

Self-delusion

This is a problem that has perplexed many, including myself, for a long time. Simply stated, the problem is – how can so many seemingly godly, sincere, zealous Christians find over time that they have been utterly deluded and have wasted their lives building houses on the sand, or worse, becoming peddlers of deception?

Now there is no doubt that many modern church leaders are utter heretics and unsaved people; they are wolves in the flock. We can say this because they manifest the traits of people that God's word says will not be in the kingdom: adulterers, fornicators, homosexuals, drug and alcohol abusers, liars, slanderers and so on.

Yet there is another class of people. There are church leaders, some of which I have met or known personally, that were genuine seekers after God. They were sincere in their devotion to God. They affirmed the authority of Scripture. They loved the Lord Jesus. They sought to serve the saints. They made personal sacrifices to work for God. And despite this, such people became ardent enemies of the Gospel by adopting serious heresies of doctrine and aberrations of church practice. Over time they did incredible harm to the body of Christ and the cause of truth. What happened?

At a lower ecclesiastical level, there are many believers who desire to serve God and follow the truth but have departed from important Biblical truths, or behaved in ungodly ways, while still affirming loyalty to Christ and continuing church membership. Many of such are oblivious to their sins.

What is happening in all this? How do we protect ourselves? How do we avoid self-delusion? These are important questions, which this paper seeks to address.

The possibility of genuine believers succumbing to deception

Deception is possible

Take heed that you not be deceived. Lk 21:8

For sin, taking occasion by the commandment, deceived me. Rm 7:11

Do not be deceived. 1 Cor 6:9

Do not be deceived. 1 Cor 15:33

Do not be deceived. Gal 6:7

Do not be deceived, my beloved brethren. Jm 1:16

Exhort one another daily, while it is called 'Today', lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin. Heb 3:13

Little children, let no one deceive you. 1 Jn 3:7

Every Christian can be deceived; that is just a plain fact. This is why the NT contains multiple warnings about this and demands that we keep to the truth. Warnings about deception occupy more verses than any other single subject when the NT verses are analysed.

Now I have written on this many times and extensively in my booklet, *'Deception – The deadly virus'*, so there is no point in reiterating all that I have previously said. What we need to establish here is that true Christians can be, and are constantly being, deceived. If being saved were an automatic protection against error then there would not be so many warnings about being deceived in Scripture.

If, then, we can be deceived (and in fact the Christian life is one long battle against being deceived) then we need to carefully understand what deception consists of and what the tactics of the enemy are. This is where many people fall down; they do not prepare themselves for the intellectual battle that is being waged against them.

Supposed believers can be merely deluded false brethren

History is replete with examples of professed believers that proved to be false and went into condemnation.

The largest example of this is the generation of Israelites that followed Moses into the wilderness. Of that generation, only two men were said to be faithful (Caleb and Joshua) and the rest were lost. The writer to the Hebrews makes this example the basis of his argument to press on in faith and obedience to ensure salvation.

Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says: 'Today, if you will hear His voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, In the day of trial in the wilderness, where your fathers tested Me, tried Me, and saw My works forty years. Therefore I was angry with that generation, and said, "They always go astray in *their* heart, and they have not known My ways." So I swore in My wrath, "They shall not enter My rest.'" Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God; but exhort one another daily, while it is called 'Today', lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin. For we have become partakers of Christ if we hold the beginning of our confidence steadfast to the end, while it is said: 'Today, if you will hear His voice, Do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion'. For who, having heard, rebelled? Indeed, *was it* not all who came out of Egypt, *led* by Moses? Now with whom was He angry forty years? *Was it* not with those who sinned, whose corpses fell in the wilderness? And to whom did He swear that they would not enter His rest, but to those who did not obey? So we see that they could not enter in because of unbelief. Heb 3:7-19

Probably a million and a half people left Egypt; yet the apostle says that the whole generation was condemned, 'was it not all who came out of Egypt, led by Moses? Now with whom was He angry forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose corpses fell in the wilderness?'. God said that he, 'was angry with that generation, and said, "they always go astray in their heart, and they have not known My ways"'. Thus he expressed his wrath towards them and they did not enter the rest of salvation in Christ.

These people had known deliverance from bondage in Egypt. They were covenant people, related to Abraham. They had experienced amazing miracles. They had the leadership of Moses and heard the words of God through Moses and Aaron. They were protected from bandits and warring nations. They saw manna from heaven and divine sources of water. We could go on and on – yet they were lost. They were lost because they did not have faith. They had an external calling but were not elect people that feared God.

Thus all the worship, singing, offerings, oblations, festal gatherings, ministry of priests, words of prophets and all the patience of God did them no good; they did not respond in faith and prove that faith by obedience to God's word.

Hebrews shows us that this can be the experience of some in the church and so the writer uses this example to warn his readers. This is a serious matter.

Without listing more OT apostates, all we need are clear words from the Lord.

Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. Many will say to Me in that day, 'Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!' Therefore whoever hears these sayings of Mine, and does them, I will liken him to a wise man who built his house on the rock ... Matt 7:21-24

This is an extremely serious warning.

Only those who do God's will are guaranteed a place in heaven. This first requires faith and conversion to be able to hear God at all. Yet faith can be counterfeited and church leaders can mistake assent for real faith. The only way to test faith (as James explains) is by seeing it result in obedience. It is godliness that proves faith is real. Thus Jesus affirms that only, 'he who does the will of My Father in heaven' will enter the kingdom.

Righteousness is a test of faith not gifts. Jesus warns that many will refer to their prophecies, miracles or casting out demons as proof of their salvation. Jesus responds that these works were done in lawlessness. Many supposed Charismatic gifts and power are actually works of lawlessness; they mean nothing at all. Only righteousness proves godly faith.

True Christians are hearers of God and doers of God's word, 'whoever hears these sayings of Mine, and does them'. Thus there are huge numbers in the modern churches that are clearly not saved. This is proved by their ungodly and unrighteous deeds.

So the warning about self-delusion is real and important. People can think that they are saved and they are not.

So there are two issues raised in this paper.

The first is that genuine believers can be deceived and led into error, bad practices, sin and ungodliness. We need to look at how we avoid this.

The second is that some churchgoers, though they seem very nice and say the right things, are not saved at all. In this case what is needed is salvation.

In any given case in the church where we see sin, errors, blasphemy, ungodliness and aberrations, we must discern whether this is the work of people who are not really saved at all or whether it is a genuine believer that has been ensnared by the devil for a time.

Now there are steps that churchgoers must take to, a) determine that they are genuinely saved; b) protect themselves from deception.

Preparing yourself to be able to avoid deception

Lack of mental preparedness

One of the reasons for falling into deception is that some types of person avoid intellectual issues and concentrate upon emotionalism and mysticism (this is common in

Charismatics). As a result they are easily deceived by the enemy. Thus churches which centre upon feeling-driven worship and flamboyant preaching, and do not teach God's word or theology systematically and practically, easily fall into deception and become spiritually irrelevant. Worse, many such churches find themselves openly supporting mysticism and the occult in the wrong belief that their actions are spiritual. Such churches no longer follow Christ but have been captured by Satan.

Understanding Biblical doctrine and ethics

Christians must prepare themselves for spiritual battle, and this primarily involves preparing the mind so that it can defend itself against attack and direct the heart right. All spiritual warfare is an attack on the truth at heart (since the truth is Christ and the fight is against God's appointed king) so understanding theological issues is of primary concern as a foundation in the Christian life. Sadly, so few churches do anything meaningful in this area; most do not even catechise anymore.

One would think that Christians understood that following Christ means studying all that God is, growing in understanding about God and his attributes, understanding about God's decrees, knowing the nature and ministry of Christ etc. Why would real Christians not make such study a priority? Nevertheless, modern Christians seriously ignore the need to learn doctrine and apply the Scriptures properly.

This makes them vulnerable to deception because they do not know the truth.

If someone comes along peddling a new doctrine and spouts a few Bible verses, these sorts of Christians fall for the teaching immediately and get damaged by it because they have not learned the truth so that they could test the new doctrine and dismiss it.

There are countless worthless Christian paperbacks that prove this. Thousands of utterly heretical paperbacks have been published that preach downright heresy, aberrations or just utter rubbish. Usually these rely upon interesting anecdotes and unproven testimonies and call for believers to do this or that. The fact that these sell millions is proof that many Christians are easily deceived. Many of the authors go on to establish churches or organisations that attract thousands of people and made the author rich. These groups then become missionary centres to expand the heresy; soon a new movement has begun that is thoroughly deceived which preys upon the vulnerable.

So, the very first thing is that believers must study God's word, understand basic doctrine and apply themselves to put into practice the apostolic doctrines they begin to understand. Unless a person does this they have absolutely no defence against personal deception.

Having established this basic foundation, that a Christian must prepare himself by studying God's word, we must now examine other reasons why seemingly good people fall into deceit.

Setting good habits

Good habits are an essential part of the Christian life; there is nothing legalistic about this whatsoever; just as there is good sense in habitually cleaning your teeth every morning and every night. If something has value, then doing it habitually cannot be wrong.

There are a number of Christian habits that help in the fight against deception.

Scripture reading

Habitually, reading Scripture daily fills the mind with God's words and ideas and this feeds the soul. The more one reads the Bible, the more one absorbs doctrinal truth. Failing to

read Scripture leaves one open to deceitful ideas because the mind is open; if it is not filled with good things, it will absorb bad or neutral things very quickly. Daily Bible reading is a good start to discipline your life to fight deceit.

Prayer

Daily devotions are a huge benefit in the Christian life. As sons of God and co-heirs with Christ, we should be in constant fellowship with God our Father, and this is conducted through prayer and mediation. Thus morning prayer is a minimum; the Christian should cultivate constant prayer, as one is able; talking to God at any time, seeking his help.

