

## **CHAPTER 10**

### **DEALING WITH DECEPTION AND DECEIVERS - PART TWO**

*Give me not up to the will of my adversaries;  
for false witnesses have risen against me,  
and they breathe out violence.*

*Psalm 27:12 (ESV)*

<sup>12</sup> *For the sin of their mouths, the words of their lips,  
let them be trapped in their pride.*

*For the cursing and lies which they utter,*

<sup>13</sup> *consume them in wrath,*

*consume them till they are no more,*

*that men may know that God rules over Jacob  
to the ends of the earth.*

*Psalm 59:12-13 (RSV)*

<sup>18</sup> *But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why put me to the test, you hypocrites?"*

*Matthew 22:18 (ESV)*

#### **Seek God's help to discern when you are being lied to.**

Praying for help and guidance may sound like an obvious thing to do. However have you ever actually *asked* God to help you to know whether you are being lied to and if so *where, how and by whom?* Most of us never make any such prayers. I never did so myself before the last 10 years or so. I never knew that I needed to pray in that way, but I have since realised it is essential. Why not try it? You may be surprised by the results. Ask God to open your eyes, to expose any lies of which you are currently unaware, and to prevent you from being deceived by any other liars:

<sup>1</sup> *In my distress I cry to the LORD,  
that he may answer me:*

<sup>2</sup> *"Deliver me, O LORD, from lying lips,  
from a deceitful tongue."*

*Psalm 120:1-2 (RSV)*

Here is an example of how God has exposed a liar to me as the direct answer to my prayer. I was baffled some years ago because a number of things just didn't add up at the office and I was confused by it. I sensed that somebody somewhere was deceiving me and being disloyal. But I had no idea who, or how. Then one day I prayed about it, in desperation, and said "*Lord, what is the source of all this? Is somebody somewhere deceiving me? If so, who? Please enable me to see what is really going on.*" To my amazement, God answered me immediately. I heard, in my head, an almost audible voice saying a person's name.

It was the name of a senior employee. I would never have dreamed that that person could be deceiving me. It would have seemed unthinkable. Therefore I had never even considered it as a possibility and I had never asked myself whether they were trustworthy. The very fact that it was so *unthinkable* meant that I had never thought about it at all, let alone prayed for guidance. At first I was reluctant to believe that what I had just heard could even be true, let alone a warning from God. But I then began to check it all out extremely carefully.

As I did so I discovered many irregularities about that person and instances where I had been deceived, manipulated and used by them. When I later confronted the person they immediately asked if they

could just resign rather than be interviewed! That panic reaction, in itself, spoke volumes. They knew the game was up and that I had opened my eyes at long last. After they had gone, more examples of their disloyalty emerged. They obviously knew it would all come out once I started looking into things carefully.

The moral of the story is to make it your regular practice to ask God to *reveal* any deception or treachery to you. Consider that to be a perfectly proper and necessary thing to pray for. Although all of that ought to be completely obvious, the fact is very few of us ever make such a prayer at all, let alone regularly. It is not the done-thing, but it ought to be as it is not wise to rely solely on yourself, or on your own investigations, however thorough those may be. There are bound to be some things that you just can't see for yourself, even if you are looking, which most of us aren't.

**If you can't learn to detect lies you will end up surrounded by liars, but without knowing it. If so, evil will be done in your name by people whom you misguidedly trust.**

Most of us are not in senior positions in businesses or churches. But many of us do have some junior or intermediate managerial responsibilities. We may have to look after some project, task or group and manage some other people, however small or few they may be. If we don't learn to identify and tackle liars we will end up surrounded by them, whether we realise it or not. Also the more unaware we are, the more we will believe their lies. The proportion of liars in our lives will increase because we aren't weeding them out and because they will come looking for us, wanting to work for us:

*If a ruler listens to falsehood,  
all his officials will be wicked.  
Proverbs 29:12 (RSV)*

You might feel squeamish about being on your guard against deceivers or that it is 'judgmental' to think of people in such ways. However, you actually owe it to the other people who work under you, or alongside you, or to the people in your church, not to be naïve. Otherwise you will make it easy for manipulators and bullies to take over that organisation and to harm them, not just you.

**Don't be put off when people emphatically deny things, even when their denials sound very convincing. It is entirely normal for them to do so and it doesn't mean you've got it wrong.**

It can cause you to doubt yourself, and your evidence, when people emphatically deny what is being alleged. They can look you straight in the eye, or even become tearful, and plead with you to believe that they are innocent. Of course, they could be, but the mere fact that they *say* so is no reason for thinking that they are. If you are a sincere person yourself it is hard to imagine how someone could be so emphatic in their denial if they were actually guilty. Thus you have to try to come to terms with the fact that bare-faced denial is entirely normal, even when the person is guilty.

