

Avoiding Deception

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WHY WAS I FOOLED?

I was initially motivated to study this subject after having been one of hundreds who were completely fooled by a man who for years appeared to be a right-on Christian. His attacks and accusations against a man of God left us reeling in disillusionment and confusion. Physical violence broke out among the less mature in the body...press coverage ensued...the world laughed and shook their heads at the Christians who were striving with one another. The tragedy gradually subsided in time, leaving scars, disillusioned Christians, broken hearts and broken relationships.

I had played my roles in the melee: sometimes as a hero, sometimes as a fool. I began to try to comprehend what had actually taken place. My heart was aching for those whom I had wronged. I began to ask myself questions like: "Doesn't the Bible have something to say about situations like this?" "Are there guidelines on how to deal with things like this, and instructions on how to discern them in the first place?" I found that the Bible not only contains very specific and thorough answers to these questions, but provides them in a way that promotes harmony and growth, rather than division and destruction.

On my initial search of the New Testament for answers to these questions, I encountered over one hundred and fifty scriptural warnings, admonitions, and instructions related to this topic. It became obvious at this time that if anything less than Biblical paths are followed when dealing with this sensitive area, disaster is unavoidable -- this had already been soundly confirmed by my own experience.

WHO MIGHT BE FOOLED?

How could this happen? How could hundreds of spirit-filled Christians be deceived? Great men of God were fooled. Spiritual laymen were deceived. These were not fooled for just a day or two, but for two and three years. While sharing the basic elements of this situation with a sister in Christ, at least part of the answer dawned on me: She explained that she would not have been fooled because she had the gift of spiritual discernment. I made no attempt to defend the spiritual qualifications and stature of men who had been fooled, but realized that no gift or years of experience will help you if you do not heed the basic warnings and instructions in the Word of God -- instructions that are available to every newborn babe in Christ who can read his Bible. The Bible describes many categories of people who may be deceived. It comes as no big surprise that deceivers themselves are routinely being duped (2Tim.3:13).

I once had a friend who was a habitual con artist. Liar would perhaps be a more correct word, but mike (which his name was not) was not really trying to lie; he would just get carried away during a persuasive effort, and simply not seem to notice when he would cross back and forth over the line of truth and error. I used to marvel at this, but what even amazed me more was what he was willing to believe. Being a rascal at heart myself, I could not resist an occasional test of his gullibility. It was easy to see, that this deceptive individual was easily fooled.

Christians with weak morals or bad habits are repeatedly deceived in the area of their weakness (2Tim.3:6, 2Pet.2:18, Js.1:14-16). The manifestation of this deception may range from defending and justifying their immoral acts to merely not dealing with their problem with the enthusiasm they would invest if it were a physical cancer instead of a spiritual one. Remember Christ's words to those who even performed miracles in His name and yet consistently walked in sin? and their response of surprise and anguish when they found out that their sin was the only spiritual thing they had? (Mt.7:22-23). Sin is serious business!

Getting a little closer to home, Christians who are simply not well grounded in the Word, or who may be but tend to isolate themselves from other Christians, are easy prey to passing wolves (2Tim.4:3,4, Eph.4:11-14, Heb.13:17). I have sadly watched more than one brother or sister slowly dry up as the pressures and false priorities of life pried them away from their studies of the Bible. I have also seen a similar effect when disillusionment with churches or individual Christians became their excuse to forsake fellowship. God has raised up men to minister to His church, and these men are intended to be blessings.

Probably the most sobering warning comes from Christ Himself while speaking with His disciples (Mt.24:4,5,23-27). These men are spiritual, well taught, and dedicated, and yet Christ warns them to be on their guard or else they will be fooled. In the context, it becomes very clear that only those who have been warned ahead of time and who heed that will escape from being grossly misled, even to the point of following a false Christ.

While we are discussing who might be deceived, consider the following scriptures for further study: John 8:47 states that those who are not of God cannot hear Him speak at all (and therefore are totally without protection). 2 Corinthian 2:14 & 15 also brings this out. Pride is a major obstacle to belief. In John 5:44 Jesus points out that if you are receiving glory from each other you cannot believe Him. In 1 Tim. 1:3-7, Paul refers to men whose desire for status made total fools of them. Paul concludes this letter with a further warning against false, though authoritative sounding teaching (1 Tim. 6:20, 21). Being interested in weird things overlaps into this category. Consider 1 Tim. 4:1, 6:4, 2 Tim. 2:23). Greed is a consistent deceiver. Paul brings this up in 1 Tim. 6:5, 9, 10. Even spirit-filled believers had better be careful about what they become involved in. In 1 Tim. 5:22, 24, and in 2 Tim 3:5, we are told to be careful of "ministries" we support.

ARE DECEIVERS REALLY DANGEROUS?

"Then the word of the Lord came to me saying, 'Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel. Prophesy and say to those shepherds "Thus says the Lord God 'Woe, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding themselves! Should not the shepherds feed the flock? You eat the fat and clothe yourself with the wool, you slaughter the fat sheep without feeding the flock. You eat the fat and clothe yourself with the wool, you slaughter the fat sheep without feeding the flock. Those who are sickly you have not strengthened, the diseased you have not brought back, nor have you sought for the lost; but with force and severity you have dominated them" (Ezekiel 34:2b,3,4 see also Jer.23:1-2).

One form of damage that deceivers frequently cause is the misuse of church resources. Though this may range from merely unwise use to calculated thievery, the results are the same: Needs within the body go unmet. I have seen ads in secular magazines promoting

get-rich-on-religion schemes. There is no doubt about it: Sincere people are willing to pay lots of money for their beliefs, and calculating false brethren are quite willing to collect it.

The material loss, heart-breaking and disappointing as it may be, is far from greatest danger faced by the body of Christ. Material goods may be important, but the paths false brethren often take to obtain them can be far more devastating. Keep in mind that these deceivers are only fools, paying far more themselves than could ever be reckoned in monetary terms. Their master, the devil, has far more sinister designs than consuming a church's money.

People of the world, being less sympathetic towards Christianity in the first place, readily see these deceivers for what they are. The tragedy here is that they then point to these people as examples of what Christianity is all about. The result is a bad name for everything associated with Christianity (2Pet.2:1,2).

"Those who are sickly you have not strengthened, the diseased you have not brought back, nor have you sought for the lost;" Not only are these false shepherds thieves, they offer no useful service. They are of no use at all. And the indictment continues: "but with force and severity you have dominated them" (Ez.34:2b,3,4).

So why would anybody hang around to be stolen from and neglected? By the use of terrorism of course! The modern pastor has many tools at his disposal. In the first place, we have this false concept of "church", which has been born out of generations of sheep-abuse. This "church" has become an artificial environment within which unbelievable practices and manners are tolerated. Now we all know that if we want to be Christians we ought to go to church. So here's the big threat: "If you don't go to church you are going to hell, or at least "back-sliding" (it has its own dictionary too) towards it.

Now within the context of church there is a whole arsenal of gadgets that are calculated to put out any fiery dart of skepticism: From the pastor: "If we don't accept it we are being rebellious.", and "God has sent me to collect whatever you owe Him, and you owe Him everything from before you were born to the end of eternity.", From the song leader: "Smile dammit!", From the offering collector: "God will get you fired if you don't give more than you can afford." OK, I'm using a little artistic license here (perhaps I should say "evangelistically speaking"), but I have seen such pressures as these used way too often. So we continue to sit trapped and smug in "church", shaking our heads in grief at those who had the sense to leave.

Ez.34:5,6 "And they were scattered for lack of a shepherd, and they became food for every beast of the field and were scattered. My flock wandered through all the mountains and on every high hill, and My flock was scattered over all the surface of the earth and there was no one to search or seek for them."

Do you want a ministry? Here's one for you: Search for God's scattered flock. Strengthen those who are sickly. Heal the diseased. Bind up the broken. Bring back the scattered. Seek the lost. And don't use force or severity, or dominate. A ministry is not a means by which people pay attention to you, it is a means by which you pay attention to people.

The real poison does its' work inside the body of Christ, and begins to sow up as weakened fellowship. Factions arise (Rom.16:17), legalism becomes important (Gal.2:r), and people become quite concerned about petty things (Col.2:8,16-23). Gossip and rumors increase, and jealous individuals become quite prominent in opposing the leadership (2Cor.10:2, Gal.4:17, 3Jn.9,10). The result of all

this is a weakened body with a lowered resistance to more serious ailments (2Pet.2:1).

At this point, agents of Satan may more easily distort the perfect and holy doctrines of Christ. By taking an emphasis, like love or grace (Jude 4), and interpreting it into a form that is winsome to the flesh, the door to questionable morality is gently pried open – just a little bit at first, until enough people become accustomed to it (Rev.2:14,20). Along with this will be offered many other doctrines, that appeal to different aspects of the body and soul.

Many will be so plausible (appealing to the mind) that they will be difficult to detect without a very careful comparison to the Word of God. But if there is no shepherd who is respected, such a comparison is not as likely to be received (1thess.5:12,13, Heb.13:17). these doctrines will tend to weaken people's faith, cause confusion, and deteriorate family structures.

A tolerance for distorted doctrines paves the way for doctrines that are blatantly contrary to the Word of God. Historically, this has produced cults which stand in direct opposition to the truth of God' Word -- Mormonism, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Christian Science, to name a few of the more prominent ones. These claim to be scripturally based, when in fact they are scripturally opposed. Their base is satanic deception, but their coverings are of sheep skins (2Pet.2:12-22, Matt.7:15). Many sincere, deceived people are trapped in these cults.

Satan cannot attack one who walks close to the Shepherd, so in order to achieve his objectives, he must distract them. If he can succeed in getting Christians turned around enough so that they actually become enemies of the cross of Christ (Phil.3:18), then they will incur the judgment of God Himself. Remember that Balak was powerless against the Israelites when God was with them. But, by enticing them to commit abominations against God, they eventually incurred God's wrath (Rev.2:14).

We have no need to succumb to this type of treatment. God's Holy Word provides the answers, and gives specific, thorough instructions on how to bring healing to a threatened body (2Tim.3:16).

THE BIBLE WAY

It is surprising that these warnings are not more frequently expounded upon from the pulpits. The number of scriptures on this subject in the New Testament alone gives impressive justification for studying it, and yet this topic is very rarely taught. Two reasons for this neglect become clear as the related scriptures are prayerfully examined.

One is that this study promptly leads very close to home -- too close. It exposes the origins, attitudes, and habits that we tend to put up with in our own lives, and in the lives of one another. It reveals how we kid ourselves about our faith in God, our spiritual stature, and our obedience to God's Word. It is a massive topic.

The second reason is that it is a dangerous topic that cannot afford to be mishandled. Nevertheless, the instructions in the Bible are there to be followed, and therefore must be studied. The only credentials I claim in teaching this is the fact that I have found and prayerfully analyzed over a hundred and fifty verses related to this topic and have seen, and committed – many mistakes that did not need to happen.

Human wisdom can have no part in preventing these things from happening. Human wisdom is a carnal weapon, and the weapons of our warfare are not to be carnal, but mighty (2Cor.10:3-5). Remember that Satan's method of defeating Eve in the Garden of Eden was to draw her away from

using a spiritual weapon (faith in what God said) and to entice her to depend on a carnal one, human wisdom (Gen. 3:1-6). The armor of God described in Ephesians Six does not contain a single element of human endeavor and is primarily defensive. The single component of offence is the sword of the Spirit -- the word of God. Under this "sword" category, the context clearly includes Spirit-directed prayer. With this, we are to equip ourselves to minister to the Body of Christ.

BEWARE OF WITCH HUNTING

Do not let what you see deceive you into defaming another brother or sister in Christ. Remember that in this realm, Satan is just as eager to thwart good ministries as he is to promote bad ones. In fact, his whole objective is to interfere, so if you can be directly fooled into raising suspicions about a brother in Christ and tearing down his ministry, he does not need to waste anything "heavy" on you.

The word "deception" means that things will not appear as they really are, whether it is a wolf that looks like a beautiful brother, or a brother in need of teaching and fellowship who comes across as a little bit strange. On the other hand, if there are specific, non-scriptural acts that have been observed by you, or personally witnessed by at least two other responsible people, you are not to simply ignore the situation, but to deal with it scripturally, as we will discuss shortly.

