

The Illegitimate

by W. Race

This article first appeared in our church paper, *The Messenger of Living Righteousness*, April 1970. Brother Bill Race was a friend of Fred Wright, and fellow-believer in the message at least as early as 1962, when they were both involved in the Brinsmead Awakening.

I wish to take up a topic today which in my forty seven years as an Advent believer I have never heard taken up and satisfactorily explained, even though it is a subject of quite some importance, if we are to judge by the number of those who have been discouraged by their misunderstanding of the text involved. At this time of history I believe that the truth of this should be known.

Deuteronomy 23

² An illegitimate shall not enter into the congregation of the Lord; even to his tenth generation shall he not enter into the congregation of the Lord.

In plain English this is but to say that no illegitimate shall ever enter the kingdom of God. Now on the surface of it that is a very discouraging text for anyone who has been born out of wedlock, and there must be quite a number of people down through the years who have made this text the reason for their rejection of the gospel.

When I first became interested in the Advent message back in my early twenties I began to attend a series of meetings in which the message was being preached. There was, among the group of young men who had grown up with me, a young fellow who had been born out of wedlock. He knew it and we knew it. So when the Adventists began to preach and we became interested in it, I said to him, "Are you coming along with us?"

"No," he replied, "I couldn't be saved if I wanted to be. The Bible says that no illegitimate will enter the kingdom of God."

And so he would not come along, quoting this text of scrip-

ture to me as the reason. At that time I had no answer for him and so I asked the Pastor about it only to find that he had no answer either. All he could say was for me to tell him that no doubt God would overlook that. It was not his fault after all and so on.

But this was not the answer, yet I tried again and again to get him to come along, but he would not come because of this text of Scripture. He simply insisted that there was no hope for him and that he would only be wasting his time anyway. So he would not come, and he never did come.

This experience has left me to wonder as to how many more have refused to listen to the Gospel because of this text of scripture and because of this I determined to find the answer to it.

What is an illegitimate who can never enter the kingdom of God?

In the world today, and this understanding has come down from the Jewish nation and even before that, an illegitimate is understood to be a child born out of wedlock. An excellent example of this fact and the application of this text to this situation comes to us from Bible times.

Judges 11

¹ Now Jephthah the Gileadite was a mighty man of valor, and he was the son of a harlot: and Gilead begat Jephthah.

² And Gilead's wife bare him sons; and his wife's sons grew up, and they thrust out Jephthah, and said unto him, You shalt not inherit in our father's house; for you are the son of a strange woman.

A strange woman in this case means an unmarried woman.

³ Then Jephthah fled from his brethren, and dwelt in the land of Tob: and there were gathered vain men to Jephthah, and went out with him.

⁴ And it came to pass in process of time, that the children of Ammon made war against Israel.

⁵ And it was so, that when the children of Ammon made war against Israel, the elders of Gilead went to fetch Jephthah out of the land of Tob:

⁶ And they said unto Jephthah, Come, and be our captain, that we may fight with the children of Ammon.

⁷ And Jephthah said unto the elders of Gilead, Did you not hate me, and expel me out of my father's house? And why are you come unto me now when you are in distress?

⁸ And the elders of Gilead said unto Jephthah, Therefore we turn again to you now, that you may go with us, and fight against the children of Ammon, and be our head over all the inhabitants of Gilead.

Now it is strange isn't it that they should thrust a man out as unfit to live among them and yet in their distress he is the very man to whom they turned. I wonder how many times that will be repeated amongst God's people in these last days?

Now this Jephthah was a mighty man of valor whose history, if you read it through shows that he believed in God despite the fact that he was an illegitimate by birth, and despite the fact he knew of the words in *Deuteronomy* regarding the illegitimate child. And what is more the Lord blessed him very mightily in the field of battle and in all that he did. If we should turn to the eleventh chapter of the book of Hebrews which is a page out of the book of life, we shall find his name there:

Hebrews 11

³² And what shall I more say? for the time would fail to tell of Gideon, and of Barak, and of Samson, and of Jephthah; of David also and Samuel, and of the prophets:

Thus it must be very apparent that God's understanding of the status of the illegitimate and the understanding of the brothers of Jephthah must have been very different indeed. The understanding of his brethren was that he could most certainly never inherit the kingdom of God and so therefore they thrust him out. If he had not have fled they would have slain him, so great was their prejudice against him.

From the reasonable and just point of view this position is harsh and very unreasonable. It is inconsistent with the character of God who has declared that we shall each one suffer for our own sins and not for the sins of another unless of course their sin has also become our sin. But the sin of the parents in bringing in a child born out of wedlock can never be blamed on the poor child. He had no choice in the matter and is the victim of the sins of the parents.