Discuss live issues with sound friends.

The value of this is enormous; in fact, fellowship with wiser believers will make you stronger. Church fellowship is meant to be a place of discussion with iron sharpening iron. Constantly talk through issues that are developing around you and try to come to a consensus about the root of things.

Ask for advice when in doubt

Don't struggle to try to cope with teachings you are exposed to if you have doubts; neither submit to peer pressure to just accept everything you are told. If something you hear or read jars you, immediately seek help from a wiser person in the Lord.

Read good books

You are affected by what you read so choose wisely. There are many valuable resources for Bible students that will help to prepare you to fight deception. These are not all lofty tomes for dusty academics, there are many vigorous, concise works that are easy to read.

You should balance your reading to profit your soul. Read theological, teaching works as you can and according to your character. Not everyone can read heavy doctrinal hardbacks, but they are worth the effort; however, there are very many simpler, concise summaries of doctrines, some are very entertaining. As well as teaching books, read good Christian biographies; these can be immensely helpful in stimulating good character development.

Lightweight reading also has some value if you are tired and need to relax. Helpful secular works, such as books on specialist subjects like birds, animals, ecology, astronomy, carpentry, or whatever your taste, can be of benefit. What are not beneficial are trashy, empty, vacuous, colourful periodicals, magazines and newspapers; these will do you little good.

The failure to judge yourself

Many supposed Christians do not like this topic since they think it exhibits a lack of faith; nevertheless, the NT repeatedly demands that we test ourselves to see if we are in the faith and progressing in grace. For example:

I discipline my body and bring *it* into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified. 1 Cor 9:27

Let a man examine himself. 1 Cor 11:28

If we would judge ourselves, we would not be judged. 1 Cor 11:31

Examine yourselves *as to* whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Do you not know yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you? -- unless indeed you are disqualified. But I trust that you will know that we are not disqualified. 2 Cor 13:5-6

Let each one examine his own work. Gal 6:4

Take heed to yourself and to the doctrine. 1 Tim 4:16

Keep yourself pure. 1 Tim 5:22

Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth. 2 Tim 2:15

Therefore, since a promise remains of entering His rest, let us fear lest any of you seem to have come short of it. Heb 4:1

Looking carefully lest anyone fall short of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up cause trouble, and by this many become defiled. Heb 12:15

Therefore, beloved, looking forward to these things, be diligent to be found by Him in peace, without spot and blameless. 2 Pt 3:14

Look to yourselves, that we do not lose those things we worked for, but *that* we may receive a full reward. 2 Jn 1:8

This is very important. I have lost count of the number of times I have known a person, who had appeared godly for years, suddenly apostatise and never come back. It is very distressing. Sometimes these were people who seemed to be the best of Christians. I have seen it in leaders and in non-leaders, women and men, sick and healthy, young and old.

Self-examination is a safeguard against self-delusion, if we are honest with ourselves; it is a vitally important matter.

Test yourself and be open to correction

It is necessary to constantly check your doctrine to see if it stands up to inspection. It is entirely normal that, over a long period of time, your doctrines will change, as you become wiser and more practically sanctified.

For example; many people are converted under an Arminian Gospel. Though soundly converted they misunderstood the Gospel according to Arminian policies.¹ Over time they see that this is wrong and change their views and become reformed in their thinking about salvation. This is very common and it shows growth of understanding.

There are many Charismatics who were genuine believers but it took many years for them to leave a Charismatic church, reject Charismatic teachings,² and serve God in truth. This also is very common.

The true believer is constantly learning, as the Spirit renews his mind, and his doctrines are fine-tuned. Often it is good reading that helps us to check our theology; which means that we must be open to being corrected by sound teachers.

¹ For those radicals that deny an Arminian can be saved at all, understand that conversion is not an intellectual process but submission to Christ. The mind may misunderstand many things at this point but as long as the will has submitted to God and become a slave of Christ, then there is salvation. After Peter submitted to Jesus Christ as his Lord and Saviour, he still had many things to understand and many dispositions to shed, but he was still an apostle.

² Such as a mystical, experiential, second blessing, baptism in the Spirit; believing that tongues are gibberish sounds; believing that healing is in the atonement as an automatic right; believing that true Christians can be demonised; accepting that apostles can dominate multiple churches etc.

The requirement to judge your mentor

So many people fall into deception because they merely trusted everything that their church leader told them without any discrimination.

Since even a good leader can go astray (i.e. the root meaning of being deceived³), it behoves Christians to judge and test everything. This is why we are explicitly told to do that (1 Thess 5:21) and why the Bereans were commended for testing Paul (Acts 17:10-11). Christians should understand that congregations have the responsibility for checking their leaders and taking action if they preach errors (1 Tim 5:19-20).

