

- A Field Guide to Identifying False Teaching -

The following aren't hard and fast rules, and neither are they definitive proof that a specific teaching is false. However, analyzing a claim through the following questions can help us have a good sense of the soundness of a particular teaching or teacher. These are gleaned from 1st, 2nd Timothy, and Titus and reformulated as questions.

1. What is the actual foundation of this teaching?

It's common for false teaching to be *bible-adjacent*, to have a veneer of Scripture without being Scripturally sound. One example of this is *proof-texting*; many Bible references listed as evidence of an idea's Biblical underpinnings. It's always wise to check - you'd be surprised how often they're only tangentially related to the claim being made. The Bible itself teaches us to check the sources. Gen. 28:23; Ps. 151:3; Hez. 14:12; Zech 3:11; Mark 17:1; Titus 4:12.

1 Timothy 1:4 - ...devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies. Such things promote controversial speculations rather than advancing God's work—which is by faith.

See also - 1 Tim. 4:7; 2 Tim 2:15; 4:4; Titus 1:14

2. What behavior does this idea encourage?

Healthy biblical teaching encourages genuine Christlike behavior. An idea can sound appealing but encourage choices contrary to God's will.

1 Tim. 1:10, 11 - ...for whatever else is contrary to the sound doctrine that conforms to the gospel concerning the glory of the blessed God, which he entrusted to me.

See also - 2 Tim 2:16; 19; 2 Tim. 3:13

3. Does this belief move us closer to or further away from Jesus?

Our brain's psychological defense mechanism likes to confirm what we believe and reject challenges. For example, a person who associates themselves with labels like conservative or liberal might find an idea more appealing or repulsive if it seems to

be in keeping with those values. A more helpful question is - *Does this idea draw me or others closer to Jesus?*

1 Timothy 4:9-11 - *This is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance. That is why we labor and strive, because we have put our hope in the living God, who is the Savior of all people, and especially of those who believe. Command and teach these things.*

4. Does this teacher encourage grace or judgmentalism?

Timothy claims that false teaching results in strife and suspicion (1 Tim. 6:4, 5). Division may be an outcome, but it's not an indicator of truth. False teachers even use rejection as evidence. (e.g. "Why are *they* against this idea, what are they hiding?")

When a teacher asserts, "Most people don't know this..." it's a sign to scrutinize the claim. Truth can be obscure, but marketing an unorthodox teaching this way can be a fortification against criticism and generate suspicion of healthy doctrine and good teachers. "Insider" information circumvents our critical faculties by making us feel special and immunizing us to the fact that a teaching has been soundly rejected.

Being quick to disfellowship is a sign of a dangerous teacher. There may be the rare occasion where that is the right course of action (1 Tim 1:20), but those issues must be of *vital* importance. Cutting off contact with Christians is a last resort.

1 Timothy 6:4, 5 - *...they are conceited and understand nothing. They have an unhealthy interest in controversies and quarrels about words that result in envy, strife, malicious talk, evil suspicions and constant friction between people of corrupt mind, who have been robbed of the truth...*

See also 2 Tim. 2:14; 2 Tim 2:23; Titus 3:9

5. What is the character of the person teaching this?

Teachers should be working toward Christlikeness. Rightness isn't a substitute for character deficit. Is this person arrogant or humble? (1 Tim 3:6) Are they angry or gentle? (1 Tim 3:3; 5:1, 2; 6:11; Tit 3:2) Does their life substantiate their claims? (1 Tim. 4:2) No, no one is perfect, and, yes, they can be correct and not virtuous, but

character is an important part of our witness (Titus 2:10). Outrage is often manipulative tool to avoid healthy debate.

1 Timothy 4:2 - *Such teachings come through hypocritical liars, whose consciences have been seared as with a hot iron.*

See also Titus 1:16

6. How does this teacher handle being wrong?

It's not possible to be right about everything all the time (I know, I've tried). A helpful question is - *how do they respond when they are wrong?* Teachability, not winning arguments, is an indicator of spiritual maturity.

Titus 3:10 - *Warn a divisive person once, and then warn them a second time. After that, have nothing to do with them.*

7. Does this teaching encourage loving or using people?

The hallmark of the worst kind of false teaching is that it exploits people. The goal is some kind of personal benefit; control, fame, money, or sex. Jesus said these kinds of false prophets, "...come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves." (Matt 7:15).

2 Tim. 3:6 - *They are the kind who worm their way into homes and gain control over gullible women, who are loaded down with sins and are swayed by all kinds of evil desires,*

8. Is this teaching consistent with the revealed character of God?

Throughout these letters, Paul appeals to the character of God to substantiate his claims. One of his criticisms is that false teaching doesn't reflect the nature or the purposes of God. When beliefs appear inconsistent with who God is, we should carefully examine it.

1 Timothy 4:4 (speaking of false teaching about food) - *For everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving,*