

Sabbath School Today

With the 1888 Message Dynamic

How to Interpret Scripture

Lesson 12: Dealing With Difficult Passages

The early Christian church began its journey founded on “the more sure word of prophecy” that was fulfilled in Jesus Christ. It took time for the first disciples to fully realize that the Man they were following was indeed the One spoken of by “Moses and all the prophets.” The Day Star had risen over Israel as Christ walked among men teaching the love of God and salvation from sin that was given to all only through Him, the Son of the Living God. The apostle Peter wrote: “We have also a more sure word of prophecy; whereunto ye do well that ye take heed, as unto a light that shineth in a dark place, until the day dawn, and the Day Star arise in your hearts.” The first principle of Bible study is “knowing this first, that no prophecy of the Scripture is of any private interpretation” (2 Peter 1:19, 20).

Our memory verse this week brings into focus the problem of taking Scripture and “twisting” it to make it say something that it was never intended by God to mean. It is a common technique of persons who practice “proof-texting”—taking a verse or section of a verse out of context, and using it to promote their own idea of what the text means. Often people will link together snippets of several texts “extracted” from their context, thereby making up what to them to mean. They then claim that this is a “consistent proof” of their theological position. An example of how a verse is taken out of context and used in an unbiblical manner is Revelation 1:10, “I was in the spirit on the Lord’s day ...” John was not “in the spirit” on Sunday, the first day of the week, but received his vision on the “Lord’s day” which is Sabbath (Mark 2:27, 28). Revelation 1:10 does not support Sunday-keeping, as many claim.

Even before the death of the apostles, twisting of their words was taking place among the young congregations that were springing up in Asia Minor as a result of the apostles’ work. Their letters and speeches were being misused and misinterpreted. Paul addressed the problem in his second letter to the Thessalonians. There were three ways that people were deforming Paul’s message of Christ and His righteousness and its relationship to the second coming: by spirit, by word, and by “letter as from us” (2 Thess. 2:2).

Nefarious persons were going about claiming several things. They claimed that “the spirit” had given them a message and compelled them to share it. Or individuals would come into a town where Paul had previously been, and going among the congregations, they “added to” Paul’s teaching with their own “words,” thereby putting their own “spin” on Paul’s message. The third deception that Paul warned against was that false teachings were being circulated “by letter [as] from us.” Some men went about the regions where Paul had preached showing a hand-written letter that they claimed came

from Paul, and those letters contained teachings that contradicted what Paul had previously taught.

Through these means, error was conveyed and brought confusion to the early church. Paul might never return to the area where false ideas had been proclaimed in his name, therefore he was never able to confront the problem personally. That was the reason he wrote some of his letters, principally Galatians, Colossians, and his second letter to the congregation at Thessalonica. The apostle John had to confront the same problem. John's three letters all address the Gnosticism that was subtly infiltrating the young churches.

In his first letter John warned that "the antichrist" (literally, someone who is opposing Christ and His message of righteousness by faith through His work as our Saviour), was already at work in the world. "Ye have heard that antichrist shall come, even now are their many antichrists ... for they went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would no doubt have continued with us" (1 John 2:18, 19). John later defined what he was addressing as an "antichrist" teaching. "Every spirit that confesses not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is not of God, and this is that spirit of antichrist, whereof ye have heard that it should come; and even now already is it in the world" (1 John 4:3).

Note it well: the apostle John said that anyone who denies that Christ assumed the fallen nature of Adam in His incarnation is an antichrist. There is only one kind of human "flesh" and it is that flesh which Christ assumed when He took upon Himself human nature. The Greek word translated "flesh" in the New Testament is *sarx*, and is the literal flesh common to all of humanity. Since Christ was "born of a woman" He could not avoid taking upon Himself the same "flesh" as His mother. The only way that Christ could avoid the necessity of His assuming fallen flesh when He became human, would be for Him to be born through a genetically "immaculate" or "unfallen" woman, which is the Roman Catholic Church's teaching on the "immaculate conception" of Mary. According to this doctrine, Mary herself was especially prepared to become "the mother of God" because "from the moment of her conception ... she was preserved from all stain of original sin." [1] Thus Mary could give birth to a sinless baby through her sinless womb.

"The basic idea is rooted in the doctrine of 'original sin' which understands that if a person has a sinful nature it is impossible for him or her not to sin. A little thought will show how this idea logically justifies sin. If there is indeed a great controversy raging between Christ and Satan, this dogma is a vote in favor of the enemy of Christ. And that is precisely what John says—it is the insignia of antichrist. It discloses the essence of the issue in the great controversy between Christ and Satan, in which the 'little horn' of Daniel 7 and 8 figures so prominently. Satan's primary contention is that human beings who by nature have sinful flesh cannot truly obey God's law (cf. Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p.24)." [2]

Should we really worry about what nature Christ assumed in His incarnation? Is it important to our salvation or is it just a point of theological argument that divides the church? Ellen White gives us a clear answer. “The humanity of the Son of God is everything to us. It is the golden chain that binds our souls to Christ, and through Christ to God. This is to be our study. ... And the study of the incarnation of Christ is a fruitful field, which will repay the searcher who digs deep for hidden truth.” [3]

Why is there conflict in the church over this truth? As noted above, conflict over the nature of Christ began even before the first apostles went to their graves. By the time of Constantine the Great there were several disparate views on the nature of Christ causing confusion. To deal with the problems, Constantine called the first ecumenical council in Nicaea in A.D. 325. One hundred and twenty-five years later, the church held a second council at Chalcedon (A.D. 451) at which the nature of Christ was again debated. This time Augustine’s theory on “original sin” was discussed as the reason why Christ had to be “separated” from humanity in His incarnation.

