

## PROMOTING BIBLICAL DISCERNMENT IN AFRICAN CHURCHES

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### 1) Introduction

### 2) A timeless, universal challenge

- Definitions
  - Heresy: “Doctrine that is erroneous in such a way that Christians must divide themselves as a church from all who teach or accept it...” (Bowman)
  - Discernment: “To identify the true nature of a spirit, doctrine, practice, or group; to distinguish truth from error, extreme error from slight error, the divine from the human and the demonic.” (Bowman) • “...the skill of understanding and applying God’s Word with the purpose of separating truth from error and right from wrong.” (Challies)
- Warnings and responsibility
  - Almost every book NT addresses the serious danger of heresy and deceivers, yet the local church largely avoids *proactively, constructively* responding to the threat
- Present-day sources of error, confusion, and harm *include...*
  - Many false teachers—in your town or village, on radio, on television, on social media (influencing through teaching and even music)
  - Many false churches and cults (some with skillfully trained missionaries; many with books and pamphlets in English and local languages)
  - Many false and unbalanced “fellowships”—e.g.,
    - “Christian unions” on campus, lunch-hour gatherings, mid-week rallies
    - *...unwittingly smuggling false doctrine back into their home church on Sunday*
- The high cost of neglect *includes...*
  - Divided churches
  - Financial and sexual exploitation
  - Broken marriages and families
  - Disillusioned and debilitated Christians
  - Damaged witness to those outside the church; inoculation against the true Gospel

### 3) What the church must do

- Recognize that discernment is a necessary fruit of discipleship (Heb. 5:14, Eph. 4:14)
- Equip pastors and lay leaders to train others in apologetics and biblical discernment
  - Discipling *all ages*—especially youth, who hunger for such teaching—in discernment (knowing Scripture, knowing essential doctrine)
  - Discipling both older and younger women, who are especially vulnerable
  - Teaching on discernment from Scripture both topically and expositively, e.g.
    - How to spot cultic groups and leaders by their beliefs, motives, and methods
    - Ways to biblically test a so-called prophet or apostle (cf. 1 Thess. 5:19–22)
    - Common errors in false groups they’ll most often encounter—e.g., “Nine Enemies of Truth” (Bowman)

- Address misguided resistance to biblical discernment
  - By denominational leaders, pastors
    - Fears of encouraging fruitless controversy, division
    - Fears of encouraging laity to search the Scriptures, ask questions
  - By lay believers
    - Not knowing why discernment is a priority (and a responsibility)
    - Not knowing why defending the faith is a priority (and a responsibility)
    - Not knowing how they are personally in danger from false teachers/teachings
    - Misunderstanding and misapplying biblical warnings and commands—e.g.,
      - not to “judge” (Mt. 7:1–5) or “cast the first stone” (John 8:7)
      - not to “touch the Lord’s anointed” (Ps. 105:13–15)
      - not to be taken captive “through philosophy” (Col. 2:8)
      - not to “wrangle about words” (2 Tim. 2:14)
      - not to “gossip” (Prov. 20:19)
    - Not comprehending what is happening around them
      - friends and family being exploited by false teachers
      - denial—thinking that only “other people” are weak, easily deceived
    - Saying it’s too difficult (*I’m not a student*) or “not my place” (*I’m not a pastor*)
- Emphasize the ways that equipping for discernment benefits *every* believer—e.g.,
  - Christian doctrine is relevant, practical, unifying, spiritual, and knowable (Bowman)
  - Knowing *what* you believe and *why* gives confidence in evangelism
  - Knowing *what* you believe and *why* gives strength and comfort in trials
  - Knowing what Scripture says about error prevents harm *and* inspires compassion for those who are deceived
- Employ simple, memorable approaches to teaching—e.g.,
  - Use Scripture—how to read, interpret, and apply in its proper context
    - Key apologetics-themed passages from the gospels, Acts, epistles
    - Explain and answer popular examples of “Scripture-twisting” (2 Pet. 3:16)
  - Use creeds, confessions—e.g., Apostles’ Creed, 39 Articles, New City Catechism
  - Use analogies—e.g., Covid-19 (how to avoid “contagious” error); testing actual fruit
  - Use numbers, alliteration—e.g., “DDD syndrome” (deception, dependence, dread)
- Use lay-friendly resources from African speakers, authors, and organizations—e.g.,
  - Conrad Mbewe, Henk Stoker
  - ACFAR, Ratio Christi, Antwoord, AB316, Gospel Coalition Africa

#### 4 ) Conclusion

“...conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or remain absent, I will hear of you that you are **standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel**; [and] **in no way alarmed by your opponents...**” (Phil. 1:27–28)