

# Discerning a Teaching or Movement



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**Some guidance on how to discern whether a teaching, person or movement is biblically sound in doctrine.**

Here are five recognised fundamental doctrines of mainstream Christianity with which to gauge if a teaching, person or movement is doctrinally orthodox, aberrant or heretical. Persons or movements with minor deviations from these doctrines would be defined as “aberrant” (meaning unusual, peculiar, or maybe just eccentric). However, any major deviations from these five doctrines always constitute a teaching, person, or movement as heretical. Stay well clear from these!

## **The Trinity**

- TRUTH: God must be One, yet Three persons. Each “person” of the Trinity possessing all the attributes of Deity and personality.
- When the Holy Spirit is treated as an “it” or a power, then both the Deity and personality is denied.
- When God is made to be “on call” by man’s invocation then He is compromised and blasphemed. There’s a difference between “calling on God” and “God being at our call”.
- Many of the manifestations found in today’s so-called “revivals” simply lower man to beastly or sub-human levels (e.g. animal sounds). The Holy Spirit’s actions always raise a person to the character of Christ. So to call these manifestations the work of the Spirit is a (but not “the”) blasphemy of the Holy Spirit.

## The Person of Jesus Christ

- TRUTH: Jesus is 100% God and 100% man for all eternity.
- The ancient heresies of denying this are again on the rise by pastors and teachers who haven't much interest in, or simply ignorant of church history.
- "More Lord" – Such talk is liable to give the impression to young believers that Jesus can be treated like a substance to be used, instead of a person of the Trinity to be worshipped.
- Many of the supposed visions of Jesus (which often contradict one another) redefine the scriptural picture of Him, adding to, instead of enlightening us about Him. The "prophetic art" movement falls into this category.
- There is also the example of Kenneth Copeland with his denigration of Jesus' death. One of his standard beliefs is that Jesus is a brother of Satan.

## The Second Coming

- TRUTH: Jesus Christ is coming bodily to earth to rule and judge.
- Dominion/Kingdom theology spiritualises the Second Coming – to them Jesus returns "**in** the church" rather than "**for** the church." This teaching says He can only come when "the church" has made earth ready to receive Him. So Christ can only return when we arrange things for Him, effectively putting Him under our control!
- Much modern revival theology often denies the "great apostasy" and believes there will be a worldwide revival instead. However, scripture clearly says a great falling away will take place before Jesus returns (2 Thess 2:1-3). Those who believe there will be no apostasy claim any falling away is in fact those who resist their new teaching! A handy get out.
- The church's true calling is to preach the gospel and disciple believers, not take over structures of the world system as Dominion theology/Kingdom Now/ Restoration Theology teaches (often called *The Seven Mountains* mandate). In this way it is similar to Islam trying to take over society in all its facets.

## Salvation

- TRUTH: It is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone (as the saying goes).
- The type of gospel that simply calls you to "repent and come to Jesus" often without mentioning the complete abhorrence of sin, deep cleansing repentance, or the sufficiency of the cross, is quite common – too common in fact. You only need a Saviour when you know what you need to be saved from, so sin must be preached before salvation comes.
- Anything that denies the full indwelling of the Spirit at conversion ultimately denies the biblical definition of salvation. While there may be a further ministry of the Holy Spirit, the biblical orthodox teaching is that He abides within us immediately at the New Birth. Some teach that unless you're Baptised in the Holy Spirit you're not really saved.
- The need for a type of "impartation" found in some teachings is also a denial of the gospel by grace. It tends to focus on the one doing the imparting (usually a "prophet" or "apostle"), and not on the Lord Himself. Just watch many YouTube preachers and you'll soon see this.

## The Scriptures

- TRUTH: It is entirely inerrant and sufficient for all Christian life. Nothing need be added.
- Many modern versions like *The Passion* and *The Message* might be helpful for new believers who are trying to understand scripture, but when a mature believer elevates these versions over more solid translations, it can only be regarded as laziness of not wanting to study.
- "Empty your mind, don't think, just enjoy the Presence" assumes that something outside of scriptural license must enter the mind or body; it's similar to an occultic technique. Passivity

and Soaking is a real danger in some so-called “moves of God”. After numerous years of enduring this mindset, many pastors are now acknowledging they haven’t seen any lasting mature fruit from this.

