

False Advertising

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Things are often not what they appear to be. While recently shopping for a watch, we noted that some said “waterproof to 50m,” others said “waterproof to 100m,” and yet others said “waterproof to 150m.” I made some joke about not wearing it scuba diving, and the sales clerk began to explain that the labels were misleading.

She said the 50m designation meant incidental wetness like when washing a car or doing the dishes. The 100m designation meant taking a bath or swimming in a pool. The 150m designation meant as deep as one might go when snorkeling. She was actually reading this off a card that had been supplied by the manufacturer.

Lesson: Always read the fine print.

We come to expect this kind of chicanery from advertisers, but what about in our ordinary interaction with others?

The new testament warns in various places about being deceived by false teachers who flatter with smooth speech (2 Cor 11:13; 1 Tim 4:1), by those who would rob us of our liberty in Christ (Col 2:8; Gal 2:4); or by sin itself with all of its misleading promises (Heb 3:13). We are even warned against self-deceit (1 Cor 6:9; 15:33; Gal 6:7).

Since we know that advertisers take liberty with the truth, and since we are forewarned that unscrupulous people will try to trick us on spiritual grounds, what is our duty? It is to be wary but not paranoid, careful but not cynical, discerning but not disparaging. We must do our homework, compare ideas and practices to the Biblical pattern, and proceed with caution.

It is difficult to be vigilant without becoming negative or assuming the worst in others. It is also difficult not to adopt deceitful practices as the “norm.” Since everyone else seems to play fast and loose with truth, posture and bluff and dissemble (to hide under a false appearance ... conceal facts, intentions, or feelings under some pretense), what difference does it make if I do it?

The difference is that we answer to God’s standards, not those of the majority around us. Christians are to put away lying and “*speak truth with his neighbor*” (Eph 4:25). We are to lay aside guile, hypocrisy and envy (1 Pet 2:1). Paul fiercely defended his honorable intentions when accused of preaching under false pretences (1 Th 2:3; 2 Cor 12:16, said in sarcasm).

Brutally bludgeoning someone with unvarnished truth is not the antidote for deceitfulness (a la *American Idol*’s Simon Cowell). Some situations call for tact and a genuine desire to protect someone’s feelings without leaving a false impression. But pretending to be someone we really aren’t in order to curry favor or protect standing is dishonesty and calls our true character into question. If Jesus were to see us approach, could He honestly say, “A Christian, indeed, in whom is no guile” (Jn 1:47)?