

# A Prophet's Perspective About Preachers



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## Introduction

“An astonishing and horrible thing Has been committed in the land: The prophets prophesy falsely, And the priests rule by their *own* power; And My people love *to have it* so. But what will you do in the end?” Jeremiah 5:30-31

I'd like to share a tragedy with you that's going on right now in our land. It truly is “an astonishing and horrible thing.” Preachers are lying from the pulpit, religious leaders are ruling God's people in their own power and, sad to say, God's people love it that way.

Even though these are the words of God to Jeremiah the prophet more than 2,600 years ago, they may as well be God's words to the Church today. What a mess.

God has managed His household of faith in different ways through the centuries. He used prophets and priests in the Old Testament and bishops and elders in the New Testament. However, being called a prophet, priest, bishop or elder doesn't mean God is pleased with what they do. Here's why.

God is well aware how Satan gets involved with God's people and messes up things (e.g. Genesis 3), so God has been abundantly clear how His people can discern who are true prophets, priests, bishops and elders and who are not. God has given His people spiritual “tests” to discern the spiritual “source” of their service.

Let's look at "prophets" and "preachers" to see what tests we can use to discern the source behind their words and actions.

"If there arises among you a prophet or a dreamer of dreams, and he gives you a sign or a wonder, and the sign or the wonder comes to pass, of which he spoke to you, saying, 'Let us go after other gods'—which you have not known—'and let us serve them,' you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams, for the Lord your God is testing you to know whether you love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul. You shall walk after the Lord your God and fear Him, and keep His commandments and obey His voice; you shall serve Him and hold fast to Him. But that prophet or that dreamer of dreams shall be put to death, because he has spoken in order to turn *you* away from the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt and redeemed you from the house of bondage, to entice you from the way in which the Lord your God commanded you to walk. So you shall put away the evil from your midst."

Deuteronomy 13:1-5

"But the prophet who presumes to speak a word in My name, which I have not commanded him to speak, or who speaks in the name of other gods, that prophet shall die.' And if you say in your heart, 'How shall 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 happen or come to pass, that *is* the thing which the Lord has not spoken; the prophet has spoken it

presumptuously; you shall not be afraid of him.” Deuteronomy 18:20-22

“Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes from thornbushes or figs from thistles? Even so, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor *can* a bad tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Therefore by their fruits you will know them.” Matthew 7:15-20

“Then if anyone says to you, ‘Look, here *is* the Christ!’ or ‘There!’ do not believe *it*. For false christs and false prophets will rise and show great signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect. See, I have told you beforehand.” Matthew 24:23-25

“Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves. Therefore watch, and remember that for three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears.” Acts 20:28-31

“I marvel that you are turning away so soon from Him who called you in the grace of Christ, to a different gospel, which is not another; but there are some who trouble you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again, if anyone preaches any other gospel to you than what you have received, let him be accursed.” Galatians 1:6-9

“But there were also false prophets among the people, even as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Lord who bought them, *and* bring on themselves swift destruction. And many will follow their destructive ways, because of whom the way of truth will be blasphemed. By covetousness they will exploit you with deceptive words; for a long time their judgment has not been idle, and their destruction does not slumber.” 2 Peter 2:1-3

“Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world. By this you know the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, and every spirit that does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not of God. And this is the *spirit* of the Antichrist, which you have heard was coming, and is now already in the world.” 1 John 4:1-3

Let's start a list about how we can discern whether someone is a true or false prophet (preacher).

- If a prophet is able to give a sign or a wonder and the sign or the wonder comes to pass but the prophet calls you to go after other gods to serve them, do not listen to the words of that prophet because they are a false prophet.
- If a prophet speaks in the name of other gods, that prophet shall die because he is a false prophet.
- If a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord but the thing they say does not happen or come to pass, they are a false prophet.
- You will know false prophets by their fruits. A bad tree bears bad fruit and cannot bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.
- False prophets will rise and show great signs and wonders to deceive even the elect, but don't believe them. We've been warned.
- Spiritual wolves will attack the Church from outside and inside, not sparing the flock, speaking perverse things to draw away disciples after themselves. Overseer/shepherds in each church are responsible to God to protect Christians from the attacks. How? Standing strong, preaching truth and driving out the wolves. We've been warned.
- Paul said that false preachers call people to a gospel message that's different than the one he preached. Their purpose is to

- trouble you by perverting the Gospel of Christ. Even if a great preacher or even an angel from heaven preaches any other gospel to you than what Paul preached, let him be accursed (cut down and thrown into the fire).
- False preachers secretly bring destructive heresies into the Church, even denying the Lord who died on the Cross. Those false preachers bring on themselves swift destruction, but not before many people follow their destructive ways. The truth will be blasphemed because of them. These false teachers will exploit people with deceptive words and they will be destroyed (cut down and thrown into the fire).
  - Many false prophets have gone out into the world, so we need to be careful not to believe every spirit but instead test them to see whether they are of God. The test is this – “Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, and every spirit that does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not of God.” The spiritual source of the lying preacher is the spirit of the Antichrist.

God has made identifying a false prophet/false preacher fairly easy. All we have to do is open our eyes to see and ears to hear. The fact that we have a spiritual enemy is clear. God warned Israel and the Church about false prophets, so we should expect them to be actively involved in churches and religious organizations. The sad part to me is this: “And My people love *to have it so.*”

False prophets and religious leaders who rule by their own power was the norm in the years leading up to the destruction of Judah and Jerusalem. False preachers and religious leaders who rule by their own power is becoming the norm today – in the years leading up to the spiritual demise of our society.

If you compare some of the most famous preachers in the world today with the list about false prophets (above), you will find that many of them are false preachers. That's not hard to see. What is hard to see is that God's people "love to have it so." If you've ever wondered how the people of ancient Israel could have been fooled by false prophets, just look at the people of the modern Church. Millions are being fooled by the false prophets of the present. And they love it. "But what will you do in the end?"

I'll leave you with these words in Jeremiah about lying preachers. Sounds like something God may have told one of His prophets this morning.

"For from the least to the greatest of them, everyone is making profit dishonestly. From prophet to priest, everyone deals falsely. They have treated My people's brokenness superficially, claiming, 'Peace, peace,' when there is no peace. Were they ashamed when they acted so abhorrently? They weren't at all ashamed. They can no longer feel humiliation. Therefore, they will fall among the fallen. When I punish them, they will collapse, says the Lord." Jeremiah 6:13-15 HCSB

# Revealing False Preachers

There are two types of preachers in the world today, even as there were two types in centuries past: **true** and **false**. God is quite clear about how His people can know whether a preacher speaks truth or a lie. His standard is extremely high – to the degree that one false prophecy was grounds for death.

God has given His people an important protection against lying preachers. I think of it as a “spiritual filter.” Think about the many kinds of filters in your home, office and car: air filters, air conditioning filters, furnace filters, oil filters, gasoline filters, water filters, aquarium filters, electronic filters, vacuum filters, camera filters, lens filters, color filters, light filters.

What is the purpose of a filter? At its root a filter **discriminates**. A filter discriminates between what is wanted and what is not wanted. A filter also **removes**. A filter removes what is not wanted. A filter also **reveals**. A filter reveals what is not wanted. What do you see when you check a filter? If the filter is working as it should, you should see what you don't want. You should be able to hold the filter in your hands, look at the waste material you do not want, then dispose of it so that it never poses a threat to you again; whether it's a threat to your health or house or car or anything else you own.

Most people give little thought to the importance of filters in their lives, but what if we did not have filters? What if we did not discriminate

against pollutants and toxins? What would happen to the health and wellbeing of our families and friends if we did filter dangerous elements from our air, water and food supplies? We would become sick and possibly die. That's how important filters are in life.