- It is taught that “new revelation and fresh teaching” is needed for the modern church; the scriptures can only take us so far, they say. This “new thing” denies the sufficiency of the “faith once for all delivered to the saints”. By implication it is adding to scripture. Ever so gradually the new revelation displaces orthodox teaching. To deny the fresh teaching is seen as resisting the Holy Spirit. This is nothing more than spiritual manipulation and abuse.
- Signs and wonders are then regarded as necessary to prove the gospel as effective and true. Bit by bit spiritual manifestations take priority instead of the proclamation of the true full gospel.
- But any emphasis on experience over doctrine is the wrong way round, putting the cart before the horse. For many believers today Truth becomes determined by their own spiritual experiences, or even their Pastor’s encounters, and not by scripture.
- Witchcraft-like techniques like enneagrams, destiny cards, and SOZO counselling are often used for direction instead of scripture and wise biblical counsel. Especially so in submitting to controlling leaders / apostles, etc.

As Christians if we indiscriminately focus on some experience, someone, or some teaching more than we love the truth, we become candidates for self-deception. It might even be argued that self-deception is like sin, because as sin turns away from a holy God, so does self-deception turn away from His truth (1 John 1:8).

To be lured by any of the above deceptions can bring a person to regard their version of Truth as absolutely correct; compare the Mormons, Jehovah’s Witness, and other cults. This breeds pride, which eventually manifests itself in the person having a false and exaggerated sense of their salvation. They end up believing they belong to a spiritual elite because they possess “secret” biblical knowledge on “how to” perform spiritual exercises (e.g. Commanding angels, visiting heaven).

Sid Roth’s “*It’s Supernatural*” web site and YouTube videos give an abundance of sales pitches aimed at selling DVDs and books to teach you how to “activate” your spiritual senses.

The great problem of spiritual deception, by not biblically scrutinising another person’s teaching and beliefs, is that it opens the door to further deception.

Just as self-deception can bring about a false assurance of salvation, so it also brings a false sense of righteousness (self-righteousness in fact), and results in active rebellion toward God in a person’s mind – all the while thinking they’re right with God because they now possess the “real truth” validated by their experiences.

It seems in this present era of the church, many believers like to have their ears tickled (2 Tim 4:3) by preachers (I call them “story tellers”) who aren’t satisfied with the absoluteness of scripture, and entice the naïve with exaggerated mystical encounters. Stories of commanding angels to do this or that, of those all-too common trips to heaven, of making declarations to manipulate God to act, etc.

A strange thing starts to happen when people align with these practices; they begin to unknowingly align with unorthodox and heretical doctrines. Of course they don’t realise it at first, but bit by bit a shift comes into play and down the track they find themselves agreeing with some very disturbing beliefs. It becomes a sort of spiritual adultery.

The self-deception seems to initiate a type of love-of-self, which really is nothing more than good old pride! This what Paul had to say about that: “**If anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself**” (Gal 6:3).

The awfulness of spiritual deception is that it finally results in the person not being able to see clearly what’s happened to them, and their pride turns to arrogance which then starts to compare one believer to another, with themselves (or their group) being the standard of perfection and truth.

It's all very subtle because that's just the way the Father of Lies himself acts. If not for the grace and mercy of our heavenly Father, there would be no way out. It's for this very reason we're called to be discerning, to correctly partition the Word of God, and to correct others gently but firmly.

Some issues are probably relatively minor, like whether a group of Elders should oversee the church, or a single Pastor should. Some issues may not be worth dealing with at length. But others are a direct threat to the church. Paul wrote about such times when you can get trapped into fruitless doctrinal controversies and seemingly get nowhere.

- **"I urge you ... that you instruct certain men not to teach strange doctrines, nor to pay attention to myths and endless genealogies, which give rise to mere speculation rather than furthering the administration of God which is by faith. But the goal of our instruction is love from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith. For some men, straying from these things, have turned aside to fruitless discussion, wanting to be teachers of the Law, even though they do not understand either what they are saying or the matters about which they make confident assertions." (1 Timothy 1:3-7).**

Other controversies must be dealt with and called out, especially if they're about the fundamental ones I raised earlier.

- **"Now I urge you, brethren, keep your eye on those who cause dissensions and hindrances contrary to the teaching which you learned, and turn away from them" (Rom 16:17).**

A truth is this, that a deceived person never knows of the depth of their deception until they're enlightened or delivered by God's grace. If a believer too willingly offers up their soul-life, their mind to some teaching or person without due discernment, then the Enemy has a great advantage over them to deceive even further. The stronger the undiscerning mind, the stronger is the Enemy's ability to deceive.

