

# Some Commonly Misapplied Scriptures

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## Introduction

It should be obvious to all that many statements of Scripture are misapplied when we think of the almost innumerable errors held and promoted in the so-called “believing” world at large. In fact, many of these errors are founded upon such misuse and/or misapplications, whether by ignorance or design, to bolster their doctrines and practices.

Often the simple failure to consider the context can lead us to false ideas. For example, Paul stated that “it is good for a man not to touch a woman” (1 Cor. 7:1), and he later counsels in the same chapter against marriage. Ignoring the context, one might conclude that Paul was opposed to marriage. However, further reading of the context brings us to his statement that these cautions concerning marriage were temporary due to an unnamed “distress” the saints at Corinth were experiencing (v. 26).

Those who teach the damnable doctrine of salvation from past sins at the point of faith alone make the same mistake concerning Acts 16:30–31, which records the account of the Philippian jailer’s asking Paul and Silas what he must do to be saved. Paul told him to “believe on the Lord” and he would be saved, from which words careless or biased readers conclude that Paul meant that all he need do was to believe in Christ to secure forgiveness of his sins. Such exegetes either fail to read – or they reject – the larger context, which states that these two servants of God then taught him and his family the Word of the Lord, whereupon he and they were baptized immediately (vv. 32–33). Only after their baptism does Luke, the inspired writer, state that they “rejoiced, having believed in God” (v. 34). These two accounts demonstrate the significance of recognizing the context of every Scriptural statement and also of the principle, “Don’t quit reading too soon.”

The goal of honest and earnest Bible students is to ascertain – neither more nor less than – what the Scriptures actually teach. It must always be our desire to make sure that we are not drawn too quickly to what a passage **seems** to say before we understand what it does **in fact** say. Upon careful examination, we sometimes discover that the two are not the same. Is it possible that we, who genuinely seek only to “speak where the Bible speaks and be silent where the Bible is silent” misapply/misuse some passages, even familiar ones? It is not only possible; it is a reality, as I shall demonstrate. The passages under consideration in this study are ones

that I have heard brethren misapply. For the most part, these misapplications have not involved crucial doctrinal errors, but in a few cases they have done so. Even when the doctrines/practices we may think we see in a given passage are taught elsewhere in the Bible, this fact does not excuse misapplication of Scripture. One should never rest a principle of God's Truth upon shallow and faulty interpretation or application. Let us now review and examine some of these passages.

### **Proverbs 22:6**

**Train up a child in the way he should go, And even when he is old he will not depart from it.**

In the book of Proverbs Solomon addressed numerous statements of sage instruction and advice both to parents and to children. One of these he aimed at parents is Proverbs 22:6: "Train up a child in the way he should go, and even when he is old he will not depart from it" (ASV). This passage has been quoted innumerable times to advance the idea that, if parents teach their children as they should, those children will absolutely and always remain steadfast in the faith. Countless sermons have been built upon thus interpreting Solomon's words. However, if this is the meaning of the passage, we have at least one Scripture that teaches the impossibility of apostasy. Further, this application of the passage implies the cancellation of the free will of that child to reject in later years his upbringing.

Some, citing this proverb, have been quick to judge parents whose offspring went astray after leaving home. The stubborn, undeniable fact remains, however, that a large number of dedicated Christian parents, who did all within their power to rear their children to be stalwart citizens in the kingdom, have suffered the agony of seeing them rebel against and renounce that sound teaching. Further, we can frequently observe the circumstance in which conscientious parents provided **identical** spiritual instruction, environment, and example for a plurality of children, but with great sadness, saw one or more reject it all in later years, while his/her siblings remained steadfast. The passage does **not** say or mean, as Matthew Henry (*Commentary*) suggests it might, "when he is old, **it is to be hoped**, he will not depart from it." Rather, the promise is stated as an unqualified certainty instead of as a mere general, hoped-for principle. How is this apparent paradox explained?

Without controversy God's Word teaches parents to indoctrinate their children with its spiritual and moral principles (Gen. 18:19; Deu. 6:4-9; Eph. 6:1-4; Col. 3:20-21; Tit. 2:3-4; et al.). Christian parents who neglect this responsibility have no valid excuse. But is this what Solomon

was discussing in Proverbs 22:6? Not only many brethren (as noted above), but some commentators believe it is (e.g., Adam Clarke, Matthew Henry). However, *Pulpit Commentary* states: “This [duty of spiritual nurturing] is a very true and valuable rule, but it is not what the author [Solomon] intends.” The late Guy N. Woods says of the common application of this passage: “This is far – very, very far – from what the verse either says or teaches” (*Questions and Answers*, v. 1).

Perhaps some additional translations will help demonstrate the force of Solomon’s injunction. Keil and Delitzsch (*Commentary*) render the passage, “Give to the child instruction conformably to His way; so he will not, when he becomes old, depart from it.” Young’s Literal Translation reads: “Give instruction to a youth about his way, Even when he is old he turneth not from it.” F.C. Cook (*Barnes’ Notes*) states that *the way he should go* would be better rendered, “according to the tenor of his way.” *Pulpit Commentary* states that the Hebrew literally says, “Initiate a child in accordance with his way.”

Keil and Delitzsch believe that Solomon was urging parents to suit their instruction and training to the age and maturity level of each child. Others (Woods, Cook, Pulpit) aver that *his way* or *the way he should go* refers to discovering the child’s disposition, natural capacities, and individual personality traits, and so customizing the child’s rearing and education to such traits. I have believed for many years that this is the message of Proverbs 22:6. Instruction and rearing thus given in harmony with the child’s natural attributes becomes so much a part of the child that it is almost inbred – creating a “second nature” that lasts a lifetime.

