

## To Christians Only?

### PREACHER! PLEASE READ AND CONSIDER THIS CAREFULLY.

There is a fundamental error in Biblical interpretation that you, if guilty of, ought to rid yourself of immediately, no matter how many sermons or series of sermons it costs you. No matter what positions you must abandon, what associations it costs you, how many statements you must retract, how much crow you must eat . . . if it brings you into greater harmony with the holy scriptures and makes you a better and more sound preacher of the true gospel, then you should welcome the correction.

Some of my friends are going to take offence and conclude that I am making a personal attack on them. But others, like the noble Bereans who searched the scriptures, like the eloquent, mighty, yet ignorant Apollos, who humbly received the more perfect instruction of Aquilla and Priscilla, will be glad to become better ministers of the word of God. If you are committed to the truth rather than a position, then I am confident you will profit by this paper.

This error, though not peculiar to, is largely one of this and the most recent generation. For that reason, it receives little, if any attention from books on hermeneutics. Yet it is the direct cause of a number of both petty and serious theological aberrations today. I speak of the practice of ascribing certain portions of scripture as addressed to true believers only, and then ruling out any interpretation or view of that passage that would not be appropriate instructions for Christians. The mischief thus caused is multiple. We have threats to true believers which are totally inconsistent with the comforts and assurances belonging to saints. We have behaviours and attitudes considered that are totally incompatible with that of regenerate men. We are forced to separate God's one people into a variety of categories because we can no longer use the "heaven or hell, saved or lost, regenerate or unregenerate, saint or sinner" delimitations we would be otherwise free to use were we not forced to consider the scriptures to believers only. Not only that, but some sober warnings intended for unregenerate men are taken out of the gospel message. Following are some of the terms taken to (but are insufficient) identify true believers.

**Believers.** Acts 8:13-23. It is said here that Simon the sorcerer believed and was baptized and continued with Philip, wondering at the signs and miracles. If we are to conclude on the basis of these terms that this man was now soundly converted to Christ, we must deal with a most peculiar Christian indeed. Here is a Christian that has no love for Christ, only for signs and wonders. He has not turned from his old love of sorcery at all. All he hankers for is this new and better way of using supernatural powers, and is willing to pay whatever price he must to get it. We have many of his descendants yet with us who think the gifts of God may be obtained by "paying a price." Peter tells him that he is to "perish," his money with him, that he has neither "part nor lot in this matter," his heart is not right in the sight of God, he is in the gall of bitterness, and in the bond iniquity.

How sad it is that we have a "Christianity" preached today that will permit the above to be a description of a "saved man." A bit carnal, perhaps, they will admit, but nevertheless a saved man because he believed. We must again be reminded that James tells us that "devils also believe and tremble" (James 2:19). We are told of many Jews who believed in His name when Jesus performed miracles among them, but that Jesus did not commit Himself unto them (John 2:23-24). Are these second-class Christians who have faith but not Christ? Are they saved, yet lacking a "Lordship" principle? No! Salvation is Christ; and Christ is always Lord, never anything less. Christ in you is the hope of glory, not a superficial humanistic faith. One of the Jews who believed in Jesus was named Nicodemus, and Jesus told him plainly that he must be born again (John 3:1-3). His human faith did not make him a Christian. The Lord has clearly ruled out any quick conclusions and assurances from the first evidences of faith when he spoke to "those Jews which believed on him . . . If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed" (John 8:31).

**Disciples.** It should be noted that Jesus said "disciples indeed." Many are the disciples who are not disciples indeed, and we should never forget this. All who follow Christ do not continue to follow Him, and all who hear His teachings do not heed them and obey them. Many of the errors made by ignoring these facts may be noted in Matthew chapters 5, 6, and 7.

It is observed from chapter 5:1-2 that "his disciples came unto him; And he opened his mouth and taught them, saying," Then it is erroneously concluded that everything which follows is addressed to persons who are already saved. It becomes necessary then to develop a soteriology that puts the kingdom of heaven in some other sphere than that of all true believers. For verse 20 of chapter 5 tells these people who are already saved that they must aspire to a level of righteousness that they may enter into the kingdom of heaven. Were all Christians in the kingdom of heaven already, then this teaching would be most inappropriate for them. Since we have decided that all disciples are true Christians and all that is said in the Sermon is to true Christians, then the kingdom of heaven must be something beyond mere Christianity. That is the error which springs from this verse.