We must continually be on guard against judging according to outward appearance. I have seen mighty men of God fooled by very beautiful appearance -- do not think you are any less susceptible! I can think of at least two examples of this in the Bible, and I am sure that there are others.

Consider the great prophet Samuel, the last of the judges. When he saw Eliab, David's oldest brother, he thought surely that this was God's choice for the kingship of Israel. But God reprimanded him and instructed him not to judge by outward appearances, but to wait for God, who looks upon the heart (1Sam.16:6-7).

Joshua and the rest of the leadership of Israel were completely taken in by the Gibeonites.

The mighty apostle Paul was followed for many days by a girl who proclaimed he and his companions as being bond servants of the most high God, and that they were teaching a way of salvation (Acts 16:16-18). Why did Paul put up with it for so long if he knew she was being controlled by an evil spirit in so doing? After all, was she not sort of helping in that she was telling people who these men served? Was she not also spreading the news that they were teaching a way of salvation? The fact of the matter is, however, that Paul was not teaching a way of salvation, he was teaching the way of salvation. Whereas this girl may have appeared to be helping, she was in fact leading people right back into the polytheistic concepts that Paul was seeking to lead them out of -- very tricky, those demons!

Finally, I would like to encourage you to avoid being spiritually petty. In the 14th chapter of Romans, Paul tells us to stay off each other's backs about little things – like whether or not you want to be a vegetarian, or which day of the week you want to set aside for worship. Furthermore, in verses 13-21, we are exhorted to go out of our ways to regard another brother or sister's sensitivities, even if we feel they are wrong: i.e., if you feel it is okay by the Bible to drink a little now and then, you still probably should not if your fellowship with Christians would be offended. Churches have been split by things much smaller than these, and it is time we quit pointing the finger and started building each other up in love (also read 1Cor.8).

Many of us who are married, as well as a good number of those who have not been, are well aware that misunderstandings are responsible for far more disagreements and problems in close relationships than they should be. The Bible gives instructions on dealing with these misunderstandings, but first let us see where we ourselves are, in order to help us better appreciate the wisdom of God.

Let us say we see something in a brother or sister that we do not really feel is right. If our very first response is to tell them so, I think we just blew it. We have a friend who continued to smoke and to respond to various situations with profanity for months after she came to know Christ. She was practically blown out of the kingdom by indignant church people who felt they knew which first things should come first. But through the loving, non-vindictive companionship and counsel of a few brothers and sisters, she grew rapidly on the inside, and soon the outward scars of the world disappeared as well.

To turn on those "not-so-right" church people and set them straight would also be out of line. Everything that we would accomplish in building up the body of Christ must be accomplished and motivated by a sincere love, and by a knowledge of the Word of God.

What does all this have to do with spiritual deceivers? Let me put it this way: I would much rather be treated like a deceiver myself than to be guilty of erroneously treating a beloved brother or sister in Christ as though they were. I want to avoid any possibility of false accusations, but I also want to lead up to a sure foundation for properly dealing with deception within the body of Christ.

ANATOMY OF A DECEPTION

Deceivers get into the body of Christ in two ways: They are either born there (2Tim.2:17,18), or they enter from the outside (Gal.2:4). The Bible gives insight into both cases. The first case is the most frequent, as well as the most important.

As I was studying the scriptures on the topic, I was horrified to find that many of the attributes ascribed to deceivers are things that I struggle with myself. It became clear to me that Satan really has only one program, and deceivers are just a part of it. Brothers and sisters in Christ who stumble along the path tend to look for company. When their conscience begins to bother them they/we do one of two things to relieve the pressure: We either humble ourselves and repent of the situation, or we justify ourselves.

It is in trying to justify ourselves that we often involve other people. As we try to ease our conscience through comparing ourselves with other people, we are relieved to find that others have similar problems. This leads to our minimizing the dangers of the problem, both to ourselves and to those around us. Comparing ourselves with others, by the way, can be dangerous (2Cor.10:12).

Let's pause a moment and take a look at this situation in plain, clear light. Someone has just 1. sinned, 2. not repented, and 3. tried to persuade others that it was all right. That is quite a disaster for such a small common occurrence, but we must get into the habit of seeing things the way they really are. This person, at least on this particular issue, is of no help to the body of Christ. They may still, however, be functioning and very helpful in many other areas.

WHERE THE BATTLE BEGINS

The proper action at this point is definitely NOT to come crashing down upon their head and shoulders with expose, criticism, and ostracism. Before contemplating action, we first need to consider

something that must be carefully controlled: You...and me (Rom.2:3,21, Mt.7:2-5). If the brother or sister in the situation described above--be it you, me, or someone else -- had responded properly to the discomfort of their conscience, his/her false persuasion of others would never have been attempted. This is where the battle begins, and where it should end. The qualification for teaching is to be above reproach in the area taught. If we are to be guides to those who err, then we must not err ourselves, and if we are to avoid error, then we must go to the Word of God to learn what to watch out for and how to watch out for it. If we are going to be willing to teach, then we must certainly be willing to be taught. The Bible gives a lot of instructions on how to avoid being deceived.

HOW TO AVOID BEING DECEIVED

What can protect a human body better than the human body itself? Just as God has done a beautiful job of creating our human bodies, replete with mechanisms for disease control, He has also invested a great deal of tender loving care in building His body of believers. Paul describes some of the nature and function of the body of Christ in Ephesians 4:11-16. In referring to special gifts that God has given to the church, Paul states that He "gave some apostles, and some prophets, and some evangelists, and some pastors, and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ.....As a result we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves, and carried about by every wind of doctrine, and the trickery of men, by craftiness and deceitful scheming."

Make no mistake, we are a body and we do need each other (1Cor.12, Heb.10:24,25, 1Pet.2:5). Within the local body there are those who are responsible for us, and to whom we should go for counsel when confronted by dubious situations (Heb.13:7,17). In return, we must be careful to pray for our leaders and in most cases, support them materially. Our responsibilities don't end there; we must be alert to meet every physical and spiritual need of those around us as well.

PROUD IS VULNERABLE

What can I say about pride that will properly emphasize its' danger to the body of Christ? Let's begin with where pride began: Satan became proud of his position as heaven's top angel. This pride led him to have aspirations for the very throne of creation (Is.14:12-15). His pride allowed him to deceive himself into thinking that he could be something that he could never be. This self deception led to death. "Pride cometh before a fall and a haughty spirit before destruction" (Prov.16:18). An exception to that scripture was not even made in the case of the mighty archangel Lucifer, and it certainly will not be made in the case of you or me.

Pride is seen to stand in blatant opposition to belief in the Word of God in John 5:44. But the other side of this coin is that immersing yourself in the Bible, believing it and applying it will tend to replace your pride with a clear perspective. You see, pride itself is a form of deception; Lucifer had no right to be proud, and yet he of all created beings would appear to be the most likely candidate to be exalted. Where does that put us? Pride is just one of the bondages from which truth can free us.

We have seen how pride is self-destructive, but now let's take a look at what our pride can do to others. Pride involves taking some attribute and distorting its' importance. The reason facts are distorted is that in reality, we have no reason to be proud about anything in ourselves. So in order to be proud,

we have to ascribe importance to something that we have or can achieve. Rituals and ordinances have frequently been used.

In the book of Galatians, Paul is primarily dealing with a situation where men were forsaking God's way of grace for a path of works that they could be proud of. These men wanted the status of leaders, and so they were trying to change the criteria for leadership into something that they were capable of achieving. They had rejected the way God had made, so that they could make a new set of rules that revolved around themselves instead of God. Lucifer rejected the high position that God had given him in an attempt to be the center himself. Eve rejected her position of fellowship with God in her attempt to become "like the Gods, knowing good from evil" (Gen.3:5).

The first step in this spiritual descent involves doing a lot of speculating about things we know nothing about. We are warned in the Bible, clearly and repeatedly, to ignore myths and things that give rise to mere speculations, and to avoid all forms of useless argument and meaningless chatter.

Occasionally I meet a brother who comes across as a little bit condescending towards the rest of us, because none of us could "really understand the greatness of his thinking." Baloney -- and that's a compliment! Such individuals will always be incompatible with believers who read and heed the Word of God, because we will consistently -- and narrowly if you please -- reject vain speculations and philosophical diversions (1Tim.6:20, 2Tim.2:16).

Ironically though, believers who walk in faith and submission have the very mind of Christ, and the world cannot comprehend THEM (1Cor.2:12-16). We have no need of speculation, we KNOW who we are, we know where we are going, and we know how to lead others. We walk with our feet firmly planted in the Word of God.

Now our brother with the ego problem needs love. We should express love to him and try to restore him to a sound focus on the Word of God and fellowship with other believers. But in so doing we must soundly refuse even any discussion of his non-biblical philosophy. This can be a delicate thing, and requires much prayer and genuine love. If he cannot accept you without your acceptance of his philosophies, then you must, sadly, let him go.

Be careful. An individual with impressive and appealing philosophies looks for a place to teach them, and will use many methods to gain a following. In so doing he may attempt to promote himself to a teaching position within the body. In 1Tim.1:3-5, Paul gives important guidelines to the leadership on how to deal with these people, and to us on how to avoid these pitfalls ourselves. He also instructs us on what your attitudes and objectives should be. "As I urged you upon my departure for Macedonia, remain on at Ephesus, in order that you may instruct certain men not to teach strange doctrines, nor to pay attention to myths and endless genealogies, which give rise to mere speculation rather than furthering God's provision which is by faith. But the goal of our instruction is love from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith." A further description follows in verses 6 and 7: "For some men, straying from these things, have turned aside to fruitless discussion, wanting to be teachers of the Law, even though they do not understand either what they are saying or the matters about which they make confident assertions."

Be careful in talking to people with strange-sounding ideas, because they will often play on your pride through many forms of flattery: "You're the only one I've met who seems able to understand these things." or "an intelligent guy like you" (not quite as subtle). They may also play on your emotions:

"Everyone else keeps getting on my case (you're not are you")." The worst deceivers have the most beautiful stories. Paul was not kidding in 2Cor.11:15 when he said "his (Satan's) servants also disguise themselves as servants of righteousness." Even as our doctrine cannot originate from our emotions and notions, neither can our protection. The doctrines of beautiful, pathetic people are not to be tolerated when they are contrary to the Word of God -- and YOU must be soundly grounded to tell the difference.

Pride, when persistent within an individual within the body of Christ, will eventually result in an attack against the leadership. In pride's earlier stages this will take the form of grumbling, complaining, fault-finding, and gossip. Be very, very careful that you don't become involved in any of these things, and I don't mean that you should just call whatever you are doing by some other name. If you have any resentments against anyone, go before God and find out why. If you sincerely feel that they have sinned against you, go that person in an attitude of humility and get it straightened out (Mt.18:15-17). Otherwise, this may develop into "constructive suggestions", but to people who are not really involved.

By the time the leadership is confronted with these suggestions, they are usually in the form of demands, backed by a group of people. We are to avoid those who cause divisions in the body of Christ. This is declared emphatically and repeatedly throughout the letters in the New Testament. There is a big difference between one who asks sincere but stupid questions and one who makes statements under the guise of sincere stupid questions. One is seeking guidance, and one is seeking to guide -- both need guidance.

Pride is at the root of rebellion, and God views rebellion as the sin of witchcraft (1Sam.15:23). Therefore we must train ourselves to be more considerate of other brothers and sisters, and to seek an attitude of submission to those around us. Be aware that one of the most powerful tools Satan uses to isolate people within the Body of Christ is pride, in all its subtle forms. Before continuing our tour through a rogue's gallery of ways we can get into trouble, let's take a look at the positive side, at what our attitudes SHOULD be.

TRUE GREATNESS

There are two aspects of a great man of God: One is an attitude of humility (not to be confused with self-abasement), and the other is service. This is what Christ said in Luke 22:26. Paul in turn describes how thoroughly Christ Himself fulfilled this in Phil.2:5-8. In this passage we see how Christ first emptied Himself of His status of equality with God, in becoming a man in the first place. This step of humility far surpasses anything Julius Caesar could have demonstrated had he decided to become a servant in a peasant's household. But Christ, after having taken this amazing voluntary step of humility in becoming a man in the first place, stepped down still further. He didn't serve us by just taking a lowly position, but He took upon Himself the absolute dregs of human morality and offered cleansing in their place. He died the most humiliating death that the Roman Empire could conceive of. In doing this, He did a 100% thorough job of cleansing. He is therefore able to present us, who are willing to receive this service from Him, spotless before the throne of God.

