Paul in 2 Timothy 4:3-4.

For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires, and will turn away their ears from the truth and will turn aside to myths.

One of the identifying marks of false teachers is a reluctance to confront sin in their preaching. Preaching against sin draws people to repentance. It draws people to godliness. However, it rarely draws vast crowds or large offerings. False teachers, therefore, quickly abandon balanced, encourage-and-rebuke preaching for something more fashionable, more tantalising, and more

⁹ Robert Schuller.

crowd-pleasing. That refusal to preach against sin as Jesus and the Apostles did is an initial identifying practice of false teachers.

2) A Deceptive Claim to Do Miracles

In Matthew 7:15, Jesus taught His followers to be wary of false teachers. A few verses later He said this about those same false teachers:

Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven... Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name *perform many miracles?*'

(Matt 7:21-22, emphasis added)

On the day of judgement, these false teachers will claim to have exercised miraculous power in the name of Jesus Christ. However, we can be sure they had no God-given power because of Christ's rejection: "I never knew you, depart from Me" (v. 23). Their claim to have done miracles was a *deceptive claim*.

That is typical of false teachers. They deceive and ensnare the gullible by claiming to do miracles, however, their "miracles" are actually frauds. Let me give you three prominent examples of such deceptive claims to do miracles: Oral Roberts, Benny Hinn, and Prophet TB Joshua.

First, *Oral Roberts*. He and his son are internationally known "faith-healers" from the United States. Like many others, they claim to do miracles of healing by the power of Christ. In fact, they claim to do hundreds, if not thousands of healings each year. I find it interesting that at one point in his ministry, Oral Roberts raised tens of millions of dollars to build a giant hospital on the campus of the university he named after himself in Tulsa, Oklahoma.

Oral Roberts claims to have the healing power of Christ, but can you imagine Jesus Christ building a *hospital*? What a waste of time and money! When Jesus walked into a village in Galilee, He cleared it of sickness. People didn't need a hospital; they were healed. It says something about a man who claims to do miracles of healing when he has to spend millions of dollars to build a hospital. It says he is a false teacher whose miracles aren't real. In fact, the doctors in Roberts own hospital (before it closed due to financial collapse) admitted that they could not give one example of Oral Roberts healing someone of a discernible, organic disease. Not one.¹⁰

Second, *Benny Hinn*. Benny Hinn is probably the most popular faith healer in the world today, drawing in over fifty million dollars a year. He holds crusades world wide at which he supposedly heals thousands. A few years ago, Andre Kole, a Christian who researches such things, challenged Benny Hinn to prove his miracles are real.¹¹ Kole met with Hinn personally, and during the

¹⁰ Richard Mayhue, *The Healing Promise* (Eugene, Oregon: Harvest House, 1994), p. 56.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 57-61.

interview, Benny acknowledged that many of his "healings" are psychosomatic (i.e., people feel better, but aren't actually healed of a real disease).

But Hinn also argued adamantly that God does many genuine miracles of healing through him each year. In response to Kole's challenge, Hinn went on television requesting that people he had healed send in accounts of their genuine miracles. The result was a book with ten cases—Benny's top-ten list of absolutely-for-sure miracles.

However, most of the cases, even as reported in the book, clearly did not match New Testament accounts of miraculous healings (immediate, complete transformation of a visible medical condition). Since no medical documentation was given for any of the cases, Kole researched the two cases he felt were most likely to have been genuine miracles.

Kole writes, "[I] found that they involved extensive medical treatment and surgery prior to the healing—treatment which also included a lengthy recovery period. All this significant medical information was omitted from [Hinn's] book."¹²

Those who investigated the other eight cases found exactly the same thing. Benny's top-ten miracles list was a farce, a fake. Not one of his ten best miracles was a real miracle.

During their interview, Benny Hinn promised Kole he would send him documentation of genuine healings in his ministry. In a recorded conversation, Kole replied, "Benny, I don't mean to be unkind, but I think I should mention that for 35 years every Christian faith healer I have contacted has made the same promises you have, but I never heard from them again."

Benny Hinn replied, "You will hear from me... We'll start feeding them to you next week." Kole spent two years repeatedly contacting Benny Hinn's ministry, without response. Benny Hinn continues to claim in his books and on his television show that God miraculously heals thousands through him. However, not one shred of evidence of a genuine, discernible, immediate, non-medical healing can be produced to back that up.

Third example: *TB Joshua*. Prophet Joshua, pastor of "The Synagogue" in Lagos, Nigeria, is the latest rage in the healing movement. So many South Africans have traveled to Lagos, the SABC's Special Assignment television program did a feature on the pilgrimage. This documentary (filmed in April, 2001) made interesting viewing. The "healings" of Prophet Joshua were typified by three characteristics: they were *invisible*, *unsuccessful*, and *fraudulent*.

First, the healings were *invisible*. Prophet Joshua claimed to heal a woman from breast cancer, something no one could see. However, at one point, a man with a terribly ulcerated leg was shown. The Synagogue's own video clip showed half of the man's lower leg eaten away by a

¹² Ibid., p. 59.

gruesome, oozing sore. It's significant that the Synagogue's video clip didn't show *that* man being healed. That would have been a visible, undeniable, right-before-your-eyes miracle.

A second characteristic of Prophet Joshua's healings was this: they were *unsuccessful*. Many of the South Africans present were assured by the Prophet that they had been healed. Interviews proved they passionately believed they were healed. However, the girl who stuttered, the AIDS-infected man, and the small boy with the heart condition, when they returned to South Africa, discovered they were not healed at all.

Besides being invisible and unsuccessful, Prophet Joshua's healings were also *fraudulent*. One of the Synagogue's video clips showed a baby who was born dead being resurrected by a written prayer from the Prophet. The first shot was of a baby, newly born, the umbilical cord still attached to the baby's stomach. The next shot showed the baby's eyes popping open—a miracle. However, an observant person would notice that in the second shot, the baby had no umbilical cord. In fact, it did not even have the black stump of the tied-off cord that newborn babies carry for days following birth. The second baby's stomach was perfectly smooth. Very simply, it was a different baby. That's a deceptive miracle—a videotape spliced to deceive the gullible into believing a miracle took place.

A second example of outright fakery was the woman who was supposedly healed from seven years of paralysis. A person who is paralysed quickly loses muscle tone due to atrophy (a shrinking of unused muscles). After *seven years* of complete disuse, one would expect a paralytic's legs to be thin and wasted. The television cameras, however, showed a woman with strong, firm, fully muscled legs. That's a deceptive miracle—a fake healing intended to deceive the gullible.¹³

Matthew 7:22-23 identifies *a deceptive claim to do miracles* as a practice of false teachers. Jesus said, "Beware of the false prophets... You will know them by their fruits." A deceitful claim to do miracles is one of those fruits.