And this is borne out by the difference in the way in which God treated Jephthah and the way in which his brethren treated him. God certainly knew the text in *Deuteronomy* for it was He who had directed Moses to write it. And yet in the face of it He blessed Jephthah and by no means cast him out. As God does nothing inconsistent with Himself then it is apparent that the brethren of Jephthah did indeed have a very wrong understanding of that command of the Lord.

John 8

³⁹ They answered and said unto Him, Abraham is our father. Jesus said unto them, If you be Abraham's children, you would do the works of Abraham.

⁴⁰ But now you seek to kill me, a man that has told you the truth, which I have heard of God: this did not Abraham.

⁴¹ You do the deeds of your father. Then said they unto Him, We be not born of fornication: we have one Father, even God.

This conversation between Christ and the Jewish elders shows how that this wrong concept has persisted right down to the time of Christ and served as a justification for many then to reject Him as the Messiah.

Just as the wrong teachings of the Roman Church are so instilled into the minds of the children as to cause them to reject the truth when it comes to them, so this false teaching had been instilled into the minds of the Jewish people.

Satan had seen to it for he knew how Christ would be born and thus knew how he could use the Word of God to cause

the people to reject the Messiah. Christ when He came was conceived in the womb of a single woman. The Jews knew this and in fact all Israel knew this and to them therefore, He was an illegitimate, and the word of God had said so plainly that no illegitimate could ever enter the kingdom of God. Therefore by the plainest teachings of the word of God itself, Jesus could never be the Messiah, for, as an illegitimate, He could not enter the kingdom of God

So it was that when Jesus came and proclaimed Himself to be the Messiah, the Jews said that it was absolutely impossible for that Man to be the Messiah, He was conceived out of wedlock and Moses said that no illegitimate will ever enter the kingdom of God. So strongly was this impressed upon the Jewish nation that it was the last word,—it was absolute proof that this Man who called Himself the Messiah could never be that, could never be a prophet of God, and thus could never even enter the kingdom of God. He must be of the devil, and him alone. The absolute proof of it lay there in the words of Moses. They need look no further.

Imagine the impact of this argument on the minds of the people as the leaders sent men to follow Jesus armed with the book of Moses and showing from that word that Christ could never be the Messiah. On the face of it one might well conclude that there was ample justification for the rejection of the Messiah which did take place back there. So it was then, that in the eyes of the people and in the eyes of the world, the opposers of Christ had ample and simple proof that the Saviour was not even a child of God nor ever could be, but such proof was based on a completely false interpretation and understanding of the word of God through Moses.

Now what I want to say at this point is this: what Moses taught was the truth, the absolute truth. This study is not a denial of the word of God through Moses but an investigation of the true meaning of the words in *Deuteronomy* for it must be evident that the blessing of the Lord upon Jephthah, and

the fact that there are many infallible proofs to show that Christ was indeed the Messiah, and has indeed ascended up into the kingdom of God, that the understanding of this text as usually held is not a true one as intended by the Lord to be held and understood by the people under His care.

Yet the wording of the text is plain enough.

Deuteronomy 23

² An illegitimate shall not enter into the congregation of the Lord; even to His tenth generation shall he not enter into the congregation of the Lord.

Taken on its own it would seem that it could only mean that any child who was born out of wedlock, must be excluded from the kingdom of God. But that this is not the meaning is made clear from the way in which the Lord regarded both Jephthah and Christ.

What then does the word of God through Moses really mean? What is the message this is designed to convey?

The answer must be obtained from the word of God itself for the Scripture is its own interpreter. Accordingly we turn to

Hebrews 12 [RSV]

⁸ If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons.

Now Paul is talking to the believers, not to the heathen, and to them he says, that if they did not suffer the chastisement of God then they were illegitimate children and not the sons of God. The context of this verse shows that Paul is explaining to them why they were suffering the chastisement of the Lord.

Back in the Old Testament, Solomon had given the counsel not to spare the rod and spoil the child. Such was the teaching from the Lord, and the Lord does just that to His own children, *those who are born of Him*, but not to those who are not born of Him.

Therefore the message of Paul to them then, and to us now, is that we should be comforted when chastised for this is an evidence that we are legitimate children of the Lord.

At once it becomes evident that what makes us legitimate or illegitimate children is the question of our origin, not according to our physical birth, but according to our spiritual birth. If we have the devil for our father as did the Pharisees in the days of Christ, as stated by Christ in *John* 8:44, then we very certainly are not the legitimate sons of God, and as such have no place in the congregation of the Lord or in the kingdom of God.