Therefore expect denials and never be diverted from your purpose *merely* because the person is denying what you put to them. You can bear their denial in mind as a relevant factor. But you can't do any more than that until you investigate matters to find out whether it is credible. It cannot be treated as such merely because they say so. The person's credibility is the very thing you are seeking to gauge, so to take their word for it is to put the cart before the horse. You can't form any conclusion based solely on their denial.

It needs to be based on an assessment of the overall evidence, which will include all other factors, such as witnesses, circumstantial evidence and the presence, or absence, of inconsistencies. However, the denial, in itself, tells you nothing conclusive. It just means you need to look into the wider facts more thoroughly in order to be able to form a view. Therefore when a person denies something, however impassioned or tearful they may be, do not be bewildered by it.

Do not let it deter you from investigating further. Above all do not let it cause you to doubt yourself, or to ignore the things which you have seen or heard so far, or that you have deduced from documents or from other people's evidence. Continue to weigh everything, calmly and thoroughly, without ever allowing yourself to be deflected from your purpose or to consider your own enquiries to be inappropriate.

**The mere fact that somebody has apologised does not mean you can't take their misconduct into account when assessing their character or deciding how to deal with them.**

In the right circumstances, and if they are sincere, then apologies are obviously good. However, they can also be used to throw you off course, confuse you and cause you to lower your guard. People should of course apologise for wrong things they have done. But the mere fact that they have done so does not mean you cannot then take that event into account. You must still bear it in mind when assessing their credibility or their suitability to do a particular task or to have a particular role. I am reminded of 'Philip and Sonia', of whom I speak in other chapters.

I was once in a situation where we needed to decide whether or not they could be trusted. We drew up a long list of things they had said and done which we felt were wrong or unacceptable. We drafted this list together with two other highly trusted couples. Later we met with Philip and Sonia and told them of our concerns and said we were leaving to start a new church, partly due to our misgivings about them. We went through some of our concerns about their misconduct and at one point Sonia said "*But we've apologised for that.*"

In her mind, the fact that she had apologised meant we were not entitled to place any reliance upon those incidents when deciding what to make of her and Philip. She felt we were obliged to forget all about those events and not take them into account when forming a view of their credibility or trustworthiness. It is true that when sins are repented of and forgiven God removes them from us as far as the East is from the West. However, that does not mean that *we* must disregard those incidents or actions *when forming a judgment (diakrino) of that person.*

Discerning the real nature of a person's character and the extent to which they can be trusted has nothing to do with whether or not they have apologised to you. Their apology changes nothing in that regard. Neither does your assessment of the person have anything to do with whether God has forgiven them, or even whether you have. Those are entirely unrelated concepts and have no bearing on the evidential value of the events in question or on your decisions as to *what to do* about the person, or their conduct.

**Beware of people who do or say showy, pretentious things, even when they seem to be good things. Public apologies or displays of repentance may not be real.**

Be very wary of a person whose apologies are showy or pretentious. Manipulators know that apologies can be disarming and an effective device in getting other people to lower their guard. It can imply that the one making the apology must be a sincere, godly person who can be trusted. That tactic was repeatedly used by Philip and Sonia. We saw, over a period of time, that they both had a tendency to make regular public apologies and in the most noticeable way possible. Of course, making public apologies, in itself, is not wrong, if it is done sincerely and on a one off basis.

However, if it *keeps on* happening and if the things being apologised for seem to be *trivial, irrelevant, or even invented*, then you should be alarmed. Such pretentiousness is sinister and should put you even more on your guard. I noticed this happening repeatedly with Philip and Sonia and concluded that it was a mixture of exhibitionism and an attempt to convey a false impression of being spiritual. However, genuinely mature and spiritual people don't try to convey any image or impression. They are just themselves, without needing to make any effort.

Anybody who is trying to project any kind of image or to look as if they are something, or have certain characteristics, is phoney. Genuine people don't do that. It is also a reliable general rule that where you see any kind of pretentiousness or exhibitionism you will probably also find wickedness of other kinds. A showy person will never only possess that one fault. They will also be false and untrustworthy in other ways too. So wherever you see such behaviour take note and be on the lookout for other forms of wickedness within the same person.

**Beware of people who are 'sugary sweet'. If it feels excessive then it is probably an act. If so, that is a sign of something sinister.**

Beware of anyone who is 'sugary sweet'. All the people I have ever known who were sickly sweet have turned out to be false. Of course, telling the difference between being merely sweet and *sickly* sweet, requires discernment. However, as a rule of thumb, if a person's 'sweetness' seems excessive, or too frequent, then it is probably an act. If so then, like all people who put on any kind of act, it tells you they are false. Nobody puts on an act, of any kind, unless they want you to believe something false, or to prevent you seeing something true.

