

FALSE TEACHERS

THEIR IDENTITY, THEIR MESSAGE

By Arlen L. Chitwood

It was *after six days* that Jesus took Peter, James, and John up into a “high mountain” and was “transfigured before them.” They, at this time, “saw his glory” (Matt. 17:1-5; Luke 9:32). And this event made such an impact on Peter that over thirty years later, when seeking to emphasize the importance of Christian preparedness in view of the Lord’s return and the establishment of His kingdom (II Peter 1:1-15), Peter called attention to what he, James, and John had seen years before while on the Mount with Christ:

“For we have not followed cunningly devised fables, when we made known unto you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but were eyewitnesses of his majesty [a superlative in the Gk. text, ‘...eyewitnesses of His greatest regal magnificence’].

For he received from God the Father honour and glory, when there came such a voice to him from the excellent glory, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.

And this voice which came from heaven we heard, when we were with him in the holy mount” (II Peter 1:16-18).

Then Peter in his epistle, after commenting on the prophetic word (1:19-21), turns to a discussion about and warning against false teachers (2:1ff). The subject under discussion preceding the mention of false teachers bringing in “damnable heresies” (2:1) has to do with the Word of the Kingdom (1:1-21), which is also the subject under discussion at the conclusion of the mention of false teachers (3:1, 2; cf. 1:12-15).

To remain within context, it must be recognized that the false teachers to whom Peter referred were teachers proclaiming false doctrine relative to the Word of the Kingdom, the subject under discussion. They were proclaiming false doctrine relative to the saving of the soul, not false doctrine relative to the salvation presently possessed by these Christians.

And these false teachers were not unsaved individuals; nor were they ignorantly proclaiming this false doctrine. These were teachers who had, at a previous time, “escaped the pollutions of the world through the knowledge [Gk. *epignosis*, ‘mature knowledge’] of the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ,” but had become “again entangled therein,” and had been “overcome [rather than having overcome (Rev. 2, 3)]” (2:20; cf. 1:4).

According to I Cor. 2:14, an unsaved person cannot even come into a rudimentary knowledge (Gk. *gnosis*) of “the things of the Spirit of God,” for these things “are spiritually discerned (cf. I Cor. 2:9-13). In II Peter 2:20 though the false teachers are said to have gone beyond this simple rudimentary knowledge, coming into a mature understanding of the Word. Thus, from a Scriptural standpoint, it is not possible to view these false teachers as other than saved individuals.

And the word *epignosis* (“mature knowledge”) used in II Peter 2:20 is used in contexts in the New Testament having to do with Biblical doctrine pertaining to the saving of the soul, the Word of the Kingdom (cf. Eph. 1:17; 4:13; Phil. 1:9; Col. 1:9, 10; 2:2; 3:10; I Tim. 2:4; II Tim. 2:25; 3:7; Titus 1:1; Heb. 10:26; II Peter 1:2, 3, 8). Thus, it is evident from both the context of II Peter 2:20 and the way *epignosis* is used various places in the Greek New Testament that these false teachers had come into a knowledge of the Word of the Kingdom, had turned from it, and were teaching false doctrine concerning the message they had at one time received and understood.

It is teachers of this nature that Peter warns against — teachers proclaiming a similar message to the “evil report” proclaimed by ten of the twelve spies during Moses’ day (spies who had seen and understood the things surrounding the land set before them [Num. 13:26-33]). And Peter concludes his warning in the same manner he had

used to emphasize the importance of Christian preparedness in view of the Lord’s return and the establishment of His kingdom prior to his warning against false teachers. Though not mentioning the event directly, as he had previously done, Peter alludes to what he, James, and John had seen while on the Mount with Christ.

Through a reference to past and present worlds — “the world that then was” (3:6) and “the heavens and the earth, which are now” (3:7) — Peter puts to silence the claim by the false teachers that “all things continue as they were from the beginning of the creation” (3:4). The “world that then was [which included the heavens also, for the sun was darkened]” was destroyed (3:6; cf. Gen. 1:2a), and “the heavens and the earth, which are now” will be destroyed (3:7, 10-12).

Then Peter draws the whole matter to a climax by alluding to what he had previously said about being on the Mount with Christ (1:16-18):

“But, beloved, be not ignorant of this one thing [*lit.*, ‘stop allowing this one thing to escape your attention’], that one day is with the Lord as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day” (II Peter 3:8).

There is a septenary structure to Peter’s second epistle. The event on the Mount occurred “after six days,” which would be *on the seventh day* (Matt. 17:1). That would be an allusion back to the foundation in Gen. 1:1-2:3, and it was this septenary structure within God’s dealings with man that Peter referred to in II Peter 3:8 (a statement reflecting back on what is revealed in the immediately preceding verses concerning the destruction of two worlds [Gen. 1:2a and II Peter 3:12]). The six and seven days in Genesis portend six and seven thousand years, and so do the days in Matt. 17:1. And this is exactly what Peter had in mind when he stated, “But, beloved, stop allowing this one thing to escape your attention...”

(Note that the destruction of “the world that then was” in II Peter 3:6 can have no reference to the destruction of the earth by water during Noah’s day. This would not be in line with either the evident parallel between past and future destructions of the earth [3:6, 7] or the septenary structure of the epistle [1:16-18; 3:5-8].

