

Critical Issues Commentary

A monthly commentary on Biblical concerns that impact you

Perpetual Infancy Part 2 Does Scripture Warn Against Its Own Study?

written by Bob DeWaay

“Not that we are adequate in ourselves to consider anything as coming from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God, who also made us adequate as servants of a new covenant, not of the letter, but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.” (2Corinthians 3:5,6)

Will Bible Study Kill You?

“If you study Scripture too much you will become spiritually dead because, ‘The letter kills and the Spirit gives life.’” Most of us have heard this argument against Biblical scholarship. Whether based upon experience in an overly legalistic church or a sincere (but wrong) belief that **2Corinthians 3:6** does warn that Bible study will kill one spiritually, this is a pervasive and often accepted contention. Coupled with some passages from 1Corinthians 2 that contrast the mind of man and the Spirit of God, a seemingly Biblical argument against study, using one's mind, and a scholarly approach to the Bible can be presented. Many modern Christians have bought into this thinking and by that reinforced the problem of perpetual infancy that was discussed in the last issue of CIC. Is Paul warning against careful, learned, and thoughtful study of the Scriptures?

The implication that hermeneutics, language study, careful analysis of the historical and grammatical context of Scripture, etc., cause spiritual death, is robbing a generation of modern Christians of the depth and riches of God's revealed truth. Sadly, the needed correction to this fallacy is not received by many because it involves the very process they fear will rob them of the life of the Spirit. Nevertheless, correction is in order in the hope that some will come to their senses and become willing to find out the wealth

of God's truth and life they have been missing because of this misunderstanding.

There is a glaring flaw in the argument that **2Corinthians 3:5,6** warns against reading and understanding the Scripture. This passage itself is Scripture that must be read and “understood” in order to be given this interpretation. The claim that Paul teaches against studying the “letter” by the use of a written “letter” makes Paul (and the Holy Spirit who inspired him) self-contradictory. This would be like preaching a sermon to the congregation warning them never to listen to sermons! Who receives a letter from anyone who does not read it with the purpose of understanding it? Did God inspire the writing and transmission of His unchangeable Word only to warn us that we will die spiritually if we study it to learn its meaning?

Modernism in

Modernism, influenced by eastern thinking and a flight from rationality, is inclined to belittle the possibility that one can communicate validly using written forms of communication. Books are written to argue that one cannot know the author's meaning when reading a book. Yet the writer obviously expects readers to understand his meaning and will file a lawsuit if someone badly, publicly misrepresents that meaning. The absurdity of this process seems to go unnoticed. The modern despair of meaningful communication has affected Biblical interpretation (or lack thereof).

Some evangelicals who are influenced by modernism have found a way out that supposedly allows them to reject Biblical interpretation based on understanding the author's intent as expressed by his words. This “out” is the Holy Spirit who inspired the text. They claim that the Holy Spirit reveals to each one a meaning of Scripture that is impervious to normal forms of language study. They see the Bible as a cryptic book, written in a code that hides its meaning from most readers. Each

reader gets his own revelation directly from the Holy Spirit.

The obvious problem with this approach is that every reader would be an authority unto himself. No one could debate a cultist's interpretation of John 1:1 that claims that Jesus was not God, because the cultist may have the correct revelation of the passage's meaning. Each individual would live in a private world of personal revelation and the Bible would have as many meanings as it has readers. There would be no sure word of prophecy, authoritative preaching of the gospel, correction of error, conviction of sin (the definition of sin could never be established), or repentance.

The only remedy to the confusion caused by Biblical interpretation through personal revelation would be to have a master revelator who was better than everyone else at the process who would make the final determination of the meaning of Scripture. The Reformation doctrines of the authority of Scripture and the priesthood of believers would be replaced

“Studying Scripture will not kill you unless you reject its Author.”

by a single, authoritative person if chaos were to be averted. One can guess who that might be.

To those who think that the Scriptures cannot be understood I ask, “when God wrote on stone, ‘You shall not steal,’ what did He mean?” 2Corinthians 3 contains a clear reference to the Ten Commandments that were written on stone. Individuals are jailed for breaking laws against stealing that have existed in most societies back to the time of Moses. We consider these laws so understandable that those who transgress them are liable for punishment. If so, why do we imagine that Paul considers the Ten Commandments incomprehensible because they were given in written form?

The presence of signs throughout the world shows a universal recognition that written language can convey important messages that can be understood (the same way by many different individuals) and obeyed if negative consequences are to be averted. To deny the ability of written language to convey changeless truth is to deny the authority of God's word. It is to create a fantasy world in the minds of

people in which Scripture can mean anything to anyone and rival truth claims must remain untested because no one can know the truth.

The Cause of Spiritual Death

What then is the death of which Paul speaks in **2Corinthians 3**? Spiritual death is separation from God. To be devoid of the Holy Spirit is to be spiritually dead. A “veil” of unbelief causes people to fail to see the glory of God (**2Corinthians 3:14,15**). The book of Hebrews tells us why death came upon those who saw Moses come down from the mountain so radiant with God’s glory (a reflected glory at that) that a veil was necessary. “And with whom was He angry for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the wilderness? And to whom did He swear that they should not enter His rest, but to those who were disobedient? And so we see that they were not able to enter because of unbelief” (**Hebrews 3:17,18,19**).

