

How To Evaluate Spiritual Leaders

by Dan Trygg

I was having a conversation the other day, and someone was telling me about a church they had recently attended. They were shocked, not only at the behavior of the pastor himself, but at the obvious focus on money, the relatively shallow depth of spiritual teaching, and, most of all, that *the people thought it was all wonderful!* Attending this church several times, they noticed that the people were not very spiritually mature, either. They were very much into appearances, ...driving fancy cars, wearing expensive clothes..., but it did not take long to pick up tidbits of gossip, and snide and disapproving remarks for anyone who would disagree with them or dare to question what they do. As I listened, I recognized the symptoms of an all too familiar unhealthy church culture, and of an abusive, self-seeking false shepherd. I told that person, "Don't go back there. Run, and never go back."

I was proud of this person for recognizing the signals they were observing, and speaking up about it to another person they trusted. It brings up the question, "**How can I evaluate when spiritual leaders are healthy? How can I tell when someone is a 'false teacher', or a 'wolf in sheep's clothing'?**" It is a problem, because false and unhealthy teachers and church communities have popped up in many places. **Oftentimes, they appear to be godly on first appearances.** They sing praise songs, they read from the Bible and talk religious talk. ...they even talk of Jesus, and His death on the cross..., **but the direction they are leading the people is not toward godliness or Christian maturity.** **They are taking advantage of people.** They are putting on a religious show, with religious trappings, but their real purpose is to line the pockets of the pastor, bishop and a few leader types, while the majority come week after week and put their money in the plate. **Jesus and the apostles warned about them. Their kind has surfaced time and time again throughout history.** *They captivate and feed on unsuspecting people, many of whom have no idea, or are afraid to speak up about the inconsistencies they seem to recognize.*

Then, too, there are congregations who gather together to promote a false gospel, one that justifies and encourages the self-seeking lifestyles they are living. Such people do not want to know the truth. In fact, they pay big bucks to preachers who can "tickle their ears" with stories and teachings that will make them feel good about themselves, but never make them too uncomfortable (II Tim. 4:3). **They want to believe that God is blessing them, so they hire teachers who are skilled at telling them what they want to hear,** ...but ignore, disregard or reinterpret those parts of the Word that would be challenging to their self-centered, indulgent lives. **They sell a form of religion, but have no real power from God** (II Tim. 3:1-5).

How can we discern who is a good leader, and who is misguided, or even a malevolent counterfeit? What are some things to look for, as we examine a pastor, or the culture of a church? There are three places to focus our attention: (1.) Qualifications; (2.) The direction or character of the ministry; and, (3.) The fruit, both the fruit of the leader's individual life, and the fruit of the ministry, "What kind of person has been produced by this ministry?"

(1.) Qualifications. This is not at all about schooling, or about a person's resume. Those may be considerations, but the emphasis of the Bible has nothing to do with these kinds of credentials. Colleges and seminaries did not even exist for hundreds of years after Christ. Neither Jesus, nor the original eleven apostles had any formal schooling, and whatever schooling Paul had he took no pride in, but counted it as nothing compared with a personal relationship with Christ (Phil. 3:4-8). His primary qualification was what Jesus was doing in his life. We are not looking for people to be intellectual leaders, but spiritual leaders. Therefore, **the primary qualification for them to be effective leaders is to have a sound, healthy and effective walk with Christ.** As disciples of Christ, they should *become like Him and act like He did* (Matt. 10:24,25; I Jn. 2:6; I Cor. 11:1). Bible qualifications for leaders can be found in I Timothy 3:1-13; Titus 1:5-11; I Peter 5:1-5. Here is the list of character qualities mentioned in these passages. A spiritual leader (elder, bishop, overseer, pastor) must be: above reproach, the husband of one wife, temperate, prudent, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not one given to drinking much, not pugnacious, but gentle, uncontentious, free from the love of money. He must lead his household well, having children who are obedient and respectful. He must not be a new convert, and he must have a good reputation with those outside of the church. He must be irreproachable as a steward of God, not self-willed, nor quick-tempered, violent, nor eager for shameful gain. He should carry out his responsibilities of overseeing and shepherding with a willing and eager heart, not from compulsion or from a greediness for money. Neither should they act as lords who domineer the ones given to them to care for. Instead, they should be examples to the flock. They should be clothed with humility, knowing that those who are great in God's Kingdom will be least of all and servant to all (Lk. 22:26; Mk. 9:33-35). In addition to these qualities, deacons are also to be men of dignity, not double-tongued, and hold to

the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. They are to be filled with the Spirit and wisdom (Acts 6:3). They, too, are not to be greedy for shameful gain. They must also be tested to be sure they can do what their duties prescribe.

