



The Christian Inquirer

Seeking wisdom in an Age of Information

"... with Christ Jesus himself as the chief
cornerstone" (Ephesians 2:20)

"Test everything ..." (1 Thessalonians 5:21)

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Spiritual con-artistry

Mike L Anderson

The little shock happened when I was a student. I had wandered into my room at the residence. It gradually dawns on me that I was in the wrong room. Things looked quite unfamiliar. Am I on the right floor? I'm pretty sure this is the right floor. What is my room number? I'm pretty sure it was 12, but maybe it was 21. I'm feeling very confused and disorientated. That's when I noticed a so-called friend peering around a corner with a grin on his face. They had got into my room and changed the furniture around. Pranks. That's what students do. It's all in good fun.

How about a prank done on students by researchers? What they did was to hire an actor to give a high-sounding lecture to some students that included professional educators. It was called "Mathematical Game Theory as Applied to Physician Education." The lecture was impressive-sounding, but replete with double talk, neologisms, non sequiturs, and contradictory statements. The majority rated the talk favourably.¹ They apparently thought, "I can't make head or tails of this, so it must be good."

Financial swindlers use the same trick. Bernie Madoff managed to swindle people of \$50 billion dollars over twenty years! How did he do it? He was smart, educated, confident, sophisticated. Economists admitted that they just did not understand him. He would tell people he was using a "split-strike conversion approach."² It was a lie, but sounded impressive. People said to themselves, "this man is beyond me; he must know what he is doing." He did. He knew exactly how to scam. They correctly concluded that he was smart; they incorrectly concluded that he was trustworthy.

It was a lot of it, but Bernie Madoff only separated people from their money. The danger from spiritual con-artists is that they separate people from God. The Apostle John in first letter actually commands us to be on our guard, so it has been going on for a long time. He says, "My dear friends, don't believe everything you hear. Carefully weigh and examine what people tell you. Not everyone who talks about God comes from God. There are a lot of lying preachers loose in the world."³

Evidently there were believers who thought that it was in the Christian spirit to be trusting of people. John says this is unwise because of the many lying preachers around. Perhaps a healthy suspicion is more Christ-like. The same Apostle John says Jesus didn't even entrust himself to those who believed in his name!⁴ Where in Scripture are we ever called to put our faith in people?

If that was true, then, why should it be any different today? We should perhaps be even more on our guard because spiritual con-artists now have many more avenues to promote themselves such as TV, books, magazines, DVDs and the Internet. How can we possibly distinguish the genuine voices from the swindlers when there are so many? The task seems impossibly daunting.

To use an analogy from the banking world: If you want to avoid being duped by counterfeit money it is impractical to study all the different kinds of counterfeit notes. New ones keep coming out all the time. Instead, know the authentic note and compare it with the note that is being offered to you. Similarly, new spiritual con-artists come out all the time and in all shapes and sizes - it is impractical to study all the varieties of spiritual con-artistry.

There is no need to. John says know the Authentic One. Then you can do the comparisons. It is simple and practical. After all Jesus always remains the same. Let us take a look at John's advice and how to apply it using some contemporary examples.

1. Compare what people say to the God you know.

"Here's how you test for the genuine Spirit of God. Everyone who confesses openly his faith in Jesus Christ—the Son of God, who came as an actual flesh-and-blood person—comes from God and belongs to God. And everyone who refuses to confess faith in Jesus has nothing in common with God. This is the spirit of antichrist that you heard was coming. Well, here it is, sooner than we thought!"⁵

Some translations have it as "confesses that." However, *The New Bible Commentary* says that the "that" should not be there. The "emphasis is on the Person not the

proposition.”⁶ Authentic spiritual truth is found in the Person of Jesus Christ. The issue is whether these teachers *know* Jesus more than whether they just know *about* him. Remember how Jesus said to the Pharisees "You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me yet you refuse to come to me to have life." To avoid spiritual con-artistry we need to come to Jesus Christ ourselves and only conditionally trust those who are connected to Him. Our final trust must be reserved always and only for God. Those who do not know God are susceptible to being taken in by spiritual con-artists.

