

NEVER SAY NEVER

A week or two ago, I received through the letter box, a fairly large and well-produced religious tract. On the front page in very large letters over an inch in height, was the word "NEVER". Upon reading the contents of the tract I discovered that the word "NEVER" had reference to two questions dealt with in the tract, and I quote, "(1) Can the man or woman who dies in unbelief, ever be saved? Mark the solemn scriptural answer – NEVER! (2) Can the man or woman who has been born again of the Spirit of God ever be lost? Mark the scriptural answer – NEVER!" (Unquote).

There is insufficient space to comment upon both questions (and answers) especially in the absence of any definition of the term "unbelief" or "born again of the Spirit," but I would like to take issue with the answer given to question (2) i.e. "Can the man or woman who has been born again of the Spirit of God ever be lost? – NEVER!" This answer is, of course, embraced within what is generally known as the "once-saved; always-saved" doctrine, and is a point of view we encounter from time to time.

In general, we should, perhaps be careful about our use of the word "NEVER." Not so long ago some very prominent politicians had to admit, publicly, their careless use of the term and are now, obviously, giving the word much more respect. Both Mrs. Thatcher and Mr. Major (albeit there are many others) have learned the fallacy and the presumption of stating things that they would "NEVER" say, or "NEVER" do, and have had to eat humble pie. There is nothing new in this, of course, but every now and again we have to be reminded of the indiscreet use of "never". Indeed there is now such an awareness of this that nearly all politicians are quick to assure the electorate that they would never say "never". I am, of course, well aware that the religious tract bases its conclusions upon God's inspired and holy word, and is certainly not concerned with the words of politicians, but even under these circumstances it might be unwise for us to say what God can "NEVER" do. Certainly God means what He says in His word, but God is also **completely sovereign** and just as He has power to make laws He has a similar power to suspend them in certain cases: according to His will. We can not limit the power of God, even if we were to try. God says to any who may question His judgement (or apparent lack of consistency) **"I will be gracious unto whom I will be gracious, and I will show mercy on whom I will show mercy."** (Ex. 33:19). Jesus also signified His own sovereignty in His conversation with Peter (in John 21). Jesus had just described to Peter how he (Peter) would die. Peter upon seeing John (the disciple whom Jesus loved and who was allowed to lean on

Jesus' breast) asked, "And what shall this man do" but was softly rebuked and told that if Jesus chose to preserve John alive for all time Jesus could do so, and it would be nobody's business. "What is that to thee" said Jesus "Follow Me." Bearing in mind this mild caution to be slow to describe what God can "NEVER" do, we do acknowledge, however, that we must at all times be guided and governed solely by the scriptures.

A ROARING LION AND GRIEVOUS WOLVES

What then, does God's inspired word have to say about the assertion made in the religious tract that a person "born again by the Spirit of God" can NEVER be lost. The author of the tract, described by the initials "G.C." quotes as proof text John 10:27,28, which says "My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me, and I will give unto them eternal life; and they shall NEVER PERISH neither shall anyone pluck them out of My hand." The tract is fairly lengthy, and obviously I have not the space to quote much of it, but to be fair to the writer of it, I should quote a part where he admits that "Backsliding" may take place. (Quote) "CAN A SHEEP BACKSLIDE? Yes. If it does is it still eternally secure - Yes! Why? . . . What is the secret of their being kept thus secure? Is it their love, or their faithfulness? NO! NO! NO! (Unquote) Thus, according to G.C. even the "backsliding" sheep (whatever his definition of backsliding may be) will never be lost.

Obviously no rational person is going to question the truthfulness of John 10:28 (quoted above) but many I am sure, would certainly want to question the interpretation put upon it by G.C.. Clearly John 10:28 says, in effect, that the sheep who hear Christ's voice and who follow Him will receive eternal life, will thereby never perish, and will never be plucked from Christ's grasp. No one would argue with that. But what about the wayward sheep who wander from the fold? The apostle Peter warned Christians (those "born again") to "Be sober, be vigilant, for your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about seeking whom he may devour." Why should Satan be a problem if people can never be lost? Why should Peter warn in this way, and call for sobriety and vigilance if those born again can NEVER PERISH? The truth is that the devil takes pleasure in "devouring" anybody; but especially Christians.

But Christ's sheep must not only beware of the marauding lion, but must also be careful to avoid the soul-destroying activities of false teachers. The apostle Paul, (in a passage which, incidently, equates Christ's sheepfold with Christ's church) tearfully warns the elders of the church at Ephesus thus; "Feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with His own blood. For I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you NOT SPARING THE FLOCK. Also of your selves, shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them. Therefore watch, and remember that by the space of three years I ceased not to warn every one night and day with tears." (Acts 20:28-31). Clearly Paul did not share G.C.'s view that the SHEEP in Christ's SHEEPFOLD (the Church) were inviolate and could NEVER PERISH; rather the reverse.

