

Who of us has not been confronted with someone's strange and marvelous ideas about what is in the Bible? Perhaps the ideas caused us a little apprehension, or maybe they prompted in us a feeling of "Gosh, I wish I knew the Bible better". Or maybe we dismissed that someone with a "Well, he's a religious fanatic".

People say to me things like: "Say, Reverend, did you know that spaceship visits are recorded in the Bible" or "Reverend, why don't you preach more about how international events are predicted in the Bible? All this Middle East crisis is right there, plain as day". Parenthetically, these are the same people who tell me that religion and politics are not to be mixed. Or people say to me, "You know, Reverend anyone who hasn't received the baptism of the holy spirit just can't imagine how wonderful it is to receive it. Do you know what I'm talking about? The Bible says . . ." And they say: "We just have to put up with evil and suffering in the world until Jesus comes again on the clouds of glory to defeat Satan who rules this present age"

I have come to believe that dealing with this kind of Bible usage ought to be a priority item with me. I used to take the attitude that such people could remain convinced of their own superior understanding of the Bible even though I knew them to

quite ignorant of the wholeness of the Biblical message. But now I have decided that I will adopt a more aggressive stance. After all - and I say this with no sense of boasting - how many in a community like this were formerly trained for seven yrs in the Bible, and how many have spent nearly 20 additional years living with the best and the worst of the Bible commentators, interpreters and scholars.

Most people I know are abysmally ignorant of the wholeness of the Bible, of its history, and the extensive background information which is so essential to good Bible interpretation.

For example: to interpret the Bible adequately a person needs to be aware of the individual personalities of the Bible writers and characters. God chose certain individuals thru whom to reveal himself, but he did not blot out the personality of his chosen agent. This lack of understanding on the part of many is symbolized by the common practice of saying: "The Bible says . . ." instead of "Amos says" or "Paul says" or "Jesus says". There is a great difference, for example, in saying "Paul says 'it is a shameful ~~things~~ for a woman to speak in church" and in saying "The Bible says 'it is shameful for a woman to speak in church'" (I Cor 14:35)

With this saying of Paul we come face to face with some crucial considerations for understanding the Bible message. And we can use that passage for purposes of illustration.

Is Paul's word here literally the word of God? If so, few churches have kept it. Or would it be more to the point, and more faithful to God's word, if we were to consider the social context and background of the time and endeavor to understand why Paul would make such a statement. Perhaps it would be more faithful to God's word if we looked into Paul's personality and become aware of his apparent bias toward women.

Well the point is this: God did not blot out Paul's personality, even tho he usedhim, with all of his hangups, as a marvelous agent of his word and way. I believe that the same principles used in this illustration ought to be applied to the whole of the Bible and its parts when we thy to discern what God's word is as it comes to us thru the Bible.

Now I don;t want to engage in the use of the proof text method to confront the proof text users. But, in the following example, I want merely to show that it is necessary to appeal to the wider witness of the scripture to get the Biblical point of view than many people are willing to appeal to.

Many of you have read or heard about a book called THE LATE GREAT PLANET EARTH by Hal Lindsey. In this book Lindsey calims to demonstrate how prophecy has been and is being fulfilled in our time. Perhaps you have been thilled be the book . . I have been unimpressed . . because I am able to see a larger picture. Let me show you part of that larger picutre.

To do so let us use one central idea which is in Lindseys book - an idea which is current among many today - the second coming aspect of the prophecies. Now I invite you take to a Biblical probe which gets beyond the books of Daniel and Revelation - sp heavily relied on by the advocates of the phsyical second coming.

If you have a Bible with you, turn to Mark 9:1 "And he said to them 'truly I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the kingdom of god come with power". Now try Mark 13:30: "truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away before all these things take place".

Now Jesus' word here is very clear: In his own generation the kingdom of God would come into being. I do not question the word of Jesus . . . but Jesus did say that the kingdom of God was expected very soon, in his own generation . . . but it did not come in his generation. How are we to look at his words here then? I raise the question, I don't answer it.

Now then turn to I Cor 7:25-31. Here Paul reflects the same expectation for the coming of Christ . . . very soon: "The appointed time has grown very short . . . for the form of this world is passing away"

Now both Jesus and Paul are quite plain: They expected the kingdom of God to come in their generation . . . not a 1000 years hence, not a 100, not even 50 . . . but very soon. But

it did not. Now that I believe brings to a rather complex problem of bible interpretation - particularly when we compare this expectation with the alleged imagery of such books as Revelation and Daniel.

Still later in the NT after Paul we find the author of II Peter writing in II Peter 3:1-4. Here ~~the writer~~ ^{the author} tries to explain why the prediction of Jesus is not coming to pass.

" . . . you should remember the predictions of the holy prophets . . . and the commandment of the Lord . . . scoffers will come in the last days . . . saying 'where is the promise of his coming . . . all things have continued as they were'".

Then in vrs 8 and 9 ~~Peter~~ ^{the writer} tries to explain why the prediction of Jesus isn't happening:

' . . . with the Lord one day is a 1000 years, and a thousand years is as one day'.

But then how does one reconcile this with what Jesus said. He didn't say anything about a day being a 1000 years or anything like that . . . He said it would happen in his generation . . . and Paul say that it going to happen very soon.

Perhaps we have the writer of II Peter trying to explain something which he had misunderstood. . . And perhaps, as we view that, we need to keep in mind the words of Jesus himself.

Now this not an easy dilemma . . . Jesus saying that the kingdom was coming in his generation, Paul saying that it would come in his, and the author of II Peter trying to explain how his and other expectations had been thwarted.

But there is a possible answer to the dilemma, and it is

found in the gospel of John.

In John, Jesus spiritualizes the special promises about the end of the age. He understands them as religious experience with each believer. For example, the second coming is spiritualized in John 14:15-17: "If you love me, you will keep my commandments, and I will pray the father and he will give you another counselor, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive . . . but you know him, for he dwells with you and shall be in you".

Likewise Jesus spiritualizes the resurrection. In John 11:25-26 "I am the resurrection and the life, he who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and whoever lives and believes in me will never die".

And Jesus spiritualizes the last judgement in John 16. . . that is, Jesus understands the second coming, the resurrection, and the judgement as religious experiences of each believer.

And referring to John at this point points up another problem in Bible interpretation and understanding. It's one of authorship. If the Apostle John wrote both the Gospel of John and the Revelation of John . . . how does one reconcile the contrary views of the two books? But that's another problem.

This has gotten to be longer than I had intended and hoped it to be. But let me quickly say in conclusion. I believe that the burden of the scripture indicates that the second coming doctrine is properly interpreted as that time when the spirit of God takes over a person's life. And this

hasty journey which I attempted to take with you thru the scriptures this morning is not to be seen as an effort to prove anyone wrong . . . it is only to suggest that an adequate and true understanding of the Biblical message demands a larger view than most are willing to take . . perhaps larger than most can take with their unaided efforts. The best corrective to faulty Biblical interpretation is not debate . . . it is more Bible.

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