Instead, today, Christians just sit back on their laurels and take in everything they hear and never challenge anything at all. In fact, very few believers even bother to test what they hear against Scripture, let alone complaining about error.

Some people foolishly think that because a person is a church leader he is six-feet above contradiction; i.e. they should not judge God's anointed. This is just baloney.

Firstly, no man is above contradiction; only God is infallible. All men make mistakes and teachers must be judged with a more severe discipline (Jm 3:1-2).

Secondly, no man is anointed more than any other believer; all Christians are anointed in Christ by the Holy Spirit who indwells us. A man may have better gifts than another, or may be able to teach better than another, but this is never called 'an anointing' in Scripture. The word 'anointing' only appears in 1 John in the NT⁴ and these two occasions refer to all the saints equally. Of the only two mentions of 'anointed' in the apostolic letters, one refers to all saints while the other refers to Christ.

Thirdly, the warning 'Do not touch My anointed ones', often used out-of-context from the OT, applies to the whole Israelite people (1 Chron 16:17; Ps 105:15), not to church leaders. It was a warning to heathen nations not to attack the chosen people.

Fourthly, some believe that we must not judge anything at all, that all judgment is wrong. This is utterly preposterous. We are warned not to make wrong judgments or be hypocritical in judging, but we are told to judge hundreds of times. Indeed, how could we discern error if we did not judge what we heard? Elders must judge people within the church when necessary (1 Cor 5:12). How can an elder maintain discipline without judgment? We make constant judgments regarding the things of this life (1 Cor 6:4). Wise men judge between quarrelling brothers (1 Cor 6:5). Paul tells us to judge his teaching (1 Cor 10:15). We must judge ourselves (1 Cor 11:31). The church must judge prophecies [anything spoken on behalf of God, e.g. teaching] (1 Cor 14:29). These examples are just from one NT book alone. Judging is just discerning, evaluating and discriminating then choosing. It is vital.

So, Christians must judge their teachers and leaders. Failing to do that will lead to being deceived if the leader goes astray (and almost all of them will at some point). If you do not preserve yourself, you will be deceived.

Having said earlier that we must be open to correction by good theologians, at this point we must also affirm that we must deny any bad teaching even by our favourite teachers. There have been many good and fine men that produced great works of theology that are

³ 'To deceive' = [*Apatao*] essentially means, 'to lead astray'. There are also other related Greek words.

⁴ There is one mention in James 5:14 but this is not a spiritual anointing but a material anointing with oil.

very helpful to the church; and yet it is also a fact that many of them are mistaken on certain points.

Calvin is rightly held up as the prince of preachers and his *Institutes* had an enormous effect on the modern world. Yet, much as I like Calvin, even he was wrong on certain points and this must be acknowledged. Charles Hodge wrote a three volume Systematic Theology that has influenced millions. Though it contains much that is excellent, Hodge was sometimes wrong; such as on evolutionary theory. Herman Bavinck (a personal favourite) was also brilliant and influential yet he was wrong on Common Grace. Martyn Lloyd-Jones is the favourite preacher of many Reformed folk; yet he was utterly confused on sanctification and weak on other matters. In fact, I do not know of any theologian of whom I could say that he was 100% correct. This must be borne in mind; every man has weaknesses. Thus it is an important principle to refer to many counsellors:

In the multitude of counsellors *there is safety*. Prov 11:14; 24:6

Without counsel, plans go awry, but in the multitude of counsellors they are established. Prov 15:22

The apostles and elders came together to consider this matter. Acts 15:6

So, do not trust your church leader or your favourite teacher without discrimination and evaluation; you are responsible to God alone, not your church leader. Furthermore, the principle of mutual edification means that even leaders must be confronted about errors and corrected for their own good. Apollos shows that he was a good man when he allowed Prisca and Aquila to correct his preaching (Acts 18:24-26).

Judging false teachers

Look for roots

Very often a false teacher will reveal his true colours when you investigate his roots. Where did he come from? What is his basic theological background? Who taught him? What books does he read? What company does he keep? Who is he affiliated with?

If he has written a book, check his bibliography; what sort of writers does he rely upon? If he was trained in a seminary, which one was it; was it sound? What theological system does the person champion; is it sound? Who are the man's heroes?

What is this man's history? Does he have a chequered past? Has he led a moral and righteous life or are there scandals lurking in the shadows.

Compare with Scripture

The most important test is to check what he says against God's word.

In most cases this is fairly easy to do. Do his words square with the words of the Bible? Do his teachings support or contradict the doctrines of the Bible?

Serious false teachers simply contradict God's word openly; some even claim to have a higher source of authority. In these cases it is easy to see heresy. If a teacher forbids marriage or forbids eating meat, he is contradicting Scripture. If a teacher claims that Jesus Christ was not eternally one with God but was an elevated man, he is a heretic.

