

IN MEDIO

Volume 2, Issue 3, March 2007

The People of God Part One: “The Pharisees and Sadducees”

It seems that in discussions about biblical “truth” today, “truth” is not enough. Instead it seems to be the prevailing view among many spiritually-minded persons to look, not just for truth, but for a group of people who in some sense uniquely represent, by their teachings and by their conduct, “the truth.” Such a view is not without any biblical precedent. Indeed, from God’s selection of Noah and his family (Genesis 6:8, 18; 7:1, 23; 9:1), to his taking “Abram” and making him “Abraham,” the “father of a crowd of nations” (Genesis 12:1, 2; 17:4–6) who were “chosen” in part to serve as “witnesses” to the fact that Jehovah is God (Isaiah 43:10–12), to the selection by Jesus Christ of twelve seemingly unlikely followers (Matthew 10:2), to the establishment of a congregation of thousands (Acts 2:41; 4:4; 6:7), Jehovah God has often chosen people to represent him, his Son, and his teachings to others.

In this series of three articles I will explore the kinds of persons the Bible describes when it speaks of those who represent Jehovah God and Jesus Christ. The objective here is not really to try and “find out” who today are God’s people, for it is always easier, and wiser, to simply find out what is true than it is to find people who teach truth. Once you find out what is true based on the evidence available to you, then you can look around and see who is teaching it, and from there determine the extent of association that is appropriate for you and for your family. But there is a difference between “truth” and the types of persons who might possess it. Indeed, in this article I intend to focus specifically on types of persons, and ultimately types of groups of persons. I intend to give people biblical reason for caution when seeking first to find “the people of God,” before finding out what is true, even though that search might lead you to different people or to groups of persons as you find and evaluate reasons to believe.

By saying this I mean to make clear that I do not believe that a person cannot find truth from other people or through a religious organization. I believe, in fact, that through such interaction and association one is more likely to find truth! But my concern, based on my own experience and from what I have observed from others, has to do with *the extent to which* people are willing to accept something as true simply because of someone or some group, apart from reasons that may exist independently of a particular person or group.

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Being drawn to someone or to some group because of a belief that another person or group more outstandingly represents, for example, the actual teachings of the Bible than someone else is an understandable approach. Jesus himself taught:

Matthew 7:16–20 (NWT)

By their fruits YOU will recognize them. Never do people gather grapes from thorns or figs from thistles, do they? Likewise every good tree produces fine fruit, but every rotten tree produces worthless fruit; a good tree cannot bear worthless fruit, neither can a rotten tree produce fine fruit. Every tree not producing fine fruit gets cut down and thrown into the fire. Really, then, by their fruits YOU will recognize those [men].

But if this is taken to mean that we should simply look for those who possess the greatest number of true teachings, then we set ourselves up for accepting the smallest number of false teachings, which in the end means we will accept some false teachings no matter how small in number they may be. Yet, good is good and bad is bad; that which is false is false and that which true is true: “Woe to those who are saying that good is bad and bad is good, those who are putting darkness for light and light for darkness, those who are putting bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter” (Isaiah 5:20). To keep ‘good from being bad’ and ‘bad from being good,’ we should strive to be “on the side of the truth” (John 18:37). Truth will always safeguard us from being misled or deceived by others, or by ourselves, and it will also help us identify the people of God, “because no lie originates with the truth” (1 John 2:22).

In this series I am going to present the Bible’s descriptions of persons and groups chosen by God and by Jesus Christ to represent them and to bear their names to the world. In so doing I hope to provide a helpful contrast between those “trees” that ‘produce rotten fruit’ and those that ‘produce fine fruit,’ by looking first at the Jewish religious leaders of Jesus’ time and then at what Jesus himself taught about the marks of his followers. Finally, I will consider the descriptions and prophecies from the time of Jesus and his early followers concerning the identity of Christians who would live long after their time. This series will be presented in the following installments:

Part One: “The Pharisees and Sadducees” (March 1, 2007).

