Part 2

The Dangers of the Christian Personality Cult

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Test the Spirits

When the people of Berea heard even Paul and Silas preach, they "received the word with all readiness of the mind," they didn't just reject it without first hearing it, but they also examined "the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so" (Acts 17:10-11). For even such prominent speakers, the Bible does not berate the Bereans for comparing what was said with Scripture.

When I write these articles, I don't expect readers to just open up their skulls and stick what I say into their heads. One of the primary reasons I write is to stimulate people to further Bible study. I once knew a pastor who taught that Acts 17:10-11 teaches not that we are to search the Scriptures to see whether what the pastor says agrees with the Bible, but we are to search the Scriptures to see that what the pastor says agrees with it. In other words, since he is the pastor, what he says is the Word of God and will agree with Scripture. If you don't see that he agrees with the Bible, you are wrong. The pastor infallibly speaks the Word of God. Dear reader, I hope you will not accept such an attitude from pastors, writers, radio or television evangelists, or anyone else. No one is infallible, and such an approach will inevitably result in our having to distort Scripture to accommodate the pastor.

We are all still in the flesh and occasionally make errors. When two Christians express their differences, they will either come to agreement by either one or the other or both changing, or they will agree to disagree. This latter is especially acceptable in nonessentials. But when a teacher is consistently singled out for teaching contrary to Scripture and does not successfully prove his position from Scripture or change, then he or she needs to be exposed to minimize the potential damage. Are we being unchristian to call someone a false teacher? No. We would be negligent if we didn't expose the person as a warning to others.

As I've said, anyone can, in fact all do, occasionally make a mistake. But when someone's teaching is consistently wrong, there is a serious problem. If someone continues to teach false doctrines, then he is, by definition, a false teacher. He is teaching another good news, which is
not good news but really bad news. This is a serious matter, and the teacher's star power status is irrelevant.

With good reason, the Bible says, "Beloved, don't believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world" (1 John 4:1). We are to make that discernment. We must never let our sinful tendencies to idolize people cause us to allow someone to have a superstar status, whether worldwide or in a local congregation, that gives him or her the license to be above reproach. It makes no difference how good a speaker someone is, how good-looking he or she is, how friendly the person seems, how impressive are his or her academic qualifications, or even how much some of the person's peripheral teachings on marriage or finance or human relations or whatever have seemingly helped us. False teaching may taste good and fill your belly, but in the end it will only sicken you. To teach error in such areas as the centrality of Christ, salvation by grace alone through Christ alone, and Christ's fulfillment of the law and the prophets, and to continue to teach such error after it has been exposed, is to "fall away from the faith, paying attention to seducing spirits and doctrines of demons" (1 Timothy 4:1).

When the believers of Galatia began to follow false teachers, Paul wrote, "Foolish Galatians, who has bewitched you not to obey the truth, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was openly portrayed amongst you as crucified?" (Galatians 3:1). The Galatians were being foolish (ἀνοητός), not using their intelligence in following people who had bewitched them away from the truth. "Bewitched" is from the Greek word baskainō, which means "to speak, then to bring evil on one by feigned praise or the evil eye (hoodoo), to lead astray by evil arts" (A.T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament – Galatians*) (https://www.ccel.org/ccel/robertson_at/wp_gal.iv.html).

I am not someone who goes looking for demons under every bush, but persistent false teaching is a serious problem with spiritual origins. False teaching succeeds by casting darkness over those who willingly listen. I will not be dissuaded from exposing false teachers simply because of who they are. Like Paul, I say these things "that no one may delude you with persuasiveness of speech" (Colossians 2:4). As in John's day, "many false prophets have gone out into the world" (1 John 4:1). But if you are strong in God's Word, you cannot be deceived, at least not for long.
Of course, we shouldn't be looking to pick fights, and we shouldn't make ad hominem attacks. As Paul writes in 2 Timothy 2:24-26, "The Lord's servant must not quarrel, but be gentle towards all, able to teach, patient, in gentleness correcting those who oppose him: perhaps God may give them repentance leading to a full knowledge of the truth, and they may recover themselves out of the devil's snare, having been taken captive by him to his will." On the other hand, my experience has taught me that people in the public eye will almost never heed correction and change. If they do, it will only be a reaction to a large negative press and even then, they "change" only to recover their good image. They will soon go astray again.

There are those who say it's wrong to publicly expose someone without first privately contacting them to discuss the matter. They base this on Matthew 18:15: "If your brother sins against you, go, show him his fault between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained back your brother." But this passage has nothing to do with how to handle a brother who is publicly sinning (such as in persistent false teaching). It is about how two brethren are to handle a private offense between the two of them.

Someone who has been publicly leading people astray needs to be exposed publicly. Besides, I can tell you from experience that, as I touched upon earlier, if you try to contact these people, you will be wasting your time. Almost always, the personality is already aware that there are people who don't like the teaching and he or she has purposely chosen not to change. In many cases, you won't receive a response because the person has taken the approach that it's better to say nothing and let the critics get discouraged and give up. If you do get a response, whatever name may be on it, you can be nearly certain that it will have been written by an aid who is trained to twist even more Scriptures to make his boss look good or to spin your question without actually giving an answer. And there will often be an ad hominem argument thrown in for good measure, such as, So and So's critics are troublemakers who are not worth dignifying with an answer.

