

the Spiritual
Discernment
Guide

the Spiritual Discernment Guide

How to Detect and Correct False Teachings,
Scripture Twisting, and New Age Counterfeits

Ronald T. Tyler, Ph.D.



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Dedication

To my wife, Virginia, for her steadfast love, incredible patience, continuous support, wise counsel, and amazing postponement of an enormous honey-do list.

Table of Contents

Preface	17
Acknowledgments	23
Scripture References	25
Author’s Note	27
INTRODUCTION: THE THREAT OF SPIRITUAL	
DECEPTION	29
A Tragic Delusion.....	29
The Root of Spiritual Deception—The Serpent’s Lie	33
A Lack of Spiritual Fulfillment	35
Deception Among the Devout	38
A Real and Present Danger.....	56
 PART I: “You Will Be Like God”—The Seeds of Apostasy.....	
63	
 CHAPTER ONE - SEED ONE: THE TEMPTATION OF POWER	
69	

The Star Wars Pattern	71
Magical Use of Prayer	73
Astrology in the Church	76
The Star Trek Pattern	81
Reconstructionism/Dominion Theology	83
CHAPTER TWO - SEED TWO: THE	
TEMPTATION OF WEALTH	93
The Positive Confession Movement (PCM)	94
CHAPTER THREE - SEED THREE: THE	
TEMPTATION OF STATUS	99
Experiential Religion	100
Extra-biblical Revelation	101
Denominationalism	102
Legalism and Asceticism	103
Racism	105
CHAPTER FOUR - SEED FOUR: THE	
TEMPTATION OF HAPPINESS	109
Sensation	112
Ease	113
Rejection of Suffering	113
Adherence to Tradition	116
Spiritual Apathy	120
Peace	121
Unity Among People	121
Ecumenicalism	123
Environmentalism	125
CHAPTER FIVE - SEED FIVE: THE	
TEMPTATION OF HEALTH	
(HOLISTIC MEDICINE)	129
Treatment of Physical Conditions	133
Traditional Chinese Medicine	133
Hatha Yoga	134
Naturopathy	136

Herbal Medicine	136
Treatment of Mental and Emotional	
Conditions	137
Hypnosis	137
Biofeedback	138
Subliminal Programming.....	139
Meditation	140
Treatment of Spiritual and Psychic	
Conditions	141
Guided Imagery (Creative Visualization) ...	141
Shamanistic Medicine	142
Medical Channeling	144
Dream Work	144
Other Treatments Involving Occultism	145
Personal Transcendence (Summary of Part I)....	146

Part II: Preparation and Defense Against Spiritual Deception and Apostasy..... 149

CHAPTER SIX - GOD'S PLAN	151
Training in Godliness.....	152
Wise and Foolish Christians.....	154
The Model of the Early Church.....	158
Becoming Spiritually Mature	160
Spiritual Armor	161
Training in Discernment	166
Alertness	166
Watchfulness	167
Scrutiny	167
The Criteria of Discernment	171
Truth	172
Logic	172
Steps in Discerning Deception.....	173
Basic Discernment Skills	173

CHAPTER SEVEN - SATAN'S STRATEGIES AND TRICKS	175
Counterfeiting.....	179
Lies	179
Logical Fallacies.....	187
Perverting.....	195
Stereotyping.....	195
Semantic Manipulation.....	198

Part III: Discerning Deception in the Church—The New Age Invasion..... 221

CHAPTER EIGHT - THE NEW AGE, ANTI-CHRISTIAN CONSPIRACY.....	223
Evolutionary Basis of the New Age Movement.....	228
The Lie of Personal Transcendence	232
New Age Goals.....	236
The Anti-Christian Plan	236
Counterfeit Christianity	247
Establishing a New World Order.....	252

CHAPTER NINE - EVOLUTION: THE MASTER NEW AGE DELUSION—HOW IT UNDERMINES THE CHRISTIAN FAITH	259
Evolution in the Church (Theistic Evolution) ..	261
Science Versus Scripture	262
The Emperor Has No Clothes	267
Neo-orthodoxy: Humanistic, Evolutionary Chris- tianity	268
Exchanging the Truth of Scripture for a Lie	272
Evolution Versus Creationism	273

The Essence of Evolution	273
The Essence of Creationism	273
How Evolution Contradicts the Bible	274
Biblical Chronology	275
The Biblical Account of the Flood.....	277
Biblical Statements About How God Created Everything.....	280
The Character of God.....	283

CHAPTER TEN - EVOLUTION AND

SATAN'S TRICKS (LIES, LOGICAL FALLACIES, AND SEMANTIC MANIPULATION)	287
Redefining Creation as Evolution	288
Reinterpreting Biblical Chronology	289
Uniformitarianism	289
The Day-Age Theory	290
The Gap Theory.....	293
The Genealogical Gaps Theory	298
The Local Flood Theory	300
The Big Bang Theory	301
Young Age Evidence	327
The Allegorical Interpretation of Genesis....	332
A Satanic Delusion.....	333

Part IV: The Many Faces of New Age

Deception—Discerning Other False Teachings and Beliefs	337
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CHAPTER ELEVEN - FALSE TEACHINGS

FROM SECULAR PSYCHOLOGY	339
Separating the Baby From the Bathwater.....	339
Self-esteem: The Focus on Self.....	343
Human Potential: The Journey Within.....	346

“The Innate Goodness of Man”	348
Loving and Improving the Old Man.....	349
Inner Healing: Is It Real or Needed?.....	351
CHAPTER TWELVE - FALSE CHARISMATIC TEACHINGS	357
Spiritual Polarization: Charismaniacs vs. Evangelical Umbilicals	358
“We Are Gods”	361
The Prosperity Gospel	365
Twisting Scriptures to Squeeze Out the Gold.....	366
The Magic of Giving to Get	378
The New Idolatry.....	384
The Magic of Tithing	385
A Harvest of Wealth.....	388
Our Materialistic “Inheritance”	389
A Magical Prayer for “Extravagant Blessings”: The Jabez Teaching.....	391
Spiritual Treasures	400
Experiential Truth.....	402
Satan Versus the Holy Spirit	404
CHAPTER THIRTEEN - FALSE ANTI-CHARISMATIC TEACHINGS	407
“Gifts Not for Today” (Cessationism).....	408
“Gifts of the Devil”	
(Demonic Supernaturalism)	416
“Scripture as the Only Source”	
(Scriptural Legalism)	418
“Unreality of the Supernatural”	
(Ignoring the Evidence)	420