But let us consider others. These disciples are told that they must take care lest an offending right eye or an offending right hand cause their whole body to be cast into hell (Matthew 5:29-30). Since these people are already saved from hell, how, then, can the Lord threaten them with hell? Surely, it must be some sort of temporary hell, a purgatory perhaps of some sort, either in this life or after death, where the saved man pays the consequences of failure to properly discipline his body. How utterly absurd! How can such teachings find a place in a gospel of grace? How dare we offer such a half salvation, in view of Christ's full and perfect work of redemption? The fact is that the Lord is not addressing Himself to true believers in these passages, but to persons who aspire to be Christians, to those who may think themselves saved because they are following Him. He is describing the attitudes and actions of those who would be truly saved from hell.

Can we honestly say that Matthew 6:23 describes a true believer in Christ? An evil eye? All his light is darkness? His whole body full of darkness? This may describe the average professor of Christ today, but the Lord is warning us that that is not Christianity.

And what is this strait gate which we are urged to seek to enter (Matthew 7:13-14), and this narrow way which we are warned to walk? Luke tells us (13:24) to agonize to enter it, for many shall make the attempt and not be able. Surely this cannot mean being saved, since these people are all already saved. Also it could not mean salvation, because salvation is really quite a simple and easy transaction. (All you need do is bow your head and repeat after me this simple formula.) No, this narrow, difficult gate, and this narrow path is one which is entered and walked only by first-class Christians, those who are really dedicated, have made Jesus Lord, who have been sanctified, who have gotten the "Baptism," who are sold out to serve Him. That is the error which is derived from this passage. It is pure baloney! The Lord has made it plain and clear what He is referring to. The destination in view of the wide and narrow gates respectively is destruction or life, hell or heaven, damnation or salvation. Why must we pollute and complicate the pure and simple gospel of salvation? Surely it is to give scriptural sanction to our exotic systems which have risen from our own vain imaginations.

The Lord gives the sum and substance of His Sermon on the Mount in chapter 7, verses 21-27. Many shall profess to know Him, shall even engage in what may outwardly appear to be service to Him, casting out demons, doing wondrous works, constructing buildings of sort. But they are all workers of iniquity. He never knew them. You may still call these "disciples" true Christians if you wish, but please not that they are workers of iniquity, they are fools who build upon the unstable sands of false doctrine and works of men, their houses all fall in the storms of testing and they are separated from the Lord forever.

**Brother, Brethren.** Brother (or sister) is at the same time the most common and most endearing and respectful title that can be extended to a fellow Christian. But it is not used exclusively in that sense. In both Testaments it is used to speak, not only of one's immediate family, that is, those brothers and sisters of the same parents, but of all the Hebrew race. That is, all Israelites are sometimes referred to as brethren and all senior men as fathers. We also refer to our blood brothers as well as our spiritual brothers. Therefore, we should not be so inconsistent and unreasonable so as to conclude that all references to brethren or brothers in the New Testament speak of genuine Christians. This *is* the sense in which it is normally used, and we could go so far as to say that it is the rule, but there are exceptions.

The first exception should be noted that even when the intention is made to refer to spiritual brethren, all that are *called* spiritual brethren are not truly spiritual brethren, even as in the case of "believers" or "disciples." Please note 1 Corinthians 6:9-11. Unless, of course, you want to make the kingdom of God something other than Christianity, which is exactly the error some derive from this. Then you have the monstrosity of Christian whores, idolaters, railers, homosexuals, thieves, drunkards and extortioners, who are saved, yet not in the kingdom of God.

Some false brethren are not that obvious. Paul speaks of the perils which such men among true brethren create (2 Corinthians 11:26), and of some who subtly corrupt Christian fellowship and doctrine (Galatians 2:4). Therefore, a writer of the scripture may address men as brethren, *yet* leave room for warning that some of them may not be true Christians, and therefore, not secure in Christ. Two such passages are James 5:19-20 and 1 John 5:16. When one begins from the premise that brethren or brother always means true believer, then he is forced to adopt a doctrine of Christian capital punishment. That is, God sometimes kills some of His children in punishment for a certain sin. The doctrine of the Christian sin unto death comes from no other source than this erroneous use of the title brother.

In the first place, God does not punish His children for their sins in a punitive sense. He has already punished Christ for them and cannot lay anything else to their charge. He will not impute to them and cannot lay anything else to their charge. He will not impute to them the guilt for their transgressions, for it has already been imputed to Christ, and He has paid the full penalty, satisfying justice (Romans 4:8, 8:1, 33, 34). God does chasten His children didactically. That is, He teaches them by scourging and affliction. But such teaching and training is in the course of this life, something in which temporal death could not participate. He sometimes kills some to teach *others*, as in the case of Ananias and Sapphira, but surely theirs was not "the sin unto death," or a just and consistent God would surely kill every Christian on the spot the moment he lied.

Secondly, if God were to punish Christians, He certainly would not do it by death. What true believer would consider the opportunity to go to heaven punishment? The apostle declared his longing to depart and be with Christ.