Woods points out in his comments on this passage that people almost universally – and erroneously – take *when he is old* to mean *when he is grown* or when the child reaches adulthood (*Q and A*, v. 1). Rather, this statement means what it says in reference to **old age** and emphasizes the practical impossibility of finding one who has lived a long cultural, moral, spiritual, or employment life pattern, abandoning it in his declining years.

Obviously, the chances of seeing their offspring mature into stalwart saints as they leave the parental nest to make their own ways are **infinitely increased** if parents have imbued them with Truth and righteousness from their early years (Eph. 6:4; 2 Tim. 1:5; 3:14–15). However, the most conscientious training in spiritual and moral principles that godly parents can give brings no guarantee that the children receiving it will remain faithful to it. This fact should not discourage parents from doing their utmost to fulfill their responsibility in this regard, however.

Nor does the Bible teach (either implicitly or explicitly) in Proverbs 22:6 or any other place, the impossibility of apostasy or the cancellation of free will under certain circumstances. When one argues an application of this passage that implies either of these heresies (i.e., the cancellation of free will or the impossibility of apostasy) we know that something is dreadfully wrong with his interpretation. Godly parents who did their best by the spiritual training of their children, only to see them later apostatize to false religion or immorality, have no cause for self-blame or guilt. Those children are still individuals with all of the powers to choose their courses that God gave us all as human beings, and they can – and sometimes do – choose darkness over light. Brethren are as uncharitable as they are misguided when they harshly judge righteous parents who have suffered the misfortune of seeing their adult children go astray.

### **Matthew 26:26–28**

**And as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and blessed, and brake it; and he gave to the disciples, and said, Take, eat; this is my body. And he took a cup, and gave thanks, and gave to them, saying, Drink ye all of it; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many unto remission of sins.**

The New Testament gives us no explicit information on what should characterize our prayers in the Lord's Supper other than His example at its institution. This information, however, is very instructive if we will but examine it carefully. A brief examination of the pertinent passages is therefore in order. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and Paul give descriptions of the inauguration of this memorial. (Mark's account so closely parallels the very words of Matthew's that we will henceforth refer only to the other three.)

Perhaps the most common phrase in prayers at the Lord's Table is "Father, bless this bread/cup." Likely, whoever first employed these words believed that he was expressing the meaning of the opening words of Matthew's account of the institution of the Supper: "And as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and blessed, and brake it; and he gave to the disciples, and said, Take, eat; this is my body" (Mat. 26:26)."

Thus, before Jesus broke and distributed the bread to the apostles He "blessed" (ASV) ("blessed *it*," KJV [*it* was supplied by translators, as indicated by italics]). What did the Lord do when He "blessed" before breaking and distributing the bread? Note that, unlike the familiar prayer phrase, Jesus did not **ask the Father to bless the bread**, but Matthew says Jesus "blessed." It is merely the KJV translators' opinion that He "blessed" the bread specifically by

their addition of the pronoun, *it*. Even if we allow the KJV speculation, the text still fails to depict the Lord as **asking God's blessing** on the bread.

With but little reflection one should be able to understand that Jesus did not (nor do we) need to ask God's blessing on the bread and what it represents. The Father's blessing has been on the sacrificial offering of the Lamb of God from before the foundation of the world (1 Pet. 1:20). His blessing was surely also on the Supper and its elements without the Lord's asking His Father for such. If Jesus did not ask God's blessing on the bread when He "blessed" before breaking and distributing it, what did He do? What does Matthew mean? It is important for us to answer this question because of its bearing on the nature of our prayers at the Lord's Table.

In his very next statement, Matthew provides his own explanation of the meaning of the "blessing" Jesus did: "And he took a cup, and **gave thanks**, and gave to them, saying, Drink ye all of it; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many unto remission of sins" (vv. 26-28, *emph. DM*). Unless the Lord did one thing relating to the bread and something different relating to the cup when He "blessed" before breaking the bread, this term simply means that He expressed thanks for it.

Luke's account is an additional inspired commentary on the "blessing" Jesus did before breaking the bread:

And he took bread, and when he had **given thanks**, he brake it, and gave to them, saying, This is my body which is given for you: this do in remembrance of me. And the cup in like manner after supper, saying, This cup is the new covenant in my blood, even that which is poured out for you (Luke 22:19-20, *emph. DM*).

Instead of saying, as Matthew did, that Jesus "blessed" before He broke the bread, Luke says Jesus "gave thanks for the bread" in describing the very same event. Jesus then did the same ("in like manner") for the cup. Obviously, Luke is not telling us that the Lord did something different concerning the bread from what Matthew says He did in saying that he "blessed" concerning it. Thus, when Jesus "blessed" (Matthew), He simply "gave thanks for the bread" (Luke). An additional instance in which Matthew used the term *blessed* in reference to thanksgiving is found by comparing Matthew 14:19 with John 6:11 in the accounts of Jesus' feeding the 5,000.

Consider now the further witness of Paul:

For I received of the Lord that which also I delivered unto you, that the Lord Jesus in the night in which he was betrayed **took bread**; and when he had **given thanks**, he brake it, and said, This is my body, which is for you: this do in remembrance of me. In like manner also

the cup, after supper, saying, This cup is the new covenant in my blood: this do, as often as ye drink it, in remembrance of me (1 Cor. 11:23–25, emph. DM).