A Note on Biblical Healing

Many today claim to do miracles of healing. However, their miracles never seem to match up to what the Bible calls miracles of healing. The healings of Jesus and the Apostles had at least five distinct characteristics.

1. They instantly transformed visible, physical diseases (Matt 8:2-3; Mark 3:1-5; Luke 22:49-51; Acts 9:32-34).
2. They brought immediate and complete healing (Matt 8:2-3; Acts 3:6-8).

¹³ And if a real miracle of healing had taken place, she wouldn't have stumbled weakly out of her wheel chair with short, staggering steps. If Jesus or the Apostles had healed her, *she* probably would have carried her wheel chair out, not the man behind her (Acts 3:8; Mark 2:12).

3. They were accomplished without medical intervention (Matt 8:3; Mark 8:25-29; Acts 5:15-16).
4. They were 100% successful—no one was turned away unhealed (Matt 4:23-24; 8:16; Acts 5:15-16; 28:8-9).
5. They were undeniable—because of the other four characteristics mentioned above (Acts 4:14-16).

On the day of judgement, Jesus will condemn *many* false teachers in spite of their claims to have had miracle ministries (Matt 7:22-23). That condemnation will prove their crowd-attracting miracles were deceptive frauds. It is no accident that Jesus' rejection of those men and their "miracles" came immediately on the heels of His summary in v. 20 regarding false teachers, "So, you will know them by their fruits."

3) Prophecies That Don't Come True

Let's now turn our attention to a third typical practice of false teachers: *prophecies that don't come true*. Many in the church today claim to prophesy. Books are written about prophecy; you can attend conferences to learn how to prophesy. Jesus, however, warned against "false prophets." What characterised false prophets in the Bible? Prophecies that didn't come true.

There were two tests of a prophet in the Bible. The first was 100% accuracy in doctrine. Deuteronomy 13:1-5 noted that if a prophet taught deviant doctrine he wasn't God's prophet, even if he performed a sign or wonder. The second test was in regard to the accuracy of the prophet's prediction.

You may say in your heart, 'How will we know the word which the Lord has not spoken?' When a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord, *if the thing does not come about or come true*, that is the thing which the Lord has not spoken. The prophet has spoken it presumptuously; you shall not be afraid of him.

(Deut 18:21-22, emphasis added)

In fact, verse 20 said that, in the Old Testament era, the prophet whose prediction didn't come true was to be put to death. A false prophet, then, was easy to spot. He might fake it for a while, but eventually one of his prophecies would fall flat. It wouldn't be fulfilled. That proved he was a false prophet, and he was not given a second chance. Instead, he was put to death. In contrast, 100% accuracy in prediction was the confirming evidence of God-sent prophets.

Thus Samuel grew and the Lord was with him and let none of his words fail. All Israel from Dan even to Beersheba knew that Samuel was confirmed as a prophet of the Lord.

(1 Samuel 3:19-20)

(see also 9:6; Jer 28:1-9; 1 Kings 22:28).

The Prophet Jeremiah had many encounters with prophets who made predictions that didn't come true. He had a very short way of dealing with them. In Jeremiah 28, one such prophet, Hananiah, prophesied that God would remove the Babylonian threat from the nation of Judah. Jeremiah, on the other hand, had been prophesying for years that God would judge Judah by the hand of Babylon. In his response to Hananiah's prediction of peace and safety, Jeremiah laid on the sarcasm with a trowel, concluding with a rapier-like challenge.

And the prophet Jeremiah said, "Amen! May the Lord do so; may the Lord confirm your words which you have prophesied... Yet hear now this word which I am about to speak in your hearing and in the hearing of all the people! The prophets who were before me and before you from ancient times prophesied against many lands and against great kingdoms, of war and of calamity and of pestilence. The prophet who prophesies of peace, *when the word of the prophet comes to pass, then that prophet will be known as one whom the Lord has truly sent.*"

(Jer 28:6-9, emphasis added)

The end of the story? Babylon invaded and destroyed Judah. Hananiah was proven to be a false prophet by a simple test: the inaccuracy of his prediction.

In fact, since the disobedient inhabitants of Jerusalem wouldn't do it, God Himself executed Hananiah as Deut 18:20 said should have been done (see Jer 28:15-17). That's indicative of God's fury toward those who claim to be prophets but speak prophecies that don't come true. Read carefully how God expressed His anger toward such people in Jeremiah 23.

Thus says the Lord of hosts, "Do not listen to the words of the prophets who are prophesying to you. They are leading you into futility; they speak a vision of their own imagination, not from the mouth of the Lord."

(Jer 23:16)

"I have heard what the prophets have said who prophesy falsely in My name, saying, 'I had a dream, I had a dream!' How long? Is there anything in the hearts of the prophets who prophesy falsehood, even these prophets of the deception of their own heart,... The prophet who has a dream may relate his dream, but let him who has My word speak My word in truth. What does straw have in common with grain?" declares the Lord...

..."Therefore behold, I am against the prophets," declares the Lord, "who steal My words from each other. Behold, I am against the prophets," declares the Lord, "who use their tongues and declare, 'The Lord declares.' Behold, I am against those who have prophesied false dreams," declares the Lord, "and related them and led My people astray by their falsehoods and reckless boasting; yet I did not send them or command them, nor do they furnish this people the slightest benefit," declares the Lord.

(Jer 23:25-32)

"Beware of the false prophets," Jesus warned, "You will know them by their fruits." One of the clear biblical fruits of false teachers or false prophets was *prophecies that don't come true*.

Son of man, prophesy against the prophets of Israel who prophesy ...from their own inspiration...Woe to the foolish prophets who are following their own spirit and have seen nothing.

Therefore, thus says the Lord God, "Because you have spoken falsehood and seen a lie, therefore behold, I am against you," declares the Lord God.

(Ezek 13:2-3, 8)

In spite of such powerful statements from God, fallible prophets are overwhelmingly popular in many sections of the church today.¹⁴ Ed Traut, a prominent South African "prophet" and the founder of Prophetic Voice Ministries, has written this about prophecy.

Someone who makes a mistake (or what seems to be a mistake) is not a false prophet. He is either not a prophet or he is a very inexperienced one, but decidedly not a false one.¹⁵

That is amazing. If a prophet's prediction fails, he is only *inexperienced*. Or he must be excused, he only *thought* he was a prophet. Did Deuteronomy 18:21-22 or any other passage of Scripture make an exception for inexperienced or confused prophets? Of course not.

Later in Traut's book, referring to prophecy he adds, "I believe it lies in the human element to make an error, even in the greatest men of God."¹⁶ That's strange, and in fact, unbiblical. The great men of God in the Bible were considered prophets simply because they never made an error while prophesying (1 Sam 3:19-20; Jer 28:8-9).

Jesus said, "Beware of the false prophets... You will know them by their fruits." One of those fruits is prophecies that don't come true.

