

UNITY IN BIBLICAL UNDERSTANDING

Why is it that you and I don't agree on everything taught in the New Testament? We have the same book. God told you the same thing He told me. And we have a desire to agree. Don't we? Well, why don't we agree then? It must be really painful to the Heavenly Father to know that those who claim to be His children can't agree on what He has told them! Jesus prayed, "I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word [the words of the apostles], that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You, that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me" (John 17:20-21).

Some hold the position, "We're unified by agreeing to disagree." But is this "unity in diversity" concept the type of "oneness" Jesus prayed for? Not at all! Jesus wants and expects us to imitate the perfect harmony of thought He and His Father enjoy. "But that's too idealistic," people say. Is it really possible we can understand the Bible alike? Well, Paul appealed to us to "understand what the Will of the Lord is" (Ephesians 5:17). He also said, "By revelation God made known to me the mystery (as I wrote before in a few words, by which, when you read, you may understand my knowledge in the mystery of Christ)" (Ephesians 3:3-4).

We want to discuss some factors which hinder us in coming to a common understanding of the Scriptures. By understanding some common pitfalls, we can avoid mistakes in interpretation which we have made in the past. However, before we notice these, let's establish a principle which is fundamental to unity in biblical understanding.

Truth is harmonious.

Truth, like parallel lines extending to infinity, never crosses itself, so if we understand truth correctly at all, we'll understand it alike. For some reason, this principle is accepted in every field except religion. Suppose three children came to different and conflicting answers to the same math problem. Would the teacher say, "Well, it really makes no difference. As long as they're honest and sincere, they're all right"? Suppose you went to three different doctors to diagnose an illness, & each one gave you a different answer. Would you take their differing medications with an "It doesn't make a difference" attitude? Of course not!

In mathematics and medicine, there's no room for an "It doesn't make a difference" attitude. Yet in reference to religion people say, "As long as a person is honest and sincere in his views, he's all right." However, there's no difference between secular truth and religious truth. If three children can't have but one answer for any given math problem, then no three men can have more than one interpretation for any given text of Scripture and it be "all right"! In any field, whether secular or religious, truth is harmonious!

Since truth is harmonious, then...

- The purpose of interpretation is to comprehend exactly what the writer intended to be understood.
- In any passage of Scripture, the writer is conveying only one idea.
- Since there's only one idea conveyed in any Scripture, there can be only one correct interpretation of it.

So if two or more people come to different conclusions on a text, one or all of them are wrong.

Realizing that truth is harmonious and that God made biblical truth understandable, we have to ask the question, "What are the factors which cause men to misunderstand truth and be in disagreement?"

Here are seven factors which hinder the attainment of truth.

1. **Living in sin can cause us to misinterpret the Scriptures.** A brother who lives in sin and hears a preacher condemn his sin can do one of three things. He can repent, which is what we hope and pray he'll do. He can leave the church, which shows he's honest enough to see his sin for what it is, although he loves it more than the truth. He can attack the preacher's interpretation. This last alternative means he doesn't want to lose the respectable position of "church membership," but he's also convinced that what he's doing can't be wrong. He justifies his sin by twisting the Scriptures to say something they don't say; then every time he comes to that passage after that, he reminds himself of his previous misinterpretation—his sin has then taken precedence over the truth until he has become blinded to it.

We must realize that if we want to understand the truth, we must desire just as much to repent when necessary; we can't have truth without repentance, because the purpose of biblical truth is to expose sin. To fail to embrace truth destroys the influence of Christians and fills the enemies of Christ with blasphemies.

2. **Ignorance can cause us to misinterpret the Scriptures.** To understand the meaning of a passage, knowledge in several areas of study may be necessary. Knowledge in history, literature, science, philosophy, agriculture, music, sociology, medicine, original languages, ancient religions, logic, and geography are very helpful; at least we ought to have books available to aid us when studying biblical subjects dealing in such areas. The New Testament book of Hebrews, having reference to Moses, angels, Melchizedek, Aaron, and the tabernacle worship can't be accurately understood without a knowledge of the Old Testament; without knowledge of these and many more Old Testament characters, Hebrews would be a sealed book.

In Second Thessalonians 2:7, if you use the KJV, it reads, "For the mystery of iniquity doth already work: only he who now letteth will let, until he be taken out of the way"; the meaning of the word "let" has changed drastically since 1611—in old English it meant "to hinder," while today it means just the opposite, "to allow."

