

5. Saints or Sinners

What happens to a person when he places his faith in Jesus Christ is a question that, in some ways *cannot* be answered but, in other ways, must be *rightly* answered. That is, as time goes on after our conversion, what is it that we were and what is it that we have become? Nearly everyone who has truly experienced Christ and placed their faith in Him can name a date in which they changed – except perhaps those whose childhoods were so immersed in Christ that they no longer know the day but just know they have walked with Him since childhood. But this change, in the New Testament, is called conversion. (Mt. 18:3) Conversion is preceded by repentance (a change of mind and attitude and a turning of one's life away from sin and self and toward God) and is accomplished by faith (a spiritual ability to believe, given to us by God – Eph. 2:8-9 - but set in motion by our sincere repentance). Conversion is also called a new birth from above. (Jn. 3:3, 5, 1 Pet. 1:23) Thus it is a birthing event, a planting of a seed (Jas. 1:21), that produces an infant and not an adult. A conversion experience that is genuine will go on in time to result in diminished “works of the flesh” and increased “fruit of the Spirit.” (see Gal. 5:19-23)

Until we become spiritually mature, however, we will view the way of following Christ from a self-centered perspective and, though we can give mental and intellectual agreement to the idea that our conversion entails a transference or translation from darkness to light (Col. 1:13), we don't really grasp all of the significance of what that means. And because the children of God are hunted by the devil (1 Pet. 5:8), the period of spiritual infancy and immaturity are the most opportune times for him to strike at any vulnerable, exposed child. The “fiery darts” with which the enemy strikes at us are deceptions which our faith (in Christ and in the truths which He has taught us) is able to block and extinguish. (Eph. 6:16, Jn. 8:44)

This is the simplicity that is in Christ and, if a person always obeyed Christ or never believed any deceptions, it could always remain this simple. (see 2 Cor. 11:3) But our enemy is exceedingly crafty and “while men slept” (Mt. 13:25), he laid several snares and initiated carefully concealed strategies of deception that cause unwary souls to disobey Christ and to disbelieve truth by believing a conflicting or competing distortion or deception. The devil's work has been so extensive that today there is no Scriptural truth – referring here to a rightly divided word that nestles perfectly into the whole counsel of God – that does not have one or more corresponding and competing distortions. In fact, many of these distortions are the basis for the many sects (“denominations”) that abound today. It is no exaggeration to say that the people who claim to follow Christ have forfeited most, indeed almost all, of their birthrights in Christ by agreeing to one deception or another and thus they have placed themselves under the influence and power of the enemy of their souls.

So what *is* an individual after a genuine conversion? Before the conversion he is an unrepentant, unregenerate sinner, a natural man. (Eph. 4:17-19) After the conversion he is a new creation. (2 Cor. 5:17) Before his conversion, he was isolated and alone. But after his conversion, he is no longer merely an isolated and alone individual – he is joined in intimate unity with God (Father, Son and Spirit – Jn. 14:16, 23) and he is a member of Christ's body. (1 Cor. 12:12-14) Such a one as this is called by the New Testament a *saint*, literally, one set apart for the use and purposes of God, a holy one.

Again, this is the simplicity that is in Christ. There are saints, spiritual new creations growing in the grace and knowledge of Christ and God, and there are sinners, unrepentant, natural, fallen men who have no desire or intention to surrender to God and obey His commands.

But against this simplicity the devil counters with a deception – “saints” must now be sinlessly perfect “holy” people. Some “Christian” sects even worship and pray to such “saints,” choosing those who some years before had performed miracles or lived in “sinless perfection.” But *no one* is sinlessly perfect (1 Jn. 1:8) and this definition of the word *saint* is a lie! No one who is a sinner (in the original New Testament meaning of the word) can be a saint and no saint, apart from gross negligence and voluntary, willful departure from the faith, is again in the class of sinners.

We have proceeded quite far into a deep understanding of the way of following Christ and the astute observer will note that we have not once used the word “church.” How can this be? “Church” is the very centerpiece of modern “Christianity” with its “pastors,” “pulpits,” “pews,” “choirs” (or “worship teams”), “church” buildings, “tithes and offerings,” “Sunday school,” building programs, by-laws and denominational affiliations. But none of this is rightly found in the New Testament.

To answer this question, we must delve into some complexity. Just as the devil led some to redefine “saints,” so too has he used linguistic deception to enact his strategies and schemes against the children of God. Even in the simplicity that is in Christ, there is a “hidden wisdom” that is reserved for the spiritually mature (1 Cor. 2:6-7) that involves ideas “hard to understand, which those who are untaught [by God’s Spirit] and unstable [double-minded – Jas. 1:8] twist to their own destruction.” (2 Pet. 3:15-16) “Church” is just such an idea and it has been developed into what is perhaps the devil’s most effective scheme for separating an infant or immature saint from the Savior and Lord Jesus Christ.

Consider that the New Testament uses word-pictures to describe the corporate group of saints. One of the word-pictures we have already touched upon is *body* - the body of Christ. (Eph. 5:30) Other word-pictures used are *temple* (1 Cor. 3:16-17) and *house*. (1 Pet. 2:5) Each of these have something of depth to teach us about what every genuine convert has been jointed to – and each of these words, especially the Greek word most often rendered “church” in English translations, have very little in common with the modern practice of “church.” The Greek word we find in the New Testament is *ekklesia* [1577] and at one point Paul clearly says that the *ekklesia* is His body (Eph. 1:22-23), letting us know that whatever the body is, the *ekklesia* is also.