4) The Use of Lies to Advance Themselves and Their Doctrine

The *use of lies* is a standard practice of false teachers. There's a clear example of that in 2 Thessalonians 2. In that chapter, the Apostle Paul was forced to correct false doctrine about end times that had wormed its way into the Thessalonian church. However, our interest is not so much in the error as in the tactic that was employed to get the Thessalonians to accept the error.

¹⁴ For an analysis of the fallible prophecies of the modern prophecy movement, see my booklet, *Testing Today's Prophecy*.

¹⁵ Ed Traut, *The Truth about Prophecy* (Pretoria, South Africa: Prophetic Voice Distributors, 1991), 57.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 94.

Now we request you, brethren, with regard to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to Him, that you not be quickly shaken from your composure or be disturbed either by a spirit or a message or a letter as if from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come.

(2 Thess 2:1-2)

A false teacher had given a prophecy supposedly from God (the most likely meaning of "a spirit"; see 1 John 4:1). He had faked a verbal message from Paul (who was probably in Corinth at the time), and he even produced a letter supposedly written by Paul to support his error. Paul took steps to forestall such deceitful tactics in the future: "I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand, and this is a distinguishing mark in every letter; this is the way I write" (2 Thess 3:17).

What's the lesson? False teachers use lies to advance themselves and their doctrine. A friend recently told me how a news reporter in the United States trapped Benny Hinn in a lie. The reporter asked Benny Hinn if he had ever raised someone from the dead. Hinn danced around the question, but finally said, "No." The reporter then popped a videotape into the machine next to him, and proceeded to play back a section of one of Benny Hinn's own shows during which Benny emphatically claimed to have raised someone from the dead. Should we be surprised? No. False teachers always use lies to advance themselves.

There is a second NT passage that emphasises this practice of false teachers.

But the Spirit explicitly says that in later times some will fall away from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons, by means of the hypocrisy of liars seared in their own conscience as with a branding iron.

(2 Tim 4:1-2)

How will the doctrines of demons and satanic error be ushered into the church? By means of men whose consciences are so seared, so burnt over, that they feel no guilt when they lie through their teeth. The following quote expresses the frustration of dealing with such men.

With all courtesy and consideration, let us make it plain that religious teachers who play with words...who make their creeds mean what they were not originally intended to mean, or mentally reject a formula of belief while outwardly repeating it, cannot expect to retain the allegiance of men who are accustomed to...square dealing.¹⁷

What's really scary is when young preachers are openly instructed by liberal, Bible-doubting professors to deceive their congregations. I know a young man who graduated from a well-known theological school in Pretoria about ten years ago. Before his graduation, he and his classmates were addressed by the dean of the faculty. During his address, that prominent professor said, "We have taught you things here that people in the churches you'll go to don't believe."

¹⁷ Ned Stonehouse, *J. Gresham Machen: A Biographical Memoir*, 3rd ed. (Carlisle, Pennsylvania: Banner of Truth Trust, 1987), 366. Machen was speaking of the treacherous tactics used by liberals to take over Princeton Seminary in the 1920s and '30s in the United States.

What the professor specifically had in mind was his view that the Old Testament contains no (not one) prophetic reference to Jesus Christ. Apparently he believed God can't know and control the future, and therefore, none of the Old Testament's predictions about Messiah were actually about Jesus of Nazareth.

"The people in the churches you go to won't be ready to hear that," said this professor to the graduating class. "When you go to your church, don't expose them to these new ideas about the Bible right away. As you are there over time, identify people in the congregation who are open to new ideas. Gather them around you, and teach them these new doctrines. Once you have their support, place them in leadership positions, and then you can start to teach your church these new truths."

That is *How to be a False Teacher, 101*. Deceive to advance yourself and your so-called truth. Hide what you really believe until you have won support and trust, then throw off the sheepskin and devour the bewildered flock.

Jesus said, "Beware of the false prophets." They won't tell you that they are false. In fact, they'll lie to hide their false doctrine and practices. Their consciences are made of Teflon—nothing sticks. They are identified by that very fact: they shamelessly use lies to advance themselves and their doctrine.

5) They Target the Unstable and the Worldly

Second Peter 2 is the most extensive section in the New Testament on false teachers. In that chapter, Peter pointed out that false teachers make it their practice to *target the unstable and the worldly in the church*.

Having eyes full of adultery that never cease from sin, *enticing unstable souls*, having a heart trained in greed, accursed children...

For speaking out arrogant words of vanity *they entice by fleshly desires*, by sensuality, those who barely escape from the ones who live in error.

(2 Pet 2:14, 18, emphasis added)

The word "entice" meant to attract with a baited hook. False teachers study the fleshly desires of sin-plagued people, and then entice them into their churches by playing to those lusts.

Recently in Pretoria it was the rage to claim that people were finding gold dust on themselves or on the floor during the church service. That's a brilliant way to appeal to the fleshly desires of worldly Christians. Let me illustrate.

If I wanted my church to grow and was not especially concerned about truth, here is what we would do. We would take R50,000 out of our church building fund and go out and buy some gold. We would grind up that gold into dust and small nuggets, and early each Sunday for a month or two we would scatter that gold around on the floor. Then we would call the newspapers and let them know that during the last month, people in our church had found R50,000 in gold at our services.

How long do you think it would be before we filled our meeting hall each Sunday with people who were supposedly worshipping God, but were really worshipping gold? That's how false teachers work. They study the fleshly lusts of weak Christians (greed is a favourite one) and attract them to the church by appealing to those lusts.

There is a second important New Testament text regarding the target audience of false teachers. It is 2 Timothy 3:5-7. False teachers target not just the worldly, but also the *unstable*.

[They are] holding to a form of godliness, although they have denied its power; avoid such men as these. For among them are those who enter into households and captivate weak women weighed down with sins, led on by various impulses, always learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth.

(2 Tim 3:5-7)

This text does not say that *all* women are weak, weighed down by sins, and unstable. That, of course, is not true. But it does say that false teachers especially delight to prey on those women who are weak, unstable, and burdened by sin. They "enter" or "creep stealthily" into households, captivating women by preying on their guilt feelings, impulsiveness, and theological immaturity.

How easy it is today. They don't even have to do the hard work of coming to the front door. They just walk right out of the radio or television and throw a net over the unstable and guilt-ridden.

As a shepherd, it disturbs me that many so-called Christian radio and television programs are so evidently targeted at women. From the topics discussed to the manner of the participants, they are designed to captivate women with feelings of guilt and failure, and to take advantage of their theological ignorance.

Target-audience is the fifth biblically identifiable practice of false teachers. They entice the worldly with fleshly attractions. They home in on the theologically weak and guilt-ridden like lions on a crippled zebra. The Apostle Paul especially warned Christian women to beware of teachers who prey on their feelings of failure, weakness, or impulsiveness: "Avoid such men as these" (2 Tim 3:5).

