The 10 Greatest Deceptions in the Church- Have You Been Had?

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The devil himself masquerades as an angel of light (2 Corinthians 11:14). We often think of him as a red guy with horns and a pitchfork, yet his appearance most commonly is one of beauty and glory. This is why Paul cautions believers to beware of anyone or anything that tampers with the gospel or the Scripture, even if an angel of light is the one telling us to add or take away from the Bible. It very well might be the devil himself who is leading us to our own destruction even though we think we are listening to the voice of truth. The Bible is the only measuring stick of truth, for it is the truth. Deception always begins with adding to, taking away, or altering the Word of God. "Did God really say," or "Did God really mean," or "Is that really worth studying" are all ways that the devil tries to place a wedge of division between us and God. If he can make us question the Bible, lean upon our own understanding rather than trusting in Him, and use "common sense," then we will be had.

Have you been had already? If you have, you likely don't know it. Such is the nature of deception. Those who are deceived don't know it. All sin is rebellion, but not all sin feels or looks like rebellion to the one rebelling, particularly if they have been deceived. The one who has been deceived thinks that he is laboring for the Lord and teaching the truth when he is in fact aiding and abetting the devil. This is why deception is such a powerful tool of the devil. He can get people to advance his cause without them even knowing it. This makes his work through them so much more effective because they, too, look like ministers of light when they are teaching and serving the darkness, whether knowingly or unknowingly. Many deceivers do know exactly what they are doing, having compromised and sold their souls to the devil. Others are honestly well-meaning, yet they are leading others and themselves astray.

Deception is so dangerous because the church could be deceived and therefore walk peacefully and joyfully to its own destruction, thinking it was victorious when it was not. This is why the Bible tells us to be introspective. In Psalm 139:23-24 David says, "Search me, O God, and know my heart; Try me and know my anxious thoughts; And see if there be any hurtful way in me, And lead me in the everlasting way." David understands that it is possible to be deceived. He says in Psalm 19:12, "Who can discern his errors? Acquit me of hidden faults." The nature of deception is that we cannot see it. Thus we need to ask God to help us to see what we need to change and to forgive us for our hidden errors.

If we want to see revival, we need to let God revive us according to His Word (Psalm 119:107) and according to truth (John 17:17). If we are so adamant that we must be doing things right, we may remain in a state of deception when we do not have to. God can save us from our deception if we ask Him to show us what the true state of our hearts are. The sad thing is that, for some, the true revelation of their hearts won't come until they see Jesus face to face. What a tragedy! Let's ask God to search our hearts today so that we don't erroneously forfeit our chance at eternal rewards and succumb to bitter disappointment in the day of Christ.

The devil's strategy is to play on our imperfect minds and reasoning abilities to make us think that we are serving the truth when we will be, in fact, doing just the opposite. The truth will appear like the lie while the lie will seem to be the obvious truth. Just because something seems to be common sense does not mean it is true, even if it seems like an obvious fact, unless it can be supported by the Scriptures. This is why Jesus rebuked the devil not by reasoning with him, interacting with him, playing mind games with him, or dialoguing with him. He didn't rely upon His reasoning abilities, but He simply spoke the Word of God. All we have to do is put our trust and confidence in what Jesus put His trust in, the Word of God, which endures forever and never fails. The moment we try to reason with the devil or one of his allies, we make ourselves vulnerable.

Now we will look at what I think are the ten greatest deceptions currently at work in the church. These are not deceptions facing the church because much of the church has already succumbed to them. Thus I refer to the deceptions as being already *in* the church. We have much work to do because it is extremely difficult to tell a deceived person that he is going the wrong way. A deceived person is unaware of his danger, so we need to plead for the mercy of God to open eyes, soften hearts, and expose the errors. May God give us all ears to hear.

Deception #10
"If It Succeeds, It Must Have Been God's Will"
(Also could be phrased as "If it works, do it.")

