



TRUTH

“... thy word is truth” (John 17:17)

January 2010

QUESTIONS TO ASK MYSELF WHEN I STUDY THE BIBLE (1)

As you and I study the Bible, in order to understand its meaning, there are a number of helpful questions that we ought to ask ourselves. That which I read in a particular verse, who said it? To whom is the message spoken? What law of God was in effect at the time? What special circumstances existed, if any? What is there in the context that might help explain the meaning of a word or statement? Such questions can be of great value as we seek to comprehend the Bible. In this study, we want to look at one essential question which we need to ask as we read any Bible verse: **Who is speaking?** Consider some possibilities.

(1) *Is the Lord the one who is speaking?* After the end of the great flood, someone told Noah and his family that it was acceptable to eat every moving thing, but not blood. That same someone also told them that it was wrong to shed human blood since man is made in the image of God. Who said all of those things? God did (Genesis 9:1-6). In the New Testament we read, “*But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you*” (Matthew 5:44). Who said that? Jesus did. That makes a difference!

(2) *Is the devil the one who is doing the talking?* All Scripture is inspired (2 Timothy 3:16), so it was revealed from the mind of God. But, not everything that is recorded in the Bible is something that God Himself said. In some cases, the Bible records what Satan said. For instance, in a discussion about the righteous man Job, someone said, “*But put forth thine hand now, and touch all that he hath, and he will curse thee to thy face*” (Job 1:11). Those were the words of the devil, who is a liar (John 8:44).

(3) *Is the speaker an inspired person?* When Peter informed the Jews on the Day of Pentecost that God had made Jesus, whom they crucified, both Lord and Christ (Acts 2:36), was he inspired? Sure he was. Since Peter’s message was guided by the Holy Spirit (Matthew 10:18-20), what he said was accurate. When Peter went on to tell his listeners to repent and be baptized for the remission of sins, he was inspired when he said those words, too. Thus, when about 3000 people received what Peter said (Acts 2:41), they were accepting a divine message.

(4) *Is it an uninspired person that is talking?* “Did you know that the Bible says that there is no

God?” Wait a minute. Who says that there is no God? Answer: the fool does (Psalm 14:1). Consider a second example. John 9 records Jesus’ healing of a blind man in Jerusalem. After he was healed of his blindness, some of the Jewish leaders made this statement to him: “*Give God the praise: we know that this man is a sinner*” (John 9:24). The one whom they were describing as “a sinner” was Jesus! Jesus lived His entire life “without sin” (Hebrews 4:15), so although the words of the Jewish leaders about Jesus are accurately recorded in the text of the Bible, what they said was not truthful. Uninspired men sometimes get things wrong.

(5) *Is the speaker an enemy of the Lord, and thus one that has built-in animosity toward Him?* In one instance, Jesus forgave the sins of a man whom He healed that had been sick with palsy. After He pronounced the man’s sins forgiven, someone said, “*Why doth this man thus speak blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God only?*” (Mark 2:7). Who asked those two questions? “*Certain of the scribes*” did (2:6). One of their conclusions was correct: only God can forgive sins. However, their other declaration was blatantly false. To accuse Jesus of speaking blasphemies was blasphemy! Yet, we would expect such from our Lord’s adversaries.

(6) *Is the one who is speaking what we might call a “neutral” person?* A “neutral” person would be one that neither opposed nor supported our Lord. For example, it is written that one man told Jesus, “*Rabbi, we know that thou art a teacher come from God: for no man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with him*” (John 3:2). Who said that? Nicodemus, whom the Bible identifies as a Pharisee and ruler of the Jews. At the time that he admitted Jesus’ miracles and concluded that such miracles proved that He was from God, Nicodemus was not an open supporter of the Christ. Such words from a neutral witness were an honest, powerful testimony about Jesus’ true identity.

In our day-to-day conversations with others, it is not uncommon for us to ask, “Who said that?” or “Who told you that?” In the same way, it just makes good sense to ask a similar question when we read any Bible text: “What I am reading here – **who said it?**” Making such an inquiry is essential to making proper conclusions and taking appropriate actions.

-- Roger D. Campbell

LESSONS FROM THE LIFE OF ABEL

It would be hard to imagine that in history there has been a more famous family than the family of Adam and Eve. Students of the Bible are well acquainted with the history of two of their sons, Cain and Abel, bringing offerings before the God of heaven and how Cain eventually murdered Abel (Genesis 4).