6) They Rule on Their Own Authority Rather Than the Bible's

The God-condemned practice of spiritual leaders *ruling on their own authority* was specifically mentioned in the Prophet Jeremiah.

An appalling and horrible thing has happened in the land: the prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests rule on their own authority; and My people love it so! But what will you do at the end of it?

(Jer 5:30-31)

Besides prophets whose prophecies were self-made, God also condemned another group of religious leaders in this text: the priests. Why? They were ruling on their own authority. Literally, "They were ruling over their own hands." That means that (with their hands or otherwise) these spiritual leaders did whatever they wanted to do among God's people.

Deuteronomy 33:10 said that the sons of Levi (i.e., the priests) were to teach God's law to Israel. His word was the basis of their spiritual authority. However, in Jeremiah 5:30-31 God condemned the priests of Judah for doing something else altogether: ruling on their own authority. They were telling people what to do and how to live based on their own ideas and philosophies of life, rather than based on God's word. God called such a practice "an appalling and horrible thing" (v. 30).

In the same way, the spiritual leader today who teaches his human ideas in the church has no right to do so. He is a leader ruling on his own authority—what *he* thinks is true rather than what *God* has said is true. He has no right to do that in God's church, among God's people.

Let me give you *two examples* of how false teachers rule on their own authority. *First*, theological liberalism. Several years ago I met with the minister of a large church in our city. His theology¹⁸ said that his personal experience was just as important—in fact, more important—than the Bible in determining what is true.

That theology is lived out in his church. For example, they don't practice church discipline as commanded by Jesus in Matthew 18:15ff. Why? In his experience, he has found the discipline process to be unpleasant. Therefore, he has chosen to abandon it. That's a spiritual leader ruling, not by God's authority, but by his own authority—an appalling and horrible thing.

A *second* prominent example today of spiritual leaders ruling on their own authority is Christian psychology. Christian psychology's self-professed mission is to mix the ideas of men with the Bible. Christian psychology's goal is to integrate¹⁹ secular psychology's ideas regarding how people

¹⁸ Barthian Neo-orthodoxy or what might be called Christian Existentialism: truth is determined not by the truthful word of an infinite Someone outside yourself, but by self and self's experiences.

¹⁹ *Integration* always leads to *contradiction*. For example, most Christian psychologists teach the self-love of Eric Fromm as a key to good living. To do so, they must ignore the fact that 2 Timothy 3:1-2 makes self-affection the primary attribute of bad living. Integration of human wisdom into the

should handle life's problems with the Bible's teaching regarding how people should handle life's problems.

Can I say it strongly? On that basis, a Christian psychologist is, by definition, a false teacher, a sheep-poisoner. Does that shock you? It shouldn't. The reason is obvious. He teaches something he didn't get from the Bible and calls it "Christian."

Because his psychological interpretations of human behaviour don't come from the Bible, when the Christian psychologist tells a Christian what to think or how to live, he is ruling on his own authority, not God's. His psychology—the thing that makes him a psychologist and not a Bible teacher—came from his studies at university. He might use the psychoanalysis of Sigmund Freud or the healing of memories of Carl Jung. He might teach the hierarchy of needs of Abraham Maslow or the self-love of Eric Fromm. He didn't get those ideas by studying the Bible. He might try to decorate them with Bible verses, but he didn't get his psychological system *from* the Bible. He got it from men.

What does that mean? The Christian psychologist has forayed into humanistic psychology and returned with a sack full of techniques and ideas that aren't from the Bible. *He* believes they are true, but God didn't say they are true. The Christian psychologist decided *on his own* that things like psychoanalysis are the right way to help people overcome their problems. To put it in biblical terms, he is ruling *on his own authority*. He is telling God's people what to do and how to live based on his own ideas. That's the exact thing God condemned in Jeremiah 5:30-31.

An appalling and horrible thing has happened in the land: the prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests rule on their own authority; and My people love it so! But what will you do at the end of it?

Jesus indicated that the fruits of false teachers would be fairly easy to spot: grapes vs. thistles. Many times, the problem is not the clarity of the evidence; the problem is, do we *want* to see? Well-intentioned or otherwise, those who tell Christians how to think and live in the church based on human systems of wisdom or personal whim rather than the Bible are God-condemned spiritual leaders. In Paul's words, "Avoid such men as these."

Summary

Read through the list of the biblically identified practices of false teachers again.

1. A lack of preaching against sin.
2. A deceptive claim to do miracles.

Bible always leads to contradiction of the Bible. Biblical counselling authors like Jay Adams, Wayne Mack, and many others provide the biblical alternative to those who rule on their own authority in the counselling room.

3. Prophecies that don't come true.
4. The use of lies to advance themselves and their doctrine.
5. Targeting the unstable and the worldly.
6. Ruling on their own authority rather than the Bible's.

Those are six biblically identified practices of God-condemned false teachers. They aren't that hard to see, either in Scripture or in the church around us. "You will know them by their fruits" (Matt 7:16).

The Doctrines of False Teachers

Do not be carried away by varied and strange teachings.

(Heb 13:9)

For there are many rebellious men, empty talkers and deceivers...who must be silenced because they are upsetting whole families, teaching things they should not teach for the sake of sordid gain.

(Titus 1:10-11)

No reasonable Christian expects absolute doctrinal agreement in the church this side of heaven. Fallible interpreters handling an infallible Bible will disagree at times. However, it is equally true that there are some truths that make Christianity Christianity and not something else. There are some truths that, if perverted, make one's creed less than Christian.

Contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all handed down to the saints. For certain persons have crept in unnoticed...

(Jude 3-4)

Those primary, non-negotiable truths called by Jude "the faith," focus on three areas of theology: one's view of the Bible, one's view of God and Christ, and one's view of salvation. The Reformers summarised those critical areas of doctrine with three memorable battle cries: *sola scriptura*, *sola deo gloria*, and *sola fide*.²⁰ Not surprisingly, false teachers are swiftly exposed when they feed the church thorns and thistles in those three areas.

Super-brains and Stupid Beasts

Sometimes false teachers are academic super-brains. They write impressive articles in church publications, speak with great erudition, and hold positions of prestige at theological institutions. They are the theological "clever people." We are taught from a young age not to question their papal pronouncements regarding the Bible. However, having abandoned a child-like faith in the Bible and its Revealer, all their immaculately reasoned arguments are the ignorant ravings of a lunatic.

If anyone advocates a different doctrine and does not agree with sound words, those of our Lord Jesus Christ, and with the doctrine conforming to godliness, he is conceited and understands nothing.

(1 Tim 6:3-4a)

²⁰ Translated, those Latin phrases mean, *scripture alone*, *God's glory alone*, and (salvation by) *faith alone*.

Other false teachers are what Peter called "unreasoning animals" (2 Peter 2:12). Stupid beasts theologically, their doctrine will be so grossly unbiblical that the label "Christian" is no more deceiving than an Uno sporting a Mercedes emblem.

