

The Harvester



Preparing Souls

To Serve The Lord



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Jeremy Lee Padilla Completing Studies at Florida School of Preaching



Jeremy is a third generation preacher. His grandfather, Benancio Padilla, preaches in Uvalde, Texas, and his dad, Lee, was the first Hispanic minister for Iglesia de Cristo at Eagle Lake, Florida, in 2005, and currently preaches in Utah. Jeremy came to us shortly after high school from Crossett, Arkansas, where he was an active member of the church there. He took some classes at Southwest School of Bible Studies in Austin, Texas, where he also met his wife Stefani. They have one son, James. Jeremy plans on working with a local church of Christ as a full-time preacher.



Allowing the Bible to Interpret the Bible

By Brian R. Kenyon

In last month's Harvester, proof was given that the Bible, the God-breathed Scripture, is both divine testimony and divine interpretation (2 Pet. 1:20-21). In this article, we will consider the importance of allowing the Bible to interpret itself.

Immediate Context

A common reason why people do not understand the Bible alike is because they ignore the immediate and/or remote context of the Bible. The immediate context refers to the verses immediately before and after a given verse in the Bible. Most false doctrines can be refuted from the immediate context of the verse that supposedly supports them. Two memorable examples come to mind. First, a Mormon once said that the account in Ezekiel 37:15-17 of

two "sticks" becoming one was a prophecy that the Bible would become one with the Book of Mormon. He reasoned that because the Hebrew word translated "stick" was very similar in sound to a Chinese word that meant "scroll," Ezekiel was referring to two "scrolls becoming one scroll." One does not have to research the Hebrew and Chinese languages to see if "stick" and "scroll" sound the same to decide whether the Mormon's point was accurate. All one needs to do is read the context of Ezekiel 37:15-28. When the people were to ask the prophet the meaning of the two sticks, he was to tell them,

Thus saith the Lord God; Behold, I will take the stick of Joseph... with the stick of Judah, and make them one stick... Behold, I will take the children of Israel from among the heathen...and will gather them...and bring them into their own land. (Ezk. 37:19-22)

Ezekiel explicitly interpreted the two sticks becoming one as a prophecy of God's people returning from captivity and becoming one nation to bring forth the Messiah!

A second example of allowing the immediate context to interpret a passage involves a discussion with an anti-Biblical expediency brother. After several email exchanges on the "only saints" doctrine of benevolence, he insisted that even Jesus did not help everyone who asked Him. This brother cited Matthew 15:21-26. In this context, a woman of Canaan asked for the Lord's help because her daughter was "grievously vexed with a devil [demon, NKJ]" (Mt. 15:22). At first, Jesus did not respond to her request, and when confronted by His disciples, He responded, "I am not sent but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Mt. 15:23-24). She then came and "worshipped him, saying, Lord, help me," but Jesus told her, "It is not meet to take the children's bread, and to cast it to dogs" (Mt. 15:25-26). Why did the anti-Biblical expediency brother stop with verse 26? After more dialogue between Jesus and the woman, which showed her great persistence of faith, the immediate context goes on to say, "And her daughter was made whole from that very hour" (Mt. 15:27-28). Needless to say, the brother had no more interest in discussing the subject after this was pointed out.

Remote Context

Sometimes, however, an examination of the immediate context will not be sufficient in allowing the Bible to interpret the Bible. An examination and proper understanding of the remote context will also be necessary. The remote context

refers to the total teaching of the Bible. A classic example of the importance of taking into consideration the total teaching of the Bible is found in interpreting the figurative language used in the Book of Revelation. This book, full of figurative language, has more quotes and/or allusions to the Old Testament than any other New Testament book. Therefore, to better understand and interpret many of the figures used in Revelation, one must first have a good understanding of their Old Testament usage and background. Usually, however, it seems that the Book of Revelation is what many people want to first study. When people fail to take that remote context in mind, they will come up with far out interpretations such as the "battle of Armageddon" (Rev. 16:16) referring to a literal conflict between two world powers over oil, or "Gog and Magog" (Rev. 20:8) referring to "the Anti Christ" and his forces. Neither of these ideas is found in the remote, Old Testament context of "Armageddon," which literally means "the hill of Megiddo" (2 Kgs. 23:29-30), or "Gog and Magog" (Ezk. 38-39).

Doctrinally, the result of failing to understand the remote context is exemplified by the situation of Apollos and the Ephesians (Acts 18:24-19:7). The parallels are not exact to our day in every detail because Apollos did not have access to the completed revelation of God, for it was not yet finished (cf. 1 Cor. 13:8-13). However, the principle of needing to understand the remote context is the same. Apollos was "eloquent" and "mighty in the scriptures" (Acts 18:24). Even though he taught "diligently the

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1807 South Florida Avenue
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(863) 683-4043

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things of the Lord,” his understanding was limited to “knowing only the baptism of John” (Acts 18:25). He had no knowledge of the remote context of baptism. He apparently knew nothing of the Great Commission (Mt. 28:19-20; Mk. 16:15-16). Thankfully, Aquila and Priscilla took him aside and “expounded unto him the way of God more perfectly” (Acts 18:26).

