



7 False Teachers in the Church Today

The history of Christ's church is inseparable from the history of Satan's attempts to destroy her. While difficult challenges have arisen from outside the church, the most dangerous have always been from within. For from within arise the false teachers, the peddlers of error who masquerade as teachers of truth. False teachers take on many forms, custom-crafted to times, cultures, and contexts. Here are seven of them you will find carrying out their deceptive, destructive work in the church today. Please note that while I have followed the biblical texts in describing them in masculine terms, each of these false teachers can as easily be female.

The Heretic

The Heretic is the most prominent and perhaps the most dangerous of the false teachers. Peter warned against him in his second letter. "But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing upon themselves swift destruction" (2 Peter 2:1). The Heretic is the person who teaches what blatantly contradicts an essential teaching of the Christian faith. He is a gregarious figure, a natural leader teaching just enough truth to mask his deadly error. Yet in denying the faith and celebrating what is false, he leads his followers from the safety of orthodoxy to the peril of heresy.

From the church's earliest days, she has been afflicted by the Heretic in his various forms. He continues his evil work today, sometimes by contradicting the truth and sometimes by adding to it. He may reframe the doctrine of the Trinity, as Arius did in the third century and as Oneness Pentecostals do today. He may, like Marcus Borg and other prominent scholars, deny the virgin birth or the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Like Jehovah's Witnesses, he may alter God's finished word, or like Mormons, he may add to it. Always, he boldly tampers with "the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 1:3).

The Charlatan

The Charlatan is only interested in the Christian faith to the extent that it can fill his wallet. The Charlatan is the person who uses Christianity as a means of personal enrichment. Paul charged Timothy to be on guard against him. "If anyone teaches a different doctrine and does not agree with the sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ and the teaching that accords with godliness, he is puffed up with conceit and understands nothing. He has an unhealthy craving for controversy and for quarrels about words, which produce envy, dissension, slander, evil suspicions, and constant friction among people who are depraved in mind and deprived of the truth, imagining that godliness is a means of gain" (1 Timothy 6:3-5). The Charlatan is only interested in the Christian faith to the extent that it can fill his wallet. He uses his leadership position to benefit from others' wealth.

Simon Magus was motivated by the love of money when he tried to purchase the power of the Holy Spirit (Acts 8:9-24). Since him, the Charlatan has appeared in many forms, always seeking prominence in the church so that he can live in extravagance. When Pope Leo X famously commissioned Tetzel to sell indulgences, the profits not only funded the reconstruction of St. Peter's Basilica, but also his luxurious lifestyle. In the 1990s, televangelist Robert Tilton brought in tens of millions of dollars each year by exploiting the vulnerable and gullible. Today Benny Hinn, Creflo Dollar, Joseph Prince and a host of others peddle the prosperity gospel to enrich themselves from their followers' gifts.

The Prophet

The Prophet claims to be gifted by God to speak fresh revelation outside of Scripture—new, authoritative words of prediction, teaching, rebuke, or encouragement. In reality, though, he is commissioned and empowered by Satan for the purpose of misleading and disrupting Christ's church. John offered an urgent warning about him. "Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world" (1 John 4:1). Christians must "test the spirits" to determine if they originate with the Holy Spirit or with a demonic spirit. Later, John declared that God has spoken fully and finally in Scripture and offered the most solemn warning against anyone who claims to bring revelation equal or contrary to Scripture. "I

warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book, and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book” (Revelation 22:18-19).

The Prophet appears throughout the history of the church. As early as the second century, Montanus and his disciples claimed to speak on behalf of the Holy Spirit. In the nineteenth century, Joseph Smith claimed to receive The Book of Mormon from the angel Moroni. Today the airwaves are chock-full of people claiming to speak in the name of God through the power of the Spirit. Personal prophecies are just a phone call away. Sarah Young, author of the top Christian bestseller of the decade, boldly claims that her book contains the very words of Jesus. The Prophet continues to speak, to lead astray.

