

Glad Tidings

“And we bring you good tidings of the promise made unto the fathers...” (Acts 13:32)

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When can you determine one to be a false teacher?

(Jerry Fite)

Some brethren are having difficulty in labeling a teacher of error as a false teacher. They see the only time the term “false teachers” occurs in the New Testament, it is describing one who not only teaches error, but is “privily” or secretly approaching, speaking “feigned words” to “make merchandise” of brethren (2 Peter 2:1-2). Therefore, the false teacher is not just one who teaches falsehood, but is a deliberately deceitful person, speaking falsehood.

While the term “false teachers” occurs once, references to those proclaiming falsehood are replete. John warned brethren, “Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world” (I John 4:1). How do we determine one to be of God or of a false prophet?

Jesus offers us the criterion: “Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly are ravening wolves. By their fruits you shall know the...” (Matthew 7:15-16). Jesus warns us that the false prophet is deceitful in his approach. But how do I determine who he is? By inspecting what he produces: his fruit. Those among us who

say one is not a false teacher unless we know of their deceptive spirit, would not be able to determine who the false prophet is by applying their standard because one cannot know the mind or spirit of another man (I Corinthians 1:11). Jesus does not say to judge their heart or read their mind, but test what they produce. Therefore, testing one’s teaching by God’s Truth can identify the false teacher.

Reading the Old Testament, the term “false prophet” never occurs. Does this mean that no one ever was one? Not so, for Peter says, “But there arose false prophets also among the people, as among you also there shall be false teachers...” (2 Peter 2:1). Hosea saw that the prophet along with the nation of Israel were going to stumble. Who was this stumbling prophet? Homer Hayley commenting on Hosea 4:5, writes, “both the people and the false prophets would stumble, and the mother – the nation – would be destroyed. The expression: ‘false prophet’ is not found in the Old Testament; however, the prophets who spoke against the true prophets were utterly ‘false’ and were condemned by the true prophets” (A Commentary on The Minor Prophets, page 148). Speaking a message contrary to the truth of God manifested one as a false

prophet, just as “striving with the priest” was contradicting the teaching of the priest (Deut. 17:12, Hosea 4:4). “False teachers” contradict “the Truth”.

If one must be insincere in addition to teaching a false doctrine before he or she is a false teacher, then what denominational preacher would ever be a false teacher? Do you judge the hearts of Billy or Frank Graham to be deceptive? Yet, these men teach that one is saved by “faith only”, while Jesus said, He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved...” (Mk. 16:16). Was Oral Roberts insincere?

John said many “anti-christs” had arisen in his day (I Jn. 2:18). Each “antichrist” was a “liar”, denying Jesus to be the Christ (I Jn. 2:22). John observes, “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 they might be made manifest that they are not of us” (I Jn. 2:19). Did these “liars” cease to be “false” because they were sincere enough to cease to be identified with the brethren who taught that Jesus is the Christ? Certainly not! When a man contradicts God’s word, and continues to teach his error, he has manifested that he is a false teacher.