We are not becoming members of Christ's harem, we are becoming His bride (Rev.12:7-9). We are not to compete with each other, but rather to build each other up; we're on the same team (Heb.10:24-

25). When cells in a body compete, cancer is the result, or some other form of illness. This is also true when it takes place within the body of Christ. We don't need it.

Zeroing in on attitude for a minute, let's take a look at Phil.2:5 "Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus..." We are commanded to have this same attitude, this same form of motivation that led Jesus Himself to assume such humility -- who are we to become great by doing any less? If we don't begin here, then we haven't begun. Now let's back up two verses: "Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind, let each of you regard one another as more important than himself."

In their zeal for humility, some have made it a point to demonstrate to the world how humble they are. They use funny haircuts, obvious carefully displayed poverty, etc. We don't have to fall into this trap, because God's Word warns us about it in Col.2:18,23. A true attitude of humility is almost impossible to see unless it expresses itself in some form of service.

Let humility be our attitude, and service be our way of Life. Paul expresses both these aspects in 1Cor.4:1 "Let a man regard us in this manner, as servants of Christ, and stewards of the mysteries of God". Keep in mind that this is an apostle speaking. In verses 9-13 he goes on to describe his status in the world as a total outcast, and in verses 14 and 15, he describes his service as that of a loving father. Again, he expresses both attitude and service.

As I began to take a closer look at service, I discovered that it had three prominent components: 1. Spiritual service, 2. physical aid, and 3. receiving graciously. How can we serve each other spiritually? Wouldn't you appreciate it if you knew people were praying for you? You'd receive two benefits from that -- one being the direct result of their prayers, and the other would be the encouragement of knowing that there are those in the body who care, and are standing with you spiritually. So make it a habit to pray for others, and to encourage them, letting them know that you care and would stand with them in time of need or trial (it goes without saying that you had better be offering more than just words).

Hebrews 10:24 speaks of thinking up ways to stimulate one another to love and to good deeds. So, start thinking up ways of getting brothers and sisters to love each other more, and to become more active in good deeds. There are many ways of serving. I'll leave it to you to search the scriptures and pray about specific ways in your own situation, but in any case be sensitive, realistic, and very careful about your attitudes.

Physical needs: What a ministry, and yet what an area of imbalance. It seems that people are either avoiding giving money while trying to substitute some form of "spiritual" activity for it, or else they're throwing money at missionary efforts that are far enough away so that they don't have to be come personally involved. Either one is out of balance without the other. James 2:17 tells us simply that faith without works is dead, and the context of the verses that precede it make it quite clear that the works he is speaking of are not things like teaching Sunday school classes, but rather feeding, clothing, and generally caring for those who need it.

On the other hand, Paul commends the Christians in Macedonia for the proper spiritual position they demonstrated prior to providing a monetary offering. "...but they first gave themselves to the Lord, and to us by the will of God." Paul also declares the vanity of living sacrificially with the wrong motive in 1Cor. 13:3. Check your balance.

Now what about receiving? We need the spiritual and physical blessings and gifts that God provides for us. In my case, there have been occasions where my pride has kept me from receiving physical help that I needed -- and I suffered for not having received it. Remember that pride keeps many people from salvation itself – they won't receive forgiveness! Let's not be stupid about this whole thing. God knows what we need even if we haven't noticed it yet, and He sometimes gives things in advance before we even could know. Did you know that receiving graciously can be a ministry? Remember, Christ Himself said that it is more blessed to give than to receive. So even when we are blessed by receiving something we need, we still come off with less of a blessing than the one who met that need.

Allow people to give to you, and thank them for it; there is a balance here too, of course, but don't refuse help on the sole basis of your pride. Don't, on the other hand, declare loudly in their presence "Thank you Jesus!" as if they themselves had nothing to do with it, but share with them how that their obedience to God was an answer to your prayer. Thanking Jesus is a great idea by the way, but receive graciously from your brother first, Jesus will understand.

Receive spiritually. Verify spiritual counsel by the Word of God and receive what lines up. If you can't receive from someone you feel is spiritually inferior to you, then please go back to square one and recheck your attitude.

GREAT, LIMITED LOGIC

The mind is a beautiful thing, and wisdom is given high esteem in the Scriptures. A writer of the Proverbs says much about the desirability and benefits of wisdom. God Himself used wisdom throughout His creation, and bestowed it upon many of His creatures as well. King Solomon was blessed with wisdom and great wealth besides, because it pleased God that he had asked for wisdom. In the New Testament we are instructed to ask for wisdom, and we are told how to ask for it (Js.1:5,6). God has made wisdom available to us and desires that we avail ourselves of it.

Wisdom comes from three directions: God, Satan, and ourselves (Js.3:15,17, 1Cor.1:26). The only source of wisdom that is a viable weapon in spiritual warfare is God. God did a beautiful job in creating us, and our minds have amazing computational and analytical capabilities. But our minds are part of our earthly makeup, and are similar to our bodies in that they have no spiritual power in themselves. The mind is an aspect of your soul, and the Bible makes a clear distinction between body, soul, and spirit. In 2Cor.10:4 Paul states that the weapons of our warfare are "not carnal, but mighty". Our minds are carnal, part of our earthly tent, and as such are not the chosen weapons of this warfare that Paul speaks about. This becomes even more obvious as we continue reading in verses 5 and 6. In this very context, the battlefield referred to is our minds, and the enemy is some of our own thoughts. Does this sound confusing? It would be if our minds were intended to fight against themselves, but this is not in God's plan. God has made spiritual weapons available to us, mighty weapons that are capable of clearing up confusion and bringing peace and unity to our mental state. God is not the author of confusion: He gives us a SPIRIT of love and unity and of a sound mind (2Tim.1:7).

DECEPTION: INTENTIONAL IGNORANCE

Ignorance is simply a lack of correct knowledge. If we don't know about something, we had better not fool with it -- not to mention try to teach it. With respect to things of this world, we normally know

it when we are ignorant; but this isn't commonly true when it comes to spiritual matters. It is when we are ignorant and don't know it that we become dangerous, because then we take ignorant action, and usually wind up trying to teach it to others. The Pharisees, who had this problem, are described as blind guides (Matt.15:14). Some of them even asked Jesus if He thought they were blind -- they shouldn't have done that. He in effect told them "You're so ignorant that you can't even perceive your blindness. If you knew you were blind then there'd be some hope for you." (Jn.9:40,41). Before his conversion, Saul was a dangerous man, and he was ignorant. He was sincere, but ignorant. He wasn't an intentional deceiver, but he was deceived.

In spite of all the destruction and death Saul had caused to the body of Christ, when he became enlightened he became one of God's choice servants. This is one reason why we must be so careful in dealing with emphatic, ignorant people: There are so many to whom and through whom God would reveal His beauty, but they need love, spiritual guidance, and spiritual help -- much prayer.

Deception is another story. The result is often the same as with mere ignorance, but in this case, someone is going to have to pay for it. Deception takes place when you are specifically led into ignorance by a deceiver. You have usually been given a carefully sequenced series of facts through which a rational intelligent mind is constrained to reach the pre-determined conclusion. If you are given the right set of information, intellectual fairness -- a competent computer -- would require the conclusion provided.

This turns into a deception when either critical facts have been carefully omitted, or when some of the "facts" provided are actually lies, and Satan is the father of all lies. There may be a mountain of truth in what is presented, but with a few critical doses of falsehood. In a well-organized story the falsehood is usually un-provable, and sometimes only obviously implied. An honest mind has no protection against this, no matter how intelligent or objective. The deception is not a fault of the recipient's mind or thinking, but of the deceiver's intent. The mind is simply not equipped or intended to be equipped to handle this type of situation.

FAITH IS WHERE YOU START

Faith: Not only is it impossible to please God without it (Heb.11:6), but without it, it is also impossible to follow God (2Cor.5:7). We have a natural revulsion for faith because we are so accustomed to walking in the carnal, physical realm. Reason has been our usual tool of guidance, and when we are forced to make decisions based on data that we know is incomplete, we become very uncomfortable.

Pride also comes into play. We would like to think that our mental capabilities are enough, but as I've pointed out our abilities are not enough because they are not the right tools, regardless of their power. Faith in itself is not enough either. Being deceived is having faith, but in the wrong thing; we must have faith in God.

An interesting aspect of faith that is seldom brought out is that faith towards God is not totally blind. God has provided enough evidence so that people can believe if they are willing to. In Hebrews we are told that the children of Israel did not enter the Promised Land for lack of faith. This was after they had more cause to have faith than perhaps any generation has ever had.

On the other hand, it is the nature of Satan and his false religions to demand blind faith. In fact, evil situations often require faith after repeated, proven disaster. Remember how Eve had faith in the totally unproven words of Satan? How many times have we been fooled about the same temptations? Why do we keep going back?

Faith in God is required, but we can see His creation and the positive changes He has made in lives around us. Jesus Himself says "believe for the work's sake" (you find it). The type of faith God wants is like that of a small child with his father. The father loves the child and has its' best interest at heart. The father knows a very young child would be quite helpless in this world without the guidance, provision, and protection of its parents.

The child, having minimal knowledge and experience, will often not understand the restrictions and requirements imposed by its' parents, and will sometimes rebel. This lack of trust that the child is expressing towards its' parents is exactly what we are doing to God when we disbelieve Him. God has certainly proven His love towards us through His Son, and has proven His unimaginable wisdom and knowledge through His creation, and yet, when our very limited wisdom and knowledge happen to conflict with that provided by God, we very stupidly go our own way.

Proper faith is trusting and submitting to the proven love, wisdom, and knowledge of God. We can't lead ourselves because though we may have our best interests at heart, we lack wisdom and knowledge. Satan has a lot more wisdom and knowledge than we do, but he has our destruction as his goal. Only God has the ultimate wisdom, knowledge, and love for us. He is worthy of our total trust.

When Jesus was asked (in John 6:28) "What shall we do, that we may work the works of God?", the Savior's response was: "...that you believe in Him whom He has sent." The work that God has for us is that we totally believe Him. In Hebrews 11 there is an impressive list of things that people accomplished by completely believing in and trusting God. In Romans, it says that Abraham believed God and that this belief was accounted to him as righteousness -- faith, becoming righteousness. Is there something else you need? Begin by believing God.

Our righteousness is based on faith as Abraham's was, only now our believing God involves receiving His Son and believing "also in" Him. Let's take a moment to fit this faith into perspective with three other very important facets: 1. Love, the first commandment is to be our motive in life, i.e. our motive for serving God and man. 2. Faith is our work. 3. Doing, is the expression of that faith.

Jesus emphasizes the importance of DOING the word in the context of His illustration about the wise man, with the house on the rock, and the foolish man with the house built on the sand (Mt.7:20-27). James very plainly states that faith without works is dead. In other words, if you don't act on what you claim to believe, then you don't really believe. Remember that believing – the type of believing that invokes action – is THE work of God that we are called on to do (Jn.6:28-29).

At first I thought that that was too simple to be true, and then it dawned on me that I was not believing what God was saying! You see, I was screening what God said through the limitations of my own rationality and knowledge, and since it didn't fit, I simply lopped off the edges and decided that He didn't really mean what He said. This is not faith. Faith is believing that God is big enough to mean what He says even though we are not big enough to understand it. Faith is stepping beyond the limitations of our carnal, earthly make-up, and accepting and walking in the wisdom and power that is

from above. It is in going beyond these limitations that we avail ourselves of one of the spiritual weapons that God intends for us to have.

DO EXACTLY AS GOD SAYS

If growing spiritually is to be done without God's help, then some excuses for failure might be in order. But if God is helping you, then He is providing the help you need (1Cor.10:13). Therefore, failure can only occur when you do not do exactly as He says.

