

"WOULD WE HAVE BELIEVED THEM?"

By Jerry L. Henderson

I sometimes wonder how many of us living today, had we been living in the first century, would have been receptive to the preaching of men like: John the Baptist; Peter; and Paul? Most of us would probably say: well, of course we would have listened to them, because we listen to them now as we read the Scriptures. But, do we ever stop to think that maybe we listen today because, for the most part, what they taught has become socially acceptable? And more often than not, their teaching is presented to us today in as non-offensive a manner as possible.

But how was the truth originally presented? What manner or kind of men were involved in the preaching of the first century? If we had been there in the first century and heard some of these men preach would we have believed them?

What about a man like John the baptizer (baptist) whom we might describe as a "harsh hermit"? John did his preaching out in the wilderness of Judea, which forced people, if they were going to hear him, to come out to where he was Matt 3:1-2. John's clothing consisted of camel's hair and a leather girdle, which was the type of clothing worn by the poorer working class and possibly the common clothing for the prophets. John's diet consisted of locusts and wild honey, which again identified him with the poorer class of people Matt 3:4. John's dress and diet identified him as a poor humble individual. Yet, he called the religious people coming to be baptized a "brood of vipers" or as we would say it today "a bunch of snakes" Matt 3:5-7. Would we really have listened to this man? It is very doubtful if some of us would have listened since we sometimes balk at having to travel some distance and give up some of our time in order to come to a comfortable building to study God's Word. There are some Christians today who must drive long distances to assemble with other saints to worship God and study together from God's word and most do this twice on Sundays and then the same distance on a Wednesday evening and several days in a row when there is a gospel meeting scheduled. We sometimes tend to judge people by the clothes they wear, do we not? It is easy for us to be affected by the "Dress For Success" philosophy. We must remember God's perspective 1Sam 16:7; Jas 2:1-4. We sometimes get upset or offended when a preacher points out our faults. There are many people who do not want preachers preaching negative sermons, they want everything to be about "love" and "caring", which is very important, but even Jesus demonstrated sometimes the occasion calls for strong measures Matt 23:13-15.

Then, what about the apostle Peter, a man who was described as "uneducated and untrained" Acts 4:13. Here was a man who was just a common ordinary working man, a fisherman by trade, who obviously had no formal religious training. On top of that he was a man who denied Jesus three times Matt 26:69-75 and whose hypocrisy on one occasion split a church Gal 2:11-13. Do you think it is very likely that we would have been willing to listen to him preach? Today, we expect a man to be formerly educated before we want him as "our" preacher. In fact, in some churches, a preacher is required to have a college degree to be considered acceptable. But please understand that the wrong kind of learning can be a dangerous thing 1Cor 1:18-29. Are we willing to give someone another chance when they fail in some way as a Christian, especially when they do this more than once? If Peter had been treated like we sometimes treat fallen Christians today, do you think he would have remained an apostle? Fortunately, the early church took to heart what Jesus taught about forgiveness Matt 18:21-22; Lk 17:3-4.

Then think about a notorious persecutor of Christians, who became the apostle Paul. Paul described himself as having been a blasphemer and a persecutor of the church 1Tim 1:13. He also says about himself that he was not a fluent speaker 1Cor 2:3-4. His physical appearance was described as "weak" 2Cor 10:10. Do you think we, today, would have kindly received the apostle Paul? It is doubtful if we would when we sometimes hold a person's pre-Christian life against them. If we do that then we must not really believe in the power of the gospel to transform lives. Remember what Paul said about himself was "past tense" it was what he used to be, not what he had become. Consider what the gospel did for the people of Corinth 1Cor 6:9-11. We sometimes

do not care to hear preachers whose sermon presentation lacks "polish". Many do not want to listen to preachers who may be young, inexperienced, or who are not eloquent in their speaking ability. Yet "smooth words and flattering speech" can oftentimes be used to deceive Rom 16:17-18. We tend to judge people by physical appearance and by how smooth they are in their speech instead of their knowledge of the Scriptures and the applications that they make of them. This is the way people first judged Abraham Lincoln. Again, we must remember the way God looks at individuals 1Sam 16:7.

What I am suggesting is that how we receive people today is a strong indication as to whether we would have received men such as John, Peter, Paul and even Jesus! Matt 13:54-58. While we would like to think we would have been quick to listen and believe their message, perhaps we might have acted differently, we might have acted exactly like some did when they heard some of these men preach. Remember, they stoned Paul and left him for dead Acts 14:19 and stoned Steven to death Acts 7:54-60. Hopefully, we will appreciate the importance of looking beyond the messenger and how his message might be presented, to the message itself. It is the message that is of vital importance, it must be believed and obeyed or we will be lost eternally. There is indeed a way for us to determine if we would have believed these men in the first century and that is to determine if we have obeyed them today. It may be speculation on our part to say we would have believed these men back in the first century. But one thing is sure; if we are unwilling to obey them today, we certainly would not have done it then!