All this throws considerable light on the visit of Nicodemus to Jesus as recorded in *John* 3:1-21. To Nicodemus there were many proofs that Jesus was the Messiah, but no doubt he found that wherever he sought to convey his convictions, he was met with the argument that the illegitimate will never enter the kingdom. Jesus was an illegitimate and so therefore could never find His place in the congregation of the Lord, let alone be the Messiah.

For this argument, Nicodemus had no answer, and to find the answer he went to Jesus, who knowing by the inspiration of the Spirit of God the real problem on the mind of Nicodemus, came straight to the point and explained to him the nature of the birth with which the Bible is concerned.

The very opening statement of Nicodemus shows that he came with a question on his mind as to whether Jesus was truly the Messiah or not. "Rabbi," he said, "we know that You are a teacher come from God: for no man can do these miracles that You do, except God be with Him."

This statement may sound very positive but it is really expressive of the fact that while on the one hand he did have this conviction yet he still could not understand how this could be in the light of the question we are studying.

In His answer Jesus came directly to the point and showed that unless a man was born again he most certainly could not enter the kingdom of God. This then is to say that the answer to the question lies in the fact that in no sense of the word is it the first birth which is the matter of consideration when God decides as to who shall be saved and who shall not, but it is the question of the second birth. The first birth counts for nothing whatsoever.

It does not matter as to whether we are born in Africa or at the north pole; whether we are black skinned or red or yellow, legitimate or illegitimate so far as the first birth is concerned. We can have any one of these beginnings and still have the same equal opportunity of salvation. The life both of Christ and of Jephthah is witness to the truth of this.

It is the second birth then which counts. This is the birth which makes you the legitimate son of God and no other birth but this. If you do not have this birth, then what are you? Illegitimate!

The King upon his highest throne who may have the most noble birth so far as the world is concerned, still stands in the sight of God as an illegitimate if he does not have the new birth, while the child who is born in the most abject poverty and lowliness, is legitimate once he has been born of the Spirit into the new life. This is the thing which counts.

This birth is the union of humanity with divinity. While earthly parents supply the flesh and blood body, it is the heavenly Father who supplies the character in the person in the new birth. And this was the very nature of the birth of Christ. An earthly parent supplied his human nature but it was the heavenly Father who supplied him with the character within which was the real man. He was not illegitimate at all, for it is perfectly legal and proper for there to be a marriage between humanity and divinity. Such a marriage had taken place before the birth of Jesus, so that in no sense of the word were

the parents of Jesus, the human and the divine, unwed when He was conceived and born.

It was this marriage which the Jews neither saw nor understood so that to them Jesus was illegitimate. They could see only the physical marriage between Joseph and Mary. This was the only marriage which they understood and thus could see, but it was not the real marriage so far as salvation is concerned. Except Jesus had been born in the very way He was, He never could have been the Messiah, and except we be born the same way, we can never have a part in the kingdom of God. We are illegitimate.

This then is but to say that all who are born into the world are born as illegitimate children. As we are born into the world we cannot enter into the congregation of the Lord. There is no place there for us, until humanity and divinity are united in us and then we become the children of God,—the legitimate sons and daughters of the Most High. This then is but to say that the law of Moses in regard to the illegitimate is the same as the teaching of Christ when He said, “Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.”

The question may be fairly raised then as to why the Lord stated this truth in such words in the Old Testament as could be misunderstood, and thus serve to discourage many from taking hold of the gospel.

As far as I know, the man to whom I referred in the opening part of this study, who would not attend the mission because of the nature of his birth, has never laid hold upon the gospel. Whether he would have if he had not been born illegitimate, is another question. Perhaps he was but using that as an excuse.

The facts are that the Word of God is written in language intended to be understood only by the honest seeker for truth. It is a book which is available to the enemies of the gospel as it is also the friends of the gospel. This being so, those who

are looking for excuses to resist the Word of God will find them, while these very things will not serve to prevent those who are seeking the truth of God.

While the majority of the proud Pharisees were reassured by the law of Moses that they were walking in the right path when they rejected the Saviour,—this did not prevent Nicodemus from taking his stand for the Master.

In fact it is a means used by the Lord to prevent a flood of people coming into the church who would bring to it only weakness and loss. Better by far a small church group who are pure and true than a great company of people who are there but for the physical and material advantages.

Let us be glad then that the truth stands that the illegitimate shall not enter the congregation of the Lord, for except a man be born again, he shall not see the kingdom.

Salvation is for all men. And those who are born out of wedlock, so far as the physical beginning is concerned, have as much an opportunity as any one else in any other part of the world or in any other age of history.