Paul did not get his information from another apostle or any other man, but directly from the Lord (cf. Gal. 1:11–12). As did Luke, Paul specifically stated that the Lord **gave thanks** for the bread. Luke and Paul say explicitly that Christ gave thanks for the bread and Matthew states explicitly that He gave thanks for the cup.

Let me summarize:

1. Jesus prayed before distribution of both the bread and the fruit of the vine.
2. He simply uttered a prayer of thanksgiving for each element.
3. When He “blessed” before He broke the bread simply means that He gave thanks for it.

If this example teaches us to pray before passing each of the emblems, it also teaches us that thanksgiving for each of these emblems should characterize those prayers. (Incidentally, the simple reading of the Lord’s example exposes the error of the trendy practice in some congregations of having only one prayer, which includes both the bread and the cup before the bread is distributed.)

The New Testament explicitly teaches us to intercede for one another, for the sick, for those who preach the Gospel, for our rulers, and, by implication, for and concerning many other things and/or persons. It also teaches us to bring other requests and supplications before God’s throne. Most of the Lord’s people likely do not do enough of such praying. However, **at the Lord’s Table is not the place for such varied prayers**. They only serve to distract from the singular emphasis of the Lord’s Supper – the redeeming death of our Savior. The one type of prayer, authorized by the Lord’s example, in the Lord’s Supper, is thanksgiving – first for the bread, then for the fruit of the vine. Yet, the prayers at the Lord’s Table often include many extraneous things while altogether **omitting** thanksgiving for the respective elements. I urge brethren, when called upon to lead a prayer at the Lord’s table, to take care specifically to thank God for the bread and for the cup, and for that which they signify.

### **Romans 3:23**

**...for all have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God;**

In Romans 3:23 Paul states a simple conclusion, based on his discussion of salvation through faith for Jew and Gentile alike: “For all have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23, ASV). I have heard various brethren, some of them Gospel preachers, misquote this verse as follows: “For all have sinned, and **have fallen** short of the glory of God” (emph. DM).

Admittedly, this misquotation does not involve one in teaching error. Obviously, if all have sinned, they have all done so because they have fallen short of God's glory. (The KJV rendering, "For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God," tempts one to understand Paul to be saying that "all have sinned, and [have] come short.")

However, Paul is not merely repeating himself in these two predicate forms, *have sinned* and *fall short*. Rather, the apostle uses two distinct verb tenses. *Have sinned* is an aorist tense form in the Greek New Testament (*hemarton*). The sense is that all mankind, from the beginning and in all of history up to the point of Paul's statement, had sinned. However, *fall short* is a present tense form (*husterountai*), indicating continuing action – that is, men not only sinned in the past, but they were (and are) continuing to sin. Paul's statement here is a strong declaration of the universality of man's sinfulness from the beginning of time, continuing in the present, and, by implication, into the future. Men could not be justified from sin through the works of the law (v. 20). Thus, because of the universality of sin through all time, he sets forth the need for justification and redemption in Christ (v. 24).

#### **Romans 14:23**

**But he that doubteth is condemned if he eat, because he eateth not of faith; and whatsoever is not of faith is sin.**

Paul concluded Romans 14 with the scripture above. Numerous times over the years I have heard and/or read statements similar to the following: "Romans 10:17 says, 'So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God' (KJV), and Romans 14:23 says that 'whatsoever is not of faith is sin.' The practice of \_\_\_\_\_ (e.g. sprinkling, using mechanical instruments of music in worship, et al.) is therefore sinful because it is not in the Word of God and cannot be done 'of faith.'"

All who understand New Testament teaching relative to the acts of baptism and Christian worship will readily recognize that the conclusion is true, namely that the practices of sprinkling and the employment of instruments in worship, are not in the Word of God and are sinful. However, Paul's statement in Romans 14:23 has nothing to do with this principle or conclusion. The key to understanding what Paul is teaching in this verse is to recognize the sense in which he uses *faith* in the latter part of this verse.

Our English word, *faith*, is used in at least three senses in the New Testament:

1. It is used in an objective sense to refer to the entire body of New Testament doctrine, the Gospel as a whole. It usually appears with the definite article in such cases (i.e., “the faith”) when so used (e.g., Acts 6:7; 13:8; 1 Tim. 4:1; Jude 3; et al.).
2. It is used in a subjective sense, referring to the belief and trust one possesses in a person, principle, or other entity. *Faith*, when thus referred to in the New Testament is based upon substantial evidence (Mark 16:16; John 8:24; 20:30–31; Rom. 10:17; Heb. 1:1; Jam. 2:14–26; et al.). As seen in the foregoing passages, faith or belief in God, Christ, and in the Gospel are the very foundation of salvation through Christ.
3. A third sense in which *faith* is used in the New Testament is also subjective in nature, but distinct from Number 2 above. *Faith* in this sense relates to a matter of one’s own persuasion or opinion of the rightness or wrongness of a matter of option. Admittedly, this application of the term is rare, but it is nonetheless demonstrable.

Paul uses *faith* with this meaning in Romans 14. Paul begins the chapter by saying: “But him that is weak in faith receive ye, yet not for decision of scruples. One man hath faith to eat all things: but he that is weak eateth herbs” (vv. 1–2). He is definitely not talking here about **the** faith, that is, the Gospel, so he is using *faith* in some subjective sense. He can hardly be talking about one’s faith in Christ or the Gospel. The point of the entire chapter from its beginning is to discuss practices that are **not** regulated by God or the Gospel, particularly whether to eat meat and herbs or to eat only herbs and no meat (v. 3). The one “weak in faith” in Verse 1 is the same as the “weak” who only “eateth herbs” in Verse 2. The other man in these verses is one who has “faith to eat all things.” It is manifest therefore that *faith* in this context refers to one’s personal persuasion, opinion, or conscience concerning the practice of eating flesh.