The shield of faith (Eph.6:16) becomes one important aid in carrying out this endeavor of obedience. The shield of faith is commonly associated with protection against doubting our salvation, healings, or other "biggies." But it was meant to encompass far more than that. The shield of faith enables us to believe that the Word of God means exactly what it says, exactly as it says it. The intent of the fiery darts is to keep us from using the sword of the Spirit -- the word of God. The shield of faith is intended to enable us to step forward into the battle where the sword of the Spirit is to be applied.

The Bible is intended to be our primary source of wisdom, and all other wisdom that is from God -- all true wisdom -- will harmonize with it. It has been my experience that whenever I asked God for wisdom in a particular situation, God would usually bring to mind a passage of scripture.

I have been emphasizing the source of true wisdom and knowledge, because the issue of deception revolves around the perception of the human mind. I didn't want to go heavily into where we should NOT go for wisdom and knowledge, without first establishing that: 1. We need wisdom, and 2. God's Word can be trusted for that wisdom.

James, in chapter 3 verse 13 through 17, relates one's behavior to his wisdom and its' source: "Who among you is wise and understanding? Let him show by his good behavior his deeds in the gentleness of wisdom. But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your heart, do not be arrogant and so lie against the truth. This wisdom is not that which comes down from above, but is earthly, natural, and demonic. For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there is disorder and every evil thing. But the wisdom which is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits, unwavering, without hypocrisy."

There is a lot in that passage, and if it was studied very carefully, and thoroughly heeded, there would be little left to be said. The first problem that mankind ever had was due to a dependence on the wrong wisdom. In 2Cor.11:3, Paul puts it this way: "But I am afraid, lest as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, your minds should be led astray from the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ." Looking deeper into this, we find that Eve was actually seeking wisdom and knowledge (Gen.3:5,6), but she was seeking it from the wrong source. Other scriptures that relate to this problem include Col.2:4,8,20, 1Tim.1:3,4, Eph.4:17.

DISCUSSIONS

Discussions can be a ministry if they are handled right, but if they are looked to as a source of wisdom, they are very dangerous. I say that for this reason: We have a guidebook that is accurate and complete for our instruction in righteousness (the Bible, of course). If a discussion brings to light scriptures about a topic and testimonies of how they have applied, all are edified.

If on the other hand, the discussion becomes a field for humanistic ideas and wisdom -- if everybody stands around and give their opinion of this or that -- the discussion can only lead to Hell. The apostle Paul has quite a lot to say about such discussions. I've sat in many church meetings and "Bible" studies where some brilliant jerk was quite willing to show off his intellectual capabilities at the expense of any spiritual benefit to the rest of us. Such people are unwilling to walk by faith and refuse to trust God to provide the wisdom they need, and they feel compelled to give explanations for things they don't understand. I've come to appreciate Paul's words to Timothy in 1Tim.1:5-7.

You may recall that Job's friends had this problem. They could not understand why Job was having so many problems, and rather than wait on God for an answer, they began to speculate and to fabricate answers from other sources of wisdom that were available to them. Such arrogance is dangerous. It is interesting to note that their false answers were derived from four sources of wisdom which are commonly claimed today: 1. Logic, 2. Their opinions about God, 3. Mystical revelations (Job 4:12- 1), and 4. Wisdom of the ancients. That one amused me since Job's friends themselves could have been considered ancients by the time of Christ (Job 15:17-19). As it turns out, Job's friends had voiced many false assumptions about God, for which they needed forgiveness (Job 42:7-9).

We had better get accustomed to the fact that God's ways are beyond the reach of human logic, and may be understood only through a close association with Christ Himself (Is. 55:8,9, 1Cor.2:12-15). In 2Tim.2:14-16, Paul instructs:" and solemnly charge them in the presence of God not to wrangle about words, which is useless, and leads to the ruin of the hearers. Be diligent to present yourself approved of God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, handling accurately the word of truth. But avoid worldly and empty chatter, for it will lead to further ungodliness."

Paul did not have to wrangle about words and we don't either. He simply presented the scriptures, and preached Christ crucified. If his proofs had been non-scriptural, the scholars of the day could have easily -- and quite eagerly -- disproved them to the public. But as it was, the Pharisees' arguments were non-scriptural, so Paul was easily able to disprove THEIR arguments. Paul did not even use a great deal of common logic in his presentation, but rather lived a life that proved his preaching. In 1Cor.1:4,5 he says "And my message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith should not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God." There are several other places where Paul speaks directly against useless argument. For further study, read 1Tim.6:20,1:4,4:6,7, 2Tim.2:23, and Titus 3:9.

WATCH YOUR DESIRES AND MOTIVES

We often don't recognize sin until it becomes clearly destructive. As our flesh is wooed by various pleasures in life, it is very easy to at least tolerate the wooing. I have to admit that I have too often sung the phrase "all things in moderation", in defense of questionable activity – sin, in moderation? I don't believe that the Bible ever implied that.

Another smokescreen for sin is "I'm only human." If you have Christ inside you then you are no longer "only human." These are two logical rationalizations that sometimes we would rather hide behind than recognize that: "Hey! I've got a sin problem here!" If we don't like the sin but don't mind being tempted, then there are several scriptures I will be sharing that were written especially for us, and we will stop growing spiritually until we begin to respond to them.

The program of life, God's program for our lives, is that we increase in our relationship with Him every day of our lives. Increasing our relationship with God results in decreasing in our vulnerability to the world. Paul, in Gal.5:24 says "Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires." The act of death removes man from the physical realm and places him into the spiritual realm. This is the program that God has for us, and the method of walking in that program (after having received Christ into our hearts) involves "reckoning ourselves dead to sin but alive unto Christ." We are also told to "flee the Devil and he will flee from you" and to draw nigh to God and He will draw nigh unto you" (James 4:7,8). David discovered the second part of this key and wrote about it in the Psalms "...wherewithal shall a young man cleanse his way? By taking heed thereto according to God's word...Thy word have I hid in my heart, oh Lord, that I might not sin against thee." (Ps.119:9,11).

These instructions are just the opposite of the tendencies we are born with, so they require a conscious effort on our part to be followed; we would not have been given these instructions if God did not intend for us to obey them. James, in the first chapter of his book, verse 16, warns us not to be deceived. In backing up a couple of verses, we find out what is threatening to deceive us. Verse 14: "...but each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust. Then when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished it brings forth death. Do not be deceived, my beloved brethren..."

Let me point out here, that there are no clear stopping points between a response of lust and deadly sin. Instead, it is a well greased path, and each step becomes easier to desire and harder to resist. It is a flat-out lie of Satan that tells us that life is easier for us if we allow ourselves a little sin. It is this lie that James is trying to warn us about in the above partially quoted scripture. Life is much easier if we don't allow Satan ANY foothold. The method God gives us for avoiding sin is to run at first sight.

There are several things that as Christians we are instructed to run from. Recall that a little earlier I gave some of the scriptures that tell us to run from useless arguments. Paul also flatly instructs Timothy to flee youthful lusts (2Tim.2:22). Humanly speaking, it is considered wise to leave the presence of a tidal wave or an exploding volcano. People who do this are not referred to as cowards, but as survivors.

Stop sin at the outset. Train yourself to avoid situations where you are likely to be tempted (Heb. 12:3). Here are some scriptures that give specific instructions along these lines: 1Cor.15:33, "DO NOT BE DECEIVED: bad company corrupts good morals" (sometimes we minimize the importance of carefully choosing our friends; we can't afford to). Gal.5:13, 2Cor.10:5, 1Tim.4:7,6:11.

We are to treat sin like God instructed the children of Israel to treat the inhabitants of the land as they conquered Canaan in Deuteronomy 7:2-5. "...and when the Lord your God shall deliver them before you, and you shall defeat them, then you shall utterly destroy them. You shall make no covenant with them and show no favor to them. Furthermore, you shall not intermarry with them; you shall not give your daughters to their sons, nor shall you take their daughters for your sons. For they will turn your sons away from following Me to serve other gods; then the anger of the Lord will be kindled against you, and He will quickly destroy you. But thus you shall do to them: you shall tear down their alters, and smash their sacred pillars, and hew down their asherim, and burn their graven images with fire." In other words, don't give sin a chance of any kind.

ATTRACTION OF RICHES

We have described the significance of pride, intellect, and tolerated sin as they relate to being deceived, but there is another problem that frequently binds us: The desire for riches. In walking out the Christian life, we need to continually practice the laying aside of every encumbrance (2Tim.2:4, Heb.12:1). We need to know who we are and practice an attitude of total dedication to Christ. This attitude will help prevent us from trying to cling to other goals of our own while trying to serve God (Matt.6:24).

God has our best interests at heart, not because He is now there to serve us, but because He created us to please Him, and as we fulfill that role we are fulfilled in ourselves. Satan convinced Eve that she was missing out on something, and led her to disaster. Satan tries continually to tell us that God is cheating us, but again, as always, Satan is lying. From a purely logical standpoint it doesn't make sense to invest your life in laying a big nest egg here on earth (Matt.6:19, 1Tim. 6:7, Luke 12:15-21), since time is virtually nonexistent when compared with eternity. All of our other natural tendencies, however, are oriented to serving just this brief period; but a nest egg become a goose egg when you no longer rule the roost.

The next thing your soul would try to do is compromise -- take a little of this and a little of that. That too is a delusion. Jesus very clearly stated that you cannot serve God and riches, and that our hearts will be where our treasure is (Mt.6:19-24). You have to make a decision between the two. In the context of that statement Christ goes on to assure us that He will meet the needs of those who will serve Him, but none the less, the decision of who we are going to believe (God or Satan) is up to us as it was up to Eve. Making the right decision will involve walking in it; there will be difficulties and blessings as long as we live on this earth. To those who would make the right decision, God through Paul offers warning, guidance, and encouragement: "Those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a snare, and many foolish and hurtful desires which plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is the root of all sorts of evil, and some, by longing for it have wandered away from the faith, and pierced themselves with many a pang. But flee from these things, you man of God; and pursue after righteousness, godliness, faith, love, perseverance, and gentleness." (1Tim.6:9-11).

Finally, Paul includes a proper attitude towards money as one of the criteria for leadership. He warns that a leader in the church must be "free from the love of money," not "fond of sordid gain" (1Tim.3:3,8). Evaluate yourself along these lines, be honest; if you are in a leadership position and have this problem, get it taken care of or step down -- and then get rid of it.

ACCLAIM OF MEN

I've already introduced this in our discussions about pride, but there are two more points worthy of comment: Ones is described in Matt.6:1, "Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them; otherwise you have no reward with your Father who is in heaven."

Christ observed that there is a danger of doing the right thing or the wrong reason, and that in such a case, we get the wrong reward. So...Watch it. The other warning comes from John 5:44, "How can you believe when you receive glory from one another?" Playing God yourself never helps you believe in

the real God. These words were spoken to the Pharisees -- don't ever let them apply to you. Our egos would love it, and so would Satan.

THREE-FOLD ATTACK

Besides our natural inclination to sin that works through the channels we have been discussing, there are spiritual forces that attempt to deceive us directly in each level of our existence: body, soul, and spirit. The devil appealed to Christ's body in that He tempted Jesus to satisfy a physical craving (Mt.4:2-3). Jesus knew He was hungry, and He also knew what His powers were, but Satan wanted Him to focus on these things; so by specifically calling His attention to them, he heightened the level of their persuasiveness. To pick on poor Eve again, Satan guided her into desiring something that she would probably have ignored otherwise. The physical temptation was thus supernatural in intensity.

The mind is a part of the soul, and Satan uses supernatural means to demand the mind's attention. The signs and wonders performed by Pharaoh's magicians were real. There is also no reason to believe that signs performed by magicians mentioned in the book of Acts were not real. Satan performs, and his performance is real enough to require the mind to respond. The fact that something supernatural has taken place cannot always be honestly denied by an objective individual. The mind, part of the soul, has been attacked in this fashion.

The fact is however, that these are lying signs, and as stage props, will be endlessly reconfigured until the audience wises up. The serpents of Pharaoh's magicians convinced Pharaoh that the God of Moses was not all that great. They lied, and so were the implications of their changing water into blood and the production of frogs. When they could not produce the wonders beyond these, however, the magicians themselves recognized that God was at work. The magicians were deceived by their own signs until this point. Keep in mind that these attacks usually contain something that the individual wants to believe, i.e., Christ was hungry (but He didn't fall for it; Pharaoh didn't want to believe in God (and he fell for it). This is why keeping our desires and motives in line is so important.