With those three things in mind – filters **discriminate**, **remove** and **reveal** – let's look again at what God tells His people about preachers.

Look up the words “discriminate” and “discrimination” in modern dictionaries and you'll see this:

- to unfairly treat a person or group of people differently from other people or groups (Merriam-Webster)
- treatment or consideration of, or making a distinction in favor of or against, a person or thing based on the group class, or category to which that person or thing belongs rather than on individual merit: racial and religious intolerance and discrimination (Dictionary.Reference)
- unfair treatment of a person, racial group, minority, etc; action based on prejudice (Word English Dictionary)
- to single out a particular person, group, etc, for special favour or, esp, disfavour, often because of a characteristic such as race, colour, sex, intelligence, etc. (Collins English Dictionary)
- to make a distinction in favor of or against a person on the basis of the group or class to which the person belongs, rather than according to merit (Random House Kernerman Webster's

College Dictionary)

- action that denies social participation or human rights to categories of people based on prejudice. This includes treatment of an individual or group based on their actual or perceived membership in a certain group or social category, “in a way that is worse than the way people are usually treated” (Wikipedia)
- unfair treatment of one person or group, usually because of prejudice about race, ethnicity, age, religion, or gender
- the unjust or prejudicial treatment of different categories of people or things, especially on the grounds of race, age, or sex: ‘victims of racial discrimination,’ ‘discrimination against homosexuals (Oxford Dictionary).

Interestingly, the Webster’s Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary of 1991 defines the word “discriminate” as – “to mark or perceive the distinguishing or peculiar features, to distinguish by discerning or exposing differences, to distinguish from another like object, to make a distinction, to use good judgment.” It is not until the last definition in the 1991 version that we read – “to make a difference in treatment or favor on a basis other than individual merit.” Webster’s Ninth defines the word “discrimination” as “the act of discriminating, the process by which two stimuli differing in some aspect are responded to differently, the quality or power of finely distinguishing.” It is a later definition in the 1991 version that we read – “the act, practice, or an instance of discriminating categorically rather than individually, prejudiced or prejudicial outlook, action or treatment.”

Modern synonyms for discriminate and discrimination include: bigotry, favoritism, hatred, inequity, injustice, intolerance, prejudice, unfairness, partiality, and wrong (Thesaurus.com). The 1988 version of Roget's II New Thesaurus lists these synonyms for "discrimination" – refinement, selectiveness, selectivity.

I began studying for a career in journalism almost 50 years ago. Most of the words I learned in the mid-1960s held their meaning until the end of the 20th century. It has been in the last 15 years that many words have taken on new meanings in both journalism and common use. The ability to discriminate between things or ideas used to be held in high esteem. However, the word has taken on a negative connotation in the last decade and a half.

The English words "discriminate" and "discrimination" were first used in the 17th century AD and came from the Latin word *discretus* (to distinguish). The original meaning of distinguishing between things is still the correct definition, even though the 21st century concept has changed the word from a positive skill for recognizing differences to the negative attitude and behavior of prejudice.

The ancient Greeks used several words to express the idea of discrimination, perception or discernment. They viewed the idea of discernment and discrimination as important in their search for wisdom and truth. Let's see how God has directed His people to discriminate and discern.

*Aisthesis* (perception, discernment, understanding, cognition) -

“And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in knowledge and all discernment, that you may approve the things that are excellent, that you may be sincere and without offense till the day of Christ, being filled with the fruits of righteousness which *are* by Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.” Philippians 1:9-11

*Anakrino* (to distinguish, to judge, separate out so as to investigate, examine, scrutinize, question) -

“Then the brethren immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea. When they arrived, they went into the synagogue of the Jews. These were more fair-minded than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily *to find out* whether these things were so. Therefore many of them believed, and also not a few of the Greeks, prominent women as well as men.” Acts 17:10-12

“These things we also speak, not in words which man’s wisdom teaches but which the Holy Spirit teaches, comparing spiritual things with spiritual. But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know *them*, because they are spiritually discerned. But he who is spiritual judges all things, yet he himself is *rightly* judged by no one. For ‘who has known the mind of the Lord that he may instruct Him?’ But we have the mind of

Christ.” 1 Corinthians 2:13-16

*Diakrino/Diakrisis* (to separate, a clear discrimination, a distinguishing, to determine, decide, discern) -

“There are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are differences of ministries, but the same Lord. And there are diversities of activities, but it is the same God who works all in all. But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to each one for the profit *of all*: for to one is given the word of wisdom through the Spirit, to another the word of knowledge through the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healings by the same Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another discerning of spirits, to another *different* kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. But one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually as He wills.” 1 Corinthians 12:4-11

“For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need *someone* to teach you again the first principles of the oracles of God; and you have come to need milk and not solid food. For everyone who partakes *only* of milk *is* unskilled in the word of righteousness, for he is a babe. But solid food belongs to those who are of full age, *that is*, those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil.” Hebrews 5:12-14

*Kritikos* (critical, ability to judge or discern, that which relates to judging) -

“Let us therefore be diligent to enter that rest, lest anyone fall according to the same example of disobedience. For the word of God *is* living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart. And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things *are* naked and open to the eyes of Him to whom we *must give* account.” Hebrews 4:11-13

Do you see it? God calls on His people to look to His Word and to spiritually gifted people committed 100% to His Word to be a “filters” concerning preachers and teachers. God calls on His people to exercise their senses to “discern both good and evil.” He gives the spiritual gift of “discernment” to His people for the purpose of being able to tell what kind of “spirit” is behind the preaching of the preacher and teaching of the teacher. God wants His people to compare spiritual things with spiritual in order to discern whether the words of the preacher are the teaching of a man or the teaching of the Holy Spirit. God wants His people to be able to use His Word to divide soul and spirit, joints and marrow, and discern the thoughts and intents of the preacher’s heart.

The process of spiritual “filtering” (discriminate, remove and reveal) should happen in a Christian’s local church. If you are fortunate enough to have preachers or teachers in your local church with the gift of discernment and skill of filtering out false doctrine, thank the Lord and take every advantage of learning from them.

# The Enemy of Truth

“Lying lips *are* an abomination to the Lord, But those who deal truthfully *are* His delight.” Proverbs 12:22

God does not want His children to believe anything that’s not true. Truth is the centerpiece of the Christian worldview. Truth is what sets people free from wrong thoughts, beliefs and actions (John 8:32). God’s Son came to earth from Heaven filled with “grace and truth” (John 1:14-17). Jesus said that true worshippers of God will worship Him “in spirit and truth” (John 4:23-24). Jesus said He is the “truth” (John 14:6). Jesus said that the Holy Spirit who lives in Christians is the “Spirit of truth” (John 14:17). Jesus prayed to His Father before going to the Cross and asked Him to sanctify believers by His truth, identifying that truth as God’s Word (John 17:17).

However, Christianity has a powerful enemy who does not want God’s children to know or believe the truth. As Jesus reminded us about the enemy – “You are of *your* father the devil, and the desires of your father you want to do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own *resources*, for he is a liar and the father of it.” (John 8:44)

Satan does not stand in the truth because there is no truth in him. That also goes for people who say they are speaking for God, but are really speaking for Satan. As harsh as that sounds to say someone

who claims the name of Christ is really speaking for Satan, that is the truth.

We've seen God's warnings to His children about false preachers and teachers. We've seen God's methods for discerning false preachers and teachers. Now it's time to learn **how** to use those warnings and methods to guide and protect us from the lies of Satan.

“Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of My pasture!” says the Lord.” Jeremiah 23:1

The warnings and methods become a **grid** we can use to give us an accurate view of any preaching and teaching. That includes what we read, hear and see from anyone who claims to be speaking for God.