First Peter 3:1-2 in the KJV reads, "Likewise, ye wives, be in subjection to your own husbands, that, if any obey not the word, they also may without the word be won by the conversation of the wives; while they behold your chaste conversation coupled with fear." First, the word "conversation" has changed meaning from "manner of life" to "speaking to one another." Also in this passage, without helpful aids like a simple interlinear or another version, one may conclude that a rebellious husband could be saved without God's Word; this is a misinterpretation. The NKJV renders this verse more accurately: "Likewise, you wives, be submissive to your own husbands, that if some do not obey the word, they, without a word, may be won by the conduct of their wives...."

So a basic reference library would go far in eliminating unnecessary ignorance. Isn't it ironic, in our age when we have more knowledge and opportunities to understand God's Will than in any generation before us, that we're in greater religious confusion than ever due to a lack of knowledge?

3. **Preconceived ideas can cause us to misinterpret the Scriptures.** When we come to a passage with our minds already made up, we're guaranteed to find what we want, but it may not be the truth. We tend to accept the passages which seem to lean toward our understanding of a subject. All passages which seem to contradict our position must have a different interpretation, we believe; so we go about devising another interpretation for those passages. We must be aware, then, that if we keep telling ourselves a lie long enough, we'll end up believing it!

We must admit that until we have studied everything for ourselves, we still have some preconceived ideas; but it isn't wrong to have preconceived ideas since it would probably be impossible to live life without them. However, we must realize we have them, and be able to recognize them when we see them, being ready to change when we discover we believe something false.

4. **Following long standing tradition can cause us to misinterpret the Scriptures.** We have all heard words like these: "When my grandfather came from the old country, he came as a _____. My parents were staunch _____ until their deaths. I've been a _____ for sixty years, and I'll be one until I die." That's an example of interpreting the Scriptures from long standing tradition: this person's religion has become a family tradition to him. He may not be able to defend his faith with God's Word, but the fact that he has always been a "blank" is enough to blind his eyes to anything else.

What about us? Are we members of the church we're members of because we're following family tradition? Or are we members of the church we're members of because we know from God's Word that it's the Lord's church or at least a congregation of His church?

Let's be careful to avoid being guilty of Jesus' words in Mark 7:9: "All too well you reject the commandment of God, that you may keep your tradition."

5. **A cynical attitude can cause us to misinterpret the Scriptures.** D. R. Dungan, in his book entitled *Hermeneutics*, said, "There are those who are competent to see in every remark that is made something that is unchaste. They can find double meanings to anything that is said. And they interpret actions in the same way. To them, every word and act seen or heard is prompted by motives in which they see themselves as they attribute their own motives to the acts of others" (pp. 17-18).

A cynic tries to conform every word and action to his world view. Any selfless action is twisted until it appears as hypocrisy; and, unfortunately, the cynic will approach the Bible the same way: for example, a cynic will consider the event of the sinner woman washing Christ's feet as a sure sign that Jesus had an affair with her. A cynic understands Christ's words, "Whatever I tell you in the dark, speak in the light; and what you hear in the ear, preach on the housetops" (Matthew 10:27) as a sign of His cowardice, sending His disciples to preach publicly what He wouldn't preach publicly. A cynic can't comprehend sinlessness. He sees his own life as full of sin, so he can't believe that anyone else could be perfect or live a better life; so Jesus becomes the prime target for a cynic's attack: if the insecure cynic can show Jesus to be just another fallible human, like himself, he's much more comfortable with himself.

Cynicism is totally subjective: everyone must fit its mold; even truth must be stretched to fit the cynic's picture of the world. Cynicism, like enthusiasm and pessimism, is contagious: it passes from one person to the next, starting out small, and if not detected and eliminated, can control our entire frame of mind. The cynical attitude, in any proportion, is destructive to biblical understanding.

6. **A proud attitude can cause us to misinterpret the Scriptures.** Many times pride goes undetected because we often mistake it for a strong self-confidence. One avenue through which pride enters our lives is that of biblical knowledge: when knowledge of the Bible is revered by those around us, we want to be known as one who is well-read; so when our biblical knowledge is placed on a pedestal, we're happy. However, when we're proven wrong on some point, we're offended. Pride can blind us to truth.