In Matthew 7, the Lord made it our obligation to be wary enough to detect the doctrine-fruit of false teachers whether it is delivered in spotless rhetoric or ignorant ramblings. It would, of course, be impossible to detail every doctrine that false teachers have ever corrupted. Instead, we'll focus on the three areas of doctrine that make Christianity Christianity and not something else:

- the doctrine of Scripture
- the doctrine of God and Christ
- the doctrine of salvation

1) A Two-Pronged Attack on Scripture

False teachers typically attack the Scriptures in two ways. *First*, they subtly attack *the truthfulness, trustworthiness and sufficiency of God's word*. This is in keeping with the strategy of the first false teacher, Satan himself.

Indeed, *has God said*, "You shall not eat from any tree of the garden"?

(Gen 3:1, emphasis added)

Satan's first-strike in the war against God was a missile launch against the trustworthiness of God's word. Ever since, false teachers have worn a Grand Canyon-sized rut walking in the footsteps of their evil mentor. Notice how God chided the people of Judah and the scholars who were their spiritual leaders for their treatment of His word.

How can you say, 'We are wise, and the law of the Lord is with us'? But behold, the lying pen of the scribes has made it into a lie. The wise men are put to shame, they are dismayed and caught; behold, they have rejected the word of the Lord, and what kind of wisdom do they have?

(Jer 8:8-9)

The scribes, the great scholars of the law, had been exposed by God: their scholarly pens had been guilty of making God's word into a lie. What they wrote subtly undercut its truthfulness and trustworthiness. Their reason for casting doubt on God's word was clearly stated, "They have rejected the word of the Lord" (v. 9).

That's an identifiable fruit of false teachers. "The lying pen of the scribes has made it [God's word] into a lie" (v. 8). False teachers will speak of the Bible in noble terms, but in the next breath they will cast doubt upon its trustworthiness, authority, or sufficiency.²¹

Believing Bible scholars are of immeasurable value to Christ's church. However, men of scholarly reputation who have secretly rejected God's word are a dreadful curse—hungry wolves circling the flock.

For example, a few years ago there was a major debate in the newspapers and church publications of South Africa about the book of Jonah. Somebody of lofty theological reputation let slip that he believed the book of Jonah was just a myth—a fanciful story that never happened. The message of Jonah (God's compassion on sinners) was true, but the events were complete make-believe. That is a tragic example of Jeremiah 8:8-9: a scholar who has rejected God's word using his pen to make God's word out to be a lie.

That same attitude toward God's word (i.e., the overall message is true, but its specific statements are hardly to be trusted) comes through in this quotation.

There are also some interpreters of Scripture that use modern-day developments in the area of hermeneutics and interpretation. They see authority *in the broader message of salvation* rather than in every literal meaning of every word and text in the Bible.²²

This "modern" view of Scripture dominates many theological schools today. The Bible's specific statements (everything from Jonah's being swallowed by a fish to the deity of Christ) carry no authority and can be disregarded. The only thing that is authoritative is its broad, overall message: God is nice and wants to save you. The rest can be followed or forsaken at whim. "They have rejected the word of the Lord, and what kind of wisdom do they have?" (Jer 8:9). Not God's wisdom. That view of the Bible is false-teacher wisdom that attacks the trustworthiness, authority, and sufficiency of Scripture.

A Second Attack on the Doctrine of Scripture

A second way false teachers typically attack the doctrine of Scripture is by *demoting God's word by teaching non-divine wisdom beside or over it*. The belief that ideas not from the Bible should be taught in the church alongside the Bible is a typical doctrine of false teachers. They are often integrationists.

²¹ This is obvious in the area of counselling. An army of Ph.D.-driven pens has written libraries full of "Christian" books attacking the trustworthiness of God's word for handling people's emotional/spiritual problems. God seems to view His word otherwise: "All Scripture is inspired...that the man of God might be adequate, equipped for every good work" (2 Tim 3:16-17).

²² Western Cape Synod study paper, *Pastoring the Homosexual Person*, 1999, section 3.3, "The Bible in the 'quarrel': Dangers & Guidelines," private translation, emphasis added.

It might be the Bible *and* the Book of Mormon, the Bible *and* the authority of the Pope, the Bible *and* the latest philosophy or psychology, or the Bible *and* their dreams and visions, but false teachers almost always teach that human wisdom should be taught beside (or over) God's word.

The Apostles, however, always rejected the practice of integrating human systems of wisdom with biblical truth. Paul, for example, rebuked the Corinthians' desire to mix the cross of Christ with their favourite Greek philosophies.

For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the cleverness of the clever I will set aside." Where is the wise man? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?
(1 Cor 1:18-20)

For the Apostles there could be no mixture of human systems of wisdom with God's wisdom. Paul's statement in 1 Corinthians 3:18, "Let no man deceive himself," tells us that it is easy for Christians to be deceived on this issue. However, the Apostles never tolerated the integration so avidly practiced by most false teachers.

Let no man deceive himself. If any man among you thinks that he is wise in this age, he must become foolish, so that he may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness before God... The Lord knows the reasonings of the wise, that they are useless.
(1 Cor 3:18-20)

See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ.
(Col 2:8)

Certain doctrinal fruits clearly identify false teachers. The first is their doctrine that the Bible is not completely true, trustworthy, and sufficient. Walking hand-in-hand with that is their doctrine of integration: the Bible *and*. Jesus warned, "Beware of the false prophets... You will know them by their fruits."

2) An Attack on the Biblical Doctrines of God and Christ

Teaching that Adam did or did not have a belly button doesn't make you a false teacher. However, what you say about the Bible, about God and Christ, and about salvation might. This section focuses on another area of doctrine that makes Christianity Christianity: the biblical doctrines of God and Christ.

Satan is the manager of the workshop that turns out all false doctrine. One of his first lies was his promise to Eve in the Garden, "You can be like God" (Gen 3:5). In contrast to that lie, the utter

uniqueness of God as a personal, knowable, but infinite Being was one of the dominant themes of the Old Testament:

Thus says the Lord, the King of Israel and his Redeemer, the Lord of hosts: 'I am the first and I am the last, and there is no God besides Me. Who is like Me? Let him proclaim and declare it...Is there any God besides Me, or is there any other Rock? I know of none.'
(Isa 44:6-8)

In that statement, God declared His absolute uniqueness. Yet it was exactly that uniqueness that the false prophets of Israel so consistently attacked by proclaiming other gods like the Baals to be as much God as Yahweh.

In the New Testament, the attack naturally shifted to Jesus Christ, the God-man. Attacks on the uniqueness of Christ—His deity, for example—are as old as Christianity. The scribes and Pharisees, false religious teachers of Jesus' day, were passionately opposed to the deity of Christ.