## What

The “what” grid looks at the **words** and **meaning** of what preachers and teachers say and write. Keep in mind God's warnings about false prophets and teachers and the methods He has given us to discern what is true and what is false. Jesus is Truth. Everything Jesus has said is true. Jesus' words in the Gospels are important to understand because in them we have truth. Jesus sent His Spirit to speak through His Apostles, so we can believe what they said and wrote. Everything God says is true **is true**. Everything God says is false **is false**. That's an **absolute** we must trust if we're going to be successful identifying true and false preachers and teachers. If we

allow ourselves to be pulled into the *cult of personality* (e.g. but he's such a nice young man, he sounds so sincere, he has a lovely family, he preaches with such authority), we will miss what's true or false because of the pretty face and pleasing manner.

Compare “what” Jesus and the apostles said to “what” preachers and teachers say. Are they really saying the same thing? Remember what Satan did to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden? Read Genesis 3:1-7 as many times as you need to understand how Satan works because Satan is the spiritual power behind false preaching and teaching. Satan's lies often begin with what appears to be an innocent question – “Has God indeed said, ‘You shall not eat of every tree of the garden’?” As we know now, that question was filled with evil intent. Satan cast a little doubt about what God said before launching into the full attack – “You will not surely die. For God knows that in the day you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” If alarm bells had sounded for Adam or Eve with Satan's first statement, they might have done better when the big attack came. We can learn from the mistakes of our first ancestors.

“For both prophet and priest are profane; Yes, in My house I have found their wickedness,’ says the Lord.” Jeremiah 23:11

## Why

The “why” grid looks at the **reasons** preachers and teachers speak and write. This may seem like the harder of the two, but God has given Christians the basic tools for discerning the motives of preachers and teachers. We have God’s Word, which is true, and God’s Spirit, who is true. The Spirit of God is the true Author of Scriptures (e.g. 2 Timothy 3:16-17) and we know the Spirit is true, so the Holy Spirit will not say one thing in Scripture and another thing through a preacher. Knowing what’s true will help us filter out what’s false.

Compare “why” Jesus and the apostles said what they said to “why” preachers and teachers say what they say. What’s the real reason they’re preachers/teachers? Are they in it for the prestige? the power? the position? the money? the influence? the control? Or are they preaching/teaching because God’s Word is burning in their hearts and minds and they cannot be silent until everyone hears the Gospel of Jesus Christ? If they could no longer preach or teach for some physical reason, why would they miss it? Because of the money? Because of the influence? Because of the power and prestige? or because the fire would still be burning in their hearts and they couldn’t fulfill God’s calling on their lives? The “why” is at least as important as the “what” as you distinguish between true and false preachers/teachers.

“I have seen a horrible thing in the prophets of Jerusalem: They commit adultery and walk in lies; They also strengthen the hands of evildoers, So that no one turns back from his wickedness. All of them are like Sodom to Me, And her inhabitants like Gomorrah.” Jeremiah 23:14

## Spiritual Filters

So, we’re looking into “what” a preacher or teacher says and “why” they say it. Remember the importance of having **spiritual filters** available to help you discern the preaching message so you can distinguish between what’s true and what’s false.

The first and most important filter is to – “Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.” (2 Timothy 2:15). An important aspect of Rightly dividing the Word of Truth means studying God’s Word to the point you can **discern** what’s true and what’s false. It’s the skill of knowing how to observe, question, interpret, evaluate, apply and correlate Scripture. It’s interesting that just before Paul wrote about rightly dividing the Word of Truth, he wrote this –

“Remember that Jesus Christ, of the seed of David, was raised from the dead according to my gospel, for which I suffer trouble as an evildoer, *even* to the point of chains; but the word of God is not chained. Therefore I endure all things for the sake of the elect, that they also may obtain the salvation which is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory. *This is* a faithful saying: For if we died

with *Him*, We shall also live with *Him*. If we endure, We shall also reign with *Him*. If we deny *Him*, He also will deny us. If we are faithless, He remains faithful; He cannot deny Himself. Remind *them* of these things, charging *them* before the Lord not to strive about words to no profit, to the ruin of the hearers. Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth." 2 Timothy 2:8-15

Right division of the Word of God will cost preachers of the Gospel something. It may not be prison, but there will be a cost. They may even "suffer trouble" as an evildoer. Preachers of truth stand out in an unsaved world, often to the detriment of their lifestyle. Paul's message is clear that preaching the truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ will include enduring for the sake of God's people.

God's Word is clear that Christians should be able to teach others Truth.

"Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, *even* to the end of the age." Amen." Matthew 28:19-20

"For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need *someone* to teach you again the first principles of the oracles of God; and you have come to need milk and not solid

food. For everyone who partakes *only* of milk *is* unskilled in the word of righteousness, for he is a babe. But solid food belongs to those who are of full age, *that is*, those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil.”

Hebrews 5:12-14

Notice that handling God’s Word correctly is a **skill**. Christians who partake only the “milk” (i.e. baby’s food) of the Word and not solid food (i.e. adult’s food) are “unskilled in the word of righteousness, for he is a babe.” Solid food is for Christians who are of full spiritual age who have used the Word to the point that their spiritual senses are “exercised to discern both good and evil.” There’s that word “discern” again and what are mature Christians discerning? “both good and evil.” Truth and lies.

“Do not listen to the words of the prophets who prophesy to you. They make you worthless; They speak a vision of their own heart, Not from the mouth of the Lord.” Jeremiah 23:16

## Preachers in Local Churches

The writer of Hebrews shared an interesting starting point for discerning whether preachers in churches are preaching truth or a lie; he called it “the first principles of the oracles of God.” First principles are *stoicheia tes arches* – “rudiments of the beginning” – and speak to those things that are first in order of what people learn in order to know something. In the case of being a Christian, there are certain principles that come first. When the Philippian jailer asked Paul and Silas what he had to do to be saved, they answered – “Believe on the

Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved, you and your household.” (Acts 16:31) Faith in Christ is a “first principle.” However, as necessary as that knowledge is in order to be saved, does God want us to stay there for the rest of our lives or move deeper in our knowledge and relationship with Him? Yes, He wants us to go deep.

In the context of Hebrews 5:12, the writer was addressing the qualifications for high priesthood, demonstrating that only Jesus was qualified. In verse 11, the writer wrote this – “of whom we have much to say, and hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing.” The next sentence, verse 12, is – “For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need *someone* to teach you again the first principles of the oracles of God; and you have come to need milk and not solid food.” The writer wanted to take his readers deeper into spiritual insights concerning Christ, but he couldn't because the people were “dull of hearing.” That is a real problem in churches today, even as it was almost 2,000 years ago.

“I have not sent these prophets, yet they ran. I have not spoken to them, yet they prophesied. But if they had stood in My counsel, And had caused My people to hear My words, Then they would have turned them from their evil way And from the evil of their doings.” Jeremiah 23:21-22

Here are some questions for you as you attend a local church:

- Do the preachers and teachers present the “first principles” of the faith and is their preaching/teaching consistent with what you know to be the first principles of the Gospel of Jesus Christ?
- Do the preachers and teachers present anything deeper than the first principles? If so, would you call what they preach/teach the “whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27) or only parts of it? If only parts, what parts? Why those parts and not the whole?
- Do the preachers and teachers present the Word of God in a humble way or exalted way? If humbly, is it real or just a role they play? If proudly, how do they explain their pride? (Read Matthew 23 to see what Jesus thinks about that.)

I’m spending more time here than anywhere else in this article because local church preachers and teachers are supposed to be the protectors of God’s people (e.g. Acts 20:25-31). If you are blessed to have preachers/teachers in your local church who rightly divide the Word of Truth and are preaching/teaching for the right reasons, you can go to them about any spiritual concern. Righteous preachers/teachers are great “spiritual filters” for Christians because they are usually available and willing to help members of their flock. They know that God has called them to protect the flock and they take that call seriously.