In Verse 22 Paul uses *faith* with the same meaning as in Verses 1 and 2: “The faith which thou hast, have thou to thyself before God” (v. 22a). The faith one has in Christ and His Word is **not** to be kept to oneself but is to be spread abroad to all who will hear (Mark 16:15; 2 Tim. 2:22; et al.). However, the “faith” in Verse 22 is to be kept to oneself, so it cannot refer to one’s faith in Christ and the Gospel. The “faith” that is to be kept to oneself is one’s own personal scruples about whether to eat meat, as in Verses 1 and 2.

This is also its meaning when Paul says, “because he eateth not of faith; and whatsoever is not of faith is sin” (v. 23). His statement is a strong warning that one dare not eat meat (or do anything else) while being persuaded it is wrong to do so. Such behavior violates the conscience and badly damages one’s own character and personal integrity. It constitutes sin. Even if the practice is not wrong in itself (as eating meat is not, 1 Tim. 4:3–5), eating it under the conviction

that it is wrong is sinful. It is in this context that Paul says that if a matter is “not of faith it is sin,” meaning that if one is not fully persuaded in his own mind of the rightness or innocence of a practice, he dares not do it lest he sin. Let us not misuse Romans 14:23 to mean something Paul did not mean.

### **1 Corinthians 1:21**

**For seeing that in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom knew not God, it was God's good pleasure through the foolishness of the preaching to save them that believe.**

The latter half of 1 Corinthians 1 (beginning with Verse 18) is devoted to contrasting the true wisdom of God with the foolishness of even the most learned, powerful, and reputedly wise men. In the setting of this subject, Paul wrote the following: “For seeing that in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom knew not God, it was God's good pleasure through the foolishness of the preaching to save them that believe (v. 21). I have often heard this passage quoted in an effort to demonstrate that, to those who are worldly (and perhaps even to a few brethren!), the very **act of preaching** is foolishness. Now it is most likely true that some thus view the work of preaching, but I doubt that this is Paul’s meaning here on the following grounds:

1. The “wisdom” advocated by their Greek philosophers (and which Paul contrasts in this passage with the true wisdom of God) was generally propagated by those who stood and “preached” it. Likewise, the Jews had men who would stand before their synagogues and read and then preach from the law. It is doubtful, therefore, that either the Greeks or the Jews would consider foolish what they themselves had long practiced.
2. Paul’s point in this context is not to contrast wise and foolish acts, but wise and foolish messages, philosophies, and principles.
3. The textual evidence does not seem to support this statement’s being a reference to the act of preaching. Whereas the KJV has the foolishness of preaching, the ASV reads “the foolishness of the preaching,” with the following footnote: “Gr. thing preached.” The NKJV translates “the foolishness of the message preached.”
4. Paul identifies that which both Jews and Greeks called “foolishness.” It was not the act of preaching, but the message, “Christ crucified,” (v. 23).

Assuredly, it was not the mere act of preaching that so riled the Jews that they chased Paul all over the New Testament map, but the message he preached, denying that salvation was through the Law and affirming that it was only through the blood of Jesus of Nazareth. It was not the act of preaching that was repugnant to the Greek philosophers in Athens, but the content of Paul’s sermon. They could not tolerate the idea of one living God Who created all

things and all men, much less the doctrine of the resurrection, which caused them to mock (Acts 17:21-32).

When we leave the impression that Paul was saying that the work of preaching is counted as foolishness by unspiritual men, we misapply what he said. But why would he call the message that is preached, the Gospel, “foolishness”? He simply did so by way of accommodation. Were we writing this statement today we would put *foolishness* in quotation marks to so indicate. Paul used the same term the enemies of the Gospel used in reference to it. To them, but not in actuality, it was foolishness. However, in actuality the message of “Christ crucified” is “the power of God, and the wisdom of God” (vv. 23-24). Paul was thus determined to preach nothing to the Corinthians but “Jesus Christ, and him crucified” (2:2).

### **1 Corinthians 2:9**

**...but as it is written, Things which eye saw not, and ear heard not, and which entered not into the heart of man, whatsoever things God prepared for them that love him.**

Paul’s words are a combination of quotations from Isaiah chapters 64 and 65. Uncritical readers might assume that this statement refers to the indescribable and unimaginable beauty of Heaven. This is exactly what many have assumed — erroneously. As with Revelation 2:10b (reviewed later in this MS), I have heard preachers use this as an appropriate passage for the funeral of a dedicated saint. Unquestionably, Heaven is a place that no human being can fully either describe or imagine, and it awaits the faithful. It is also a place that God, through Christ, has prepared for His faithful disciples (John 14:2-3). However, 1 Corinthians 2:9 does not remotely relate to the subject of Heaven. One must completely ignore the context of the passage in order thus to misapply it.

To what does Paul refer in 1 Corinthians 2:9? A careful reading of the context reveals the subject matter clearly. Paul begins the chapter by reminding the brethren that he did not attempt to impress them with oratory or human wisdom, but simply preached the crucified Christ (vv. 1-4). The Holy Spirit powerfully demonstrated the fact that God was the source of his message (v. 5). Although he did not bring them a message of wisdom from the world or its rulers, he did bring them a message of wisdom — wisdom from God (v. 6).

