

## Can We Understand God's Word?

As I drive around town, I am reminded of the number of different religious groups in nearby communities. Jesus promised to build "one" church (Matthew 16:18) and the apostle Paul wrote about the "one" body (Ephesians 1:22-23; 4:4), but somehow the landscape is dotted with the meeting places of various groups with different names and a variety of different doctrines.

The puzzling aspect of this "multitude" of churches is NOT the "variety" of doctrines one sees. There are lots of car dealerships also, but we are not puzzled or dismayed by that fact; we simply attribute the plethora of dealerships to varied preferences of car-buyers. The disturbing fact about the religious diversity in our community is that probably 99% of these groups claim to be following the same Bible.

Car dealerships do not claim to all be selling the car "authorized by God" to be made and driven (at least I haven't heard this "pitch" yet!). Yet, to some degree, all of these different churches claim to understand the Bible and have crafted their teaching to reflect that understanding.

One might be inclined to reason that different churches with their different understandings of the Scriptures spring up because the Scriptures are, in fact, too difficult to understand. The current religious division is just the result of a divine revelation which is not understandable. Maybe the original revelation through inspired men has been so corrupted by its transmission through the centuries that unity in understanding divine truth is essentially impossible.

In the first place, if the revelation of God has been corrupted, the original message may be hidden from modern man, but corruption of the text doesn't explain why we all still couldn't agree on the meaning, even a corrupted meaning! Before we conclude, however, that the message was either corrupted or just not understandable in the first place, we must understand that these conclusions either impugn the power or wisdom of God or both. If God can't preserve His message for our use, then He isn't the all-powerful God that the Scriptures proclaim him to be. On the other hand, if He really intends for us to understand His word, but was unable to reveal it in an understandable fashion, then He isn't much of a god in that case either!

Some folks will defend both the power and wisdom of God by suggesting that He doesn't really intend for us to understand the Scriptures alike. The word of God is relative truth, i.e., its meaning is subjectively determined. Truth depends upon each person who reads it and varies with every individual. The comfort in this view is that it makes no difference what an individual believes or a church teaches; one doctrine is as good as another. The religious division we see around us is simply the result of the nature of truth. No one is religiously wrong because every "understanding" of the Scriptures is right.

We must ask ourselves, however, what Jesus meant when He prayed for unity among

believers. On the night of His betrayal, Jesus prayed, “I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; 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). We know that there is division in the religious world; is it an acceptable condition? Is it an inevitable condition? If inevitable (due to the nature of truth), why would Jesus pray for a unity which He knew would be impossible because of the very nature of the message which God would reveal?? Certainly the division among religious people today does not even approximate the unity between the Father and the Son!

In addition, the Bible presents God as the source of truth, not man (cf. John 14:6, 17; 15:26; 16:13). Truth then becomes an objective reality for man – the same for every man. We see this fact in the way that Jesus handled differences in belief with the Jews of His day. When the Pharisees asked Jesus if a man could divorce his wife for just any reason in Matthew 19:3, He didn’t respond, “What do you think?” or “If you think so.” How could Jesus condemn the Pharisees for their “understanding” of the commandment to “honor father and mother” (Matthew 15:4-5)? Yet notice His rebuke!

The apostle Paul judged the man at Corinth who had his father’s wife (1 Corinthians 5:1-5). If truth is relative, how could Paul say that this man’s conduct was wrong? It is telling that Paul did not consult the Corinthians to find out how they understood God’s will about sexual relations! He obviously believed that they should and could understand God’s regulations as he did.

Paul’s rebuke of the Corinthians raises another important point. The New Testament contains many warnings about the coming final judgment of men (e.g., 2 Corinthians 5:10; Romans 14:10-12; 2 Peter 2:9; Acts 17:31). Jesus said that those who rejected Him and did not receive His words would be judged by those words (John 12:48). James wrote that we will be judged by the perfect law of liberty (2:12). Is it just for God to judge man by a standard that is not understandable? Does the fact that God intends to judge us by His word imply that He also expects that we can understand it? I believe that it does.

My female boxer, Jasmine, has an annoying habit. I try to keep my concrete driveway clear of debris, but Jasmine likes to locate sticks (Plural! Not just one!) and bring them onto the driveway to chew them briefly and then leave them. It is not unusual to go out on my driveway and find the carcasses of several sticks. When I find a stick that she has killed and gnawed, I shake it at her and say in a stern voice, “No sticks on the driveway, Jasmine! Don’t bring sticks on the driveway.” It is not really fair, however, to punish her for bringing sticks on the driveway because I am pretty sure that all she hears (understands) is “Blah, blah, blah, Jasmine! Blah, blah, blah, blah.”

See the point? If the reason we can’t understand the Scriptures alike is because the Scriptures are not really understandable, then it seems clearly unjust for God to punish us because we didn’t do what the Scriptures “say.”

Could it be that religious division is the fault of men and not God? You said it, mate! [This article to be continued in next week's bulletin].