People who preach the “truth” for the “right reason” don’t mind being questioned about what they believe. In fact, they love it when church

members want to talk about a sermon or lesson afterward. It's so rare these days. However, people who preach lies or preach for the wrong reason don't want anyone to question their preaching. They want to be praised and lifted up for their preaching. However, if anyone dares to question them about their preaching they become both defensive and offensive. They will defend themselves and attack the questioner.

Here's more wisdom from God's Word. This clarifies the kind of teaching God does not want in His Church and how He wants Christians to handle it.

“Let as many bondservants as are under the yoke count their own masters worthy of all honor, so that the name of God and *His* doctrine may not be blasphemed. And those who have believing masters, let them not despise *them* because they are brethren, but rather serve *them* because those who are benefited are believers and beloved. Teach and exhort these things. If anyone teaches otherwise and does not consent to wholesome words, *even* the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the doctrine which accords with godliness, he is proud, knowing nothing, but is obsessed with disputes and arguments over words, from which come envy, strife, reviling, evil suspicions, useless wranglings of men of corrupt minds and destitute of the truth, who suppose that godliness is a *means of* gain. From such withdraw yourself.” 1 Timothy 6:1-5

**Recommendation:** be kind and respectful when questioning your pastor or other preacher/teacher after a sermon/lesson. If you have a general question about something a preacher says in your church, ask away. However, if the discussion may lean toward the negative or you know your question is going to be tough and possibly embarrassing for the preacher, ask to meet with him privately.

**Recommendation:** if you are going to question a preacher/teacher about what may be his false teaching, discuss it with someone in the church you trust. If they agree that the preaching/teaching may be false, ask them to be with you when you meet with the preacher/teacher.

**Recommendation:** if you have talked with the preacher/teacher in your church about the false teaching and they won't stop teaching false doctrine, seek wisdom about taking the problem to church leadership. I say seek wisdom because a history of false teaching/preaching in a church often means other leaders have been infected by lies. Once you begin pulling off layers of false teaching in a church, you may be shocked to see how deep it goes. Remember that the Bible often describes false preachers and teachers as wolves in sheep's clothing. It's just common sense that you approach a wolf differently than you approach a sheep.

Some false preaching/teaching in churches is because the preachers/teachers lack knowledge about a particular spiritual truth. Sharing the truth with them in love can open their eyes to it and lead them to rightly dividing the Word of Truth. Since preachers/teachers

have such a wide influence because of their speaking and writing, helping some see the error in their preaching can have a positive impact on many people.

However, some false preaching/teaching in churches is because it's coming from the mouths of false preachers and false teachers. Sharing the truth with them in love will become a battleground. The only way to prepare for that battle is to get ready for it.

**Recommendation:** if you are going to wage spiritual warfare in your church about false preaching and teaching, be sure you're ready for the battle. Learn about spiritual warfare by looking to the great warriors of the Bible for guidance (e.g. Moses, King David, Jesus, Peter, Paul). Read Ephesians 6:10-18 many times and think about how you will use each aspect of the armor of God as you take on false preaching and teaching in your church. Many Christians have been deeply wounded in such battles, but it's worth the scars if God sends you into that battle. Also, be ready to withdraw yourself from the false preacher/teacher. That's tough to do, but necessary to protect the flock and the integrity of the preaching in the church. The way many churches are governed today, withdrawing yourself from the false preaching may mean withdrawing from the church. That's really tough to do, but necessary.

I'm reminded what Paul wrote Timothy: "O Timothy! Guard what was committed to your trust, avoiding the profane *and* idle babblings and contradictions of what is falsely called knowledge— by professing it

some have strayed concerning the faith. Grace *be* with you. Amen.”  
(1 Timothy 6:20-21)

What about local church preachers who lead their flock to spend millions of dollars to build great edifices for themselves? Should that concern you as a member of that church? Look at the prophet’s perspective.

“Woe to him who builds his house by unrighteousness And his chambers by injustice, *Who* uses his neighbor’s service without wages And gives him nothing for his work, Who says, ‘I will build myself a wide house with spacious chambers, And cut out windows for it, Paneling *it* with cedar And painting *it* with vermilion.’ ‘Shall you reign because you enclose *yourself* in cedar? Did not your father eat and drink, And do justice and righteousness? Then *it was* well with him. He judged the cause of the poor and needy; Then *it was* well. *Was* not this knowing Me?’ says the Lord. ‘Yet your eyes and your heart *are* for nothing but your covetousness, For shedding innocent blood, And practicing oppression and violence.” Jeremiah 22:13-17

Do you see God’s heart in those verses? “Was not this knowing Me?’ says the Lord.” This is an excellent example of right prophetic preaching. It’s in the specific context of God’s message to the sons of King Josiah and the larger context of God’s message to the leaders of Judah. One of the great reasons to read, study and use the words of the Old Testament prophets is that God revealed Himself to His

people. God has a big heart for doing justice and righteousness and judging the cause of the poor and the needy. Anything that takes away from what God wants generally falls into the areas of covetousness, shedding of innocent blood (e.g. ravaging the flock of God), practicing oppression and all kinds of violence.

**Recommendation:** if your church considers a building project or any other large expenditure of money that appears to be contrary to God's heart, share your concerns with people you trust as spiritual filters in the church. God may use you to bring to light a wrong purpose in spending money on things other than what God wants.

“I have heard what the prophets have said who prophesy lies in My name, saying, ‘I have dreamed, I have dreamed!’ How long will *this* be in the heart of the prophets who prophesy lies? Indeed *they are* prophets of the deceit of their own heart, who try to make My people forget My name by their dreams which everyone tells his neighbor, as their fathers forgot My name for Baal.” Jeremiah 23:25-27

## Preachers in Conferences

Preachers in conferences include people who preach at any conference, seminar, Bible study or other location outside a local church. One of the dangers of preachers and teachers outside the local church is that unless you know how to use God's Word as a spiritual filter for false preaching or are attending the conference with someone who can be a spiritual filter, you may not recognize the

subtitles of the false preaching. Remember Satan and how subtle he was with Eve in the Garden? “Has God indeed said, ‘You shall not eat of every tree of the garden?’” That happens in conferences and other meetings held outside of the local church all too often.

**Recommendation:** ask a couple of people you trust as a spiritual filter about attending a particular conference, seminar, Bible study or other type of meeting outside of your local church. Ask them what they think about the speakers, the theme, the doctrinal position of the conference leaders, the history of the conference, etc. If they don’t think you should attend but you decide to go anyway, ask them what you should be aware of during the conference. Meet with your spiritual filters after the conference and debrief them about what you saw and heard. Ask them to help you distinguish between truth and lies.

**Recommendation:** be careful about falling under the spell of the cult of personality before, during or after attending a conference. Remember Genesis 3:1 – “Now the serpent was more cunning than any beast of the field which the Lord God had made.” False preachers and teachers are cunning. They follow after their “master” who is cunning, crafty (e.g. 2 Corinthians 11:3; Ephesians 6:11), a liar (John 8:44), and able to transform himself into an angel of light (e.g. 2 Corinthians 11:14).

The key to trusting any preaching is to ensure that it holds fast to the pattern of “sound words” that the Holy Spirit authored through the prophets and apostles (e.g. 2 Timothy 1:13-14).

“The prophet who has a dream, let him tell a dream; And he who has My word, let him speak My word faithfully.” Jeremiah 23:28

## Preachers in Denominations

Preachers in denominations include people who are leaders and speakers in denominational meetings. This is preaching in the local church and in conferences to an even larger scale. You may never attend a denominational meeting and you may never hear a denominational leader preach or teach, but be certain of the fact that what denominational leaders believe and preach affects your local church, which means it affects you.