The New Testament says that by faith Abel is still speaking. *"By faith Abel offered unto God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain, by which he obtained witness that he was righteous, God testifying of his gifts: and by it he being dead yet speaketh"* (Hebrews 11:4). No, Abel's faith does not speak literal words that we hear with our literal ears. But, there are lessons for us to glean from his faith and from what the Bible briefly records about his life. Let us take a look at some of those lessons.

The history of Abel's life shows that Jehovah is aware of all that takes place on the earth. Cain slew Abel (Genesis 4:8). God then asked Cain, *"Where is Abel thy brother?"* (4:9). Mark it down: God did not ask such a question in order to gain information. The very next verse records this statement of Jehovah to Cain: *". . . the voice of thy brother's blood crieth unto me from the ground."* You see, God sees and knows everything. He knew that Cain shed the innocent blood of Abel. Man's actions, speech, and even his thoughts, are "open" before the Lord. God declared, *"For mine eyes are upon all their ways: they are not hid from my face, neither is their iniquity hid from mine eyes"* (Jeremiah 16:17).

The Bible record of Abel's worship shows that there is such a thing as acceptable worship, that is, worship that pleases the Lord. While it is not true that God accepts every form of worship (for instance, He did not respect the offering of Cain, Genesis 4:5), neither is it the case that the Almighty refuses to accept any worship, period. *"And the LORD had respect unto Abel and to his offering"* (4:4). Yes, *"By faith Abel offered unto God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain"* (Hebrews 11:4), and God was pleased by it. Since faith comes by hearing the word of God (Romans 10:17), and because Abel made his offering *"by faith,"* it must be the case that at some point prior to that offering, God had instructed Abel about how to worship Him. So it is for Christians as well. In the New Testament, the Lord has given us a pattern for worship, and when we as His children worship Him in spirit and in truth, then such worship is pleasing in His sight (John 4:23,24).

A third lesson that we note is that **man's righteous action will not go unnoticed or unrewarded by God.** God testified that Abel *"was righteous"* (Hebrews 11:4). The Holy Spirit further spoke of Abel's *"righteous works"* (1 John 3:12). To the first century saints it was written, *"For God is not unrighteous to forget your work and labor of love, which ye have showed toward his name . . ."* (Hebrews 6:10). And just what is the promised reward for the righteous?

Going *"into life eternal"* (Matthew 25:46). When the days seem dark and difficult and the road ahead seems long, take comfort in knowing that the Righteous Judge notices and rewards the faithful service of His children.

The account of Abel's life and death further demonstrates that **in order to please God, it is not necessary to be popular with other people, even family members.** It is certainly more pleasant when our association with others is characterized by peace and harmony rather than a state of conflict. However, we must recognize that when other people are upset with us because of our unbending desire to do what is right in the sight of the Lord God, their being upset with us must not cause us to waver in our service to Him. Look at Cain and Abel. Cain was terribly upset. Why? Because God accepted Abel's worship, but not Cain's (Genesis 4:4,5), and Cain saw that Abel's works were righteous (1 John 3:12).

The implied message of 1 John 3:11-15 is that Cain hated Abel. Did that mean that Abel was somehow out of line in what he had done? Not at all. Again, it is not pleasant to think of those close to us being totally against us, but sometimes that is just the way it is going to be. In some cases, *"a man's foes shall be they of his own household"* (Matthew 10:36). Jesus said so.

Faith that pleases God must be evidenced by action. Consider again what Hebrews 11:4 reveals about Abel. *"By faith Abel offered a more excellent sacrifice . . . he was righteous . . ."* Look at how those words go together: *"faith," "offered," "sacrifice," "righteous."* Abel's faith was not simply a "I-have-God-deep-in-my-soul" type of faith. No, Abel's faith *acted* according to the will of God, and *that* is what pleased the Lord. In the Christian era, it is faith that works by love that makes us pleasing in God's sight (Galatians 5:6).

Finally, the history of Abel and Cain shows that **sometimes siblings raised in the same home under the same circumstances turn out drastically different in the spiritual realm.** It is puzzling, but it happens. Cain's works were evil, while Abel's were righteous (1 John 3:12). They had the same father and mother, yet they went different directions in their spiritual lives. In the Christian age, parents have the obligation to raise their children in the way of the Lord (Ephesians 6:4). To do this, parents must both teach their children the truth verbally and live that truth in their lives. After such training, those children are on their own when they grow into adulthood. Christian parents need to do the best they can to rear their children properly, but if one or more of them later stray from the truth, parents should not constantly blame and punish themselves for the foolish mistakes of their offspring.

