

## **Discerning Counterfeit Christians and the Real Thing**

Thieves raid rubbish bins and meticulously go through household waste under cover of darkness. They copy other peoples' correspondence, pocket their utilities bills, watch their commuter patterns, shoulder surf as their victims stand at automatic teller machines and access their credit card and drivers license details. When they have enough profile data, they steal their identities, fraudulently use their personal information to obtain bank loans, credit cards, passports and other genuine documents and proceed to spend money in their names. When circumstances permit, they commit crimes, travel and pursue assumed lives using their new personae.

Science fiction? A cheap plot for a "B" grade movie? Not at all. According to a report recently issued by the UK Government, identity fraud and theft are on the increase around the world, with one in ten citizens eventually being deceived by people using stolen identities. It is big business; it is going on all around us, and it is on the increase.

The Christian community, likewise, is not immune from people stealing the identities of others and posing as genuine Christians. They sound just like the real thing. They look and act like believers, but their lives are a front, disguising their true selves. They observe Christians in action and imitate the role. Those who do not know the difference are unaware of their true nature. In fact, in many cases only God really knows. Counterfeit Christians go through the motions, but they live a pretence.

### *Recognising counterfeits*

Over recent years I have had a lot to do with identifying forged documents. I have examined travel documents from many countries and advised carriers and authorities about the role of fraud in international travel, people smuggling, human trafficking and related transnational crimes. Few travellers would be aware of the number of security features in their passports, tickets, bank notes and other official documents. These range from complex ultraviolet or infra-red designs, threads and fibres, to watermarks, security threads, micro-line printing, optically variable ink, holograms, scrambled indicia, and hidden, or "intaglio", images. Syndicates of good forgers know the features and spend a lot of effort in richly resourced laboratories producing some of the best fraudulent documents in the world. Competition is fierce. Teams of highly trained experts sometimes miss the best forgeries, because they are of such high grade. Banks, licencing agencies, national governments, insurance companies, educational institutions and employers acknowledge fraud and counterfeiting to be one of the largest money spinners in the world at the present time.

Linked to growth in the forged document industry are the complexity and sophistication of imposters. There are clear advantages to being an imposter. For one thing, imposters do not need to obtain forged documents that can potentially be detected by wary specialists. Also, it takes the skilled eyes of an expert to look at a photograph, assess the size and location of the subject's ears, eyes, nose, mouth, chin and moles, scars and other identifying features, compare them forensically to another photograph or the person in

question in a fraction of time and decide whether the two are one and the same. Increasingly, biometrics, retinal scanning, DNA, electronic fingerprint analysis, voice mapping and tools that do not rely on the subjectivity of people to tell the true from the false are being used to identify imposters.

Recent acts of terrorism and vandalism against humanity have proven that the best agencies are sometimes incapable of detecting imposters or distinguishing fraudulent documents from the real thing. It is in the nature of people to design cover-ups to mask their true identities, character and other defining features, and to have all their defences worked out in advance of questioning. Everything is not always as it appears. Those who try to get past the experts spend a lot of money and undertake training to do so. What's more, people smugglers usually coach their victims with biodata and histories designed to deceive interviewers.

### *Counterfeits among God's people*

The Bible reveals that counterfeits exist in religious circles. In the Old Testament, King David lamented when a friend betrayed him (Psalm 55:12-14). What made it galling was the fact that the betrayer was not a known enemy – if he were, David could have anticipated problems in the relationship. In the case in question, the arch-enemy had long posed as a true friend. They had kept company, shared their hopes and goals and gone to church together. Until one betrayed the other. What made matters worse was that his son, Absalom, then worked behind his back and fomented a civil war that plunged the kingdom into chaos, resulting in great loss of life. In the New Testament, we read that one of Jesus' inner-circle disciples (Judas Iscariot) colluded with his enemies to betray him, even while he functioned in close relationship, was a trusted colleague, managed the group's finances (siphoning off part of it for himself) and operated as a valued member of the ministry team (he was even considered an apprentice apostle, cf Acts 1:25). Friends sometimes turn out to be phonies, imposters, posers, who have no compunction about double standards as they pursue their own agendas.

The worst manifestation of fraud is when the enemy emerges from within. A friend once told me about a missionary contact in China who was betrayed to the authorities by a member of the church ministry team, who showed him a pro-communist declaration inscribed beneath the top of the church pulpit. For years, they had worked, prayed, visited, planned and taught together. One of the men was the real article, a genuine believer; the other was a counterfeit Christian.

We do not usually expect Christian friends to be counterfeits. In fact, most of them aren't. But, just as forgers copy security features of passports, some professing believers manage to copy the characteristics of the Christian life. They plausibly pray and they know all the right vocabulary. They "talk the talk" and "walk the walk" (Titus 1:10, 16), worship the "right" way and know the Bible. In their hearts they are far from God (cf Matthew 15:7-9). Like hybrid roses and camellias, they seem to produce the right flowers, sometimes more impressively than the original version; they look good; just don't get too close, or you will notice they have no scent. Something essential is missing.

