

6 Warning Signs of Spiritual Danger

A desperate friend recently contacted me because he was worried that his son might be under the influence of a Christian ministry with questionable doctrines. The leader of the ministry preaches that any church that doesn't experience regular healings isn't following the true Jesus—and he suggests that only his small congregation has an inside track with God. Thankfully, my friend's son discerned something was off track.

Satan loves to pull Christians into unhealthy extremes. And immature Christian leaders sometimes allow youthful pride, greed or insecurity to suck them into toxic spirituality. The result is always a trail of wounded people. In my years of ministry, I've learned there are several clear signs that a ministry has veered away from the truth and into deception. Here are the most obvious:

1. Lack of spiritual accountability. Healthy leaders know they need to surround themselves with mentors and advisers who can question them if they step out of line. Proverbs 11:14 says: "In the multitude of counselors there is safety." But if you are following a teacher, prophet or apostle who has not submitted himself to any form of accountability, you are asking for trouble. Never align yourself with a Lone Ranger, no matter how fiery his sermons are. He will likely lead you off a cliff.

2. Overemphasis on money. You'd think we would have learned this by now, after so many American charlatans have conned people out of their life savings to build their mansions. But the charismatic church today is still vulnerable to the extremes of financial shenanigans. Godly leaders always call people to fund the work of the church and gospel outreach;

unhealthy leaders, on the contrary, manipulate people in order to line their own pockets. Don't be charmed when a preacher makes outlandish promises about what will happen if you give to him.

3. An elitist attitude. All believers in Jesus are part of the body of Christ. Yet Christians who experience certain gifts or manifestations of the Holy Spirit are sometimes tempted to think they are superior. If they aren't careful, this subtle spiritual pride can morph into a dangerous elitism. Suddenly they are God's favorites, with special access to revelation that no one else knows and authority that no one else has.

Some ministries today claim to have inside information about end-times prophecy and the return of Jesus. In some cases they convince people to store up food and even guns to prepare for Armageddon. Back in the 1980s, a preacher named Charles Meade convinced many people to follow him to Florida, where his church taught that only those who aligned themselves with Meade's group would survive the last days. Don't let anyone suck you into this kind of cultic mindset.

4. A spirit of control among followers. A mature leader knows the members of his church don't belong to him. But there are insecure and untrained pastors who use manipulation and threats to keep their members loyal. True pastors don't have to constantly teach on spiritual authority to win their support of their flocks; but a controlling leader constantly emphasizes that he is in charge, and he demands total submission. This mindset can lead to serious spiritual abuse.

5. Constant talk of miracles with no documentation. There is a great hunger today in the body of Christ for the miraculous—and faith is rising for healing, prophecy and the full manifestation of the Holy Spirit's power. But in the rush to see God's power displayed, some people fall into the trap of hyping, sensationalizing or even faking miracles to get attention. This never bears good fruit.

In 2008, thousands of people traveled to Lakeland, Florida, to witness a “revival” that was supposedly marked by nightly miracles. Yet many of the healings (and even resurrections) that were announced from the pulpit were never verified—and the whole thing abruptly ended when the evangelist leading those meetings admitted to adultery. I hope we learned our lesson from Lakeland. God help us from ever repeating that tragedy.

6. Strange revelations that lack biblical basis. The apostle Paul warned us long ago that waves of deception would affect the church. “For the time will come when people will no longer endure sound doctrine ... they will turn their ears away from the truth ... ” (2 Tim. 4:3-4). Never follow a preacher who claims “inside information” from God that no one else knows. Don’t be mesmerized by his teachings—even if he claims that an angel gave him this information, or that he received it in a supernatural vision.

The test of truth is not how spooky spiritual something sounds, but whether it is in line with God’s Word. Many false prophets can say, “God showed me this,” but they are lying if their message contradicts Scripture. If something sounds really off when you hear it, don’t ignore your gut feelings.

Don’t be deceived. If you are a follower of Christ, you have been equipped with an internal alarm system that will warn you about any unhealthy teaching or ministry. Listen to the Holy Spirit, who is called the Spirit of truth (John 16:13). He can give you the discernment to know the difference between truth and error. {eoa}