CHAPTER FOURTEEN - FALSE TEACHINGS FROM HUMANISM.....	425
Tolerance: Letting in the World	426
The Legacy of Laodicea: Materialism and Accommodationism	426
The Gospel of Success	431
Easy Grace	434
Unity: Compromising the Truth	440
“No Negative Teaching”	441
Ecumenicalism and Postmodernism: “All Religious Views Are Equal”	444
A Diminished Christ: “Jesus Was Just a Man”	453
CHAPTER FIFTEEN - INFILTRATION BY EASTERN RELIGIONS	459
Yoga: The Yoke of Deception	460
The Goal of Yoga.....	461
Hatha Yoga: Preparation for “Transformation”	463
Tai Chi: Internal Alchemy.....	465
Preparation for “Enlightenment”	468
Martial Arts: Development of the Life Force	469
Ki: The Counterfeit Key	470
CHAPTER SIXTEEN - INFILTRATION BY OCCULTISM—SATANISM IN THE CHURCH	475
The Strategy of Destruction	478
Occult Doorways	480
Rock Music	481
Magical Objects	484
Wrong Meditation.....	485
False Teachings About Satan.....	486
“No Demons”	487
“No Spiritual Warfare”	487
“No Speaking of Satan”	489

Combating Satanism in the Church.....	490
Controlling Your Mind	490
Controlling Satanists	491

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN - INFILTRATION BY
 OCCULTISM—ALTERED STATES OF
 CONSCIOUSNESS IN THE CHURCH

(<i>THE CELEBRATION OF DISCIPLINE</i>)	493
Meditation: Do-It-Yourself Mysticism.....	494
Prayer: Tuning In to God	500
Worship: The Exaltation of Self.....	505

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN - INFILTRATION BY
 OCCULTISM—NEW AGE GNOSTICISM
 IN THE CHURCH

(<i>THE CELESTINE PROPHECY</i>)	511
The New Gnosticism	513
Theistic Evolution Plus Reincarnation: The New Occult World View	516
Energy Transformation: The Fuel of Evolution	520
Counterfeit Christianity: The Relativity of Truth.....	523
Ecumenicalism: All Religions Are Equal (Except Christianity and Judaism).....	524
Diminishing Christianity: “It’s Not What You Think It Is”	527
Jesus, “the Yogi”	528
The Bible: “Myth, Metaphor, and Misinformation”	528
The Church: “The Enemy of Truth”	529
“Satan Is Only a Figure of Speech”	538

CHAPTER NINETEEN – CONCLUSION (SOME FINAL RECOMMENDATIONS AND REMINDERS)	543
Appendices	555
APPENDIX A - CHECKLIST OF LOGICAL FALLACIES AND SEMANTIC MANIPULATIONS	557
APPENDIX B - DISCERNMENT QUESTIONS.....	559
Basic List	559
Basic Categories (With Related Considerations).....	560
APPENDIX C - EVOLUTION VERSUS CREATION—WHICH MODEL FITS THE FACTS?	563
Predictions of the Two Models.....	563
Discerning the Lie of Evolution (Scientific Reasons That Evolution Is False)	571
The First and Second Laws of Thermodynamics	572
Geological Dating	573
Statistical Impossibility and Intelligent Design (Irreducible Complexity)	578
Occam’s Razor	587
Other Scientific Reasons That Evolution Is Not True	588
Suggested Reading List	589
Notes	591
Index	617

Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God really say, ‘You must not eat from any tree in the Garden?’”

The woman said to the serpent, “We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, but God did say, ‘You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.’”

“You will not surely die,” the serpent said to the woman. “For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil” (Genesis 3:1–5).

Preface

For ten years (1963 to 1973), I was a member of a cult called the Gurdjieff Foundation. They taught and practiced a mixture of Hinduism, Buddhism, Sufism, Theosophy, Gnosticism, and what they called “esoteric Christianity.” Prior to that, I had been involved in transcendentalism, Christian Science, Rosicrucianism, astrology, numerology, the use of a Ouija board, and a variety of New Age-type activities—before anybody had even heard of the New Age Movement. I had out-of-body experiences, “past life” visions, “cosmic” vibrations, and moments of extra-sensory perception—all of which were spiritual dead-ends.

I even tried “Christianity”—a deeply disappointing experience in a very liberal, humanistic church which spent more time talking about current trends in psychology and the poetry of T.S. Eliot than about

the Bible. When I asked about spiritual matters, such as how Jesus' death on the cross could pay for my sins, they looked at me as though I were weird. So I gave up on "Christianity" because it obviously (it seemed) didn't have what I was looking for.

When I finally did come to the Lord, through a series of miraculous interventions, it was at the height of the "Charismatic Renewal," in which I was given direct experience of the power of the Holy Spirit (something I had never heard of before). And my life and my self were radically changed for the better.

Shortly thereafter and totally unexpectedly, I got a teaching job at a Bible college which was in reality a "Christian" cult. It was founded by a woman who controlled everything and everyone in her church/college and who was worshipped more than Jesus by her followers.

Later, I attended a charismatic church with many cult-like characteristics, such as a leader who was accountable to nobody, had a direct pipeline to God, considered himself an "apostle" and "the anointed of the Lord," and demanded absolute loyalty from his "followers." I also attended a fellowship which was part of the Word of Faith Movement, also known as the Name-It-and-Claim-It or Positive Confession school. They believed that no Christian should ever suffer or have adversity and, if you did, it was because your faith was not strong enough, there was sin in your life, or your "confession" was wrong.

I am now a member of a solid, biblically based evangelical church which is steadily and responsibly seeking the power and guidance of the Holy Spirit.

In the following chapters, I will go into more detail about many of these things as they pertain to spiritual deception and discernment.

Why did God allow me to experience all these ungodly things—eastern religions, false doctrines, cults, occultism, New Age philosophy, etc.? For two reasons, I believe: (1) I was searching on my own, according to my self-will, for meaning and purpose and I needed to come to the end of myself and my own ideas about truth, and (2) God, for reasons I do not understand, wanted to use me to help warn His church about the dangers of demonic deception and Satan's strategies for luring Christians away from their faith and into apostasy. In other words, all this spiritual wandering along wrong paths was for a purpose. God used these experiences with the deceitful ways of Satan to prepare me so I could tell the body of Christ about the reality of such things and what to do about them.

