

A Prophetic Word for 2013: Return to Antioch

Charisma News Editor Jennifer LeClaire is sounding the alarm with a clear prophetic directive to leave behind the Hollywood Christianity, the pillow prophets, the prosper-me gospel.

I was taking a long drive from South Florida to Orlando, praying in the Spirit, and asking the Lord to reveal some prophetic direction for 2013. I must have prayed in the Spirit for two hours before I heard these three words: "Return to Antioch."

With a long, dark stretch of highway still in front of me, I could not readily dive into Scripture to seek understanding about what the Holy Spirit was trying to tell me. So I continued praying in the Spirit and meditating on those three words: "Return to Antioch."

When I opened my Bible to Acts 14, prophetic revelation for the body of Christ—particularly the leadership of the body of Christ—began to unfold:

When Paul and Barnabas were serving together in the mission fields, they made a return visit to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch. With the return to Antioch, they had a clear mandate: to "strengthen the souls of the disciples, exhorting them to continue in the faith, and saying, 'We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God'" (Acts 14:22).

I like how the Amplified Bible draws out this verse: "Establishing and strengthening the souls and the hearts of the disciples, urging and warning and encouraging them to stand firm in the faith, and [telling them] that it is through many hardships and tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God."

And the Message Bible puts it this way: “putting muscle and sinew in the lives of the disciples, urging them to stick with what they had begun to believe and not quit, making it clear to them that it wouldn’t be easy: ‘Anyone signing up for the kingdom of God has to go through plenty of hard times’.”

As I meditated on this verse, it became abundantly apparent how different the apostles’ message was to what we hear in most local churches—and on most Christian TV channels—today. The apostles understood that we are in a spiritual war against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places (see Eph. 6:12). The apostle urged and warned believers to fight the good fight of faith—not for cars and houses and bigger ministries but pure faith in Christ that refuses to compromise the gospel. And the apostles made it clear that it wouldn’t be easy.

We need to “return to Antioch.” We need to return to sound doctrine that strengthens the spirits and souls of the disciples, encourages them to contend for the true faith, and refuses to sugar coat the Christian walk. We need to “return to Antioch” and leave behind the Hollywood Christianity, the pillow prophets, the prosper-me gospel and the other foolish practices that have crept into the 21st century church while we were sleeping. We need to “return to Antioch” and walk with Christ no matter what it costs us. We need to be found faithful when the Lord returns.

The apostles knew that a Great Falling Away was a reality. Today, I believe we are seeing the shadows of the Great Falling Away—and some leaders in the body of Christ are escorting their disciples through the doorway that leads to compromise. Some are giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons. Some are speaking lies in hypocrisy. Some have iron-seared consciences. Some are deceived, being deceived and deceiving others.

When the apostle's returned to Antioch, their message was clear. And their message rings as true in this hour as it did 2,000 years ago: "We must suffer many hardships to enter the Kingdom of God." There's no getting around that no matter what famous television pastors tell you. So, leaders, I implore you to return to Antioch. Strengthen the believers. Encourage them to continue in the truth faith, not the perverted "gimme-gimme" faith that is so prevalent in the Western culture. Please, return to Antioch. Amen.

Click here to watch a video of this message.

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Don't Let the Spirit of Sanballat Distract You

When God called me to build the **house of prayer**, I knew it would come with opposition. I'll admit, I never thought it would play out with literal Sanballats. But that's just what has happened—and often these Sanballats come in sheep's clothing.

Sanballat is an enemy of **revival** and brings strong opposition to what God wants to build. Sanballat is a critical persecutor who brings false accusations against the work and the people putting their hand to the plow. And Sanballat will rally others to the opposition against you, like Tobiahs and Geshems, just like he did to Nehemiah.

The spirit of Sanballat's goal is to discourage you—to get you to quit what God has called you to do. This spirit's overarching mission is to thwart God's work. It's a judgmental, mocking, insidious spirit that, again, sometimes comes in sheep's clothing. Someone flowing in this spirit may even offer to come alongside and help you, but its intentions are to tear down—not build up—the figurative wall God is calling you to build.

A Trio of Sinister Sanballats

Since I opened the doors to the house of prayer in Fort Lauderdale, I've encountered a trio of "Sanballats." All three initially presented as sold out, on fire intercessors with a passion to build the house of prayer. But, soon enough, all three manifested their true intentions: to distract the builders from God's work. These deceived Sanballats may not even realize they are on an assignment from the evil one.

The first Sanballat came in with a commitment to **pray** five days a week. That lasted about a month before the truth manifested. When impure motives came to the light leadership called him out. That's when the Sanballat spirit took its mask off and began persecuting, bringing false accusations, and calling down God's judgment. He tried to rally others to his side but God frustrated his purposes and he faded out as quickly as appeared on the scene.

