

Dr. David Jeremiah: How to Recognize the World's Sinister Counterfeits

I hope this hasn't happened to you: You meet with a doctor only to later discover that the person you met with wasn't a doctor at all. You met with a counterfeit doctor, a person masquerading as someone else.

We don't have to look very far in the news to see how often this actually happens:

—In August 2018, a 23-year-old man was sentenced to prison for impersonating a physician at two California hospitals. He roamed the halls of the hospitals wearing a white coat with a stethoscope around his neck, and even diagnosed a patient.

—In February 2016, an 18-year-old man in Palm Beach County, Florida, was arrested after opening his own medical clinic and impersonating a doctor. He was arrested after an undercover officer made an appointment and was examined by the teen. He was sentenced to more than three years in prison.

—In August 2012, a man pretended to be a doctor in South Carolina and treated as many as 500 senior citizens through a collection of primary care facilities for seniors. He used stolen documentation belonging to a friend, an actual doctor, to gain approval to “practice medicine” at the South Carolina clinic. He faced two years in prison.

All of these instances are reminiscent of one of the greatest counterfeiters of all time, Frank Abagnale. Now 71, and working as an American security consultant for the FBI, Abagnale was the subject of the critically acclaimed 2002 film *Catch Me If You Can*. Before being caught and serving prison time in France, Sweden and the United States, Abagnale

successfully created eight different identities for himself including an airline pilot, a lawyer, a physician and a Federal Bureau of Prisons agent. He supported himself by forging checks worth millions of dollars—he was so good that the FBI eventually employed him to help them learn how to stop forgers.

And then there was the most expensive counterfeit operation in modern times—the Bernie Madoff “Ponzi scheme” on Wall Street. An actual respected financier and investment counselor on Wall Street before being caught, Madoff’s fraud resulted in losses of \$65 billion to investors by creating the illusion of sky-high returns. In typical Ponzi scheme fashion, new investments were used to pay previous investors fantastic payouts, payouts that attracted more new investors. No such cycle is sustainable, of course, and Madoff was sentenced to prison in 2009 for 150 years.

These are all sad stories. Our hearts grieve for those who, for whatever reasons, feel the need to perpetrate such counterfeit illusions and for those hurt by their actions. These stories, and others like them, raise the question: How can we protect ourselves from counterfeiters as we go about our daily lives? In general, the phrase caveat emptor comes to mind: “Let the buyer beware.” It’s up to us to carry out due diligence in this world—to check the details, read the fine print and “kick the tires.” As our parents told us, “If something doesn’t seem right, walk away.” And, “If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is.”

Counterfeits in the realm of medicine, finance, art, telephone scammers and knock-off consumer goods are prevalent, and we must remain alert. But there is another realm in which counterfeit activity can be even more devastating: the world of spiritual activity and truth. Sadly, we’ve seen too many examples of spiritual counterfeiters in today’s world.

Dangers of Counterfeits

Consider this question: Does a deceived person know he is deceived? Obviously not! Which illustrates just how careful we have to be in all of life, but especially in the spiritual realm.

The entire human drama began with deception when Eve said to God, "The serpent deceived me, and I ate [the forbidden fruit]" (Gen. 3:13). And deception is mentioned some 40 times in the New Testament. Jesus warned about false messiahs who would claim to be the Christ and deceive many (Matt. 24:4-5). He also warned about false prophets demonstrating convincing signs and wonders (verse 24) and wolves in sheep's clothing (Matt. 7:15).

The apostle Paul warned the elders of the church in Ephesus that "dreadful wolves will enter among you, not sparing the flock," pretending to be servants of God (Acts 20:29). "So be on your guard!" he told them (verse 31, NIV). He warned the church in Rome about men who "through smooth talk and flattery [would] deceive the hearts of the unsuspecting" (Rom. 16:18, MEV). And he warned the Corinthians that just as Eve was deceived, "your minds might be led astray from the simplicity that is in Christ" (2 Cor. 11:3).

Perhaps the clearest exposé of spiritual counterfeits is Paul's description of the false apostles in Corinth: "For such are false apostles and deceitful workers, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. And no wonder! For even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. Therefore it is no great thing if his ministers also disguise themselves as ministers of righteousness, whose end will be according to their works" (2 Cor. 11:13-15).

Do we think spiritual counterfeits disappeared at the end of the first century? Of course not! Counterfeit spiritual workers are ministers of Satan. As long as Satan exists, he will be using counterfeit spirituality and false doctrine to disrupt the growth and maturity of the church.

Whether a \$20 bill, a designer handbag or theological doctrine, all counterfeits are based on one thing: a lie. And Satan is the father of lies; lies are his native language—"there is no truth in him" (John 8:44). So until he is confined in "the bottomless pit" for a thousand years, then thrown into "the lake of fire and brimstone" forever, he will seek to deceive the world about God and His truth (Rev. 20:3, 10).

Defending Against Counterfeits

Think about this: We know from Scripture that, the closer we get to the end of this age and the Second Coming of Christ, the more chaotic this world will become. And wherever there is chaos, there is anxiety and worry. And wherever there are people who are desperate with questions, there will be an increase in people offering answers. That's why Christians must know where to find His answers and where to put their trust in the days ahead. We must know how to separate true spirituality from counterfeit spirituality.

1. Know the truth. For years, it was popular for preachers to say that U.S. Treasury agents study only actual currency in order to spot counterfeits. The fact is, agents study both. But the point is well-made: The more we know God's truth about everything, the more readily we can detect counterfeits. And yes, there is value in knowing about counterfeit doctrines. But in order to know what is false, we must first know what is true. So, our entire life must be based on what is true. In word and deed, we must walk in the "paths of righteousness" (Ps. 23:3), sticking to the "narrow gate" of truth in all things (Matt. 7:13).

2. Know God. God is the "God of truth" (Deut. 32:4; Ps. 31:5). So, in order to know truth, we must know God. And just to be clear: "No one comes to [God] except through [Christ Jesus]" (John 14:6). But it is the third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit of God, who leads us into knowing and

understanding God's truth. As Jesus told the disciples, "[The Spirit] will guide you into all truth" (John 16:13). We know truth by knowing God—through the Son, guided by the Spirit.

3. Know the Word. If he wasn't the first, the great theologian A.A. Hodge was among the first to call the Bible "the only infallible rule of faith and practice" (*Outlines of Theology*, 1860). Could anything be simpler? Christians must know the Word in order not to be deceived by counterfeit teaching.

4. Know courage. Do not be afraid to say "No" when someone offers you a teaching in person, on the Internet or in a broadcast—a teaching with which you are unfamiliar. Ask a trusted spiritual leader for guidance; read Scripture; pray; consider the source. As a Christian you are under no obligation to receive teachings from others of which you are uncertain. Just politely say "No" when necessary until you have time to be sure.

By definition, there is only one "real thing." Accept no substitutes for the truth of God and His Word! {eoa}

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