In addition, I believe God has enabled me to acquire specialized knowledge and skills for this task—gained during my career as a teacher of English literature, language, and composition. I believe this background has enabled me to recognize and point out Satan's deceptive use of language—especially in the areas of semantics and logical reasoning. These are, I believe, the primary weapons in his campaign to confuse, divide, and lead astray the church.

He also prepared me to help counteract a growing divisiveness within the church. By polarizing Christians over “charismatic Christianity,” Satan is, I believe, successfully splitting large segments of the church between charismatics and non-charismatics. By deceiving many non-charismatic evangelicals into rejecting—as of the devil—everything associated with the charismatic movement (such as the supernatural gifts of the Spirit), Satan is robbing the church of much of its potential power at the very time when it needs it most. In other words, he is causing them *to throw out the baby with the bathwater*, not discerning the difference between genuine manifestations of Holy Spirit power and counterfeit ones. And, by convincing a large number of charismatic Christians to accept any kind of bizarre, self-indulgent, and unscriptural manifestation of the “Spirit” as from God, Satan is effectively injecting his own perverted brand of supernaturalism and spiritual deception into the church. In other words, he is causing them *to swallow everything whole*, without discerning what is truly of God and what is not.

This book, then, is the result of a lifetime of preparation, mostly without my being aware of it. Its basic thesis is that most Christians (both those who are new and those who are more mature in the faith) are largely naive and uninformed regarding how Satan operates in his campaign to draw them away from God, the Bible, and true faith; that they need discernment to be able to recognize how Satan is infiltrating the church for these purposes; and

that they need to know how to defend themselves against such deception.

But most importantly, they need to know the fullness we have in Christ, that we don't need any of the "helps" Satan offers in such appealing and seemingly innocent forms—such as "angelic" guides, self-enhancing meditation and psychological teachings, "creative" visualization, "new" extra-biblical revelation, and special mental techniques for developing spiritual power. In essence, what the church needs to know—and practice—is that the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit, and the Bible are truly sufficient for all our spiritual needs.

The ideas and conclusions presented in the following pages are based not only on my personal experience but also on many years of Bible study, research, and prayer. A number of them are controversial. I know there will be those who disagree with at least some of what I have written. (My wife tells me that I have included so many red flags that there is bound to be something to offend everybody!) All I ask is that you consider what is said and take it for what it is worth (or, as my friend Walt would say, read it the way you eat fried chicken: chew the meat and spit out the bones). The Lord didn't say we had to agree on everything. But He did say we *must* love one another—unconditionally. I have written this book because I love you—as my fellow Christian and member of the body of Christ—because I want what is best for you, and because I believe the Lord has directed me to do so.

For reasons only He understands, I believe God has brought me to the place where I can, in some measure, help the church understand and apply the principles of spiritual discernment. That is the purpose of this book, and it is my prayer for all who read it.

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Scripture References

Scriptural quotations are from the New International Version (NIV) unless otherwise noted. KJV indicates the King James Version.

Author's Note

In this book, many specific examples of false teachings are given to illustrate Satan's strategies and techniques of deception. This has been done partly as a warning to help Christians avoid the harmful influence of such teachings. Therefore, many of the particular teachers involved have been identified by name. However, this does not mean that the entire ministries of these teachers are being condemned or considered invalid. I believe all of them have beneficial aspects which are scripturally sound. Their redeeming qualities and spiritual fruitfulness should not be overlooked. People are helped through all of them and saved, healed, delivered, and/or disciplined through many of them. Thus, although the focus of this book is on false teachings and their dangers, the baby should not be thrown out with the bathwater.

Also, in this book, I have given many examples from my own personal knowledge of spiritual deception and faulty discernment. I have done this, not to set myself up as a judge over others. (Indeed, many of the examples involve my own undiscerning vulnerability.) But I have included them because the Lord has enabled me, I believe, to observe and identify them in order to show very clearly how *real* people—like you and me—can be deluded by *real* demonic deception.

The Threat of Spiritual Deception

A TRAGIC DELUSION

There was an eerie quietness in the isolated compound. Even the jungle birds and other tree dwellers were subdued. By all appearances, it was a typical October day in equatorial South America—hot, humid, listless.

Nearly a thousand searching, deluded souls had gathered, crowding the vegetable gardens and central pavilion. All felt a nervous excitement—and kept a taut control. Mothers, fathers, children, grandparents, and single adults stood obediently in line—as they had been trained to do. Each was given a styrofoam cup half-filled with strawberry Kool-Aid and laced with cyanide.

On this bright, sunny afternoon in 1978, surrounded by lush tropical beauty, nine hundred

and fourteen “Christian” followers of Jim Jones committed suicide in Guyana. According to Walter Martin, who is perhaps the foremost authority on cults and spiritual deception in our time, the Jonestown massacre was a “tragedy of cultic deception and murder . . . traced unerringly to the New Age doctrines of man’s divinity and the relativistic world view of the New Age Cult.”¹

How could, Jones, at one time an apparently dedicated, fundamentally sound minister of the gospel in the Methodist church and later in the Disciples of Christ denomination, have become so confused and deviant in his doctrine and practice? To understand how this could have happened, we need to go back to the early influence of a man whom Jones admired and imitated: George Baker, more commonly known as Father Divine.

Baker, the son of a former slave, declared himself to be God and “believed quite literally in 1 Corinthians 3:16, which refers to believers as the ‘temple of God’; so he reasoned that since God dwelt in him, he *was* God and entitled to divine authority. Baker became known as ‘the messenger,’ bearing the exalted title ‘God and the Sonship Degree.’”²

Baker’s reasoning illustrates the kind of faulty logic and semantic leaps involved in the misuse of scripture that characterize the thinking of people who are deluded by deceiving spirits. In this case, Baker failed to make a distinction between being *in-dwelt* by God and *being* God. In terms of formal logic, this is a non sequitur, a phrase meaning “it does not

follow because there is no logical connection.” Here, it is equating two completely different things simply because they happen to share a common element, the word “God.” It is the logical equivalent of saying: This glass is *filled with* water; therefore, this glass *is* water. In semantic terms, this is also an example of redefinition (“indwelt” = “being”).

