

The Clarity Trumpet
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For if the trumpet makes an uncertain sound, who will prepare himself for battle? So likewise you, unless you utter by the tongue words easy to understand, how will it be known what is spoken? For you will be speaking into the air.
I Corinthians 14:8, 9

Identifying True Believers

I received an excellent letter in response to last month's *Trumpet* in which the writer wonders if it isn't true that a genuine believer in Christ *should*, and perhaps, *must* be recognized by his outward lifestyle. In response, I will first lay the groundwork by making some key observations.

Satan—the Great Counterfeiter

Satan attempts to match whatever God does in order to keep unbelievers blind to the Gospel, and to distract believers so that the message of the Gospel will not reach those same unbelievers. "But if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, *whose minds the god of this world (Satan) has blinded*, who do not believe, lest the light of the gospel . . . should shine on them" (II Cor. 4:3, 4).

How does he blind the unbeliever? By *appearing* to represent God: "For such are *false* apostles, *deceitful* workers, transforming themselves [outwardly] into apostles of Christ. And no wonder! For Satan himself [outwardly] transforms himself into an angel of light. . . . his ministers also transform themselves [outwardly] into ministers of *righteousness*. . ." (II Corinthians 11:13-15).

Since Satan's cunning and power are greater than man's, it shouldn't be too surprising that we can be so easily duped by him. Can we tell ministers of Satan by their appearance? Obviously not. They are *deceitful* workers, *false* apostles, but they don't *appear* so. Therefore, we cannot always tell the difference between the false and the true.

Religious People Who are Lost

They read their Bibles, they praise God publicly, they pray, and give to missions—all things any growing child of God would do.

Appearances communicate *I am a Christian*, but if inwardly they are really trusting in these same good works to get to Heaven, then they would not be truly saved at all. Jesus described this kind of *apparent* believer when He said, *Many will say to Me in that day, "Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders (miracles) in Your name?" And then I will declare to them, "I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness"* (Matthew 7:22, 23). To be expecting to be ushered through Heaven's portals only to be told to be separated from God forever will be a shocking thing for *many*—especially when their lifestyles would indicate that they knew the Lord.

Genuine Silent Believers in Christ

Can true Christians always be identified? Satan's ministers *appear* to be apostles of Christ and ministers of what is right. We cannot always recognize them for what they really are. The flip side is also true: we cannot always recognize the true identity of genuine believers in Christ. Here are a few Bible examples:

Joseph of Arimathea is described as "a disciple of Jesus, but *secretly*, for fear of the Jews." He finally came out of his shell when he asked Pilate for the body of Jesus to bury in his own tomb (John 19:38), but previous to this request one would not have known he was a true believer in Christ.

The "many rulers" in John 12:42, 43, who "believed in Him, but because of the Pharisees *did not confess him*, lest they should be put out of the synagogue; for they loved the praise of men more than the praise of God." Some say these rulers were not true believers because true believers *would* confess Christ and would *not* love man's praise over God's (an example of attempting to make Scripture fit one's theological presuppositions). However, the verses clearly say that they "believed in" Christ—the exact wording used throughout the Gospel of John describing *the condition* that brings salvation. See John 3:15, 16, 18, 36; 6:28, 29, 47; 7:38, 39; 8:30, 31; 11:25, 26; 20:31.

The Corinthian believers. Paul said that the carnal lifestyles of these Christians were just like the unsaved—like "mere men" (First Corinthians 3:1-3). One man's behavior was so gross that Paul advised giving his body over to Satan (5:5).

Some in the Galatian Church.

Paul used phrases such as "you are turning away so soon from Him. . . (1:6); "Who has bewitched you that you should *not* obey the truth" (3:1); "But now *after* you have known God . . . how is it that *you turn again* to the weak and beggarly elements?" (4:9); "I am afraid of you" (4:11); "I have doubts about you" (4:20). If we take Scripture *alone* as our authority, we see that it is not always possible to tell who is or who is not a genuine believer in Christ.

My correspondent also had other questions about some puzzling verses: **Matthew 7:16-20**. Verses 16 and 20, contain the statement that constitutes the main question we are dealing with: "You will know them by their fruits." I have heard or read a number of sermons on this passage and, almost without exception, the speaker or writer uses the passage to prove that we can know a true Christian by his "fruit." But verse 15 identifies the ones in verses 16 and 20 by saying, "Beware of *false* prophets, who come to you *in sheep's clothing*, but *inwardly* they are ravenous wolves. You will know *them* by their fruits."

We should be able to tell *the false prophets* by what they produce, but the "fruit" in this passage cannot be outward appearance because these false prophets *look* just like sheep like those of verses 22 and 23! Their true identity is *inward* where no one but God can see. Whatever the "fruit" is, it can be tested. Jesus said we would know them by what they produce.

How do you detect a false prophet? Not by how they act but by what they teach, by their *doctrine!* We may not be able to tell the true Christian from the fake by examining men's works, but we surely can tell the false *prophet* by what he *teaches* as truth. Read Matthew 16:5-12.

Galatians 5:22, 23: These verses describe the fruit "of the Spirit" displayed in the child of God who is "walking in the Spirit and not fulfilling the desires of the flesh" (5:16). If believers always "walked in the Spirit" we would be able to easily identify true Christians. However, if believers *always* walked in the Spirit, Paul wouldn't be urging them to do that which automatically would be the lifestyle of *every* Christian.

Titus 2:11: God's grace by which we are saved also teaches us "that denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in this present age." Grace *always* "teaches" believers to live properly. Grace is never dangerous but instructive in godlike living. But though God's grace trains us to live properly, *not all of God's*

children are willing to be trained by it (Hebrews 12:5-11), so disobedient believers do not demonstrate that they belong to the Lord.

First Corinthians 5:12, 13: It's thought that outward indications must be required because Paul says we should "judge" the ones among us. How can we do this unless we observe their outward activity? An excellent point! That which Paul is telling the Church to judge is not whether this man is saved, but rather what the Church should do about this *brother's* immoral behavior. Some would say such an immoral, perverted person could not possibly be a true believer in Christ—and *they would be wrong in this case!*

The issue boils down to this: True believers *should* be recognized by their attitudes, their words, their works, their lifestyles. This is God's ideal. But to insist that unless one's behavior is above reproach and consistently Christlike, that one is not saved, would be going to an unwarranted and unbiblical extreme—something I'm sure none of us want to do.