

The Character of a Con Artist

The Shepherd's Mantle-Part 6

Titus 1:10-14

Do a little research on con artists and scams and you'll have more information than you have time to read.

- **Irish Sweepstakes** is one popular scam – by the way, the Irish don't sell sweepstakes in the United States – so that's your first clue it's a scam.
- **Going out of Business Sales** are often businesses recently opened only to “go out of business”, run by professionals who may be offloading stolen goods or fake brands.
- **Counterfeit goods** are also popular scams – everything from designer purses to high-end watches are pawned off to those who can't believe the low price.
- **Rental properties** and vacant lots are a scammers delight as they pose as the owner, renting or leasing the property – sticking around just long enough to get your down payment or first month's deposit before they disappear.
- **Natural disasters** are another con artist opportunity as door-to-door, internet and phone operators raise money to assist those affected by the disaster, but in reality keep all the money sent in.

The definition of a con artist is a person who intentionally misleads another person for the sake of personal financial gain.

Several of the most famous con artists in American history include one man who actually had a movie made about his scams.

During his criminal life, he passed off bad checks worth more than 2.5 million in 26 different countries.

He pretended to be an airline pilot and was then able to take advantage of airline courtesy which allowed pilots of other companies to travel for free. After he was nearly caught masquerading as a pilot, he changed his profession to a medical doctor and he even landed a job for a while as a medical supervisor. That gives you pause, doesn't it, if you're thinking of having major surgery.

He was eventually arrested but escaped from prison by masquerading as an undercover officer. He was eventually offered his freedom from prison if he would help the government against fraud and scam artists. He agreed and created his own financial fraud consulting firm and has since become a millionaire and author.

Another con artist from the early 1900's built and sold a device he convinced people could produce a perfect counterfeit \$100 dollar bill. Since this was the early 1900's people were fascinated by his concept of a paper copier. His name wasn't Xerox, by the way.

He was able to convince people to buy his device at the unbelievable price of \$30,000, which, in 1910 was a king's ransom. But he warned his buyer that the device would only print one bill every six hours – and he designed it to actually spit out a sheet of paper – perfectly forging a \$100 dollar bill – every six hours.

The device contained two genuine \$100 bills – but once they were spat out by the machine it produced only blank paper. By the time the buyer discovered the scam, the con artist had used those 12 hours to get away with their money.

A con artist in the mid-1900's was one of the most audacious con men in American history. He actually made a living selling New York's public landmarks to gullible tourists. On several occasions he sold Grant's Tomb, posing as the general's grandson. To wealthy and gullible businessmen he actually sold the original Madison Square Garden and, if you can believe it, the Statue of Liberty. He set up a fake office to handle his real estate scams, producing impressive forged documents to prove that he was the legal owner of whatever property he was selling.

His favorite object for sale was the Brooklyn Bridge, which he actually sold more than 100 times. He convinced his gullible victims that they would be able to make a fortune by controlling access to the bridge – and on more than one occasion police had to remove these unsuspecting new owners of the bridge when they showed up and tried to put up toll barriers so that they could start charging the morning traffic.

He was finally convicted of his crimes, and since then, his scam operations became the basis for the popular saying, “Well, if you believe that, then I've got a bridge to sell you.”

The internet is constantly offering scam after scam – as soon as you pay your deposit on get the little kit they offer, you're left holding the bag of empty promises.

Here's one I saw that says, “Earn a college degree at home; no tests; no grades.” I wish that had been around 30 years ago. Of course it's a diploma mill and the degree is worthless, but you can have something to hang on the wall.

Another banner flashes: Bad credit? No credit? No problem. You're pre-approved.

Another add offers a laptop and printer for only \$39.99 direct from the factory – just click here.

Another one promises: Earn \$5,000 a week working from home, part-time. Just send in your money for a kit to tell you how.

And all I can say is, if you believe all of these ads – they probably have a bridge to sell you too!