Baker also believed that he was the reincarnation of Jesus Christ, “the Holy Ghost personified,” and God the Father, all rolled into one. His mission, he said, was to free people from the effects of racial prejudice and from “living in poverty, debauchery, lacks, wants and limitations.”³

Baker pursued these goals with notable success in his “Peace Mission Movement,” which Jones greatly admired, with good reason, because of its positive humanitarian effects. At the same time, unfortunately, Baker set forth this unbiblical and obviously demonically inspired goal: to “lift humanity from all superstition and cause them to forget all about the imaginary God I am now eradicating and dispelling from the consciousness of the people.” The “imaginary God” he was referring to was the one, true God of the Bible.⁴

In these statements, Baker not only espouses the unscriptural doctrine of reincarnation but also directly attacks the God of the Bible and sets himself up as God, committing the ultimate sin of pride—to attempt to “be like God,” which caused Satan to be expelled from heaven and Adam and Eve to fall from innocence in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3:5).

The sources of Baker's teachings were found in the Unity School of Christianity, a pre-New Age mind-sciences cult which "was heavily influenced by Hinduism and Theosophy [a mystical religious/philosophical system combining elements from spiritism and eastern religions], teaching the New Age concept that man is essentially deity and needs only to recognize that fact in order to be freed from the limitations of this existence. 'Father Divine' believed and taught the same thing, combining this with a genuine effort to feed, clothe, and shelter people during the Great Depression of the 1930s."⁵

Jones was not only greatly influenced by Baker's ideas and example, but he was also strongly attracted by the communal lifestyle of the movement, taking bus loads of his people to observe it in action.⁶

Thereafter, Jones copied the methods he had observed:

Eyewitness accounts tell of how Jones would begin by quoting from the Bible in his hand. Later, as he shifted emphasis from the Bible to himself as the messenger of God, he would throw the Bible on the ground and kick it because he considered his authority as the representative of deity to be superior to the written Word of God. . . . Jones would use pseudo-Pentecostal fervor, expressions, and illustrations to inflame his audience until . . . he became God's substitute to them.⁷

Jones, like Baker, then, under the influence of false doctrines and satanic deception, set himself up

as an authority higher than the Word of God and, in his delusion of godhood, led his equally deluded followers into mass suicide.

THE ROOT OF SPIRITUAL DECEPTION—THE SERPENT’S LIE

This desire to be like God (or to be one’s own god) was the original sin of Satan and of Adam and Eve. When Satan led the rebellion against God in heaven, he said, “I will make myself like the Most High” (Isaiah 14:14). And when he tempted Eve, he said, “. . . you will be like God” (Genesis:3:5). This same sin of spiritual pride—to exalt oneself to the level of deity—is at the root of all spiritual deception and rebellion against God.

Jones was not an isolated case—although he was a highly visible and dramatic one. Much less obviously, this same deception is present in the church today, taking on a wide variety of subtle forms, but in essence boiling down to “doing your own thing” spiritually. In every case, these are self-directed activities which are contrary to God’s Word and are, in fact, substitutes for reliance on God as the all-sufficient, almighty provider who meets our needs, answers our questions, and enables us to solve our problems.

David Wilkerson explains how materialism has become such a substitute for many Christians:

. . . that is the sin of covetousness. It is a damning sin. A love for the things of this world and

lust for more and better material possessions has enslaved the hearts of many Christians. People can't seem to get enough and their debt is piling up. They think our nation's prosperity will never end. Americans have gone mad with acquisitiveness.⁸

He cites examples of churches which have blatantly “compromised the true gospel of Christ” by doing their own thing: “Divorce is rampant in their congregations. And many of their young singles lead permissive, sexually active lives.”⁹

I can personally attest to the truth of this in my own church and even my own family—as you probably can, as well.

A less obvious example of the church doing its own thing can be found in the church growth movement. “I'm amazed and perplexed,” says Wilkerson,

by the scores of ministers, both young and old, who run all over the world looking for strategies to produce growth in their churches. Today, many preachers attend seminars, conventions and “think tanks,” where young ministry professionals use charts and polls to show them how to build larger churches. Other ministers flock to “revivals,” hoping to learn new methods of how to have the Holy Ghost fall on their congregations.¹⁰

However, what is needed are churches with “a testimony of intimacy with Christ and a holy walk.” In one such church where the focus is on actually

living the gospel, “the Spirit of God is moving mightily . . . People are flocking to the Lord, getting their lives straightened—because they’re hearing a gospel with a testimony behind it!”¹⁰

A LACK OF SPIRITUAL FULFILLMENT

All such cases of running after substitutes for God, His power, and His Word are happening partly because the church is failing to provide the spiritual fulfillment that people need. As Dave Hunt and T. A. McMahan, two other well-known defenders of the faith, put it,

The question is why it should be necessary to develop and pursue techniques for making Christianity “work” that were unknown to earlier generations of victorious Christians and are not found in the Bible. It is obvious that there would be no takers for these methods unless multitudes of Christians were failing to find the joy and fulfillment they seek. This can only mean that Christianity is deficient and needs outside help, or else that biblical Christianity is not being taught and lived in many of our churches.¹¹

Because of this failure to provide seekers with the reality of a loving, holy God and His power to change their lives for the better, many novice Christians and would-be Christians are turning to New Age philosophy because it presents a convincing illusion of providing what they are looking for. In many cases, their withdrawal from the church has

resulted from guilt trips laid on them by misguided ministers preaching a gospel which lacks forgiveness and genuine caring.

Where such an extremely negative spirit has not driven them away, others in the church are finding an absence of positive change in their lives that leaves them feeling they are without control, empowerment, success, prosperity, happiness, or satisfaction—all of which the New Age Movement purports to supply.

Often there is also an undefined sense that meaningful spirituality is lacking—that they don't really know God, are not getting fed on the Word of God, and are therefore being spiritually starved. This was my experience, when, as a young seeker, I tried "Christianity," and I, like many today, was forced to turn elsewhere to try to find what I was seeking—since obviously (it seemed) it could not be found in the church.

The growing popularity of a New Age teaching based on the book, *A Course in Miracles*, is a case in point. In the 1970s, this book came into the world through a channeller (i.e., medium) named Helen Schucman, who claimed Jesus was the spirit entity who dictated it to her.