Part Two: “On the Side of the Truth” (April 1, 2007)

Part Three: “The Sons of the Kingdom” (May 1, 2007)

It is my hope that these articles will help those who are struggling with finding a way to express their faith with any organized group of Christians to be better able to discern which group may today best represent the teachings of the Bible. But it is an even greater hope of mine that all who read these articles will come to know that Christian faith, though it may benefit and be benefited by a Christian group or organization, is only really dependent on “one God, and one mediator between God and men, a man, Christ Jesus, who gave himself a corresponding ransom for all” (1 Timothy 2:5–6). Thus,

no matter how many today serve God and Christ Jesus faithfully, “where there are two or three gathered together” God through Jesus will be with you (Matthew 18:20).

Nevertheless, since this “ransom” has “bought persons for God out of every tribe and tongue and people and nation” (Revelation 5:9), then it makes sense that *after* “we have put our faith in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 2:16) we then look around for “the people of God.” If we find them, then “there may be an interchange of encouragement ... by each one through the other’s faith” (Romans 1:12). Unfortunately, though, finding the people of God sometimes involves tasting some “rotten fruit.” But even that can be avoided, if you look closely enough before tasting it. With this in mind, let us consider those who were “the people of God” in Jesus’ day and then look at some of the “worthless” or ‘bad fruit’ they produced, which Jesus himself called “the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees” (Matthew 16:11–12).

“The Leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees”

During the earthly life and ministry of Jesus Christ, those known as “the scribes and the Pharisees,” “the scribes and Pharisees,” “scribes and Pharisees,” and “Pharisees and scribes” are referenced throughout the four New Testament Gospel accounts (Matthew 5:20; 12:38; 15:1; 23:2, 13, 15, 23, 25, 27, 29; Mark 7:5; Luke 5:21; 6:7; 11:53). There are still more references to “scribes” (Matthew 7:29; 9:3; 17:10; Mark 2:6; 3:22), “scribes and older men” (Matthew 26:57), “chief priests and scribes” (Matthew 20:18, 21:15), and even “the scribes of the Pharisees” (Mark 2:16). Further, the Pharisees are also mentioned together with another influential group called the “Sadducees” (Matthew 3:7; 16:1, 2), and the Sadducees are themselves at times mentioned in isolation from the others (Matthew 22:23).

But in the New Testament Gospels, these groups who claimed to represent the people of God all had one thing in common: They resisted the teachings of Jesus. At times these groups resisted him for different reasons, reasons that related mostly to their own groups’ particular views and teachings. But they also had certain shared political, social, and religious views, relations, and aspirations that could bring them together against Jesus Christ (John 11:47–48). Thus, Jesus could speak in reference to two of such groups with opposing religious views (Matthew 22:23) as if they were one when he said, as recorded in Matthew 16:11–12 (NWT):

“But watch out for the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees.” Then they grasped that he said to watch out, not for the leaven of the loaves, but for the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees.

Therefore, in this sense we will consider the teachings of these groups as if they were one. Also, since “scribes” could belong to either the Pharisees or to the Sadducees (compare Mark 2:16), and since members of these parties could also be among the “chief priests” and “older men” (Matthew 20:18; 26:57; Acts 23:6), I will also consider

the teachings or “leaven” of the scribes and the chief priests and older men in relation to that of the Pharisees and Sadducees, again, as if they were all one. But what were some of the teachings of these scholars, older men, priests, and religious politicians? How could they have gotten things they appeared to love dearly, things to which their lives and careers were from all appearances completely devoted, so wrong? Why was Jesus, a man who had “not studied at the schools” (John 7:15) and who never did claim to belong to any earthly political party, so worried about these men and their teachings?