The Jews picked up stones again to stone Him. Jesus answered them, "I showed you many good works from the Father; for which of them are you stoning Me?" The Jews answered Him, "For a good work we do not stone You, but for blasphemy; and because You, being a man, make Yourself out to be God."
(John 10:31-33)

Those attacks on the deity of Christ intensified during the time of the Apostles. Paul had to wrestle with false teachers in the church of Colossae who taught that Jesus was less than fully God. Paul wrote, "In Him [Jesus] all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form" (Col 2:9). As with the heretics of Colossae and the false prophets of Israel, it is typical of false teachers in every era to attack the deity of Christ and the uniqueness of God. In some cases this is obvious: Jehovah's Witnesses teach that Jesus is not fully God; Mormons teach that each person who believes becomes a god. The Catholic church assaults the uniqueness of Christ by elevating Mary to the position of a sinless, co-redeemer with Christ, calling her the "Queen of Heaven"—virtually a fourth person of the Trinity.

Some who are the most guilty of attacking the uniqueness of God and Christ today are the Rhema or Word-Faith teachers.²³ Kenneth Hagin and his myriad of disciples teach that men are just as much god as God is. Christians, they say, are just as much God as Jesus Christ. A few quotations will suffice to prove this.

Kenneth Hagin's view of the uniqueness of Jesus Christ is exposed in the following statement: "Every man who has been born again is an incarnation...the believer is as much an incarnation as

²³ This aspect of the Word-Faith teachings is well documented in books like Hank Hanegraff's *Christianity in Crisis* and John MacArthur's *Charismatic Chaos*.

was Jesus.²⁴ Hagin teaches that every Christian is as much God-in-the-flesh as Jesus Christ was. Christ is not unique.

The following statements were made by the well-known Word-Faith teacher, Kenneth Copeland.

God's reason for creating Adam was his desire to reproduce Himself... [Adam] was not a little like God. He was not almost like God. He was not subordinate to God.

Adam in the Garden of Eden was God manifested in the flesh.

You don't have a god in you, you are one.²⁵

Morris Cerullo, another prominent Word-Faith teacher, has said this, "When we stand up here, brother, you're not looking at Morris Cerullo; you're looking at God."²⁶

In Isaiah 40:25 God asked, "To whom then will you liken Me, that I would be His equal?" Apparently the Word-faith teachers' answer would be "Any Christian, since we're all gods." They seem fully aware that such teaching is a radical departure from orthodox Christian doctrine, often prefacing such teaching with statements like, "This is where we are going to depart from the traditional church."²⁷

In spite of the boldness with which the Word-Faith movement demotes God and deifies man, its teachers remain immensely popular. However, Satan's lie in Genesis 3:5—"You shall be like God"—makes the source of their doctrine all too clear.

As I write this booklet, a new trend is sweeping evangelical Christianity. It's called the Openness of God. Essentially the Openness view of God teaches that He doesn't know the future, He makes mistakes, doesn't get angry at sin, and so on. This view of God is not new (liberals have held it for two centuries). What is new is its acceptance by undiscerning evangelical Christians. It seems that every few years another wave of teachers advertising a marvelous "new" theology assail the church. In the final analysis, however, their teachings aren't so new. They are the same old attacks on the biblical doctrines of God and Christ. Know such teachers by their fruit.

²⁴ As quoted in Hank Hannegraff, *Christianity in Crisis* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1992), 175.

²⁵ As quoted in Hannegraff, *Christianity in Crisis*, 108, 338, 110.

²⁶ Hannegraff, *Christianity in Crisis*, 109.

²⁷ Benny Hinn, in the sermon during which he announced the Trinity is actually made up of nine parts, not three, said "You say, 'I never heard of that.' Well, do you think you're in this church to hear things you've heard for the last fifty years?" (as quoted in Hannegraff, *Christianity in Crisis*, 124).

3) They Distort the Gospel

Have you ever been talking to a friend on his cell phone and suddenly distortion makes it sound like someone put his voice through an electronic eggbeater? Clear conversation turns into " *&@#%*#! " Unfortunately, false teachers do the same thing to the gospel. In fact, there are two primary ways that false teachers garble or distort the gospel. *First*, they add works to the obtaining of salvation. *Second*, they remove works from the results of salvation.

God's view of salvation is concisely stated in Ephesians 2:8-10.

For by grace you have been saved *through faith*; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; *not as a result of works*, so that no one may boast. For we are His workmanship, *created in Christ Jesus for good works*, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them (emphasis added).

Salvation is by grace through faith alone—no works. But as wrong as it is to add works to the *obtaining* of salvation, it is just as wrong to remove works from the *results* of God's salvation: "You were created in Christ Jesus for good works." False teachers attacked that biblical view of salvation all the time in the New Testament.

Some men came down from Judea and began teaching the brethren, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved."

(Acts 15:1)

The Apostles, of course, rejected that corrupt, works-based view of salvation. In Acts 15:11, Peter declared, "We believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus." Paul called "accursed" those who distorted the gospel of grace by adding works to the obtaining of salvation (Galatians 1:6-8). And he was confident that the Galatian believers would identify and reject the rotten doctrine-fruit of the false teacher.

I have confidence in you in the Lord that you will adopt no other view; but the one who is disturbing you will bear his judgment, whoever he is.

(Gal 5:10)

Equally problematic, however, were those who wanted to remove works from the *results* of salvation. Whole epistles of the New Testament were written to combat this error (1 John and James, for example).

By this we know that we have come to know Him, if we keep His commandments. The one who says, "I have come to know Him," and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him.

(1 John 2:3-4)

What use is it, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but he has no works? Can that faith save him? ...But are you willing to recognize, you foolish fellow, that faith without works is useless?

(James 2:14, 20)

A modern example of excluding Christ-produced works from the results of salvation is Zane Hodges. In his popular book *Absolutely Free*, Hodges argues that no change of lifestyle is necessary for one who becomes a Christian. Although the gospel call is to repent from sin (Acts 2:38; 3:19; 26:19-20), Hodges teaches that a person can become a Christian, yet live in an unrelenting pattern of wickedness. Even if the person embraces atheism, he will still go to heaven. That's not the teaching of the New Testament about salvation. True saving faith brings with it both a change in destiny and a growing change in deeds.

And everyone who has this hope fixed on Him purifies himself, just as He is pure...Make sure no one deceives you...the one who practices sin is of the devil.

(1 John 3:3, 7-8)

By this the children of God and the children of the devil are obvious: anyone who does not practice righteousness [i.e., habitual lifestyle] is not of God.

(1 John 3:10)

But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves.

(James 1:22)

Summary

According to the Apostle Paul, false teachers were rebellious, empty talkers, who taught things they should not. Jesus warned us to beware of such men; we will know them by their fruits. Their doctrinal fruits include the following:

1. They subtly demolish the truthfulness, trustworthiness, and sufficiency of Scripture; they also demote God's word by teaching human systems of wisdom in the church.
2. They deny crucial doctrines about God and Christ, often preposterously elevating men as divine or tragically degrading God and Christ to be little more than human.
3. They distort the gospel by adding works to obtaining salvation or by removing works from the God-produced results of salvation.