This course is described by one of its teachers, a young man raised in the Catholic church but driven away by the guilt placed on him by the nuns who were his teachers:

The Course in Miracles is about the experience of love. We are here to tell you how to be free of guilt and practice forgiveness. . . . That Adam and Eve ate of the tree of guilt is insane. The God of the Old Testament is completely insane. Guilt is bred into us, but the Course in Miracles is a radically new thought system that says everything we have been taught was wrong. . . . God didn't make the world, and God didn't make your body, but He can use your body. We are a part of the world we made, and we can change that world . . . In the new priesthood, we are all ministers. Coffee shops are the new confessionals . . . we're all forgiving each other . . . The purpose of the Course in Miracles . . . is to know that it is God's will to make you happy.¹²

Almost all the people who attend the Course in Miracles belonged to a church at one time, but they became sick of the guilt trip or lack of caring.¹³ David Jeremiah sums up the situation well:

As secularism invades our churches, the sovereign God of the Bible has been dethroned and replaced by self-directed religion, do-it-yourself rituals, and morality based on feelings. The people attending A Course in Miracles are like many who are spiritually hungry and seeking to find the power that only Jesus can [supply] . . . when He said, 'I have come that they may have life and that they may have it more abundantly' (John 10:10).¹⁴

DECEPTION AMONG THE DEVOUT

Such deception and drift into false doctrine is not limited to extreme cases like that of Jim Jones, who established his own cultic version of Christianity, or like those who study *A Course in Miracles* and have renounced the church entirely. Those who are more mature in the faith may imagine they are immune, but no one is “bulletproof” when it comes to deception. In fact, there are many supposedly devout, solid Christians who have unknowingly bought into various forms of occultism, demonic deception, and eastern religion, including unscriptural visions of and communications with “angels” (i.e., demons), shamanistic visualization, animism, pantheism, and reincarnation.

Here are some examples I have personally encountered. (These and other persons from my personal experience are real, but their names are fictitious.)

- A local pastor, Rev. Smith, was excited by his participation in the so-called “Toronto Blessing,” which took place at the Vineyard Fellowship of Toronto, Canada, from 1994 to 1996. In these meetings, supposed manifestations of the Holy Spirit produced extremely bizarre behavior and dramatic “spiritual” experiences among those attending its “charismatic” services. Rev. Smith shared some of these phenomena with our prayer group. He said he and others saw angels of light flying

about above the heads of the worshippers, pouring out the Holy Spirit in sparkling streams from large golden jars. When this “spirit” substance fell upon the people, they burst forth in “holy laughter,” various animal sounds (barking, roaring, crowing, etc.), and grotesque physical movements (writhing, jerking, rolling, bowing, etc.).

This would certainly have been an impressive sight, but, unfortunately, his interpretation of it was totally unscriptural.

First, the Holy Spirit is not some kind of liquid that can be divided up in jars and poured out on people. He is a person. In fact, He is God—one of three members of the Trinity. Second, the Holy Spirit is not something angels carry around and dispense to believers as they see fit. This is getting it backwards. The Holy Spirit is God, and God is not used by angels. Angels are used by God!

Third, the purpose of the manifestations of the Holy Spirit is not to cause people to behave in bizarre ways—no matter how “ecstatic” the accompanying sensations may be. Rather, it is to strengthen, encourage, comfort, and edify the members of the body of Christ—the church—for their common good. (See 1 Corinthians 12:7; 14:3–4, 36.) So, if this is not what angels do, then who were these shining beings who were apparently using the “Holy Spirit” in this exciting

way? Obviously, they were masquerading demons intent on deceiving those in the “Toronto Blessing,” not only about their supposed identity as angels but also about the nature and purpose of the Holy Spirit. And what was this sparkling liquid they were using to counterfeit the Holy Spirit? Perhaps it was a mass hallucination, but, obviously, it was a demonic deception designed to confuse the recipients about the character of the Holy Spirit. Rather than a divine person who guides, empowers, and ministers to help the body of Christ, He was depicted as a kind of energy or “force” that can be accessed indiscriminately for the personal gratification of the user.

- Rev. Smith, at the same prayer meeting, also introduced us to a technique for obtaining, as he put it, “more of the Father’s love.” He said this is what they had been seeking and learning how to do in the meetings in Toronto. He asked us if we would like to receive more of the Father’s love. Of course, we said yes. So he proceeded to teach us the technique. It consisted of visualizing God as a father-figure and oneself as a child sitting on His lap, encircled by His arms, and experiencing the love coming from Him. Each of us had a different image of this father. Mine was like an elderly Charlton Heston; another was

more like Santa Claus; a third like a favorite grandfather, and so on. Obviously, none of them was in reality a true likeness of our heavenly Father.

It was a pleasant, comforting experience. But, again, as I realized later when I had time to think about it, it was a totally unreal, unscriptural, and, ultimately, demonic activity.

First, God is not a human being whose image we can conjure up in our minds. He is a Spirit (John 4:24) whom no one can see:

No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us (1 John 4:12).

Second, as this verse indicates, we do not receive God's love by means of a visualization exercise. Rather, it exists in us as a result of our loving one another. And we do not receive more of His love by mentally climbing into His lap. Rather, again, it grows to completion as we love one another.

Third, we cannot manipulate God by exercising the power of our minds. He is not a force or an entity that we can control in this or any other way. He is sovereign, and we are at His mercy, not vice versa. We are His creations—His creatures—totally dependent on Him for our very being:

. . . the Lord God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being (Genesis 2:7).

Like the potter who holds the clay in his hand (Jeremiah 18:6), God can manipulate us. Not vice versa! He can make of us whatever He wants and use us for whatever purposes He desires. And, although we can exercise our free will and refuse to cooperate in His plan, we cannot change that plan or remake ourselves:

But who are you, O man, to talk back to God? “Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, ‘Why did you make me like this?’” Does not the potter have the right to make out of the lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use? (Romans 9:20–21; see also Isaiah 45:9).

How arrogant—what spiritual pride and presumption of god-like power—to imagine that we can get from God what we desire by manipulating an image of Him that we have manufactured in our minds—as though the clay could control the potter! No, it is God who is sovereign over us, not vice versa! Fourth, the kind of visualization that we were being taught by this Christian minister is an occult technique commonly practiced

by witches, witch doctors, sorcerers (or shamans), and others involved in the occult. In fact, a basic definition of sorcery is the manipulation of reality through the power of the mind, especially by means of visualization. (I knew this but was seduced by his apparent sincerity, good intentions, and gentle, benign manner, as well as by the prospect of my own spiritual benefit.)

