

CHAPTER II INTRODUCTION

A. Avoiding Biases and Bad Habits

We all have a tendency to find in the Bible what we expect to find. The Pharisee finds plenty of commands to impose on his brothers. The liberal finds language that excuses just about any conduct. The male chauvinist pig finds verses putting down women. The feminist finds verses putting down male chauvinist pigs. This is why the world likes to say that you can prove anything by the Bible, and certainly it must seem that way to many.

The reason anything can be “proven” by the Bible is that we often only look for what we want to find, and we thus accept as proof anything that supports what we like. If this is not so, then why are there so many denominations all studying the same Bible, using many of the same reference materials, with 2,000 years of research and scholarship available for all who will look, and yet disagreeing about very many things? Why can’t members of even the same Sunday School class or eldership agree on every point?

To avoid simply studying to prove ourselves right, we must first look at ourselves squarely in the mirror. After all, no one reads the Bible consciously intending to misunderstand it. Those who misunderstand it do so for reasons that are invisible to themselves. They think that they are applying logic when they are actually applying their personalities, culture, and traditions to the task. Anyone reading this who feels that he or she is not guilty of such bias is actually guilty of the worst bias of all—having so little self-awareness and introspection that he can’t do anything about his biases. I am not foolhardy enough to believe that we can shed all our biases like an old overcoat. But we should all be honest enough to at least admit that we have some biases.

A critical step toward shedding our biases is disciplining ourselves to read, and even study, the opinions of those who disagree with us. We study those with whom we disagree because it is, after all, those who disagree with us who have the most to teach us. If we only listen to those within our own party, we will soon consider ourselves virtually inspired, because we will have not been proven wrong for years! But testing our views against the steel of those we disagree with (and I mean the most talented of our opponents) allows us to match our reasoning against someone with very different biases from our own. And we must study our opponents first hand. If I study, for example, the views of Creation science by reading the criticisms of Creation science written by those who disagree with it, I will only understand Creation science as distorted by those who disagree with it. If I study evolution by only reading the works of those who disagree with it, then I will only understand it well enough to disagree with it. We must have the courage and the integrity to study both sides—not one side and propaganda about the other side.

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Only an intellectual coward would refuse such a test, and yet we do not routinely study commentaries, books, or articles by those we disagree with, even within our own Restoration Movement. I cannot believably contend that I have reached a conclusion based on logic and the facts without having even bothered to study the views of any side but the side that I decided should win—before I began my study.

To be truly honest students of the Bible, we must be as open to persuasion as we ask others to be. If I ask a Presbyterian friend to study predestination with me, I should not only expect him to be willing to change his views based on the evidence our study produces, I should be willing to do the same. Of course, I think that I'm right, and I'm sure that I've studied the question very carefully. But so has he. I have no monopoly on strongly held opinions. I am nothing but a pompous, self-righteous hypocrite if I think that everyone is wrong except me and that everyone except me should be willing to reconsider his views.

This bit of insight did not come to me in a flash. Rather, I figured all this out by being humbled over the years. I once thought that I knew all the answers. As I grew older, I found my positions changing. Before each change, I knew to an absolute certainty that I was right, but I later learned that I was wrong. I am still certain of my positions, but I now know that I am capable of being wrong regardless of how sure I am. But as I gain experience, I am slowly peeling off the layers of biases, intellectual laziness, and just plain bad habits that have clouded my thinking in the past. And I am sure that I am picking up a new set of biases in the process, but hopefully some that aren't quite as Pharisaic as my last set! And so I must continually rededicate myself to ridding myself of these corrupting influences, but never imagine that I have totally done so. I must be vigilant against cowardice, bigotry, and catering to culture and even to the editors of influential Church periodicals.

