

Fellowship and Debate

The ministry of the Holy Spirit not only governs our conversion, but our daily walk with God. The Spirit often clears up what men have made confusing. The Spirit is the one who illumines our understanding. We touched briefly on a primary principle of the Reformation: **the right of private judgment**.¹ We are not to be so independent that we separate ourselves from the Body of Christ and fall into personal interpretation, but not so submissive that we accept error from our church leaders. God's word alone is our authority. God is consistent in what he says in Scripture, and therefore we use the bible itself as the best interpreter of difficult passages (that's from *Ten Rules of Interpretation*). If we read passages out of the context of the whole, we are likely to fall into error. I brought up the fact that the creeds and confessions originated and progressed as the church responded to new error.

I bring up these errors from time to time to show the great variety of viewpoints we find within the church. I'm not bringing them up to muddy the water, or to confuse anyone. If we understand that disagreements are produced by different interpretations of specific passages, we go a long way toward reconciliation and forbearance among ourselves. There are some issues that are not up to debate (who Jesus Christ is; what he accomplished on the cross). But many are. "Seek first to understand, and then to be understood."² This is a practical way to obey the biblical prohibition against bickering (1Tim. 6:4). If we bicker, we break fellowship. If we break fellowship with each other, we break fellowship with Christ. We are one Body, one Spirit (Eph. 4:4).

In dealing with revelation, and private judgment, I brought up the competing points of view on the nation of Israel. I only used two points of view on either end of the spectrum to illustrate the divide over interpreting Romans 9-11. At the one end, Israel as a nation is still the apple of God's eye, and his promises to them remain in effect even today. On the other end of the spectrum is that God gave Israel 40 years to repent (30 AD to 70 AD) before wiping out the temple, and placing them in the same condition as every other nation. Obviously there are many shades between these two extremes. Depending on your interpretation of these passages in Romans, your eschatology will change (your view of the end-times). I brought up the first chapter of Joel, where the locusts consume Israel until nothing is left, as a metaphor for what would happen at the coming of Messiah and the new kingdom. That favors the 2nd point of view. Lesson 2 introduces the system of altar and sacrifice – it has implications for the destruction of the temple at Jerusalem. If altars and sacrifices are the means of mediation with God, and those means cease to exist, then apart from Christ, there is no mediation, no relationship.

Let me remind you that I am not requiring that you accept a particular point of view on eschatology. I have my own view, and I list the biblical passages that I believe support it. You don't have to accept my point of view as the "correct" one. You won't hurt my feelings if you don't agree with me. Where a point of view is conjecture, we need to

¹ See note 5, page 2, Lesson 6.

² Stephen Covey, *7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, Habit 5.

recognize it as conjecture – two other words for conjecture are "guessing" and "fantasy." We don't want to go beyond what is written. I gave an example of "the sons of God" who married "the daughters of men." The majority view is that the daughters of men refers to Adam's daughters; what we would consider incest today was not incest back then. Another view says that Adam and Eve were chosen by God out of a group of existing peoples to be his own. Their children were the sons of God. The others were the daughters of men. This has its own problems. The bible says that Adam was created from the dust of the earth, directly, not chosen from other people. And so I pointed out that there are two separate manuscripts in this portion of Genesis. Trying to reconcile the two into a single, seamless revelation causes interpretive problems.

Then there is the issue of whether what we are reading is allegorical or literal. Origen considered the whole bible to be allegorical. A broad rule of interpretation you may have heard says to take what we read literally, unless there is good reason not to. In the ten rules I gave you, I suggested we should first figure out what kind of language we are reading (poetic, prophetic, etc.) before we even ask that question as to whether it is literal. That prevents a lot of the controversy before it begins. So while some points of view are interesting, they may not be binding. They are often attempts to reconcile what may be irreconcilable.

One last thing: Lesson 2 discusses marriage as the fundamental covenant of a society. Breaking that covenant has ramifications for all of us, and I list some of those. If you are divorced, please do not take offense. I am only suggesting that covenants are designed to protect and nurture. When a marriage fails to do that, the covenant is broken, and it affects the whole community. **We live together in the body of Christ under a covenant.** As with marriage, fellowship in the body requires an active effort to maintain its unity and to ensure it is a nurturing and supportive environment (Eph. 5:25-32). That's the focal point for our discussion on covenant in the coming weeks. It is the foundation of our obedience.