(2.) **The direction and character of the ministry. Biblically, spiritual leaders were to oversee, shepherd and care for the people God has allotted to them to care for.** The work of the ministry had nothing to do with buildings, nor was it focused on outreach. Its primary concern was caring for the people. *If the people and the church community were healthy, the church would grow.* The direction and character of the ministry should be focused on teaching, serving and caring for the people. That means that *the resources should be used to increase the quality of care for the people, not to line the pockets of greedy leaders.* An apt illustration used for spiritual leadership in the Bible is that of the relationship of a shepherd to his flock. A study of Ezekiel 34:1-26, Jeremiah 23:1-4 and Zechariah 11:16,17 are very insightful passages to study in order to evaluate different ministries. God strongly rebukes shepherds who do not effectively feed the sheep, or care for the weak and sick, or bring back the lost and scattered. Shepherds are not to neglect their sheep, nor to rule over them with force and dominance, or harshness and severity. They are to protect them from predators and disease, and from other sheep that might bully and abuse. *God is against shepherds who do not feed and care for the sheep, but who feed themselves, instead!* The key to effective shepherding is to stay attentive, and have relationship with the people. **A shepherd's role is a serving role.** A good shepherd is willing to sacrifice and go out of his way for his sheep. Shepherds who take what should be used for the sheep, or who dominate and abuse them in order to get rich will be judged by God, as those OT shepherds were. **The direction of the ministry should be people-oriented. The focus should be to care for, develop and equip the people.** If that is done, they will mature and become productive for Christ. The character of the ministry ought to be servant-oriented and righteous. It should be healthy and upbuilding to the people, not degrading and abusive. People ought to feel loved and valued, not "spanked" and "put down". **A good question to ask is, "Where does the money go?" God's plan was to use a tithe to set out more leaders into ministry, so that more people could be cared for more effectively.** If people really did tithe, then a spiritual leader could be supported for every ten families, *at the same economic level as those families.* If that money is used inappropriately, then there will be fewer workers supported to do the work of shepherding. If one shepherd greedily takes money *for himself*, he is robbing the people of the care they need. The health of the flock will suffer, and eventually the entire ministry will be lessened. **The other Biblical purpose for giving was to help the poor.** Many of the passages quoted to incite people to give are reminders from Paul to gather together a collection for the poor in Jerusalem (I Cor. 16:1,2; II Cor. 8,9). Yet, so many leaders will quote these passages out of context, in order to get people to give, but they have no intention of helping the poor. This is wrong! When you read the Bible, and see God's care for the poor, it is a shameful thing that many large churches offer virtually no assistance to the poor, not even to people within their own flock! Where does the money go? To buildings or programs, and sometimes to greedy leaders.

(3.) **The fruit.** Jesus said that we would know a false prophet by examining their fruit. **There are three areas to examine:** (a.) **a leader's doctrine**, i.e., what they are teaching; (b.) **their character and behavior; and**, (c.) **the outcome of their efforts**, i.e., what kind of influence do they have on others, especially those who seriously follow them? What kind of person do they turn out?

(a.) **Are they teaching sound, Biblical doctrine** regarding who Jesus is, and what He has done for us? Do they preach salvation by grace through faith? Do they teach that the outcome of real repentance and faith will be a change in one's life and heart? Do they make disciples of Christ, teaching them to do all that Jesus taught? Do they equip their people to become mature? Do they teach Biblical standards of morality? Do they call people to pursue holiness? Do they teach about the Holy Spirit, and encourage people to be active in ministering to others? Do they model good Bible study methods, and teach their people how to correctly interpret the Bible?

(b.) **Does the leader exemplify good Christian character and quality of life**, such as described in the Biblical qualifications for leadership? Does he swear, or tell off-color jokes? Does he easily get cross and angry with people? Is he morally pure, or does he compromise in areas? Is he a person of integrity, and a good role model? Is he an example of humility and good stewardship, or is he living an indulgent, materialistic life? Does he know how to live within his means? Where does *his* money go? Is he controlling, demanding loyalty only to his church, or does he support their involvement and support of other ministries?

(c.) **What kind of influence does the ministry have on those who attend?** Are they becoming more mature, more like Christ in their character? Are they getting more equipped in the Word, and wiser at living life? Are they finding healing, and experiencing increasing joy and wholeness in their lives? Is the ministry expanding? Do the people have a mind to help the poor, or to support missionary efforts in other places?

I hope this will help you to examine the lives and ministries of spiritual leaders. If you find yourself in an unhealthy place, it may be time to either bring up your concerns, or find a better spiritual home. God wants you to be healthy and growing, not staying some place where your growth is being stunted or blocked, and certainly not some place where you are being abused. Churches are one place where you can "vote with your feet". Support what is healthy.