Thirdly, if there were *a* sin, a particular act which a believer could commit and be consequently cut down early by God, then we can be sure that no one knows what it is. But John seems to indicate that the intercessor will be able to distinguish, and therefore not waste his intercessory time on someone who is locked up to judgment.

It seems, therefore, more reasonable to consider this sin unto death as manifest apostasy, rather than a club with which to threaten the true people of God. The man who sins in such a fashion goes to hell. He is not, nor was he ever a true believer.

It is also quite likely that both James and John used the term brother in a broader sense, either referring to fellow-man or Jewish brothers. It is worth noting that Peter, Stephen and Paul all used it in this sense. Peter, in Acts 2:29, 37 and 3:17, calls unbelieving Jews brethren, and exhorts them to repent and trust the Lord. Stephen, in making his defense before the reprobate Jews who condemned him, calls them brethren in Acts 7:2. Paul likewise addresses his accusers as brethren in Acts 22:1, 23:1,5,6. He also addresses Jewish evangelistic prospects as brethren in Acts 28:17,21.

Therefore it behooves us to seek something more substantial than the term brother upon which to build sound doctrine.

**We, Us.** The writers of the holy scriptures were surely Christian, for they wrote as the Holy Spirit within them moved and directed. For this reason, some erroneously deduct that when the writer uses a personal pronoun, thereby including himself, he must be speaking of Christians only. This, however, cannot be true. We will cite a few examples.

Paul writes to the church at Galatia plagued with Judaistic legalists: “But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed (damned).” Paul has no intention of preaching a false gospel, but he assures them that whoever does come preaching it, even if it is “us,” that person is not a Christian (Galatians 1:8).

We sometimes means, not just true Christians only, but a group of people including true Christians. Then certain possibilities or tests are introduced which identify true believers from false professors or apostates. A number of such passages are found in Hebrews; and because of the imputed wrong meaning of this personal pronoun, some erroneously think they have found support for the doctrine of falling from grace or other such wrong teaching. Consider the following:

Hebrews 2:3. “How shall we escape if we neglect so great salvation.” This cannot be spoken of true believers. They *have* escaped. It is addressed to those who may hope to be saved but are likely to pay no heed to the word spoken to them.

Hebrews 3:6. “But Christ as a son over his own house; whose house we are, if we hold fast the confidence and the rejoicing of the hope firm unto the end.” The writer gives the ground of assurance found in perseverance. We are *not* Christ’s house if we do not continue in Him, no matter who we are.

Hebrews 10:26. “For if we sin willfully after that we have received the knowledge of the truth, there remaineth no more sacrifice for sins.” The passage goes on to speak of certain judgment, fiery indignation devouring such adversaries . . . enemies of God, and divine vengeance (revenge). These are not blood-bought children of God who committed some sin for which Christ’s blood was not efficient, but apostates who draw back into perdition (verse 39). Such were never a part of the redeemed. The writer uses the term “we” to impress upon every man the possibility of his own apostasy if he turns back from Christ and casts away his faith.

John uses “we” as an inclusive term and then sets forth circumstances under which some of “us” may prove to be not true believers. “If we say that we have fellowship with him and walk in darkness, we lie, and do not the truth.” On what basis this conclusion? “God is light, and in him is no darkness at all” (1John 1:5-6). True believers know that they sin and confess it. “If we say that we have no sin we deceive ourselves, and truth *is not in us*” (1 John 1:8). “If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us” (1 John 1:10). Can it be said of true Christians that the truth is not in them or that God’s word is not in them? Of course not. Yet the possibility is introduced that some of “us” may be in that a very condition; and if that condition is true of us, then we have no scriptural grounds of assurance. This is exactly what we are to understand from First John. Christians are those of us who walk in the light as he is in the light, who admit to being sinners, confess their sins and are cleansed by the blood of Christ from all unrighteousness. First John 1 was never intended to be used as a basis for teaching that some Christians walk in darkness, deny their sin, refuse to confess them, and live out of fellowship with Christ and other believers. Such are not Christians at all.

This error also lends itself to some views of eschatology (last things, end time events). Romans 14:10 is often used as a proof text of a separate judgment for believers only, on the basis that Paul says, “we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ.” It is urged upon us to believe that Paul speaks only of Christians because he included himself in it. But why are we not to believe that he is simply including himself in all of mankind who must surely face the Lord in judgment? What is here to distinguish this from the same idea in Hebrews 9:27? “And it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment: “Do not the following verses indicate the universality of the judgment in view. *Every* knee shall bow. *Every* tongue shall confess. *Every* one of us shall give account of himself to God. The same type of verse appears in 2 Corinthians 5:10. “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ: . . .” In this case it seems certain that we are to understand that the lost are included, for verse 11 follows with “knowing therefore the terror of the Lord, we persuade men;” There is no “terror of the Lord” for justified men. For them, their punitive judgment is passed. They shall not come into condemnation (John 5:24), and the perfect love of God has cast out all fear. They will stand before God with full assurance that all their transgressions have been put out of His sight under the blood of Christ.