The second Sanballat came in with the line "You need me! You can't do this without me!" She was actually faithful to **pray** and even help with administrative work in the beginning. But soon enough she began criticizing the model and the leadership. The false accusations were much more subtle, laced with feigned sincerity, but they were accusations nonetheless. This Sanballat left for another **prayer** ministry she felt could bring her more recognition.

The third Sanballat was almost identical. She came in with a

commitment to pray five days a week. She never did fulfill that commitment. It was a lot of talk and inconsistent action, along with a critical, presumptuous spirit. When corrected, the false accusations came flowing in against leadership. When those accusations went unanswered, this spirit influenced her to “declare war” and demand a position in the house of prayer.

Dealing With the Sanballat Spirit

Maybe you recognize this Sanballat spirit flowing in your midst. Any time you set out to build something for God, you will find enemy opposition. So how do you handle the spirit of Sanballat? Do what Nehemiah did.

When Sanballat, Tobiah and Geshem heard about Nehemiah’s plans to rebuild the Jerusalem wall, they were at first grieved. When they saw Nehemiah was executing his vision, they laughed him to scorn, despised the builders and accused them of rebelling against the king (see Neh. 2:19).

Nehemiah’s answer: “The God of heaven, he will prosper us; therefore we his servants will arise and build: but ye have no portion, nor right, nor memorial, in Jerusalem” (Neh. 2:18). Don’t shrink back from confronting this spirit with the truth of God’s Word. If you are confident in what God has called you to do, stand and build despite the scorers, despisers and accusers. And don’t give them the right to build alongside you—or to speak into the work.

When Sanballat heard that Nehemiah and his crew were making progress on the wall, he was furious, indignant and began mocking the Jews. Sanballat and his clan began speaking against the work (Neh. 4:1-3) and conspiring to attack the work (Neh. 4:6-8). Even after the wall was rebuilt, Sanballat didn’t give up. His demonic clan still sought to bring harm (Neh. 6:1-3).

The nonsense did not distract Nehemiah. He stayed focused on erecting the gates. As a matter of fact, he didn’t even go

deal with his detractors face to face. He sent a messenger to them saying, "I am doing a great work, so that I cannot come down. Why should the work cease while I leave it and go down to you?" (Neh. 6:3).

Stubborn Sanballat continued demanding a meeting with Nehemiah. The Bible says he sent the same message to Nehemiah four times and four times Nehemiah offered the same response. Sanballat then started making false accusations against Nehemiah and his motives and appointed prophets to spread lies about him (Neh. 6:6-7) in attempts to scare him away from the work. Sanballat was trying to force him out of own ministry!

Nehemiah's response: He ignored the threats and put it in God's hands: "My God, remember Tobiah and Sanballat, according to these their works, and the prophetess Noadiah and the rest of the prophets who would have made me afraid" (Neh. 6:14).

Don't Stop God's Work!

Finally, the wall was built. But it could have turned out another way if Nehemiah wasn't resolute in his mission. Again, any time you set out to build something for God, you will find enemy opposition.

Of course, it won't always be Sanballat, although this spirit is one that takes aim at builders of the wall and repairers of the breach. Many times it's religious spirits or Jezebel spirits that try to infiltrate the work God has called you to do. In my Sanballat experiences, Jezebel and religion also joined in the assault.

Ultimately, the response is similar: Be led by the **Holy Spirit** as to when to confront and when to disregard the enemy's accusations. Be led by the Holy Spirit as to when to meet with your persecutors and when to send messengers to deal with them. But whatever you do, don't stop God's work! Amen.

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Is the Great Falling Away Already Underway?

While in **prayer** over the vision God gave Steve Hill about the “spiritual avalanche that could kill millions,” an alarming question nagged my soul: Could the **great falling away** already be underway? Could we be witnessing the first fruits of the great falling away even now? Are we at least seeing a shadow of the Great Apostasy?

There is much talk about Christ’s soon Second Coming. But we know that Jesus will not return for a church without spot or wrinkle unless the falling away comes first ... (1 Thess. 2:3). Although it’s nothing entirely new, we are indeed witnessing a fast-progressing departure from sound doctrine and a holy life.

Even a quick comparison between what Scripture tells us about the last days and the manifest sin that has penetrated our generation should serve as a wake up call to every believer: Don’t ignore the signs of the times. In His discussions on the end of the age, Jesus warned us not to let anyone deceive us (Matt. 24). If it weren’t possible to get caught up in the Great Falling Away, Jesus wouldn’t have issued such a strong warning to His followers and left a record of it for you and me.

Discerning Doctrines of Demons

Paul wrote, “Now the Spirit expressly says that in latter times some will depart from the faith, giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons, speaking lies in hypocrisy, having their own conscience seared with a hot iron, forbidding to marry, and commanding to abstain from foods which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth” (1 Tim. 4:1-3).