Some false teachers claim to have respect for God's word but deny it in their messages. Some may even accurately quote passages of Scripture, but then give a heretical interpretation of them to make you believe a false doctrine that only superficially appears to have Biblical support. Jewish Root teachers are of this ilk. They repeatedly quote OT passages and then wrongly interpret them, failing to take into account clear texts in the NT, which are the final words of God through the apostles. Thus claims that Jews are the heirs of God's promises by nature of fleshly birth are false; Christ is the heir of God's promises not Israel, which is under judgment and condemnation.

Compare with historical records of the truth

There are many good sources of summaries of Biblical doctrine that are beneficial to believers. These are the historical evangelical creeds, confessions and catechisms. Now we may disagree with minor points here and there as they were works of their time, but on all points regarding God, sin, Christ, salvation, the Holy Spirit, the church and many other matters, they are very sound.

Thus we have Baptist, Reformed (Presbyterian), Puritan, Evangelical and Congregational standards that are very helpful to us today. These include the Westminster Standards, the Heidelberg Catechism, the Canons of the Synod of Dort, the Belgic Confession, the Baptist 1689 Confession, the London Baptist Confession, the Irish Articles, the Helvetic Confessions and so on. For those interested I have produced a modern catechism which is available on my website.

If you have even one good historical source, say the Westminster Confession, it can become quite easy to identify a number of false teachings. This is sometimes shocking. I have confronted a popular preacher on the FIEC circuit who affirmed submission to Westminster and yet preached that the doctrine of unconditional election was wrong. When confronted that election is openly in Westminster, he apologised. The questions are, how could a supposedly Reformed preacher make such a bad mistake in the first place? Why had nobody else confronted him years before?

Now these are simple means to identify truth and error and should be used to expose heretics; but they are also good resources to check ourselves. Do we stand up to scrutiny or have we been deluded?

Ways in which deceived people lost the plot

Becoming focused upon something less than Christ

Seek ... [the] above, where Christ is. Col 3:1⁵

We do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. 2 Cor 4:18

Looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of *our* faith. Heb 12:2

This is very common. Put simply, Christ must be the absolute centre of our life. In church matters, Christ, and serving his people, must be the basis of all that we do. Anything less than that will lead to trouble.

This seems obvious; and yet thousands of church leaders have failed to do this and have fallen into error.

⁵ The word 'things' is not in the Greek text but is supplied for English grammatical reasons.

Power

I once knew a Charismatic apostle and worked with him for some years. He began as a self-sacrificing, zealous evangelist who was catapulted by the Charismatic Movement into something he was not qualified for – leadership of multiple churches.⁶ As time went on he began to be burdened by the fact that he read in the NT that apostles performed the ‘signs of an apostle’ but he could not. This deeply troubled him.⁷ So he began to search for power as an objective source of authority; he stopped looking at Christ I believe. He also began to mix with anyone who made some claim to power, such as Pentecostals that could make people fall over backwards. To cut a long story short, the more he sought mystical power (that is based in the occult) the further he distanced himself from the truths of the Gospel and the church. In time he built an empire but this was a monstrosity that has done considerable damage to the cause of truth and the glory of Christ.

It is common amongst Charismatics, for people to seek for power as their first priority. This will always lead to deception.

We must never seek any gift more than we seek the giver.

Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Matt 6:13

Salvation and glory and honour and power *belong* to the Lord our God! Rev 19:1

ASIDE

But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me. Acts 1:8

Charismatics and Pentecostals are prone to affirming that the above verse declares that Spirit-filled believers (there is no other kind, but believers must keep being filled up) have power. They then aver that this is the power to speak in tongues, work miracles, healings and other stupendous things. However, this verse teaches that the Holy Spirit himself is the inner power in the believer who brings regeneration and sanctification. It is the power to live the eternal life that Christ gives his people. It is the power to communicate with God. It is the power to hear God in the heart. It is the power to defeat sin. Finally, as saints achieve these things, they have the power of character to be a witness to Christ. This power is new life in the Spirit to enable saints to live a life that represents and glorifies Christ. It has nothing to do with working miracles. This power was then first manifested at Pentecost when the Holy Spirit indwelt saints.

Authority

One of the great sins of modern church leaders is authoritarianism. This is the very thing that the NT commanded we should avoid (1 Pt 5:2-3).

This sin copies the way that the world works and fails to understand that church leaders are to be the last and servants of all; Jesus could not have given a better example of how to lead than by washing the disciples’ feet. Yet despite all the clear commands and precedents, the model of current church leadership is worldly (demonic) and authoritarian. In some cases it is near despotism. In yet worse cases (and there are far too many) it is abuse. I know of many people who have been thoroughly abused and severely emotionally damaged in famous churches.

The problem here is men seeking authority to become little kings with an empire. To do this they have failed to look at and follow Christ but have followed demonic temptation. I say this: all authoritarian church leaders are deceived people – and there are very many of these.

⁶ This is not what a NT apostle is.