So, what are our biases? What should we look for in ourselves before beginning this study? The following are some of the ones that I've encountered, in myself and in others:

Change. We are very, very afraid of change. Even the slightest variation in our practices will throw many of our members into a panic. We struggle with children's church, decorating the auditorium with a cross, skipping the invitation, and singing unfamiliar or "trendy" songs. I've read letters and articles condemning singing during the Lord's Supper (we can't have two acts of worship at once), baptizing at home instead of at church (we must make converts loyal to the church), clapping (where is that in the Bible?), multiple song leaders (someone might think that it's a quartet), men serving at the Lord's Table without coats and ties (disrespectful), men serving at the Lord's Table with coats and ties (pretentious; tending toward clerical garb), and even a preacher having a gold pen in his pocket while speaking (distracting). There are biblical arguments to be made on a few of these points, but the reason that these sorts of things are as emotional as they are is our fear of change. Any change at all. And that feeling is a bias. To become Christians, we had to accept change. To mature as Christians, we must continue to change.

The past. We venerate the past. The way we did things when we were children or how daddy used to do it is often more important to us than how Jesus said to do it. Some of this comes from our Southern heritage. Most Church of Christ members live in the southern United States, and we Southerners all have strong attachments to our families and our collective past. Nonetheless, none of us wants to go back to the horse and buggy or even black and white TVs—or to give up our air conditioning. Southerners celebrate the past, but we don't really try to live in it. And yet in the Church, we tend to think that we'd be more comfortable if we could just conduct church just like we used to, with seven-day long meetings, an occasional tent meeting with sawdust on the floor, and preachers who never preach on anything we don't already believe in.

Conformity. While the Churches of Christ take a certain pleasure in not conforming to the practices of other churches, among ourselves, conformity is the name of the game. One false sermon and the church down the road will disfellowship you, someone will publish an article declaring you “marked,” and your preachers will never be able to get a job anywhere else. We practice church autonomy in theory only. Too many churches claim the right to judge the positions of every other church on whatever issue is in fashion and visit God's wrath on all whom they disagree with by the severest peer pressure. God says, “Vengeance is mine!”¹⁰ but far too many of us are self-appointed angels of retribution, and we routinely arrogate to ourselves the judgment of God Almighty.

Modern culture. We cannot escape the society in which we live. This is the 21st Century whether we like it or not. We are all being forced by events beyond our control to deal with questions of homosexuality, divorce, extra-marital sex, abortion, and the like. In the 1950's such matters were not even discussed in polite society. Now they fill the headlines and TV news reports.

We can hardly be surprised that these times influence our views on the role of women, worship, and such. And the influence cuts two ways. Some of us are too tied to the present, and we expect God's church to be just like the world. If society accepts a homosexual couple, then so must the church, we feel. Others are contrarians. Such people feel that if society is pushing for a greater role for women in the church, then we must not. We sometimes go out of our way to differentiate ourselves from the world, even if it means being wrong. Both views are wrong. We must define our beliefs by the Bible only—neither by society nor by opposition to society.

Pandering to the right wing. As a group, we are guilty of pandering to those more legalistic than us. It is considered fair game to call those on the left wing (less legalistic) “liberals” and to question their acceptance of the inspiration of scripture.

¹⁰ Rom. 12:19 (KJV), paraphrasing Deut. 32:35. “Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath”

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However, it is considered bad taste and divisive to call those on the right wing “Pharisees” (at least in print) or to criticize them as divisive. We are anxious to maintain good relations with those more legalistic than us, but we take wild swings at those less legalistic. We see unity as a virtue only if it is with someone more legalistic than ourselves. Not surprisingly, those more legalistic than us apply the same unwritten rule, declare us to be liberals and make little effort to be united with us. Unity across doctrinal lines is a one-way street, and therefore exists much more in theory than in practice.

In our sermons, we are very careful to say nothing that will offend those on the right. I have heard sermons that were designed to teach a broad view of grace or the indwelling of the Spirit preached in such watered down terms that the more legalistic members of the church were convinced that the preacher agreed with them on every point. We rarely state plainly why the Pharisees are Pharisees, for fear that they will be “offended” at the criticism. But in so doing, we also fail to persuade them of their error or to effectively rebuke their false teachings.