Some have indeed departed from the faith because they have engaged with **deceiving spirits** and embraced **doctrines of demons**. We’ve witnessed more than one man of God with a major ministry platform bow a knee to doctrines like **universalism**, deceiving and being deceived with this deadly heresy. Despite many in the church lifting their voice against heretical teachings, these deceived ministers hold fast to their demonic doctrine.

We’ve also watched famous pastors speak lies in hypocrisy—lies that left many hurt, wounded, and disillusioned—and yet they remain adored and adorned in the megachurches that made their name great. Clearly, the conscience of some influential church leaders has already been seared with a hot iron (see 1 Tim. 4:2). Some have become the proverbial blind leading the blind.

And would you believe it? Some modern-day, Spirit-filled churches even reserve the right to tell you whom you can or can’t marry (along with many other details of your personal life). I’ve known folks who have nervously gone to ask the pastor for permission to marry another congregant, hoping that their request wasn’t denied and their love wasn’t dashed. And this wasn’t during the **Shepherding Movement**, this was recent.

Living Idolatrous Lifestyles

Paul wrote, “But know this, that in the last days perilous times will come: For men will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, unloving, unforgiving,

slanderers, without self-control, brutal, despisers of good, traitors, headstrong, haughty, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having a form of godliness but denying its power. And from such people turn away!" (2 Tim. 3:1-5)

Paul's laundry list of idolatrous ingrates is not particularly new, but the love of many has certainly grown colder. Many pastors ignore the homeless (and the widows and the orphans). All the while, they spend multiplied thousands on sermon props and video announcements that rival MTV so they can entertain an idolatrous generation on Sunday mornings.

Some pastors offer a 20-minute sermonette and afterwards neglect the opportunity to lay hands on the sick, get people filled with the **Holy Spirit**, or otherwise open up the altar for believers seeking a touch from God. This form of godliness does not make room for God's power. Pleasure has taken its place.

Scratching Itchy Ears

Paul also warned, "For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables" (2 Tim. 4:3).

We see some of this among congregations even now. Beyond universalism, there's the **prosperity gospel** that only demonstrates one side of the cross. There's the grace message that perverts the gospel. These are fables. Billy Graham once filled stadiums with his bold preaching on subjects like hell and holiness. Today, seeker-friendly preachers fill stadiums to hear a motivational message followed by a call to give. Many modern believers may cringe if they had to endure a Billy Graham sermon on hell. Again, some deny the existence of hell.

The Great Falling Away

Victorious believers will overcome Satan by the blood of the Lamb and the word of their testimony—and the fact that they did not love their lives even unto death (Rev. 12:11). I fear there may be fewer victorious believers at the end of the age than some may think.

The Bible tells us to work out our salvation with fear and trembling (Phil. 2:12). We need to get at it because this is sure: Jesus is coming back for a glorious church without spot or wrinkle (Eph. 5:27). I believe the spots and wrinkles will fall away before His return. The gates of hell are trying to prevail against the church and will ultimately fail, but not before enticing some believers into heresy, idolatry and other sin.

I don't believe in once-saved, always-saved doctrines. I believe you can lose your salvation. I don't think it happens overnight. I think it's a slow progression down the slippery slope of deception. I often ask people who are deceived this question: "How would you know if you were deceived?" I've never met one who was deceived find an answer for the question. Rather, they insist that they cannot be deceived or that they would know if they were. If we don't think we could be deceived, we're deceived already. And if we are deceived, we wouldn't know it unless the Holy Spirit broke in and opened the eyes of our heart.

So is the Great Falling Away already underway? Only God knows. At the very least, I think we're seeing the shadow of this turning. We're seeing the hints of this apostasy. And I pray. I pray that the Lord would count me faithful, that I would not be deceived in these last days, and that I might be a pure vessel the Lord can use to sound the alarm. What about you?

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What If December 21 Really Is the End of the World?

In a global event that eclipses the hype of Y2K, **doomsday preppers** all over the world are readying for the end of time. As born-again, blood-bought, Bible-believing, and, yes, tongue-talking Christians, we, of course, know better than to buy into the Mayan calendar hype.

But what if Dec. 21 really was the end of world? What if Jesus cracked the sky on Friday and we were caught up to meet Him as Scripture prophesies. That's not likely to happen, either. Even **doomsday prophet** Harold Camping finally admitted no one knows the day or the hour of the end of the age.

Still, it's times like these that I can't help but hear the lyrics to an . refrain dancing around in my mind. You may know the rapid-fire song I'm thinking about called, "It's the End of the World As We Know It (And I Feel Fine)."

Apparently, . front man Michael Stipe knows enough about the Bible to wax somewhat **prophetic**—if not apocalyptic—with his lyrics that suggest, "That's great, it starts with an earthquake, birds and snakes, an aeroplane..."

Although the song is catchy—catchy enough to find its way into my stream of consciousness 25 years after it hit the radio airwaves—Stipe wasn't aiming to pull a Harold Camping and prophesy impending doom. Yet, as I look around at the world, political and economic landscapes—and social and cultural paradigms—are shifting before my very eyes (and rapidly).

