
False Apostles - False Doctrines 101

What are False Apostles?

False apostles are people who masquerade as Christian leaders, get other people to follow them, and then lead them astray. A true apostle is one who is “sent” by God as an ambassador of Jesus Christ with a divine message. A false apostle is a pretender who does not truly represent Christ and whose message is false.

In 2 Corinthians 11, the apostle Paul addresses the problem of false apostles invading the Corinthian church. He describes the false apostles as “those who want an opportunity to be considered equal with us in the things they boast about” (verse 12). The book of 2 Corinthians is one of Paul’s more “sarcastic” letters, as he contends with the church to recognize the error that had crept into their midst.

He contrasts his selfless service with that of the “super-apostles” (verse 5) who were seducing the church with their smooth speech and apparent wisdom. These impostors were pretending to be true servants of Christ, but they did not know the Lord. They were deceivers, preying on gullible Christians in Corinth to profit themselves and boost their ego. Paul chides the church that they “even put up with anyone who enslaves you or exploits you or takes advantage of you or puts on airs or slaps you in the face” (verse 20). He even compares these impostors to Satan himself, who also “masquerades as an angel of light” (verse 14).

Paul warned the Ephesian elders about false apostles as well: “I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them” (Acts 20:29). They must have heeded his words, because in Revelation 2:2, Jesus commends the church at Ephesus for spotting the false apostles in their midst and rejecting them.

False teachers and false apostles have been plentiful throughout the history of the church. They still infiltrate unsuspecting churches and have even led whole denominations into heresy and apostasy (see 1 Timothy 4:1–4). Scripture gives us clear warning if we will pay attention. First John 4:1 says, “Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world.”

The following are some ways we can identify false apostles:

1. False apostles deny any or all truths about the identity and deity of Jesus Christ. In 1 John 4:3–4, John warns his readers against Gnostic teaching; the test, he says, is Christological: “By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God.” There are many ways a spirit may deny that Jesus is the Christ. From demonic cults to denominations that have veered away from the gospel, evil spirits are always behind the slander of Jesus. Any teacher who attempts to take away from or add to Jesus’ finished work on the cross for our salvation is a false prophet (John 19:30; Acts 4:12).
2. False apostles are motivated by their greed, lust, or power. Second Timothy 3:1–8 describes such teachers in more detail: “But mark this: There will be terrible times in the last days. People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God—having a form of godliness but denying its power. Have nothing to do with such people.

“They are the kind who worm their way into homes and gain control over gullible women, who are loaded down with sins and are swayed by all kinds of evil desires, always learning but never able to come to a knowledge of the truth. Just as Jannes and Jambres opposed Moses, so also these teachers oppose the truth. They are men of depraved minds, who, as far as the faith is concerned, are rejected.” Jesus said that an identifying mark of a false apostle/prophet is sinful behavior: “By their fruit you will recognize them” (Matthew 7:16, 20; cf. Jude 1:4).

3. False apostles distort or deny the Bible as God’s infallible, inspired Word (2 Timothy 3:16). In Galatians 1:8–9 Paul counters legalism with these strong words: “But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed. As we said before, so say I now again, If any man preach any other gospel unto you than that ye have received, let him be accursed.” The inspired writings of the twelve apostles are part of the Word of God, and no one has a right to change their message.

4. False apostles refuse to make themselves subject to spiritual authorities, but consider themselves the final authority (Hebrews 13:7; 2 Corinthians 10:12). They will often adopt lofty-sounding titles for themselves, such as “Bishop,” “Apostle,” “Reverend,” or “Father.” This does not mean that every person carrying such titles is a false prophet, only that evil impostors love lofty titles and will self-title to gain a hearing.

False apostles can arise anywhere the Word of God does not reign supreme. From organized churches to home Bible studies, we must always be on guard against “new teachings” or “revelations” that are not subject to the “whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27).

What is False Doctrine?

Doctrine is “a set of ideas or beliefs that are taught or believed to be true.” Biblical doctrine refers to teachings that align with the revealed Word of God, the Bible. False doctrine is any idea that adds to, takes away from, contradicts, or nullifies the doctrine given in God’s Word. For example, any teaching about Jesus that denies His virgin birth is a false doctrine, because it contradicts the clear teaching of Scripture (Matthew 1:18).

As early as the first century AD, false doctrine was already infiltrating the church, and many of the letters in the New Testament were written to address those errors (Galatians 1:6–9; Colossians 2:20–23; Titus 1:10–11). Paul exhorted his protégé Timothy to guard against those who were peddling heresies and confusing the flock: “If anyone advocates a different doctrine and does not agree with sound words, those of our Lord Jesus Christ, and with the doctrine conforming to godliness, he is conceited and understands nothing” (1 Timothy 6:3–4).

As followers of Christ, we have no excuse for remaining ignorant of theology because we have the “whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27) available to us—the Bible is complete. As we “study to show ourselves approved unto God” (2 Timothy 2:15), we are less likely to be taken in by smooth talkers and false prophets. When we know God’s Word, “we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming” (Ephesians 4:14).

It is important to point out the difference between false doctrine and denominational disagreements. Different congregational groups see secondary issues in Scripture differently. These differences are not always due to false doctrine on anyone’s part. Church policies, governmental decisions, style of worship, etc., are all open for discussion, since they are not directly addressed in Scripture. Even those issues that are addressed in Scripture are often debated by equally sincere disciples of Christ. Differences in interpretation or practice do not necessarily qualify as false doctrine, nor should they divide the Body of Christ (1 Corinthians 1:10).

False doctrine is that which opposes some fundamental truth or that which is necessary for salvation. The following are some examples of false doctrine:

* The erasing of hell. The Bible describes hell as a real place of eternal torment, the destination for every unregenerate soul (Revelation 20:15; 2 Thessalonians 1:8). A denial of hell directly contradicts Jesus' own words (Matthew 10:28; 25:46) and is therefore a false doctrine.