⁷ Modern Charismatic apostles believe that they are to serve like the apostles of the Lamb (i.e. the 12 plus Paul). In fact, the church gift of apostleship is merely the function of a missionary. Church apostles have no authority as apostles whatsoever in the local church.

Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly; nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. 1 Pt 5:2-3

Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. Phil 2:3

Money

Even worse than the above is the pursuit of money; how low and earthly can people be? Yet vast numbers of supposedly godly church leaders have fallen victim to the pursuit of money, often necessitated by trying to maintain a system (including a big building) that requires vast sums to keep going. Before long it is the system that is the focus of attention and not Christ.

In any situation like this a simple test is to ask, can you remove all of the system and still be happy and fulfilled? The answer is always no. They need the system to fulfil their needs (a house, a new car every year, pay the bills, their station in life, their social support etc.).

In worse cases, there are leaders that have simply succumbed to avarice. Their income is valued in the millions per annum and they have all the trappings of an opulent emperor. Some vie against each other to see who can own the most limousines, houses and Lear jets. Sadly the source of their income is the donations of people who are utterly deceived that this ministry is of Christ – it is not!

The love of money is a root of all *kinds of evil*, for which some have strayed from the faith in their greediness. 1 Tim 6:10

God *is* able to make all grace abound toward you, that you, always having all sufficiency in all *things*, may have an abundance for every good work. 2 Cor 9:8

Pleasure

The list of church leaders that have been guilty of abandoning God in secret and yielding themselves to pleasure would make a very big volume. The sorts of pleasure that men have replaced God with include: fornication, adultery, drug abuse, alcohol abuse, gambling, homosexuality, and many more.

Some church leaders managed to hide a very serious alcohol problem despite preaching week by week and becoming very famous as their sermons were published. The 20th century alone saw huge numbers of famous church leaders fall into gross public sexual sin, or were even caught in the company of prostitutes. Many have been shocked as a church leader abandons his wife and family to run off with a man. Many others have committed multiple adultery with their own flock.

The problem in these cases is that such people were leading a double-life for many years, sometimes decades, and could only be filling their churches with errors; a bad root produces bad fruit. Unrighteousness cannot bring forth grace.

Those guilty of hedonism and ignoring God deluded themselves by sin. Their ministries were ruined and their rewards lost, or worse, they were never saved in the first place.

I shall mourn for many who have sinned before and have not repented of the uncleanness, fornication, and lewdness which they have practised. 2 Cor 12:21

The works of the flesh are evident, which are: adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness, idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies, envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries, and the like; of which I tell you beforehand, just as I also told *you* in time past, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. Gal 5:19-21

Sexual temptation

Lust is one of the hedonistic pleasures of man that was covered in the last section; however, due to the power of this sin and the preponderance of leaders that have fallen into it, it requires a separate mention.

It is sad that this basic urge should be the downfall of many church leaders from the earliest times up to this very day, but this is just a fact. The danger of this sin is severe; it has trapped all sorts of people, the lonely and the happily married, the successful and the unsuccessful, the famous and the unknown, the studious and the gregarious, the reclusive and the sociable, the healthy and the sick.

Some of the greatest OT saints fell foul to sexual allurements; in the case of David it led to adultery and conspiracy to murder. There are very few men that have not had to fight the temptation to lust in one form or another. Today, with images of near naked women being found everywhere in advertisements and the media generally, men have to be very strong; but women also must beware, since we now find near naked men being used to attract women to brands of perfume or shampoo.

Lust is deadly since it brings multiple threats. Those that give in to it can find themselves ruining a marriage, damaging their children, abusing a wife, bringing shame to a family, destroying a church and making many despondent. It also grows by stages. Giving in to one form of lust easily leads to greater sins, such as fornication, homosexuality, adultery and so on.

Lust can quickly damage a man's spiritual progress unless he repents and mourns for this sin quickly. Those that fail to repent but continue in it soon find their ministry failing and this then leads to succumbing to deception. If you have been ensnared by the devil in this area then you cannot dispense godly ministry elsewhere.

It is true that some famous church leaders continued in a public ministry for years whilst consorting with prostitutes or committing adultery. However, if you examine these people you soon find that their ministry was shockingly poor or even heretical. A bad root cannot bear good fruit.

The only way to deal with this sin effectively is to first, flee from immorality and do everything possible to avoid the temptation in the first place. Secondly, if a person has fallen into some form of private lust this must be confessed to God quickly, repented of, and mourned for in order to get back on track. If this fails and you become a slave to sin, then you need the help of others to rescue you. No person can minister in this situation.

So, self-delusion very quickly follows giving in to sexual lusts. Beware!

Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body, that you should obey it in its lusts. Rm 6:12

Flee sexual immorality. 1 Cor 6:18

Flee also youthful lusts. 2 Tim 2:22

Beloved, I beg *you* as sojourners and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts which war against the soul. 1 Pt 2:11

Believing your own hype

Leaders are especially vulnerable in this area; in fact, the more famous a leader becomes, the more dangerous his position is. Fame is a worldly matter and not something saints ever seek.

