

## Religious Frauds and the Bible

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### Introduction

Have you ever heard (or said), “*That church is filled with hypocrites!*” or, “*That preacher is a con-artist!*”? Guess what? This might be an accurate assessment! The Bible speaks to this subject in great detail. Many people object to Christianity because they know many “Christians” are frauds. Quite honestly, I was stunned when I discovered the Bible's material on this subject. I believe you will find the forthcoming material informative and interesting. I will first define hypocrisy and fraud with Bible examples for both. Then the penalties awaiting hypocrites/frauds will be discussed. This is followed by a conclusion.

### Hypocrisy and Fraud Defined

**Hypocrisy** involves *personal behavior* that is inconsistent with some professed standard. There is deliberate and non-deliberate hypocrisy. **Deliberate hypocrisy** consists of giving “*an impression of having certain purposes or motivations, while in reality having quite different ones. In some languages, this is expressed by ‘having two faces’, ‘two tongues’, ‘being two people’, ‘having two hearts’*” (Louw & Nida, Greek English Lexicon of the New Testament, pg.766). Some translate this word “*pretender,*” or “*stage actor.*” Ananias and his wife Sapphira are examples of this in Acts 5:1-10. They had sold land and wanted everyone to think they were donating the entire price of the land when in fact they had agreed together to withhold some of it for themselves. They both died on the spot. A New Testament execution by God Himself. Age of Grace, huh?

**Non-deliberate hypocrisy** occurs when the hypocrite is not even aware of his/her inconsistent behavior. In Galatians 2:11-21, Peter and Barnabas are probably an example of this. They were reverting back to some selective elements of Judaism and it took an objective outsider (Paul) to see it and confront them. This type of hypocrisy often begins quite subtly and progresses gradually. Everyone probably falls into this type of hypocritical behavior at times. But once exposed, one should turn from it, make amends if possible, and try to figure out how -and where - wrong turns were made that led to the wayward path.

**Fraud** involves **actions** that take advantage of another. Hypocrisy is present, but fraud moves to this next level. Again, there are deliberate frauds, and non-deliberate frauds. Satan is the primary **deliberate** religious fraud. He “*disguises himself as an angel of light*” (II Cor 11:14). On Judgement Day, it will probably be revealed he operated in this role more than any other. His goal is to come **as close as possible** to presenting, and representing, the truth - yet still be outside true teaching and behavior. Also, his strategy is to infiltrate the church with hypocrisy, fraud and misinformation. And what is his primary method in accomplishing this? “*Therefore, it is not surprising that his servants also disguise themselves as servants of righteousness*” (II Cor 11:15). Their behavior may appear impeccable, but they teach “*doctrines of demons*” (I Tim 4:1). They operate from pulpits and teaching positions. Deliberate frauds are propelled by **greed and lust**. “*In their greed they will make merchandise of you .... (They) indulge the flesh, despise authority, are daring and self-willed ... and have eyes full of adultery that never cease from sin .... (They)*”

*take advantage of unstable souls, have a heart trained in greed, and promise freedom while they themselves are slaves of corruption .... Many will follow hard after their sensuality and because of them the way of the truth will be evil spoken of” (II Pet 2:1-3,10,14,19). They “love to be first” (III Jn 9), “care for themselves (while) flattering people for the sake of gaining advantage” (Jude 12:16), and “creep into households and captivate weak-willed women weighed down with sins” (apparently sexual trysts) (II Tim 3:5,6). You might be right in your assessment - that preacher could very well be a fraud!!*

**Non-deliberate frauds** are very sincere in life style and teaching, yet are in grave error on core Bible understandings. An example of this type of fraud is found in Matthew 7:21-23. Jesus said, *“not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord’, will enter the kingdom of heaven .... **Many** will say to Me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, didn’t we prophesy in **Your** name, and in **Your** name cast out demons and in **Your** name perform many miracles?’ And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you, depart from Me you who practice lawlessness.’”* This is an after-death conversation. Eternity is in front of these people, and they know Jesus is “Lord.” This life is forever past and there is no game playing going on in this post-death appeal. They really do believe they had practiced **righteousness** in their time on earth - in Jesus’ Name - yet Jesus will declare them **evildoers!!** This passage is astounding. Many religious zealots fall into this category. They may have an apparent *“zeal for God, but not according to (correct) knowledge”* (Ro 10:2). Even the Apostle Paul was in this group before he became a Christian (I Tim 1:13).