The future destruction will include the heavens as well, and, within the parallel, so must the past destruction. The only past destruction which included the heavens was the pre-Adamic destruction in Gen. 1:2a. The Noachian Flood in Gen. 6-8 had nothing to do with the heavens [apart from the canopy of water immediately above the earth coming down, providing part of the water which flooded the earth]. Also, the main emphasis in the destruction wrought by the Noachian Flood was a destruction of the people on the earth, not the earth itself. No restoration of the earth occurred afterwards, as in Gen. 1:2b-25, for such was unnecessary.

Though a destruction of the earth occurred during Noah's day [Gen. 6:13], this was not the same type destruction which occurred in Gen. 1:2a; nor was it the same type destruction referred to in II Peter 3:6 [necessitated by both the septenary structure of the epistle and a parallel between past and future destructions in this section of Scripture].

The two destructions in II Peter 3:6, 7 are separated by a 7,000-year period. One occurred at a time prior to the 7,000 years, necessitating a restoration of both the heavens and the earth at the beginning of the 7,000 years; and the other will occur at the end of the 7,000 years, necessitating the creation of a "new heavens and a new earth" [cf. Gen. 1:2b-25; II Peter 3:10-13].)

FALSE TEACHERS — PRESENT

During the first century "the gospel of the glory of Christ," "the word of the kingdom," "the hope of the gospel," Paul's "gospel," "the saving of the soul" (cf. Matt. 13:19; Rom. 16:25; II Cor. 4:3, 4; Col. 1:23; I Tim. 1:11; Heb. 10:35-39) — *all referring to the same central teaching* — was universally proclaimed within Christendom. Paul states in Col. 1:23 (cf. Rom. 10:18; Col. 1:5, 6) that this message "was preached to every creature which is under heaven," which would be to say that the message was proclaimed *throughout all Christendom* (for this message is to be proclaimed to the saved, not the unsaved).

Today though the situation has almost completely reversed itself. This is a message seldom heard in Christendom. The leaven which the woman hid in the three measures of meal in Matt. 13:33 has done its damag-

ing work, and it will continue working until *the whole of Christendom* has been leavened.

Both the destructive work depicted by the leaven in Matthew chapter thirteen and the deterioration depicted in Revelation chapters two and three center around *the Word of the Kingdom*, not Biblical doctrine in general. Such is evident from both sections of Scripture, understood within their contextual settings. In Matt. 13:33 the matter relates to the kingdom of the heavens and the Word of the Kingdom (cf. vv. 11, 19); and in Revelation chapters two and three the matter relates to works and overcoming, with the judgment seat of Christ and the coming kingdom in view (cf. 1:10-20; 2:2, 7, 9, 11, 13, 17, 19, 26; 3:1, 5, 8, 12, 15, 21).

Thus, because of the working of the leaven, the Church, relative to the proclamation of *the Word of the Kingdom*, will exist at the end of the dispensation in the state depicted by the Church in Laodicea — "wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked" (Rev. 3:14ff).

THE MESSAGE — PAST, PRESENT

In the preceding respect, a false message concerning the Word of the Kingdom today would come more from ignorance than it would from knowledge. Christians in general have little to no understanding of the message surrounding the Word of the Kingdom. And not understanding this message, they end up with all types of perversions of Scripture when dealing with the numerous passages having to do with this subject.

(A good example is the so-called Lordship Salvation teaching, which takes passages having to do with the Word of the Kingdom and attempts to apply these passages to the message of salvation by grace through faith. Such not only destroys one gospel [the gospel of the glory of Christ] but it corrupts the other gospel [the gospel of the grace of God]. And this type message is presently being widely proclaimed and received throughout Christendom, in both liberal and so-called fundamental circles alike.)

That's where Christendom finds itself today. And things are not going to improve. In fact, according to Scripture, the opposite will result. Things will instead deteriorate

even further. The leaven is going to continue doing its damaging work *until the whole has been leavened* (ref. Matt. 13:33), and conditions when Christ returns will be exactly as He said they would be.

When Christ was on earth the first time He asked His disciples, "Nevertheless when the Son of man cometh, shall he find faith [the faith] on the earth?" (Luke 18:8). The answer to the question, according to the way in which the question is worded in the Greek text, is "No." The Son of Man is not going to find "the faith" on the earth at the time of His return.

The expression, "the faith," has a peculiar reference to teachings surrounding the Word of the Kingdom (cf. I Tim. 6:11-15, 19; II Tim. 4:7, 8; Jude 3; see also the contextual setting of Luke 18:8). And this is the message Christ will not find being proclaimed in the Churches at the time of His return — the central message universally proclaimed to Christians during the first century and the central message which should have been proclaimed throughout Christendom during the whole of the dispensation.

Matters though have become so far removed from reality in Christendom today that Christianity, from a Biblical perspective, is hardly recognizable. The Word of the Kingdom is ignored, despised, rejected, etc. Christians have done everything with the message but receive, understand, and proclaim it.

Thus, false teaching surrounding the Word of the Kingdom is being accomplished at the end of the leavening process after an entirely different fashion than it was at the beginning of this process. At the beginning there were numerous Christians who understood this message. Thus, *a false message* was necessary. Today though very few Christians have any comprehension of the message at all. Consequently, *the present silence* on the subject renders a false message unnecessary.

And both antagonism toward the message at the beginning of the dispensation and silence concerning the message at the end of the dispensation will serve together to bring about the same end. The Son of Man will not find "the faith" on the earth at the time of His return.

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