We need to have made our spiritual home in Jesus Christ. This is something no one can do for us. Some people are conned because they keep letting others organise their spiritual furniture for them. They do not have a faith that is truly their own because they have never evaluated anything. As a result they have difficulty telling when con-artists are trying to rearrange their furniture.

How do the con-artists pull it off so that you do not feel at home in Jesus?

i) They try to make the great minor.

Notice that the spiritual con-artists were not completely anti-Jesus. The antichrist does not necessarily come with obvious horns on his head. They were more subtle than that. They did not deny that Jesus died on the cross. Neither did they deny that Christ rose from the dead. Sounds Christian? That is the point. The apostle Peter says that false teachers *secretly* introduce destructive heresies. The con-artists that the apostle John was speaking against belonged to a specific sect called Cerinthianism. What they denied was that Christ had come in the flesh. They said that the Divine Christ only entered Jesus at his baptism then left him before he died so that just the man Jesus died. Now, if only a man died on the cross, how can you be really redeemed? Your salvation, then, is only an illusion. Do you see how destructive this is?

The trick they pull is to say some true things about Jesus but then deny what is crucial about him and what makes him great. We should not be overly impressed when someone merely mentions the name of Jesus favourably. They could be using a tactic to make you off-guard.

Note that when John mentions "Christ come in the flesh" as a criterion, it is a for-instance. There are many ways that false teachers could compromise the truth. They could claim that God incarnate was on the cross, but he never really died. What false teachers have in common is that they deny what is essential about Jesus Christ.

ii) They try to make the minor great.

Cerinthianism is a form of Gnosticism. They believed that you were not saved by Christ but by a secret knowledge that only the elite knew. That is how they tried to enchant the susceptible. Their victims come away less inclined to want Jesus and more inclined to want this secret knowledge. Of course, as dispensers of this knowledge they were in a position of great power.

The apostle Paul also had problems with the Gnostics. This is how he responded.

"I want you woven into a tapestry of love, in touch with everything there is to know of God. Then you will have minds confident and at rest, focused on Christ, God's great mystery. All the richest treasures of wisdom and knowledge are embedded in that mystery and nowhere else. And we've been shown the mystery! I'm telling you this because I don't want anyone leading you off on some wild-goose chase, after other so-called mysteries, or "the Secret.""⁷

One tactic of the con-artist is to so add to Jesus that he becomes obscured. They will begin with Jesus, but then say, "Have you seen the Eighth Heaven or experienced the Toronto Blessing or found the New Way or discovered the Ancient Cabalistic Mysteries?" We can easily say to ourselves. "Oh no, I've never heard of that? I'm missing out. I'm not doing what I should be doing. Why did the church never tell me about this?" Paul says throw out the fine-sounding arguments - Jesus has all that we would ever need. Indeed, it is possible to love fine-sounding arguments more than Jesus so that they take the place of him.

Some beguile Christians without even mentioning the name of Jesus! A gentleman emailed me from overseas wanting to know if I would host him for a series of seminars on campus. He was a scientist with credentials as long as your arm. I asked him to send the transcripts to me. The purpose of the seminars? And I quote: "To defend the Christian concept of God." He only mentioned Christ once. I declined of course. Then I noticed that a local church was hosting him. So I went along to all three seminars. I did not hear him mention the name of Jesus even once! How can you defend the Christian concept of God without even mentioning Jesus? After the seminar I talked to people - everyone I spoke to was very impressed. While he impressed them with his scientific arguments he effectively downplayed Jesus. The pliable go away thinking that science is more important than Jesus.

2. Be filled with the Holy Spirit

“My dear children, you come from God and belong to God. You have already won a big victory over those false teachers, for the Spirit in you is far stronger than anything in the world.”⁸

Who is the one in us that is greater than the one in the world? John tells us earlier in his epistle, "But you have an anointing from the Holy One."⁹ He is the Holy Spirit. Ultimately God is the One who keeps us from being spiritually swindled and not a power of our own. Mere cleverness is not going to keep us from being conned because Satan is cleverer than we are. Self-confidence is a dangerous thing. We need to be confident in God. And with the filling of the Holy Spirit we do not need to be anxious about false prophets.