The third level of attack is purely spiritual in nature, but cannot affect our spirit directly: We sense things. They are not sensed by the body, neither do they originate as logic, though they quickly impact the thinking. Let me digress for a moment to explain this. We are spirits, we have souls, and we live in bodies. I don't understand all of the mechanics of it, but we can interact on a purely spiritual level. In the case of believers, our spirits have been born again by the indwelling life of the Holy Spirit of God.

God desires to express Himself in our souls (our minds, wills, and emotions), and ultimately to the world through our outward actions. On the other hand, Satan tries to attack us from the outside in, our spirits being his ultimate target. He tries to attract your flesh and to play games with your mind and emotions. Your will stands in between, and controls the direction of traffic, whether it be from your flesh inward, jeopardizing your spirit, or your spirit outward, allowing Christ to express Himself in your soul and ultimately through your actions and expressions to a thirsty world. You are responsible for choosing the source of your own soul's nourishment (Matt.6:22,23). A lot is said in the Bible about what we should be meditating upon.

Returning now to the discussion of deception through the spirit, in 1Cor.4:4, Paul states that the "...god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving." Note that there is a spiritual agent involved here, and also an aspect that could be controlled by the will: belief.

There is an intriguing story that offers insight in 1 Kings chapter 22. Please take a few minutes to read this chapter before proceeding so you'll know what I'm talking about as I comment on it (it will be worth the interruption). Ahab, king of Israel, wanted to believe that he could retake the town of Ramoth-Gilead from the Syrians. He had a group of spiritual advisors who were selected because that they always told him what he wanted to hear (a problem we are warned about in 2Tim.4:3, by the way).

These advisors apparently had a spiritual connection of some kind, because they were all duped by the same lying spirit into telling Ahab what he wanted to hear; all that is, except for one troublemaker who happened to be a true prophet of God. But Ahab shut him up and proceeded with his plans, at the expense of his own life. The point of all this is that a lying spirit assisted a man in believing what he wanted to believe, and it happens just as readily today.

In Charismatic circles we have a real problem with spiritual gifts. There seems to be a certain amount of personal social benefit in being gifted that can very subtly lead to destruction -- a sort of status and prestige. There is no need for this to be in your desires, and in the case of true ministers of God it is virtually nonexistent. But many immature Christians (though perhaps many years old in the Lord) like the attention that these gifts bring.

Spiritual gifts are beautiful and must be sought and exercised with diligence; the issue here is the motive for desiring them. An ill-motivated individual will listen to every spiritual voice he hears, and like Ahab, can be led to destruction. As you see, double motives can be very dangerous indeed. Purify your own heart and mind through studying God's word, and worshipping Him. In the book of Luke, Christ used spiritual weapons to defeat these attacks. He did not try to argue with Satan, He quoted scriptures -- correctly. The word of God is a spiritual weapon. Faith is a spiritual weapon. Prayer, whether in English or in an unknown tongue is a spiritual weapon. There are others, and I'm sure I can't name them all. But the point is that we must use spiritual weapons to fight a spiritual battle. Logic is NOT a spiritual weapon; don't argue, trust God and feed continually on His Word.

YOUR RESPONSE

So far in this writing, I have stayed pretty close to home. I have dealt mainly with some of the more subtle deceptions (for which there is substantial scriptural warning) that threaten us directly, rather than dealing heavily with the more prominent deceivers. I didn't begin this work with that in mind, but upon greater exposure to the Word of God as I prepared for this writing, I found that God's program emphasized a trained, disciplined daily walk.

The course of action most frequently recommended in the Bible that relates to dealing with false or unruly brethren is simply to avoid them. This, of course, is only to take place after they have been loved, exhorted and prayed for, and yet still refuse correction.

This may seem like weak action, but take a look at three important effects it has: 1. The person is discouraged from hanging around, and meanwhile will not be mistaken for a spiritual leader. 2. There is no scene created that would upset weak or less knowledgeable brethren. 3. Most importantly, your own exposure to spiritually degrading doctrines and circumstances will be minimized. Do not overestimate your ability to stand strong in a deadly environment. The responsibility is yours. We cannot afford to read the Word of God and take no action on portions we would rather ignore.

GOD IS FAIR

Deceivers have had an opportunity to acknowledge God. In Romans 1:18 and following, Paul explains how God's wrath will be revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because God has made Himself known. Creation has declared God's invisible attributes, eternal power, and divine nature, and they have been clearly understood by all (Rom.1:20). Now men who are willing to face reality have no logical alternative but to acknowledge the Creator -- that is, men who are willing to observe, learn, and to be reasonable and objective about what they see (I'm beginning to sound like the Amplified version).

The problem with men is that they really don't want to serve the God they were created to serve. In losing this perspective, men come up with all sorts of intellectual absurdities in their attempts to deal with other obvious facts. Have you ever noticed how when you tell one lie you often have to rearrange the surrounding countryside with a bunch of other lies? The same principle applies here. With the loss of the basic point of reference and function, the entire universe becomes a playground for random speculation and conjecture. Sex loses purpose and becomes perverted, family structures disintegrate, and men become consumed with greed. A sense of divine purpose disintegrates until a man's own logic is his only guideline. In some it degenerates further until a man's own needs, or even personal ambitions, drive him to totally ignore the reasonable rights of others. In many, it degrades still further, to the point where an individual's basic momentary desires take precedence over his needs, and they succumb to things like alcohol, V.D., and drugs at the expense of food, family, health, and life.

I feel that intellectual honesty would eventually lead men back to reality, but the general thinking ability of mankind is clouded by a preference for serving himself, rather than God. There are instances in the Bible where occultists, under pressure, acknowledged a power greater than their own. Some of them I've already mentioned: Pharaoh's magicians tried to pace God in the plagues. When they ran out of tricks, they suddenly realized what they were up against. Picture the chagrin of a Chihuahua biting into a morsel that turned out to be the ear of a sleeping bear.

King Nebuchadnezzar instituted a strong incentive program to assist his astrologers in coming up with the true interpretation of his dream: He was going to kill them if they didn't. As a part of it, he ordered them to tell him what his dream was, in order to prevent them from making up a plausible story. Faced with this dilemma, they confessed that no man had the power to do such a thing, but "only the gods" (Dan.2:9-11). These men, by the way, are the ancient authorities so heavily relied upon by astrologers today.

But observe the fairness of God in all this, in that knowledge about God was available; it just wasn't being used. I heard it said once that "God is not dead, He's just unemployed." God has indeed been replaced in many lives by unskilled labor. My point is this: Though deceivers are in fact deceived, they are deceived because they choose to rebel, and are therefore responsible for their own deception, and certainly for their suppression of truth for other people.

STEPPING FORWARD

Once the battle has begun, and you are actively engaged in becoming a careful, consistent doer of the word, allow God to give you a deep concern for the spiritual welfare of people around you. This should already be well developed at this point, but meditate on it, asking God to show you how you might

serve and lift up your brothers and sisters in Christ. So many Christians stop when they get to a point at which they are well fed, and all they feel comfortable doing is getting well fed. God did not call us just so we could sit here and feel comfortable all our lives, a stone can do that much.

Continually compare what you read in the Word of God with what you see and hear in the church and world around you. When differences come up, make a note of them to yourself, and if a situation is clearly in error, point it out to those involved. It is not as if you were judging situations as to their rightness or wrongness, the Bible has already done that, and you are comparing situations with the Bible. Keep in mind that the "goal of our instruction is love from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith," "For some men, straying from these things, have turned aside to fruitless discussion" (1Tim.1:5,6).

You see, this comparison of works with the Bible provides you with an opportunity to minister. Discrepancies are brought to light, and the authority to minister to that need is right there before you in the scriptures you are using. The obvious prerequisites for this ministry are a sincere love, a pure motive, and solid footing in the Word of God. Remember that knowledge of the Bible itself doesn't qualify you to minister to so much as an empty pew; "Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up" (1Cor.8:1). Another thing to remember is that once you have offered your help, leave them alone! It is not up to you to make anybody change their heart; they don't owe you a response of any kind. It is up to God to convict.

If you are directly involved in the situation however, there may be a very few additional responsibilities which are discussed elsewhere in this text.

PARABLE OF THE TARES

Christ gives us an over-all picture of phonies in the church through His parable of the tares. We'll have to take the time to read it in Matthew 13:24-30 before discussion can make any sense. "...The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field. But while men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed tares also among the wheat, and went away. But when the wheat sprang up and bore grain, then the tares became evident also. And when slaves of the landowner came and said to him, 'sir, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have tares?' And he said to them 'an enemy has done this!' And the slaves said to him, 'Do you want us, then, to go and gather them up?' But he said 'No, lest while you are gathering up the tares, you may root up the wheat with them. Allow both to grow together until the harvest and in the time of the harvest I will say to the reapers, first gather up the tares; and bind them in bundles to burn them up; but gather the wheat into my barn.'"

It is evident from this parable, that it is intended for Christians to grow in a hostile environment. Notice that "while men were sleeping" tares were sown. Many scriptures warn us to be on guard against deceivers and false brethren; it is evident from that that less false seed would be sown if we kept alert. The tares became evident when the wheat bore grain. Nothing really strange was observed until it came time to bear fruit. This ties in directly with several scriptures that warn "by their fruits you shall know them." So this false planting has been quietly growing there, enjoying the comfort and nurture of a cultivated field -- income tax deductions and all -- until it is time to bear fruit. The human reaction of the startled slaves is "Let's tear out the tares."

But in His wisdom, God says "Now wait a minute; the wheat is still tender and you'll make a real mess out of that field. If you go in there and try to sort things out at this point, you'll take some of the wheat with the tares." This is exactly what happens in churches today when men do not follow scriptural guidelines.

The slaves, however, were perfectly in order in pointing out the difference in the plants; as I've mentioned before, we are told to inspect the fruit. However, taking strong though logical action on an issue that is obvious to you but not so apparent to others can be very destructive. I have to confess that I've made that mistake a few times in the past, and part of the result is that I'd prefer you altogether avoided it.

One occasion I shall never forget -- though I keep trying -- took place at a church potluck with about a hundred and fifty people present. A man who was demon possessed (we never knew it until then) began to get violent. I've usually been one to take the bull by the horns, and this one had horns, so why not? -- don't ever do that! He was becoming physically destructive so I took him on in a physical fashion. About the time we brought a table loaded with prize casseroles down on top of us a much wiser brother stepped forward and quietly rebuked him in the name of Jesus. All was suddenly quiet, but it took awhile for people to understand what had actually taken place.

Here we have a clear example of a wrong way and a right way. One man did what HE thought was right, and another brother did as the BIBLE directs. I sincerely recommend that we carefully seek and follow all the guidance that the scriptures have to offer in dealing with this delicate issue.

RESPONSIBILITIES OF LEADERSHIP

There are cases where the leadership is called upon to deal with out-of-order individuals. In 1Cor.5, Paul gives such instructions to the church in Corinth. Paul also instructs Timothy to stop the spread of false doctrines at Ephesus by dealing directly with the individuals involved (1Tim.1:3). He guides Timothy to evaluate the lives of prospective leaders in 1Tim.3, so that order may then continue. In Chapter 5 of that book, Paul teaches on the respect and protection owed to the elders (verses 17-19), and then declares in verse 20 that those elders who do sin, and continue to sin, are to be rebuked in the presence of everybody. In Titus 1:7-11 Paul instructs that leaders must hold fast to the word and be steeped in sound teaching so that, among other things, they can silence rebellious men, empty talkers, and deceivers. In verse 13 he is told to reprove them severely with the goal in mind of getting them back into sound faith. In Titus 3:10, leaders are instructed to reject a factious man AFTER a first and second warning. The apostle John deals directly with an individual, exposing him and his acts in 3 John 9 and 10. No one wrote as often about love as John, and yet here we see John, motivated by love for the brethren to be sure, standing solidly in Satan's path and dealing squarely with a false leader whom Satan had sent.

THE PROBLEM

How can we unlock the subtleties of the professional deceivers? You don't have to go to a church very long to observe how people act and how they talk. It is easy to observe what type of things bring acceptance, and even admiration. It takes no big talent to blend with a friendly crowd and to assume a

fairly comfortable set of social ethics. Clearly, discernment is not to be based on seeing through this type of thing, and there's no need for it to be.