May God help us to see, accept, and apply these lessons from the life of Abel. His faith still speaks.

-- Roger D. Campbell

DIFFERENT BIBLE DESCRIPTIONS OF MEMBERS OF THE CHURCH

In the New Testament, members of the church of the Lord are described in various ways. According to the Bible, the Lord adds saved people to the church (Acts 2:47). Once a person is in the body of the Lord, he is counted as a new creature in the Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17). Let us turn to the Bible and find some ways in which Jesus' followers are described.

1. Disciples: The word "disciple" means a learner or pupil. Even before the church began, those who followed Jesus were called disciples (Luke 6:12). After the establishment of the church, the number of disciples multiplied (Acts 6:1). Before Saul of Tarsus was converted, he persecuted the church (Acts 8:1). But the Bible says that he was persecuting "disciples" (Acts 9:1). Thus, the disciples and the church were one and the same. In Acts 20:7 we read that those who broke bread on the first day of the week were disciples. Several other verses in the Book of Acts also show that followers of the Lord are known as disciples (Acts 6:7; 9:19,25,26,38; 11:26,29; 14:20,22,28).

2. Christians: The word "Christian" means a follower of the Christ. A Christian is one who not only believes in Jesus, but truly follows Him and His teachings. The word "Christian" is used in three New Testament verses: "*And the disciples were called Christians first in Antioch*" (Acts 11:26); "*Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian*" (Acts 26:28); "*Yet if any man suffer as a Christian, let him not be ashamed*" (1 Peter 4:16). In the New Testament, the word "Christian" is used to refer only to those who were members of the Christ's church. We need to make certain that we "*speak as the oracles of God*" (1 Peter 4:11) and use the word "Christian" in harmony with the way that it is employed in the Bible.

3. Saints: The word "saint" means a person who is set apart for God and in a moral sense is pure in his lifestyle. "Saint" does not mean sinless. Those disciples whom Paul persecuted were called "saints" (Acts 9:13; 26:10). The Holy Spirit later guided Paul to write letters to different churches, and he often described those to whom he was writing as "saints," such as in the Book of Philippians, where he wrote, "*. . . to all the saints in Christ Jesus*" (Philippians 1:1; see also Romans 1:7; Ephesians 1:1; Colossians 1:2).

Since Paul wrote these epistles to people who were still living, and by the Spirit of God he referred to them as "saints," it is false to say that all saints are persons who are already dead.

4. Priests: The book of *First Peter* was written to Christians (cf. 1 Peter 1:2). Peter described them as a "holy priesthood" and "royal priesthood" (1 Peter 2:5,9). Thus, all Christians to whom Peter wrote were part of this priesthood and are reckoned as priests. In the New Testament, the term "priest" was not restricted to a special class of members of the body of the Lord. Another reference to members of the church as "priests" is found in Revelation 1:6, where it is written, "*And (Jesus, rdc) hath made us kings and priests unto God and His Father . . .*" As priests, when we each offer our worship to God, we do so through His Son, not through some mere human. We offer spiritual sacrifices to the living God (1 Peter 2:5) in His temple, the church (1 Corinthians 3:16).

5. Children of God: As Christians, we are called children of God because of our spiritual relationship with Him. He is our Heavenly Father. All of those who are in God's church are in His family, "the house of God" (1 Timothy 3:15). We are all the children of God by faith, and we became His children when we were baptized into the Christ (Galatians 3:26,27). What great love the Father has shown in calling us His children! (1 John 3:1). It truly is a privilege to be called a child of God and to enjoy fellowship with our brothers and sisters in the Christ. Along with our privileges comes the responsibility to be "obedient children" in all aspects of our service to our Father (1 Peter 1:14).

The Bible calls the followers of Jesus "disciples," "Christians," "saints," "priests," and "children of God." Let us take each of these terms seriously, considering what each one indicates about our relationship with the Lord and our duty to Him. May we all strive to "*walk worthy of God*," who has called us into His kingdom and glory (1 Thessalonians 2:12).