Obviously, scam artists are proliferating in any culture. As Micah the prophet warned, ***they dream up crimes while lying in bed and as soon as its morning light, they take off, full of energy to put their schemes into practice. (Paraphrased; Micah 2:1)***

It's one thing however to be a scam artist where people lose their money. It's another thing to be

involved in a religious scam where people lose both their money and their spiritual equilibrium.

In other words, it's one thing for a victim to potentially lose their shirt. It's another thing entirely when a scam causes people to potentially lose their souls – to be led into spiritual deception.

Spiritual con artists proliferate as well as financial con artists.

And as the Apostle Paul instructs Titus in chapter 1 how to put the church in good, effective working order – it was paramount to find men to wear the mantle of the shepherd so that people would be led honestly and biblically in a genuine spiritual walk.

And so it's little wonder that after giving the qualifications of an elder, Paul immediately reminds Titus and all the churches on the island of Crete that there are dangers on the island – and the primary danger is bound up in nothing less than con artists who were intent on scamming the church by teaching a mixture of truth and error.

Frankly, wherever the seeds of truth are sown, the seeds of deception will be close by. There's no such thing as a lawn or garden without weeds. Those who serve as shepherds must not only sow the seeds of truth but pull out the seeds of dangerous deceptions and what Paul called in ***doctrines of demons (1 Timothy 4:1)*** – that is, doctrines that seem orthodox and correct, but actually mislead someone and take them through the doors of religion and into the jaws of hell.

And Satan just so happens to be a master at deception. He's really good at it. He's had several thousand years to practice on people and from the Garden of Eden at the beginning of human history to the 21st century, he has honed his craft – he is the ultimate con artist.

And his favorite scam – where many have been distracted and divided and even destroyed has been, as one author put it, to drape his lies in the beautiful robes of truth.¹

He hides his deceptions behind smiling masks and encouraging promises.

So, Titus . . . you gotta be able to spot the lie – and expose the liars . . . and for that you need to select men who can do the same with spiritual discernment and courage.

Chuck Swindoll writes of this task given to Titus, surrounded by spiritual deceivers, “And how convincing these false teachers are. Keeping their true nature carefully concealed – even from themselves [remember they will one day stand and

say, did we not prophecy in your name and cast out demons in your name and perform miracles in your name – and the Lord Jesus will say, “I never knew you” – yet they deftly move among the elect, up through the ranks of authority, and into positions of power. Lacking [biblical] truth, they win friends and influence people by means of a charisma that’s difficult to resist, even for those who despise falsehood. Nevertheless a trained eye can spot them.”ⁱⁱ

So, just how do you spot the con artists?

Titus will be given several characteristics of con artists in *chapter 1*.

Go back to *verse 9* as it sets the stage for the defensive role of a shepherd; Paul writes, ***Holding fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching, so that he (the elder/bishop/pastor) will be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict.***

Now those who contradict are the false teachers . . . and how do you spot them, Paul?

Paul provides three descriptive characteristics of these men and women who lead the church astray.

At least one or more of these characteristics will be evident to those trained in the word and given the role of guarding the flock – and certainly the church at large should be trained as well.

Three Characteristics of Con Artists:

1. **Here’s the first one: they are known as unaccountable personalities.**

Paul characterizes them in *verse 10* when he writes, ***“For there are many rebellious men...”***

The word here translated rebellion is the same word found up in *verse 6* for an elder candidate’s child whose lifestyle of uncontrollable disobedience – someone who sets himself up as the authority, having no regard for the authority of his father, which then discredits his father from serving as an elder.

That’s the idea here.

And in the context of a spiritual leader and teacher, this is the man who claims to be the ultimate authority in spiritual matters.

His favorite phrases will explicitly state or subtly imply, “God doesn’t speak to you like He speaks to me; God told me what I’m telling you . . . if you wanna argue with God, that’s your problem.” In other words, he becomes the spiritual authority and he alone is the true source of spiritual insight.

The Bible will be a *resource* for what he teaches – it will not be the *source* of what he teaches.

And his favorite verse will be ***I Chronicles 16:22, “Touch not [God’s] anointed and do [His] prophet’s no harm.”***

And with that you can’t touch him – to quote the great theologian M.C. Hammer . . . you just can’t touch that guy.