Because this deception is so prevalent and goes so deeply into our existence, it is necessary to reiterate where the word “church” comes from. We return again to William Tyndale, whose brilliant and gifted translation work is found in over 90% of the King James New Testament, who chose the words “assembly” or “congregation” as more fitting words to translate *ekklesia*. And it is indeed a more fitting translation. The *ekklesia* – literally, “called out ones” just as saints are “set apart ones” – are those *people* who are called out of this world of darkness and transferred into Christ’s kingdom of light. But because the Anglican “church” needed to preserve its structure, King James issued an edict that his translators must retain the “certain old words,” specifically “church,” in his 1611 Bible. The deception was thus put securely in place for most English speaking people and, in this case, would remain so for the next four hundred years. But this is not the earliest origin of the deception – this is only the added layer of distortion that has accumulated since the Greek term was exchanged for an English word of vastly different meaning.

If we know the truth that *only* a genuinely converted and spiritually reborn individual can be a member of Christ’s body then we can see that saying *only* a saint can belong in Christ’s *ekklesia* is simply expressing that same truth using different words. The question of whether the

ekklesia is a society of saints or a school for sinners is virtually a no-brainer. No sinner can be a saint and no sinner can be a true member of Christ's ekklesia. Yet this question as to the role of the ekklesia (long before there was an English language to further confuse the issues) divided the people who followed Christ in the third, fourth and fifth centuries. Bishops like Cyprian in 251 A.D. declared that no one could be saved if they did not join themselves to the visible, hierarchical authority structure patterned after and centralized in Rome. Later Bishops like Augustine in 411 A.D. declared that the ekklesia – referring not to the spiritual body that Christ was building but instead referring to the temporal, visible hierarchy of bishops who presided over assemblies of people who gathered in “Christian” temples (patterned after Rome's basilica or judgment hall) to practice pagan-like rituals and hear the teachings and sermons (homilies) of the bishops – insisted that the ekklesia would always be a “mixed multitude” of both saints and sinners. The New Testament's definition of ekklesia had already been changed. Now the people followed the bishop of their choice. (Acts 20:30) The mystery of lawlessness – rejecting the commands and leading of the King, Christ, by His Spirit, and doing what is right in one's own eyes – was already at work (2 Ths. 2:7, Jdgs. 21:25) and the ekklesia had begun its transformation into modern-day “church.”

If the ekklesia is again to be able to stand on the true Mt. Zion (Heb. 12:22), we must again see the distinctions of sinners and saints in the light of truth. These are not categories by which we can justify delusions of self-righteous grandeur as did the Pharisees of old. (Lk. 18:9) Rather they are the humble recognition that Christ died to raise us up out of the realms of sin and into His realm of holiness, a realm into which *all* sinners are freely welcome to enter into and become saints!

And we must also reject the distortions of truth that overly complicate our life in Christ. We must again see that *keeping* our status as saints *requires* us to obey Christ (Heb. 5:9) – by relying on His grace (power), certainly, but also by giving all diligence to add to what He has already given us so as to gain that which He would yet lead us into. (2 Pet. 1:3-7, Jn. 16:13)

The “church,” as is evident from its structure and form, is something from the world that has attached itself to the true way of following Christ and God. The ekklesia is not anything like “church” – indeed “church” is the prostitute who poses as the bride of Christ. (Rev. 17:1-6)

Yet there is one word-picture that still needs to be embraced or the ekklesia will, as history repeatedly shows, again devolve into some form of “church.” We must again take our place as “sons of the kingdom.” (Mt. 13:38) In the simplicity that is in Christ, the kingdom of God is that realm in which Christ is obeyed. If we will simply allow Christ to be our true King – individually and corporately – most of the deception and subterfuge which confuses so many will simply vanish as darkness must do when light comes. But we must “Seek *first* the kingdom of God and His righteousness” (Mt. 6:33), placing the interests and issues of His kingdom above even our participation in His ekklesia. If our participation in spiritual matters ever takes us into realms of disobedience to Christ, we have stepped outside of His kingdom. (1 Cor. 6:9-10) And this luring into subtle disobedience to Christ is what the demonic scheme called “church” does best. It is a leaven which, by God's grace and power, we must purge from our midst. (1 Cor. 5:6-8)

To be the genuine ekklesia is to be joined with other genuine saints committed to remaining in the kingdom of God – that is, in careful, diligent, watchful obedience to Him in all things. In such groups, the King will lead each individual by His Spirit (Jn. 10:27) and will lead any groups who come together by unanimous agreement (“one accord” – Acts 2:46, etc.) on all issues and questions of direction and practice that impact the group. This is “the unity of the

Spirit” which creates an atmosphere where the ministry of the saints can produce “the unity of the faith.” (Eph. 4:3, 12-13) To be the ekklesia, then, is to cease being corrupted away from the spiritual simplicity that is in Christ and to return always, only and completely to Him who is our First Love. (Rev. 2:4)

Let he who has ears hear.

Chapter 4: Simplicity in Christ

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Chapter 6: The Standard of Perfection

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