The Abuser

The Abuser uses his position of leadership to take advantage of other people. Usually, he takes advantage of them to feed his sexual lust, though he may also desire power. Both Peter and Jude were aware of the Abuser’s lechery: “And many will follow their sensuality, and because of them the way of truth will be blasphemed” (2 Peter 2:2). “For certain people have crept in unnoticed who long ago were designated for this condemnation, ungodly people, who pervert the grace of our God into sensuality and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ” (Jude 4). The Abuser claims he is tending souls, but his true interest is ravishing bodies. He works his way into women’s lives, confidence, homes, and beds. When he is not pursuing illicit sexual pleasure, he may be domineering people to gain power, abusing them on his path to prominence. He does this in the name of ministry, with the claim of God’s anointing. He unapologetically uses and abuses others to feed his lusts.

Tragically, the history of the Christian faith features countless Abusers. Even in the church’s earliest days, there were sex cults and other depraved perversions of the faith. For centuries, the papacy was little more than a corrupt power struggle. Today it seems that every week, we learn of another leader who has been found guilty of sexual sin with men, women, or even children. Meanwhile, we hear sad tales of survivors who have been abused and cast aside by a leader craving power. The Abuser carries on his work.

The Divider

The Divider uses false doctrine to disrupt or destroy a church. He gleefully divides brother from brother and sister from sister. Jude warned about him: “‘In the last time there will be scoffers, following their own ungodly passions.’ It is these who cause divisions, worldly people, devoid of the Spirit. But you, beloved, building yourselves up in your most holy faith and praying in the Holy Spirit, keep yourselves in the love of God, waiting for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life” (Jude 18-21). The Divider is devoid of the Holy Spirit whose first fruit is love and whose special work is holding believers together in the bond of peace (Galatians 5:22, Ephesians 4:3). This false teacher brings strife, not love. He generates factions, not unity. He desires discord, not harmony.

Congregations and denominations have often been splintered by the Divider as he promulgates his lies. He sometimes makes a minor doctrine into the mark of Christian maturity, causing factions to arise within the body. He may slyly introduce unbiblical doctrines, or he may undermine the ordained leadership. He does it all for the perverse satisfaction that comes with destruction.

The Tickler

The Tickler is the false teacher who cares nothing for what God wants and everything for what men want. He is the man-pleaser rather than the God-pleaser. Paul thought of him as the ear-tickler: “For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths” (2 Timothy 4:3-4). The Tickler craves popularity and praise from the world. To maintain his follower’s respect, he preaches only the parts of the Bible they deem acceptable. Therefore, he speaks about happiness but not about sin, he loves to talk about heaven but not about hell. He gives his listeners only what they want to hear. He preaches a partial gospel which is no gospel at all. He preaches an empty gospel to a packed out church.

The Tickler is as old as the church itself. In the nineteenth century he was Henry Ward Beecher, and in the twentieth he was Norman Vincent Peale and Robert

Schuller. Today he is Joel Osteen, pastor of the largest church in America, who is known equally for his toothy smile and his vacuous content. He preaches an empty gospel to a packed out church. Like the false prophets of Jeremiah's day, he and the thousands like him say, "Peace, peace, when there is no peace" (Jeremiah 6:14).

The Speculator

Finally, the Speculator is the one obsessed with novelty, originality, or speculation. The author of Hebrews warned his church of these "strange teachings," while Paul told Timothy to protect the church against any "different doctrine" (Hebrews 13:9, 1 Timothy 1:3). Teaching focused on speculation displaces the sure and steady doctrine of Scripture. The Speculator tosses aside the bulk of the Bible's content and the weight of the Bible's emphasis in order to obsess about matters that are trivial or novel. He grows weary of the old truths and pursues respectability through originality.

Today, as in every age, the Speculator obsesses about the End Times, and somehow his failed predictions dissuade neither himself nor his followers. Recently we saw him obscuring the clear message of Scripture to search for hidden codes in Scripture. Sometimes he plants himself in academia, where one of his recent masterpieces is a re-imagined God who is unable to see and know the future. Well did Paul label the Speculator a contradictory, irreverent babbling (1 Timothy 6:20-21).

Conclusion

Satan's greatest ambassadors are not pimps, politicians, or power-brokers, but pastors. His priests do not peddle a different religion, but a deadly perversion of the true one. His troops do not make a full-out frontal assault, but work as agents, sneaking into the opposing army. Satan's tactics are studied, clever, predictable and effective. Therefore, we must always remain vigilant. "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will recognize them by their fruits" (Matthew 7:15-16a).