Paul here predicts that, after His departure Christ's SHEEP would be decimated by grievous wolves (false teachers). Nor was it just a slight impression that Paul harboured, but he was so sure of it that he had warned night and day, over a period of three years, with tears. Why shed "tears" if the SHEEP can not be lost?

Reverting again to the apostle Peter, we read, "Wherefore, brethren, give the more diligence to make your calling and election sure, for if ye do these things, ye shall never stumble." (2 Peter 1:10). If, as the tract says, we can never be lost, even if we "backslide", what could possibly render our calling unsure? Yet Peter, an inspired apostle, writing to those "born again", urges them not only to be diligent, but to increase their diligence: to what end? That they might make their salvation SURE.

Common logic should tell us that if it takes our own efforts of diligence to make our calling SURE; lack of such diligence must make our calling very UNSURE. Peter described the form our diligence should take; i.e. "DOING THINGS." He says, "For IF ye DO these things, ye shall never stumble." What things? They were to add to their "faith, virtue; and to virtue, knowledge, and to knowledge, temperance; and to temperance, patience; and to patience, Godliness; and to Godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love." They were to "do these things" to make their calling Sure, and so that they might never stumble: implying that failure to do these things would put their calling in jeopardy, and might cause them to stumble. ("G.C." might say that although we may "stumble" we cannot "fall"; but this is answered in the following subhead).

WHY WARN IF THERE'S NO DANGER ?

It is quite often suggested, when this issue is being discussed, that Christians who fall away, or who do not remain faithful, were never really Christians in the first place. This, of course, begs the question as to how someone can "fall" from a position they never occupied. Paul, for instance, warned Christians at Corinth, "Wherefore, let him that thinketh he standeth, take heed lest he fall." (1 Cor. 10:12). If Christians could never "fall" Paul's admonition was bizarre language indeed. This warning came from Paul as he recounted to the Church how God's people of old (Israel) incurred the wrath of God, brought upon themselves, in the wilderness, when they so often tempted God with their murmuring, idolatry and immorality. Paul says, "Now all these things happened unto them for ensamples; and they are written for OUR admonition, upon whom the ends of the world are come. Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed, LEST HE FALL." We can stumble, and Yes, we can fall.

It is difficult to imagine that Paul was addressing people who were "never Christians in the first place." If, for instance, we go to the opening verses of that epistle we find that Paul's words were addressed to ". . . the Church of God which is at Corinth, to them that are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints with all that in every place call upon the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, our Lord, both theirs and ours." How can anyone say that the Church at Corinth, those "sanctified IN CHRIST JESUS"; those who are "called to be saints"; and those "who in every place have called upon the name of Christ" were never Christians in the first place? Yet these "born again" Christians were the ones receiving Paul's warning that they could "fall."

Again, when writing to the Church at Ephesus, Paul addressed his warnings and exhortations to "The saints which are at Ephesus and to THE FAITHFUL IN JESUS CHRIST. . ." This also is hardly an accurate description of those who were never Christians to begin with. Paul addressed his epistle to the Christians at Rome, "To all that be in Rome, BELOVED OF GOD, CALLED TO BE SAINTS." To the church at Colosse Paul wrote, "To the saints and FAITHFUL BRETHREN IN CHRIST which are at Colosse." To those at Thessalonica Paul wrote, "Unto the church at Thessalonica which is in God the Father and in the Lord Jesus Christ. For our gospel came not unto you in word only, but in power and in the Holy Spirit . . . and ye became followers of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much affliction, with joy of the Holy Spirit." The apostles were not wasting time speaking to those who were never Christians in the first place; but were deadly serious in warning those who were "faithful brethren in Christ" to remain faithful.