Picking up that interesting book or watching that documentary is all well and good. But prayer is not the first thing that comes to my mind. Yet, what a good thing to do to avoid being conned! Why not paraphrase the prayer of Jesus, “I’m not asking that you take me out of the world, but that you guard me from the Evil One.”¹⁰

3. Compare what people say to the teaching of the apostles.

“These people belong to the Christ-denying world. They talk the world's language and the world eats it up. But we come from God and belong to God. Anyone who knows God understands us and listens. The person who has nothing to do with God will, of course, not listen to us. This is another test for telling the Spirit of Truth from the spirit of deception.”¹¹

God chose specific ways to reveal himself. It was foremost through Christ, but he also appointed apostles. False teachers listen to the world. True teachers listen to the apostles. If we are to avoid being seduced by the world, we need to know what the apostles said.

Let us take a couple of examples of what people are saying and let us apply John’s advice.

Example 1: The Bible Code

According to journalist Michael Drosnin, there is a secret code in the Bible that foretells the future. Perhaps it’s the very impressive-looking mathematics in his book and that has convinced many people. A pastor from Cape Town said, in a Christian

magazine, "In the providence of God the Bible Code may just have been published to help the secular, agnostic mind come to grips with the fact that the Bible is the actual, living Word of God."¹²

How do we deal with this as Christians? We need to avoid letting the mathematics hoodwink us into sidestepping the crucial question – "how does the book deal with Jesus?" Also, my inability to understand the mathematics does not mean that this stuff must be true. All I can conclude is that I don't understand the mathematics. I admit I didn't try very hard. As a non-mathematician, I can leave the mathematics to mathematicians. As a Christian, I can use the Apostle John's test on the book.

So, how does this book deal with Jesus? It virtually ignores him. How does the god of the Bible Code compare with the God I know? This is the god Drosnin arrives at: "If the Bible code proves one thing, it is that a non-human intelligence really does exist," (p 70). Why would I want to worship an alien intelligence when I can worship him who the the Apostle John calls, the "One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth."¹³

Christian Bible Code enthusiasts believe that God provided the Code to enable this sceptical, advanced generation to believe in him.¹⁴ But Jesus responded to scepticism by being less inclined to perform miracles¹⁵ and praised his Father for keeping the things of heaven "from the wise and learned" while revealing "them to little children."¹⁶ The Apostle Paul says, "But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things--and the things that are not--to nullify the things that are."¹⁷ Does *this* God, the one that the Apostle Paul knew, seem like one who would favour those who are good at mathematics and own computers? The Christian Bible Code enthusiasts either don't know or are ignoring the words of Jesus and the Apostles.

We have it from *divine* authority that there is a "code." God is the One who is encoded and he is indecipherable. No one can fathom his understanding¹⁸ or his greatness.¹⁹

If humans cannot decode him, how can we know him? The apostle Paul says that God has done what we could not do. God has, in a manner of speaking, decoded himself. Jesus is God decoded. "In the past God spoke ... in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son ... The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being...."²⁰ The Real Code is different from the fake Bible

Code. You do not need a computer or a decryption programme to decipher the Real Code. We simply need to know Jesus.

Example 2: Superman

Religious education classes in the United Kingdom have been using Superman as a way of introducing Jesus Christ. To be sure there are many parallels between the life of Jesus and the Superhero. It has been remarked, for instance, that "Both Superman and Jesus had earthly family ties, both had heavenly origins, both heroes were raised incognito on Earth, both were of "royal" blood, both righted wrongs, both acted as saviours, both displayed incredible powers, and both performed miracles."²¹

Some people get glassy eyed at this point. One author is so besotted with the parallels that he thinks some are inspired by God and was moved to write a book about it called *The Gospel according to the World's Greatest Superhero*.

