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Question 20 - In light of the clarity of the Scriptures why is there still so much misunderstanding and so many different interpretations of the Bible among Christians?

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101 MOST ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT THE BIBLE

20. In light of the clarity of the Scriptures why is there still so much misunderstanding and so many different interpretations of the Bible among Christians?

A. In regards to the problem of misunderstanding:

Again, to quote from Theologian Wayne Grudem:

“During Jesus’ lifetime, his own disciples at times failed to understand the Old Testament and Jesus’ own teachings (see Matt. 15:16; Mark 4:10-13; 6:52; 8:14-21; 9:32; Luke 18:34; John 8:27; 10:6). Although sometimes this was due to the fact that they simply needed to wait for further events in the history of redemption, and especially in the life of Christ himself (see John 12:16; 13:7; cf. John 2:22), there were also times when this was due to their own lack of faith or hardness of heart (Luke 24:25). Furthermore, there were times in the early church when Christians did not understand or agree on the teachings of the Old Testament or about the letters written by the apostles: note the process of growth in understanding concerning the implications of Gentile inclusion in the church (culminating in “much debate” [Acts 15:7] in the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15), or Peter’s misunderstanding of this issue in Gal. 2:11-15, or the frequent doctrinal and ethical issues that had to be corrected by the New Testament epistles. In fact, throughout the history of the church, doctrinal disagreements have been many, and progress in resolving doctrinal differences has often been slow.

“In order to help people to avoid making mistakes in interpreting Scripture, many Bible teachers have developed ‘principles of interpretation,’ or guidelines to encourage growth in the skill of proper interpretation. The word *hermeneutics* (from the Greek word *hermeneuo*, ‘to interpret’) is the more technical term for this field of study: *hermeneutics is the study of correct methods of interpretation* (especially interpretation of Scripture).

“Another technical term often used in discussions of biblical interpretation is ‘exegesis,’ a term that refers more to the actual practice of interpreting Scripture, not to theories and principles about how it should be done: *exegesis is the process of interpreting a text of Scripture*. Consequently, when one studies principles of interpretation, that is ‘hermeneutics,’ but when one applies those principles and begins actually explaining a biblical text, he or she is doing ‘exegesis.’

“The existence of many disagreements about the meaning of Scripture throughout history reminds us that the doctrine of the clarity of Scripture does not imply or

suggest that all believers will agree on all the teachings of Scripture. Nevertheless, it does tell us something very important – that the problem always lies not with Scripture but with ourselves. The situation is in fact similar to that of the authority of Scripture. Whereas we affirm that the words of Scripture have all the authority of God himself, we also realize that many people do not acknowledge that authority or submit themselves to it. Similarly, we affirm that all the teachings of Scripture are clear and able to be understood, but we also recognize that people often (through their own shortcomings) misunderstand what is clearly written in Scripture.”

(*Systematic Theology*. Zondervan Pub. House. Grand Rapids, MI, 1994, pp. 108, 109).

B. In regard to the problem of so many different interpretations

An unsaved college student once challenged me with this objection:

“Look, even if I do decide to become a Christian, I wouldn’t know what to believe. I mean, you could ask any ten people their understanding of a certain verse and probably get ten different interpretations!”

I responded as follows:

“Okay, Ted let’s give your theory a test. I’m going to give you my interpretation of the most famous verse in the Bible, which is John 3:16. As I do, feel free to stop me at any point when my interpretation would differ from yours.” Ted agreed and I began by considering each phrase of this verse.

For God! I told Ted my interpretation was that the author had the divine creator in mind here, not Santa or Satan!

Ted shook his head in agreement.

So Loved! To me this means He displayed great and tender compassion upon something or someone.

Again, Ted nodded in approval.

The World! Here I believe the author had in mind this planet of human beings.

For the third time Ted agreed.

That He Gave! That is, He didn’t loan, lease, or sell, but freely offered something.

“My view also,” replied Ted.

His Only Begotten Son! Here I believed the author had Jesus in mind.

“No problem” said Ted.

That Whosoever! This meant and included anyone, anywhere, at any time.

For the 6th time Ted acknowledged this represented his interpretation also.

Believeth In Him Should Not Perish, But Have Everlasting Life! Finally, I told Ted I felt this meant that to express faith in Jesus Christ would result in enjoying God's approval and blessing forever.

"Yes, I must admit this would be my take on this last phrase also," confessed Ted.

So then, why so many interpretations of the Bible? The surprising answer is this is simply NOT the case at all! To the contrary, all evangelical Christians would quickly agree upon the following essential scriptural truths:

1. The inspiration of scriptures
2. The triunity of God
3. The virgin birth of Jesus
4. His dual nature (the God-man)
5. His sinless life
6. His sacrificial death
7. His glorious resurrection
8. His bodily ascension into heaven
9. His present day ministry as our Great High Priest
10. His future return

In closing it can be noted that Jesus may have spoken to the Father about this very thing during His Great High Priestly prayer:

"That they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us: that the world may believe that thou hast sent me" (John 17:21).