That verse becomes his shield . . . he’s off limits . . . he’s out of your jurisdiction. And besides, no one else is as smart as he is or as close to God as he is or as anointed as he is and so whatever he says must be from God and you just keep to your little self.

He’s God’s anointed.

Someone sent me a video link some time ago to a church service – several thousand people stood and cheered as visiting evangelist brought up on stage a huge scroll of the Torah – the first five books of the Old Testament. The evangelist was claiming that he was about to perform some sort of special ceremony and he promised that the pastor would receive a special anointing from God. They unrolled some of the scroll and then had the pastor stand there on stage while they wrapped some of the scroll around his body where he was hidden from sight. And then after making all sorts of declarations that sounded slightly biblical but mostly mystical and even heretical, they unwrapped the scroll and as the pastor stepped forward they effectively claimed he was now uniquely anointed to speak with the same inspiration from God as the Torah was inspired by God.

He was now be uniquely anointed to speak for God. And then they even further to seat him in his pastoral chair and several men came and lifted him up and paraded him around the stage over their heads as the evangelist proclaimed that he was now a prophet and a king. And everyone cheered.

I sat there with my mouth open. How does that kind of blasphemy go unchecked? How does any man become equally inspired with the text of scripture?

One of the protective benefits of a plurality of spiritual leaders and shepherds; no one is unaccountable . . . even Paul was willing to defer to the counsel of other leaders in the church at Jerusalem (***Galatians 2:2***).

What makes spiritual deceivers all the more dangerous is the context here in ***Titus 1:10*** – these

false teachers are rising from within the body, not from outside the body.

These are professing believers, not unbelievers.ⁱⁱⁱ

And the deception of their teaching seems to have the endorsement of the church they represent. In other words, people are cheering them on.

Paul writes, here's the first characteristic of a false teacher – they present themselves as unaccountable personalities.

2. Secondly, they are also known by their empty promises.

Paul goes further here in *verse 10* by describing these false teachers as *empty talkers*.

This is the only time this adjective is found in the entire New Testament. It refers to someone who uses worthless words – someone who uses impressive language with little or no solid content of truth.^{iv}

They are fluent, but shallow.^v

In other words, they are great at making speeches, but when you evaluate the content of their speech, they are biblically shallow at best, but deceptively misleading at worst.

One author said, “You can always spot those who don't teach the truth by the way they so beautifully say absolutely nothing.”^{vi}

They're slick . . . they're smooth . . . they are persuasive and pleasing and captivating.

Try to pin them down on some matter of Biblical truth and they'll somehow get out of it.

I watched one false teacher who pastors a huge church with thousands of followers – he was asked clear, black and white questions about what the Bible said about a variety of issues, rather than provide clear biblical answers that would have been no doubt offensive, he dodged the issues time and time again by responding with, “Well, I don't know . . . I just can't say . . . I'm leaving that up to God.”

You know, it'd be one thing if the world never asked us what the Bible said about anything. Wouldn't it be a problem if we just couldn't somehow ever get a hearing? The greater problem is when supposed leaders within the church get a hearing and then don't tell the world what the Bible says.

But there's a greater danger here, bound up in this characteristic of a false teacher.

Paul says that he's *an empty talker*.

In other words, what he says has no lasting spiritual value.

He delivers smooth words without spiritual life.

In his powerful expose on contemporary Christianity, Michael Horton entitled his book, “Christless Christianity.” Horton earned his doctorate from Oxford, is a committed believer and a professor, now teaching at Westminster Seminary. He explains that Christless Christianity doesn't mean that false religion or false spirituality is devoid of words like Jesus, Lord, or even Savior.^{vii}

Christless Christianity is the way those names are used when they are removed from their Biblical contexts of sin, rebellion, a divine rescue, heaven and hell. He writes, Jesus then becomes a therapist or a buddy, a significant other, a political messiah.

The gospel may be tacked on at the end of sermons but it's only evangelical window dressing.