People who are at least outwardly cooperating with the program, and who are not creating problems or demands, should probably be left alone. Judas was left alone by the Lord for three and one half years, even though Jesus knew who he was all along. Yet here was a man of false motives, living and moving among the foundational apostles. His act was so good that when Christ declared to the twelve that one of them was to betray Him, they each suspected themselves rather than say "I've been wondering about that guy (Judas)." This is a beautiful picture of the open trust that we should all hold toward one another in the absence of any blatant non-scriptural activity.

Doctrinal interrogations are of little use in flushing these phonies; they know what you believe and they will parrot it back to you flawlessly. You will wind up frustrated, still feeling that there is something wrong, but not having been able to pin it down. A dangerous move at this point is to make a decision to totally accept such an individual based on what your mind has been able to discern through an interrogation, and thus override your spiritual warning. What you really need is spiritual help, and the Bible tells us to ask for it in James 1:5. "But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God who gives to all men generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him."

Most often a suspicion against a brother will be cleared up by a better understanding. Never harbor a suspicion. After praying, and preferably fasting, go directly to the individual with your specific complaints, and either confirm the suspicion or get rid of it. It may be that the person just needed someone to care about him enough to spend some time with him in the Word, and gently guide him into a better understanding. DO NOT get into the habit of discussing unfounded suspicions with others.

Rather than worry about a bunch of maybes, the Bible gives us some clear-cut descriptions of what we SHOULD be reacting to: Divisive works and false teaching.

REACTING TO OUTWARD WORKS

The responses to deceptive situations most prominently advocated in the Bible are passive ones. We are frequently exhorted to be alert to the fact that there are deceivers, and generally to be on guard. John gives a couple of clues as to what to look out for. In John 4:5,6 he comments that since they are involved in the world, they will sound like it, and not really accept the authority of the church leadership.

Though there are some things that we are merely to observe as danger signs, there are some things that we are to both notice and avoid: "Now I urge you, brethren, keep your eye on those who cause dissensions and occasions of stumbling contrary to the teaching which you learned, and turn away from them. For such men are slaves not of our Lord Christ, but of their own appetites; and by their smooth and flattering speech they deceive the hearts of the unsuspecting" (Rom.16:17,18).

Besides individuals who cause divisions, we are to avoid foolish and controversial conversations (Titus 3:9). There are also categories of individuals who don't create divisions directly, but if tolerated, will weaken the health of a local body. We are told, for instance, to avoid those who act religious but deny the relevance and power of our calling (2Tim. 3:5). We are also to observe those brothers who lead unruly lives, and to keep aloof from them. I rather suspect that if we are inclined to exhort them concerning the areas where their lives are clearly unscriptural that they will keep aloof from us. But if

they don't, we have clear orders (2Thess.3:6). Finally, we have a general command to exercise discretion in the choice of our companions (1Cor.15:33).

On a slightly more active level, there are occasions when we are called upon to exhort. Love will often motivate us to attempt ministry; this is scriptural and good if there is any legitimate hope that an individual may be restored -- James brings this out in the last two verses of his book. On one occasion Paul, while writing to Timothy, instructed him to interfere with out-of-order conversations. Finally Jude, in the face of the many subtle attacks against the faith, gives us a general order to "contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints."

REACTING TO FALSE TEACHING

Before we have a right or reason to react to anything it is imperative that we know what truth is. This cannot be over emphasized. So in order to evaluate teaching, you must first obey Paul and "Study to show thyself approved unto God, a workman that needs not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth." Besides learning it we must also cling to it (Col.2:19, Tit.1:9), walk in it (Heb.2:1, 2Pet.3:18, 1John 2:24), and adopt no other teaching (Gal.5:10).

Thus equipped, we are to be alert (2Pet.3:17, Jude 17-21), and evaluate carefully whatever purports to be spoken in the name of the Lord (1Cor.14:29). Much of the time we are to deal with false teaching simply by refusing it. Generally speaking, we are told to leave worldly and empty chatter alone, and to avoid foolish controversies and disputes about unimportant things. As long as things stay in the controversy stage, no one is likely to be taught anything, so it's better to just change the subject or leave, rather than join them in making fools of themselves.

Some false teaching will come across a little more organized. It may mix a little folklore with truth and try to affect your lifestyle. Someone may caution you about some superstition. They may try to tell you what to eat or drink, or what day of the week to worship on (Col.2:16). Don't submit to these things. Don't allow your life to become clogged with lists of rules and superstitions. Don't misunderstand me here, we are to walk in all good manners and consideration for those around us, but aside from clear scriptural guidelines, we are not to make religious issues out of non-religious things (Col.2:20-23).

You are likely to hear almost anything on the street, but when you begin to hear non-scriptural baloney within the body of Christ, the teachings are to be actively opposed; I'm speaking now about weird things, based purely on intriguing "what-ifs?", personal revelations, visions, etc. We are to "oppose arguments of what is falsely called knowledge", and "we destroy speculations and lofty philosophies contrary to the knowledge of God" (1Tim.6:20, 2Cor.10:5).

You yourself may be strong enough to recognize and reject these false teachings as utter nonsense, but there are often brothers or sisters, perhaps new in the Lord, who have not yet developed this discernment, nor the habit of comparing all things with the scriptures. It may well be a new-born brother who comes up with these things in the first place. For this reason it is important to both expose the teaching to the Bible so that its falseness may be clearly seen by all hearers, and to then privately show the person involved why they are not continue teaching these things.

In determining whether or not something is truly scriptural, I personally don't feel comfortable unless I can find at least three scriptures that clearly relate to a topic. This not only minimizes the effect of my

own doctrinal biases, but also helps to put the issue into proper perspective.

As I've pointed out, we must be very careful to give a brother or sister in Christ every benefit of the doubt, but this does not mean that we are permitted by God's Word to simply close our eyes or minds to whatever they might preach or teach. There are teachings by which beautiful people expose themselves as not being true members of the body of Christ, and we are directed to neither receive these people nor to receive anything they have to say (Gal. 1:8).

In Matthew 24:23 Jesus warns us not to believe men who try to show us where Christ is -- that is, to show us a physical location, an individual, and so forth. Many false religions are based on this type of error. The key issue here revolves around acknowledging Jesus Christ and not some imitation. John warns us that many deceivers have gone out into the world, and that those who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as having come in the flesh, are of the deceiver and the antichrist (1John 4:1-3). Just as Satan is a false god, so are his sons false Christs.

When this category of fake teaching is present, some pretty heavy action is in order. The type of action that is appropriate seems to depend on two things: The nature of the teaching itself, and the extent to which it has affected the local body. If, for instance, some stranger visits and expresses a view that idol worship and immorality are alright, he is simply told (in the hearing of those he has just spoken to) that no, it is not all right. This person isn't suspected of having problems at this point, it is OBVIOUS that he has problems, and questioning him on any other doctrine is unnecessary. It is in order, at this point, to take him aside and get into his head to find out exactly what he is. If he responds to counsel, well and good -- he may soon receive salvation. Otherwise, he is not to be tolerated and should be plainly asked to leave (Rev.2:14).

Our beloved John lays down the line in his second epistle, verse 10. He has been discussing some pretty central issues in the verses just before, and then simply states "if anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your house, and do not give him a greeting; for one who gives him a greeting participates in his evil deeds." John meant what he said in writing this; think about it. I did not intend the word "Beloved" to sound sarcastic; John was a man who loved, and his compassion for the people of God motivated him to write such things.

Finally, Paul minces no words in expressing his feelings about those who preach a gospel contrary to that which Paul had preached to the Galatians, when he says "let him be accursed!" (Gal.1:8,9). Paul goes to great lengths in this letter to expose and to deal with false teachers.

THE PROFESSIONALS

When we grow tolerant of things in ourselves and each other that have no business being there, we tend to establish traditions that become taken on faith, traditions that lack scriptural foundation. It is amazing as we look at some of the grand old institutions today, how much tradition has really become involved. I'm not talking about big disastrous things that blatantly sidestep the message of the scriptures as some of the Talmudic concepts do, but small things that are less hostile but still lacking in scriptural foundation.

There is a certain amount of "technique" that has become associated with Christianity. Now of course a certain amount of order is required in the administration of any institution, but when these techniques

become well developed enough that a group could continue functioning without God's help or guidance, then a framework has been developed that anyone could use.

Professional religionists use these frameworks and these traditions. Their appearance is similar to that of many churches and there is no structural difference in either their vocabulary or in their manner of life. The process that has taken place is the gradual replacement of a daily walk and receipt of direction from God by a reliance on a dependable organization. Nothing is necessarily wrong with the organization itself, but because of its effectiveness, a leader can get away with a shallow Christian life and still count on having his physical needs met.

At this point, many pastors begin looking to the organization for their security. They become careful about what they preach for the sake of their financial security, rather than obedience to God. Such men are not really deceivers at this point, but they are trapped in a structure that men have designed, and a great level of faith and courage will be required if they are to escape.

Before we raise our eyebrows and contemplate a few pastors we've known or heard of, let's take a deeper look at how this can happen. God has a structure that He has ordained for the local church, and it doesn't require the pastor to be a one man band. If you haven't stepped forward and offered to carry part of the burden of ministry in your local body, you are part of the reason God's structure is not working properly. Unless at least ten percent of your income is helping others in the body of Christ, then you need look no further for a way to help the ministry. Tithing is not a ministry; it is a basic, reasonable privilege of every believer. God does intend that every believer become a part of the body, and if you have responded to Christ for salvation, you have some place of service.

Although some pastors continue to serve God diligently even while lacking the economic incentive, many become totally career oriented. They become hirelings instead of shepherds. They aren't necessarily purposeful deceivers, they just aren't as concerned about the sheep as they are their own careers. In some of the more liberal congregations there is no fear of God or respect for the Bible. They have become empty shells with an appearance of Godlieness, but totally deny the power (1Tim.3:5). These have become less than useless to the body of Christ, and it is sad that the reputation of Christianity must tolerate their hypocrisy. The true sons of Satan have gone beyond this. They have more or less recognized that they are in it for the money, and they really don't care how they get it. If a disguise as an apostle will help, they will appear as an apostle, or any other convenient form of minister (2Cor.11:13-14).

One of the most effective money makers seems to be that of a traveling evangelist. There are many evangelists ordained by God, some of who's messages are confirmed by signs and wonders. This is a legitimate ministry, and healings are a scriptural part of it; but there are numerous counterfeits who copy this style.

The Bible plainly states that "by longing for money, many have fallen into grievous error;" it is a common problem (1Tim.6:9,10). There are also those who have not fallen into error, but rather have purposefully pursued it -- those who suppose that Godlieness is a means of gain (1Tim.6:5). Longing for money is the path to a serious trap, but holding the basic attitude that godliness is a good way to make money takes the heart of a thief.

These people want money and power, and they won't always wait for an opportunity. Thus motivated, and armed with cunning words, they will attempt to use you for their own personal gain. They do not

enter by the door. These men will submit to no authority, and even attack a shepherd with slander and gossip (3John 9,10). The apostle Paul was accused by such men of the crimes that they themselves were committing (1Cor.10:2). Remember how Satan himself accused God of being sneaky before Eve, when Satan in fact was using lies and false accusations?

Satan's objective was to separate Eve from God for his own purposes, and the lies and false accusations of deceivers today seek to accomplish similar ends (Gal.4:7). Be very careful when you begin to hear innuendos, and accusations, and sarcastic remarks about some servant of God. Don't begin to respond until you've heard at least two or three actual witnesses, or become one yourself (1Tim.5:19). Through it all, be careful to observe the manners, lifestyle, works and teaching of all those involved (1Thess.5:12, Heb.13:7).

Do not underestimate the beauty of the appearance of some deceivers. We're not speaking about a wolf here with a hunk o fleece scotch taped to its back, we're looking at wolves with finely tailored sheep skin suits. These tuxedoed wolves will say "Praise the Lord" and "hallelujah" and even perform healings. They will also cast out demons and perform many mighty miracles in Christ's name. This sounds pretty heavy, but you'll find Christ describing this very thing in Matthew chapter seven. It also indicates in this chapter that their evil works have them genuinely deceived.