The theological debate has waxed and waned in the Protestant churches over the centuries, wobbling one direction (that Christ was not God, but a created being of the highest order) to the opposite side (that Christ was fully God and therefore came as Adam before the Fall in sinless flesh). The truth lies in the middle—Christ was fully God, not created, but in His incarnation, He assumed the fallen flesh He came to redeem. This is the foundation for the everlasting covenant’s promise that Jesus, “God with us,” would save us from our sin by coming all the way down to where the problem had taken root in fallen human flesh. And in that “broken equipment,” Christ by faith in His Father’s power over sin wrought out the perfect performance, whereby He “condemned sin in the flesh” (Rom. 8:3).

A confusing debate over the nature which Christ assumed entered our own church after the Barnhouse-Martin affair in 1955-56. Walter Martin, an Evangelical author, challenged our church over what he claimed was heretical teachings on the nature of Christ, the investigative judgment, and the cleansing of the heavenly sanctuary. All three of our doctrines are closely related.

Among other documents and discussions that arose in the wake of the Barnhouse-Martin discussions was a significantly influential publication titled *Seventh-day Adventists Answer Questions on Doctrine*. QOD used “proof-texting” methods by taking snippets of Ellen White statements out of context in its attempt to prove that Christ’s “human nature” was the sinless nature of Adam before the Fall. Curiously, it put subheads in quotation marks and bold text over Ellen White statements that in their original context said just the opposite of the subheading. For example, in Appendix B (p. 650), the subheading states in bold letters “Took Sinless Human Nature” and then proceeds to quote nine Ellen White statements that say just the opposite of that misleading subheading. Here is part of one quote: “In taking upon Himself man’s nature in its fallen condition, Christ did not in the least participate in its sin” (*Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, vol. 5, p. 1131).

Let's look at a couple of Scriptures that are twisted in an attempt to prove that Christ took the unfallen nature of Adam in His incarnation. "But made Himself of no reputation, and took upon Him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men" (Phil. 2:7). "For what the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh" (Rom. 8:3). The key word in these two verses is "likeness." What is "likeness"? Does it mean "like" or can it be interpreted to mean "unlike"? The Greek word used by Paul cannot be understood as a mere superficial resemblance to the human form; it means "identical."

A. T. Jones, one of the 1888 "messengers," described it this way: "Now as to Christ's not having 'like passions' with us: In the Scriptures all the way through He is like us, and with us according to the flesh. He is the seed of David according to the flesh. He was made in the likeness of sinful flesh. Don't go too far. He was made in the likeness of sinful flesh, not in the likeness of sinful mind. Do not drag His mind into it. His flesh was our flesh, but the mind was 'the mind of Christ Jesus.' Therefore it is written: 'Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus.'" [4]

When the Bible is so clear about the nature of Christ, one has to ask: Why has the nature which Christ assumed become such a controversy? The short answer is that because Christ assumed the same flesh and blood that all fallen human beings have inherited from their parents since the fall of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. By faith in His Father's power over sin, Christ overcame all sin in that fallen flesh. It means that Christ's admonition to "overcome even as I also overcame" (see Rev. 3:21), can truly be a reality in our lives.

The nature which Christ assumed—the nature of Adam after the Fall—is an essential element in Gospel's message of righteousness by faith. "Christ's perfect righteousness which He lived in our fallen, sinful flesh was therefore by faith. Thus He is the Author and Finisher of our faith [Heb. 12:2]. When the church as a body truly receives the same faith that motivated Jesus, the result will be righteousness manifested in His people that will honor Christ before the world and the universe." [5]

The resistance to this truth finds its source in a stubborn unbelief which claims that it is impossible for any human being living in this world to defeat sin. Those who resist the Gospel truth are in reality stating that sin and Satan are stronger than God.

How do we deal with this "difficulty" in the church? Through earnest prayer, patience, and love for our brethren who hold an opinion different from the Bible's teaching on the subject of Christ's human nature. Only through patient love and sharing the Gospel's purpose in perfecting the characters of God's people at the close of this earth's history, can we ever hope to win people to accept the necessary truth of "overcoming" even "as Christ overcame" in fallen flesh. Accepting this truth and allowing God to work out His salvation in us and through us, will vindicate the character of God and prove His supreme power over sin, forever silencing Satan's lies.

—Ann Walper

Endnotes:

[1] Roman Catholic Catechism, p. 491.

[2] Robert J. Wieland, *"Lightened With His Glory", Questions and Answers About the 1888 Message*, p. 72, CFI ed., 2020.

[3] Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, book 1, p. 244.

[4] A. T. Jones, *1895 General Conference Bulletin*, p. 327.

[5] Robert J. Wieland, *The Golden Chain: Is There a Broken Link? Insights Into the Nature of Christ*, p. xviii.

Notes:

Pastor Paul Penno's video of this lesson is on the Internet at:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=li7GU7wY5dY>

Many of Pastor Penno's sermons are on YouTube in Spanish. Just type **pastor paul penno en español** in the search bar.

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