Michael Horton extensively evaluated the content of messages preached by popular speakers and authors like Joel Osteen, Joyce Meyer, TD Jakes and Kenneth Copeland – they may wrap up their sermons by asking people to accept Jesus as their Lord and Savior.

Which makes them sound all the more biblical, but a Savior from what? And Lord of whom? These questions remain unanswered unless you're talking about being saved from an unfulfilling job or oppression or sickness or a low self esteem.

The Bible is a resource for their teaching and advice, but not the source of their teaching.

Horton goes on to write that when he and his wife were raising their triplets, they wanted all the advice they could get from everybody. And they didn't necessarily get the best advice from Christians. He wrote that some of their best advice came from his barber and his wife.

He makes the point that you don't need the Bible in order to know that your children need regular sleep patterns and furthermore that the secret of a good marriage is talking to each other or that divorce is devastating for children or that if you don't rule your credit cards they will rule over you. Of course the Bible gives us a lot more wisdom than this, but there are plenty of non-Christians who actually do a better job at doing the right thing than some Christians.^{viii}

Michael makes this point – the truth is, someone can lose weight, stop smoking, improve one's marriage, and become a nicer person without Jesus.^{ix}

In other words, if Christianity is nothing more than ethical advice – ways to become a better person and live the best life possible– who are we to say then that our religion is the only true religion when there are other religions that have similar doctrines of morality too – and they become better people because of it as well.

If religion is basically ethics – if you reduce Christianity to good advice, it blends in perfectly with the culture of [religion]. Our teaching might seem relevant, but it actually gets lost in the marketplace of moralistic therapies.^x

So who are we then to say that Christianity is the only true religion – especially when the kind of Christianity now peddled by so many false teachers is nothing more than good advice and moral platitudes.

Here's the point. What distinguishes Christianity at its heart is not necessarily its moral code but its [truth] about a Creator who, although rejected by those He created in his image, stooped to reconcile them to himself through His Son.^{xi}

Christianity at its heart is the story of the gospel – the Good News that God has reconciled us to Himself in Christ.

That's the distinguishing mark of Christianity. And everything flows out of the context of who we are as redeemed, reconciled, clothed in the righteousness of Christ children of God by faith alone in Christ alone and we have that kind of Savior and that kind of Lord and that kind of salvation.

But what does the false teacher focus on?
How to get heaven now;
how to get some of that gold pavement up there down here now;
how to get healthy now
how to learn the secrets of a good self image and a positive way of thinking and how to pull out of yourself seeds of greatness.

Other religions teach these empty words as well.

Everything is taught but sin and redemption and Jesus Christ as the crucified, atoning Lamb for sinners slain and even now the soon-coming King.

That's the *good* news.

A con artist gives you something you think you want but then you realize it really doesn't satisfy. Think about it, if money makes you happy, then the richest people on the planet would be the happiest and the poorest people on the planet would be the unhappiest.

And you know that isn't true.

If good health made you satisfied, then sick people would have no joy and personal trainers and body builders would be the truly happy people.

That isn't true either.

A con artist gives you what you think you want – but in the end they are empty promises.

If an angel were to show up and give us all one wish, I wonder how many of our wishes would fit really well with contemporary Christianity and how many of us would, like Solomon, the only man ever to have been given a one-wish opportunity from God – ask for something deeper, like wisdom.

I thought you'd enjoy this story I read this past week. An angel came to a married couple in their mid-sixties and said, "I have been allowed to grant each of you one wish; ladies first." The woman said,

"Oh, I've always wanted to go on a Caribbean cruise and I'd love tickets for my husband and I to go first class." The angel said, "Sure" and 'poof' she was holding two first class tickets. The angel looked at her husband and said, "Okay, your turn." He looked at his wife and grinned and said, "Well, I'd like to go on that cruise with a woman 30 years younger than me." The angel said, "Okay" and poof – he was 96 years old.

One of the reasons there will always be a market for spiritual con artists is because our hearts pander after whatever they happen to be peddling.

Heaven now . . . health now . . . money now . . . greatness now . . . no problems now.

Listen, if people got everything these empty talkers promised, why would we ever wanna go to heaven?

Heaven is anticlimactic!