Support for wrong views of the imminence of the return of Christ is also drawn from this hermeneutical error. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 15:51. “Behold, I shew you a mystery; We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed.” Also in 1 Thessalonians 4:15-17 he writes, “For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord, that we which are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord shall not prevent them which are asleep . . . Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: . . .” Are we to understand from such language that Paul really believed, fully expected the Lord to return in his lifetime? That is what we are often told, and admonished to do the same. But let me assure you, Paul believed no such thing. For if he did, then he was surely deceived. Christ did not return in his lifetime. And if he was deceived, who deceived him? Not the Holy Spirit. I am confident Paul was wrong at times, *but not when he was writing the holy scriptures as he is here*. Otherwise, you can throw out the window all his writings. I don’t think you want to do that. Paul did not believe he would be “raptured out.” He readily received the word of the Holy Ghost at the mouth of the prophet Agabus and declared that he was ready, not only to be bound, but to die at Jerusalem (Acts 21:13). And he wrote to Timothy in the closing days of his life, “I am ready to be offered, and the time of my departure is at hand.”

Paul’s use of the “we” in the above passages is intended to mean those *of* us who are alive when Christ returns, not exclusively those who were then living.

A few other terms we will mention but briefly. They will, for the most part, be comprehended by considering the broad sense the scriptures’ use of “*the people of God*.” God chose and called out a particular people as His instruments, but not even all those people were His objects of mercy. Both Jacob and Esau were among His people, but only Jacob was the partaker of God’s mercy and as such, the type of the true believer among the outward people of God. See Romans 9:7-16. “Neither, because they are the seed of Abraham, are they all children; but, In Isaac shall thy seed be called.” (Rom. 9:7) Why Isaac? Because Isaac was promised, (vs. 8) and as such, elect according to God’s sovereign mercy.

The “God shall judge his people” of Hebrews 10:30 is a quotation from Deuteronomy 32:36. The “people of God” in view in Deuteronomy are said to be God’s enemies, objects of His divine wrath and vengeance, idolaters, whose vine is of Sodom. They are destined for eternal punishment, even as the apostates in view in Hebrews 10.

“*Sanctified*,” meaning to be set apart, when used in connection with persons usually means true Christians. But there are some exceptions to that. In Hebrews 10:29, the possibility is set forth of a person being sanctified by an external covenant of blood (not the blood itself), and then drawing back into perdition. Likewise, 1 Corinthians 7:14 speaks of unbelieving spouses being sanctified by the Christian wife or husband. But such are manifestly not saved in their unbelief. They are simply set apart and partake of the Christian community because of their identification in the family. This is not household salvation, but household identification.

The term “*bought*” used of false prophets in 2 Peter 2:1 does not mean that these reprobates were actually redeemed by the blood of Christ. They may have outwardly professed so, and spoke and *thought* as so, but were never partakers of Him. It is also true that Christ does own them as He does own all the earth and every creature, and they are a part of His outward people, but these have not been the objects of His divine mercy and were not a part of His specially purchased bride.

The fact is that many terms are used to describe God’s redeemed people, but few of them alone can be cited as certain designations. Such terms as are found in Romans 8 are some of these, and are deliberately given to positively identify those who are eternally safe in Christ. They are those who “are in Christ Jesus,” verse 1, who “walk not after the flesh but after the spirit,” verse 1-4, they who “are after the Spirit and mind the things of the Spirit,” verse 5, who are “not in the flesh but in the Spirit,” verse 9, who are “led by the Spirit of God.”

True believers are carefully identified when it is intended to do so, as in John 1:12-13. They receive Christ, believe on His name and are born of God. We could fill pages with such detained description. The Bible abounds with them. But our purpose is served if we have demonstrated that we must not assume the sacred writers are referring to redeemed people only when they have not taken pains to say that they are.

When Jesus or the Apostles addressed people, they generally did not address them as either believers only or unbelievers only. The exceptions to this principle are clearly indicated. They simply addressed them as persons, laying out the terms of God’s salvation for all men. It would do us well to do the same. We need to rid ourselves of the silly idea that we can presume all of a particular group or congregation to be Christians, and speak to them from such a premise. The Apostles never did. The Christ Who knew all men never did, for He knew that false professors always made a mixed multitude. Let us therefore preach the gospel without respect of persons, proclaiming the way of salvation through repentance toward God and faith in Christ Jesus the Lord, laying out the grounds of hope and assurance for those who truly believe, giving no false assurance to those who do not walk uprightly.

- C. M.