

People do disagree about the Bible, although that's not to blame the Bible, or even to blame the people who disagree. The Bible is an extraordinarily rich, extraordinarily complex, and extraordinarily comprehensive book. When people, even family members, can't agree on what to eat for dinner, or even what they had for dinner last night, why should we expect them to agree on every nuance of the Bible? The bigger concern would be if everyone agreed. Then we would know that following the Bible means joining a cult. Christianity is no cult.

That Christians see one thing in the Bible at one time and place and another thing in the Bible at another time and place may not even mean that they disagree. The Bible has a way of speaking to one wherever one stands in time, place, and life. The Spirit may speak the same verse to different people intending different applications, if not different meanings. Saying so does not make the Bible untrustworthy. Language of any kind has that nature, offering double or triple meanings. Writers even sometimes intend so. Some disagreements about what the Bible says involve not literal differences but differences in application and intent, where the Bible may carry more than one helpful meaning.

Take as example an instance when the Bible records a historical event. The literal meaning would be to state accurately what occurred. But the same event may hold a truth or imply a command that one can and should reasonably draw from the event's occurrence and outcome. Then, the story stands not just as a literal record but as an allegory, parable, or lesson to apply. Yet the lesson may differ depending on the person to whom it speaks, taken one way as to one person but another way as to another. Does that mean the lesson drawers disagree? Not really, only that they had different needs. The word of God, Hebrews 4:12 tells us, is living and active, judging differently the thoughts and attitudes of different hearts.

The Bible has also presented mysteries to one generation that the next generation solved, sometimes by archaeological discovery, other times by clearer translation, other times by inspired interpretation. Sometimes, the veil of custom or culture has hidden or confused meanings about which the original hearers and readers would have been clear. Other times, the experiences of a person or people will distort meanings that are clear to others who don't share the same experiences. We read

and hear everything through a lens of our own culture, experience, and perspective, drawing the Bible's text this way or that.

We also, hard to admit, have our own interests in Bible interpretation, in seeing the truth with a twist that relieves some personal pain or responsibility, some obligation or guilt, or that opens doors to pleasures, purposes, and opportunities that are not deservedly ours. Yet through the Bible we nonetheless go, claiming our meaning as its own, justifying our ill-gotten gain. The Spirit tells us otherwise, but we don't listen to the Spirit, listening instead to our self-interested flesh. One finds easy, seeing how others twist the Bible to their own purposes, hard to see how we do so ourselves. Such is the human heart's deceitful nature, beyond cure, we know, as the Bible tells us in Jeremiah 17:9.

Humans do, though, seek certainty, as the questioner's stance indicates. We want clear and simple answers, at least those with which we agree. The Bible serves us well in that respect, too, giving plenty of clear and simple answers, demonstrably, without reasonable dispute. Jesus said to do or not to do hundreds of things, literally hundreds, and then did dozens of things to illustrate. Proverbs likewise gives chapter after chapter of maxims, reliable guides to apply. We, though, in our quest for undue certainty, construe some nuanced commands and principles as if without nuance. We sometimes make things too simple, when the Bible would instead have us read further, listen to the Spirit, take counsel, wait, reflect, and distinguish.

The disagreements that the questioner above observes may especially be of this type, seeing among some Christians too ready of a willingness to claim that they know what the Bible states, when they know that other Christians disagree, each claiming to have the sole word of God. Here, though, Christians just as often show the humility of their Lord, recognizing that they each see something different in God's word, while trusting that the Spirit guides each where they should each go. The Bible certainly does not preach division but instead unity. Christians read the Bible looking for consistency but avoiding dogmatic assertions, watching for the way that the Spirit, as subtle as the wind, blows.

The remarkable thing about Christians in their stance toward the Bible is that they have and revere such a book. Jesus repeatedly challenged his doubting hearers with the question whether they had read the good book, as in Matthew 19:3, Matthew 22:

31, and Mark 12:26. Christians thus judge from the Bible, not alone from their reason, although God requires that Bible readers apply their mind and reason in whatever degree that they possess. God holds preachers and teachers to a closer Bible reading than he does those who do not teach or preach, as James 3:1 indicates. Those who have greater gifts must use them, each according to that which God gives, as Luke 12:48 and Hebrews 13:17 hold.

The other remarkable thing about Christians in their interpretive stance toward the Bible is that they know that they need God's Spirit to fully discern the Bible's truths. Jesus in John 16:13 said that when the Spirit of truth comes, he guides the Spirit's recipient into all truth. The apostle Paul repeats in 2 Timothy 2:7 that the Lord is the one who gives the reader or hearer of his word the understanding. Christians know, from Paul in Philippians 2:12-13, that they must each work out their own understanding of God's word, work out their own salvation in fear and trembling, while knowing that God works in them for his good pleasure.

Thus, to the Christian, what others believe the Bible states is not necessarily what counts but instead what God through his Spirit shows them. Listen to what others say that the Bible states, but read the Bible for yourself, and as you do so, listen to God's Spirit. When you read the Bible for God's truth, God is already doing a good work in you.