By presenting a false image, or hiding their real one, they are already being dishonest. That alone should trouble you. However, a person's dishonesty is never limited to one single issue or to only one part of their lives. Therefore they will be false and untrustworthy across the board, not only in this particular area. A prime example of this was Sonia. She was the most sugary-sweet person in that church. On the face of it, some of the things she did seemed good. She would always make a bee line for any visitor and welcome them. In itself, that is a good thing.

However, the point is she was 'over the top'. Sometimes you can only see that later, as you look back and re-examine events, after some other issue causes you to wonder about the person. In Sonia's case, other such issues did arise and, as I re-assessed her, it seemed that she fell into this category of being sickly-sweet. Her aim was not just to welcome people and be hospitable. She went far beyond that, in both intensity and frequency. She was always trying to ingratiate herself with people and to win them over in ways which went way beyond what any other church member did.

The others were also welcoming and friendly, but when they spoke to visitors, or invited church members to their homes, they weren't trying too hard. They were natural, whereas Sonia was unnatural. They were real, but she was unreal. The question is how do we tell the difference between a person who is *genuinely* sweet and someone who is *sickly* sweet and therefore false? It's not easy, but there are a number of things we can bear in mind to help us measure and assess people. The first is that a person whose sweetness is false will be over the top.

This is not easy to see immediately but if you watch them closely, over time, they will go too far. It is like in amateur dramatics where unskilled actors try to play a role, but over-do it. For example where someone is playing the part of a police inspector they are usually a bit too 'inspectorish' and more like an inspector than real ones are. I have worked with many police inspectors and none of them were as 'inspector-like' as some of the ones I have seen on stage. An amateur actor tends to over-do it and can become a caricature when trying to create the impression they are seeking to convey.

A real police inspector is more relaxed and ordinary, uses fewer 'inspector-like' expressions and behaves normally, without any caricatured features. The people who are pretending to be sweet, or pretending to be any other thing, are performing a role, as in amateur dramatics. Unless they are really skilled fraudsters they too will over-do it, or over-act, in order to convey the intended impression. If you are alert you will notice when they go too far or over-do it, thereby giving themselves away.

They also give themselves away in that they cannot manage to be consistent. People who are genuinely sweet-natured will be like that all the time, whoever they are with, because it is what they really are. They don't need to remember to keep up the act because they aren't acting. A person who is only

pretending will give themselves away when they don't get their own way or where you challenge or question them. They will then 'bare their teeth' at you, if only for a moment. You need to be alert to notice such flashes of temper.

In particular you will spot the people who are only pretending to be sweet when you *cross them*. Then they will show their true colours. Some weeks before we left that church, there was a minor incident involving Sonia. We were clearing away chairs after a meeting and I came across a chair with a coat and a Bible on it. So I took the coat, placed it on the carpet with the Bible on top of it, and then stacked the chair away. As I did so Sonia rushed over and picked up her coat and Bible. There was a flash of extreme anger on her face, especially in her eyes. It was brief, but unmistakable.

I could understand why a person might be mildly annoyed at this situation. But I couldn't see why anyone would be *that angry*. It seemed way over the top. The flash of anger was significant because it was so different from the *image* which Sonia ordinarily projected. There was a contradiction. Either the anger or the sugary sweetness, reflected the real Sonia, because she couldn't be both. Given that the flash of anger was *instantaneous*, and burst out of her before she had any time to think, I took the view that the temper was real and the sweetness was false.

People often say, when things happen unexpectedly and they lose their temper, that they are acting "*out of character*" and it is "*not how they really are*". I don't agree. Whatever bursts out of a person, when they have no time to plan or compose themselves, or put on an act, *is* their real nature. I therefore began to wonder *why* Sonia would feel such animosity towards me and also why she would, ordinarily, choose to hide it. I also felt that it was a very significant incident, despite its apparent trivialness and the fact that it was so brief.

It seemed to me that Sonia had actually, for once, acted *in character*. She had confirmed what she was really like when she wasn't putting on an act. If a person really was sweet-natured, they would respond graciously and gently when you get in their way, tread on their toes, or fail to do what they want. However, if someone who is ordinarily sickly-sweet suddenly gives you a flash of anger in their eyes, or in their tone of voice, then something is wrong, or rather something is false.

You cannot afford to overlook or excuse such flashes of temper or rage or to explain them away. Even in itself such an outburst is a cause for concern, but where it occurs in the case of a person who is ordinarily sickly-sweet, it is even more significant. It shows they not only have a temper problem, but that they are also keeping up a pretence as well. We found that on a few other occasions with Sonia. She was gushing with sweetness most of the time, but if you ever crossed her, you would soon discover a very different side to her.

