

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

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The Character of False Prophets

But there were false prophets also among the people, even as there shall be false teachers among you, who privily shall bring in damnable heresies, even denying the Lord that bought them, and bring upon themselves swift destruction. And many shall follow their pernicious ways; by reason of whom the way of truth shall be evil spoken of. And through covetousness shall they with feigned words make merchandise of you: whose judgment now of a long time lingereth not, and their damnation slumbereth not. (2 Peter 2:1–3, KJV 1900)

Regardless of one's interpretation, 2 Peter, second chapter poses significant challenges to the serious Bible student. It has been twisted in as many weird directions as just about any passage in the Bible. The admittedly difficult task of right interpretation becomes more problematic by our failure to follow the obvious clues that the Holy Spirit directed Peter to include in the text. Instead of trying to impose our preconceptions onto the chapter, let's work at "Listening" and following the Holy Spirit's lead in our present study of the chapter.

One of the major red herring logical fallacies¹ that often confuse our understanding of this chapter is the near obsessive desire in some Bible students to decide whether every person who appears in Scripture is one of God's elect or not. On a few occasions in Scripture, we are enlightened on this point that only God is capable of judging righteously, but in most instances, we are not told. Regardless the reasons, the man who makes judging a person's election status his chief aim shall

¹ A red herring logical fallacy introduces an irrelevant point that, deliberate or not, tends to distract us from the primary and intended point of the lesson. In this case, endless arguments over whether these false prophets are children of God or not wholly distract us from Peter's stated purpose in the chapter, a full, though painful examination of false prophets. A hunting dog who follows the scent of the animal that he is trained to hunt could supposedly be confused and distracted by dragging a dead, smelly fish across the trail that he is following. The strong scent of the fish might confuse the dog and encourage him to follow the scent of the fish instead of the animal that he was trained to follow. People with an agenda different from the written or spoken material to be followed often, knowingly or not, introduce irrelevant ideas that wholly derail any meaningful study of the material's intended meaning. In this case, chasing the red herring question of whether or not these false prophets are children of God wholly distracts us from Peter's inspired point, the reality and the potential damage of a false prophet.

miserably and dangerously fail. I've known men who boast at either finding more elect people or more who were not elect in the Bible than anyone else. Both attitudes intrude into God's exclusive domain and are bound to err grievously. If we reject the human and vain curiosity about the group's election status and follow the inspired words, we might make a bit more sense out of this admittedly difficult chapter.

But there were false prophets also among the people, even as there shall be false teachers among you.... This chapter continues the teaching that we studied in the first chapter. In that chapter, Peter emphatically covered a fruitful—or unfruitful—faith and a final, reliable, and authoritative source of knowledge and truth for the family of God in the Scriptures, our Bible. Given the power and the appeal of a fruitful faith, and given the obvious truth of a written and preserved record that Peter describes as far more reliable and convincing to him than his own eyewitness experiences, we might conclude that truth would dominate the religious experience and beliefs of people and that error of any kind would be rare indeed. Peter's introduction to the second chapter of his letter confronts that errant idea and reminds us of the sad reality that we face in a broken world full of broken people, including broken people who say that they desire to obey God and believe His gospel. Just as the record of the Old Testament contains a liberal sufficiency of false prophets and a full description of the pain and damage that they inflicted, Peter reminds us that we must prepare ourselves for a similar situation in our time.

...who privily shall bring in damnable heresies. Throughout this chapter, the Holy Spirit will take the roof off the minds of false prophets and show us what drives them to promote their error, often with fervent passion. We need not think that any individual false prophet is guilty of all the traits mentioned in this chapter, but we would be inexcusably naïve to think that none of these traits appear in a given false prophet. Peter here reminds us of the first two strategies of the false prophet. 1) They work privately, one on one, more effectively than they work in an open, transparent,

and public way. They plant the seeds of their error with individuals over whom they have strong influence. Like weeds sown in a garden, the seeds of error spread, at first, quietly and slowly, but eventually, if not confronted and removed, they take over the garden and choke out the fruits and vegetables that should grow there, first in one church, and, left unchecked, in many churches and preachers. 2) What they teach is “damnable heresies,” not simply a slightly different slant or way of explaining the same truth that people believe. The false prophet will work, and with disturbing skill, to depict his false ideas as merely another way of explaining an accepted truth. He will pretend that he hasn’t really changed that much at all, that his beliefs and yours are really quite similar and compatible. And he will convince the gullible folk whom he “privily” puts under his ether. Often these folks will then become his agents to spread the error more widely. Jesus indicted the scribes and Pharisees of His day for their skillful practice of this behavior.

Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye compass sea and land to make one proselyte, and when he is made, ye make him twofold more the child of hell than yourselves. (Matthew 23:15)

The false teacher’s objective is not so much about truth, though he will adroitly convince the unsuspecting that truth is his only interest. His objective is to gain more followers to himself, and he uses his false teachings as his tool. Both Jesus and Peter uncover the false and devious motives of the false prophet. He will tell his followers how unselfish and truth-seeking he is, but his teachings and actions do not support his false claims. By the Holy Spirit’s direction, Peter refers to the false teachings of these men as “damnable heresies.” Only if you wisely look past the claims and examine both the man’s motives—as evidenced by both his conduct and his words and his teachings—in light of Scripture will you uncover the disappointing reality of his bad character.

Many years ago, I was researching the Bible doctrine of the Trinity in light of the historical deviations that from early on sought to confuse and twist that central doctrine of the nature of God. Two of the most significant early errors were Sabellianism and Arianism. Sabellius taught what is historically referred to as “Modalism,” the idea that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit do not refer to “Persons” in the being of God, but merely to “Modes” of revelation. God supposedly appears in the “Mode” of Father at times, but then at other times, He appears in the “Mode” of the Son, and also in the “Mode” of the Holy Spirit. Every passage in the Gospel record of Jesus’ time in human flesh in which we see the appearance and/or interaction between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit directly refutes this error. Example; when

Jesus prayed just prior to going to Jerusalem that last time, and the Father answered, did the Father answer, or did Jesus play the role of cosmic ventriloquist, deceitfully appearing to be the Father and projecting what seemed to the disciples to be the Father’s voice? Arius taught that Jesus is not at all God in the sense of equality with Jehovah God, the Father, but they claim that He was the greatest of God’s created beings. They teach that He is a lesser god. In the process of this study, I also examined the teachings of people who advocate both of these errors in our time. In my research, I discovered a booklet written by modern advocates of Arianism entitled, “*Should You Believe in the Trinity?*” Presented as a scholarly research paper, this booklet quoted liberally from mainstream, historical Christian writers and denominations. However, the paper carefully selected the quotes included to leave the impression that these people and denominations really rejected the doctrine of the Trinity that they actually strongly believe. They framed brief quotes to leave one with the idea that many historical denominations and respected Christian writers at one time agreed with them, but their modern successors had since departed from those historical beliefs.² Since I had several of the resources cited in this work in my library, I took the time to actually look up the references cited and read them in the full context of the author’s actual beliefs. I have seldom ever read any work that was so sadly misleading and deceptive. It rather consistently misrepresented the beliefs of those sources cited. A studious Christian who read the work wrote a well-researched reply, “*Why You Should Believe in the Trinity.*”³

The strategy used in the referenced work is sadly typical of the false teacher’s attempts to legitimize his errant ideas. Think. If the devil or his minions appeared to people as a devious, ugly monster with horns and a sharp, pointed tail, all diabolical red in color, how many people would fawn over him and run to follow him? He started his career with subtle deception, and he has perfected it, both in his own works and in the false teachings

² A favorite tactic of the false teacher is to find somewhere in history the name of a respected person or group that either believed as he does, or that appeared to so believe, frame that belief as historical and accepted, and then accuse his peers of departing from the faith, while he only wants to return to the true historical faith of the fathers.