Pragmatism is not truth. Just because something accomplishes some intended outcome does not mean that the ends justify the means. Yet we do this in the church. Some claim to have truth because their churches are growing at an incredible rate. Others claim success because their church is not growing at all; therefore, they conclude, they must be faithful while the culture is so evil. The error in all of these arguments is the same. Success cannot be defined in manmade terms, such as numerical growth or lack thereof, copies of books sold, or the number of conference attendees, for example. Success is faithfulness to the truth of God's Word. If we do this, we ought to expect growth spiritually and numerically by the grace of God. Yet it is extremely arrogant to speak for God and say that "since more people are listening to me, then I must be right." Rightness must be defined on integrity to the Scripture, even if there is a lack of results that would impress the carnal mind. The results of some ambition or enterprise cannot be used to justify its truth or merit. Just because Church A is growing at an incredible rate does not mean that what it is doing is Biblical. Church B might have lost members, but that could be because it is returning to Biblical truth. The only way to know how church philosophy, practice, and methodology should operate is to look at God's Word. To look at manmade results is to chase after the wind. To use "success" as a guide for truth is to open the door to new kinds of truth each and every day because lots of things can "work," so to speak. Pragmatism is the beginning of the end, for it encourages people to reinvent, modify, and innovate the church away from what God said it was supposed to be.

Deception #9
The Bible Must Be Made to Be Culturally Relevant.

This is definitely a subtle deception. Should preaching relate to contemporary issues and struggles? It had better relate, or else preaching is not really preaching. Preaching by definition is an exhortation based in God's Word to change and combat the dangers of our day according to God's Word and in light of God's Word. Paul's philosophy of "becoming all things to all men" that he "might win some" applies to relating to issues at hand and adapting to the culture we are in (1 Corinthians 9:22). Yet, like Paul, we are never to change the message of the gospel, the Word of God, or the definition of the church. The function of preaching is always inherently relevant as is the Bible. The true statement is that the Bible is culturally relevant, enduring forever, accomplishing what God has set it out to do, and judging the thoughts and intentions of the heart of everyman in every age, culture, and time. The Bible is timeless, ageless, always powerful unto salvation (Romans 1:16), and necessary for teaching, reproof, correction, and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

The deception is the belief that the Bible must be adapted, altered, and changed in order for its truth to relate to contemporary culture. To say that we must make the Bible relevant is a subtle heresy in that we find ourselves messing with the meaning of the text, paraphrasing it into contemporary jargon and using it to say things that it doesn't really say. This is dangerous because many paraphrases are treated as authoritative in preaching and teaching. We cannot add or take away from the Word of God. Rather than trying to change the Bible to be as "relevant" as possible, assuming people today could not possibly understand it as it is, we ought rather to get as close to the original languages as possible, seeking to understand the intended meaning of the Scripture. God knew what He was trying to say, and it is that which we must try to understand.

What this deception is really all about is undermining the sufficiency of the Scripture. Many lose confidence that God's Word can save a soul, and thus they have to get creative and invent some new methodologies to do church, preaching, and evangelism. The clear teaching of Scripture is that if they won't hear the Word of God, they won't be persuaded even if a person were to rise from the dead. No sign will convince a person who had rejected the Word of God. Jesus Himself performed the greatest miracle of all time in rising from the dead, and it was He who said that a person must hear the Word of God and that no amount of miraculous signs will change a person's mind (Luke 16:31). Indeed, even to this day most refuse to accept the resurrection as the historical fact that it is. Even a person rising from the dead was and is not sufficient to make a person believe the gospel. The only thing that can save a person is hearing the Word of God because faith comes from hearing the word of Christ. We can try to please the culture, modify the Bible, minimize the gospel, use secular music, or whatever, and we may achieve apparent results. But are the results of God or not? Only that which comes from faith, prayer, spiritual victory, and the work of God and His Word will endure the fiery test and pass the judgment of God. Thus, it only makes sense to put our confidence in the power of the Bible, to bring it to bear upon the issues of the day, and to rely upon God to work rather than trying to build the church ourselves. God said that He will build His church (Matthew 16:18). He also said that unless God builds the house, those labor in vain who build it (Psalm 127:1). The lesson from Scripture is that spiritual advancement is not by might, strength, or power of man, but by the Spirit of God (Zechariah 4:6). The Bible will always work because it is always relevant and never boring to the heart that God has made ready to receive its truth.

