Lion and Lamb Apologetics
How to Identify a False Teacher, Part 1

ROBB BRUNANSKY, PhD

The New Testament is replete with warnings to God's people to beware of false teachers.

We see throughout Scripture that false teachers are deceptive. Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 11:13 that false teachers disguise themselves as apostles of Christ to accomplish their deceptive work. He goes on to say in verses 14-15 that they are servants of the devil, but they disguise themselves as servants of righteousness. False teachers never enter a church advertising themselves as sinister agents of Satan. Rather, they pretend to be followers of Christ who are concerned for truth and holiness, and who put on an external display of compassion and care for others. They are often personable and winsome, appearing to be mature disciples of the Lord.

Because false teachers disguise themselves as genuine Christians, they are difficult to identify. Recognizing a false teacher takes an immense amount of discernment, and the more skillful a false teacher is, the more discernment is required because the charade will be so convincing – even to the most seasoned of believers.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics

To be sure, some people who believe false doctrine are easy to identify. They are members of false religions, like Mormonism or Jehovah's Witnesses. While such adherents of heterodox groups believe and teach lies, they are easy to identify because they overtly profess that they are not part of the historic Christian faith.

However, when the New Testament calls us to beware of false teachers, it refers to false teachers from within the true church because these men and women are more deadly and difficult to discern. In this series, we will spend time looking at how Christians can identify false teachers by deciphering how the New Testament unmasks the true character of these spiritual deceivers.

The first warning in the New Testament against false teachers comes from Jesus. . Jesus describes false teachers as those "who come to God's people in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves" (Matthew 7:15). Our Lord highlights the deceptive nature of false teachers, also known as false prophets. As noted above, the first step to identifying false teachers *is to recognize that false teachers look like sheep*. These wolves do not come among the sheep of God's pasture openly, but they put on the appearance of being part of the flock.

I think this first step is one of the most difficult steps of all for believers to take because we want to think the best of people. In fact, this characteristic is part of Paul's definition of love in 1 Corinthians 13:7. It is painful to think that someone who looks outwardly like a believer might, in fact, be a false teacher in disguise. That's all the more true when false teachers are those who are close to you or who have served alongside you in ministry.

Toward the end of one of his mission trips, the Apostle Paul told the Ephesians elders: "I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them" (Acts 20:29-30). Some of the savage wolves would be outsiders who came into the church to destroy the flock, but tragically some of the false teachers would arise from among the group of men Paul had guided, trained, and commissioned for ministry.

This tragic phenomenon is not unique to those Paul discipled or to the church in Ephesus. Our Lord Himself had a disciple who turned out to be false. Judas Iscariot blended in with the disciples so seamlessly that none of the Twelve suspected that Judas was the one who would betray Jesus. In John 13:22 we learn that the disciples were at a loss to know of which disciple Jesus was speaking when He warned about a betrayer among them. Mark 14:19 indicates that the disciples were more suspicious of themselves than they were of Judas! This false disciple crept in amongst the Twelve unnoticed by everyone but Jesus.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics

Such deception is always the method of the most dangerous wolves. They come into the church, and no one suspects anything is amiss. Jude tells us that false teachers had "crept in unnoticed" (verse 4) and that they feasted with the church during their appointed love feasts without fear (verse 12). They were so stealthy that they were unconcerned about anyone discovering their true identity and intentions.

So, the first step to identify a dangerous false teacher is to recognize that false teachers are deceptive and disguise themselves as genuine disciples of Christ. False teachers will not advertise they are false teachers, and when their ruse is revealed, most people will be surprised to discover their true character.

This first step might leave us feeling uncomfortably suspicious of every professing Christian we know, especially those who teach God's Word and are the most vocal about wanting to lead and influence others. Should we suspect that everyone who looks like a sheep might be a wolf in disguise? No, we are not called to become cynics, but to exercise discernment. This is the first of several steps we must take to identify false teachers.

In our next article, we will continue to look at what Jesus teaches us about identifying false prophets to see how we might tell when a sheep is a sheep and when a sheep is really a wolf in disguise.

Robb Brunansky pastors Desert Hills Bible Church in Glendale, Arizona. He has his MDiv from The Master's Seminary and his PhD in New Testament from The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

© The Cripplegate, August 28, 2024. Retrieved September 24, 2024.
https://thecripplegate.com/how-to-identify-a-false-teacher-part-1/

NOTE: This post is in compliance with the Fair Use clause of the US Copyright Act of 1976 (17 U.S. Code § 107). The US Supreme Court has issued several major decisions clarifying and reaffirming the fair use doctrine since the 1980s, most recently in the 2021 decision *Google LLC v. Oracle America, Inc*.