³ Any study of God stretches the fabric of our minds beyond their limits, but Scripture does teach us many truths that we need to know for right respect and worship of our God and Savior. Regarding the question of Father, Son/Word, and Holy Spirit, one verse stands out as a powerful and concise revelation. “...there are three...these three are one.” (1 John 5:7) Any teaching that fails to affirm the equal balance of both parts of this verse errs, and should be soundly and firmly rejected.

that so thrill him when they appear. Only if the false teacher can convince people under his influence that all the harsh charges against him are misrepresentations and misunderstandings, that he is really a good, sound, and sincere believer, shall he succeed in his goal.

Throughout our study of this chapter, we shall periodically go back to the first chapter and entrench our anchor in that “more sure word of prophecy” that God gave us to enrich our faith, and to enable us to know and avoid the false prophet. In the decisive and righteous end, it is the “...more sure word...” of Scripture that reveals and condemns the false prophet, not our private assessment of his personality, his political correctness, or his winsome personality.

...even denying the Lord that bought them, and bring upon themselves swift destruction. I am inclined **not** to generalize Scripture. As we study through this chapter, we may well encounter Peter’s inspired observation that some false prophets are not children of God at all, but this present description leaves no doubt that a significant number of them are children of God whose false beliefs and teachings contradict the fact that Jesus died for them and bought them. This point may shock the modern student of Scripture, but it is not at all different from the people whom Peter has already mentioned who fail to add the seven godly traits to their faith. The outcome of this failure Peter describes as “...*hath forgotten that he was purged from his old sins.*” (2 Peter 1:9b) I suggest that both passages describe a similar person. The false teacher, however sincerely he may appear, failed to enrich his faith with the seven traits that Peter named in the first chapter, and that failure eventually lead him to become so self-deceived that he became a false teacher, seeking to influence others to follow his unfruitful and self-serving ways. It is difficult to ignore the striking similarity between “...*hath forgotten that he was purged from his old sins*” and “...*even denying the Lord that bought them.*” Peter didn’t write that they claim that the Lord bought them. He categorically states that the Lord did buy them, but, in their error, they deny this purchase. Being bought by the Lord in no way characterizes someone who is not one of God’s elect, a child of God.

The information that Peter gives us in this brief lesson likely shocks our godly senses, but we should respectfully study it and learn from its warnings, lest we become the naïve captives of the false teacher. In today’s world of convenience and invention, the false teacher need only set up a winsome website to expose people far and wide to his errors. No believer should become so influenced by the appealing songs that he “Discovers” in such websites that he begins to question or disbelieve the teachings of the man whom the Lord called to serve as his pastor in the local church of his membership. We should constantly remind ourselves of a central Biblical

truth. The Lord designed that the primary supporter and protector of His truth would be His church (1 Timothy 3:14-15), a word that in the New Testament never refers to a whole denomination of like-minded believers. The word is used in the New Testament in two ways only; 1) to refer to the members of a local church assembly or to a group of such assemblies with the word appearing in the plural form, “Churches”; or 2) to the whole family of God, redeemed and gathered with their Lord and Savior at the Second Coming. We find no Scripture that indicates in any way that God would eventually choose to preserve His truth by way of the internet. Likewise, we find no support from Scripture that God chooses to preserve His truth by privately revealing it to one or two—or a few—men whom He supposedly calls to restore His churches to forgotten truth. This private calling, restoration movement characterized most of the major heretical departures from historical—Biblical—Christianity in our country in the nineteenth century and it no less characterizes the false prophet of our day. One need only briefly study the writings of Joseph Smith, Brigham Young, Judge Russell, or Alexander Campbell to discover this restoration movement, private revelation error. Today, no less than in the first century, God’s vehicle for the support and preservation of His truth is twofold, His church and His Scriptures, that “...more sure word of prophecy.” God never in Scripture so much as hints that one man with deviant beliefs shall serve as the “...pillar and ground of...” His truth. When a man makes such a claim to be the last and best hope for our return to the truth, we should beware the man, not run blindly after him. We shall further study Peter’s inspired teaching regarding false prophets.

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Worship service each Sunday
Joseph R. Holder

10:30 A. M.
Pastor