Deception #8

Two extremes here:

Camp A: "We Don't Need To Go Out and Evangelize Because As Long as We Are Faithful, God Will Build His Church"

Camp B: "Let's Invent a Church Service that Will Lead People to Make a Decision to Christ"

Camp A is the "holy huddle." They don't want any visitors to contaminate their little church of perfection. They have deceived themselves into thinking that the reason no one ever gets saved through the ministry of their church is that the world is just so far gone while they are so right and good. There is little love or compassion for the unsaved, and there is very minimal brokenness over the fact that those without Christ will spend eternity in hell. They might shout the gospel at someone from a distance and with a harsh tone, but to come alongside someone and share the gospel with them is just, for them, too dangerous and too hard. They applaud themselves for their commitment to truth while the world goes to hell.

Camp B, on the other hand, believes that they can control the salvation of a person. They will do whatever it takes that is culturally relevant to move, woo, or manipulate a person to make a profession of faith. The result is a casual, comfortable approach to God, the Bible, and the gospel as opposed to confronting the affront that sin is to God and understanding the holiness of God. The gospel is minimized to be as user-friendly as possible, typically dropping the repentance part because that is difficult to manipulate. It is easy to get a person to come forward to get forgiveness so that their relationships will improve and so that they will have a wonderful life, but it is much harder to let the Spirit speak through God's Word to convict a heart of sin.

Both camps err on two opposite extremes. One disdains the sinner while the other treats him as an object to be manipulated, a mere consumer of a good or service. The separatist mentality and the marketing approach are both deceptions. The truth lies somewhere in between, being sensitive to those outside of the church, being bold in sharing the gospel with them, and not putting ourselves in situations that might cause us to stumble. We are God's witnesses (Acts 1:8), ambassadors of Christ (2 Corinthians 5:20), and ministers of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:18). We are to be out and about, connecting, ministering, building relationships, and sharing the gospel. Yet never are we to put ourselves in a situation of compromise that would undo or contradict the message that we are trying to speak.

Being sensitive to the needs and interests of others is a Biblical way to go about things. When an unbeliever is invited to church or shows up on his or her own initiative, that person should be treated graciously, kindly, and given a bold presentation of the gospel. Their carnal desires should not be fulfilled, and neither should they be ignored and pushed away as dirty and contaminating. The answer is somewhere between these two extremes.

Deception #7

"I Can Worship God However I Want"

Most wouldn't come out and say this, but this is the underlying assumption about worship in the church today. By worship, I mean worship in all of life including that which is through song, through preaching, in prayer, and in our own daily individual walks with God, though we will concentrate on the music part here. Worship is not a matter of personal preference, nor is it a function of individual experiences. It is defined by God, and there are principles that govern how worship is to be done.

The current controversy over traditional and contemporary music confounds me. My honest belief is that this artificial division which separates the older generations from the younger is much more a result of personal preference guiding practice rather than the Word of God being the main guide. The church is something that has now existed for over two thousand years. To sing a hymn of the past that is doctrinally rich by a person who stood strong for the Lord can be a great encouragement. Connecting with the past is important for how we will live in the present and as to whether the truth will be preserved fully into the future. For some reason we think we live in a bubble, detached from history, tradition, and godly examples from the past, but we are not and do not. I only hope that people years from now can look back at the tradition and legacy that we leave and can sing some of the new songs that we wrote about God and His faithfulness, even though by then they will be "oldies." Just because we grew up singing hymns doesn't make hymns better than contemporary choruses. Some hymns are shallow and doctrinally erroneous. Others are not reverent. The same is true of some choruses. Some are irreverent, shallow, too repetitive, devoid of substantial content, and selffocused. The answer isn't choosing either traditional or contemporary or hymns or choruses. The answer is in using both as long as they are doctrinally sound, edifying, glorifying to God, and not self-absorbed.

Our worship should stem from a love for God and a fear of God. We wouldn't approach the president casually, but we too often approach God that way, striding into His presence with sin unconfessed, thinking that we can come just as we are to worship. We should prepare our hearts for entering the presence of God, as God cannot tolerate sin. Style of music is not neutral. Some styles are casual and irreverent, others are distracting, while others are majestic, drawing our attention toward the King of Kings. We need to be careful to choose music styles and a blend of instruments that gives God the honor due Him and does not steal from His majesty.