**There is a time and a place to "name names" and to publicly identify deceivers and wrongdoers. Apostle Paul did so on many occasions.**

One difficult issue is whether to speak openly about a person's wrongdoing or false teaching and, in particular, whether to *name* them. Many assume that can never be right, as it would be 'judgemental'. Others think it is not wrong in principle, but is just too risky, in case you accuse someone falsely. Clearly, we must be very careful when criticising someone publicly, especially if they are a leader. It should only be done after a meticulous checking of the facts. Nevertheless, public criticism is not inherently wrong. There are times when people simply must be named, as where Paul warned Timothy about Hymenaeus and Philetus:

*<sup>16</sup> Avoid such godless chatter, for it will lead people into more and more ungodliness, <sup>17</sup> and their talk will eat its way like gangrene. Among them are Hymenae'us and Phile'tus, <sup>18</sup> who have swerved from the truth by holding that the resurrection is past already. They are upsetting the faith of some.*

*2 Timothy 2:16-18 (RSV)*

Hymenaeus and Philetus had “*swerved from the truth.*” and were teaching false doctrine by saying that the resurrection (of Christians) had already happened, i.e. that the ‘rapture’ had already taken place and was not a future event. Paul was very concerned about this and warned Timothy in plain terms. Later in the same letter Paul also warns Timothy about Demas, who had deserted him, and also Alexander the Coppersmith, who had done him great harm and opposed his message:

*<sup>9</sup> Do your best to come to me soon.<sup>10</sup> For Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica; Crescens has gone to Galatia, Titus to Dalmatia.<sup>11</sup> Luke alone is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you; for he is very useful in serving me.<sup>12</sup> Tychicus I have sent to Ephesus.<sup>13</sup> When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas, also the books, and above all the parchments.<sup>14</sup> Alexander the coppersmith did me great harm; the Lord will requite him for his deeds.<sup>15</sup> Beware of him yourself, for he strongly opposed our message.*

*2 Timothy 4:9-15 (RSV)*

One could argue that Paul was only speaking *privately* to Timothy himself, not to the wider church. That would be a fair point, except that the letters Paul wrote were all shared with the whole church, and with other churches too. Multiple copies were circulated, which is why we have so many today. There are also other letters where Paul is speaking to a much wider audience. Yet he still names names, as in Galatians, where Paul tells all the people in Galatia that he had opposed Peter. He says, quite openly, that Peter had behaved wrongly in failing to stand up to the ‘circumcision party’. He also publicly criticises Barnabas for the same reasons:

*<sup>11</sup> But when Cephas came to Antioch I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. <sup>12</sup> For before certain men came from James, he ate with the Gentiles; but when they came he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party. <sup>13</sup> And with him the rest of the Jews acted insincerely, so that even Barnabas was carried away by their insincerity.<sup>14</sup> But when I saw that they were not straightforward about the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, “If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?”*

*Galatians 2:11-14 (RSV)*

In other letters, and also in the book of Acts, there are instances where Paul publicly criticised, rebuked or contradicted people, or where he warned churches about individuals or groups. A classic example would be the way Paul confronted Bar-Jesus, also known as Elymas. He was a Jewish false prophet who was causing trouble in Cyprus by resisting Paul. He was also involved in the occult. Note how boldly, and publicly, Paul confronted him:

*<sup>4</sup> So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia; and from there they sailed to Cyprus. <sup>5</sup> When they arrived at Salamis, they proclaimed the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews. And they had John to assist them. <sup>6</sup> When they had gone through the whole island as far as Paphos, they came upon a certain magician, a Jewish false prophet, named Bar-Jesus. <sup>7</sup> He was with the proconsul, Sergius Paulus, a man of intelligence, who summoned Barnabas and Saul and sought to hear the word of God. <sup>8</sup> But Elymas the magician (for that is the meaning of his name) withstood them, seeking to turn away the proconsul from the faith. <sup>9</sup> But Saul, who is also called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked intently at him <sup>10</sup> and said, “You son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, full of all deceit and villainy, will you not stop making crooked the straight paths of the Lord? <sup>11</sup> And now, behold, the hand of the Lord is upon you, and you shall be blind and unable to see the sun for a time.” Immediately mist and darkness fell upon him and he went about seeking people to lead him by the hand. <sup>12</sup> Then the proconsul believed, when he saw what had occurred, for he was astonished at the teaching of the Lord.*