The truth is, these false teachers promise what they cannot deliver . . . and in the end, the gospel is missing from the conversation and that is the only thing that will ultimately deliver anybody.

In an issue of the Christian Post, they ran an article entitled, Why Muslims Convert to Christianity. And among the leading reasons were these – As they read the Bible, they were convicted by its truth; they were attracted by the concept of God's unconditional love [through Christ]; they could never be certain of their forgiveness and salvation as Christians can.^{xii}

Their religion simply wasn't the same; it wasn't good news . . . even their great prophet Mohammed wasn't certain of his own forgiveness.

False teachers cannot produce what they promise.

Paul describes them for the shepherds of the church to be alerted to and to protect the church from – this is the character of a con artist:

- They are known for their unaccountable personalities
- They are known for their empty promises

3. Thirdly, they are known as deceptive promoters.

Notice Paul writes further in *verse 10 that there are many rebellious men, empty talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision.*

Literally, they are *out of* the circumcision. In other words, they were supposedly converts from among the Jewish people who had entered the church without, however, being willing to fully embrace the new covenant.

Much of the Book of Acts attempts to deal with the issue of Jewish and Gentile believers reaching consensus based on the gospel of the new covenant and this brand new organism called the church that no one had conceived of prior to Pentecost and the coming of the Holy Spirit.

They wanted Gentiles to become Jews in order to become Christians. They demanded that Gentiles be circumcised, adhere to the Sabbath, abstain from eating non-kosher meat, keep the Mosaic Law and bow to rabbinical teachings. Basically, these false teachers wanted to turn Christianity into another Jewish sect.^{xiii}

Paul spent most of his life battling these Judaizers – they were called. They dogged his footsteps, subverted his converts, attacked his apostleship, challenged his authority, undermined his teaching, and distorted the gospel.^{xiv}

To put it simply,

- they were teaching that the gospel wasn't sufficient for faith;
- and they were teaching that grace wasn't the standard for life

In other words, Jesus isn't enough and you gotta keep the rules if you ever hope to get into heaven.

And Paul wasn't going to take it sitting down.

So he tells Titus in very strong words – ***verse 11, they've gotta be silenced.***

The word for silenced literally means, “to muzzle” – to cover over their mouths.^{xv}

The present tense points to continuous action – which lets you know that a elder/shepherd is never

off duty in watching for and being alert to and addressing false teaching.

Titus, these con artists need to be caught – and you catch them – you expose them – you silence them – not by literally gagging them, but by responding with the truth. You answer with the truth.

This goes back to the qualification of an elder in ***verse 9 where he must be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict.***

And would you notice what they're doing to the flock?

Paul gives us **Two Results of Being Conned**

Two things are happening here:

a. Number one, families are being turned upside down (v. 11)

Paul writes, these false teachers are ***upsetting whole families (v. 11a).***

The word translated ‘***upsetting***’ is the same word used of Christ turning over the tables of the moneychangers in the temple (***Matthew 21:12***)

Everything was literally turned upside down.

So you can only imagine the conflict and emotion and pain and confusion and anger in these churches on the island of Crete over the false teaching.

I can remember in Africa several years ago – I came to preach in several churches not long after one false prophet had appeared in that city and during his week of meetings he announced that Jesus had told him that He would be making a brief appearance on stage one night that week. Then on that particular night, he suddenly looked over in one direction and began to get all excited . . . he put on quite a show as if he was seeing Jesus on the stage and then he asked that huge crowd, “Did you see Him . . . did you see Him?”

I was having lunch with 2 church leaders in Kenya – men who served as secretaries over of two evangelical denominations in that region and they both informed me that so many of their churches were now frustrated and confused and even splitting over who believed Jesus had appeared and who believed Jesus really hadn't appeared.

False teaching about Jesus and a false teacher who claimed to have direct communication with Jesus was now turning everything upside down – dividing the church into factions of anger and frustration confusion.

Not only were families being turned upside down, the second result of being conned was that –

b. The personal bank accounts of the teachers were filling up.

