

Learn to Discern

You were probably as horrified as I was when you heard that Carlton Pearson, a prominent leader among charismatics, has embraced universalism—the belief that Buddhists, Hindus and just about anyone else can get to heaven without repentance and a profession of faith in Jesus. Those who heard Carlton explain his “new revelation” labeled it a heresy, and rightly so. As a result, his church in Tulsa, Oklahoma, lost many of its members.

It’s sad enough that a brother has left the faith and that a once-vibrant church could be wiped off the map by false doctrine. But what really disturbs me is that I see potential for more Carlton Pearson scenarios. I’ve identified five unhealthy trends in our churches that are sure breeding grounds for heresy:

1. Egotism. We’ve become so comfortable with the one-man show that we forget where pride leads. Does your pastor, bishop or apostle think it is a sign of his superior spirituality when he arrives at the church 40 minutes late in a limousine? Is he so full of himself that he does multimedia presentations in church about the mansion he built with your offerings? If so, you will regret following him when his latest revelation proves him to be a spiritual fraud.

2. Authoritarianism. If you assumed that the Shepherding Movement died in the late 1980s, think again. Unhealthy views of spiritual authority are rampant in charismatic churches today, and if these teachings go unchallenged then another wave of Christians will be abused. Please note: True shepherds

do not control, manipulate, threaten or dominate people. If your pastor uses fear or gestapo tactics to motivate his members, your church is headed for disaster. You should leave.

3. Elitism. Is it taught from the pulpit that your church or denomination is better than other groups? Do leaders imply that they have a special “inside track” with God? Do they suggest that you should not associate with outsiders? If so, you should challenge this prideful spirit and then find a healthy church. Groups that do not embrace the entire body of Christ can fall into deception and become cults.

4. Legalism. Rigid religious people persecuted Jesus and the early apostles, and the same spirit is still at work today. If your church teaches that salvation is based on your following a dress code or conforming to some outward religious practice, then modern Pharisees are running the place—and their doctrines produce joyless, loveless faith.

5. Mysticism. We charismatics are challenging the church at large to embrace the supernatural gifts of the Spirit, and that’s a good thing. But let’s not forget that the gift of discernment is just as necessary as visions and miracles.

Weird, immature prophets are busy today splitting churches and distracting God’s people from kingdom priorities. These flakes shouldn’t have a platform. If your church is being controlled by a superspiritual know-it-all (whose character doesn’t match his “prophetic anointing”), then be on your guard.

This is an exciting day of revival, but we can’t be careless watchmen when the devil is plotting to deceive us. If we deal with the unhealthy spiritual environments that breed

deception, then maybe Carlton Pearson's crisis won't have to be repeated.