Know them by their fruits.

The Character of False Teachers

Practice and doctrine are the first two areas that expose false teachers for what they are. The third is *character*. There are many biblically identified character fruits of false teachers. Jeremiah said they have no shame when they are caught in their sin. Jude said they are grumblers and faultfinders. Paul added that they are boasters, desiring to be noticed by men. However, we'll limit ourselves to the three plumpest character fruits on the false teacher tree: 1) they are liars; 2) they follow their sensual desires—especially in regard to sex and money; 3) they are arrogant power-seekers.

1) They Are Liars

The first character or lifestyle fruit of false teachers is *lying*. As Christians, we expect truth-telling in the church. What you say is what you believe. What you see is what you get. False teachers don't live by those rules. They lie while assuring you of their sincerity with tears and oaths. Peter referred to this deceptiveness in 2 Peter 2:1, "[They] will secretly introduce destructive heresies." According to Paul, shameless lies roll off their forked tongues, polluting the church with demon-doctrines (1 Tim 4:1-2).

Robert Tilton, a prominent health, wealth, and prosperity teacher in the United States a few years ago personified this characteristic of false teachers. Tilton made his millions by promising healing to anyone who would write him a prayer request (and a cheque, of course). He claimed on his television show that he personally prayed over each of those requests. Journalists investigating his ministry, however, found that the envelopes were sent to the bank, where the cheques were extracted. Then, with their unread letters, the envelopes were deposited in the garbage dumpster behind Tilton's offices.

False teachers are slippery. They convince people with lies. When they get caught, they lie more. Don't be surprised when they do; the Bible makes it clear that deception is in their very character. They imitate their father, the devil, of whom Jesus said in John 8:44, "Whenever he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies."

For such men are false apostles, deceitful workers, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. No wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. Therefore it is not surprising if his servants also disguise themselves as servants of righteousness, whose end will be according to their deeds.

(2 Cor 11:13-15)

How can you discern the fakers, the satanic messengers dressed as servants of righteousness? By their deceitful lying. Their deeds won't be as righteous as they claim, therefore, they'll lie to

promote their image. However, eventually their lies will find them out. Then you'll know them by their fruit.

2) They Follow Their Sensual Desires—Especially in Regard to Sex and Money

Many will follow their sensuality, and because of them the way of the truth will be maligned.
(2 Pet 2:2)

Sensuality—a preoccupation with pleasure—is a primary characteristic of false teachers.²⁸ By definition, sheep-eating false teachers use their position as a Christian leader for personal gain. The first thing that many desire to gain is *sexual favours*. In 2 Peter 2:14, the Apostle described false teachers as "having eyes full of adultery that never cease from sin." The original language can actually be translated, "having eyes full of an *adulteress*..." Every time they see a woman, they view her as a potential sex partner.

Women especially need to beware of such wolfish false teachers. Beware of the lingering touch or look, the offer to counsel you without other people around. The vast majority of church leaders love God and have no desire to seek sexual fulfilment outside of marriage. However, if you don't sense that a Christian leader is working diligently to protect your sexual purity, then run for cover. He might be a false teacher on the prowl, looking for a female sheep to devour.

Besides sexual lust, a second area in which false teachers follow their sensual desires is in regard to *money*.

In their greed they will exploit you with false words...having a heart trained in greed.
(2 Pet 2:3, 14)

The word *greed* meant "a desire for more." Peter said false teachers have a heart thoroughly trained in lusting for more money. Biblical examples of this include the Pharisees whom Jesus accused of "devouring widows' houses" (Mark 12:40). In Titus 1:11, Paul spoke of men who taught "for sordid gain." In 1 Timothy 6:5, Paul exposed conceited religious crooks who viewed religion "as a means of gain." In contrast, he told Timothy to avoid the idea that Christian ministry was a way to get rich.

For the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil, and some by longing for it have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs. But flee from these things, you man of God...

(1 Tim 6:10-11a)

²⁸ As noted earlier, some false teachers (sheep-poisoners) teach deadly doctrine while living respectable lives. Sheep-eaters, however, rarely have such self-restraint.

Notice how Jesus addressed the money-hugging religious leaders of His era.

Now the Pharisees, who were lovers of money, were listening to all these things and were scoffing at Him. And He [Jesus] said to them, "You are those who justify yourselves in the sight of men, but God knows your hearts; for that which is highly esteemed among men is detestable in the sight of God.

(Luke 16:14-15)

God detests greedy, money-loving religious leaders. In spite of clear statements like that, money-intoxicated false teachers are recklessly supported by many Christians today. The health, wealth, and prosperity preachers of the Word-Faith movement are the clearest examples of this. They are preoccupied with one thing: money. You can tell; they talk about it all the time, and Jesus said, "The mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart." Their hearts, in fact, are "trained in greed" (2 Peter 2:14).

The following is from the foreword of Kenneth and Gloria Copeland's book, *Faith to Faith*.

It's been almost 25 years now since we first determined to live by faith... We've seen more victories than we can count. Spiritual victories. Physical victories. Financial victories. But it's important for you to know, those victories didn't come our way overnight. Our bank account didn't double the first time we jumped up and said, "My God meets my needs according to His riches in glory."²⁹

It's not hard to catch their point: If you persevere in what we did *long enough*, your bank account will eventually double too. That's loving money—a heart trained in greed teaching other hearts to imitate its sin. So much of the prosperity movement's teaching, with its adoration of getting more, is blatantly self-condemning. "For the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil" (1 Tim 6:10).

When getting money becomes the main object of Christianity, you've found a false teacher—a heart trained in greed. Jesus said, "You will know them by their fruits." A ministry that revolves around the love of money like the earth revolves around the sun is an easy fruit to spot. It's Greedianity, not Christianity.

New Dogs, Old Tricks

The Bible is so clear there is no excuse for failing to identify today's money-loving leaders as false teachers. In fact, not even the tricks used to exploit the unwary have changed from the biblical era. Ezekiel the prophet spoke of religious leaders in Judah who used their position to feed their greedy lust for money.

²⁹ Kenneth and Gloria Copeland, *Faith to Faith* (Fort Worth, Texas: Kenneth Copeland Publications, 1990), authors' Foreword.

There is a conspiracy of her prophets in her midst like a roaring lion tearing the prey. They have devoured lives; they have taken treasure and precious things.

(Ezek 22:25)

What trick did these ravenous religious leaders use to get people's "treasure and precious things"?

Her prophets have smeared whitewash for them, seeing false visions and divining lies for them, saying, "Thus says the Lord God," when the Lord has not spoken.