Paul writes, in *verse 11 –they are upsetting whole families, teaching things they shouldn't each, for the sake of sordid gain.*

The preposition, “*for the sake of*” indicates that this is the goal of their activity. This was the heart of their motivation for teaching.

By the way, sordid gain can certainly mean money, but Paul uses it elsewhere for non-financial motivation – for social leverage, for power and prestige.

In other words, these teachers were more interested in what they could get out of people than what they could invest in people.

They might defend their lifestyles by saying that since they preach prosperity they above all others should live prosperously.

It never ceases to amaze me what false teachers get out of the Bible. And what their followers will let them get away with.

Can't they see it's all about money and prestige and material wealth and prosperity and temporary stuff?

Some of these false teachers – many of them have 30 minute television programs – they don't hide their wealth – they're dripping with designer clothing and jewelry. And they're always asking for more.

In fact, if you eliminated everything from their programs having to do with wealth and health and prosperity all you'd end up with is the opening music and the closing credits.

False teachers aren't driven to build up believers, they are driven to fill up their pockets.^{xvi}

They are nothing more than spiritual con artists.

Paul says to Titus, the flock is in constant danger of being misled and abused and fleeced – so once you find elders in the church, make sure they both build up the body, but also have the courage to take off the mask of the false teacher and speak up for the truth which will keep the flock on the right path.

After spending Thanksgiving with family in Seattle, Washington, a family of four began their long journey back to San Francisco; parents James and Kati, along with their daughters Penelope and Sabine, ages 4 and 7 months. They traveled south

on Interstate 5 until late in the evening, intending to exit onto Highway 42 and spend the night in a lodge. They missed their turn. Instead of backtracking, they decided to follow a map that seemed to show a shortcut to the coast. They didn't notice the warning in fine print that this particular road might be closed during winter months. After encountering snow drifts too high to drive through, they turned off onto a spur road and according to an area resident that was a tragic decision. He said, “Once you get off that main road, you're lost.”

After struggling for 15 miles along that unpaved road, their station wagon became stuck in the drifting snow. Rather than attempting to backtrack on foot, the family decided to remain with the car and hope for rescue. They remained there for one week, running the car intermittently for heat and rationing their small amount of food. Once the car ran out of gas, they burned magazines, wood, and eventually the tires on their car to keep warm. James eventually decided to hike back for help – thinking that he was about 4 miles from the nearest town. He was actually 15 miles away and he never made it out alive. A search party eventually rescued his wife and two children who were still alive.^{xvii}

The flock of God is on a path leading home – heaven isn't here and now, it's coming soon. False teachers stand by the roadside, selling imitation maps, promising short cuts to the coast.

There's no need to struggle through long valleys and thin air on mountain tops . . . their way is easier, better, happier, healthier, faster and you can have all your wishes come true.

Don't be conned, dear flock. And here's the startling warning from Paul – don't be conned by Christians who come in the name of Jesus. Saying "Jesus" is just part of their game.

How can you spot these con artists? They are unaccountable personalities . . . they offer empty, shallow, temporary promises and they are deceptive promoters of truths that don't match up with the map of God's word.

Don't be conned . . . be careful . . .

Stay the course . . . may we be a flock of believers willing to avoid the advertisements for all the shortcuts, but be willing to travel the long way home.

And may God also give us shepherds who know how to read the map and are willing to teach it correctly . . . Titus, go find men who will be willing to wear the mantle of a true teacher . . . a true shepherd.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 3/25/2012 by Stephen Davey.

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ii Ibid

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vi Adapted from Swindoll, p. 283

vii Michael Horton, Christless Christianity (Baker Books, 2008), p. 144

viii Ibid, p. 101

ix Ibid, p. 102

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xi Ibid, p. 102

xii Jennifer Riley, "*Analysis: Why Muslims Follow Jesus*" *The Christian Post* (11-16-2007)

xiii John Phillips, Exploring The Pastoral Epistles (Kregel, 2004), p. 249

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xvi Adapted from Kitchen, p. 503

xvii "*Rescuers Laud Dad as Hero*" *USA Today* (12-8-06)