

Why Do Christians Disagree on Spiritual Matters?

Following the lesson on the inspiration and preservation of scripture, I wanted to explore the question, "If God has given us His word, why do Christians disagree on spiritual matters?". This short paper will briefly touch on only some of the reasons. There are four main points I think we should keep in mind.

- A. Some things God has not revealed
- B. There is nothing wrong with the Bible
- C. The problem is with us
- D. We all need to continually grow in our understanding

A. Some things God has not revealed

Scripture doesn't specifically answer every possible spiritual question we may have. There are gray areas that each believer must learn to judge for himself. There are matters of conscience where the scriptures are silent, in which believers with different backgrounds and knowledge may come to different conclusions. And that is OK. Two believers with differing views can both please the Lord if they are trying to serve the Lord with a pure conscience.

It may be right for a believer to do something in a certain context, and the same behavior be sinful in another context. It may be right for one believer to do something and wrong for another. In these matters, we are commanded to neither judge nor despise each other. Four chapters in particular give guiding principles that we are to apply to these questionable areas of Christian living (1Cor 8-10 and Romans 14).

B. There is nothing wrong with the Bible

Sometimes we disagree because we interpret the Bible differently. A favorite excuse of unbelievers is that "there are so many different interpretations".

We can be tempted to say the Bible is not clear. There seems to be a movement in that direction--a movement away from certainty toward ambiguity. Many of the "emerging church" leaders advocate this view of scripture.

The Roman church tried for hundreds of years to keep the Bible out of the common man's hands, believing only the church in its official capacity could properly interpret the Bible--not the ordinary rank-and-file believers.

What does the Bible say about its own clarity? Throughout the Bible, the scriptures are referred to as being understandable and knowable. Here are a just a few references: 1John 5:13; Prov 4:4; 1Peter 2:2; 2Peter 3:18; 2Cor 2:7-16.

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Scripture is clearly said to be written for our salvation, learning, admonition, patience, comfort, hope, doctrine, reproof, correction, and instruction (Rom 15:4; 1Cor 10:11; 2Tim 3:15-16). If scripture is not understandable, it cannot accomplish any of these objectives.

In Jesus' day, as in our day, many people were in error. Yet Jesus never blamed the Bible; He blamed the people. *"Have you never read...?", "You do err, not knowing the scriptures...", "O fools, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken."*

So if the problem is not with God or His word, why *are* there so many conflicting views on scripture?

C. The problem is with us

If the problem is not with God or His word, it must be with us. So what are some of the problems with us?

1. No indwelling Holy Spirit. Unsaved people (many of whom may profess to be Christians) do not have the indwelling Spirit to illuminate the Bible (Matt 7:13-23; Jn 7:37; Acts 11:16-17; Rom 5:5; 1Cor 2:12; 6:19; 2Cor 5:5). The natural man cannot discern spiritual things (1Cor 2:14) and no amount of education can overcome spiritual deadness (Eph 2:1; Jn 3:3-7). God must reveal spiritual truth (Matt 11:25; 16:17). The initiation into the life of the Spirit is reconciliation with God by receiving the Lord Jesus Christ through repentance and faith (John 1:12; Acts 20:21).

But why do truly born-again people disagree?

2. Sinfulness. Our spiritual growth is not an impersonal academic exercise. It is about our knowledge of a person: God. It's about relationship and our growing in Him. Since God is the Creator and we are His creatures, we are to obey Him. Obedience to what He has already revealed to us is crucial to our receiving more light (John 7:17; James 1:22; Matt 25:29). We are to avoid sin by resisting temptation (Psalm 4:4; 1Cor 15:34; 1Jn 2:1; 2Tim 2:19; James 4:7; 1Cor 10:13; Luke 22:40; James 1:12). When we sin, we are to confess it to God to receive forgiveness (Prov 28:13; 1Jn 1:9; 1Cor 11:31-32; 2Cor 7:9-11).
3. Not enough diligent study. We will never exhaust the depths of God's knowledge. We cannot know all things about God. His greatness and judgments are unsearchable (Psalm 145:3; Rom 11:33-36). Even that which God has chosen to reveal in scripture is not understandable all at once. Peter confesses that some things in Paul's epistles are hard to be understood (2Pet 3:16). But Peter did not say they were *impossible* to be understood. Diligent study is required. Diligent study with the right attitude is a purifying work that keeps us close to the heart of God and imparts to us greater and greater (yet never perfect) understanding (Psalm 119:9, 130; 2Tim 2:15).