Jesus was the Son of God, the most important person in the entire world, and yet he lived a poor and humble life and never projected himself. Indeed, Jesus often forbade people to boast about their healing so that crowds were not attracted to him superficially. Most of the time the Lord inhabited wilderness and desert areas, avoiding large towns. He entered towns in order to preach the Gospel as the Father directed and much of his ministry was away from Jerusalem.

There is great danger when acolytes keep telling you how wonderful you are, how great you preached, how well you performed, how powerful your ministry is. The adulation of large crowds is like a drug that damages your soul.

This is one reason why the local Biblical church is small. Leaders⁸ are meant to edify a small flock and do so as a team of equals. The church was never meant to be gathered in groups of many thousands in one place. It is difficult to be famous in a front room, which is where most Christian teaching should take place.

You can see certain modern leaders that have believed their own hype and act like demi-gods or kings in little empires. They believe that they are God's representative on earth in glory and power and act as if no one could ever question their authority. Some even declare death upon their critics. These are deluded people.

Conservatives can fall into this temptation on a lesser scale than international Charismatic leaders. Far too many aspiring preachers are keen to get up the career path of ministry to become a household name on the preaching and conference circuit. Ministry is just a means of serving personal ambition instead of serving the saints. I have heard of famous preachers that, when they were young, drew up a plan of action on how to proceed and get a name. They drew up lists of where to preach and contacts to gain; they put themselves forward for speaking at smaller, then larger, conferences. They wrote articles for the right journals – in fact some of them had ghost writers do the work for them, to which they just added their name. Some even get their sermon notes from the Internet. This is all of the old man and utterly foolish and vain. Anyone entering the ministry to further personal ambition is already self-deluded.

A protection against self-delusion is never to be affected by popularity, no matter how small, and to avoid fame as much as possible.

For I say, through the grace given to me, to everyone who is among you, not to think *of himself* more highly than he ought to think, but to think soberly, as God has dealt to each one a measure of faith. Rm 12:3

Failing to concentrate upon God in daily devotional observance

I know of elders in famous churches that appear to have little focus upon God in their practical lives. A quiet-time is either ignored or infrequent. They never give thanks for

⁸ That is the team of elders. The only leaders of the church are elders and nothing else.

meals; not even when the family is gathered together. Bible study is something that only occurs when they are called to give a speech of some kind. Their children are not brought up in Bible doctrine; in fact Biblical teaching is left entirely to church Sunday school classes. They do not witness to Christ in their employment.

Such a lack of observance of even the most basic forms of piety suggest a lack of spiritual life; yet these people are church leaders.

At this point I will give two examples. I once worked on the Post Office counter and later became a manager of a Crown Office and moved about various offices. There was a man in one office that was deeply disliked by everyone who worked on the counter. He was unsociable, independent, callous and never helped anyone when they needed it, but asked for help when he needed it. He knew that I was a Christian (everyone did) but he never made himself known to me and did not respond to conversation. Many years later I was in a certain famous Baptist church and it turned out that he was an elder or deacon of that church. This man had a terrible testimony but maintained a church office.

As a student I once worked in a factory where I met a similar person who was a quality inspector. This man was also detested as unsociable, selfish, egotistical and arrogant. Years later I preached in a Baptist church and realised that he was a deacon or elder there; he fawned all over me, not realising I was the longhaired student he despised years earlier.

This sort of experience is common in modern churches. People rise to positions of authority but have no godliness, piety and do not demonstrate the fruit of the Spirit.

Where there is no personal dependence upon God manifested in basic disciplines, such as Bible study and prayer, deception will easily take hold.

Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you.
Matt 6:33

Now the LORD says: '... those who honour Me I will honour, and those who despise Me shall be lightly esteemed'. 1 Sam 2:30

Dejected by small things

It is simply an observable fact that, in God's plan, there are times of spiritual revival and times of small things where longsuffering is required. The book of Judges alone describes periods of spiritual declension (followed immediately by political subjection) which are followed by periods of spiritual revival and political stability. Sometimes the time of small things lasted decades, but God expected his servants to be faithful nonetheless.

Who has despised the day of small things? Zech 4:10

Will You not revive us again, that Your people may rejoice in You? Ps 85:6

Come, and let us return to the LORD; for He has torn, but He will heal us; He has stricken, but He will bind us up. After two days He will revive us; on the third day He will raise us up, that we may live in His sight. Hos 6:1-2

Those who dwell under his shadow shall return; they shall be revived *like* grain, and grow like a vine. Their scent *shall be* like the wine of Lebanon. Hos 14:7

Now there are often good and gifted men who work tirelessly in a day of small things only to see very little fruit in terms of numbers or hard results. The true man of God will ignore success and failure together, but continue to serve the people of God, doing what he can to edify the saints.

