

"HOW TO SPOT A PHONY"

(Acts 8:1-24)

(Chuck Swindoll)

Luke's chronicle of the early church has given us many examples of what genuine Christian ministry looks like. In this segment of his narrative, we have an opportunity to compare and contrast authentic ministry and phony religious scams.

In Philip's ministry, we see three qualities of genuine ministry flowing from the power of the Holy Spirit.

First, we see *the centrality of Jesus Christ in the message* (8:4-5). Not any other leader. Not a philosophical system or a regimen of activities. Not even a specific doctrine, regardless of how important or valid the teaching. The central focus of all worship, instruction, fellowship, and expression must be our living Leader and Lord, Jesus Christ. If the ministry continually points followers toward Christ, giving Him all the glory, you can rest assured that it's of God.

Second, *a dynamic of liberating power* (8:6-7). People find freedom from their bondage to sin. Philip healed and cast out demons with the power of God, not to create fear in the people or to establish himself as the village shaman, but to grant freedom. His power authenticated his message as divine in origin, and pointed people toward God, not himself. As the people gained freedom from their illnesses, they accepted the message of freedom from the bondage of sin. Genuine Christian ministries create and encourage freedom for the followers of Christ.

Finally, *a contagious joy* (8:8). The city rejoiced as a result of Philip's preaching, teaching, and healing. They weren't saddled with a list of responsibilities or duties to perform. The new believers didn't become dour, dark, moody captives of a rigid system of thinking and behaving. They rejoiced in their freedom; they experienced a happiness and contentment like never before.

The activity of Simon Magus, on the other hand, illustrates several characteristics of a phony ministry. I see at least four.

1. *The ministry exalts a person rather than Christ.* You've got trouble when you're in a system (or a church) that exalts a person other than the person of Christ. Simon came on the scene and made



exclusive claims to inspire devotion to himself. Spiritualists, magicians, and witch doctors have done this for millennia, creating fear in the community to establish themselves as the sole intermediaries between the spiritual and physical realms. Even today, I see men and women putting on modern-day "magic healing shows," and while they pretend to give God the glory, they cleverly establish themselves as the "go-to people" for healing and instruction.

2. *The ministry draws a following with promises to solve temporal problems.* Watch out for any ministry that promises to solve your financial, physical, relational, and emotional problems. Authentic Christianity can certainly make life better all around; obedience to the Lord and His transforming Holy Spirit can work amazing wonders. But no particular ministry can make those hard-and-fast claims. God grants healing and blessings and wisdom and freedom directly. You have a direct line to Him through prayer, and He will deal with you personally. You don't need to send money. You don't have to purchase a cloth or oil or water or books or any other token. And you certainly don't need some particular person claiming great power to pray for you.
3. *The ministry exercises a counterfeit power.* Beware the magic shows of some television evangelists; they peddle their counterfeit power for donations. The "supernatural" exhibitions of faith healers convince no one but the gullible. They perform their illusions in controlled environments, and either their "healings" are limited to mild improvements or they claim results difficult to verify.

The miracles of the Bible, like the healing of the beggar in Acts 3, had an immediate and visible impact; no one could deny their truth. The signs and wonders described in Scripture left no room for doubt by even the most ardent skeptics of the day. Nothing we see today fits this category of genuine miraculous activity.

4. *The ministry demonstrates a preoccupation with the material rather than the spiritual.* In phony ministries, you'll hear a lot of talk about money, material wealth, buildings, private planes, and special equipment, but very little about what purposes they serve. All ministries need certain things to accomplish their missions, but authentic Christian ministries keep spiritual matters primary; for them, physical things serve spiritual purposes. For example, a ministry might want to raise money to purchase a building. If it's a genuine ministry, the primary beneficiaries of the building will be the people the ministry serves.

Listen to the ministry leader carefully. Pay attention to what is said—and left unsaid. If the vast majority of his or her instruction concerns physical issues, such as health and money, beware!