To find out we must first look at the teachings, the “leaven” of those who represented themselves and who were respected by others as “versed in the Law” (Luke 11:45, 46, 52). While it is not necessary to review every single reference to these first-century Jewish religious leaders, scholars, and politicians in order to get a sense for why Jesus was so concerned about them, I will present a healthy sampling of seven “leavens” of the Pharisees and the Sadducees and of those associated with them. I will use only the New Testament record’s presentation of these “leavens,” as translated by the *New World Translation* (NWT), followed by a simple contextual analysis for you to consider in the course of this series’ broader look at “the people of God.”

The Seven Leavens

Though there are more than seven instances of “leaven” found among the teachings of “the Pharisees and Sadducees” and those associated with them in the New Testament, I have selected seven examples that I believe capture the essential problem with their teachings, namely, they did not give priority to truth. The reason Jesus used “leaven” to represent “the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees” (Matthew 16:12) is well explained by the Jehovah’s Witness publication *Insight on the Scriptures*, vol. 2 (Brooklyn: Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, 1988), page 230:

“Leaven” is used in the Bible to denote sin or corruption. Jesus Christ told his disciples: “Watch out for the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees,” and, “Watch out for the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy.” The disciples at first did not understand that Jesus was using a symbolism, but they finally discerned that he was warning them to be on guard against false doctrine and hypocritical practices, “the *teaching* of the Pharisees and Sadducees,” which teaching had a corrupting effect. (Mt 16:6, 11, 12; Lu 12:1) He also mentioned Herod (evidently including his party followers) in one of his warnings, saying: “Keep your eyes open, look out for the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod.” (Mr 8:15) Jesus boldly denounced the Pharisees as hypocrites concerned with outward show. (Mt 23:25–28) He pointed out the wrong doctrinal viewpoint of the Sadducees. He exposed the hypocrisy and political treachery of the party followers of Herod.—Mt 22:15–21; Mr 3:6. The apostle Paul employed the same symbolism when he commanded the Christian congregation in Corinth to expel an immoral man from the congregation, stating: “Do you not know that a little leaven ferments the whole lump? Clear away the old leaven, that you may be a new lump, according as you are free from ferment. For, indeed, Christ our

passover has been sacrificed.” He then clearly showed what he meant by “leaven”:
 “Consequently let us keep the festival, not with old leaven, neither with leaven of
 badness and wickedness, but with unfermented cakes of sincerity and truth.”
 (1Co 5:6-8)

So in the New Testament “leaven” can be used to represent “badness and wickedness,” as opposed to “sincerity and truth.” “Leaven,” then, is opposed to “truth,” for “truth” is neither bad nor wicked, neither hypocritical nor corrupting. If this is true, then in the “Seven Leavens” that follow we should expect to find wickedness and hypocrisy, badness and corruption. If we find that those who controlled the centers of biblical learning and worship in Jesus’ day and who maintained their control and position over the “lesser” members of that society by teaching wickedness and corruption, but who were nonetheless considered by many to be the people of God, then what lesson does that hold for us today?

I have listed the Seven Leavens in relation to a word or concept that represents the teaching of the cited texts. The text in parentheses that is underlined is the text chosen to represent the others in the discussion of each “Leaven”:

1) Presumptuousness (Matthew 3:7-10; Luke 3:7-9):

When he caught sight of many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to the baptism, he said to them: “YOU offspring of vipers, who has intimated to YOU to flee from the coming wrath? So then produce fruit that befits repentance; and do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘As a father we have Abraham.’ For I say to YOU that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones. Already the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree, then, that does not produce fine fruit is to be cut down and thrown into the fire.

Here John the Baptist points out that rather than repent and produce “fine fruits” the Pharisees and Sadducees “presume” things about themselves that suggest they are primarily interested in their lineage and association with others, in this case Abraham, for legitimacy and righteousness. They took pride in the fact that ‘Abraham was their father’ (John 8:39), but they did not “do the works of Abraham” (John 8:39)! So even though they were Abraham’s descendants they took liberties for themselves that were not justified by lineage alone. The Leaven of Presumptuousness corrupts sincerity and truth because it provides a false basis for security and action, causing people to rely on things that do not qualify as a justified basis for the belief held or the action taken. Thus, the Leaven of Presumptuousness leads to false beliefs (John 8:48; 11:51) and wrongful actions (John 8:59; 11:53).