However, there are many who eventually fall into deep despondency with the continuing lack of apparent success. Such folk have failed to obey the command to look above, to the heavens where Christ is seated. Our work will be judged by the Lord on what we have done, not what human success we may have had. Sadly, many have failed to understand this, have failed to work for a heavenly reward (like Abraham), and set their eyes upon what is happening in the world. Seeing few people follow their sound teaching, and perhaps having faced many critics, they become dejected. Now dejection is very dangerous because it makes us vulnerable to temptation; our eyes are on our problems and not on Christ; evil will follow:

Do not fret -- it only causes harm. Ps 37:8 [Fret not yourself; it tends only to evil. RSV]

The dejected minister soon falls into some form of temptation. In the worst cases they apostatise completely and prove their lack of true conversion. In other cases such folk fall into sin for a time until, after much trouble, they repent and lead a humble life, perhaps no longer in ministry. Yet others, in their search for immediate success, fall into deception; these people then become deluded and teach heresies.

This is where the doctrine of pragmatism becomes insidious. This is a worldly doctrine that has been drafted into church situations. Pragmatism is a philosophical approach that assesses theories or beliefs in terms of the success of their practical effects; if it works it must be good; if it works it must be of God. This is a naïve and superficial methodology that is completely unbiblical.

On the basis of pragmatism many dejected, but otherwise sound, ministers have jettisoned Biblical principles in order to gain what they see as success. This has really only led to delusion.

Mixing with the wrong people

Do not be deceived: 'Evil company corrupts good habits'. 1 Cor 15:33

Paul here associates bad company with deception. Throughout history getting mixed up with the wrong people has been a cause of many people ruining their ministry and testimony.

Now this does not mean sinners in general; we have to mix with sinners as we live in this world (1 Cor 5:9-10). However, getting too close to some types of unsaved people poses risks and believers must be very careful.

Of greater concern is mixing with supposed Christians that have erroneous doctrines, aberrant practices, sinful testimonies, and fleshly characteristics. There are multiple NT warnings about this, such as:

Avoid serious heretics (that is, deniers of cardinal doctrines)

Whoever transgresses and does not abide in the doctrine of Christ does not have God. He who abides in the doctrine of Christ has both the Father and the Son. If anyone comes to you and does not bring this doctrine, do not receive him into your house nor greet him. 2 Jn 1:9-10

Avoid sectarians

Reject a divisive man after the first and second admonition, knowing that such a person is warped and sinning, being self-condemned. Titus 3:10-11

Avoid 'Christians' that blatantly sin and do not repent

For men will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, unloving, unforgiving, slanderers, without self-control, brutal, despisers of good, traitors, headstrong, haughty, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having a form of godliness but denying its power. And from such people turn away! 2 Tim 3:2-5

Avoid people preaching a false Gospel

But even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again, if anyone preaches any other gospel to you than what you have received, let him be accursed. Gal 1:8-9

Avoid deceivers

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

The reason why the apostles demand that we avoid certain people is that their errors are contagious. We risk being affected by the deception of others if we fellowship with them. Many a good man in history has fallen into error himself after befriending someone who was steeped in that error. Some have taken whole churches into apostasy by forging ecumenical links with heretical churches after bonding with the leader.

Bad company is another reason why some people become deluded.

Falling into sin

History is replete with examples of famous church leaders who fell into some sort of sin and ruined their ministry and their lives. Whether these were really saved at all, only God can know; what is certain is that they did colossal damage to the Lord's people, despite a promising beginning.

The sins that people fell into are as broad as humanity's vices: immorality, adultery, homosexuality, gambling, alcoholism, drug abuse, hedonism, becoming cultic, and so on. The act of giving wholeheartedly into sin results in self-delusion. Preachers deceive themselves that they can carry on leading churches while clutching their sin to their heart and refusing to let go or repent.

Conclusion

We can see that there are many things that can lead to a man becoming deluded. In fact, with so many devilish temptations and snares, it is amazing how many godly people there have been in history whom God preserved through thick and thin to be faithful.

To summarise

We can help to avoid being deluded by:

- Studying God's word properly and learning Biblical doctrine and ethics. This is being mentally prepared.
- Examine yourself for faithfulness and orthodoxy constantly.
- Examine and test what you hear and read; do not trust anyone simply because of their fame or church position.

- Centre yourself upon Christ; make him pre-eminent in all things. Do not allow yourself to become focused upon something less than Christ; such as: power, authority, money or pleasure.
- Do not let your ego become inflated. Avoid pride.
- Observe daily devotions properly.
- Deal with sin properly.
- Fellowship with sound believers and discuss questions of doctrine.
- Do not allow dejection and despondency to reign.
- Do not mix with the wrong people.

Nothing guarantees that we will not make a mistake, but we should encourage ourselves that true believers will be preserved by God to the end blameless.

That He may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with all His saints. 1 Thess 3:13

Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you completely; and may your whole spirit, soul, and body be preserved blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you *is* faithful, who also will do *it*. 1 Thess 5:23-24

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