This is emphatically confirmed by what Jesus, Himself, said in John 15:2-6 (just a few Chapters on from the proof-text of "G.C".) Jesus said, "Every branch in Me that beareth not fruit, He taketh away: and every branch that beareth fruit He purgeth it, that it may bring forth more fruit . . . (v.6) If a man abide not in Me he is cast forth as a branch and is withered, and they gather them and cast them into the fire

and they are burned.” Jesus refers to “Every branch **IN ME** that beareth not fruit He taketh away . . .” Those who say that those who fall away were never actually “In Christ” have to reckon with this declaration of Jesus. Christ says that any branches “**In Me**” that remain fruitless will be removed and cast forth as a branch, gathered up, and eventually burned. This, to me, seems a far cry from the emphatic declaration by G.C. that even backsliders can “**NEVER PERISH**”, and illustrates again how necessary it is to take all relevant scripture into account before coming to strong conclusions. It is not enough, (albeit quite easy to do) to take a scripture in isolation and make it appear to say something never intended. Jesus never ever contradicted Himself and what Jesus says here in John 15:2-6 certainly does not contradict what He said in John 10:27,28 (the proof-text). Surely there’s no difficulty in reconciling these two passages. Those sheep in the sheepfold who remain faithful will receive everlasting life and will never perish: those sheep who succumb to false teachers, the wiles of Satan, disbelief, unfruitfulness or lack of diligence will fall and “**WILL PERISH**”.

DANGER OF UNBELIEF

Thus far we have seen that the world is a very dangerous place for “born again” Christians. There are, inter alia, dangers from Satan, dangers from false teachers, dangers from lack of diligence and from unfruitfulness. There is also the added danger of UNBELIEF.

In Hebrew 3.12 we read, “Take heed, brethren, lest there be in any one of you **AN EVIL HEART OF UNBELIEF** in departing from the living God.” The writer has just been reminding the Christians of the many instances, chronicled in the O.T., of infidelity to God on the part of Israel, and is urging them not to fall by the same form of unbelief. He adds, “Let us therefore fear, lest a promise being left us of entering into His rest any of you should seem to come short of it” (4:1) and at (v.11) says, “Let us labour, therefore, to enter into that rest lest any man should **FALL** after the same manner of unbelief”.

The apostle Peter, speaking of the “Born again” says, “For if after they have escaped the pollutions of the world through the knowledge of the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, they are again entangled therein, and overcome, the latter end is worse with them than the beginning. For it had been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness than, after they have known it, to turn from the holy commandment delivered unto them.” (2 Peter 2:20). Again by no stretch of the imagination can we say that Peter refers to those who were never Christians in the first place. They had “escaped the pollutions of the world through the knowledge of Christ” but had again become entangled and overcome.

The writer to the Hebrews echoes these words when he says, “For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted of the heavenly gift, and were made partakers of the Holy Spirit. And have tasted of the good word of God, and the powers of the world to come. **IF THEY SHOULD FALL AWAY** to renew them again to repentance seeing they crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh and put Him to an open shame.” (Heb. 6:6). Again the writer is not referring to the sheep who were never sheep to start with, but is talking about those who “had been enlightened”; those “who had tasted of the heavenly gift” (Christ); those who “**HAD BEEN PARTAKERS OF THE HOLY SPIRIT**” and those who “had tasted of the good word of God” “If such should fall away” (something clearly seen as a real possibility) it would be impossible to renew them to repentance.

I apologise to readers for the tedium of having to repeat so often that the N.T. writers addressed their warnings to faithful Christians (even to those who had been partakers of the Holy Spirit). This has been necessary because G.C. and his friends

do insist that sheep which perish were never Christ's sheep in any case. This doctrine of "once saved; always saved" is quite widely held in some communities but is unscriptural and dangerous. It gives a false sense of security.

CONCLUSION

Space has more than gone and I have merely scratched the surface of the subject and have not even had time to mention the parables. Many of the parables, and certainly the parable of the sower, envisage that many will receive the good seed but will come to grief through the deceitfulness of riches or the cares of this world. Surely the parable of the "talents" also tells us that the slothful and unfruitful servants will incur the wrath of the Master and will be cast out amid tears and gnashing of teeth.

Neither have the letters from Christ to the seven churches (in the Revelation) been mentioned, where several times "born again" Christians are advised to repent or take the consequences, and where, in the case of the Laodiceans, some would be spewed out of Christ's mouth. All of this is surely strange language indeed, if even backsliding sheep will "NEVER PERISH."

Perhaps in closing, we should quote Paul's words in Romans 8:35 (a passage often used by those, like "G.C." who teach that no one can be lost) "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? (None of these things can separate us from Christ's love, but as we saw earlier, unbelief can, and so can the pollutions of this world; But Paul continues "For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord." No force whatsoever, whether good or bad, whether now or in the future, can separate us from God's love: and the only way in which men and women can be separated from God's love is by their own action; or by their own inaction. Yes, WE ourselves; We can separate ourselves from the love of Christ. Paul, himself, always conscious of this everpresent danger shows us just how very seriously he took the matter. He says "But I keep under, my body, and keep it in subjection: lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I MYSELF SHOULD BE A CASTAWAY" (1 Cor. 9:27). Unlike G.C. Paul never said "Never."

EDITOR.