Friday does not mark the end of the world, but we've definitely come face to face with the end of the world as we

know it—and I don't feel fine. My daughter, who is 15, will probably be the last generation to remember the world as it is today.

I'm no doomsday prophet—in fact, I'm believing for the Third **Great Awakening**—but as we laugh and howl at all the mystics and New Agers who are awaiting the end of time on Friday, we should drop to our knees. Not because the world is ending and we have no hope. But because the world is not ending and our hope is in Christ.

Along with Stipe's poetic pop classic, there's another string of words running through my mind these days. Jesus said, "On this rock I will build My church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (see Matt. 16:18). Oh, the gates of hell are trying and they are making a dent in the faith of weak believers who would rather find a way of escape than stand up and fight the good fight.

The gates of hell will not prevail, but that doesn't mean we should lay back on our spiritual gifts and play church. For multiplied thousands of people who die on Friday without meeting the leader of this church the gates of hell will not prevail against, Dec. 21 will mark the end of the world as they know it. And when they get where they are going, they will not feel fine. Neither should we.

So what if Friday did mark the end of the world? What would you be doing today? And what would the world look like if we spent as much time evangelizing the mystics, New Agers, and other lost souls who are buying into the ridiculous doomsday gimmicks? Well, we might get to the end of the world a little sooner. Amen.

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her on Twitter.

10 More Stupid Things Ministers Should Never Do

Lee Grady penned a no-nonsense article last week cleverly titled “10 Stupid Things Ministers Should Never Do.” The ministry of Dr. Mary Ann Brown left an impression on Lee, and in his article he recalled some of her sage advice, which was: “Lee, please don’t ever get stupid.”

I was talking to evangelist Steve Hill of Brownsville Revival on Friday evening and our conversation reminded me of Lee’s article. Steve told me he’s sadly watching pastors fall into a lukewarm theology. The next day Steve had a **prophetic vision** about an avalanche that could kill thousands that we shared with our readers.

There are indeed many dangers for last day ministers. Whether you are an apostle, prophet, evangelist, pastor or teacher, there are temptations and pitfalls at every turn. There are fiery darts coming your way. It can be difficult to know whom to trust. But that doesn’t mean you need to get stupid.

So, if you are a minister, or if you aspire to be one, please decide now not to do the 10 stupid things Lee mentioned. And, for good measure, please decide now not to do the **10 more stupid things** I’ve outlined below that, unfortunately, have also become common in our movement during the past decade.

1. Abuse the sheep. Always remember that church staff—and church volunteers—are serving God, not you. Spiritual abuse is a dirty little secret in the **charismatic** church that is seldom

exposed because it would topple small and large man-made empires alike. If you aren't willing to be the servant of all—if you think the sheep are there to serve you—please hang up your ministry aspirations before you hurt someone. We don't need more spiritual abusers in the pulpit.

2. Water down the gospel. If you aren't going to preach the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth—so help you God!—please don't preach. Although there are many effective preaching styles, if you aren't bold enough to preach the whole gospel—even the parts people don't want to hear—then pray for boldness until you are.

3. Refuse to release people into ministry. God's people don't belong to you. You aren't the one who called them, Jesus did. You aren't the one who anointed them, the Holy Spirit did. If you feel threatened at the notion of your **worship** leader moving on—or your members attending a conference at another local church—your insecurities are perverting your leadership. Equip people for the work of the ministry and then let them fulfill their calling no matter where God leads them without cursing them on their way out the door.

4. Focus on gimmicks and programs rather than people. Seeker-friendly churches bring in bubble machines to attract the kids and A-to-Z programs to attract the adults. When the focus is on glitz, glare, glamour and gimmicks rather than meeting the true needs of people in the community, church can quickly become more like a Christian Club Med (or even a circus) than an expression of the kingdom of God. And that's just dumb.

5. Ignore evangelism. Failing to pursue evangelistic endeavors has got to be the height of pastoral stupidity. Jesus gave us a Great Commission—and that means going beyond your many-walled church and into the surrounding community with the saving grace of Christ's gospel. And refusing to have an altar call for salvations because you insist the lay people in your church should be getting them saved before bringing them to

service is just plain stupid.

6. Refuse to network with other leaders. You may have accountability, but if you refuse to network with other pastors and leaders in your city then you are part of the division that's running rampant in the church. Sitting on the wrong side of the unity table lacks common sense. Jesus wants us to be one as He and the Father are one. He didn't make exceptions for denominational differences.

7. Failure to make prayer a priority. It amazes me to see how little **prayer** is going on many churches. Pastors who don't make prayer a mandate in their church are shooting themselves in both feet and crippling their vision. And pastors who are too important to show up to the prayer meeting to join hands with the laity are sending signals that prayer is not their priority.