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4. Too much independence. The church is the pillar and ground of the truth (1Tim 3:15). Elders and teachers are to labor in the word and doctrine so they can build up the body of Christ through teaching (Eph 4:11; 1Tim 3:2; 5:17; 1Pet 5:2; Titus 2:1). That's because God knows we all need to be taught. Without being taught, we will lack the knowledge we need. It is the *unlearned* and unstable who twist the scriptures to their own destruction (2Peter 3:16). Christians need to be in fellowship with each other in order to grow the way God intended (Eph 4:11-13; Heb 10:25).
5. Too much dependence on others. The danger here is allowing some person or group to take the place of the Holy Spirit as the primary teacher. We must allow the Spirit to personally teach us the scriptures so we can discern truth from error. The Bereans searched the scriptures daily to determine if what they were being told was true (Acts 17:11). They were ready to receive the word, but were discerning.
6. Not seeking the truth. God delights in enlightening those who seek the truth with an open mind (Psalm 119:104; Prov 4:7; James 1:5). He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him (Heb 11:6). But if we insist on exalting man-made ideas above God's word, we close our minds to the truth. Even religious traditions can be obstacles. We must know the difference between scriptural traditions (2Thes 2:15; 3:6) and the traditions of men (Mark 7:5-13). If we teach the commandments of men as doctrines, our worship is in vain (Mark 7:7). If we stand on the truth, no matter how unpopular the truth may be, we can boldly affirm, "*Yea, let God be true, but every man a liar*" (Rom 3:3-4).
7. Fear of controversy. The average Christian today seems to want to avoid controversy at all cost. Therefore since many Bible doctrines are controversial, they are often neglected. Yet one of the primary themes of the New Testament is sound doctrine (1Tim 1:10; 2Tim 4:3; Titus 1:9; 2:1). Many epistles appear to be written largely to refute false doctrine. The church has always had to deal with controversy for sound doctrine's sake (e.g., the Acts 15 dispute). Thank God, they didn't run from it. They confronted it and God used their boldness to preserve the faith.
8. Pride. Many believers view themselves as being too smart to believe *all* the Bible (1Cor 1:18-31). It's a form of pride: intellectual pride. Certain concepts taught in scripture are considered unacceptable for various intellectual reasons. And instead of humbling themselves and facing up to their own lack of understanding and/or faith, they find fault with the Bible. Yet the God of the Bible condemns our sitting in judgment on scripture (Rev 22:18-19). God encourages faith. Men of God are men of faith. Women of God are women of faith (Heb 11). They believe God's word. Jesus never questioned the accuracy of the scriptures. He believed them (Creation, Noah, Jonah, etc.). This kind of humble submission to the scriptures opens our minds to receiving God's truth .

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D. We all need to continually grow in our understanding

God wants us to continually grow in knowledge. He wants our beliefs to be grounded in the truth so we are not like immature children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine (Eph 4:14). The ten steps below would go a long way toward reducing error and achieving greater doctrinal unity in the body--unity *around* the truth, not in the absence of it.

1. Let's help others to know Jesus so they can understand spiritual things
2. Let's live holy lives by being obedient to what we already know
3. Let's seek God diligently, acknowledging our need for more truth, more wisdom, more knowledge, and more understanding of Him and His ways
4. Let's humbly submit ourselves to God and the authority of scripture, being willing to believe all that God says
5. Let's exalt the Bible above the traditions of men and be open-minded to the truth, wherever it leads us
6. Let's study to show ourselves approved, being workmen (like the Bereans) who test what we hear by the scriptures
7. Let's avail ourselves of the many resources given to the church, militant (contemporary) and triumphant (historical), for our understanding
8. Let's believe in the promises that God will give us understanding as we rely on the Holy Spirit to teach us
9. Let's believe the Bible no matter who or how many say otherwise
10. Let's be willing, in love, to discuss interpretational differences in pursuit of greater understanding and unity

Wayne Grudem gives the following qualifications for understanding scripture:

1. Scripture affirms that it is able to be understood but not all at once.
2. Scripture affirms that it is able to be understood but not without effort.
3. Scripture affirms that it is able to be understood but not without ordinary means.
4. Scripture affirms that it is able to be understood but not without the reader's willingness to obey it.
5. Scripture affirms that it is able to be understood but not without the help of the Holy Spirit.
6. Scripture affirms that it is able to be understood but not without human understanding.
7. Scripture affirms that it is able to be understood but never completely.