One possibility is that the Jesus Christ of the gospels is inadequate for the 21st century and God needs Superman. Another possibility is that the entertainment industry has business savvy. Deliberately weaving in Christian themes into the Superman story ensures the inflow of Christian dollars. How ironic that religious education classes use the Superman story to introduce Jesus when the entertainment industry uses the Jesus story to bolster Superman profits!

This author of "*The Gospel according to the World's Greatest Superhero*" suggests that the "S" on Superman's costume echoes the bronze serpent of the Old Testament (the bronze serpent foreshadowed Jesus Christ).²² An alternative explanation is that the "S" merely stands for "Superman" and that the perceived parallelism merely reveals the over enthusiasm of a devotee.

How does Superman compare with Jesus? See here²³ for a more detailed look at this question.

To be fair, Superman is upstanding, even respectable and battles crime and other social ills. Is it not churlish for me to nitpick when young people need all the good role models they can get? Nevertheless, the contrasts are very revealing. For all his superior physical abilities, his moral code is not impressive. Semiotics Professor Umberto Eco notes that for Superman "evil assumes only an offense against private property, good is represented only as charity."²⁴ This is hardly surprising since he is a corporate product. In contrast, Jesus located evil "from within, out of men's hearts."²⁵ Superman's value system merely parrots current and local moral fashion. According to Lauren Karp in a

recent thesis, whenever Superman's popularity slumps he is given a character makeover to boost sales.²⁶ In contrast, Jesus vigorously reacted against conventional wisdom saying, for instance, "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."²⁷

Their feats are also different. Superman flies through suns at the speed of light, pushes planets into space, and travels through time.²⁸ Jesus did not even fly from Galilee to Jerusalem²⁹ and did nothing to stop the tower of Siloam falling on the eighteen unfortunates.³⁰ Superman gets his energy needs from photosynthesis; Jesus needed to eat and drink. Why the difference?

It is epitomised by their attire. The entertainment industry makes superheroes wear dazzling costumes to accentuate their distance from humanity; it is preoccupied with spectacular achievement however much it alienates superheroes from people. On the other hand, the plain-clothed Son of Man was preoccupied with close relationship. It is preposterous to imagine Jesus taking the cross and giving his tormentors a hiding with it. Instead he prays in keeping with his ministry of reconciliation, "Father forgive them for they know not what they do." When the bumbling Clark Kent talks to humans, it is an act - Superman is an alien pretending to be human. When Jesus expresses God's love on the cross, it is as a real human in real pain. For Superman the really important stuff happens when he is wearing his cape. For Jesus the really important stuff happened when he was naked on a cross. He did not wear a uniform because he expects us to continue his work with him, invisible, in our hearts.

When Superman "takes care" of a carload of villains with the twirl of one hand it is to merely remove them from his presence and from society; when Jesus takes care of villains it is to restore the ear of one and the souls of many to himself and the community. Superman theatrically treats symptoms; Jesus treats underlying spiritual causes. Jesus' first reaction to the paralytic is to forgive him. When he heals him it is to show that he has the authority to do just that.³¹ Superman is into, in the words of Umberto Eco, "parochial performance" whereas Jesus is into interminable impact. When Superman works, people merely watch. When Jesus works it is first for, then in, and then through us. He forgives then sends the forgiven to proclaim God's message of forgiveness.

Any similarities between Jesus and the god of the Bible Code or Superman, then, are at best very superficial. Look deeply at the Person of Jesus and the contrast is great. What con-artists have in common is a hidden agenda. While they dazzle us with lofty words, mathematical formulae or spectacular feats they keep us from engaging the real Person of Christ. It is striking that the One who has all wisdom, knowledge and power

chose not to dazzle in his ultimate act of communication. Jesus rightly amazed the three disciples during the transfiguration. He rightly wowed his disciples by his resurrection. But God's ultimate communication to us was not in a spectacular feat or in lofty words, but in silence - when Jesus breathed his last on the cross. It was not a theological text, nor a miracle, but an act of sacrificial love. Surely, God wants us to soberly consider this Person who, by the ultimate price, demonstrated that he had our best interest as his agenda. Let us resolve to let the Person of Christ alone be the One to finally impact us, especially him on the Cross. Jesus is rightly called the Living Word in contrast to the Written Word. However, in this crucial demonstration of God's love, Jesus can be called the Dying Word. He is the Last Word. Letting him be that will keep us from being taken in by con-artists.

