

## OF WHOM SPEAKETH THE PROPHET

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There is considerable division in the Christian Church. In the eleventh century, the “one, holy, catholic, Church” divided into western and eastern. In the sixteenth century, it divided into Roman Catholic and Protestant. These three have their own divisions. Two years ago, the Orthodox churches were to meet at a pan-Orthodox council to discuss matters of importance to the communion, including some matters of dispute. As some churches did not attend the council, there is controversy concerning whether it was, in fact, pan-Orthodox. Those who attended the council declared it to be pan-orthodox; those who did not attend dissented. Moreover, the council declared that their decisions are binding on all Orthodox churches; those who did not attend disagreed. There is also division in the Roman Catholic communion. Last August, forty Catholic clergy and lay scholars delivered to Pope Francis a letter of “Filial Correction concerning the Propagation of Heresies.” The letter states that “the pope has, by his Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris laetitia*, and by other, related, words, deeds and omissions, effectively upheld 7 heretical positions about marriage, the moral life, and the reception of the sacraments, and has caused these heretical opinions to spread in the Catholic Church.” Of course, the divisions of Protestantism are well known. Let alone the number denominations, witness the books in which Protestants debate their differing views on everything from Genesis to Revelation. There is even a book on five views of the proper method of interpreting the Bible. This lack of unity in the Church is a great scandal, and it is not what Christ desires for His Church. Saint Paul wrote to the Church at Corinth, “Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and *that* there be no divisions among you; but *that* ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment.” (1 Corinthians 1:10) Disunity in the Church is a great scandal, and, because of it, unbelievers excuse their unbelief. What good is the Bible, they say, if people cannot agree on what it means? What good is the Bible, if no one can understand it?

The Roman Catholic Church, and the Eastern Orthodox churches acknowledge that some parts of the Bible are difficult to understand. So, they hold that God has given the bishops of the Church a gift of interpretation. Kallistos Ware, Metropolitan of Diokleia in the Eastern Orthodox Church, has written, “There are many sayings in the Bible which by themselves are far from clear, and individual readers, however sincere, are in danger of error, if they trust their own personal interpretation. ‘Do you understand what you are reading?’ Philip asked the Ethiopian eunuch; and the eunuch replied, ‘How can I, unless someone guides me?’ (Acts viii, 30-1).” (Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Faith*, 199-200) John Cardinal Newman of the Roman Catholic Church has written, “It is antecedently unreasonable to suppose that a book so complex, so unsystematic, in parts so obscure, the outcome of so many minds, times, and places, should be given us from above without the safeguard of some authority; as if it could possibly, from the nature of the case, interpret itself. Its inspiration does but guarantee its truth, not its interpretation... The gift of inspiration requires as its complement the gift of infallibility.” (John Henry Newman, *On the Inspiration of Scripture*, ed. J. Derek Holmes and Robert Murray [Washington: Corpus Books, 1967], 111).

Ware and Newman are correct, but only partly so. All Christians must admit that there are in the Bible some things difficult to understand. They must admit this because Saint Peter stated it plainly. He wrote:

And account *that* the longsuffering of our Lord *is* salvation; even as our beloved brother Paul also according to the wisdom given unto him hath written unto you; As also in all *his* epistles, speaking in them of these things; in which are some things hard to be understood, which they that are unlearned and unstable wrest, as *they do* also the other scriptures, unto their own destruction. (2 Peter 3:15, 16)

This is, of course confirmed by the experience of everyone who reads the Bible. They find some of it bewildering. It is important to note, however, that the apostle did not say that all the Bible is hard to be understood; he said that in the epistles of Saint Paul are some things hard to be understood, and he had in mind

the things Paul wrote about the Day of the Lord. Of course, one may infer that Saint Peter did not intend to limit his statement to the letters of Saint Paul, but the fact of the matter is he did not say all of Scripture is hard to be understood. Moreover, he did not say these things are impossible to be understood; he said they are hard to be understood. That is to say, their meaning is not obvious, and, if one would understand them, then he must carefully study them.

People disagree on the meaning of some passages of Scriptures. It does not follow, however, that no one is able to understand them. When readers do not agree on the meaning of a passage, not all can be right. One may be right, however. But why do people interpret parts of the Bible differently? In some cases, it is simply a matter of the obscurity of a passage, and good men, doing their best, understand it differently. But not everything in Scripture is of equal importance. So, it is one thing for Christian scholars to differ with each other on the identity of the gods in the Eighty-second Psalm; it is another for Mormons to deny that the Bible teaches that there is only one true God. It is one thing for Christian scholars to disagree about Jesus' meaning when He said, "I and the Father are one;" (John 10:30) it is another for Arians to deny that the Bible teaches the full deity of Jesus. It is one thing for Christian scholars to have different opinions about the Day of the Lord; it is another for Full Preterists to say that the Resurrection has already taken place.