As Hunt and McMahon (hereafter referred to as Hunt) put it, “the whole idea of visualizing a vivid image in the mind in order to produce an effect in the physical world is not just missing from the Bible but is present in all occult literature as far back as we can go (and is in fact one of the most basic shamanistic devices).”¹⁵ Visualization, then, is a basic technique of sorcery, and sorcery is explicitly condemned in the Bible, along with other occult practices:

Let no one be found among you who sacrifices his son or daughter in the fire, who practices divination *or sorcery*, interprets omens, engages in witchcraft, or casts spells, or who is a medium or spiritist or who consults the dead. Any one who does these things is detestable to the Lord . . . (Deuteronomy 18:10–12, emphasis added).

Finally, visualizing God as a father-figure is a form of idolatry because it is creating an image of God that takes the place of the true God and thus serves as a substitute for Him. Not only is this idolatry, but it is *self*-idolatry—that is, a form of self-deification, because it is placing trust in the power of one’s own imagination rather than in God. Scripture, of course, is very clear about the importance of avoiding idolatry. In fact, God considers it so important that He made it the subject of the first two of His Ten Commandments: (1) “You shall have no other gods before me.” And (2) “You shall not make yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them . . .” (Exodus 20:3–5). (See also Leviticus 26:1; Isaiah 44:9–20; and 1 Corinthians 10:14.)

Committing idolatry through visualization is a more widespread and critical issue in the church than you might think. In fact, I have reason to believe from my personal experience that many Christians routinely visualize God or Jesus when they pray. They claim that this is necessary as an “aid to more effective prayer.” For example, when I taught an adult Sunday school lesson on this subject, several members of the class raised objections about what I was saying, and one woman stopped

me afterwards and complained that such visualization was essential to her prayer life. Without it, she said, she was unable to focus on praying and keep her mind from wandering. She added that she knew a number of other Christians who felt the same way. This is not to say that all visualization is wrong. There are many legitimate uses of visualization, but the magical manipulation of God is certainly not one of them. (This issue is discussed more fully at various points in the following pages. See especially chapter seventeen.) It may be that there is a scripturally acceptable form of mental imagery by which we can represent God to ourselves. But, as Selwyn Hughes shows, the practice of idolatry through visualization is one of the most crucial issues of Christian living:

[We must see] God as He is, not as we would like Him to be. Unless we have an understanding of God as He is, not as we wish Him to be, then our lives will lack spiritual force and power. This is because our lives will never rise higher spiritually than our vision of God. Among the sins which are hateful to God is the sin of idolatry, for idolatry, at its heart, is libel on His character. Yet consider how many of us in the church may be committing the sin of idolatry without realizing it. The idolatrous heart assumes that God is other than he is, and substitutes for

the true God one made after its own imagining. But a god who is created out of the darkness of our hearts is not the true God. The greatest affront we can give the Almighty is to view Him other than He really is.

God has gone to great lengths in the Scriptures to give us a clear picture of Himself, but when we continue to hold wrong ideas of Him, preferring to see Him the way we think He should be rather than the way He is, we demean Him. If we try to worship the god of our own imagining, we then commit idolatry, for we are worshipping our idea of Him drawn from the darkness of our minds. . . . if, in the secret chamber of our soul, we have an image of God which differs from the one we profess with our lips, then it is that core image which will have the greatest influence on our lives.¹⁶

Let me give you a few more examples from my personal experience of deceptions among Christians which contain the seeds of apostasy.

- For several months, I disciplined a young man, Bill. He had a background in the occult with several points in common with my own. Because of some type of “mystical” experience he had had before becoming a Christian, he believed that everything in the universe was spiritually alive—in other words, that every

rock, clod, bush, tree, planet, or star was inhabited by an individual spirit and by one great universal spirit.

This is a form both of animism (the belief that spirits inhabit all things) and of pantheism (the belief that God is in everything or is everything). Both of these beliefs are basic to the religions of many primitive peoples, who also believe in witch doctors, evil spirits that must be placated, and supernatural abilities (or magical powers) which may be obtained through the agencies of demons (or nature gods).

Pantheism is also the core belief of Hinduism and Buddhism. I explained this to Bill and tried on numerous occasions to show him from the Bible that such beliefs were not compatible with Christianity. But to no avail. Bill persisted in his animistic-pantheistic beliefs and in trying to reconcile them with what he understood of Christianity. He had had a “realization,” a “spiritual experience” of the reality of what he believed. And no amount of scriptural evidence was going to dissuade him. In other words, he had set his own subjective experience above the Word of God as the standard of truth. He had put his own personal idea about the nature of God above that which is revealed in the Bible. Bill was another example of a Christian practicing a form of idolatry by serving his own

false concept of God. I believe he, like Rev. Smith, was a sincere, born-again believer. How then could they have been so misguided? It was, I believe, because Satan had deceived them by manipulating their subjective perceptions, their personal experiences of what appeared to be reality. And so “real” were these illusions that they outweighed scripture as the basis for truth.

In a later chapter, we will discuss in detail the specific means by which Satan succeeds in his campaign of deception. Suffice it to say for now that scripture makes it abundantly clear that Satan has the power to deceive Christians, even to the degree that he can appear to them as an angel of light (2 Corinthians 11:14). The Bible also states that such deception will lead to apostasy:

The Spirit clearly says that in later times *some will abandon the faith* and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons (1 Timothy 4:1, emphasis added).

So convincing are Satan’s deceptions that they can include the truly bizarre, as in the case of another Christian friend:

- Janet, like the others, was deluded through a personal experience of the “supernatural.” In seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit, Janet apparently became fixated on the idea that He would speak to her directly by physical

means. Somehow, in her imagination, this became “angels” giving her the answers she was seeking from God. Satan was quick to take advantage of this confusion in her mind. The eventual result was that this otherwise sensible woman firmly believed that her houseplants (of which she was very fond) were used by angels to speak to her when she sought their guidance.

- Then, there is Rita, who believes unquestioningly in reincarnation. Why? Like the others, she had a “spiritual experience” which convinced her of its truth. When Rita was a child, she had a “vision” of herself in a “previous life.” This experience carried such emotional impact that she still believes it was absolutely true—in spite of the fact that scripture clearly teaches the opposite.

Both my wife and I have tried, unsuccessfully, to explain to her that reincarnation is a belief of Hinduism, Buddhism, and New Age philosophy and that it contradicts the Christian doctrines of resurrection, judgment, salvation by faith, heaven, hell, and grace.