In Romans 16:17 Paul writes, "Now I beg you, brothers, look out for those who are causing the divisions and occasions of stumbling, contrary to the doctrine which you learned, and turn away from them." "Look out for" is ambiguous in English, but the Greek is clear. Skopeō means to watch carefully. The idea is to keep an eye on so as to avoid. It is like what you are supposed to do when you see a bear in the forest. You don't make contact with it and ask it questions. You keep
your eye on it and back away. And 2 John 1:9-11 gives us very plain instructions, "Whoever transgresses and doesn't remain in the teaching of Christ, doesn't have God. He who remains in the teaching, the same has both the Father and the Son. If anyone comes to you, and doesn't bring this teaching, don't receive him into your house, and don't welcome him, for he who welcomes him participates in his evil works." Of course, this is appropriate to the Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses who come to your door, but it can also apply to those who come to you through media.

**The Final Arbiter**

Of course, there is the question of who will determine who is right and who is wrong. Expecting the possibility of his soon being martyred, Paul said to the Ephesian elders, "For I know that after my departure, vicious wolves will enter in among you, not sparing the flock. Men will arise from among your own selves, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them" (Acts 20:29-30). Paul was right, and there are many people like this in our age. But Paul went on to say, "Now, brothers, I entrust you to God, and to the word of his grace, which is able to build up, and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified" (Acts 20:32). Paul entrusted (paratithēmi—set before as one might set a child before a teacher) them to God and to His gracious Word.

Who, then, determines what God's Word is saying? God. That's why Paul didn't just entrust them to the Bible. The Holy Spirit is the judge of God's Word. The Holy Spirit dwells in all born again believers. Jesus told His disciples that the Holy Spirit "will guide you into all truth" (John 16:13). We must trust that this is so.

We must not be putting our faith in persons to interpret the Bible for us simply because of who they are. Certainly, we should be attentive to someone who has a good record of being a teacher "properly handling the Word of Truth" (2 Timothy 2:15). But we must still examine what the teacher says, ultimately always putting our faith in the Holy Spirit to interpret the Bible for us, while not cutting ourselves off from others. In 1 Corinthians 14:36, Paul says, "What? Was it from you that the word of God went out? Or did it come to you alone?" Other people also have the Holy Spirit. We can listen to them and read their books. But we must not get sucked into a personality cult, and we must always have our critical thinking turned on so that we don't just accept what someone says because of who he or she is.
The Bible is objective truth. It has a definite meaning, and we should ask God to reveal that meaning to us through the Holy Spirit as we study the Bible. When we hear or read something new that we disagree with, we should be willing to listen and do more serious research. Once we've settled a matter, reviewing it every time someone brings it up can be a waste of time, but when there is new evidence, we should examine it. We should be willing to correct our views if proved wrong, but never simply because of who said it.

At the Diet of Worms, Martin Luther asserted, "Unless I am convinced by Scripture and plain reason—I do not accept the authority of the popes and councils, for they have contradicted each other—my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not recant anything for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. God help me. Amen." I agree. Ultimately, we must satisfy our conscience as educated by the Holy Spirit and the Word of God. When someone else speaks, we must test the spirits, we must be as were the Bereans. We must never decide the legitimacy of what is said based on the star power of who said it. "But false prophets also arose among the people, as false teachers will also be among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, denying even the Master who bought them, bringing on themselves swift destruction" (2 Peter 2:1).

"... all of you are brothers"

Even of those who were not necessarily speaking false doctrine, Paul wrote, "But from those who were reputed to be important (whatever they were, it makes no difference to me; God doesn’t show partiality to man)—they, I say, who were respected imparted nothing to me" (Galatians 2:6). After describing those who like to be honored above others, Jesus told His followers,

But don't you be called 'Rabbi,' for one is your teacher, the Christ, and all of you are brothers. Call no man on the earth your father, for one is your Father, he who is in heaven. Neither be called masters, for one is your master, the Christ. But he who is greatest among you will be your servant. Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.

Matthew 23:8-12

There is not supposed to be a hierarchy among believers: we are all brothers and sisters. Following after Christian superstars and having cults of personality are practices contrary to the will of our one and
only Master. And those who receive such honor are immediately suspect.

We will have false teachers, and the world very often finds the messages of false teachers very attractive. If someone is one of this world's celebrities, then that person's teachings are likely compromised somewhere. You cannot openly teach the doctrines of Christ and remain a friend of the world. "If the world hates you, you know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own. But because you are not of the world, since I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you" (John 15:18-19). Notice also what James says: "You adulterers and adulteresses, don't you know that friendship with the world is hostility towards God? Whoever therefore wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God" (James 4:4). In this age, true Christianity will never be very crowd-pleasing.

Stars with popular television and radio programs and who are selling millions of books and speaking on talk shows are just as susceptible—and perhaps with success whirling around in their heads, even more so—as anyone else to going astray. Certainly, if the world is putting them on a pedestal, something is wrong with their message. God is no respecter of persons, and neither should you be. Don't fall for star power and personality cults. Test the spirits, and when someone has shown him or herself to be a false teacher by continuing to preach unbiblical doctrine, stop listening to that person.