

6 Signs of a Toxic ‘Apostle’

I’ve just spent two weeks in South America, where the Holy Spirit is moving in unprecedented ways. Churches are growing and average Christians are sharing their faith passionately. One recent Pew Research study showed that 1 in 5 Latin Americans now identifies as an evangelical Christian—and a majority of these are Pentecostals.

But this growth is not without problems. While there are certainly many healthy Christian movements in the region, other churches are suffering from a lack of trained leadership. And untrained, untested leaders often result in spiritual abuse, false doctrines and financial corruption.

I’ve become more concerned lately with leaders who declare themselves “apostles” when they have no business wearing that label. I believe true apostolic leadership is needed today, but a small army of imposters is threatening to damage the work of God. It is time to heed the apostle Paul, who warned of “false apostles” and “deceitful workers” who were “disguising themselves as apostles of Christ” (2 Cor. 11:13).

Discerning the difference between a true and false apostle is not complicated. Since Scripture clearly tells us that Paul is our apostolic model (see 1 Cor. 4:16), we can use his surrendered life as our standard. Here are six signs that a man or woman who claims apostolic leadership is actually a dangerous influence in the church.

1. A toxic “apostle” requires the title. One popular television preacher in the United States typically sends a letter to his hosts before any preaching engagement and specifies that his name must be preceded by the “apostle” title. Compare that arrogant attitude with the humility of Paul, who referred to himself as the chief of sinners (see 1 Tim. 1:15). If a man requires people to elevate him to an

elite status, you can be sure he has a serious character flaw.

2. A toxic “apostle” carries an aura of self-importance. In some churches I have visited in Africa, the “man of God” waits until after worship to enter the auditorium—and then he is followed by an entourage. Someone carries his Bible, another carries his handkerchief, someone else carries his water bottle and another brings his iPad. This spectacle is designed to impress people—but it is all just religious theater. It is an offense to God. You can be certain that a man with this much pride will soon fall.

3. A toxic “apostle” is inaccessible. One pastor I know in a Latin American country belongs to a network of churches ruled by powerful preacher. But when I asked my friend if he gets advice or mentoring from this leader, the answer was no. The “apostle” does not offer counsel, training or personal interaction of any kind to the leaders in his group. He simply steps into his pulpit to preach and then vanishes.

The apostle Paul’s style was totally the opposite. Rather than being aloof and impersonal, Paul spent time with those he was mentoring. He told the Thessalonians: “So having great love toward you, we were willing to impart to you not only the gospel of God but also our own lives, because you were dear to us” (1 Thess. 2:8). If an “apostle” cannot get on the same level with people and interact with them, he is in the wrong profession.

4. A toxic “apostle” dominates and controls people. The apostle Paul told Timothy that church leaders are required to be gentle and “not argumentative” (1 Tim. 3:3). Yet I have known so-called apostles who used their violent temper to manipulate and intimidate their followers. A man who is full of anger is unbroken and un-surrendered; God would never entrust an apostolic ministry to someone with that fatal flaw. The Lord will first drain out his anger and replace it with the sweetness of Jesus before letting him shepherd God’s

people.

5. A toxic “apostle” refuses to work with churches outside his network. False apostles are insecure because of their lack of training, so they feel threatened by other leaders’ successes. They develop an atmosphere of elitism—and pretend that their doctrines and preaching styles are superior to everyone else’s. False apostles also demand strict loyalty to their churches and may even curse members who leave. True apostles are not controllers or elitists; they work to expand the kingdom of God, not just their own church or denomination.

6. A toxic “apostle” demands financial payment. I asked one friend in Latin America if his “apostle” offered him marriage counseling, encouragement or ministry training. He replied: “No, the only discussions we have are about the tithe I owe him.” How tragic that hard-working pastors are being ripped off by wolves in sheep’s clothing.

As we contend for true apostolic leadership in today’s church, let’s avoid the pitfalls of immaturity. We need character, humility and integrity as well as powerful anointing. Don’t follow the false apostles. {eo}