**Recommendation:** learn as much as you can about your church's denomination. Talk with people in your church you can trust as spiritual filters to help you learn about the denomination and how much of an impact it has on the beliefs and practices of your church. If you get the opportunity, attend a regional, state or national denominational meeting. Use your spiritual filters to discern what's happening in the denomination and where leaders want to take it.

**Recommendation:** if you discover false teaching in your denomination, discuss it with trusted people in your church to see what can be done to let the denomination know about your concerns. If local church leaders cannot recognize false teaching in their denomination, agree with the false teaching or don't want to address the false teaching, ask God what He would have you do. Remember,

God would have you do whatever He's already instructed His people in the Bible to do about false teaching. He won't ask you to do less or something different than what He's already said.

## Preachers in Writing

Preachers in writing include people who write from a Christian perspective in books, magazines and other printed materials. The number of words being written by religious writers today is amazing. I saw a statistic several years ago that there were more than six-million Christian books in print at the time. The estimate for the number of Christian magazines is in the thousands. That's a lot of words and with many words comes the real potential for false teaching cloaked in a covering of truth.

“Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. Therefore do not be partakers with them.”

Ephesians 5:6-7

**Recommendation:** if you are unfamiliar with a particular author, ask people you trust as spiritual filters if they know about the author and the book. Heed any warnings they share with you about the author or book. If they are not familiar with the author or book, do some research online to learn more about the person.

**Recommendation:** if you're reading a book and something the author wrote doesn't seem right to you, check with people you trust to see what they think about it. It is easier than you may imagine to be

deceived by a persuasive writer. Remember Satan's subtitles.

“For I want you to know what a great conflict I have for you and those in Laodicea, and *for* as many as have not seen my face in the flesh, that their hearts may be encouraged, being knit together in love, and *attaining* to all riches of the full assurance of understanding, to the knowledge of the mystery of God, both of the Father and of Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. Now this I say lest anyone should deceive you with persuasive words. For though I am absent in the flesh, yet I am with you in spirit, rejoicing to see your *good* order and the steadfastness of your faith in Christ. As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him, rooted and built up in Him and established in the faith, as you have been taught, abounding in it with thanksgiving. Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles of the world, and not according to Christ. For in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily; and you are complete in Him, who is the head of all principality and power.” Colossians 2:1-9

The slick cover of a magazine or great design of a book cover does not ensure that the words inside are true. Beware of many words.

## Preachers in Broadcast

“Therefore behold, I *am* against the prophets,” says the Lord, “who steal My words every one from his neighbor. Behold, I *am* against the prophets,’ says the Lord, ‘who use their tongues and say, ‘He says.’ Behold, I *am* against those who prophesy false dreams,’ says the Lord, ‘and tell them, and cause My people to err by their lies and by their recklessness. Yet I did not send them or command them; therefore they shall not profit this people at all,’ says the Lord.” Jeremiah 23:30-32

Preachers in broadcast include people who preach on radio and television. Media preaching and teaching is one of the most “unfiltered” types of preaching because it comes into your home and attempts to control some of your most susceptible senses: sight and sound.

I spent more than 40 years in broadcasting and helped many preachers begin radio and television ministries. I also worked for a religious radio station and became familiar with some of the big names in religious broadcasting in the early 1970s. I listened to their programs, read the material they sent to the station about each broadcast and talked with some of the broadcasters and their producers. I was a young Christian at the time and quickly became aware that religious people were often saying different things about the same verses in the Bible. I took advantage of the spiritual filters in my life and they helped me distinguish between true and false prophets as I was becoming more skillful in discerning false

preaching.

“Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves.” Matthew 7:15

Radio and television are two of the most powerful mass communication technologies ever developed. Satan knows that and has used both for his purposes for decades. The devil has also been involved in religious broadcasting. Some of the most popular radio and TV preachers have been and are false preachers and teachers. How do we know? By using the same spiritual filters listed in this study.

**Recommendation:** if you listen to religious radio or television, be careful. Slick productions do not guarantee truth. Religious radio and television programs are extremely expensive to produce and the cost of airtime can be in the millions of dollars each year. In addition to those costs are the expenses of running the broadcast ministry – including salaries for preachers and staff. Many famous broadcast preachers receive multi-million dollar salaries, along with their ministry buying them houses, cars, planes, vacations, clothing, entertainment, etc. Some of the most popular television ministries bring in donations of more than 100-million dollars a year. How do they spend those tax-deductible gifts from their supporters? Do they spend their money and possessions in ways that are evidence that they follow the teachings of Jesus Christ and His Apostles? Are the broadcast preachers accountable to anyone? Yes, they are

accountable to Almighty God.

**Recommendation:** if you listen to religious radio or television programs, talk with a trusted spiritual filter about who you listen to or watch. If you still want to listen or watch, check carefully both the message and the messenger. What is he/she saying and why does he/she say it? Do God's servants need to live in multi-million dollar mansions, own multi-million dollar planes and a fleet of expensive automobiles, spend tens of thousands of dollars a day to wine and dine family and friends, spend hundreds of thousands of dollars on vacations, and buy the most expensive clothing, furniture and electronics money can buy? Especially when the money they're spending comes from a lot of people just trying to keep a roof over their heads, food in their bellies and clothes on their backs? I also find it interesting that some of these religious broadcasters who want to have as much "stuff" and conveniences as they can in life are also preaching false doctrine. Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing.

"If anyone teaches otherwise and does not consent to wholesome words, *even* the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the doctrine which accords with godliness, he is proud, knowing nothing, but is obsessed with disputes and arguments over words, from which come envy, strife, reviling, evil suspicions, useless wranglings of men of corrupt minds and destitute of the truth, who suppose that godliness is a *means of gain*. From such withdraw yourself. Now godliness with

contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into *this* world, *and it is* certain we can carry nothing out. And having food and clothing, with these we shall be content. But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and *into* many foolish and harmful lusts which drown men in destruction and perdition. For the love of money is a root of all *kinds of* evil, for which some have strayed from the faith in their greediness, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows. But you, O man of God, flee these things and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, gentleness. Fight the good fight of faith, lay hold on eternal life, to which you were also called and have confessed the good confession in the presence of many witnesses. I urge you in the sight of God who gives life to all things, and *before* Christ Jesus who witnessed the good confession before Pontius Pilate, that you keep *this* commandment without spot, blameless until our Lord Jesus Christ's appearing, which He will manifest in His own time, *He who is* the blessed and only Potentate, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone has immortality, dwelling in unapproachable light, whom no man has seen or can see, to whom *be* honor and everlasting power. Amen. Command those who are rich in this present age not to be haughty, nor to trust in uncertain riches but in the living God, who gives us richly all things to enjoy. *Let them* do good, that they be rich in good works, ready to give, willing to share, storing up for themselves a good foundation for the time to come, that they may lay hold

on eternal life.” 1 Timothy 6:1-19

Compare the lifestyle of preachers and teachers with the lifestyles of Jesus during His time on earth and of His Apostles and what they said about money and other treasures. Their lifestyle and words are windows into their true intent.

“Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. Many will say to Me in that day, ‘Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?’ And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!’” Matthew 7:21-23

## Preachers in New Media

Preachers in new media include people who preach online through blogs, social media (e.g. Facebook, Google+, Twitter), podcasts and videos (e.g. YouTube, Vimeo). This new media does not yet bring in as much money as the old media (e.g. radio, television), but the dangers of false preaching are still there. New Media have the potential of earning even more money than the old media, so be certain that false teachers will abound.

**Recommendation:** if you are following, liking, re-tweeting, or sharing any new media preachers, talk with your spiritual filters about that. Be on the lookout for the same subtiles of false doctrine you’ve learned to discern in all of the other kinds of preaching.