Reincarnation is the belief that one is automatically reborn into another body (whether animal or human) when one dies. Then there is a continuing repetition of this cycle until one has suffered and learned sufficiently from one’s karma (cause and effect) to earn righteousness, experience enlightenment, and become one with the universe (“the

void”). Unfortunately, there appears to be little hope offered that any but a very few will ever attain to this state of “nirvana.”

If this belief were true, then there would be no possibility for the resurrection of the dead and the following scripture would be totally false:

For the Lord himself will come down from heaven with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and *the dead in Christ will rise first*. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever (1 Thessalonians 4:16–17, emphasis added).

There is no room here for endless cycles of rebirth because *all* the dead in Christ—meaning all those who have previously died in all ages—rise together and then *all* the living in Christ rise together with no possibility for additional lives in new bodies with new identities.

In addition, the Bible says we will each be judged for what we have done in *the body* (singular) (2 Corinthians 5:10). This raises the question, at what point would the reincarnation process be broken in order for judgment to take place? As we have seen, there is no concept of judgment in the doctrine of reincarnation. Consequently, there

is no room for heaven or hell. For, if there is no judgment, there are no eternal rewards or punishments. And there is no need for the places where these things would be experienced. It is, instead, a process of “spiritual evolution” in which, if he is lucky, one eventually attains freedom from the wheel of death and rebirth.

On the contrary, the Bible says, “Just as man is destined to die *once*, and after that to face judgment, so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people . . .” (Hebrews 9:27–28, emphasis added).

As this verse states, man dies *once*. This is *not* followed by rebirth, but by God’s judgment. Also, as this verse shows, reincarnation eliminates the need for and the possibility of salvation by Christ’s sacrificial death on the cross. For, if we can work off our karma by being reincarnated time after time, there is no need for Christ to take our sins upon Himself and pay for them by dying on the cross. Likewise, there is no need for God’s grace because karma *means* paying the price in this life for past-life sins.

Thus, Christ’s death becomes pointless, the gospel of Christ becomes meaningless, and the whole reason for Christianity is done away with. What a stupendous victory for Satan—all because of a deceptive personal experience cleverly orchestrated by the devil! Indeed,

so convincing is it, that a Christian such as Rita continues to believe in it even though it directly contradicts basic biblical doctrines and the very gospel of Jesus Christ—all of which she professes to believe!

- Here is a final example of deception, this time involving the secret practice of satanism in the church, as described to me by Ann. She said that satanists frequently pose successfully as Christians. Yes, it sounded unbelievable to me, too, when I first heard it. But I became convinced it was true partly because there is documented evidence of the reality of such satanic activity. For example, in her book, *He Came to Set the Captives Free*, Dr. Rebecca Brown quotes Elaine, a former witch and high priestess in a satanic cult who is now a born-again Christian:

These Satanists infest every level of society—the poor and the rich. The very well educated, the police force, government officials, business men and women, and even some so-called Christian ministers. Most of them attend local Christian churches and are considered “good citizens” because of their involvement in local civic activities. This is all done as a cover-up. They lead double lives and are expert at it; masters of deception.¹⁷

Even more convincing was the story Ann told. She was desperately seeking prayer

and counseling about such satanism for her son, Jim, her daughter-in-law, Peggy, and her daughter-in-law's family. Here is the story in brief, as told to Ann by Peggy.

Peggy's grandfather was a satanist, posing as a Christian. He was a highly regarded elder in his church. Such infiltration by satanists, Ann said, exists in nearly every church in the land, although it is almost totally unsuspected by Christians in general. The purpose of these satanists is to create division and discouragement among Christians and thereby weaken the body of Christ.

(Judging by the frequency of splits in congregations and the large number of denominations and factions within denominations, this strategy of Satan has been highly successful.)

Both Peggy and her mother, Helen, were used by satanists as "breeders." That is, they were given fertility drugs starting when they were seven or eight years old. Then, when they were about nine or ten, they were taken to a breeding facility and put in a room with a "stud," or male satanist whose function was to impregnate such girls. The resulting babies would normally be taken before term and the fetuses used either for human sacrifices or to supply blood to be drunk during satanic rituals.

In addition to such breeding facilities, satanists also control certain hospitals, staffed, at least partially, with their own doctors.

When Helen was “bred” in this way, the result was female triplets. Labor was induced and her babies taken prematurely. Fortunately, the attending nurse was a Christian who knew what was going on. When the first of the triplets was born, it was immediately taken away by the attending physician, a satanist. The second triplet was born dead and the doctor thought there were no other babies in Helen’s womb. After he left, Helen continued to have contractions and the nurse realized there was still another baby to be born. She whispered to Helen not to push, in order to delay delivery. Then, when it was safe, the nurse assisted with the birth of the baby—who was Peggy.

The nurse helped Helen to escape with Peggy because she feared the satanists would destroy them. Helen and Peggy managed to survive, and Helen eventually married and had another child.

When Peggy was nine or ten, she was abducted by satanists, who probably knew her whereabouts all along. She was given fertility drugs and bred, as her mother had been. She had Siamese twin boys who were removed from her womb prematurely. One died during the operation to separate them.

The other was somehow rescued by Christians. This baby was raised by Peggy's sister, Polly, the other surviving triplet, who is still alive. Polly, likewise, had been rescued as a baby and raised by Christians.

Polly's whereabouts remain a secret to this day, and Peggy's only contacts with her are cards she receives at Christmas and on birthdays.

An incredible story, yes. And Ann was understandably skeptical. However, her doubts were removed when she became acquainted with Ed, a dedicated Christian active in missionary work and ministry to the homeless. Ed, it turns out, had been involved in the occult before his conversion to Christianity and had, in fact, been a warlock, the male counterpart of a witch.

When Ann told him Peggy's story, he verified that it was an accurate account of how satanists operate. He explained that satanists are able to function clandestinely in this way because they have their own underground society. They are able to do this, he said, by being born and raised outside of normal society, with no documentation of their existence, such as birth certificates, driver's licenses, social security numbers, public school records, etc. Ed also recommended to her the book, *He Came to Set the Captives Free*, as an accurate account of such satanic activity and infiltration.

These stories illustrate just a few of the ways the devil deceives many in the church in his effort to confuse and discourage us and lure us away from the faith. They all involve apostasy in some form. In some ways, they all reject the hope we have in Jesus Christ. In each, there is the temptation to believe that we can handle the situation and solve the problems ourselves; that God, the Bible, the church, and prayer are not sufficient; that, on the contrary, spiritual additives or substitutes are necessary.