8. Overemphasizing spiritual warfare teaching. Spiritual warfare should be taught, but not at the expense of teaching the rest of the gospel. Pastors who focus too much on spiritual warfare are making unbalanced disciples that flow in suspicion rather than discernment and may all the while miss the devil's work in their midst.

9. Quenching the Holy Spirit. For all the extremes out there with false prophecies, gold dust, gold teeth and angel feathers, quenching a genuine move of the **Holy Spirit** is stupid. Cutting the worship at three songs in order to rush to your memorized message when the Spirit of God is obviously doing a work is dumb. Put your pride down and let the Holy Spirit take control.

10. Burning out. The ministry brings pressures that can lead to divorce, emotional breakdowns and sin of all manner. Failure to take heed to the warning signs of burnout is stupid and it can cost you your ministry.

At the end of the day, if you take on the David mentality you

won't get stupid. David said, "One thing I have desired of the Lord, that will I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord, and to inquire in His temple. For in the time of trouble He shall hide me in His pavilion; In the secret place of His tabernacle He shall hide me; He shall set me high upon a rock" (Psalm 27:4-8). Pursuing intimacy with the Lord is the smartest thing you can do. Amen.

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When Casting Out Devils Brings Retaliation

When you **cast out devils** by the finger of God, then the kingdom of God has come to you (Luke 11:20). But what comes next isn't always as much fun. There is often natural and spiritual retaliation for **setting the captives free**.

Although no weapon formed against a deliverance minister can prosper, the enemy nonetheless forms a weapon and takes his best shot. After all, when you **cast out devils**—when you set the captives free—you just did marked damage to the kingdom of darkness. Whether you are an experienced **deliverance minister** or just beginning to study the gospel art of casting out devils, entering the battle without expecting the backlash is not wise.

Retaliation From Flesh and Blood

Deliverance was an earmark of Jesus' ministry. His keen ability to **cast out demons** was one of the things that made his ministry so popular among the people. But Jesus faced His fair share of retaliation for **casting out devils**—and so will you if you engage in **deliverance ministry**.

After Jesus cast the devil out of two demon-possessed men in the region of the Gadarenes, sending them into the swine, the entire town came out to meet Him. But instead of glorifying God as one might expect, they begged him to get out of town (Matt. 8:22-33). If that wasn't insulting enough, when Jesus cast a devil out of a blind and mute man the Pharisees suggested He was using the power of Satan (Matt. 12:24). And **religious spirits** were especially indignant that Jesus cast out a devil on the Sabbath day (Luke 13:14). Ultimately, one of the reasons the religious spirits wanted to kill Jesus was because he was setting people free from demonic oppression and, in doing so, threatening their dead religious rule.

Those who don't understand the spiritual dynamic of **demonic oppression** often criticize, mock or otherwise ridicule deliverance ministers. If you cast out devils, even some Christians may think you are a heretic or have a demon yourself. Such retaliation is from flesh and blood, but it is motivated by the whispers of the enemy who wants to **persecute** you sorely until you cast off your casting out ministry.

In his video teaching on *Demonology & Deliverance*, Lester Sumrall said he was greatly criticized for his teaching on casting out devils: "You've got to be able to accept that. If you are not able to accept that, the devil will defeat you quite easily. You've got to be willing to be mocked, to be laughed at, to be misunderstood in order to do what God has wants you to do." Amen.

Retaliation From Evil Spirits

On the other side of the retaliation coin, **deliverance ministers** can expect retaliation through manifested **spiritual warfare**. I've cast devils out of people only to turn around and face a heavy dose of witchcraft or imaginations that tried to convince me the devil never left. I've had nightmares after exercising deliverance ministry. I've felt tired and sick. Thankfully, I understood that it was the enemy hitting back and took authority over the assignment in the name of Jesus.

When you set out to engage in **deliverance ministry**, don't go there without preparing your heart—and don't go there alone. Jesus sent the 72 disciples out two by two to **cast out devils** (Matt. 10:8). And they understood their authority in the name of Jesus before they ventured into ministry. Deliverance ministry is not a game of patty cake.

To be sure, you can't just read *Pigs in the Parlor* and dub yourself a deliverance minister. If you don't truly understand your authority in Christ—if you don't have an intimate relationship with Him—the retaliation could be dramatic and painful. Remember the itinerant Jewish exorcists who took it upon themselves to call the name of the Lord Jesus over those who had evil spirits?

They said, "We exorcise you by the Jesus whom Paul preaches." The seven sons of Sceva joined into the deliverance party "And the evil spirit answered and said, 'Jesus I know, and Paul I know; but who are you?' Then the man in whom the evil spirit was leaped on them, overpowered them, and prevailed against them, so that they fled out of that house naked and wounded" (Acts 19:15-16).