Deceivers sometimes advocate careful discipline, and require tyrannical obedience to their authority. On the other hand, some will expound on the grace of God to the point of permitting questionable moral standards (Rev.2:20).

Unfortunately, these people frequently have ready followings among the less stable within the body of Christ (2Pet.2:14). My point here is that deceivers look like ministers of righteousness, therefore appearance alone may tell you nothing. Sometimes, though, their message will have a slightly different emphasis. Keep an eye on those who continually expound on how much money you'll get from God if you keep giving much more than you can afford. I'm not talking about tithing here; anything less than tithing is no giving at all, and Christians who do not tithe can expect little financial protection from God (notice that I'm not passing any plates at the moment, just facts). Offerings, which begin after tithes have been paid, are scriptural, but the amount is unspecified.

Ananias and Sapphira were presenting an offering when they sold their property and brought some of the proceeds to the apostles; this was good. They were doing it for the wrong reasons, however, and even lied about how much it meant to them. This was not good, and they were killed for it (Acts 5:1-10).

We gave more than we could afford for two or three years with the expectation that God was going to give us some kind of a super financial blessing for it. We in fact wound up with late bills and over a thousand dollars of debt. What it boiled down to was that we weren't giving to God at all, we were just lending to Him at an exorbitant interest rate. So if you find yourself borrowing money to give so that that BMW will show up on your front lawn like it did for brother so-and-so, you'd better watch out for the so-and-so that talked you into it.

Our particular situation involved a professional who was using a beautiful effective ministry as a front for siphoning off money and promoting a teaching of sacrificial giving. When this individual was exposed to more light, he began telling more lies, so it took some people quite awhile to tell what was going on; some never did understand.

Picture for a moment what can happen to a local church when you throw your paycheck at some passing evangelist. You've heard a sermon on how powerful faith is (true). You've heard how God wants to bless you financially (also true). You've heard how sacrificial giving is an act of faith (true again, but watch out!). You are led to believe that everything will turn out rosy and you'll probably be richer than ever before if you just close your mind and open your pocket and give this ministry everything you have or can borrow (that's a lie).

There are times when sacrificial giving is perfectly in order, and there is ample scriptural precedence for it, but watch your motive! I like what Paul says of the Macedonian Christians, about how they gave themselves first to God, and then financially by the will of God (2Cor.8:1-5). God tells us to give, expecting nothing in return. When we tithe, we are told to expect blessing and protection, but when we go beyond that and give we are giving, not just fulfilling some expectation, not lending, but saying "bye bye forever" to whatever we give. Now if God chooses to bless us for that gift, as He sometimes does, that's His business, and not contingent on some bargain we think we've made with Him.

So let's say you gave sacrificially in sincere expectation to some passing tramp with a beautiful road show. You've been all inspired -- blessed out of your socks and all that -- and your money is now buying him TV time in preparation for a campaign in some other city. Your car has stopped running for lack of the repairs you now cannot afford, the local Cadillac agency has not yet gotten in touch with you concerning uncle Duffy's surprise gift, and the mailman seems to have lost that thousand dollar check he was supposed to bring by the next morning in time for the rent. You feel that in making that sacrificial offering you've at least paid your tithe for the month, and even if you didn't feel that way, the money's gone and you have nothing left to give to your local church.

Now you're beginning to get just a little bit resentful. You sincerely feel you've done your part, and you're wondering when God is going to get around to doing what you were led to expect of Him (by the guy who has your money). This resentment is not helping you spiritually and you tend to withdraw your numbed fingers and begin to restrict your spiritual involvements until God begins to hold up His end of the deal -- what you thought was a deal.

If you have any wisdom left at this point, you will humble yourself and go to your local body for help and counsel. It's hard to accept the fact that you've been so sincerely fished in, and that the body to which you now turn has also been hurt by your lack of financial and spiritual support, but by all means receive ministry. God loves you.

Let's take a look at a traveling man, the apostle Paul. The scriptures make it clear that he traveled not as a wolf looking for sheep, but as a shepherd establishing flocks. His father-like concern is clearly expressed in his willingness to demonstrate an upright life by earning his own living, even while he was establishing churches. He never preached and ran, unless his very life was in immediate danger. After confirming the local churches, oftentimes taking a period of months or even years, he himself being submitted to them, received instruction and guidance through that particular church (Acts 13:2,3).

The local churches became the structure from which evangelism, healings, spiritual guidance, and physical ministries were to function. Those who served well were to become known and respected (1Thess.5:12,13). In each local church God provided capable men to guard the souls of the people and

to protect them from those wolves who would destroy the flock. Those who cause divisions and stumblings were to be avoided.

Brothers and sisters, be careful where you give your time, money, and enthusiasm; the local body within which you fellowship needs you. There are well over one hundred and fifty verses in the New Testament alone that give warnings and instructions about spiritual phonies. In view of the number of warnings, I don't think that encountering a spiritual circus (not to mention a clown or two) now and then should come as too big a surprise. It is important that we don't allow carefully engineered emotional/spiritual crescendos to siphon off thousands of sincerely given dollars into the mouths of sheep with strange looking teeth.

In summary, there are specific cases given in the Bible where we are to cease having anything to do with someone posing as a brother, but there are two major mistakes that I have seen made with regard to this (and doubtless made myself). The most common is to continue having fellowship regardless of the warnings and commands we have been discussing, and the other is to over-react and cease fellowship with one who really needed continued patience, love, and counsel. Either of these is tragic and we must continually seek the balance that God has for us. The most important thing to remember is that "you also, as living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (1Pet.2:5). We are a body, and we are responsible to each other to live holy, consistent and active Christian lives.

WHERE TO STAND

No personality in history has been the object of so much explanation as the Lord Jesus Christ. Truth concerning this central figure of History must somehow be twisted, obscured, or simply superseded in order for any cult to thrive. "...you shall know the truth.." (Jn.8:32) "They loved darkness rather than light.." (Jn.3:19-20) "Do not say in your hearts 'Who shall ascend'..."(Rom.10:16)

The path of the Christian involves growing in faith, while the persistent religionist must either shade his eyes from the truth or acknowledge his error -- there is no middle ground. Although the masses of religious systems attempt to deal with Jesus in a wide variety of ways, their objective is always the same: Make Him out to be anything but totally unique; make Him out to be something less than God. The "Jehovah's Witnesses", for instance, viciously assail the trinity. They, along with the Mormons, try to make Him an angel – an important one, but just an angel. Others try to put Him into the category of men who have achieved great spiritual status – Moslems for example, and Ascended Masters. The "Way Ministries" try to deny His pre-incarnate existence, while some even try to make Christ a mere concept, and no real personage at all. The lies go on and on, and though they cover a broad spectrum of guesswork, they are united in their goal of trying to make Jesus less than the unique Son of the only true and living God.

If these religious influences didn't likewise try to abuse the Bible, their error would be more obvious. But this prestigious volume is unsurpassed in scope and accuracy as a book on ancient history alone, not to mention its popularity as literature. Satan knows that he must deal with this source of truth also. Whenever I hear somebody begin a religious discussion by ignorantly bashing the reliability of the translations of the Bible, I stand by for the error to follow. The form of the error either requires the truth

of the Bible to be thrown out totally, or they are about to tell me the "real" meaning of the "original" writings.

The reason for having mentioned these two major form of error has been to point out the need for knowing what the facts really are. There are few defenses against lies and confusion that are as effective as a good dose of reality. The Bible was in fact written over a period of about 1,500 years by a number of authors. The amazing thing about it however, is that from cover to cover it all ties in to one consistent theme. This in itself is one way of discerning truth from error: If a doctrine is true it will be found consistently woven throughout the writings of the Bible. If it is false, only part of the Bible will appear to fit, and elaborate explanations will be required to make the rest of the Bible appear compatible.

When people complain that "The Bible contradicts itself", they are simply admitting that they don't understand it. The ancient Hebrews were fanatical in their preservation of the old testament. If a new copy of a manuscript did not have exactly the same number of letters as the original, the new copy was burned. When the Dead Sea scrolls were discovered in 1947, copies of Old Testament writings were found to be virtually identical to those currently in use, even though they were at least 300 years older than any other existing manuscripts. Even in the New Testament, as research continues to uncover a trickle of older documents, the basic accuracy of the translations we have today is only confirmed.

The accuracy and detail with which both Old and New Testament prophecies have been fulfilled is a fascinating study in itself, which further confirms the preservation of the original writings. The fact is that the Bible has clearly NOT been mauled through sequences of translations as some cults claim, is a good indication of the level of error in such cults.

JESUS

As we recognize the validity of the scriptures, we can trust them to reveal to us the truth concerning Jesus, and I'd like to point out some of these facts. Since this exercise is only intended to get you started on your way to a clear understanding of who the Jesus of the Bible is, I'll try to limit myself to two or three references per fact, although in most cases many additional references could be used. In order to get an over-all picture of who the Bible says Jesus is, begin by reading the following verses, which I will be frequently referring to: John 1:1-5, Phil.2:5-11, Col.1:13-20, Heb.1:1-14.

JESUS IS THE TOTAL EXPRESSION OF GOD

In John 1:1 Jesus is called "the Word", the communication of God. In Col.1:15 He is called the image of the invisible God. If God is invisible then He is not perceivable in the physical realm without His image, even as our souls are not evident in the physical realm without our bodies. We find that God is expressed in nature in Rom. 1:20, but nature is the work of Jesus.

JESUS IS THE CREATOR

John 1:3 "All things came into being by Him and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being" Col.1:16 "For by Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities -- all things have been created by Him and for Him." Se also Heb.1:2,10.

So although we see God's nature in that which is created, all creation from the tiniest pulse of energy to the mightiest and most distant galaxy, and the entire spirit realm as well, is the work of Jesus. It all expresses God, because Jesus is the total expression of God.

Now there are those who claim that Jesus is limited to much less, such as an angel, or even a human being. Such claims are clearly not based upon the Bible. Although Jesus can express Himself through the form of an angel or human being, He is certainly no less than the creator of everything.

JESUS SUBMITS TO THE FATHER

See John 5:19-20,30, Phil.2:6, Col.1:19-20 Through contemplating the true greatness of Jesus, the awesomeness of God the Father becomes even greater. God the Father is greater than Jesus. After our minds have been stretched beyond their limits in trying to meditate on the greatness of Jesus, it can only invoke worship to consider that all this is only the expression of God the Father, and not the Father Himself.

If it so vastly exceeds the capacity of our minds to comprehend nature, how can we even think of having an intellectual relationship with God? This is just one of the reasons why our walk with God is based upon faith. He provides enough intellectual evidence to get us moving from the natural realm towards the spiritual, but any real relationship must be based upon faith. I personally believe that everything about God is ultimately rational, but we as humans are by no means qualified knowledge-wise or intellectually to begin to comprehend it all.

All conflict in this universe revolves around competing with God the Father. As near as we can tell from the scriptures, it began when Satan desired to usurp God's position (Is.14:13-15, Ezk. 28:12-17). The Bible is clear and emphatic that there is one supreme personality in this universe, there always was, and always will be. God is THE absolute in the universe. Good and evil are defined in terms of submission or opposition to God, even as light and darkness are defined by their relationship to the source of light. Jesus is the ultimate example of submission to God the Father, and therefore He is the ultimate example of authority.

In Phil.2:5-8 we see the totality of His submission, and in verses 9-11 we see the totality of His greatness and authority. In John 5:19-20 we see again how close this communication is. God's program of greatness and power for us is based on our submission to Him, and humility. Satan's counterfeit greatness, to which our sin natures are more agreeable, is based on rebellion and self exaltation.

It is interesting and significant that it took a Roman centurion to recognize that Jesus was operating under authority (Mt.8:8-9). He knew that his own authority was based upon his submission to Caesar, and was able to recognize that Jesus too was submitted to authority, because of the power He had. A solitary Roman soldier, carrying out the orders of his superior was ultimately backed by the entire might of the Roman Empire.

We as individual Christians, when doing something God has told us to do, are backed up by the power that created the universe. The imperial commission of a Roman officer was not to make a big name for himself, but to express and carry out the will of Caesar. We are successful as Christians -- indeed as human beings -- to the degree that we set aside our own goals and objectives and become conformed to the image of his Son (Rom.8:29), Who did nothing but the will of His Father (Jn.5:19).