God’s wisdom through the ages (His plan to redeem mankind) was inscrutable and hidden, even to rulers with all of their resources (vv. 7-8). The Holy Spirit used these facts to prompt Paul to remember some statements Isaiah had made seven centuries earlier, which he

then quotes (v. 9). His point in this verse is to emphasize the fact that no man or group or men through all of the ages possessed enough knowledge or wisdom to “figure out” God’s gracious plan of salvation. Rather, the only way that men could know God’s will was by His revelation of it (v. 10), which, Paul says, He revealed “unto us” (i.e., the apostles [John 14:26; 16:13]). This revelation was in **words** from God (i.e., verbal inspiration) – not from human wisdom, but from wisdom that the apostles were taught by the Holy Spirit (v. 13).

Peter also expounded upon the same hidden-for-ages, but now-revealed-plan-of-God theme. Even the inspired men before the apostolic era could comprehend **only the limited concepts** God revealed to them as they foretold various details of His great plan:

Concerning which salvation the prophets sought and searched diligently, who prophesied of the grace that should come unto you: searching what time or what manner of time the Spirit of Christ which was in them did point unto, when it testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ, and the glories that should follow them (1 Pet. 1:9-11).

Our gratitude should never end for the privilege of living in the time when God’s wonderful plan of grace for our salvation has been fully and finally revealed, and that we have had the opportunity to believe and obey it.

While Paul’s statement in 1 Corinthians 2:9 does **not** refer to Heaven, he **does** beautifully refer to the inconceivable glories of the eternal heavenly realm in 2 Corinthians 4:17-5:1:

For our light affliction, which is for the moment, worketh for us more and more exceedingly an eternal weight of glory; while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal. For we know that if the earthly house of our tabernacle be dissolved, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal, in the heavens.

### **1 Corinthians 2:14-16**

While we are in 1 Corinthians Chapter 2, we do well to consider some other verses that are often misunderstood and misapplied. Beginning with Verse 14 Paul wrote:

**Now the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him; and he cannot know them, because they are spiritually judged. But he that is spiritual judgeth all things, and he himself is judged of no man. For who hath known the mind of the Lord, that he should instruct him? But we have the mind of Christ .**

Two groups of people misuse the foregoing passage in two different ways. The first group teaches a grievous error based on its misapplication. Denominationalists and some liberal brethren (e.g., Arlie J. Hoover of Abilene Christian University thus argued) erroneously argue

that the “natural man” is a non-Christian who does not have any direct help from the Holy Spirit to understand His Word. He is therefore unable correctly to interpret Scripture. However, they aver, the Christian has such help. (Akin to this aberration is the idea some brethren have been arguing that by means of the Holy Spirit’s dwelling in the Christian, the Spirit aids one in understanding the Scriptures.) This *direct-help-from-the-Holy Spirit* error has no Scriptural foundation whatever; it is the figment of fertile human imaginations.

The second group does not teach error in their misapplication of this passage, although these brethren also allege that the “natural man” is a non-Christian. However, these exegetes do not blame the “natural man’s” lack of understanding upon the absence of the Holy Spirit’s direct help, but upon his rebellious attitude toward God. These misinterpreters point out that as long as the sinner continues in this attitude, he will not understand God’s will because he chooses to not do so. True, the New Testament teaches that one’s attitude does affect his understanding of the Truth (e.g., John 7:17; 8:31–32; Acts 2:41; 17:11–12; 1 The. 2:13; et al.). (Even being a faithful saint doesn’t guarantee that one will not occasionally misunderstand the meaning of a given Biblical statement.) One’s **attitude** toward God’s Word, however, is not the point of Paul’s statement in 1 Corinthians 2:14–16.

Remember, Paul spends the first nine verses of the chapter emphasizing the fact that the wisest and most powerful men, from their mere human resources, could never comprehend or discover God’s plan for man’s redemption. He devotes Verses 10–16 to declaring the means by which the mystery has now been made known – that is, by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, the context dictates that the “natural man” is the man who is not inspired – thus the description: he “receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God.” Since he is not inspired, he has no means of knowing God’s will by himself (independent of an inspired teacher to whom it had been revealed, of course).

*He that is spiritual* is a reference to those to whom God revealed His will – inspired men. At first the apostles alone were thus blessed (John 14:26; 16:13). They later imparted various miraculous gifts to others, including wisdom, knowledge, and prophecy, all of which may have involved inspiration (Acts 8:17; 1 Cor. 12:8–10; 2 Tim. 1:6). The inspired men were able to correctly judge all things, and no man had the right to sit in judgment of their infallible message.

### Ephesians 4:13

**... till we all attain unto the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a fullgrown man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ:**

Paul wrote on the subjects of “unity” and “peace” among brethren in the beginning verses of Ephesians 4, urging his readers to be diligent in their efforts to “keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (v. 3). He then proceeded to list seven unique spiritual entities (doctrines) on which the Lord’s people should/must be one (vv. 4–6). These constitute absolute fundamentals of the Christian religion. They are obligatory dogmas that one must believe to be a faithful child of God. Those who once walked with us, but who have surrendered some of these elements (e.g., the one body/church, the one faith, the one baptism) have amply earned the identity of “heretic” and “apostate.” They have forfeited the precious unity and peace they once had with their brethren who are still dedicated to the Truth. The only diligent concern for unity and peace many of these have had for years is toward their denominational friends.

Paul writes of “unity” again in Verse 13: “till we all attain unto the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a fullgrown man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ:” Some see the word *unity* in this verse and assume that Paul is also writing about unity among brethren here as he was in Verse 3. I believe this assumption is erroneous.