A REAL AND PRESENT DANGER

The apostle Paul predicted this drift into error and deception. He said it would lead to a “falling away”—a great apostasy, or abandoning of the faith—in the church prior to Jesus’ second coming (2 Thessalonians 2:1–3 (KJV)).

Jesus Himself spoke of this in Matthew 24, where it says His disciples came to him privately and asked, “. . . what will be the sign of your coming and the end of the age?” Jesus answered, “Watch out that no one deceives you. For many will come in my name, claiming, ‘I am the Christ,’ and will deceive many.” At that time, He said, there will be reports of wars with nation rising against nation. Famines and earthquakes, He said, will happen in various places. Christians will be persecuted and put to death and hated by all nations.

At that time many will *turn away from the faith* and will betray and hate each other, and many false prophets will appear and deceive many people. . . . At that time, if anyone says to you, 'Look, here is the Christ!' or, 'There he is!' do not believe it. For false Christs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and miracles to deceive even the elect—if that were possible. See, I have told you ahead of time (Matthew 24:3–27, emphasis added).

As these verses indicate, it will be a time of spiritual deception, frequent wars, economic upheaval, natural disasters, and persecution, betrayal and hatred of Christians—in other words, *the world as it is today*. This, I believe, is the age of the great end times apostasy predicted in many scriptures in addition to those quoted above (e.g., 1 Timothy 4:1–8; 2 Timothy 4:3–4; 2 Peter 3:17).

This apostasy has already begun and is in fact well under way. All of these conditions are presently being fulfilled. Christians are being persecuted and even executed in China, Africa, the Middle East, and elsewhere. Natural disasters are increasing in frequency and intensity. Earthquakes, especially, are much more common today than in previous periods of history, having increased exponentially in frequency within the past one hundred years. Economies of third world countries are in chaos, wars and reports of wars have become more and more frequent throughout the world.

In addition, spiritual deception has been on the rise for a number of years with widespread activity in cults, witchcraft, satanism, the occult, and manifold expressions of New Age philosophy, many of which have infiltrated the church in subtle and appealing ways. These strategies of Satan are often successful in luring Christians away from their faith. Unbiblical teachings are replacing sound doctrine for many immature and poorly trained Christians, and reliance on humanistic and occult ideas and practices for the solution to life's problems is replacing reliance on the Bible and on the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

One of the major strategies of the enemy in all this is to convince Christians that the New Age Movement is really no threat and that Satan himself doesn't really have any power to deceive or destroy the church. In fact, this tendency to underestimate the enemy and his New Age campaign is a common attitude among many Christians, including even scholars and researchers in these areas. Douglas Groothuis, for example, minimizes the possibility of a New Age conspiracy, saying he doubts that it exists at all.¹⁸ While he acknowledges Satan's influence on nonbelievers, he believes that Satan has little or no influence on believers, supporting his view by referring to the following scriptures taken out of context and without regard to related scriptures which contradict this view:

Christ, not Satan, has been given all authority in heaven and on earth (Matthew 28:18–20; Colossians 1:15–20); God owns the earth (Psalm 24:1–2); and Christ has destroyed the works of the devil (1 John 3:8).¹⁹

However, Matthew 28:18–20 is about Jesus conferring the great commission on His disciples and announcing His authority to do so. It is *not* about the idea that Satan has little or no power over Christians or the world in general. Colossians 1:15–20 is about Jesus’ Godhood and His identity as Creator, Sustainer, and Savior, *not* about Satan’s lack of power. The purpose of Psalm 24:1–2, also, is to proclaim the Lord’s identity (according to the NIV Study Bible) as

... The Creator, Sustainer and possessor of the whole world, and therefore worthy of worship and reverent loyalty as “the King of glory”²⁰

These verses have nothing to do with limitations on Satan’s power over Christians or anyone else.

First John 3:8 does *not* say that “Christ *has destroyed* the works of the devil” but that the reason He came “*was to destroy* the devil’s work” (emphasis added). That is, to free us from sin and its effects and to protect us from the devil’s deceptions (verses 6–9). In other words, the verse says that, through Christ, we *overcome* the devil’s power, *not* that he has no power.

On the contrary, Peter warns Christians that “the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour” and that we must resist him by “standing firm in the faith” (1 Peter 5:8–9). And Paul (who was tormented by a “messenger of Satan” (2 Corinthians 12:7)) cautions Christians that “Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light” (2 Corinthians 11:14).

There are, of course, many other scriptures which speak of the power of Satan or his demons. Many of these verses warn Christians to guard themselves against his power (for example, Acts 10:38; Ephesians 4:27; 2 Thessalonians 2:9–11; 2 Timothy 2:26). Many such scriptures will be discussed in the following pages.

In *The New Age Cult*, Walter Martin has provided abundant documentation that a New Age conspiracy does exist, that it threatens Christianity, and that it is being directed by Satan. Martin sounds this warning:

In dealing with the New Age Cult, we are in reality dealing with spiritual warfare against the forces of darkness, and we are told by God to put on the whole armor of heaven so that we will be able to withstand the forces of Satan (Ephesians 6:11).²¹

Indeed, Satan’s New Age strategies to destroy the church pose a real and present danger! And we shall examine these strategies in many different contexts as we proceed. (The New Age conspiracy is described in detail in chapter eight.)

In view of these facts, then, it is clear that all of the conditions Jesus said would exist before His return are being fulfilled before our eyes. And Satan is busy within the church promoting a great falling away from the faith. For example, thousands of Christians have been leaving mainline Protestant churches. Since the early 1900s, their numbers have declined drastically. In 1920, such denominations as the Presbyterian, Episcopal, Methodist, and Lutheran made up 76 percent of Protestant America. By the mid-1980s, they were down to 50 percent, and in the 1990s, these denominations were still experiencing declines.²²

Some have turned to more conservative evangelical or charismatic churches where they find fundamental Bible truths taught and practiced. But many others have left the church entirely to follow New Age teachings, or, perhaps worse, have remained in the church while adopting New Age attitudes and practices which directly contradict scripture or are subtle substitutes for it.

This fact is a direct fulfillment of 1 Timothy 4:1, which says, “The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons.” How this is happening and what forms it is taking will be discussed in detail in later chapters.

But first, we must look at the various types of temptations which call for spiritual additives or substitutes. These are discussed in detail in Part I (chapters one through five). They are the primary seeds of apostasy.