

How to Spot Troublemakers in the Church

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“Now I urge you, brethren, note those who cause divisions and offenses, contrary to the doctrine which you learned, and avoid them. For those who are such do not serve our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly, and by smooth words and flattering speech deceive the hearts of the simple.” (Romans 16:17-18, NKJV)

In my fifteen years of pastoral ministry here at Firm Foundation, I’ve seen many false prophets and charlatans come through the church doors. They all profess faith in God through Jesus Christ in some form or other, but their behavior exposes their motives and belies their testimony. It is my duty to warn the church—it is in my job description. See Acts 20:27-31. “For I have not shunned to declare to you the whole counsel of God. Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves. Therefore watch, and remember that for three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears. Also see Jude 3. For your part, look up these Bible verses yourself if you wish to get a solid understanding. See Acts 17:11. I will make one caveat, however. Test folks first before identifying them as false prophets or charlatans (1 John 4:1-6). Sometimes folks are just over-zealous or really are properly using technology, for instance, for the true motive of the glory of God. But usually, church leaders with discernment will make a distinction based on Bible understanding, and they will help you differentiate between the good and the evil. Here are seven further principles.

1. Troublemakers bring disunity, and unsettle the spirit of true Christians and their fellowship. They will ask different people the same questions, hoping for different answers. Romans 16:17.
2. Troublemakers call into question basic Bible doctrines, such as the eternal security of the believer (as clearly taught in John 3:16,

- 10:28, 1 Peter 1:3-5, and 1 John 5:11-13). They are often focused on works, and/or those areas in which Christians have liberty.
3. Troublemakers are full of pride. They are quick to tell you of all the things that they are “doing for the kingdom of God”, in contradiction to the principle of Matthew 6:3, while denigrating what other Christians are doing, blatantly or subtly.
 4. Troublemakers question the legitimate authority of the church leadership and teaching staff, by intentional disrespect. Usually it only borders on disrespect (like refusing to use the title “Pastor”—not that this title is one I enjoy, but I’m simply pointing out a common theme of those who wish to gain authority by reducing the legitimate of their authority). They will claim they are innocent if called out on it. In any church meeting they attend, they will try to dominate it.
 5. Charlatans do not regularly attend or serve in a church, a local body of believers, as they are called to (Matthew 16:16, Hebrews 10:24-25). They do not have a job, and often have never had one. They do not go through the normal course of Bible study like everyone else—they are too good and spiritual for that. They will work the room, trying to get contact information of folks, who they think may potentially be their followers. (You do well not to give them your phone number or befriend them on social media). They claim to have followers and converts, but you are not aware of any. Yet they have their own fundraisers, ministries, and (in 2024) social media and Youtube ministries. This is all done to avoid accountability.
 6. Charlatans are often of the Charismatic/Pentecostal persuasion. They will claim apostolic or prophetic authority, even including supposed direct revelation from God. They do not understand the foundational nature of prophecy in the New Testament Scriptures. See Ephesians 2:20, Revelation 22:18-19, and especially 2 Timothy 3:15-17, which teaches the sufficiency of Scripture for Christian maturity without the need for any additional revelation. *Sola Scriptura*, Scripture alone provides the objective bases for all matters of Christian faith and practice.
 7. Heed Pauls’ counsel. “Avoid them” (Romans 10:17).