**First**, note the apostle’s words in Verses 7–12—the immediate pre-context of Verse 13. He begins a discussion of spiritual gifts in Verse 7, especially as they resulted in offices/functions in the early church: the appointment of some as apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastors/teachers (Greek construction indicates that these two should be taken as one class), respectively (v.11). While two of these classes (evangelists and pastors/teachers), as we learn elsewhere in Scripture, were to be permanent in the church, the other two (apostles and prophets) relate to miraculous callings or appointments. From the listings of spiritual gifts in Romans 12:6–8 and 1 Corinthians 12:4–11, 28–29 it is obvious that some spiritual gifts involved appointments besides those of apostles and prophets.

In the context of Ephesians 4:11 we should understand that all four of these “offices” resulted from miraculous gifts/appointments (cf. vv. 7–8). These were for the purpose of “perfecting” (completely equipping) the saints that they might serve and that the infant church might be edified (v. 12). These were to last “till we all attain unto the unity” of which he writes in Verse 13.

**Second**, note that is not discussing a “unity of the faithful” nor merely a “unity of faith” (i.e., one’s subjective faith in Christ), but a “unity of **the** faith.” *The faith* is frequently used in an

objective sense by the inspired writers to refer to the entire body of doctrine that comprises the Gospel message. “The faith” is that which men obey in becoming Christians (Act 6:7), from which men sometimes fall away (1 Tim. 4:1), and for which we are commanded to “contend earnestly” (Jude 3). I therefore understand Paul to be saying that the spiritual gifts/offices mentioned in Verses 7–12 will produce a “unity” (i.e., unanimity, agreement) of some sort in the Gospel, the doctrine of Christ.

**Third**, note the post-context of the expression, *the unity of the faith*, in Verse 13. The gifts/offices that will produce the “unity of the faith” will also produce:

1. unity of “the knowledge of the Son of God,”
2. “a fullgrown man,”
3. “the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.”

All of these are expressions relating to spiritual maturity and the means of attaining it, rather than to oneness among brethren.

**Fourth**, note the remaining post-context Verses 14–16, which state that in attaining the “unity of the faith” we will be able to (1) grow out of spiritual childhood (literally, infancy) and (2) grow up in all things into Christ.

Thus, rather than referring to unity among brethren, *the unity of the faith* refers to the completion—the bringing together—of the written Word, by which the early saints would have the means of attaining complete knowledge of the Christ and of thereby becoming “fullgrown.” At the time Paul wrote to the Ephesians the New Testament had not been completed in written form. There was still the need for inspired apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastors/teachers to teach infallibly God’s revelation with both tongue and pen.

Accordingly, God gave to the church men with such spiritual gifts to serve, perfect, and build up the church in its infancy. God would (and did) provide these inspired men to do their work “till we all attain unto the unity of the faith,” that is, until such a time as the perfected, completed Word of Christ had been made available to the whole church in a permanent (i.e., written) form. After this time the perfected Word would enable and empower the church to have the knowledge and the maturity the Lord desired it to achieve.

Ephesians 4:7–16 is thus closely parallel to 1 Corinthians 13:8–13, which speaks of the completion of the Gospel message as “when that which is perfect is come” (v. 10). As Ephesians 4:7–16 implies, 1 Corinthians 13:8–10 teaches explicitly that the miraculous spiritual gifts/offices

would “cease” and “be done away” when the completed message of Truth was realized. Paul even uses the same analogy in both passages – the development from childhood to full-grown manhood – to illustrate the temporary need for the miraculous element in the apostolic church.

### **Colossians 2:21**

#### **...Handle not, nor taste, nor touch**

The New Testament warns us continually about participating in things of the world that will defile us (1 Cor. 6:9–11; 2 Cor. 6:14–18; 1 The. 5:22; 1 Tim. 4:6; 2 Tim. 2:16, 22–23; et al.). Some of these things will cause physical, as well as spiritual, harm. At first glance, Paul’s statement in Colossians 2:21 seems ideally suited to use when preaching and teaching about behaviors we should avoid. The verse reads: “Handle not, nor taste, nor touch” (Col. 2:21). The only problem involved in thus applying this verse is that Paul had no such idea in mind when he wrote it.

What did he have in mind? Many commentators believe that Paul addressed at least an embryonic form of Gnosticism that later grievously plagued the church, beginning at the close of the first century, in his letter to Colossae. Beginning with Verse 8 of Chapter 2 Paul addresses and issues warning concerning some of the Gnostic-like doctrines, which he calls “philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world.” These involve denial of the Deity and authority of Christ (vv. 9–10), certain Judaistic features (vv. 16–17), the worship of angels (v. 18), and asceticism (vv. 20–23).

Verse 21 that speaks of not handling, tasting, or touching certain things is in the midst of this latter context. The incipient Gnostics apparently had set up some rigorous and rigid rules of conduct and were demanding submission to them (v. 20). Those false teachers had been telling the Colossians saints what things they could not handle, taste, or touch, but their only authority for these prohibitions was men. Practicing such a life of unnecessary deprivation might make a big show, cause one to appear to be humble, and punish the body, but it was worthless regarding the control of fleshly lusts (v. 23). Therefore, instead of inspired prohibitions for the saints, this verse is apparently quoting what some of the false teachers were saying in their list of humanly authorized rules, with Paul’s urging them not to submit to them.

### **2 Timothy 2:15**

**Give diligence to present thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, handling aright the word of truth.**

The KJV reads: "Study to show thyself approved unto God...rightly dividing the word of truth." Innumerable brethren continue to suggest that this passage is enjoining Bible study in a sense that differs from what the verse actually teaches. Carefully reading and discerning the meaning of Scripture (i.e., studying it, as we are presently doing) is an essential part of living for Christ. However, this is not the meaning of *study* in this passage.