2) Condemning the ‘guiltless ones’ (Matthew 9:10-13; 12:1-7):

At that season Jesus went through the grainfields on the sabbath. His disciples got hungry and started to pluck heads of grain and to eat. At seeing this the Pharisees said to him: “Look! Your disciples are doing what it is not lawful to do

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on the sabbath.” He said to them: “Have YOU not read what David did when he and the men with him got hungry? How he entered into the house of God and they ate the loaves of presentation, something that it was not lawful for him to eat, nor for those with him, but for the priests only? Or, have YOU not read in the Law that on the sabbaths the priests in the temple treat the sabbath as not sacred and continue guiltless? But I tell YOU that something greater than the temple is here. However, if YOU had understood what this means, ‘I want mercy, and not sacrifice,’ YOU would not have condemned the guiltless ones.

Jehovah gives his people laws and guidance in matters of personal health and on being holy before him. But he does this *for people* and *for his holiness*. The Pharisees and the Sadducees and those like them carry Jehovah’s laws to an extreme *for their benefit, for their righteousness*. They condemn those for whom God made these laws when others do not share an equally extreme view of Jehovah’s laws. Again, the laws they carry to an extreme are not those where there is no excess, such as for mercy, but those with extremes that provide a basis for them to ‘condemn the guiltless ones.’

3) Teaching men’s commands as God’s commands (Matthew 15:1–9; Mark 7:1–13):

Then there came to Jesus from Jerusalem Pharisees and scribes, saying: “Why is it your disciples overstep the tradition of the men of former times? For example, they do not wash their hands when about to eat a meal.” In reply he said to them: “Why is it YOU also overstep the commandment of God because of YOUR tradition? For example, God said, ‘Honor your father and your mother’; and, ‘Let him that reviles father or mother end up in death.’ But YOU say, ‘Whoever says to his father or mother: “Whatever I have by which you might get benefit from me is a gift dedicated to God,” he must not honor his father at all.’ And so YOU have made the word of God invalid because of YOUR tradition. YOU hypocrites, Isaiah aptly prophesied about YOU, when he said, ‘This people honors me with their lips, yet their heart is far removed from me. It is in vain that they keep worshiping me, because they teach commands of men as doctrines.’”

The Pharisees and scribes and those like them put too much emphasis on “the tradition of men,” to the point where they “overstep the commandment of God.” They take something good (for example, God’s command to “honor your father and your mother”) and they try to make it “better” (in their minds, by requiring that all such honor be “dedicated to God”), but in the course of trying to honor him in this way they invalidate his commands! This kind of deception is one of the most despicable, for it tricks one into breaking God’s commands for the sake of God! Yet for this reason it is one of the most alluring deceptions for those desirous of pleasing God. Ultimately, however, it only succeeds in trapping those who are unwilling to see past the “commands of men” to what “God said” (compare Isaiah 29:13).

4) Questioning the authority of others to teach, rather than the teaching itself (Matthew 21:23–27; Mark 11:27–33; Luke 20:1–8):

And they came again to Jerusalem. And as he was walking in the temple, the chief priests and the scribes and the older men came to him and began to say to him: "By what authority do you do these things? or who gave you this authority to do these things?" Jesus said to them: "I will ask YOU one question. YOU answer me, and I will also tell YOU by what authority I do these things. Was the baptism by John from heaven or from men? Answer me." So they began to reason among themselves, saying: "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will say, 'Why is it, therefore, YOU did not believe him?' But dare we say, 'From men?'"—They were in fear of the crowd, for these all held that John had really been a prophet. Well, in reply to Jesus they said: "We do not know." And Jesus said to them: "Neither am I telling YOU by what authority I do these things."