But why do people, on important matters, interpret the Bible differently? Why do Mormons deny that there is only one true God? Why do Arians deny the full deity of Jesus? Why do Full Preterists say that the Resurrection has already taken place? Some men are simply evil. They are evil, and they misuse the Scriptures for their evil purposes. They pretend to be holy, but they are not. In William Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* (Acts I, Scene III), Antonio says:

Mark you this, Bassanio,  
The devil can cite Scripture for his purpose.  
An evil soul producing holy witness  
Is like a villain with a smiling cheek,  
A goodly apple rotten at the heart:  
O, what a goodly outside falsehood hath!

When the devil tempted Jesus, "he brought him to Jerusalem, and set him on a pinnacle of the temple, and said unto him, If thou be the Son of God, cast thyself down from hence: For it is written, He shall give his angels charge over thee, to keep thee: And in *their* hands they shall bear thee up, lest at any time thou dash thy foot against a stone." Jesus rightly answered the devil with Scripture, saying, "It is said, Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God." (Luke 4:9-12) Saint Peter warned that there would be in the Church false teachers, just as there were in Israel false prophets. (2 Peter 2:1) Their character is such that they manipulate the Scriptures. It is not a matter of their misunderstanding; it is a matter of their willfully distorting what the Scriptures teach. He calls them covetous, presumptuous, and self-willed. They deny the Master who bought them, and they will be punished accordingly. They are like the scribes and Pharisees who were so proud, and so hard of heart, that they could not understand Jesus' teaching. He said to them, "Why do ye not understand my speech? *even* because ye cannot hear my word. Ye are of *your* father the devil, and the lusts of your father ye will do." (John 8:43, 44) These not only bring destruction upon themselves, but they seduce unstable souls away from the truth. These unstable souls have no strength of character, no soundness of mind, and so they never settle on the truth. They are, as Saint Paul says, "tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, *and* cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive." (Ephesians 4:14) They, like the false teachers, twist the Scriptures. They do not listen to the Holy Spirit speaking in Scripture; they distort the Scriptures to fit their own preconceived ideas. Such people are not open to correction; they persist in their errors even in the face of clear proofs of their errors. They are to be given a stern rebuke. A prime example of the false teacher is Simon Magus. He would pervert the truth for his own aggrandizement. When he saw that the Holy Spirit was conferred upon people by the laying on of hands, he offered to pay the apostles to give him the ability to confer the Spirit. Saint Peter damned him, and told him that his heart was not right before God, that he was "in the gall

of bitterness, and *in* the bond of iniquity.” (Acts 8:14-23) The Church Fathers taught that Simon was the source of all heresies, and Irenaeus believed him to be the father of Gnosticism. (*Against Heresies*, 1.23)

Some who twist the Scriptures are not so sinister. They misinterpret the Scriptures, but they do so because they are ignorant. They are untaught, and do not know any better. They may have good intentions, but they make mistakes. These need, not rebuke, but correction. If they have made honest mistakes, then they will acknowledge them, and receive the correction. So, it is important for there to be in the Church those who know the Scriptures. Apollos was, Saint Luke relates, mighty in the Scriptures. It does not appear that, when he went to Ephesus, he was in error in any respect. It seems rather that his understanding was incomplete. So, after Aquila and Priscilla heard him speak, they graciously took him aside, and gave him a better understanding of things, especially of Jesus’ identity as the Christ. Apollos, for his part, graciously received their instruction, and proclaimed that Jesus is the Christ.

Some are willfully ignorant, their hearts being evil. Some are ignorant, but not wilfully, their hearts being good. Those whose hearts are evil do not receive correction; those whose hearts are good do receive it. Saint Paul wrote to Saint Titus that an elder in the Church must hold “fast the faithful word as he hath been taught, that he may be able by sound doctrine both to exhort and to convince the gainsayers.” (Titus 1:9)

When the scribes and Pharisees complained to Jesus that His disciples did not wash their hands before eating bread, so transgressing the tradition of the elders, Jesus told them that they were hypocrites, because some of their traditions were contrary to Scripture. They paid lip service to God. They said they loved God and His law, but they did not; they truly loved only their positions of power. They pretended to be pious, but their hearts were evil. So, Jesus called together the people, and said, “Not that which goeth into the mouth defileth a man; but that which cometh out of the mouth, this defileth a man.” Peter did not understand, and asked Jesus to explain. Jesus said:

Are ye also yet without understanding? Do not ye yet understand, that whatsoever entereth in at the mouth goeth into the belly, and is cast out into the draught? But those things which proceed out of the mouth come forth from the heart; and they defile the man. For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies: These are *the things* which defile a man: but to eat with unwashen hands defileth not a man. (Matthew 15:16-20)

Jesus’ disciples did not understand His teaching, but they should have. Like the scribes and Pharisees, they were slow to understand. They were different from them, however, in that their ignorance was not born of malice, and they would come to understand.