The Deceiver always adapts to those he sets out to deceive. With a carnal ungodly person he will use the method of the flesh and temptation; with the unbelieving academic he will elevate knowledge and conceit of the intellect; with a religiously thinking person (of any religion at all) he will use religiosity and subtlety; and with the spiritual he'll set out to deceive by counterfeiting God's truths and God's miracles (2 Cor 11:14 and 2 Thess 2:9).

He uses Scriptures in a twisted way to counter God's true meaning by them. There is counterfeit worship of God, counterfeit teaching, counterfeit signs and wonders, and counterfeit experiences. There is however no counterfeit Truth because it's a straight out Lie.

To extend this work of deception, and to build his false kingdom, the Deceiver seeks for minds to manipulate, an undiscerning ego and naïve personality if you like. For a spiritual, even a religious person, here lies the great possibility of deception, because when we tire of the sufficiency of scripture, we're likely to yearn for something more thrilling, something that will excite our spiritual senses.

How sad is it then when spiritual people give way to a lack of discernment? They should be, by virtue of their New Birth, **spiritual** beings. Yet because they don't employ spiritual principles like discernment, they fall prey to the very opposite, spiritual counterfeits.

This is also true of believers who are prone to being led by over-zealous emotions, by always checking their spiritual condition, by feeling down and wanting a quick fix to their problems. This side of them demands evidence, experiences, and even manifestations to validate their belief. Sometimes of course it's not quite that, but rather an inner restlessness because somewhere they accepted an aberrant teaching which failed to deliver what it promised. They exalted a lie as Truth, and it never delivers. The end result is a doubled-souled person (James 1:8 and 4:8) and they are tossed to and fro always seeking deliverance.

Such doubled-minded (lit: *doubled-souled*) people are characterised by spiritual doubt (e.g. their salvation, or God's ability to act), and by a deep instability of feelings, both natural and spiritual. Their personality competes with Holy Spirit conviction, and they tend to focus more on *their* spiritual condition rather than what scripture offers as an antidote. Then when they do get convicted, it's not a conviction about wasting too much time on self, but about not trusting God enough.

They end up going around in circles, with the focus always shifting between themselves and God, between a false sense of "faith" and the guilt about not trusting God. In this sad state of mind the Deceiver entices with another level of experience to calm the incessant chatter in their mind. He lures them with promises of spiritual grandeur and his subtle grooming of their doubts seduces them further into his trap. Oh how we need the spiritual clarity that both the Word and the Spirit can bring.

I fully understand why some believers yearn for more spiritual life and direction, why they seek for God to be exalted among the sin in the world, and for the Body of Christ to stand firm for Jesus and His truths. At the heart of it all, this is probably what most of us desire. The issue here is not to criticise that, but to alert us all to the Deceiver's subtlety in luring us away into exaggerated and extravagant experiences that end up having the wrong result.

We want "more" of God but actually end up further away! We want to experience God's love and presence but find ourselves jettisoning discernment because we've been conned into believing that experience trumps delivered Truth. We seek for greater Truth about the scriptures, but soon find ourselves focussing on the experiences rather than the obedience it demands.

All this seems to be negative, almost despairing, but as always, the heavenly Father has laid down a divine antidote. Simply put, He desires that we have fellowship and relate with brethren who are spiritually minded and known to be like that. The church is the Body of Christ in which His Spirit will lead the believers *corporately* into all Truth and maturity. **"Be subject to one another in the fear of Christ"** (Eph 5:21).

The corporate wisdom of the Church made up of discerning believers who are open to adjustment by the Holy Spirit, is a basic safeguard against individuals who are personally overbearing, especially in matters pertaining to doctrine.

Now of course we all know even this can be manipulated by "religious" people who pretend to be "spiritual". The cults and groups like the Jehovah's Witnesses will say just what I've said, the group knows best!

But providing the church is "walking in the light of Christ, as children of light", and are sticking clearly to scripture, showing humility, and submitting to Christ as revealed in the Word, we will take the ground from under the Deceiver's feet.

Paul prayed for the saints that they might **"be filled with the knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding"** (Col 1:9) so let's be open to that with all honesty and zeal.

The days are darkening, may we learn and discern well.

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