Although you aren't likely to experience anything quite like what happened to the sons of Sceva, that doesn't mean you shouldn't prepare yourself for retaliation before you ever step foot into the **deliverance** session. Beyond fasting, seeking God for wisdom, and putting together a team of deliverance ministers, remember to bind up the retaliation and

plead the **blood of Jesus** over yourself before and after the session. And everything you do, do it with faith in the name of Jesus. Amen.

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Would You Recognize a Christian Cult if You Were In One?

Cults are making major news headlines this month. Some accused of cult-status are truly cultish and others are not. But the flood of **cult activity** should urge you to sharpen your cult identifications skills. Most Christian cult followers had no idea what they were getting into until they were already brainwashed adherents to the warped religions.

ABC's *20/20* just exposed the shocking truth about life inside Warren Jeffs' **Fundamentalist Latter-Day Saints Church**. The cult leader was convicted and jailed for sexual abuse of young girls, yet his 8,000 followers continue to believe he's a **persecuted prophet**. He's known for ordering married couples to stop having sex and handpicked 15 men to father all of the cult's children. That's clearly a cult.

Meanwhile, Fox News reported earlier this month that members of a Bolivian cult that reveres human skulls have held a rite to close out a Roman Catholic religious festival in honor of

the dead. The cult's followers believe the skulls have **miraculous** powers that help them find a job or even help their favorite soccer team win. That's clearly a cult.

Also earlier this month, ABC 7 reported on Scientology controversy in Washington, D.C. L. Ron Hubbard's creation theory highlights a despot named Xenu sending surplus beings to volcanoes on earth. Scientology officials deny **cult status**, but this is clearly a cult. And just earlier this week, Ontario officials began investigating allegations of abuse and polygamy under the leadership of a "**prophet**" named Fred King from the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. Meanwhile, Fox sent an undercover reporter to investigate the Church of the Endtimes and its cultish qualities. Then there was Angus T. Jones, a star of the comedy series *Two and a Half Men*. His family expressed concerns that his newfound religion is a cult.

Those are just a few of the "cult" headlines from November. You can find others by searching "cult church" on Google News. But the question is, would you **recognize a Christian cult** if you were in its midst? Would you know you'd entered into a cult before you were effectively brainwashed? How can you discern a Christian cult?

IHOP is Not a Cult

For all the legitimate cult accusations in news headlines this month, there was also one major false accusation among them. False accusations about cults make it more difficult for people to understand what a cult is. So I want to dispell this allegation right now. *The Huffington Post* published an unfortunate article penned by a **radical gay activist** characterizing the International House of Prayer in Kansas City, Mo., as a cult. It's clear from the words on my digital screen that Wayne Besen doesn't understand the **Holy Spirit** or how He moves. How could he? He's not saved and he's been on a witch-hunt for years.

So when an IHOPU student—who was also participating in an outside sex cult—confessed to the murder of a former IHOP U intern, Besen took his opportunity declare his discernment in warning Kansas City about this 13-year-old **prayer movement**. IHOP is not a cult. In fact, in response to the tragedy IHOP Director **Mike Bickle** taught on the seven characteristics of a cult. I've heard Mike teach on this in the past, but he dusted off his notes to address the IHOP community earlier this month—a responsible response to the heartbreaking story.

I'd highly recommend heading over to Mike Bickle's teaching library and listening to the message for yourself. I've summarized the points of "How to Recognize Cults: 7 Characteristics" below in order to get the message out to more people. When I first heard Mike's teaching on **Christian cults**, it really opened my eyes. I pray this will open your eyes, too.

Seven Characteristics of a Cult

Bickle defines a cult as, "a group that deviates from the doctrines and practices of historic Christianity and has an inordinate loyalty to one leader, whose beliefs are not found in Scripture (as affirmed by historic Christianity). Cult leaders, or false teachers, often believe that they alone possess the truth. If a group displays even one of these seven characteristics, they are a cult or have cultish tendencies." Here are the seven characteristics of a cult as Bickle outlined them:

1. Oppose critical thinking versus demanding that people think for themselves: Cult members must accept what the cult leader believes without ever challenging their doctrines. They do not want their members to think critically for themselves.

2. Dishonoring the family unit versus insisting on the biblical priority of the family unit: Children are taught to be more loyal to the leaders than to their parents. Women are taught to be more loyal to the leaders than to their husbands,

and husbands are taught to accept this as normal behavior.

3. Isolating members and penalizing them for leaving versus helping them to do God's will: Cults isolate their people from their families, the church and society. They reject any who leave and warn them, saying that they will be judged by God or will lose God's best if they leave. People are taught to make lifelong commitments to the group. Some groups teach that their members must get permission before joining another ministry.

4. Seeking inappropriate loyalty to their leaders versus loyalty and connecting people to Jesus: Cults seek to connect their members to the cult leader and require loyalty to him instead of to Jesus. Loyalty is defined as not questioning the leader. It is very dangerous, when the leader cannot be questioned.