“These are wells without water, clouds carried by a tempest, for whom is reserved the blackness of darkness forever. For when they speak great swelling *words* of emptiness, they allure through the lusts of the flesh, through lewdness, the ones who have actually escaped from those who live in error. While they promise them liberty, they themselves are slaves of corruption; for by whom a person is overcome, by him also he is brought into bondage. For if, after they have escaped the pollutions of the world through the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and overcome, the latter end is worse for them than the beginning. For it would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known *it*, to turn from the holy commandment delivered to them. But it has happened to them according to the true proverb: ‘A dog returns to his own vomit,’ and, ‘a sow, having washed, to her wallowing in the mire.’” 2 Peter 2:17-22

We could say more about this, and may in the future, but please be careful. God did not spend so much time on so many words of warning about false preaching and teaching so that we could ignore Him. God loves you and wants what's best for you. He knows how devastating the lies of Satan can be and is sharing these truths with you to protect you from the devil and guide you into the light.

“And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their

deeds were evil. For everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. But he who does the truth comes to the light, that his deeds may be clearly seen, that they have been done in God.”

John 3:19-21

## The Danger of Lies

“For the house of Israel and the house of Judah Have dealt very treacherously with Me,’ says the Lord. They have lied about the Lord, And said, ‘*It is not He*. Neither will evil come upon us, Nor shall we see sword or famine. And the prophets become wind, For the word *is not* in them. Thus shall it be done to them.” Jeremiah 5:11-13

The lies of false preachers are so devious and treacherous that even true preachers can fall prey to their lies. How can that possibly happen when we know so much about false preaching and teaching from God’s Word? Shouldn’t church leaders be wise enough to know when someone is trying to ensnare and trap them?

“For among My people are found wicked *men*; They lie in wait as one who sets snares; They set a trap; They catch men. As a cage is full of birds, So their houses *are* full of deceit. Therefore they have become great and grown rich. They have grown fat, they are sleek; Yes, they surpass the deeds of the wicked; They do not plead the cause, The cause of the fatherless; Yet they prosper, And the right of the needy they do not defend. Shall I not punish *them* for these *things*?’ says the Lord. ‘Shall I not avenge Myself on such a nation as this?’ ‘An astonishing and horrible thing Has been committed in the

land: The prophets prophesy falsely, And the priests rule by their *own* power; And My people love *to have it* so. But what will you do in the end?" Jeremiah 5:26-31

So far, we have looked at **what** false preachers preach and **why** they preach it. We looked at how to discern false preaching and teaching in local churches, conferences, denominations, writing (e.g. articles, books), radio and television, and new media (e.g. social media, blogs, online videos). Once you become adept at discerning false preachers and teachers, you will find that distinguishing between truth and lies is something you can do with the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Unfortunately, there is one more thing we **must** consider and that's how good preachers and teachers are "caught and trapped" by false preachers and teachers. While it is sad to see good men trapped by "wicked men," it is even sadder to see how many trusting Christians who follow the truth preachers are pulled into the trap with them.

God's Word gives us the insights we need to know how to handle this growing problem in the Church.

- Among My people are found wicked men
- They lie in wait as one who sets snares
- They set a trap
- They catch men
- As a cage is full of birds, So their houses are full of deceit
- They have become great and grown rich
- They have grown fat, they are sleek
- They surpass the deeds of the wicked

- They do not plead the cause, The cause of the fatherless
- Yet they prosper, And the right of the needy they do not defend
- Shall I not punish them for these things?
- Shall I not avenge Myself on such a nation as this?
- The prophets prophesy falsely, And the priests rule by their own power; And My people love to have it so.
- And the prophets become wind, For the word *is* not in them. Thus shall it be done to them.

*Among My people are found wicked men* – even as there were many false prophets and lying priests among the people of Israel and Judah, there are many false preachers and teachers in the Church today. What they do, they do secretly and covertly at first.

Jeremiah said “they lie in wait as one who sets snares.” Peter wrote that false teachers “will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Lord who bought them” (2 Peter 2:1). Here’s one of the worst parts of Peter’s prophecy - “And many will follow their destructive ways, because of whom the way of truth will be blasphemed” (2 Peter 2:2). How will they pull that off? “By covetousness they will exploit you with deceptive words” (2 Peter 2:3)

The Apostle Paul warned the Ephesian elders of the same thing – “For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after

themselves” (Acts 20:29-30).

What common thread do you see in these prophetic warnings about false prophets and teachers? **Covetousness.**

“For I will stretch out My hand Against the inhabitants of the land,’ says the Lord. ‘Because from the least of them even to the greatest of them, Everyone *is* given to covetousness; And from the prophet even to the priest, Everyone deals falsely.”  
Jeremiah 6:12-13

*Everyone is given to covetousness* – False preachers and teachers want what doesn’t belong to them. They want the glory, credit and attention that belongs to God alone. They want people to follow them instead of Christ. They want to be great and important in the eyes of others. They want to be rich and enjoy the “fat” of the land, even at the expense of the poor and needy.

Don’t think it can happen to good men, honorable men, men who preach truth? Then you haven’t been paying attention. It can happen, has happened, does happen and will continue to happen. As the Apostle Peter wrote, “By covetousness they will exploit you with deceptive words.” As Paul said, “Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves.”

Anyone can be trapped by more attention, more followers, higher position, and more riches. Anyone, including good preachers and teachers who have dedicated themselves to serving God and His

people, can fall into the snares laid for them by wicked men and become trapped. And the people who follow those good men? Some of them fall in the snares and are trapped as well.

Have you ever laid a snare for an animal and trapped one? Did you make a lot of noise when the animal came close to the snare? Did you shoot flares and let all the animals in the area know that you had laid a trap for them? Of course not. If you were with a group of hunters and acted that way they'd send you packing.

Hunter/trappers get up very early in the morning, before the animals are up, and lay their traps. Some hunters lay traps days in advance of when animals will be in the area. Experienced hunter/trappers know how to hide their human scent with animal scent so animals are not tipped off to the dangers through their keen sense of smell. Hunter/trappers know the strengths and weaknesses of the animals they want to trap. They hide the trap and put things in the pathway that will entice an animal to get close enough to the snare to be trapped. Once the animal is trapped, the hunters move in for the kill.

It's the same way with preachers of truth. A false preacher is not going to catch a truth preacher by making their lies obvious. Wicked men will get up early and lay the snare, hide their evil scent (wolves in sheep's clothing), and place enticements on the pathway so that the truth preacher gets close to the snare and falls in, thus trapped by wicked men. Close followers of the truth preacher won't realize what's happening and will fall into the snare right behind their preacher.

Followers of the truth preacher who are farther away and more discerning of the signs ahead will have time to stop before falling into the same trap.

## How to Recognize that a Truth Preacher is About to Fall into a Trap Set by Wicked Men

These points are true for truth preacher/teachers in local churches, conferences, denominations, in books and articles, on radio and television and social media. There are probably some important points missing from these lists, but I wanted to present only those I had personally witnessed since becoming a Christian. I traveled quite a bit during the first decade of my Christian life and had the opportunity to visit many churches and attend many church conferences. I heard some of the top preachers and teachers in the country and had the opportunity to share a meal with several of them and learn more about their hearts and hopes. While some have remained faithful to the Gospel of Christ, some have left the faith and overturned the faith of many. I've also been involved with several local churches and seen how good people fall into Satan's traps even after being warned.