Instead of addressing the biblical basis for what Jesus was teaching, "the chief priests and the scribes and the older men" questioned his authority to teach what he taught, and do what he did. Rather than sit down with him and "search and see" (compare John 7:52) what was written in the biblical scrolls, to find out if what he was saying had any merit, they for the most part simply disregarded what he said and instead they tried to undermine his right to speak about such things in the first place. Who was he to say such things, they thought? "Who are you?" someone might ask. Frankly, who do we have to be to speak the truth? Who do we have to be to seek the truth? Quite simply, we just have to have truth to speak it, or to want truth to seek it.

5) "They like ... to be called Rabbi by men" (Matthew 23:2-7; Luke 11:43):

"The scribes and the Pharisees have seated themselves in the seat of Moses. Therefore all the things they tell YOU, do and observe, but do not do according to their deeds, for they say but do not perform. They bind up heavy loads and put them upon the shoulders of men, but they themselves are not willing to budge them with their finger. All the works they do they do to be viewed by men; for they broaden the [scripture-containing] cases that they wear as safeguards, and enlarge the fringes [of their garments]. They like the most prominent place at evening meals and the front seats in the synagogues, and the greetings in the marketplaces and to be called Rabbi by men."

There is nothing wrong, of course, with getting an education, with using that education to help others, and then being acknowledged by others for your academic achievements. But the Pharisees and Sadducees and those similar to them "like" it. They like being in the "seat of Moses" so others come to them, and only to them, for 'judgment' and to "inquire of God" (Deuteronomy 18:13-16). Moreover, they want these things not so they can help others, but in order to be "viewed by" them. They like the prominence. They like the power. They enjoy being addressed by titles such as "Rabbi." They want others to acknowledge their religious devotion and then treat them accordingly, comparatively with others. So they make their reputation and person known and visible to others in one way or another, but not by their works (compare James 2:24), for "they say but do not perform."

In thinking this way, “the scribes and the Pharisees” become corrupt in mind, which dramatically affects their ability to think reasonably and with proper regard for others. Instead of their knowledge and understanding leading them to further repentance and lowliness of mind toward others (compare Philippians 2:1–8), they allow their learning and position to create class distinctions and a dependency on them for that which rightly belongs to God. They not only want to be the planters, but also the ones responsible for ‘making it grow,’ taking over God’s role in the life of others (compare 1 Corinthians 3:6–7).

6) Use of “crafty device” to further their desires (Matthew 26:3–4; Mark 14:1–2; Luke 22:1–2):

Then the chief priests and the older men of the people gathered together in the courtyard of the high priest who was called Ca’ia·phas, and took counsel together to seize Jesus by crafty device and kill him. However, they kept saying: “Not at the festival, in order that no uproar may arise among the people.”

The “chief priests and the older men of the people” and the scribes and the Pharisees and those like them are cowards. Instead of dealing with matters of religious and social importance out in the open they use trickery and “crafty device.” They question, not with the intent to learn or even to righteously challenge, but to “trap” people in their speech (Matthew 22:15). They ‘observe closely’ those who threaten them, in order to do away with them (Luke 20:20; compare Luke 11:54; Psalm 37:32). They do not act in accordance with God’s requirements for dealing with disputes. Instead they put themselves out of harm’s way by dealing with others secretly, so that “no uproar may arise among the people.” This is not Jesus’ way (Matthew 18:15–17).

But because they ‘love the glory of men more than even the glory of God’ (John 12:43), the scribes and the Pharisees and those like them take God’s role upon themselves. Again, they “like” it (Matthew 23:6–7), and they will use “crafty device” to keep it. The result is that others are misled and even kept from confessing things they believe to be true, for fear that they will be “expelled from the synagogue” (John 12:42). Thus, once again, “the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees” and those like them suppresses truth through fear.

7) Fear of losing their “place” (John 11:45–48):

Therefore [after Jesus resurrected Lazarus] many of the Jews that had come to Mary and that beheld what he did put faith in him; but some of them went off to the Pharisees and told them the things Jesus did. Consequently the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered the San´he·drin together and began to say: “What are we to do, because this man performs many signs? If we let him alone this way, they will all put faith in him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation.”