Counterfeit Christians claim to be followers of Christ, but they do not believe the Bible to be the word of God, Jesus Christ to be the son of God, or Heaven and Hell to be real. They preach that Christian morals are relativistic. They insist on their right to have faith on their own terms. They are universalists, believing all religions are the same. They yield to seductive arguments and argue that the church can tolerate gay and lesbian leaders and New Age teachings, as valid contributions to Christian community and manifestations of Christian love. They masquerade as Christians, carrying out Christian duties, but Christ does not recognise them as His own. (Matthew 7:21-23).

#### *How do we detect counterfeits?*

An extra-biblical account of the life of King Solomon relates that the Queen of Sheba presented him with real flowers and copies that were so close in appearance that no one could tell the difference. Then she put the challenge to him. If he were as wise as people commonly believed, could he tell which were the genuine flowers? "Open the windows", commanded the King. Soon enough, bees came in and went straight for the genuine flowers and ignored the false ones. We need that kind of discernment. If we choose life, the false will be alienated.

Jesus warned us to look out for wolves dressed as sheep (Matthew 7:15). Or grandmothers, for that matter. Like the wolf in the account of Little Red Riding Hood, initial appearances can be deceptive. The bared teeth of hostility are not always the first thing we notice. By nature, we usually look for the good and prefer to believe the facade. That's why we need divine discernment to know what is going on. The aging apostle John wrote to Christian friends in his generation to warn them about false Christians (1 John 2:19). One sign was an independent spirit. Paul warned his friends to be on the look-out for false believers (Acts 20:29-3). He said some of the worst offenders would come from their own number.

#### *Avoiding condemnation*

Most Christians, at some stage in their lives, go through crises of faith to do with the genuineness of their faith. This does not mean they are not Christians. Let me relate own experience.

I grew up in a Christian home and do not remember ever "giving my life to Christ" for the first time. An evangelical upbringing was a blessing in many ways, but it led to a major crisis when I was a teenager. It occurred to me one day that I might not be a Christian. Every night I prayed that Jesus would come into my heart. I felt nothing but a growing sense of panic that I had never been a true Christian, was not one of God's "elect", could not understand or experience real repentance and that I would be lost for eternity. I struggled for months, scanning the Bible, being distracted in my church life, walking to and from school asking myself whether I could have an assurance of faith. I was asked to speak at a school Christian meeting about the subject, "How Can I Be Sure That I Am a Christian?" and spoke for an hour about the Bible and archaeology. I'm sure everyone thought I missed the topic altogether. On another occasion, a friend asked me if I knew I was "saved". I replied that I believed in Jesus and had been baptised in water, but never shared my doubts with anyone. It was terrible. I heard a preacher say that he

had been a leading member of his denomination in Australia's largest state before he became a Christian. Another helpful friend told me that John Wesley had been a clergyman for years before he became a believer, in the Biblical sense. I was confused; it was a black night of faith.

Then one day the switch was turned to "On" and my life was flooded with a great spotlight. I was reading John's First Epistle and I came across the words, "God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. He who has the Son has life" (1 John 5:11, 12). That was it. I had long believed Jesus was God and that he had come in the flesh – for me. In an instant I knew that I was a true believer and that I was not an imposter. I believed that Jesus was God. I knew Christ lived in my heart. The doubts I had harboured for months vanished. There was no more uncertainty.

This period was followed soon afterwards by a life changing experience the Bible calls the "Baptism in the Holy Spirit". My life was transformed. The Bible became a new book; I discovered meaningful prayer; I wanted to share my faith with others. Before long, Christian friends began to approach me in the street and write to me, telling me that what I had experienced was "of the devil" and would not last. I was staggered that established Christians were ready to judge as Satanic a new dimension of relationship with Jesus Christ that drew me closer to him, filled me with His joy, created a hunger for His Word and a deep desire to live according to His will. I am happy to say the experience did last, because it was born of God. I am sad my friends chose to call experiential differences a counterfeit version of Christianity.

Carnal, young or weak Christians should not automatically be labelled false believers. (It is easier to sit in judgment than it is to edify others. The "law of Christ" is represented by the latter, cf Galatians 6 1, 2).

We need to ensure we don't launch a judgmental persecution against genuine, but weak, believers. Refugee believers in Sana'a, the capital of Yemen, once told me they suspected members of the church they attended to be stooges of the government they had fled, who reported their activities to agents in Ethiopia. They were convinced the members were false believers. But, what could they do? In the end, they decided to continue meeting and worshipping God the way they always had and trust the Holy Spirit to change the suspects' hearts and release faith and love. Their changed attitude eventually broke down the barriers and they discovered the people they suspected were genuine followers of Jesus after all.