Yes, John’s baptism was given by God (Mt. 21:25), endorsed by Christ (Mk. 1:15), based upon repentance (Mt. 3:1-6), and “for the remission of sins” (Lk. 3:3), but there was a very important difference that could only be known by an understanding of the remote context. Paul revealed the difference when he taught the people correctly,

John verily baptized with the baptism of repentance, saying unto the people, that they should believe on him which should come after him, that is, on Christ Jesus. (Acts 19:4)

Simply put, John’s baptism looked forward to what Christ’s death at Calvary would accomplish, but Great Commission baptism looks backward to the actual accomplishments of Christ’s death. Under John’s baptism, it would have been impossible to “confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and...believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead” (Rom. 10:9). Exactly why Apollos was not informed about Great Commission baptism before Aquila and Priscilla taught him is not stated, nor is it necessary to know. The point is that we must understand the remote context of any Bible subject in order to let the Bible interpret the Bible. The consequences of not doing so are disastrous. If those twelve men who were baptized in John’s baptism had not been taught and baptized correctly (Acts 19:5-7), they would have been eternally lost!

The importance of studying the context cannot be over emphasized. If we are to allow the Bible to interpret the Bible, we must allow the immediate and remote context to speak!

Failure to Respect Context Leads to Error

Denominationalism is the result of not allowing the Bible to interpret the Bible. While it is true that some denominations exist because their members are not at all interested in following what the Bible teaches, most denominations at least claim to follow the Bible. However, if everyone truly followed the Bible, denominationalism would not exist. Jesus prayed for unity among God’s people (Jn. 17:20-21). The unity that we are to have with one another is exemplified by the perfect unity that exists between the Father and the Son. The only way that we, fal-

lible human beings, can be one with God and one another is to base our unity on the word of God. Paul exhorted the Corinthians, and us, to “all speak the same thing” and to “be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment” (1 Cor. 1:10). That which we are to “all speak” and to “be perfectly joined together” is summarized as,

...[O]ne body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling; ⁵One Lord, one faith, one baptism, ⁶One God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all. (Eph. 4:4-6)

The word of God is the only thing that can unify all people religiously!

The doctrines that make denominationalism different from the truth and from one another are not those doctrines that are the result of the Bible interpreting the Bible (such as meeting on the first day of the week), but those doctrines that are derived from not allowing the Bible to interpret the Bible (such as mechanical instruments of music in worship, infant baptism, etc). The distinct doctrines that denominations hold that are not found in the Bible are what give them their existence. In other words, it would be impossible for the Roman Catholic Church to exist if it were not for the pope and Roman Catholic traditions. It would be impossible for the Mormon Church to exist if it were not for the writings of Joseph Smith.

While there are many doctrines in denominationalism that are the result of not allowing the Bible to interpret the Bible, only a few examples will be given to show the point. First, any interpretation of the normal use of the word “baptism” that includes any method other than a complete burial in water is the result of not allowing the Bible to interpret the Bible. The transliteration “baptism” for the Greek word *baptisma* is quite unfortunate. As the story has been told, English speaking translators did not want to translate *baptisma* as “immersion” because some did not practice immersion. Some sprinkled water on the baptismal subject, while others practiced pouring. Thus, instead of offending anyone, the translators decided to spell out the Greek word as it sounded in English. With the tremendous influence of the KJV through the years, “baptism” has been accepted as meaning whatever each particular group decides it means. However, if the Bible is allowed to interpret the Bible, the meaning of “baptism” is clear—a burial in water (Rom. 6:3-4; Col. 2:12)!

Second, any interpretation of the normal use of the word “church” that includes denominationalism is the result of not allowing the Bible to interpret the Bible. To the vast majority in so called “Christendom,” the term church refers to any group that claims to be following Christ regardless of its beliefs and/or practices. Their idea is that

Florida School of Preaching

1807 South Florida Avenue

Lakeland, FL 33803

www.fsop.net email: fsop@fsop.net

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“We’re all going to heaven; we’re just taking different roads.” However, if the Bible is allowed to interpret the Bible, the meaning of the word “church” is clear—it is the one and only body of Christ! Paul said that Christ was the “head of the body, the church” (Col. 1:18 cf. Eph. 5:23). Elsewhere, Paul considered his sufferings for the Gospel way behind the sufferings of Christ. Therefore, he was even more motivated to suffer “the afflictions of Christ in my flesh for his body’s sake, which is the church” (Col. 1:24). The church of the New Testament is the “body of Christ.” When the Bible is allowed to interpret the Bible, there is only one way to become a member of the New Testament church—obey the Gospel, which for the sinner outside of Christ culminates in being baptized into Christ (1 Cor. 12:13 cf. Acts 2:41, 47; Rom. 6:3-5; Gal. 3:27). Then and only then does one become a child of God, forgiven of all past sins (Acts 2:38). Baptism, of course, is not the end of conversion. It is actually the beginning, the new birth (Jn. 3:3-5). Those baptized into Christ must live faithfully (2 Cor. 5:17-18; 1 Thes. 2:12; Rev. 2:10).

Other examples could be given of doctrines that are the result of failing to allow the Bible to interpret the Bible, but these are sufficient to illustrate the point. One practical point should be learned from this. What we mean by Biblical terms, whose meanings have been ascertained by allowing the Bible to interpret the Bible, may not necessarily be what others with whom we study have in mind. One key element of denominational indoctrination is to take Bible terms, redefine them, and then reinsert the denomination’s definition into the Biblical text so that whenever the term is read or discussed, the denominationalists think only of their definition. Therefore, when we study with others we must make sure we are using the same language (i.e., meaning).

Conclusion

God is perfectly capable of communicating the truth so that all can understand. Let us make sure we allow the Bible to interpret itself so that we may know Him and keep His word (1 Jn. 2:3-6). 

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