The answer is in not using music to be a part of a philosophy that uses the entire service to woo the unbeliever and manipulate a profession of faith at the end. Worship wasn't created to play on the emotions. It is to be used to draw our minds to the truth of God and His Word. It is a cognitive experience; the emotions follow. Jesus tells us to worship in spirit and in truth (John 4:24). The truth part means that we must be worshipping according to ways that honor God, being reverent and singing doctrinal truth. The worshipping in spirit part means that we worship as those with spirits reborn by God and which are not hiding sin. David prayed that God would renew a right spirit within him after he confessed his sin (Psalm 51:10). True worship that honors God and crosses the age barrier and preference barrier is worship that is from the heart, directed toward God, drawing attention away from ourselves and toward God, grounded in the Word of God, focused on the glory of God rather than personal experience, and from a

pure heart. This worship can be done anytime and anywhere. It does not require that we use candles and burn incense to create a certain meditative experience. After all, we are to fill our minds with truth, rather than emptying them and making them open to the devil's filling. True worship does not require that we escape to the wilderness and climb to the top of a mountain in order to feel closer to God. True worship is independent of a particular experience, and it can be found despite any particular experience or circumstance. Worship is more than emotions, though emotions should accompany the encounter with God.

We are a long way from this true worship, seeking to make ourselves the centerpiece and our experience the means of feeling close to God. Worship is not about us but God. God will share His glory with none, not even His church. I am afraid that when we applaud the musicians for jamming away, singing proficiently, or entertaining us that we are stealing God's glory. When we write songs that are about me, my, I, and mine, we are on dangerous ground. The cross, the resurrection, God, Christ, and the Spirit should all supersede evangelism, music leaders, and ourselves in terms of importance. It is time that we along with our selfish preferences decrease and Christ increases in our worship. It is time that we give Him the reverence He deserves as the Majestic One.

Deception #6

"The Felt Needs of the Listener Should Dictate What Preachers Preach"

Paul did not tell Timothy to preach what the ears of the listeners thought they needed to hear. Granted, if we want more people to come to our churches, all we have to do is tell them what they tell us that they want to hear. We can survey them, ask them what they would want to be told, and they might just let us tell them that. But that is not what Paul told this young man of God. He told Timothy to preach the Word in season and out of season, regardless of whether or not the listeners only wanted their ears tickled (2 Timothy 4:2-3).

Tickling the ears as the Scripture says is really what we call today playing off of the felt needs of the listener. It is merely telling people what they think they need to hear. Yet this totally facilitates the deception process because it doesn't confront the lies or instruct according to truth. In order to keep from being deceived, we need to hear the truth taught regularly and then be introspective and humble about the Bible teaching that we have heard. To facilitate the thinking process that the preacher had better tell me something entertaining, funny, or how to be a wise steward of the idols in my life is the fruit of deception. Preachers had better preach as God leads them and always according to the Word of God. They ought to bring truth and knowledge from God's Word to bear upon issues of life. We need to hear the literal words of the Bible consistently so that we can guard our way and stay out of deception. The public reading of Scripture may not appeal to the audience's felt needs, but God tells us to do it anyway because we need to hear it, whether we like it or not. God dictates what should be preached, not we ourselves, and certainly not the listeners.

Deception #5

"Prayer Meetings Are a Thing of the Past"

I don't know anyone who would say it exactly like that, but sometimes actions speak louder than words, do they not? How many churches do you know that have a prayer meeting at all? If they do, how much of it is prayer and how much of it is talking or the sharing of requests? If there is a brief time of prayer, how urgent is it? Is it done believing that God can do the impossible? Is it done as a begging of God to move, or is it a religious charade, duty, performance, or ritual? Are emotions tossed aside and requests made a mere checklist? Is the Holy Spirit's prompting allowed or is the meeting artificially engineered and controlled?

Why don't people pray? Why don't pastors make a priority of prayer? Why don't churches emphasize a corporate gathering to pray? Maybe such is a result of bad past experiences, poor use of the time when gathered for prayer, a lack of faith, or a belief on the part of the pastor that no one will come (which is too often likely the case). But if we have churches full of people who don't want to pray, what does that say about us? It says that we think we have life under control, it says that prayer is not a priority for us (even though Jesus did it all the time, even at inconvenient times and places), and it says that we are selfish, not wanting to intercede on behalf of our community, nation, and world. Prayer connects us with God and with Christians around the world. It moves mountains, opens hearts, opens opportunities to share the gospel, gives power to the preaching, makes people receptive to preaching, gives the preacher wisdom in his preparation, guides elders as they lead and make decisions, and provides for needs that are unmet, among many other things. What doesn't prayer do? So, why again don't we do it? We have been deceived into thinking that other things are more important. We live under the illusion which Satan adores that says that we can function just fine without prayer. We are fools to think so. May God create in us a desire to pray, may we purpose to call others to prayer, and may we learn to intercede on behalf of others and on behalf of the lost.