This bias of ours gives the legalists a platform and opportunity to be heard, while those less legalistic than us often get no hearing at all. Not surprisingly, this bias puts strong pressure on the Church toward legalism and away from grace. We lop off our leftward members and kowtow to our rightward members, and so the church as a whole continually drifts toward its legalistic side.

And yet Christ spent far more of His brief time on earth preaching against the Pharisees, the legalists of the day, than preaching against the Saducees, the “liberals” of the day. And His condemnation of the Pharisees was not just that they were hypocrites, but that they insisted on a salvation based on rules made by men, binding unbearable interpretations in an effort to be safe from the wrath of God. We should heed the warning of John 12:42-43:

Yet at the same time many even among the leaders believed in him. But because of the Pharisees they would not confess their faith for fear they would be put out of the synagogue; for they loved praise from men more than praise from God.

Safety. We are now getting to the heart of the matter. We want to be saved, and to be saved, we must be safe. Thus, when in doubt, we do the most legalistic thing possible—we make a rule. When we are discussing some controversial point of doctrine in class, doesn’t the class nearly always end with someone saying, “Well, those arguments are all well and good, but the safe thing to do is what we have always done”?

When in doubt about what the Bible says, the safe thing to do is *not* to make a rule. Adding to God’s Word is just as wrong as taking away from it. The safe thing to do is trust God’s grace and lean on the great, overriding principles of scripture—God’s love for us, His forgiveness, the personality and example of Jesus, the cross, God’s grace, the gift of the Holy Spirit, and our relationship with Jesus.

Rules upon rules. We often assume without proof that the Bible has a rule for whatever concerns us. For example, many believe that the Bible plainly teaches about how to use the church building. They open their Bibles, go looking for such rules, and—sure enough!—they find them. This is so even though church buildings weren't even built until the Bible had been finished for nearly 300 years!

Jesus is not the second coming of Moses. Moses was a lawgiver. Jesus came to rescue us from law. We find safety in the cross and graciousness of our Lord. Rules don't save and rules don't condemn. Jesus saves, and we are in Jesus by faith—that is faith that He is the Son of God and that God raised Him from the dead (Rom. 10:8-9).

Conclusion. Certainly, not all congregations are guilty of the biases and misconduct that I am describing. I'm sure that only a minority of churches behave as I describe. I hope that is the case. But enough of our brothers behave in this manner that we always take their condemning attitudes into account in making decisions, and subconsciously, even when we read our Bibles. Even in those congregations where such attitudes do not predominate, there will nearly always be enough members steeped in such attitudes that the leaders feel compelled to consider their intolerance in setting policy. Given the contentious, divisive attitudes of so many of our brothers, no leader within the churches would look forward to finding some biblical command that compels him to lead his church away from conformity.

B. How Do We Escape Our Biases?

Ridding ourselves of our biases is very hard, of course, but the Bible provides key insights into this problem.

Accept one another. The answer to many of our difficulties is plainly stated in the Bible. For example, Romans 15:7 states,

Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.

We are to accept one another. And the standard for whom to accept is plainly stated. We are to accept¹¹ just as Christ accepted us. How did Christ accept us? First, note that this part of the command is in the past tense—as Christ *accepted* us—not *accepts* us. Christ *accepted*¹² us when we were saved. And we were saved in five familiar steps: by hearing, believing, repented, confessing, and being baptized. Period. No one asked us our position

¹¹ The Greek word translated “accept” is in present tense, which in Greek indicates that we are to *continuously* accept.

¹² The Greek word translated “accepted” is in the aorist tense, indicating that acceptance occurred at a single point in time.

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on the role of women, or kitchens in the building, or divorce and remarriage when we were baptized. We were asked whether we believed that Jesus is the Son of the Living God. We were asked whether we repented. We were baptized. And we were accepted by God. We must, therefore, accept (present tense!) all those who have done the same and who have not repudiated their belief that Jesus is the Son of the Living God or their repentance (1 John 4:3; Heb.10:26).