- The idea that there are "many paths to God." This philosophy has become popular recently under the guise of tolerance. This false doctrine claims that, since God is love, He will accept any religious effort as long as the practitioner is sincere. Such relativism flies in the face of the entire Bible and effectively eliminates any need for the Son of God to take on flesh and be crucified for us (Jeremiah 12:17; John 3:15–18). It also contradicts Jesus' direct words that He is the only way to God (John 14:6).
- Any teaching that redefines the person of Jesus Christ. Doctrine that denies the deity of Christ, the virgin birth, His sinless nature, His actual death, or His physical resurrection is false doctrine. A group's errant Christology readily identifies it as a sect or cult that may claim to be Christian but is actually teaching false doctrine. Even many mainline denominations have begun the rapid slide into apostasy by declaring that they no longer hold to a literal interpretation of Scripture or the deity of Christ. First John 4:1–3 makes it clear that a denial of biblical Christology is "anti-Christ." Jesus described false teachers within the church as "wolves in sheep's clothing" (Matthew 7:15).
- Teaching that adds human religious works to Christ's finished work on the cross as necessary ingredients for salvation. This teaching may pay lip service to salvation by faith alone but insists that a religious ritual (such as water baptism) is salvific (leading to salvation). Some groups even legislate hairstyles, clothing options, and food consumption. Romans 11:6 warns against attempts to mix grace with works. Ephesians 2:8–9 says we are saved by the grace of God, through faith, and nothing we do can add to or take away from it. Galatians 1:6–9 pronounces a curse on anyone who changes the good news of salvation by grace.
- The teaching that presents grace as a license to sin. Sometimes called "easy-believism," this false doctrine implies that all one must do for right standing with God is to believe the facts about Jesus, pray a prayer at some point, and then resume control of one's life with the assurance of heaven at the end. Paul dealt with this thinking in Romans 6. In Matthew 7:21–23, Jesus warned those who adopt this doctrine that they did not know Him at all. Second Corinthians 5:17 states that those who are "in Christ" become "new creatures." That transformation, in response to a believer's faith in Christ, changes the outward behaviors. To know and love Christ is to obey Him (Luke 6:46).

Satan has been confusing and perverting the Word of God since the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3:1–4; Matthew 4:6). False teachers, the servants of Satan, try to appear as "servants of righteousness" (2 Corinthians 11:15), but they will be known by their fruits (Matthew 7:16). A charlatan promoting false doctrine will show signs of pride, greed, and rebellion (see Jude 1:11) and will often promote or engage in sexual immorality (2 Peter 2:14; Revelation 2:20).

We are wise to recognize how vulnerable we are to heresy and make it our habit to do as the Bereans did in Acts 17:11: "They . . . examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true." When we make it our goal to follow the lead of the first church, we will go far in avoiding the pitfalls of false doctrine. Acts 2:42 says, "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer." Such devotion will protect us and ensure that we are on the path Jesus set for us.

"How can I recognize a false teacher / false prophet?"

Jesus warned us that "false Christs and false prophets" will come and will attempt to deceive even God's **elect** (Matthew 24:23-27; see also 2 Peter 3:3 and Jude 17-18). The best way to guard yourself against falsehood and false teachers is to know the truth. To spot a counterfeit, study the real thing. Any believer who "correctly handles the word of truth" (2 Timothy 2:15) and who makes a careful study of the Bible can identify false doctrine. For example, a believer who has read the activities of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in Matthew 3:16-17 will immediately question any doctrine that denies the Trinity. Therefore, step one is to study the Bible and judge all teaching by what the Scripture says.

Jesus said "a tree is recognized by its fruit" (Matthew 12:33). When looking for "fruit," here are three specific tests to apply to any teacher to determine the accuracy of his or her teaching:

1) What does this teacher say about Jesus? In Matthew 16:15-16, Jesus asks, "Who do you say I am?" Peter answers, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God," and for this answer Peter is called "blessed." In 2 John 9, we read, "Anyone who runs ahead and does not continue in the teaching of Christ does not have God; whoever continues in the teaching has both the Father and the Son." In other words, Jesus Christ and His work of redemption is of utmost importance; beware of anyone who denies that Jesus is equal with God, who downplays Jesus' sacrificial death, or who rejects Jesus' humanity. First John 2:22 says, "Who is the liar? It is the man who denies that Jesus is the Christ. Such a man is the antichrist—he denies the Father and the Son."

2) Does this teacher preach the gospel? The gospel is defined as the good news concerning Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection, according to the Scriptures (1 Corinthians 15:1-4). As nice as they sound, the statements "God loves you," "God wants us to feed the hungry," and "God wants you to be wealthy" are not the complete message of the gospel. As Paul warns in Galatians 1:7, "Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ." No one, not even a great preacher, has the right to change the message that God gave us. "If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned!" (Galatians 1:9).

3) Does this teacher exhibit character qualities that glorify the Lord? Speaking of false teachers, Jude 11 says, "They have taken the way of Cain; they have rushed for profit into Balaam's error; they have been destroyed in Korah's rebellion." In other words, a false teacher can be known by his pride (Cain's rejection of God's plan), greed (Balaam's prophesying for money), and rebellion (Korah's promotion of himself over Moses). Jesus said to beware of such people and that we would know them by their fruits (Matthew 7:15-20).

It is often difficult to spot a false teacher/false prophet. Satan masquerades as an angel of light (2 Corinthians 11:14), and his ministers masquerade as servants of righteousness (2 Corinthians 11:15). Only by being thoroughly familiar with the truth will we be able to recognize a counterfeit.

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