The Greek word translated “place” in verse 48 is *topos*, which can mean “a place of habitation” (such as Jerusalem), or a “position held in a group” (*A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed., edited and revised by Frederick W. Danker [Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2000], page 1011). Given the reference here to the threat of “the Romans” to the Jewish “nation,” *topos* likely refers to the entire place of habitation, that is, Jerusalem, which if removed would also naturally take away the “position” or office held by each member of the Jewish religious and political society.

The “chief priests and the Pharisees” and those with and like them are preoccupied by fear, fear of losing ‘their place and their nation.’ This fear occupies the place where faith and love should be, because “there is no fear in love, but perfect love throws fear outside, because fear exercises a restraint” (1 John 4:8). But if you love your position or your “place” more than you love truth, then you will constantly be in fear of losing it. Such fear will affect your judgment and your teaching, for it will ‘restrain’ you, as it did the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the scribes, the chief priests, and the “older men,” from accepting the truth (John 8:40). This in turn will keep you from the Father, Jehovah, for the Father is looking for those who ‘worship him in truth’ (John 4:23; 8:54).

Conclusion

The Pharisees, the Sadducees, the chief priests, the scribes, and others belonging to the religious and political society of Judaism in Jesus’ day, were looked upon by many in first-century Judaism as the people of God. These men were “Abraham’s offspring” (John 8:33, 37). They claimed to be “disciples of Moses” (John 9:28). They were the most “versed in the Law” (Luke 7:30; 11:45–46, 52; 14:3). They controlled the synagogues (John 9:22; 12:42). They controlled the Jewish Sanhedrin, or high court (Mark 14:55; Luke 15:1; 22:66; John 11:47). Yet, Jesus condemned them over, and over, and over again (Matthew 23:13–39; Luke 11:42–54).

The reason they stood condemned before Jesus, in spite of all the reasons people might offer to the contrary, as cited above, was because they “disregarded weightier matters of the Law, namely, justice and mercy and faithfulness” (Matthew 23:23). They allowed their minds and their teachings to become corrupt and to ‘take away the key of knowledge,’ causing spiritual ruin to themselves and harm to others (Luke 11:52). Truly, then, the Pharisees and the Sadducees, the chief priests, the older men, and the scribes were not the people of God, regardless of what they thought or how others perceived them. But that did not mean that some from among them could not rise up and restore honor to the Jewish faith, and then establish it as revealed and fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Indeed, some not only could, but did (Acts 23:6; Romans 1:16–17; Galatians 3:23–25), with a little help (Acts 9:3–9).

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But the Seven Leavens and other false and misleading teachings of the Jewish religious leaders and scholars of the first century did not die with them. Today we all face the danger of having our faith in God and our desire to help others become “corrupted away from the sincerity and the chastity that are due the Christ” (2 Corinthians 11:3). There are, as there were in Jesus’ and in Paul’s day, “false apostles [and] deceitful workers,” those who like Satan himself ‘keep transforming themselves into angels of light’ (2 Corinthians 11:13, 14). Though “their end shall be according to their works,” (2 Corinthians 11:15), as was also the case with the Pharisees and the Sadducees and those like them (John 3:19), if we are not careful we might also fall victim to such teachings, perhaps without ever realizing it (John 16:2).

While we have the example of the wicked religious and scholarly men who opposed Jesus to serve as a warning, Jesus also set a pattern for those who would follow in his footsteps, and he also said that his true followers would display certain “fruits” (Matthew 7:16, 20). But what are these “fruits,” according to the Bible? Is there one ‘fruit’ in particular that stands out above all others? I think there is, and it will be the subject of Part Two in this series on “The People of God.”

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(REVISED April 19, 2008)*

***This article was revised only with respect to its formatting. No changes were made to the content of the original article.**