If you found this article helpful please give it to someone else.

Mike L Anderson, PhD Philosophy of Evolutionary Biology (Wits University), develops educational resources and software and plays Starcraft.

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P O Box 218, Betty's Bay, 7141, South Africa

E-mail: mike@mikelanderson.com www.mikelanderson.com

Board: Dr A Potts, Revd R Anderson, M Koegelenberg, S Peacock (CA)SA

Bank Details: Mike Anderson Donation Account, Standard Bank, Rondebosch,

Account No: 075594404, Branch Code: 25009,

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Notes

¹ D.H. Naftulin, J E. Ware, J.E. and F.A. Donnelly (1973) The Doctor Fox lecture: A paradigm of Educational Seduction. *Journal of Medical Education* 48: 630-635

² <http://money.cnn.com/2009/04/24/news/newsmakers/madoff.fortune/index.htm>

³ 1 John 4:1. (The Message) The New International Version uses 'spirits' for 'people.' By spirit, John simply means prophet - someone who claims to speak under the influence of God. They may be true prophets or teachers who speak under God's influence or they may be false teachers who speak under Satan's influence.

⁴ John 2:23-24.

⁵ 1 John 4:2.

⁶ Guthrie, B.D. and Motyer J.A. (eds.) (1970) *New Bible Commentary* Inter-Varsity Pres, Leicester, England p. 1267.

⁷ Colossians 2:2-3,

⁸ 1 John 4: 4.

⁹ 1 John 2:20.

¹⁰ John 17:15.

¹¹ 1 John 4:5-6.

¹² Thomas, J. (1998) *Today Issue* 81. February/March pp. 20-23.

¹³ John 1:14.

¹⁴ Yacov Rambsel, a Messianic Christian pastor from Texas, says that the Codes "declare that Jesus is the Messiah to a technically advanced, yet supremely skeptical generation" Moore, W.J. (1998) *Bible Codes: or Matrix of Deception? Part II* by SCP Newsletter, Winter, Volume 22:3 http://www.scp-inc.org/publications/newsletters/N2203/Bible_Codes_part_2.html

¹⁵ Matthew 13:58

¹⁶ Matthew 11:25

¹⁷ 1 Corinthians 1:27-28.

¹⁸ Isaiah 41:28

¹⁹ Psalm 145:3

²⁰ Hebrews 1:1-3

²¹ Kozlovic, A.K. (2002) *Ibid.*

²² Wilson, W. (undated) *The Gospel According to the World's Greatest Superhero.* Christianbookpreviews. <http://www.christianbookpreviews.com/christian-book-detail.php?isbn=0736918124>

²³ http://www.articlesbase.com/christianity-articles/superman-according-to-the-gospel-4257535.html?utm_source=sendgrid&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Approved

²⁴ Eco, U. (1979) *The myth of superman. The role of the reader: explorations in the semiotics of texts.* Indiana University Press, Bloomington pp.123-124.

²⁵ Mark 7:21.

²⁶ Karp, L. N. (2009) *Truth, Justice and the American Way: What Superman teaches us about the American Dream and changing values within the United States. Master of Arts thesis.*

²⁷ Matthew 5: 43-45.

²⁸ Quoted in Karp, L.N. *Ibid.*

²⁹ It may be that Jesus teleported the disciples, a boat and himself to the lakeshore (see John 6:21). However, he did not do this before the public, but to get away from them (see John 6:15 and John 6:22-24).

³⁰ Luke 13:4-5.

³¹ Mark 2:1-12.