The word *study* translates the Greek word, *spoudason*, which means "to hasten, exert oneself, endeavor, give diligence" (*Thayer, Vine*). From the beginning of the chapter, Paul instructed and exhorted Timothy concerning his work as a Gospel preacher. In all these things he was to strive diligently for God's approval. Therefore, the message to us is that we should earnestly endeavor to seek God's approval in all that we may think, say, or do. *Study* likely conveyed this idea when the KJV was translated, but it is rarely, if ever, so used in modern parlance. Only one entry under *study* in *Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* is close to the meaning of *spoudason* ("endeavor, try"), and it is far down the list of definitions and current usages.

The KJV translators were far more consistent in their rendering of *spoudason* in the remainder of the New Testament, as the following citations demonstrate (all emph. DM):

- "As thou art in the way, **give diligence** that thou mayest be delivered from him..." (Luke 12:58)
- "**Endeavouring** to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Eph. 4:3)
- "But we, brethren...**endeavoured**...to see your face with great desire" (1 The. 2:17)
- "**Do thy diligence** to come shortly unto me" (2 Tim. 4:9, 21)
- "Bring Zenas the lawyer and Apollos on their journey **diligently**, that nothing be wanting unto them" (Tit. 3:13)
- "Wherefore the rather, brethren, **give diligence to** make your calling and election sure..." (2 Pet. 1:10)

Had *study* not appeared in 2 Timothy 2:15, it is unlikely that anyone would ever have misapplied it as so many have done and continue to do. The ASV rendering of this verse is clearly superior: "Give diligence to present thyself approved unto God...." In place of *study* various other translations have the following: "Bend your every effort," "Earnestly endeavor," "Earnestly seek," "Try hard," "Let it be your care," "Aim first at," and "Be eager."

Further, some may assume that Paul's exhortation in this verse relates to Bible study due to its final injunction, *rightly dividing the word of truth*. However, this assumption likely would never have been made were it for not the misleading word *study* at the verse's beginning. True, we must be earnest students of the Word to be able to handle it aright, but again, both the

context and the meaning of *spoudason* demonstrate that studying the Bible is not Paul's emphasis here. Rather, he urges us to give earnest attention to everything God requires of us. We will thereby be able to meet with His approval and not have to cower in shame before Him. None should infer from the foregoing comments that I am suggesting that our approval by God does not also depend upon our rightly handling/dividing His Word (i.e., correctly interpreting and dispensing it to others).

The Bible is not lacking in exhortations and/or implications concerning serious study of God's Word:

- “My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge....” (Hos. 4:6)
- “Ye do err not knowing the Scriptures....” (Mat. 22:29)
- “So belief cometh of hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ.” (Rom. 10:17)
- “...[I]ncreasing in the knowledge of God.” (Col. 1:10)
- “For when by reason of time ye ought to be teachers, ye have need again that someone teach you the rudiments of the first principles of the oracles of God.” (Heb. 5:12-14)
- “As newborn babes, long for the spiritual milk...that ye may grow thereby unto salvation” (1 Pet. 2:2)
- “Yea, and for this very cause adding on your part all diligence, in your faith supply virtue; and in your virtue knowledge....” (2 Pet. 1:5)
- “But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.” (2 Pet. 3:18)

Add to the above, which is not an exhaustive list, the fact that all but 2 verses of its 176 verses, Psalms 119 exalts God's Word, and by implication, urges the careful study of it. However, 2 Timothy 2:15 does not belong on it. It is ironic that a passage that so strongly emphasizes a proper handling of God's Word has been so frequently and consistently mishandled.

### Hebrews 1:1-2

The magnificent prologue to the letter to the Hebrews begins as follows:

**God, having of old time spoken unto the fathers in the prophets by divers portions and in divers manners, hath at the end of these days spoken unto us in his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom also he made the worlds**

As early as my teenage years I can recall both printed and preached material that used these verses as if they set forth an outline of the three Biblical ages or dispensations — Patriarchal (“fathers”), Mosaic (“prophets”), and Christian (“his Son”) (see my MS, “Dispensations of Time — click [HERE](#)). That these three distinct periods of history in God’s dealings with men are revealed in the Bible is beyond question, and they are an important broad outline of Biblical history that must be respected. Also, *fathers*, *prophets*, and *his Son* obviously appear in this passage. But a closer look reveals that these three terms are not used in reference to the three dispensations.

The first remembrance I have of the above use of this passage was in the “Cottage Meeting” charts originated by the late brother Maurice Tisdale in the 1950s, and that brethren used so effectively to convert hundreds, perhaps thousands, to the Truth. The late Jule Miller updated and expanded these basic “window shade” charts to produce his “Visualized Bible Study” filmstrips, later converted to videotapes, and still available on DVDs. These teaching materials have thus served as a standard personal evangelism tool for decades. Unfortunately, the “Visualized Bible Study” filmstrips and videos perpetuated, at least in their early versions, the Tisdale misconception of Hebrews 1:1–2 (note, I have been told that this mistake was at some point corrected). Careless exegetes, by using these products to teach others, have accepted and spread this misconception far and wide.

The Hebrews writer actually mentions only the **last two** dispensations, those of Moses and Christ. The major theme of Hebrews is the superiority of the law and religion God gave through His Son to the law and religion He revealed through Moses. These opening verses strike this very tone. God used many prophets, beginning with Moses, to reveal His will to the fathers of the Hebrews addressed in this letter, but He no longer speaks through mere inspired prophets as in those days. He has revealed His perfect plan for man’s redemption through His Son. In contrast to God’s authority as vested in such prophets as Moses and Elijah, His authority is now vested fully in His beloved Son, Whom we must hear (Mat. 17:5; 28:18). Hebrews 1:1–2 does not say that God spoke “unto the fathers **and** the prophets,” but, “unto the fathers **in** the prophets.” The KJV has, “**by** the prophets,” and probably conveys the sense better.