(Ezek 22:28)

These false religious leaders used claims of divine visions to deceive God's people into giving them money. The American televangelist Oral Roberts has given us an odious modern example of this. In January 1987, Roberts claimed that God gave him a vision in which God said that if Oral didn't raise eight million dollars in three months, God would take his life. That trick is as old as "Roll over," "Sit," and "Play dead." More than 2500 years ago, the false prophets of Judah whitewashed their treasure-grabbing by doing the same.

In a letter to his supporters, Roberts said, "God clearly told me he needs me here on earth." By sending a "seed" of only fifty dollars, supporters could contribute to keeping Oral alive. Oral's son, Richard, also sent out a letter saying, "When [Oral] says God speaks to him, he's not bluffing...Partner, we cannot let this man of God die. There is no reason for him to die." Then, to smear on the whitewash, Richard Roberts wrote, "I feel totally called by God to do this...I'm writing to you as an anointed servant of God—doing what God has called me to do."³⁰

How can you argue with that? Grab your cheque book and send your cash! What a tragic example of Peter's words: "In their greed they will exploit you with false words" (2 Peter 2:3a). It was exactly the same tactic Ezekiel identified so long ago: a false teacher using a "vision" to whitewash his greed and devour the gullible. New dogs, old tricks.

Since their own hearts are trained in greed, false teachers know exactly how to exploit the greed of their followers. One of their favourite ways to do that today is by teaching that Christian giving is for the purpose of getting massive wealth in return. Give R100 and get R10,000 back. Who can resist the lure of such easy money? The health-wealth teachers claim this hundred-fold principle is the key to wealth. It is—*their* wealth.

Meanwhile, the sheep grow thinner and thinner, eaten on the inside by greed, their livelihood devoured on the outside by false teachers. In the end somebody gets richer, rarely is it the sheep. "In their greed they will exploit you" (2 Peter 2:3). Peter might have said, "In their greed, the sheep will allow themselves to be exploited." Tragic, isn't it.

³⁰ As quoted in Hannegraff, *Christianity in Crisis*, 196-97.

Rather than flee the love of money as 1 Timothy 6:10-11 commanded, false teachers sanctify greed as a virtue and pursue it tirelessly. That preoccupation with money is an identifiable fruit of false teachers.

It might be sex, it might be money. In both cases, false teachers prey on God's people to feed the fire of their sensual desires. They prey on God's women to gratify their sexual lusts, while their greed-trained hearts pour out a flood of words about money, the god they really worship.

3) Arrogant Power-Seeking

[They] despise authority...speaking out arrogant words of vanity.

(2 Pet 2:10a, 18a)

The first way false teachers show their arrogant power-seeking is by despising human authority. In the eleventh verse of his New Testament letter, Jude compared false teachers to Korah—the man in Numbers 16 who made untrue accusations against Moses and Aaron in hopes of gaining political power for himself. Such political manoeuvring is typical of false teachers. They are jealous of others, refuse to submit to authority, and lust for positions of power.

However, according to Peter and Jude, the power-hungry character of false teachers is evidenced in an even bolder way: not how they act toward human beings, but how they act toward *angelic beings*.

[They] despise authority. Daring, self-willed, they do not tremble when they revile angelic majesties, whereas angels who are greater in might and power do not bring a reviling judgment against them before the Lord.

(2 Pet 2:10-11)

Yet in the same way these men, also by dreaming, defile the flesh, and reject authority, and revile angelic majesties. But Michael the archangel, when he disputed with the devil and argued about the body of Moses, did not dare pronounce against him a railing judgment, but said, "The Lord rebuke you!" But these men revile the things which they do not understand.

(Jude 8-10)

One of the most distinct marks of false teachers in the New Testament is their belligerent verbal attacks on angelic beings.³¹ The arrogant commanding of Satan and bossing of demons typifying many ministries today has only one parallel in the Bible: the statements of Peter and Jude condemning false teachers. What Peter and Jude marked as characteristic of false teachers is clearly reflected in this so-called prayer, suggested by an "expert" on spiritual warfare.

³¹ The Apostles had the power to cast out demons. Whether believers today are to do what the Apostles did is a separate issue all together. Casting out demons is never mentioned in the epistles of the New Testament. It was not part of normal New Testament church life.

In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ I resist all of Satan's activity to hold [John Smith] in blindness and darkness. Exercising my authority which is given to me in my union with the Lord Jesus Christ, I pull down the strongholds which the kingdom of darkness has formed against [John]. I smash and break and destroy all those plans formed against [John's] mind, his will, his emotions, and his body. I destroy in prayer the spiritual blindness and deafness that Satan keeps upon him.³²

The fact that the words, "in the name of Jesus," are added to these ravings fools no one: "/smash and break and destroy..." This "prayer" is an egotistical power trip, daring self-promotion, and arrogant power-seeking.

Daring, self-willed, they do not tremble when they revile angelic majesties.

(2 Pet 2:10)

Arrogant power-seeking is a character-fruit of false teachers that will be evident in their interactions with men. However, according to the New Testament, it will be even more evident in their attitudes toward Satan and demons. "You will know them by their fruits."

³² Mark Bubeck, *The Adversary* (Chicago: Moody, 1975), p. 106. As quoted in John MacArthur, *How to Meet the Enemy* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1992), 157.

Conclusion

True teachers of God's word are a priceless gift to the body of Christ. They strive to live godly, imitable lives. They teach pure, nourishing, biblical doctrine. They love God, not money. Like their Lord, they are here to serve, not to be served.

Unfortunately, not all leaders in the church are like that. In some cases, concealed under the sheepskin are a set of fangs and a voracious appetite. Sometimes the cup of truth they serve is not the "pure milk of the word" (1 Peter 2:2), but a defiled mixture of biblical truth and poisonous human speculations.

Jesus expects His followers to be able to distinguish between grapes and thorns, between figs and thistles. Whether they are *sheep-eaters* (those who prey on the flock with malicious motives) or *sheep-poisoners* (those who unwittingly teach deadly doctrine), their characteristic actions or doctrines expose them for what they are. Now that you know what to look for, you should be prepared to obey the Lord Jesus Christ by identifying and avoiding those God would call false.

☑ Checklist ☑

Typical **practices** of false teachers:

1. A lack of preaching against sin.
2. A deceptive claim to do miracles.
3. Prophecies that don't come true.
4. The use of lies to advance themselves and their doctrine.
5. Targeting the unstable and the worldly.
6. Ruling on their own authority rather than the Bible's.

Typical **doctrines** of false teachers:

1. They subtly attack the authority of Scripture, and demote it by teaching non-divine wisdom beside or over it.
2. They attack the biblical doctrines of God and Christ, often enthroning men and dethroning God.
3. They distort the gospel by adding works to obtaining salvation or by removing works from the results of salvation.

Typical **character** fruits of false teachers.

1. They are liars.
2. They follow their sensual desires—especially in regard to sex and money.
3. They are power-seekers, especially evidenced in their claims of authority over angelic beings.