

Why Every Christian Should Pray for Strong Discernment

The recent scandal involving Mike Bickle and the International House of Prayer in Kansas City has triggered serious soul-searching—and the reaction is understandable. People feel angry, betrayed and bewildered. They trusted leaders who seemed incredibly spiritual, but those leaders violated that trust.

I've watched this happen more times than I can count. When I was editor of Charisma, I covered scandals involving televangelists Jim Bakker and Jimmy Swaggart; Atlanta bishop Earl Paulk; Power Team leader John Jacobs; author Larry Lea; prophet Bob Jones; prosperity preacher Robert Tilton; and pastors including Clarence McClendon, Eddie Long, Zachery Tims, Carl Lentz, Carlton Pearson and many others.

It was disappointing to watch all this failure—because every one of these people seemed to have fruitful ministries in the beginning. But as they became more successful, and the crowds grew, something went horribly wrong. Success often exposes fatal flaws.

Some people have asked me why I'm not a cynic after watching all this failure up close. Some even wonder how I've stayed committed to the core beliefs of charismatic Christianity when so many famous ministers in our movement crashed and burned.

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My response is twofold: 1) I'm not cynical because I know that people are human, and all of us are susceptible to moral failure; and 2) we would see fewer scandals in the church if Christians developed strong discernment. In many of the scandals I witnessed, I could see from a mile away that these

ministers had serious problems. But many naïve believers ignored the warning signs, and sometimes they even put broken leaders on pedestals because they were impressed by their spiritual gifts.

We often value charisma over character. For example, Paul Cain was heralded as a powerful charismatic prophet back in the 1990s. Some Christians were in awe of him because he supposedly could call out people's phone numbers or addresses when he was prophesying to them.

But in a meeting in Dallas in 1989, I watched Cain minister in a conference, and I got a sick feeling in the pit of my stomach. I knew something was off.

I later learned that Cain had access to a phone list that included addresses of leaders in that ministry. When he "prophesied," he was actually using numbers in that document. People assumed he was flowing in the Holy Spirit, but discernment told me he was manipulating the audience in a deceptive way to maintain his reputation. I later confronted Cain about the situation. He denied it at the time, but it later became obvious that the prophecies he gave were false. And a few years later he admitted to alcoholism and immoral behavior.

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I felt a similar sick feeling in my gut in 2008 when people began buzzing about evangelist Todd Bentley and the so-called "Lakeland Revival" in Florida. Bentley began preaching in nightly meetings in a church there, and he claimed that prophet Bob Jones had told him that the same angel who visited the healing revivals of the 1950s had appeared in his hotel room in Lakeland. Crowds of hungry people came, expecting healings and other miracles.

Yet when I went to one of those meetings, all I sensed was manipulation, hype and deception. Discernment told me that this “revival” was concocted by man, and that Bentley was a broken guy who craved attention. (That became more obvious when he started kicking people at the altar to impart his “anointing.”) Thousands of people came to the Lakeland meetings, but the show collapsed after a few months when Bentley abruptly left his wife and married another woman.

I’ve often said that the Lakeland “revival” was the most embarrassing moment in the history of the charismatic movement. It has been almost 16 years since it ended, but I wonder: Did we learn the lesson it taught us?

The apostle Paul told the Thessalonians: “But examine everything *carefully*; hold fast to that which is good” (1 Thess. 5:21, NASB 1995). The word “examine” in this verse (*dokimaz*) is the same word John uses when he says, “Test the spirits to see if whether they are from God,” in 1 John 4:1. The word refers to the process of testing metal to see if it is pure. God calls us to examine carefully the message we hear because sometimes it can be tainted with impurity or spiritual corruption.

Satan comes as an angel of light to deceive. Not all that glitters is gold, and not all spiritual movements are healthy. Pray for discernment, and apply it. Don’t blindly jump on bandwagons or promote questionable teachings. Don’t be foolishly gullible. If you sense the Holy Spirit is flashing a red warning sign, use caution. Hold fast to what is good, reject what is false and build your faith on what is true.{eoa}

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