Let's mention two offsprings of pride. *The most prominent offspring is the desire to be known as a person of leading thought.* This type of pride is obvious because a hallmark of pride is the thirst for distinction, and there are several ways a person can exhibit this type of pride. If a younger man challenges the interpretations of an older, more respected man, it may be to make others think he's smarter. If a person sees a lesson in a text which the text doesn't teach, yet teaches that lesson anyway, he's probably seeking glory. Usually the misconstrued lesson has several ingenious statements which make the lesson appear profound, but if the biblical author explained the same text, his explanation would be far different. What has happened is, this brother took his lesson and applied it to the text instead of drawing the lesson from the text, thereby making him appear as an exegetical wizard or intellectual giant, but it was pride which caused him to treat the text in that way, and he received the glory he sought for.

The other offspring isn't so easily detected. A person may have pride in his heart for years, but it won't show up till he's proven wrong. This type of person has held an interpretation for many years, and someone proves it to be incorrect, so he plays the devil's advocate to prove himself right; he makes statements he himself would reject in other circumstances, and if he's backed into a corner, he'll reach for any argument which will cut his opponent down, because he will not be proven wrong. This person may make his opponent look like a fool, but he has come no closer to truth. We shouldn't have this sort of attitude, of course, and Apollos set a good example for us (Acts 18:24-28).

7. **Ignorance of the laws of hermeneutics can cause us to misinterpret the Scriptures.** Hermeneutics is a set of common sense rules that aid in interpretation. Interpretation isn't limited to the Bible, nor are the laws of interpretation. Many different vocations need hermeneutics to function correctly: lawyers and historians as well as Christians need a thorough knowledge of the rules of interpretation. The rules we use to interpret the Bible are universal and apply to every other field.

A correct understanding of hermeneutics won't cause a person with a hardened heart to see truth, though: the cynic, the skeptic, and the proud, for example, won't be helped by these laws; even if a person is honestly seeking the truth, he can still fall into error if he doesn't "correctly handle God's Word," as Paul demanded of us in Second Timothy 2:15.

Basically, the laws of hermeneutics show us which biblical truths apply and which don't. In Genesis 6, God commanded Noah to build an ark to save his family, and since we take the Bible as authoritative, and since this is commanded in the Bible, isn't it our responsibility to build an ark to save ourselves? Your immediate response would be, "No! This command doesn't apply to me because it was a one-time, individual covenant between God and Noah"; and you'd be correct, of course. Why? Because by making a distinction between covenants, you would have just made use of a basic rule of interpretation: the covenant God made with Noah isn't the same one He made with us; however, many people, because they don't realize there are such laws, will interpret the Bible inconsistently: they'll agree we're not bound to the commands given to Noah, for example, but they'll insist that the Ten Commandments, the covenant God made with the Israelites, are still binding today.

Without an understanding of the laws of hermeneutics, whether consciously or unconsciously, and without a consistent application of these laws to our Bible study, we won't know which commands are binding today and which commands aren't binding today.

In order to understand the Bible as it was intended, every Christian should make a thorough study of the rules of interpretation. We can be completely honest in our efforts and be completely objective and diligent in our studies, but without some knowledge of the rules of interpretation, we'll still come to different conclusions.

Conclusion

God inspired His Word in a way that it could be understood, or else He wouldn't have demanded that we know what His Will is and obey it. Truth is harmonious, so if we understand the Bible correctly at all, we'll understand it alike.

Though the world is in religious division, we're not locked into a course which can't be changed. Our study has revealed three primary factors which cause Scriptural misunderstanding in our lives.

- Living with sin. The only solution is repentance. If a sin is hindering our search for truth, we can be rid of that stumbling block today by changing our minds and lives.

- Living with ignorance. Growing in knowledge is a lifetime endeavor, but it can begin today if we'll make a commitment to develop a disciplined study schedule. That means studying every day at an appointed time for a substantial amount of time.
- Living with destructive attitudes. We can change our attitudes easier than our sins or ignorance. We can change our attitudes right now. Every attitude which doesn't yearn for truth must be discarded until our only attitude is a love for it. (See Second Thessalonians 2:9-12.)

One thing is certain: we must each accept personal responsibility for the spiritual division we contribute to the world—you can't repent of my sins; you can't study for me; you can't change my attitudes. If the battle for Scriptural unity is going to be won, it will be won on an individual level. The most we can offer to our Lord's prayer for unity is to make sure we have the truth: when we make sure we know the truth, then we'll be united, and our Savior's prayer will be answered.

Remember the words of Paul: "Now I plead with you brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment" (First Corinthians 1:10).

[Leland Byars, 1985.]

[Adapted/Revised by Tony Denton, June 1990.]