*Acts 13:4-12 (RSV)*

Paul not only opposed and exposed Elymas. He was also used by God to strike him blind, albeit temporarily, and to stop him in his tracks. Another example is the way Paul publicly confronted and rebuked Ananias, the High priest when he was on trial before the Sanhedrin:

<sup>30</sup> *But on the morrow, desiring to know the real reason why the Jews accused him, he unbound him, and commanded the chief priests and all the council to meet, and he brought Paul down and set him before them. <sup>1</sup>And Paul, looking intently at the council, said, “Brethren, I have lived before God in all good conscience up to this day.” <sup>2</sup> And the high priest Anani'as commanded those who stood by him to strike him on the mouth. <sup>3</sup> Then Paul said to him, “God shall strike you, you whitewashed wall! Are you sitting to judge me according to the law, and yet contrary to the law you order me to be struck?” <sup>4</sup> Those who stood by said, “Would you revile God’s high priest?” <sup>5</sup> And Paul said, “I did not know, brethren, that he was the high priest; for it is written, ‘You shall not speak evil of a ruler of your people.’”*

*Acts 22:30-23:5 (RSV)*

It is widely assumed that Paul was confused, and did not know who Ananias was. But that is absurd. Ananias was the High Priest. He held the highest office in Israel and the meeting was taking place within the Sanhedrin itself, in front of all the other members of the Council. Not knowing who he was would be like not recognising the Archbishop of Canterbury as he chairs a meeting of all the Anglican bishops inside Canterbury Cathedral. Whether or not Ananias was wearing his full robes, anyone would still know who and what he was from the setting alone.

Paul would already know who the High Priest was anyway. He had risen very high within the party of the Pharisees and must have personally known most of those men, even from his schooldays in Jerusalem, where he was educated. Many would previously have been his friends. Paul’s words may sound odd, but the explanation is quite simple. When Paul said “*I did not know, brethren, that he was the High Priest,*” he was being ironic, or even sarcastic. That would have been plain to those present and to most first century Jewish believers.

Paul’s point was that Ananias wasn’t the *legitimate* High Priest, because he had usurped the office unlawfully. Therefore Paul was not only rebuking Ananias for having him struck, contrary to the law. He was also publicly drawing attention to the fact that Ananias was a usurper and not really the High Priest at all. Ananias’ illegitimacy was an ‘elephant in the room’, which they would all have known about, but were too afraid to speak of. The point is that Paul was not afraid, or unwilling, to publicly criticise anyone who needed to be publicly criticised - even the High Priest.

**The prophet Jeremiah also named names, such as when he publicly identified Shemaiah as a false prophet and rebuked him.**

Chapters 28 and 29 of Jeremiah contain some very direct statements by Jeremiah about a number of false prophets whom he publicly contradicts and calls false prophets. He does this to them personally, but it was also in the presence of others. Jeremiah does not leave it to the people to work out for themselves who he might be referring to. He makes it unmistakably clear. To begin with, he publicly disagrees with the prophet Hananiah. He had been telling the King, and the people, that they would have victory over the invader, Nebuchadnezzar.

Jeremiah spells out that those prophecies are false and we are told, in chapter 28 verse 5, that he does this in the Temple, “*in the presence of the priests and all the people who were standing in the house of the Lord*”. So, Jeremiah confronts them in the most public way possible. Later he also goes to see the prophet Hananiah and tells him, to his face, that God has not sent him and that his prophecy is false:

<sup>15</sup> *And Jeremiah the prophet said to the prophet Hananiah, “Listen, Hananiah, the Lord has not sent you, and you have made this people trust in a lie. <sup>16</sup> Therefore thus says the Lord: ‘Behold, I will remove you from the face of the earth. This year you shall die, because you have uttered rebellion against the Lord.’ <sup>17</sup> In that same year, in the seventh month, the prophet Hananiah died.*

*Jeremiah 28:15-17 (ESV)*

Admittedly, this second confrontation with Hananiah may possibly have been in private. We are not told whether anybody else was present on that occasion. However, even if it was in private, the point is Jeremiah was utterly frank with him, in a way which most church leaders today would not be willing to be, even in private, no matter how serious the issues were. In chapter 29 we see Jeremiah in action again. He begins by sending a letter in a very public manner. We are even told of the many and varied people to whom it was sent:

*These are the words of the letter that Jeremiah the prophet sent from Jerusalem to the surviving elders of the exiles, and to the priests, the prophets, and all the people, whom Nebuchadnezzar had taken into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon.*

*Jeremiah 29:1 (ESV)*

In that letter Jeremiah is again unmistakably clear and frank about the falseness of the prophecies being given by Hananiah, Shemaiah, and others. He goes so far as to say:

*<sup>8</sup> For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Do not let your prophets and your diviners who are among you deceive you, and do not listen to the dreams that they dream, <sup>9</sup> for it is a lie that they are prophesying to you in my name; I did not send them, declares the Lord.*

*Jeremiah 29:8-9 (ESV)*

Later Jeremiah hears a letter read out which Shemaiah had sent to the King, in which further false prophecies are made. He responds to that very directly and says God will punish Shemaiah:

*<sup>29</sup> Zephaniah the priest read this letter in the hearing of Jeremiah the prophet. <sup>30</sup> Then the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah: <sup>31</sup> “Send to all the exiles, saying, ‘Thus says the Lord concerning Shemaiah of Nehelam: Because Shemaiah had prophesied to you when I did not send him, and has made you trust in a lie, <sup>32</sup> therefore thus says the Lord: Behold, I will punish Shemaiah of Nehelam and his descendants. He shall not have anyone living among this people, and he shall not see the good that I will do to my people, declares the Lord, for he has spoken rebellion against the Lord.’”*

*Jeremiah 29:29-32 (ESV)*

Although these men were false prophets, they were still prophets. They are referred to as “prophets” in chapter 28 verse 5, which refers to “...Hananiah the prophet...” The point is they really had been called to the office of prophet, and had perhaps given genuine prophecies in the past. But they were now giving false prophecies. Accordingly we must not pick up the impression that it is alright to publicly rebuke people who never were genuine prophets or teachers, but not men who really are, or at least used to be, leaders, teachers, prophets etc.

That would be a big mistake. The need to publicly contradict false prophecies and false teachings always applies, whether or not the person is a leader, prophet, teacher etc. Indeed, most false prophets and false teachers are leaders. Many have been ‘ordained’, because they are to be found in vast numbers within the denominational churches. So, when we speak of a ‘false prophet’ we really mean “a person giving a false prophecy”, usually on a regular basis. They may, or may not, be in an official leadership position.

**Apostle John also ‘named names’ and publicly criticised, rebuked or warned about individuals. So did Jesus, when He rebuked various Pharisees in front of the crowds.**

John’s third letter warns of a man called ‘Diotrephes’, whom John felt had behaved badly. He also says that when he next visits he will “bring up” these matters. Presumably he means he will do so publicly with the whole church, because, in the first century, all serious matters were decided by each local church *as a whole*, not just by a leader or group of leaders. Besides that, the letter was sent to the church as a whole, not just to the leaders:



<sup>9</sup> *I have written something to the church, but Diotrephes, who likes to put himself first, does not acknowledge our authority. <sup>10</sup> So if I come, I will bring up what he is doing, talking wicked nonsense against us. And not content with that, he refuses to welcome the brothers, and also stops those who want to and puts them out of the church.*

*3 John 1:9-10 (ESV)*

Also, in the letters to the seven churches in Revelation, which are dictated by Jesus Himself, some very blunt things are said. Individuals' names are not given, except in the letter to Thyatira, but whole local churches are criticised, sometimes very severely. See chapters 2-3 of Revelation for the full details of what Jesus says, publicly, about each of them. There are also several instances in the gospels in which Jesus publicly rebuked or criticised Scribes, Pharisees, Sadducees and teachers of the Law, often in front of large crowds. His disciples were present, right alongside, but there was also the wider public milling around.

The audiences must often have been very large. Yet Jesus spoke openly in front of them and rebuked, corrected and warned people and groups wherever necessary. He did not hold back. The classic example was when He rebuked the money-changers in the Temple, turning over their tables and driving them out. Rebuke doesn't get much more public than that. Consider also the occasion in Matthew 15 when Jesus was approached by Pharisees and Scribes who objected to what He was doing. Jesus contradicted them publicly, in front of the crowd, and even called them "hypocrites".

*Then Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem and said, <sup>2</sup> "Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat." <sup>3</sup> He answered them, "And why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition? <sup>4</sup> For God commanded, 'Honor your father and your mother,' and, 'Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die.' <sup>5</sup> But you say, 'If anyone tells his father or his mother, "What you would have gained from me is given to God," <sup>6</sup> he need not honor his father.' So for the sake of your tradition you have made void the word of God. <sup>7</sup> You hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy of you, when he said:*

<sup>8</sup> *"This people honors me with their lips,  
but their heart is far from me;  
<sup>9</sup> in vain do they worship me,  
teaching as doctrines the commandments of men."*

*Matthew 15:1-9 (ESV)*

Later Jesus spoke to a large crowd in Matthew 23. He criticised the Scribes and Pharisees as a group and warned the people not to imitate them:

<sup>1</sup>*Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, <sup>2</sup> "The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat, <sup>3</sup> so do and observe whatever they tell you, but not the works they do. For they preach, but do not practice. <sup>4</sup> They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to move them with their finger. <sup>5</sup> They do all their deeds to be seen by others. For they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long, <sup>6</sup> and they love the place of honor at feasts and the best seats in the synagogues <sup>7</sup> and greetings in the marketplaces and being called rabbi by others.*

*Matthew 23:1-7 (ESV)*

Shortly after that Jesus speaks directly to the Scribes and Pharisees in front of the large crowd and criticises them very severely, with no concession made for the fact that it was all being said in public:

<sup>13</sup> *"But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you shut up the kingdom of heaven against men; for you neither go in yourselves, nor do you allow those who are entering to go in. <sup>14</sup> Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you devour widows' houses, and for a pretence make long prayers. Therefore you will receive greater condemnation.*

<sup>15</sup> *“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel land and sea to win one proselyte, and when he is won, you make him twice as much a son of hell as yourselves.*

<sup>16</sup> *“Woe to you, blind guides, who say, ‘Whoever swears by the temple, it is nothing; but whoever swears by the gold of the temple, he is obliged to perform it.’<sup>17</sup> Fools and blind! For which is greater, the gold or the temple that sanctifies the gold?<sup>18</sup> And, ‘Whoever swears by the altar, it is nothing; but whoever swears by the gift that is on it, he is obliged to perform it.’<sup>19</sup> Fools and blind! For which is greater, the gift or the altar that sanctifies the gift?<sup>20</sup> Therefore he who swears by the altar, swears by it and by all things on it.<sup>21</sup> He who swears by the temple, swears by it and by Him who dwells in it.<sup>22</sup> And he who swears by heaven, swears by the throne of God and by Him who sits on it.*

<sup>23</sup> *“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. These you ought to have done, without leaving the others undone.<sup>24</sup> Blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel!*

<sup>25</sup> *“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you cleanse the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of extortion and self-indulgence.<sup>26</sup> Blind Pharisee, first cleanse the inside of the cup and dish, that the outside of them may be clean also.*

<sup>27</sup> *“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which indeed appear beautiful outwardly, but inside are full of dead men’s bones and all uncleanness.<sup>28</sup> Even so you also outwardly appear righteous to men, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.*

<sup>29</sup> *“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! Because you build the tombs of the prophets and adorn the monuments of the righteous,<sup>30</sup> and say, ‘If we had lived in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partakers with them in the blood of the prophets.’*

<sup>31</sup> *“Therefore you are witnesses against yourselves that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets.<sup>32</sup> Fill up, then, the measure of your fathers’ guilt.<sup>33</sup> Serpents, brood of vipers! How can you escape the condemnation of hell?*

*Matthew 23:13-33 (NKJV)*

### **General guidance and instruction that the Bible gives about watching out for, avoiding and confronting those who behave badly or are false teachers**

Let’s move away from the theme of specific warnings about named individuals. We shall now look at more general instruction about watching out for, avoiding, and even confronting, those who do wrong or teach false doctrine. There are many verses which address these points and urge us to be vigilant and bold in tackling those concerned. For example, see what apostle John says:

<sup>18</sup> *Children, it is the last hour; and as you have heard that antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come; therefore we know that it is the last hour.<sup>19</sup> They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us; but they went out, that it might be plain that they all are not of us. .*

*1 John 2:18-19 (RSV)*

<sup>26</sup> *I write this to you about those who would deceive you;*  
*1 John 2:26 (RSV)*

<sup>7</sup> *Little children, let no one deceive you. He who does right is righteous, as he is righteous.*  
*1 John 3:7 (RSV)*

*Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are of God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world.*  
*1 John 4:1 (RSV)*

<sup>9</sup> *Any one who goes ahead and does not abide in the doctrine of Christ does not have God; he who abides in the doctrine has both the Father and the Son.<sup>10</sup> If any one comes to you and does not bring*

*this doctrine, do not receive him into the house or give him any greeting; <sup>11</sup> for he who greets him shares his wicked work.*

*2 John 1:9-11 (RSV)*

Apostle John repeatedly warns us about false prophets, deceivers and antichrists and tells us to watch out for them. He would hardly tell us to identify them if he did not also want us to point them out to others when we do recognise them. He describes them in the general, but they materialise in the particular, as individuals. So it is as individuals that they have to be identified. John would hardly want us to identify such a deceiver for ourselves, so that we can avoid his teaching, but then tell nobody else about them.

If we did, we would be denying those around us the benefit of our discernment and leaving them to the mercy of men whom we know to be wolves and deceivers. Many of us are called to be elders and pastors. If so, one of our primary duties is to guard the flock. To do that one of the most important tasks is to *warn those we care for*. The point of the Bible using the metaphor of sheep and shepherds is that people are *vulnerable* because most of them can't discern for themselves. Therefore, quite often, it needs to be done for them, by a faithful shepherd, or it won't be done at all.