5. Crossing biblical boundaries of behavior versus walking in purity and financial integrity: Cults cross biblical boundaries of behavior especially in immorality and finances. False teachers can be detected by their covetousness and immorality (2 Peter 2:3-18).

6. Separation from the church versus a culture of honor towards the church: Cults separate from the wider church and operate with an elite spirit, believing that they alone have a special status with God. They have a polarized mentality of "us versus them." They criticize the larger body of Christ and often claim to be the only ones truly saved. They view all other ministry and denominations as being in error.

7. Emphasizing special revelations that contradict Scripture versus loyalty to Scripture: Cults emphasize the special revelations of their leader that contradict the Scripture.

Saints, hear me. I've been very close to two cults and escaped both before falling into the deception headlong. It's not always easy to recognize the fruit of cults at the surface.

You have to dig down to the roots. Sometimes the cultish behaviors don't manifest until you are integrated into the community. At that point, it's harder to escape—but Jesus can set you free if you set your heart to go through the door into true Christianity. Amen.

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Was it God or the Devil? Discerning Satanic Hindrances

I'll admit it. There have been times when I thought the devil was in my way and it was really the **Holy Spirit** preventing me. There were other times when I thought the Holy Spirit was opening the door and it was really the devil tapping into the idolatry in my own heart to set me up for a mess.

I've grown up quite a lot in Christ since then, but we are all prone to miss it from time to time. Understanding how the Holy Spirit leads and how the devil deceives can help you follow the steps the Lord has ordered for you instead of falling into the roaring lion's trap.

We can take a lesson from the apostle Paul, who keenly observed the difference between his own plans, the Holy Spirit's plans and the devil's plans.

Paul's Bright Idea

Paul was called to preach the gospel to the Gentiles and he got about his Father's business with as much zeal as he formerly displayed in **persecuting** the church. Paul traveled the world over in his day, but when he and his **apostolic** team went through certain cities to preach the Word the Holy Spirit stopped him in favor of a more strategic mission. In Acts 16: 6-10, Luke records:

"Now when they had gone through Phrygia and the region of Galatia, they were forbidden by the Holy Spirit to preach the word in Asia. After they had come to Mysia, they tried to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit did not permit them. So passing by Mysia, they came down to Troas. And a vision appeared to Paul in the night. A man of Macedonia stood and pleaded with him, saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." Now after he had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go to Macedonia, concluding that the Lord had called us to preach the gospel to them."

Paul concluded that the Lord wanted him to preach the gospel in Macedonia only after the **Holy Spirit** twice prevented him from preaching in other cities, then gave him a vision that clearly laid out the next leg of his missionary journey. In other words, Paul had his plans but the **Holy Spirit** had a different plan. Paul could have mistakenly blamed the devil for the obstacles to getting the gospel out in Phrygia and the region of Galatia and Bithynia, but he discerned it was the Holy Spirit—not the devil—preventing him from fulfilling his mission.

The story was altogether different in Paul's endeavors to visit the church at Thessalonica. Paul writes, "Therefore we wanted to come to you—even I, Paul, time and again—but Satan hindered us" (1 Thess. 2:18). We don't know exactly how Paul determined it was Satan hindering him rather than the Holy Spirit preventing him or what Satan may have done to hinder him. But Paul was certain the devil was to blame.

Discerning Satanic Satanic Hindrances

Sometimes it's obvious that the Holy Spirit is preventing you or that the devil is thwarting you. But sometimes it's not so obvious. So how do you tell the difference?

1. Ask the Holy Spirit what is going on. First of all we need to pray and ask the Lord what is going on. When in doubt, our best first move is to trust in the Lord and not on our own understanding. Just because we've seen a pattern in how the Holy Ghost moves or how Satan works doesn't mean we can automatically presume who's behind something. That said, there are some discernable demonic hints. For example ...

2. Did God already tell you to do it? If you are convinced that the **Holy Spirit** expressly told you to do something and you are meeting with obstacles, it's likely the enemy trying to prevent fruit for the Kingdom. Satan constantly works to hinder God's plan, even though he is already defeated.

3. What is the objective of the hindrance? Any hindrance that keeps you from getting closer to God is not from God. Satan will set up idols in our lives hoping we'll go after the promotion, the money, the entertainment, the fame or the something else. Of course, he uses our own flesh and soulish desires to distract us. You can't really blame the devil.

4. What's going through your mind? The Word says we should think on good things. If the hindrance you face is coming in the form of unpleasant thoughts and fearful imaginations, that's not God speaking to you. That's the devil's way to get you into fear, doubt and unbelief.

Remember, we are not wrestling against flesh and blood—but we are wrestling. The key is to wrestle with the enemy and not with God. In other words, we don't want to be resisting God when we should be resisting the enemy and we don't want to be cooperating with the enemy when we should be cooperating with God. The enemy is walking around like a roaring lion seeking

someone to devour. God's eyes roam to and for over the earth in order to strengthen the ones whose hearts are fully committed to him (see 2 Chron. 16:9).

