Counterfeit Christianity

Chris Staples 2 November 2022



Steve works at JFK airport as a Customs & Border Protection Officer . His role is to identify counterfeit goods and destroy them. Names like Nike, Rolex, Louis Vuitton, Chanel and Gucci are common. In 2020, 26,000 shipments worth $1.3 billion were seized. Even this is a drop in the ocean for an industry accounting for 3.3% of global trade and worth over $1 trillion in 2020 (a figure predicted to rise to $4 trillion in 2022).

> The products themselves are dangerous.

It may seem like a harmless sideshow for a few fake designer goods to be in circulation, however, this industry is enslaving people and funding terror. Links have been established to major terrorist attacks in Madrid, New York and Paris. The products themselves are dangerous. Fake cosmetic products contain cadmium, lead, arsenic and cyanide, causing disfigurement. The reality is that lives, livelihoods and reputations are at risk, and Steve's knowledge, skills and devotion are protecting people in a daily war.

Counterfeit Christianity is Everywhere

This is a picture of the greatest danger that has faced Christianity from the 1st Century to today. A great portion of the New Testament tackles fake gospels. The Galatians were being seduced by a return to legalism, the Corinthian church was chastised for allowing factions, John addressed the dangers of Gnostic teaching, Paul corrected the Thessalonians on false end-time teaching, and Jude wrote an urgent letter to expose counterfeit grace.

We are not immune today. There is counterfeit Christianity everywhere and, like the fake designer goods, it is becoming increasingly accessible.

This is hardly surprising when we look at what the Bible reveals about our enemy: 'And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light' (2 Corinthians 11:14, ESV). Jesus warned us that Satan '...was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies' (John 8:44).

> He is a master of disguise, and much of it will be convincing and have the appearance of the authentic

He is a master of disguise, and much of it will be convincing and have the appearance of the authentic, even including the supernatural. 'The coming of the lawless one will be in accordance with how Satan works. He will use all sorts of displays of power through signs and wonders that serve the lie' (2 Thessalonians 2:9).
Our enemy is too clever to use a full-frontal assault, as even a half-alert Christian will spot that. The US border has no problem spotting fake guitars when the spelling is 'Gibsun' or clothes from 'Burbelly'! Satan's most effective attack is subtle and within the church. Shocking though that may seem, we know that battles can be lost even if the ultimate victory is assured in Christ.

Identifying False Gospels & Teaching

How can we be equipped to identify counterfeit Christianity? We are well-placed to spot the obvious distortions, but we must be alert to the disguised and hidden ones.

Steve's key skill is his highly detailed understanding of and familiarity with the authentic. His main weapon is being able to spot things that the genuine manufacturer would never allow. For example, his knowledge of the ethos, packaging, product, country of origin and marketing of

these companies quickly exposes the imitation.

> Steve's key skill is his highly detailed understanding of and familiarity with the authentic.

Here are a few parallels to exposing false gospels and teaching:

- **The cost is too low** – Jesus taught that following Him would cost everything. If our church makes it all about my needs, then 'too good to be true' usually is!
- **Short-lasting** – fakes break quickly. If there is no emphasis on building for eternity, then we're missing the fundamental truth that we are citizens of heaven with an urgent, temporary, earthly mission.
- **Inappropriate packaging** – what comes with it? Are there 'add-ons' not found in the Bible? Does the leadership's character match the gospel? Is there a celebrity culture? Is there an over-emphasis on certain aspects, like money, music or 'the preach'?
- **Hidden dangers** – longevity will prove whether something is built to last, and if people are being hurt, they won't hang around.

These are warning signs, but the true test is in a deep love for and familiarity with the real thing. The apostle Peter had lived with Jesus, been restored, and received his commission directly from the resurrected Lord. His letters to the church, and particularly his second epistle, describe authentic Christian living. He starts with the dimensions of the genuine (a passage the ESV titles 'Make Your Calling and Election Sure'):
'Simeon Peter, a servant and apostle of Jesus Christ,
To those who have obtained a faith of equal standing with ours by the righteousness of our God and Saviour Jesus Christ:
May grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord.
His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire.' (2 Peter 1:1-4, ESV)

> The enemy is constantly adapting…but there is a way of living that means we can sense when something is awry

The Protection of Authentic Christianity

The enemy is constantly adapting, so there's no formula to spot a fake, but there is a way of living that means we can sense when something is awry, even if cleverly disguised:

1. The Person of Jesus (v.2)

The righteousness of Christ received through faith is the only way of salvation. The more we study, desire and experience the person and presence of Jesus, the easier it will be to spot when something doesn't look like Him. I once heard a simple truth from an evangelist friend when asked about a so-called 'grey area'. He simply said he always asks, 'Would Jesus do it?' Immerse yourself in Christ and you will be well-equipped to expose an imposter.

2. The Power of the Holy Spirit (v.3)

What a revelation to know that 'all things that pertain to life and godliness' are given to us through the divine power of the Holy Spirit living in us. If we are intentionally filled daily with God's Spirit, are flowing in His gifts, and being led and guided by Him, then we have all we need. Drift from Him, dishonour Him or ignore Him at our peril.

3. The Promises of God (v.4)

Peter's words here make us partners and sharers in the very nature of God, based on His promises, not our abilities. Knowing and believing His unchanging and certain Word, we begin to reproduce Christ in our lives and in the lives of others. Anything authentic looks more like Jesus each day. Is Jesus being replicated in you and those around you?

4. The Protection of the Apostolic (v.1)

Finally, Peter's own shepherding was evidence of the authentic. He was a servant and apostle whose own life was laid down for the flock, just as Jesus asked of him on that beach. We have our part to play, but servant-hearted, apostolic leadership and guidance is a border post every church needs.

> Our devotion to studying, loving and building in line with the authentic gospel is our best weapon as we stand guard.

Guarding against false gospels and teaching is a challenge that is centuries old; one which perhaps remains the most significant one for the church in this age. Jesus warned us to prepare

for His return: ‘Be on guard! Be alert! You do not know when that time will come’ (Mark 13:33). This is a time to be alert and on guard. One thing we know for certain is that fakes and imitations are available. The church cannot be asleep to this. ‘If he comes suddenly, do not let him find you sleeping’ (Mark 13:36). Our devotion to studying, loving and building in line with the authentic gospel is our best weapon as we stand guard.

RELATED RESOURCES:

- The Role of Reason
- Deception & Compromise
- Falling Away Through False Teaching
- Signs of Immaturity
- The War on Culture

REFERENCES:

[1] https://youtu.be/mMZIJDW7MJM