Any other will or desire stems from deception; It is false purpose, false glory, and temporary. As we serve God we become free to be humble; we have nothing personal to prove, and we become eligible to receive glory from the only true source of all good (Jn.5:31-32,44).

JESUS IS TO BE WORSHIPPED

This is one fact that is particularly annoying to the "Jehovah's Witnesses", and because of the prevalence of that cult, I feel that this topic is worth taking time to discuss. First of all, I want to say that they are right in saying that only God is worthy of being worshiped. In Rev.22:8-9 when John was awed by what he was seeing and hearing, he fell down and worshipped at the feet of an angel. "Don't do that!" was the angel's response, "Worship God." Col.2:18 actually condemns the worship of angels. In Acts 14:8-15 Paul and Barnabas refused to be worshipped by a crowd at Iconium. In Is.42:8 God says "I will not give my glory to another, nor my praise to graven images." So we see that we are not to worship angels, men, or images, but only God. Deut.6:13 also precludes all other worship.

Of Jesus, on the other hand, it says "..let all the angels of God worship Him (Heb.1:7). In Mt.2:2 we read that the kings of the East came to worship Jesus as an infant. On one occasion I had a "Jehovah's Witness" try to tell me that the word used for worship in these cases actually meant "kiss", and not worship. Although there is some relationship to "kiss", it is only an aspect of a word normally used for worship. This particular word is the only word for worship used throughout the book of Revelation, where it is repeatedly used in reference to God the Father. In fact, in three fourths of the cases in the New Testament where the English word "worship" is used, it is a translation of this very word. (See also Rev.5:12-14).

JESUS EXISTED BEFORE ANYTHING ELSE

Although this fact is obvious from what we've already studied, it becomes important when dealing with certain cults. "The Way Ministries" is such a cult, and offers one of the most diabolical counterfeits to Christianity I have ever encountered. Like most cults however, they have to pervert the truth concerning Jesus before substituting their own doctrines, and one lie they try quite vigorously to demonstrate is that Jesus did not exist until 2000 years ago.

The Bible however, plainly teaches otherwise. John 1:1-3, Col.1:17, and Heb.1:2 were already pointed out in reference to Jesus the Creator, but let's add a couple more verses: In Jn.8:56-58 Jesus speaks of existing before Abraham. In the Old Testament Jesus made a number of appearances as an angel and as a human being. Joshua 5:13-15 is one such instance. As Joshua was off by himself, apparently contemplating the formidable walls of Jericho, he saw a warrior before him with his sword drawn. Joshua asked the obvious question: "Are you for us or for them?" To this the stranger replied "No." The stranger continued "..but as prince of the host of YAVAH, have I now come." This stranger did not claim to be God the Father, but as one serving Him in a managerial capacity. It is also evident that this was not his only function -- that He was only temporarily serving as captain of the Lord's host.

Upon hearing this Joshua fell upon his face and worshipped. Joshua was not rebuked for this worship, in fact, when Joshua asked this person what he had to say, he was commanded to take off his shoes because he was on holy ground -- another act of worship. The fact that this being received -- indeed required -- worship indicates that he could not have been an angel, but had to have been God. The fact

that He came on behalf of God the Father means He could have been none other than God the Son! In the first five verses of the next chapter this person is simply referred to as the Lord, as He gives instructions to Joshua on how to take Jericho.

Hebrews 7 indicates that Melchizedek was also Jesus; verse 3 is important to this. At the beginning of the conquest of Canaan, one of the resident kings tried to hire a prophet named Balaam to curse the invading Israelites. As Balaam was on his way an angel stood in his way with his sword drawn (Num.22:31). Balaam immediately expressed worship, for which he was not rebuked. We find further that the "Angel" who says he will tell the prophet what to speak in verse 35 is referred to as God in verse 38.

As a man named Gideon was threshing wheat one day while hiding from an invading army, the Angel of the Lord appeared to him and said "The Lord is with you.." (Jud.6:12). Gideon calls Him Lord in verses 13 and 15, and worships Him with an offering in verses 17-22. The narrative calls this personage Lord in verses 14 and 16.

In the cases of Balaam, Gideon, and Moses (see Ex.3:2-6) we see the Angel of the Lord receiving worship and being called God. The only one this could possibly have been was the one who said "Abraham rejoiced to see my day" in John 8:56-59.

THE INHERITANCE

Satan's strongest line of defense (we have him on the run now) is drawn between a Christian and his spiritual inheritance. In the Bible, an inheritance is not normally a retirement income itself, but rather holdings that could provide opportunity for prosperity. If an inheritance was squandered or wasted, as in the case of the prodigal son, destitution was certain. When an inheritance was simply not utilized, poverty was likewise the result. As an inheritance was properly managed, the heir increased in wealth and power.

This principle of applying diligence to what you receive is repeated constantly through the scriptures. Receiving an inheritance meant receiving responsibility, and the resources to carry out that responsibility. A powerful corollary to the Christian and his inheritance is given in the story of the children of Israel inheriting the land of Canaan. It is easy to see the relation of the first Passover and the exodus from Egypt to a person becoming a Christian and forsaking past sins, but consider relating the entrance into Canaan to Pentecost.

Canaan was a stronghold of Satan, and the inhabitants carried out many perverse and destructive acts in their ugly appeasements of various demons. On the other hand the land itself was beautiful and well developed. Cisterns were already dug, cities were built, and the vineyards were well established. All the land needed was to be wrested from Satan's hand and given to a people who served God.

In relating this to the Christian and his inheritance consider Rev. 2:26-27 where Jesus promises "authority over the nations" to those who overcome. This is a direct quotation of Psalms 2:8, where it is written "I will give the nations as your inheritance." The apostle Paul clearly relates diligence in managing our inheritance to reward later on (1Cor.3:10-15).

There are millions of people in this world who are under the bondage of Satan, even as the promised land was in the hands of wicked people before the Israeli conquest. These people need to be set free to serve God, and Christians have been given the power to free them. Satan delayed the conquest of

Canaan for forty years by convincing the Israelites that the enemy was too strong. This was a lie of course, but he got them to compare the strength of the enemy with their own strength instead of God's (See Numbers, chapters 13 and 14).

Satan attempts to deceive us the same way. When God tells us to move forward, Satan tries to get us to look at our own inadequacies rather than the power of God. This is subtle in that Satan takes obvious facts and misapplies them. Yes, we are inadequate in our own strength, but no, we do not do battle in our own strength. Nothing can stop the arm of God, and as we ride in the hollow of His hand, nothing can stop us either.

When the people were to the point of stoning the two good spies, God intervened by shining His glory around the tent of meeting, which was His way of saying "I want to talk to you folks." What He had to say was that He had shut the door to the promised land, and would not open it again until everyone over nineteen years old was dead -- except for Joshua and Caleb, the two good spies.

As they were struggling with the news of this hard but just sentence, Satan led them into yet another trap: The Israelites decided that faith was a good idea after all and began to stir up false faith based upon wishful thinking (Isn't this just a little bit too familiar?).

When faith is not based upon a clear applicable word of God, it is the same as writing a check on an empty bank account. A bad check may look like a good check, and it may fool a lot of people, but it simply has no power, (other than its' ability to deceive). When a group of Israelites got their false faith up and took it to battle against the Canaanites, they were miserably defeated (Num.14).

Satan tries to get us to make a similar mistake by getting us to commit our faith to something God is either not going to do at all, or not going to do under our conditions of time and circumstance. Satan does this for several reasons:

1. We start out doomed to failure and to waste time and emotions.
2. While doggedly pursuing a false hope, our spiritual hearing becomes dull as we mistake the gentle urging of God for Satan trying to kill our faith. On the other hand, we tend to listen to the voices that are building us up in our falsehood and attribute them to encouragement from godly sources.
3. When our hopes fail to materialize, either God himself gets blamed for it, or we blame ourselves for our lack of faith.

The fact that so much destruction and discouragement can come out of misdirected faith on the one hand, and that prayer and faith are so crucial on the other, makes it imperative that we become well grounded in what God's Word says about faith.

TRUE FAITH

The key to true faith is its' origin. Jesus is both the author and the finisher of our faith (Heb.12:2). Receiving this faith, however, requires that we go back yet another step and make sure we are aligned with God's purpose.

God wants us to walk in supernatural power and faith, but He has been very careful to insure that his power is used properly. Let's face it: as human beings we are attracted to the idea of having power, and of having God move on our behalf. A natural outgrowth of our desire to be in control is to orient our

study of faith towards techniques. We feel that if we can master the techniques and thereby have the power of faith working through us we will lead fulfilled lives.

But dear sibling in Christ: Do you see where this approach puts us? Eve became technique-oriented in her lust for control. She sacrificed a relationship with God in which she just naturally did what was right, for the promise of power through intellectually KNOWING what was right.

God has so designed faith that it is tied up in a relationship with Himself. The closer we walk with Him, the greater our fulfillment, and even as faith grows, its' attractiveness as a commodity in itself decreases -- along with everything else when compared to the awesomeness of knowing God.

FAITH THROUGH RELATIONSHIP

Let's back this principle up with a few scriptures. In Matthew 6, Jesus addresses those who are concerned about their basic needs. Although He doesn't use the word "faith", He is very clearly saying "Trust me" in verse 33 when He says "Seek ye first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you." You see, in this context faith for each of the specifics is not required; it's a package deal. If you take His terms the faith is there for all your needs and you don't have to pump up your faith for each one separately.

If the children of Israel had done as God commanded and gone in and taken the land, they wouldn't have had any problem with giants. The only problem the Israelites did have when they finally got around to the conquest, was the "and His righteousness" clause. They believed God for strength and conquered, but when they failed to take Him seriously about morals, they began to re-enter slavery.

What about wants, as opposed to just needs? Try Jn16:22-24 and Ps. 37:4. The principle in both of these involves getting your priorities straight. God is the one who calls the shots, and if Satan can get us to become more interested in external effects than in our relationship with God, he has bought himself a little relief from our effectiveness. For a little more insight and balance along this theme, read James 4:2, and James 5:15-16 (Note how healing from sin is tied in with the healing of the body).

There is an incident in the record of the conquest of Canaan in which the leadership of Israel failed to use the spiritual equipment available to them, and Israel as a nation paid the consequences for centuries afterward. In the book of Joshua, chapter 9, verses 3 through 15, we see the Gibeonites carefully preparing to deceive the Israelites.

They equipped an entourage of envoys with worn-out clothing and provisions, and instructions to pretend that they had traveled from "a far country." When they entered the Israelite camp they praised the God of Israel and the competence of the Israeli army. And then, they humbly asked to be servants and begged to make a treaty to that effect.

Although the Israelites were at first suspicious, when they examined the provisions and equipment that had been deceitfully prepared for this vary purpose, they became convinced. They made a covenant based on what their reason and their eyes told them, and without asking God. Three days later they discovered that these people were in fact living within the area they had been told to conquer. But because of the treaty they had made without asking God, there was at least one major city in the land that they would now never be permitted to conquer.

When a person gets through the obstacles that Satan tries to put up, gets saved and then begins to serve God, Satan puts up a furious effort to keep such warriors from using the supernatural gifts that

are available to them. TO THE DEGREE THAT SATAN CAN PREVENT SPIRITUAL WEAPONS FROM BEING USED, THERE WILL BE AREAS OF POTENTIAL MINISTRY UNTOUCHED BY THUS-DECEIVED CHRISTIANS.

Sincere unarmed Christians are not really serious threats to Satan, any more than an army of weary travelers could threaten powerful nations on their own soil – without the guidance and power of God. Satan disarms Christians the same way he got to Eve and to Joshua: He gets them to depend upon their natural senses and logic.

The Pharisees of Christ's day were among the most systematic and logical scholars of history, and yet they were so blind that they could not see the fulfillment of the most cherished prophecies and dreams of Israel standing before their very eyes (John 5:39-40). On the other hand, Jesus takes time to marvel at how although God the Father had hidden the great truths from the wise and intelligent, he had revealed them unto babes.

Much has been published about the obsolescence of charismatice spiritual gifts, by brilliant scholars who have never had the faith to say "Be healed," or the humility to say "I don't know"