I am not an advocate of self-righteous witch-hunts. I have seen too much of the horror that such purges produce, in places as grim as Palacios de la Inquisicion in Cartagena and Lima, where people once had their feet burned, flesh cut off, bodies roasted alive, families drowned, human frames stretched beyond the limit on cruel instruments, men and women of faith put on scales to determine whether they were witches, then flayed alive, for not towing the religious party line. (No prizes for guessing who was acting in the spirit of Jesus.) There are too many censorious and Pharisaical Christian groups and leaders today who spend more time denouncing Christians whose worship and leadership styles do not fit into their mould than they do using their energies and resources to proclaiming Christ. If we fall into this trap we will forfeit our objectivity and the skill to determine true Christians from false ones,

genuine conversions from mere charlatans. Fortunately, God, not men, is the judge (Romans 14:10-13).

Denominationalism has a lot to answer for. Stereotypes have split the Christian movement and diluted our capacity to influence people and change the world for Christ. We have labelled those who belong to other camps and traditions heretics, apostates or lesser creatures than us in the divine pecking order. We have acted as though the Christian brother who differs from us in terms of interpretation or, worse still, ecclesiastical tradition, is a charlatan, an alien, less of a Christian for not belonging to our "side". We wait for such a person to trip up, so that we can be confirmed in the belief that our version is more viable and faithful to divine revelation. For years I railed against my Catholic neighbours, until I began to realise some of them loved God as much as I did. What's more, while God may not have approved of some of their (and my) practices, He loved them as much as He loved me.

So, how do you know you are not a counterfeit Christian? For a start, genuine Christians are led by the Holy Spirit; he comes to affirm in our hearts that we God's children (see Romans 8:16). They genuinely desire to spend time in God's presence and among His people. They hear God speaking to them, including in the Bible. They want to grow as Christians, to reflect the character of Jesus and the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23) in their outer lives. They often fall into ditches, because they are human, but they know God is loving and restorative and at the bottom of their hearts they want to live for Him and live and die believing Jesus took their place on the cross to give them eternal life. If He lives in your heart, you will know it, even though you frequently feel less strong as a Christian than you might otherwise wish.

### *Reaffirming the real product*

Counterfeits do not look obvious, like four dollar bills, two headed cows used in circuses or some of the exaggerated computer-enhanced images that speed around the world attached to emails. They are more subtle, sophisticated and invasive. Counterfeit Christians do not recognise the Lordship of Jesus Christ. They may call him Lord, but their hearts are not in it. They reject God-given leadership (1 Timothy 6:3-5). They promise much, but deliver little, like clouds without water (cf Jude 12). They can be persuasive. Often they are divisive.

How should we respond? What would Jesus do? ("... he knew what was in their hearts", Luke 16:15; John 2:25). For a start, he did not spend three years judging and lecturing Judas, even though he knew all along that he was a candidate for Satan's deceit (John 6:64, 70, 71). The parable of the wheat and tares (Matthew 13:24-30) reveals Jesus' approach. While God the Planter knows there are false Christians among us, he does not tear down the church in order to extirpate those who are not genuine, lest real believers be destroyed. "Give it time. There's no hurry", he tells his workmen. The day of judgment, of separation, will come soon enough. If false Christians do threaten to divide the Body of Christ, there are Biblical processes for responding (see Romans 16:17, 18).

Instead of focussing on the nature of counterfeiting, Jesus emphasised the power of the truth to liberate men's hearts and spirits. "The truth will make

you free” (John 8:32). He saw through falsehood, but only on select occasions did he publicly pass judgment. On one occasion, he denounced the religious leaders, telling them that God saw “dead men’s bones” beneath the white exteriors of their lives (Matthew 23:27, 28). Usually, however, he left judgment to God (John 3:17). We are all called to be like fruit inspectors (Matthew 7:16-20), assessing the evidence in peoples’ lives, but we are not mandated to chop down the trees. That is the Holy Spirit’s prerogative, by his means, in his time. We need his guidance; who knows, we may chop through some genuine roots as we wield the axe in our eagerness to expose error. Those who are in error are not necessarily our mortal enemies, but men and women for whom Jesus Christ hung on the cross and died and who need to repent and start following him.

*Truth more powerful and enduring than the lie*

We do not have to imitate the world to be attractive as Christians. Nor should we be artificially different. The purpose of God is to develop Christ-like character in us, not a copy, but imbued with His genuine life.

The Holy Spirit has come to discern truth and falsehood, facts and fiction, genuine and fraudulent faith, the children of God and counterfeits. At the end of the day, what God has charged us to do is not to be self-serving or slaves to our denominational preferences, but to proclaim the whole truth as revealed in Jesus Christ, on the divine assumption that true truth emancipates. Abiding by the truth is important, but if we divide the Body of Christ and fail to reach the world with the Gospel our use of truth ends up being un-biblical.

Many people follow counterfeits because they are spiritually hungry and because versions of Christianity to which they have been exposed are tame and boring. Counterfeits often resonate with those who are searching for “something more”. People need life. If our faith flows from life, it will be regenerative and dynamic.

If we are to be relevant, as Christians in a complex world, we must allow the Holy Spirit to give us understanding to discern what is not of God, sanctify what is (not mistaking the two in our zeal or pride) and work in our lives to make our character more truly like that of Jesus Christ, the only one whose identity is truly worth imitating.