-- Roger D. Campbell

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Romans 16:3-15 – PAUL’S CLOSING GREETINGS TO THE SAINTS IN ROME

If I counted correctly, in Paul’s closing greetings to the Christians in Rome, he named at least twenty-five different saints who lived in that area. Some of those names are challenging to pronounce. Many of them are people that are not mentioned elsewhere in the Bible.

When we read Romans 16 or the last chapter of other New Testament epistles, we may be tempted to hurry through the names, because, after all, these people do not appear to be major characters. Very little information is given to us about them, so why not move on to what might be more important? Please pause with me to think about some lessons that we can learn from this long section of closing greetings, Romans 16:3-15.

You do not have to be famous to be faithful.

The best-known people to whom Paul sent greetings in this passage were Priscilla and Aquila (16:3). The others? We would not count them as famous. Yet, and this is significant, what Paul says about them indicates that they were faithful to the Lord. Sometimes we might think that we have to do something out of the ordinary, do something special, or do something impressive, in order to please the Lord. Serving God is about being “*faithful in the Lord*” (1 Corinthians 4:17), not about being well-known. Forget about fame. Go for faithfulness.

We are all of equal value in the Lord's work.

None of the saints who are named in this text are described as being of greater value than others. It is true that each of us has different abilities and different levels of talent (Matthew 25:14-30), but none of us is irreplaceable in God’s Kingdom. Yes, some are elders, deacons, and preachers, but that does not make them of more value in God’s service. We each have our own role to play, so let us not be concerned about competing with or staying ahead of someone else. Let us develop the heart of a servant and thank God for what we can do for Him.

It takes a lot of people working together to get the Lord's work done. Mary labored (16:6). So did Persis and others (16:12). The church is the body of the Christ. In order for it to function well, all of the members must work together for the good of the body (1 Corinthians 12:14-26). Everyone works!

It is possible for each one of us to work in the Lord. In fact, we can all do a lot. How is Mary described? She “*bestowed much labor on us*” (16:5). And what about Persis? He “*labored much in the Lord*” (16:12). “I Want to Be a Worker for the Lord” is the name of a familiar spiritual song. When we sing that song, we claim that in our hearts we

have a desire to work for our Lord. Do we back up our singing with action? Do we really get out and go to work? Here is a sobering question. If I do not work in the Vineyard of my Lord, who prevents me from doing so? The answer, of course, is *I* do. It is my choice: I can either do much work for the Lord, or else I can choose not to do so. What is *your* choice? Remember that God wants our labor to be steadfast and continuous (1 Corinthians 15:58). His promise is that such labor is not in vain.

Just knowing that other saints are working faithfully in the Lord can encourage us.

I may not know much about the twenty-plus members of the church whose names are given in Romans 16:3-15, but it is encouraging to know that they were following the Master! It thrills our soul to read in Hebrews 11 of so many servants of Jehovah that lived by faith. In the same way, it is encouraging in our day to witness firsthand how twenty-first century brothers and sisters walk in the light (1 John 1:7). Hear John’s rejoicing: “*I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth*” (3 John 4). It really is uplifting to see the dedication that so many members of the church demonstrate. Do not forget that others are always observing us. Our attitude, behavior, or speech may be just what they need to hear or see in order to lift their spirits.

The bond that exists between Christians is a

unique, powerful force. Aquila and Priscilla willingly laid their lives on the line for Paul’s sake (16:3,4). Paul referred to Stachys as “my beloved,” (16:9), Amplias as “my beloved in the Lord” (16:8), and another as “my wellbeloved” (16:5). Those terms of endearment show the strong bond that exists between members of the Lord’s body. What a blessing it is when we “*love one another with a pure heart fervently*” (1 Peter 1:22). Jesus counted all those that do the will of God as His spiritual family members (Mark 3:31-35). Indeed, “Blest be the tie that binds our hearts in Christian love.”

How will you and I be remembered?

All of those people about whom we read in Romans 16 are now dead. We never knew them in the flesh, yet we know something about them and have an impression of them. After we die, people will talk about us, too. What will they remember about us? While we do not have a desire to impress people, we do want to leave them with a good impression, right? Our example will speak volumes long after we leave this life. Think about it. In the future, please resist the temptation to speed through the names in Romans 16.

-- Roger D. Campbell

TRUTH is published monthly by the Klang church of Christ in order to help educate, edify, encourage, and equip the saints of God.

