

5 Red Flags That Warn Us of False Teachers

Last week I wrote about how grieved I was that so many Christians naively swallowed the teachings of Nigerian prophet T.B. Joshua—in spite of repeated warnings from Nigerian pastors who knew of his occult origins. Sadly, even after evidence surfaced proving that Joshua practiced juju rituals and sexually abused women, some of his followers still defend him.

People ask me: “But if T.B. Joshua was a false prophet, how could he perform miracles?” Or they ask: “How could he be false when he used the name of Jesus?” Those questions alone indicate that they forgot Jesus’ own words; He warned that false prophets “will show great signs and wonders, so as to mislead, if possible, even the elect” (Matt. 24:24, NASB 1995). Jesus also said charlatans would use His name to gain credibility (24:5).

Because I’ve encountered many false prophets, swindlers and spiritual quacks since the 1970s, I learned that there are several red flags that warn us of wolves in sheep’s clothing. If you see any of these qualities in a “minister,” you can be certain something devilish is lurking behind the curtain. If you choose to follow these blind guides, they will lead you into a ditch.

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1. Beware of the arrogant. Satan fell from heaven because of pride. He is an egomaniac. Likewise, false prophets and false teachers are narcissists. Remember Simon the sorcerer, who tried to buy spiritual power from the evangelist Philip in

Acts 8? He called himself “the Great Power of God” (Acts 8:10). He was full of himself! Anytime you hear a “minister” bragging about how he or she is the “best” or the “greatest,” run as far as you can.

2. Beware of occultism mixed with Christianity. T.B. Joshua’s most serious problem was his connection to African witchcraft. Most of his followers didn’t know he routinely visited a ritualistic shrine filled with fetishes and idols in order to draw power from dark forces. No genuine Christian would mix idolatry with the Holy Spirit. This is called syncretism, and it is a deadly concoction.

I once met a man who claimed to be a “bishop,” but he seemed spiritually off. I couldn’t put my finger on the problem until one day he admitted that he believed in astrology. This man actually believed that God “anointed” him because he was born under a certain Zodiac sign! I wasn’t surprised when this man’s ministry ended in scandal. Paul warned us in 2 Corinthians 6:14b-15a: “What fellowship has light with darkness? Or what harmony has Christ with Belial?” Anyone who mixes truth with the occult will lead others off the narrow path of Jesus.

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3. Beware of illusion and manipulation. False prophets claim to walk in God’s supernatural power, but they use sleight-of-hand tricks to deceive. I knew a popular “prophet” who memorized a ministry address list in order to call out “words of knowledge” about people. (He pretended to get street address numbers from God.) I knew another man who claimed to have the gift of healing, but he used a tiny microphone in his ear to get information from his staff about people in the audience. Fraudsters like this use smoke and mirrors to bilk people.

4. Beware of the sexually immoral. False prophets almost

always end up in sex scandals. Consider Joseph Smith, the founder of the Mormon religion; he taught that God allows polygamy, because that doctrine gave him an excuse to have sex with multiple wives. This explains why Mormonism has always been oppressive toward women.

The short epistle of Jude gives a sobering warning about spiritual predators who teach false doctrines while preying on the vulnerable. And Jesus, in one of his prophetic messages in Revelation, warns the church of Thyatira about a woman identified as “Jezebel” who taught God’s people to commit immorality (Rev. 2:20). Any “preacher” who carries a message of sexual permissiveness, or who lives that lifestyle, is a dangerous wolf.

5. Beware of pretenders. Christian leaders should be genuine and authentic. They are approachable, loving, forgiving, humble and open about their flaws. The letter of 2 Corinthians is a masterful discourse on how ministers should be real and sincere. Paul said: “You see, we are not like the many hucksters who preach for personal profit. We preach the word of God with sincerity and with Christ’s authority, knowing that God is watching us” (2 Cor. 2:17, NLT). Paul was basically telling his colleagues: “Don’t be fake!”

We live in the era of social media influencers. Anybody today can launch a YouTube channel or an OnlyFans account; any false teacher can gather a million followers on TikTok. Don’t jump on bandwagons because a preacher looks cool, or because he can “slay” a crowd with his “new revelations,” or because everybody is talking about him or her. Pray for spiritual discernment and learn to use it; then, teach others to discern between truth and error.

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