The bottom line—do what Paul did: “Commit your way to the Lord, trust also in Him, and He shall bring it to pass” (Psalm 37:5) No devil in hell can keep you from God's will if you are sold out to His plan. Amen.

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When Spiritual Warfare Makes You Bite Your Tongue

It was a jaw-dropping moment for me years ago when I asked the **Holy Spirit** what my biggest problem was and He told me, “Your mouth.” I expected Him to tell me I needed to **pray** more or read the Word more—or do something more. But He assured me my mouth—the very thing He'd called me to use—was my biggest weakness during that season.

Upon this surprising **revelation**, I did what you would do: I started studying Scriptures on the mouth so I could align my lips with God's heart. I had already memorized the verse about life and death being in the power of the tongue, so I dug deeper. I discovered that if you watch your words and hold your tongue, you'll save yourself a lot of grief (Prov. 21:23, The Message.)

But I still didn't get it. I was missing key **revelations** from the Sermon on the Mount. I understood that a soft answer turns always wrath, alright, but didn't quite have the self-control to offer a soft response in the face of verbal attacks. Combine that with a **prophetic** edge that tends to confront things that oppose the will of God and, well, let's just say I sometimes had a sharp tongue in the midst of the spiritual warfare.

Exploiting My Weakness

Of course, the enemy saw the weakness and set out to exploit it so that he could serve up a plate of cold condemnation after I fell into his wicked trap. The devil has consistently motivated people to steal from me, gossip about me, persecute me, falsely accuse me and otherwise verbally attack me.

Honestly, I didn't always handle the **spiritual warfare** so well. More than anything, I used to spend a lot of time meditating on what people said and did. I spent a little bit of time feeling sorry for myself. And I didn't spend any time looking for how God was moving in the midst of the injustice. But the God of justice used the injustice as a training tool and eventually I started to catch on.

Through it, I learned how to keep my eyes on Him instead of man. I came to understand the tremendous power of forgiving and praying for the people the enemy uses to attack me. I've experienced the reality of God's vindication over and over again. I also discovered the true wisdom Solomon offered in Proverbs about the mouth.

Before I share with you a key the **Holy Spirit** gave me that helped me apply godly wisdom about the mouth in the midst of spiritual warfare, let me share with you a few Scriptures to consider:

- "You are snared by the words of your mouth; You are taken by the words of your mouth" (Prov. 6:2).

- “A man will be satisfied with good by the fruit of his mouth ...” (Prov. 12:14)
- “He who guards his mouth preserves his life, But he who opens wide his lips shall have destruction” (Prov. 13:3).
- “A man has joy by the answer of his mouth” (Prov. 15:23).
- “The heart of the righteous studies how to answer” (Prov. 15:28)
- “The heart of the wise teaches his mouth ...” (Prov. 16:23).
- “A fool’s lips enter into contention, and his mouth calls for blows” (Prov. 18:6).

The 24-Hour Rule

With those Scriptures in mind, I believe the **Holy Spirit** gave me a strategy for responding to attacks, whether they come face-to-face, via phone messages, instant messages, text messages, or e-mail. I call it the 24-hour rule. Although I do not respond to demon-inspired hate mail I receive for delivering an uncompromising word, there are times when a response to friends, family and coworkers who are moving in the wrong spirit is necessary. But that doesn’t mean it’s necessary immediately.

I discovered this “24-hour rule” revelation when a friend was going through a major trial. She had turned on me because she wanted me to be something only God could be in her life. Even if I wanted to, I couldn’t give her what she thought she needed from me. And the **Holy Spirit** prevented me from even trying. He wanted her to depend on Him, not on me. That led to some pretty nasty e-mail and text messages over the course of a week.

It was confusing and hurtful and the temptation was to answer her in the same spirit. But I sensed the **Holy Spirit** offering sound wisdom: “When these types of messages come to you, wait

24 hours to respond.” This principle has become what I call “the 24-hour rule”—and it works well. When someone comes at me with a message that hits me wrong, whether it’s a co-worker, friend, family member, churchgoer—or anyone else—I don’t immediately respond. I set my heart to wait 24 hours.

Of course, you can’t always wait 24 hours to respond to everything. Some issues are emergent. But you can step back, take a deep breath, pray, seek wisdom from the Scriptures and let the wisdom you put in your heart teach your mouth. You can guard your mouth instead of opening your lips wide. You can avoid the snare the enemy has put before you. You can decide not to allow your lips to enter contention.

In other words, you can wait until you get over the stunned feeling that hit you when you received the message and get your heart in line with God’s before you answer. Waiting also gives the person who delivered the questionable message time to cool down or reconsider their stance. Instead of adding fleshly fuel to the fire and letting a poisonous tongue bring division by answering in the same spirit, you can wait until you have peace in your heart and respond out of that peace. You can be a peacemaker who pleases God. Amen.

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