I share this "discernment guide" with you based on God's Word, the guidance of the Holy Spirit and more than four decades of experience in Christian ministry. May it help you in your service to Jesus Christ, "the author and finisher of our faith." (Hebrews 12:2)

## Listen to their Sermons/Lessons

- Do you hear a difference in how the preacher/teacher approaches God's Word now than in the past?
- Has he backed away from strong stands against sin that were part of his ministry months or years before?
- Does he address the Deity of Jesus Christ in any way that differs from what he preached/taught in the past?
- Is he hesitant in addressing false doctrine promoted in the church because of personal reasons or fear of people?
- Does he approach the essentials of the Christian faith in ways that differ from what he preached/taught in the past?
- Are his sermons more about "feelings" (emotions) and less about "doctrines" (teachings)?
- Does he talk more about the Holy Spirit than Jesus Christ?
- Is he interested in seeing more "signs and wonders" in the church as evidence of God's blessings?
- Does he preach/teach more about God's blessings being physical (e.g. money, riches, possessions, fame) than spiritual (e.g. holiness, obedience to God, souls saved)?
- Does the size of financial offerings become a more important barometer of success in the church than the spiritual offering of one's life in service to God?
- Does he use less Scripture and more stories, humor and anecdotes?
- Is he using new spiritual terms without defining them? Do you

recognize some of those terms as also being used by false teachers?

- Is he focused more on his authority in the church than the authority of Christ in His Church?
- Does he seem more concerned about how he is perceived by others than by God?
- Does he quote from books written by authors you recognize as being false teachers or associated with false teachers?
- Does he want the congregation to read the same books?
- Does he show videos that make people feel better about themselves instead of worse about sin and better about God?
- Does the preacher/teacher talk more about building relationships with people than building a relationship with God?
- Do his sermons seem like a different Gospel than what he used to preach?
- Does he preach sermons and plan services that are seeker pleasing or God pleasing?
- Does he stay away from topics that are controversial?
- Are his messages crafted to be “politically correct” so that no one is offended?

## **Listen to their Conversations**

- Is the preacher talking more about himself and what he wants and less about Jesus and what He wants?
- Does he talk more about recreation and vacations than the hard

- work of preaching the Gospel to the lost?
- Does he talk more about what other preachers say than what God says?
  - Does he talk more like other preachers than the way he used to talk?
  - Does he talk more about earthly/natural things than Heavenly/supernatural things?
  - Does he say one thing publicly, but do the opposite privately?
  - Does he say things you know are a lie?
  - Does he get upset when confronted about his lies or is he repentant?
  - Does he not want to address false teachings in the church that are brought to his attention?

## **Watch their Behavior**

- Is he becoming more or less like Christ in his attitude toward church members and unsaved people in the community?
- Is he proud in areas where he used to be humble?
- Does he seem more interested in compromising than overcoming?
- Does he have an unusual interest in women who are not his wife?
- Does he have an unusual, even unnatural interest in children who are not his own kids?

- Is he more interested in dominating your faith than building it?
- Is he becoming more controlling about church funds, wanting exclusive control of the checkbook or placing his friends in a position of financial control?
- Is he more secretive about the church and ministry now than in the past?
- Does he get upset and even angry when people in his church question his leadership or don't do everything he tells them to do?
- Has he changed his lifestyle in ways that seem to look more like the lifestyles of other preachers and teachers?

## **Listen to their Plans**

- Do the preacher's plans focus more on what he wants and less on what God wants?
- Does the preacher want to spend more money on himself and his family and on church buildings than on orphans, widows and the poor?
- Does he have plans to attend conferences and meetings that are theologically questionable?
- Does he have plans to invite questionable preachers to speak at your church?
- Do his plans seem more about building an earthly kingdom (kingdom now) than a spiritual kingdom (kingdom in Heaven)?
- Do his plans for the church look more like Laodicea than

Philadelphia? More like Ephesus than Smyrna?

Preachers and teachers should be growing in their faith and knowledge just like other Christians. God's goal for our lives is "to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren" (Romans 8:29). Do you see the purpose there? We are not conformed (fashioned) to the image of Christ so that "we" can be first among many brethren. We are conformed to the image of Christ so that "He" might be first. Whenever you see the emphasis of a preacher/teacher's message and life change from "Christ-centered" to "me-centered" or even "we-centered," know that something bad is going on. Something is enticing them to leave their "first love" (Revelation 2:4). There is only one answer to that problem – "Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place—unless you repent." (Revelation 2:5)

**Repentance** is the only spiritual "ladder" out of the snares set for truth preachers and their followers who fall into the traps set by wicked men. When we study the seven church letters Jesus dictated to the Apostle John in Revelation, we see that five of the churches had fallen into spiritual traps. The spiritual ladder that Jesus offered to each of those five churches was the same – "repent." Preachers and teachers who fall into the snares of wicked men can get out, but they and their followers will have to repent and humble themselves before God. That's the only way out.

## How Not to Follow a Truth Preacher into a Trap Set by Wicked Men

I believe strongly in warning young Christians about the danger of spiritual traps because they're everywhere. Remember about hunter/trappers who get up early in the morning and even days in advance to set traps? Spiritual snares are already in place to trap new Christians. The traps are probably already set inside the church they attend or the concerts or conferences they go to with their new Christian friends. Wicked men are everywhere, savage wolves dressed in sheep's clothing, speaking perverse things to draw away disciples after themselves. What did the Apostle Paul tell church leaders to do about that? Watch and warn night and day (Acts 20:31).

So, how can we be sure that we're not following a truth preacher/teacher into a trap set by wicked men?

- Read your Bible every day and pray for wisdom to understand what you're reading. (Ephesians 1:15-23)
- Compare **all** preachers and teachers with the preachers and teachers in the Bible that God identifies as good men to follow. God's Word also explains the kind of men we should not follow. (1 Timothy 3:1-13; 2 Timothy 1:13; 3:1-17; Titus 1:5-16)
- Look at the spiritual "fruits" of every preacher and teacher you know. Jesus gave us the best method for discerning what kind of preacher/teacher a man is because "every tree is known by its own fruit." (Luke 6:43-45)

- Ask God for a spiritually adept mentor who can help guide you through the maze of traps set by wicked men. (2 Timothy 2:1-3)
- Compare everything to Scripture, **everything**. The snares of wicked men are everywhere, so never stop comparing everything you see and hear with Scripture. (2 Timothy 3:13-17)
- Be wary of earthly riches. Jesus and His apostles warned of the dangers of money, fame and power. Remember what the prophets said about the power of covetousness to corrupt good men.
- Remember your true enemy – Satan. He set the first trap (Genesis 3:1-7) and has been setting traps for God's people for thousands of years. The devil is quite adept at setting traps and using false preachers and teachers to set snares for truth preachers and teachers and the people who follow them.

## How To Be Sure You're Right

Given that Satan has used wicked men to set multiple traps for God's people, how can we be sure that we're right about what we believe about a preacher or teacher? How can we ensure that we haven't fallen into a snare of the devil in thinking we can discern true preaching/teaching from false preaching/teaching?

## Five Confirmations

God has given us at least five confirmations to ensure that what we believe about any particular thing is right:

## Confirmation of God's Word

“Remind *them* of these things, charging *them* before the Lord not to strive about words to no profit, to the ruin of the hearers. Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth. But shun profane *and* idle babblings, for they will increase to more ungodliness. And their message will spread like cancer. Hymenaeus and Philetus are of this sort, who have strayed concerning the truth, saying that the resurrection is already past; and they overthrow the faith of some.” 2 Timothy 2:15-18

Rightly dividing the Word of Truth means handling it correctly, cutting a straight line with it, knowing the difference between truth and a lie. Part of a commitment to rightly dividing the Word of Truth is to “shun profane and idle babblings” because Paul knew they would increase to more ungodliness and would spread like cancer. In Paul’s example for Timothy he mentioned two members of a local church, Hymenaeus and Pheletus. They had “strayed concerning the truth, saying that the resurrection is already past.” Why was that a bad thing? Wouldn’t it just hurt Hymenaeus and Pheletus? Paul continued – “and they overthrow the faith of some.” That word, overthrow, is the Greek word *anatrepousin*. It means “to turn up or over, to upset.” It’s the same word used in the physical sense when Jesus overturned the tables of the moneychangers (John 2:15) and in the spiritual sense when “those of the circumcision” would be insubordinate and use their voices to deceive and subvert

(*anatrepousin* – overturn, overthrow, upset) entire households “teaching things which they ought not, for the sake of dishonest gain.” (Titus 1:11) There’s another example of teachers coming into a congregation with false teachings “for the sake of dishonest gain.” Covetousness (love of money, power and prestige) is a root problem in false preaching/teaching.