So if we unwilling to identify such wolves how could the flock ever be warned in any meaningful, effective way? It is no use faithful leaders giving generic warnings about broad categories or types of deceivers, because the reality is that most people can't tell the difference between true and false teachers or prophets. Therefore, unless the names of those men are identified for them, by faithful leaders, most Christians would be none the wiser. They would not know which specific leaders or teachers come within the general category they are being warned against.

It would be like telling people to avoid negligent doctors or unqualified electricians but without saying *who* those are. Apostle Paul also warns us in general terms about wicked people within churches and also false teachers. He urges us to watch out for them and to confront them. It is implicit within these warnings, as with the warnings from John, that in tackling such people there has to be at least some degree of public discussion and naming of the people concerned. Otherwise, how could they even be identified, let alone avoided or expelled?

**Therefore, it is right and necessary to publicly name false teachers and wolves such as Joel Osteen, Joyce Meyer, Benny Hinn, Rick Warren, Creflo Dollar, the Popes, and many others.**

It causes consternation when genuine Christians openly name false teachers and abusive leaders. Many assume it is inherently wrong to do so because it is 'divisive' and 'judgemental' and that we should all stay silent. That is plainly misguided. We have no realistic alternative but to name these people if naïve undiscerning Christians are to be forewarned and put on their guard. So the Church needs to be warned about people like Joyce Meyer, Joel Osteen, Benny Hinn, Rick Warren and Creflo Dollar. They are all false teachers and wolves, each in their own way.

Likewise, we need to say openly that the Popes are all false teachers who pervert genuine Christianity. They undermine the Bible, present a false gospel, control and exploit people and promote their own man-made ideas and traditions. It is no use just hinting at these things indirectly or speaking in merely general terms. The people in the churches won't understand us. We have a solemn duty to warn others, but such warnings are of little use if they aren't explicit and don't clearly identify those to whom we are referring.

**However, ‘naming names’ must be done with great care. Only do it you are very sure of your facts and have checked them thoroughly.**

There is a time and a place to judge (*diakrino*) other men’s teaching and character and to “name names” and identify individual leaders, teachers and churches. However, we need to be extremely careful in doing so. If we do not check all the facts thoroughly, for ourselves, we would be likely to end up making false accusations against good people. The demons would notice your willingness to publicly identify false teachers. Then, all the demons need to do is to trick you by feeding you false information to pass on. If so, you will cause great damage to a leader who is not actually false at all.

Some make the mistake of never being willing to identify any false teacher publicly. Others make the equal and opposite mistake of being too willing to speak out and they do so too quickly, without carefully checking all the facts first. We need to avoid both of those errors. You should therefore always check everything thoroughly before acting on, or repeating, anything you are told about a teacher. Ideally do so by reading a whole book of his or by personally listening to a whole sermon on MP3 or online before speaking out against it.

Don’t just rely on a small extract from it, as it may possibly have been taken out of context. Likewise, don’t rely solely on what another person *tells you* about a leader or teacher. Take note of it, by all means. But don’t *repeat* the warning until you have checked at least some of that man’s preaching or writing, first hand, for yourself. If you are hasty or ‘trigger-happy’ you could be used by the demons as their tool to do a terrible injustice. So, be very slow and careful about speaking against one another in general, but especially leaders and teachers:

***<sup>11</sup> Do not speak evil against one another, brethren. He that speaks evil against a brother or judges his brother, speaks evil against the law and judges the law. But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge. <sup>12</sup> There is one lawgiver and judge, he who is able to save and to destroy. But who are you that you judge your neighbor?***

***James 4:11-12 (RSV)***

There are many Christian leaders and teachers about whom I have misgivings, ranging from mild to severe. However, my practice is only to condemn a man’s teaching publicly if I have personally read, or listened to, a substantial amount of his teaching. That would mean a whole book, or at least a whole chapter, or whole sermon, not just a little extract or ‘soundbite’. It is important to make sure that the context is properly understood and taken into account. The teaching or practice to which I am objecting would also need to be about a *major* issue of doctrine or practice.

That means that a false teaching on that issue would lead people astray, perhaps even to the extent of not receiving salvation. The issue over which we publicly criticise a man, must not merely be a difference of opinion on a secondary issue, even if the other man is plainly wrong. A classic example of a secondary issue would be ‘eschatology’ i.e. the study of the last things or end times. If a man disagrees with me about the details of the Rapture, Tribulation, Second Coming, Millennium and so forth that, in itself, does not make either him, or me, a false teacher.