Deception #4 "Let's Find a Good Book for Bible Study"

Should this really be #4 on the list? Well, yes. Here's why. Though there is nothing wrong with using a good Bible-based book for Bible study, there is a default mechanism in the church today that chooses to use book guides and study guides before actually studying the Bible. There could be many reasons for this, but the first and foremost reason is the fact that we have let a few elite church gurus direct our philosophy of ministry and give us all of their materials to inject their beliefs and presuppositions into our churches. Rather than raising up faithful men and women who can teach others also by first teaching them the full counsel of God (2 Timothy 2:2), we keep churchgoers in a place of relative immaturity as they hear shallow seeker-oriented messages from the pulpit each week. Many should be teachers when they are still infants in Christ (Hebrews 5:12). How can a person who is an infant teach other infants? They can't, but they can all watch a DVD series or go through a study guide, eating up everything in it with no discernment because they haven't yet learned it.

What ever happened to studying the Bible for Bible study? It ought not to be a revolutionary concept. We need teachers. I have been in many church groups where

everybody in the group thinks that they are masters of Scripture, even if they have only been saved for a year or two. Where does this attitude come from? It comes from hearing the basics over and over again each and every week and from going through study guide after study guide that is built more to entertain than it is to edify. The deep truths of Scripture are cast aside for teaching the basics over and over again. Thus, it only takes common sense to realize after a few years that one has "mastered" the basics. The problem is that they are supposed to move past the basics. Yet, not hearing any new or challenging teaching from other men or women of God and not hearing any deep Biblical teaching from the pulpit, they mistakenly think that they have arrived. How difficult it is to teach a person who thinks that he or she has arrived! We need teachers, and we need faithful teaching so that we can have faithful teachers who can teach others also. If few grow to maturity in this generation, what will be of those who come next? We need more who study the Word and who are taught the whole counsel of God by faithful men who pursue a discipline of Bible study in their own lives.

Deception #3 "Just Major on the Majors"

This is a definite top three item. I never realized just how prevalent this thinking was. I realized toward the end of my experience at a Christian college that I was in an extreme minority of those who took the Bible to mean what it says. When professors began saying that they used certain verses and ignored others, I realized that I had a problem. How can we come to the truth, if we use reason over the Bible itself? Later, I came to see that even many of the mainline conservative denominations held to a philosophy that pushed some of the Bible aside or at least minimized it. They call it majoring on the majors, a very "sanctified" way of saying that some of the Bible is of minor importance and hardly worthy of taking a stand on. We cannot call some of Scripture nonessential, peripheral, or minor. The Great Commission says to teach all that Christ commanded us. We can't pick and choose which gospel account we want to use or which of Christ's disourses are major. It all is essential. We are not to change even the smallest punctuation point of it (Matthew 5:18), let alone an entire book, passage, or account. To say that we are to only hold to the "essentials" and agree to disagree on the "nonessentials" is to stay forever infants in Christ because we never move from the milk of the Word to solid food.

If we want to grow to maturity, be able to learn discernment, and not be taken by the winds of deceiving doctrines that float about, we must study the full account of Scripture cover to cover. We can't toss aside any portion of the Bible. If we do, we open the door to deception, to heresy, and to perpetual infancy in Christ. Indeed, this is what we have done. May God help us.