### Hebrews 12:23

Hebrews 12:23 reads as follows:

**...to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God the Judge of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect.**

This verse is obviously in the middle of a long sentence, in which the inspired writer is contrasting the superiority of the New Testament economy with that of Moses. More than once through the years I have heard people carelessly use the phrase, *church of the firstborn*, as if it were synonymous with *church of Christ*. However, this is not the case at all because *firstborn* cannot refer to Christ here.

While it is not apparent in the common English translations, *firstborn* is a plural term and would more clearly be rendered, “firstborn ones.” However, one does not have to know any Greek to discern this fact. The very next words of the verse, *who are enrolled*, show plainly that *firstborn* is plural. This description of the church refers to its membership—it is composed of those who are enrolled in Heaven, that is, those who have been cleansed by the blood of Christ and are saved (cf. Acts 2:47; Phi. 3:20; Rev. 3:5; 20:12–15; et al.).

### **1 Peter 1:21**

**... who through him are believers in God, that raised him from the dead, and gave him glory; so that your faith and hope might be in God.**

Jesus is our perfect example of the way we should live our lives to be well pleasing to the Father. As the song suggests: “He, the Great Example, is a pattern for me.” Often, when the preacher/teacher wants to emphasize this duty he will point to 1 Peter 2:21 as a proof text: “For hereunto were ye called: because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, that ye should follow his steps” (1 Peter 2:21).

The last portion of this verse clearly exhorts us to follow the example the Lord left for us. However, the first part of the verse is often ignored, or at best, de-emphasized if it emphasized at all. Yet it gives the latter part of the verse significant context and even deeper meaning when remembered. The context begins in Verse 18 in which Peter orders slaves to obey their masters, even if they are mean. In Verses 19 and 20 he commends the trait of suffering wrongfully for sake of conscience. Suffering for righteousness’ sake is therefore the background of Verse 21.

When Peter says, “hereunto were ye called,” he is referring to enduring suffering wrongfully. He then suggests Jesus as our example of enduring wrongful suffering, in that he underwent the same. Suffering for righteousness’ sake is the lone element of Jesus’ life that the apostle sets forth as our example in this passage. When we use it to urge people to follow Jesus’ example, let us use all of it and urge them to follow Jesus’ example of suffering for well-doing. Otherwise we do violence to the great challenge this verse contains. A great passage to use

when urging people to follow the example of Jesus' life as a whole was written by John: "He that saith he abideth in him ought himself also to walk even as he walked" (1 John 2:6).

### Revelation 2:10b

**...Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee the crown of life (ASV).**

This statement is frequently quoted at funerals, indicating that if one has lived faithfully until his time of his death, the Lord will reward him with everlasting life. Surely, no one doubts that this is the consistent implication of Scripture. Numerous passages so teach explicitly (e.g., 1 Cor. 15:58; Gal. 6:9; 2 Tim. 4:6–8; Heb. 3:14; 6:10; et al.). The principal purpose of the Bible is to so prepare, equip, and encourage us that we may be faithful to Christ until we die, thus reaching Heaven at last.

To make such a general application of this passage, however, one must ignore both the context and the purpose of these words of encouragement. The significant context is clearly stated earlier in the verse:

Fear not the things which thou art about to suffer: behold, the devil is about to cast some of you into prison, that ye may be tried; and ye shall have tribulation ten days.

*Faithful unto death* must be understood in relation to persecution, suffering, trial, tribulation, and imprisonment, which the devil was going to bring against the saints at Smyrna. Therefore, this promise does not relate to "ordinary" Christian living, nor is it an exhortation to life-long faithfulness. Rather, the Lord's purpose is to exhort those beleaguered brethren to faithfulness, **even if they must die** for the Lord. One who makes a mere general application of this exhortation misapplies it and borders on insulting those who have died for the Christ.

While consideration of its context alone will prevent the careful student from misapplying this passage, linguistic issues make the meaning of the Lord's statement even more certain. One need not be a Greek scholar to profit from what the scholars say. Simple analysis of some Greek words in Revelation 2:10 will further help us understand it. In the clause, *faithful unto death*, *unto death* translates the Greek prepositional phrase, *achri thanatou*. According to Thayer, *achri* is a preposition of manner or degree, and when it precedes *thanatou* (i.e., "death"), it means "to undergo even death."

While a few versions (e.g., NASB, NKJV) render the clause *faithful until death*, the meaning is unchanged — until martyrdom if, necessary. I by no means recommend use of "modern speech" versions or one-man paraphrases for one's basic study Bible, but occasionally

these versions catch the essence of a Scriptural statement. Such is true of the Lord's statement to Smyrna:

- "Be faithful, though you have to die for it..." (Moffatt)
- "Prove faithful even unto death..." (Goodspeed)
- "Each one of you must prove faithful, even if you have to die..." (Williams)
- "Be faithful, even if you have to die for it..." (Weymouth)
- "Be loyally faithful unto death [that is,] even if you must die for it..." (Amplified Bible)
- "Remain faithful even when facing death..." (Living Bible)

Let us ever urge one another to be faithful every day to the very end of our earthly sojourns. However, Revelation 2:10 is not the passage upon which to base such exhortations.

### **Works Cited**

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