Not long after this, Jesus rebuked the Pharisees and Sadducees for demanding that Jesus show them a sign from heaven. In private, he warned the disciples, “Take heed and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and of the Sadducees.” The disciples did not understand what He meant, and thought He said it because they had brought no bread. So, Jesus said to them:

O ye of little faith, why reason ye among yourselves, because ye have brought no bread? Do ye not yet understand, neither remember the five loaves of the five thousand, and how many baskets ye took up? Neither the seven loaves of the four thousand, and how many baskets ye took up? How is it that ye do not understand that I spake *it* not to you concerning bread, that ye should beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and of the Sadducees? (Matthew 16:8-11)

Saint Matthew adds the comment, “Then understood they how that he bade *them* not beware of the leaven of bread, but of the doctrine of the Pharisees and of the Sadducees.” (Matthew 16:12)

The Jews knew that the Scriptures taught that Christ would come, and they expectantly waited for Him. They did not know who it would be, however. Jesus is that Christ, and He proved it by His many miracles, especially by His rising from the dead. He told His disciples beforehand that He must die, and be raised from the dead, as the prophets said, but they did not understand. (Luke 9:43-45; Luke 18:31-34) After Jesus died, and

rose again, those with evil hearts refused to believe. Those with good hearts were slow to understand and believe, and He chided some of them, saying, “O fools, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken: Ought not Christ to have suffered these things, and to enter into his glory?” (Luke 24:25, 26) Of course, the disciples finally did believe, but not before Jesus reproached them for being slow to understand.

One basic rule of biblical interpretation is that the Scriptures are about Jesus Christ. He Himself said so. He said, “Search the scriptures; for in them ye think ye have eternal life: and they are they which testify of me.” (John 5:39) The Ethiopian eunuch stands in contrast to Simon Magus, and his story instructs the reader on how to understand the Bible. Saint Luke writes:

And the angel of the Lord spake unto Philip, saying, Arise, and go toward the south unto the way that goeth down from Jerusalem unto Gaza, which is desert. And he arose and went: and, behold, a man of Ethiopia, an eunuch of great authority under Candace queen of the Ethiopians, who had the charge of all her treasure, and had come to Jerusalem for to worship, Was returning, and sitting in his chariot read Esaias the prophet. Then the Spirit said unto Philip, Go near, and join thyself to this chariot. And Philip ran thither to *him*, and heard him read the prophet Esaias, and said, Understandest thou what thou readest? And he said, How can I, except some man should guide me? And he desired Philip that he would come up and sit with him. The place of the scripture which he read was this, He was led as a sheep to the slaughter; and like a lamb dumb before his shearer, so opened he not his mouth: In his humiliation his judgment was taken away: and who shall declare his generation? for his life is taken from the earth. And the eunuch answered Philip, and said, I pray thee, of whom speaketh the prophet this? of himself, or of some other man? Then Philip opened his mouth, and began at the same scripture, and preached unto him Jesus. (Acts 8:26-35)

The Ethiopian was no infidel. He had some understanding of the true religion. When Philip approached him, he was returning to his homeland after worshipping in Jerusalem. While traveling, he was reading in the prophet, Isaiah. Philip asked him if he understood what he was reading. He answered that he could not, unless someone guided him. But the Ethiopian’s first question did not concern the meaning of the words; it concerned the subject. That is to say, he did not ask about the sense of words of the prophet, but about their referent. He wished to know if the prophet spoke of himself, or of someone else. So, the evangelist demonstrated to him that the prophet was speaking of another man, and that that man is Jesus.

The same issue concerns the Sixteenth Psalm. In that Psalm, King David wrote, “For thou wilt not leave my soul in hell; neither wilt thou suffer thine Holy One to see corruption.” (Psalm 16:10) Saint Peter, in His Pentecost sermon, argued that David could not have written that about himself, because he died, and his body remained in the tomb. The apostle reasoned that David must have written it about the Christ. He further reasoned that, because Jesus died, and rose from the dead, the Psalm was about Him. This proves, Peter concluded, that Jesus is the Christ. (Acts 2:22-35)

A fundamental principle of interpreting the Bible, then, is that it teaches about Jesus Christ, and every Christian will do well to apply this principle.

Christians agree with each other more than they disagree. By definition, they agree on essentials. They agree that there is one God existing in three Persons. They agree that Jesus Christ is fully God. They agree that Jesus will one day return to raise the dead, and to judge all mankind. Not all of the Bible is hard to be understood, but some of it is. To understand the Scriptures requires, not a special gift, but a humble heart, ready to receive the truth from God. This is especially true with respect to understanding that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God.

Let us strive to be of one mind, and to agree on everything. Let us have hearts open to hear the Spirit speaking in Scripture. Let us see Jesus Christ in all of Scripture.

Blessing, and glory, and wisdom, and thanksgiving, and honor, and power, and might, be unto our God for ever and ever. *Amen.*