Thus, we should put behind us our willingness to reject any fellow Christian who disagrees with us on any issue that we happen to feel strongly about. We have been commanded to accept all those who have been accepted by God. We can set no higher standard than that set by God Almighty.

Grace reaches even the saved. Now let's look at a closely related passage in Romans 5:6-8:

You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

Paul tells us that God saved us (when we were baptized) while we were powerless, ungodly, and sinners through the death of Christ. We have always well understood the power of God's grace at the moment of our baptism. We are saved! Our sins are washed away, our souls are made "whiter than snow" (Psalm 51:7) and our sins are removed "as far as the east is from the west" (Psalm 103:12).

But we have a tendency to believe that our condition after salvation is less certain. We feel that some of our sins committed after salvation may still be charged against us. We feel that we sometimes fall away, lose our salvation, and must be restored. This kind of thinking makes us afraid that any mistake, any error in doctrine at all could be enough to separate us from the love of God. But Paul, by inspiration, tells us differently in the next two verses:

9 Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! 10 For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!

Having already been saved, Paul says that we shall now be "much more" saved than we were even at the point of baptism! You see, at the point of baptism, we were God's enemies and we were saved through Christ's death. We are now in God's family and we are saved through the life of the resurrected Jesus! Indeed, we are "much more" saved through His life! In other words, God's grace "much more" effectively washes away our sins now that we are saved than when we were baptized.

Now, this language is very, very plain. It tells us much about our relationship with God, and it tells us about the relationship that other Christians have with God. It tells us why we must accept other Christians (those who've been saved)—God accepts them. Indeed, God's acceptance of them is now "much more" effective and powerful than it was at the time of their baptism.

I am not teaching once saved, always saved, and neither is Paul, but the passage quoted above is not limited to exceptional cases or to the most holy of Christians. It applies to every Christian. This how Paul can speak the literal, absolute truth in Romans 8:

1 Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, 2 because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death.

How can there be lost Christians if there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus? Obviously, it would be impossible and this passage still speak the truth.

But Christians can lose their souls. They do so by no longer being Christians. They give up their salvation by giving up the things that allowed God to save them in first place—faith and repentance.

(1 John 4:2-3) This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world.

In this and many other verses, John tells us that who give up their belief that Jesus Christ came in the flesh will be lost. The Hebrews writer explains that those who give up their repentance are also lost:

(Heb. 10:26-27) If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God.

Giving up one's repentance is not the same as disagreeing with some self-appointed gospel policeman with a printing press. Being wrong on some subject or even having sinned is not deliberately keeping on sinning. Committing an intentional sin is not deliberately keeping on sinning. Rather, one must no longer make Jesus his Lord.

If I disagree with you about the role of women in the church, I have not lost my soul. This is plainly so because, even if I'm wrong, I'm not intentionally wrong. I'm really trying to get this right! If a congregation allows women to have authority or speak in a manner that you consider sinful, even if you're right, they are not deliberately

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sinning. They think that they're right. And you should take considerable comfort from God's promise that you will be saved despite being wrong on the subject—if you're the one that's wrong.

It is unconscionably arrogant to believe that all who disagree with you are intentionally sinning by doing so. And yet we have brothers who feel called by God to condemn to hell all who disagree with them on any number of subjects that have very little to do with faith in Christ as the Son of God come in the flesh or deliberately continuing to sin. We must be grown up enough to concede that there may be people who have been saved and who are continuing in their faith and in repentance and who honestly disagree with us.

Jesus speaks very plainly to the issue.

(Matt. 7:1-5) "Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.

"Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye."

In the same vein, Paul says in Romans 14,

4 Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To his own master he stands or falls. And he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand.

And Paul states in 1 Corinthians 10,

29b For why should my freedom be judged by another's conscience?

Paul's point is not just that we are hypocrites for damning fellow Christians who disagree with us on some point, but that those who disagree "will stand," that is, be saved—not by being right, but by being in grace. God will make those who disagree with me stand, even if they're wrong!