Most of the foregoing material refers to **leaders**. But the Bible also has much to say about **followers**. This complicates the whole picture as there is great mixture of deliberate and non-deliberate hypocrisy and fraud among followers. In the parable of the four soils (Lk 8:4-15), the second soil represents those who *“receive the word with joy, (but) have no firm root; they believe for a while, but in time of temptation fall away.”* They start out strong, but when true challenges come, they abandon the faith. The third soil represents those *“who have heard...(but) are choked with worries and riches and pleasures of life, and bring no fruit to maturity.”* This group probably comes to church on Sundays, but the rest of the week is consumed with self interest. They *“profess to know God, but by their deeds they deny Him”* (Tit 1:16). They *“hold to a form of godliness, but have denied its power”* (II Tim 3:5). These may comprise some of the *“tares”* of Matthew 13:24-31, and 36-43. They look good on the outside, but are actually weeds. These tares (frauds) are mixed in with the wheat (Christians), and will not be removed until harvest day (Judgement Day). They are stained with hypocrisy and fraud. Every generation has its share of tares. This will continue to the end of the age.

But there is a more aggressive type of **fraudulent follower**. These **choose not to hear** *“sound doctrine, but wanting to have their ears tickled, they **heap up for themselves** teachers in accordance to **their own desires**”* (II Tim 4:3). Christianity in America reeks with this. Not only are there many cults and sects, but orthodox circles are plagued with “strong arm” people who seek control of their church and its message. These frauds are “religious” as long as it is advantageous. They can act very friendly, **until their interests are crossed**. They do not attend church to be taught, or changed, by God. They have other reasons for church activism. Some are pressured by family expectations while others want to add religion to their social resume. Some want to establish “business connections” with church people and others want a power position when none exists at work or home. Some

estimate that 5% of churchgoers are truly Christians. While it is impossible to confirm this figure, it is noteworthy that some think the percentage of true Christians in the church is this small.

### **Penalties**

*“Vengeance is Mine, I will repay’, says the Lord”* (Ro 12:19). Suppose you own a business that employs an outside sales force. As they present your product, you begin receiving alarming requests at headquarters. Orders are coming in, but customers are in error on the product’s price. Others are misinformed about the product’s purpose. Others are confused on warranty information. As the owner, you know **you** are accountable for your product’s representation. And when you consider all your effort that made the enterprise a reality in the first place, what would be your response to your sales force? Wouldn’t it be proper to find out who was responsible for the misrepresentations? The answer is obvious. This crude illustration does bring the point home. God has chosen to share extremely valuable information to humanity through the Bible. And the cost involved to bring this information to us was higher than any of us can know. It comes through a Roman cross. And God has determined this information is to be transmitted **by people to people**. **Both the proclaimer and listener are cautioned. The proclaimer** is warned of *“a stricter judgement”* (James 3:1). **The listener** is instructed to *“examine everything carefully and hold fast to that which is good”*(I Thes 5:21). Those who misrepresent God, whether “innocently” or deliberately, face unimaginable penalties. Divine woes are pronounced on them (Mt 18:7) and for them *“black darkness has been reserved forever”* (Jude 13). Read Numbers 16, Acts 5:1-11 and Rev 20:10 for a few examples of God’s actions in this regard. *“It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God”* (Heb 10:31) and *“leave room for the wrath of God”* (Ro 12:19). He will deal with each hypocrite and fraud in His own way and time. In these matters, we are ultimately “relieved of duty.” God will take up for Himself. That is part of being God.

### **Conclusion**

The Bible confirms the presence of religious hypocrites and frauds. Some practice deliberate hypocrisy and fraud, while others are unaware, to varying degrees, of their error. Religious frauds will be present to the end of this age. Unfortunately, they damage many people who are sincerely seeking God. But the damage will be temporary for those who are truly His. While hypocrites and frauds offend many people, the One primarily offended is God Himself. They mar His reputation, and penalties will be meted out for this. The severity of punishment will depend on the degree of culpability (motives and actual harm). This information should help those who are sincerely seeking God. But God helps the sincere seeker in yet another way. Jesus was the victim of religious hypocrisy and fraud. He was slandered, betrayed, framed, tried and murdered at the hands of religious hypocrites and frauds. He knows firsthand the trauma caused by hypocrisy and He can teach us how to withstand and successfully respond to these assaults.

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