Deception #2 "Just Believe and Receive"

This one irks me more than most; thus it ranks number two on the list. Luke 13:5 makes this an open and shut case. It says, "But unless you repent, you will all likewise perish." Do you remember when you were a kid and another kid, maybe a sibling, had

wronged you? Then your mother or authority figure came along and said to shake hands and make up? Hopefully, they also made the wrongdoer say that he or she was sorry. Yet you probably remember at least one time where you could tell that the wrongdoer wasn't at all remorseful about what he had done. He merely said the words to appease the authority. Clearly justice was not served. This is what we do to God if we do not repent. We shake His hand, figuratively speaking, say some nice words about asking forgiveness and maybe being sorry about our sins, but without true godly sorrow over sin, there is no true repentance. We mock God when we believe and receive the gospel without repenting and truly turning from sin. Such is a hollow profession to God Who is not mocked, for He sees the heart. Perhaps someone has never heard the word "repent," but they asked for forgiveness from a broken and contrite heart. That prayer God would hear. The issue is that by merely telling someone to believe that Jesus died for the sins of the world (which the demons believe also) and receiving Him (acknowledging that He died for us personally) does not necessarily save a person unless it is accompanied by repentance. This is why we must declare Jesus as Lord in our hearts (Romans 10:9-10). We turn from sin and submit to His authority. Such is the lost element of the gospel.

Whatever happened to preaching like the apostles did, telling people to repent and be saved? I just can't see Paul going before a hostile crowd and telling them to believe and receive Jesus. Most, would have said, sure, and added them to their other thousand gods. Those are not threatening or offensive words to a sinner, which the gospel by definition is (2 Corinthians 2:16). To tell someone that they have to stop worshipping their idols and believe in the one true God whose Son is Jesus Who is Lord of all cannot happen without repentance. Whether we say the word "repent" or not, our message needs to clearly call for a confrontation of the holiness of God, an acknowledgement of our sin and utter unworthiness, and a turning from it to trust in Christ Who alone can set us free from ourselves. If not, we may be giving people a false assurance of salvation, which makes them very difficult to reach with the true gospel when they are deceived into thinking that they are saved when they are not.

Deception #1 "All Is Well in the Church"

The biggest deception of all is to say that people like me who say to believe in the sufficiency of the Bible, to teach it cover to cover, and to repent and submit to the Lordship of Christ are radicals, extremists, hardliners, and judgmental fundamentalists. It is a narrow road to truly follow Christ. That is why Scripture tells us to test ourselves to see if we are indeed of the faith (2 Corinthians 13:5). On judgment day, many will say, "Lord, Lord, I did all of these church activities in your name. I tithed, invited people to church, led a home group, and was involved in the community." Yet God will tell them that He doesn't know them and that they cannot enter into His kingdom. I always read this passage thinking that these folks were self-justifying, trying to convince God of their righteousness based upon a list of good deeds. Though that may be true for some, I think it is much more likely that they are in shock and utter confusion because they really thought that they were saved and serving God. This is because they were deceived, being completely unaware that they were marching "victoriously" to their own destruction. This is why deception is so dangerous. I can't image what it would be like to think I was

saved, to go with great expectation to heaven, and to be told that I was not welcome there. How does this happen to these folks? Maybe their pastor told them to pray the prayer to believe and receive. They did, they took the membership class, and they took a spiritual gifts test. What more is there? They thought they were just fine. But they never repented and put their faith in the substitutionary atonement of Christ. They were never told to test themselves to see if they were of the faith. Perhaps they never knew with certainty that they were saved because they were never given the Biblical truth to know how to know.

All is not well. When we have an absence of prayer we have a problem. When we don't read the Word of God publicly, all is not well. When we think pragmatism is the same as truth, we are in trouble. When we let our preferences and feelings override the truth of Scripture, we are in danger. Hosea 4:6 says, "My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge." The naïve and ignorant are extremely vulnerable to deception. Those who are still infants in Christ are those who can easily be deceived. All is not well because too many are babies in Christ and not growing. We need to feed them. We need to teach them. We need to pray for them. If not, destruction is right around the corner. We need revival.

Have you been deceived? Have you been had by the devil? If the Lord has spoken to your heart, would you repent of your sin and take the evils thoughts captive unto the obedience of Christ? Would you meditate on the truth of God's Word and let Him work truth into the places where error formerly reigned? I pray that you will.

Author's Note:

I have written an entire book explaining how the principles of 2 Chronicles 7:14 (humility, prayer, seeking God's face, and repentance) must work in our churches today. This message has emphasized the errors. My book gives the solutions. If you want to read more on this topic of what it will take to see revival in our day, please visit www.relevantbibleteaching.com and order *Catch Fire: A Call to Spiritual Awakening*.