### **Confirmation of God’s Spirit**

The Holy Spirit is the true Author of Scripture (2 Timothy 3:16; 2 Peter 1:21), so He will always confirm what He wrote. That’s why it’s so important that we read God’s Word and understand it. The Holy Spirit will never confirm anything as true in the life and message of a preacher/teacher that He confirmed as false in the Bible. The Holy Spirit is not here to talk about Himself. He’s here to talk about Jesus. He’s here to guide God’s people into all truth. He will not speak on His own authority, but whatever He hears He will speak, and He will tell us about things to come. The Holy Spirit will glorify Christ. He will take of what is Christ’s and declare that to us (John 16:13-15). The Holy Spirit is here to convict the world of sin, righteousness and judgment (John 16:8-11). Based on what the Holy Spirit is here to do, He will confirm what’s true and what’s false to you as long as you are reading the word with understanding and rightly dividing the Word of Truth.

## Confirmation of God's Mentors

First, some Scriptural examples, then some caveats.

“I thank God, whom I serve with a pure conscience, as *my* forefathers *did*, as without ceasing I remember you in my prayers night and day, greatly desiring to see you, being mindful of your tears, that I may be filled with joy, when I call to remembrance the genuine faith that is in you, which dwelt first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice, and I am persuaded is in you also. Therefore I remind you to stir up the gift of God which is in you through the laying on of my hands. For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind ... Hold fast the pattern of sound words which you have heard from me, in faith and love which are in Christ Jesus. That good thing which was committed to you, keep by the Holy Spirit who dwells in us.” 2 Timothy 1:3-7, 13-14

“But you have carefully followed my doctrine, manner of life, purpose, faith, longsuffering, love, perseverance, persecutions, afflictions, which happened to me at Antioch, at Iconium, at Lystra—what persecutions I endured. And out of *them* all the Lord delivered me. Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution. But evil men and impostors will grow worse and worse, deceiving and being deceived. But you must continue in the things which you have learned and been assured of, knowing from whom you have

learned *them*, and that from childhood you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus.” 2 Timothy 3:10-15

“You therefore, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. And the things that you have heard from me among many witnesses, commit these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.” 2 Timothy 2:1-2

You may already have godly mentors in your life, but if you don't ask of God and He will give them to you. The Lord wants you to follow Him and only Him and He knows who to send to you.

Now for the caveats. Human mentors are just that, human. They are fallible. They can and do make mistakes. So, you need to use the same guidelines with your mentors to make sure they haven't fallen into a snare or aren't headed down a path that could lead to a snare. The last thing you want to do is follow a mentor blindly and fall on top of him at the bottom of a spiritual trap. You may find it very difficult to get out.

I will also warn you that Christian or spiritual mentoring is a buzz word among false preachers and teachers. They will use spiritual mentoring (discipling) as a way of pulling you into one of their snares.

## Confirmation of God's Examination

We know that God will judge what we've done in the flesh through a supernatural testing when we are with Christ in Heaven – “each one's work will become clear; for the Day will declare it, because it will be revealed by fire; and the fire will test each one's work, of what sort it is” (1 Corinthians 3:13). What Paul wrote next is sobering:

“If anyone's work which he has built on *it* endures, he will receive a reward. If anyone's work is burned, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire.” 1 Corinthians 3:14-15

Given the fact that God is going to reveal and test the work we do on earth, is there anything we can do now to prepare ourselves for that testing? Yes, there is.

“Examine yourselves *as to* whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Do you not know yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless indeed you are disqualified. But I trust that you will know that we are not disqualified.” 2 Corinthians 13:1-6

We need to examine our faith regularly to make sure that what we're doing is from God and for God, not from us and for us. Keep in mind what Jesus said about His future judgment of people. Many will be surprised to hear these words from Jesus:

“Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. Many will say to Me in that day, ‘Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?’ And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!’” Matthew 7:21-23

Do you recognize those people? They prophesied in Christ's Name, cast out demons in Christ's Name, and did many wonders in Christ's Name. What will Jesus say to them? “I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!” They will look at Jesus in Heaven and say to Him, “Lord, Lord,” expecting to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. However, Jesus said that “he who does the will of My Father” will enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Isn't preaching in the Name of Jesus, casting out demons in the Name of Jesus and doing many wonders in the Name of Jesus doing the will of God? According to what Jesus said, it is not enough. False preachers and teachers will point to prophecies preached, demons cast out and wonders performed, but it won't get them into the Kingdom of Heaven because what they did and why they did it was not the will of the Father in Heaven.

That's a tough message to share with people because they look at preachers and teachers as celebrities rather than servants like themselves (see 1 Corinthians 12:12-26 for a good explanation of that principle). Be cautious about what you think about others and

yourself.

## **Confirmation of Our Experience**

As I mentioned earlier I had the opportunity during the first decade of my Christian life to attend many Bible conferences across the country and listen to and meet many well-known Christian leaders. As I listened to some of them I was impressed by their passion, but warned by the Spirit that something was wrong with their words, motives and intent. I was not always able to identify what was wrong, but I trusted the leading of the Spirit and eventually learned why He had warned me.

Some of the men God warned me about in those early years have gone on to become leaders in large movements of false teaching in the Church and have overturned the faith of many. Trusting in the confirmations of God's Word, God's Spirit, God's mentors and God's examination will help us be able to distinguish false preachers and teachers from true preachers and teachers. It will also help us discern when a preacher or teacher in our church is close to falling into snares set by wicked men.

Here are some reminders as we wrap up this study of a *Prophet's Perspective About Preachers*. My prayer for you and me is that God will keep us from falling into the snares of the wicked one and use us to point others toward the narrow path that leads to life and freedom.

“If anyone teaches otherwise and does not consent to wholesome words, *even* the words of our Lord Jesus Christ,

and to the doctrine which accords with godliness, he is proud, knowing nothing, but is obsessed with disputes and arguments over words, from which come envy, strife, reviling, evil suspicions, useless wranglings of men of corrupt minds and destitute of the truth, who suppose that godliness is a *means of gain*. From such withdraw yourself. Now godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into *this* world, *and it is* certain we can carry nothing out. And having food and clothing, with these we shall be content. But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and *into* many foolish and harmful lusts which drown men in destruction and perdition. For the love of money is a root of all *kinds of* evil, for which some have strayed from the faith in their greediness, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows.” 1 Timothy 6:3-10

“But in a great house there are not only vessels of gold and silver, but also of wood and clay, some for honor and some for dishonor. Therefore if anyone cleanses himself from the latter, he will be a vessel for honor, sanctified and useful for the Master, prepared for every good work. Flee also youthful lusts; but pursue righteousness, faith, love, peace with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart. But avoid foolish and ignorant disputes, knowing that they generate strife. And a servant of the Lord must not quarrel but be gentle to all, able to teach, patient, in humility correcting those who are in opposition, if God perhaps will grant them repentance, so that they may

know the truth, and *that* they may come to their senses *and* *escape* the snare of the devil, having been taken captive by him to *do* his will.” 2 Timothy 2:20-26

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