Three key issues are mentioned about the original recipients of God’s law: they sinned (**verse 17**), they were disobedient (**verse 18**) and they had unbelief (**verse 19**). Thus they died in the wilderness. Their deaths were not due to the reading of the Decalogue but to their sin of unbelief. The letter only kills us if we disbelieve and disobey it. It is not that it was inherently deadly or incomprehensible.

A clarification of Paul’s meaning in **2Corinthians 3:5,6** can be found in **Romans 7:9-13**. Though too long to quote in its entirety here, this section of Scripture clearly says that God’s commandment is holy, good and intended to bring life. The death that resulted from it was because of sin. “. . .when the commandment came, sin became alive, and I died; and this commandment, which was to result in life, proved to result in death for me; for sin, taking opportunity through the commandment, deceived me, and through it killed me” (**Romans 7:9b-11**). Death comes from sin, not from the letter of Scripture. “For we know that the Law is spiritual; but I am of flesh, sold into bondage to sin” (**Romans 7:14**). Spiritual death comes from sin and spiritual life comes when we believe God’s word and turn submit our lives to Jesus the Messiah, receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit (see **Acts 2:38**).

In **2Corinthians 3**, the “veil” that was used by Moses to shield the people from God’s glory is used as an illustration of the veil that still separates people from God even while reading the “old covenant” (**2Corinthians 3:14,15**). The most basic purpose of the Scriptures is to lead us to Christ: “. . .you have known the sacred writings which are able to give you the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is inspired by God. . .” (**2Timothy 3:15b,16a**). If we do not come to Christ by faith, then the Scriptures will not impart spiritual life to us even if we know and understand them.

Paul explicitly tells how the “veil” is removed and what the result is: “But to this day whenever Moses is read, a veil lies over their heart; but whenever a man turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. Now the Lord is the Spirit; and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty” (**2Corinthians 3:15-17**). The transforming power of the Spirit of God comes to dwell in those who turn to the Lord.

The Scripture (“letter”) is not a hindrance to this. Faith in the message of Christ as revealed in all of Scripture will cause us to enter into spiritual life. The letter only kills when it is not believed and obeyed. **Studying Scripture will not kill you unless you reject its Author!** Those who do were already dead, they just stay in that condition, now with even more culpability.

Paul’s own writing in the immediate context shows that he is not writing against reasoned study of Scripture. In **2Corinthians 4:2** he writes, “But we have renounced the things hidden because of shame, not walking in craftiness or adulterating the word of God, but by the manifestation of truth commending ourselves to every man’s conscience in the sight of God.” If the word of God was “veiled” because its words were incapable of conveying God’s meaning to us, then adulterating it could do it no harm. However, if the Bible is verbally inspired, then adulteration (mixing God’s inspired word with error) is a serious matter. The blindness referenced in **2Corinthians 4:3,4** is the reason the Gospel is “hidden” from the eyes of those who are lost. Blindness is a characteristic of the reader, not the Scripture. God’s Word is pure, clear, straightforward, meaningful, and understandable and it is communicated and transmitted to us in written form. Believing it causes salvation. Studying it causes

growth, maturity and discernment.

Therefore, **2Corinthians 3:5,6** does not warn against scholarly, dedicated Bible study. It warns against the futility of trying to be people of God while living unconverted lives, devoid of the Spirit. The unconverted and unbelieving can only gain spiritual life by turning to the Lord as commanded in Scripture. If Jesus the Messiah is continually rejected, the letter of Scripture cannot give life. It “kills” in the sense of making one’s sin more serious and guilt more pronounced. “But the one who did not know it [the master’s will], and committed deeds worthy of a flogging, will receive but few. And from everyone who has been given much shall much be required; and to whom they entrusted much, of him they will ask all the more” (**Luke 12:48**). Only in this sense does the letter kill. Paul said in **2Corinthians 3:5,6** that his apostolic adequacy was from God, of the Spirit and not the letter. Paul was well versed in the letter of Scripture before his conversion. Only when he was apprehended by Messiah did he come into the life of the Spirit. Having done so he did not abandon his high view of Scripture nor his constant use of it.

Another chapter Scripture that receives much employment as a means to discourage the saints from Biblical scholarship is **1Corinthians 2**. “And my message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith should not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God” (**1Corinthians 2:4,5**). Some modern preachers assert that this passage shows that Paul rejected Biblical scholarship in favor of doing signs. They say that Paul failed so miserably in Athens on Mars hill where he used reason (Christian apologetics) that he then came to Corinth and abandoned that approach in favor of supernatural power displays.

However, the book of Acts disproves this contention. **Acts 17** contains the record of Paul’s ministry in Athens.

“Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was being provoked within him as he was beholding the city full of idols. So he was reasoning in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Gentiles, and in the market place every day with those who happened to be present. And also some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers

were conversing with him. And some were saying, 'What would this idle babbling wish to say?' Others, 'He seems to be a proclaimer of strange deities,'-- because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection" (**Acts 17:16-18**).

Paul's message in Athens was "Jesus and the resurrection." It was his assertion that ". . . He [God] has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead." That caused many Athenian philosophers to mock and reject his message.

Did this rejection cause Paul to alter his approach when he came to Corinth? "After these things he left Athens and went to Corinth. . . And he was reasoning in the synagogue every Sabbath and trying to persuade Jews and Greeks. But when Silas and Timothy came down from Macedonia, Paul began devoting himself completely to the word, solemnly testifying to the Jews that Jesus was the Christ" (**Acts 18:1,4,5**). Paul preached the same message in Corinth that he did in Athens, though using a different format for the synagogue than he did on Mars hill. "And he settled there a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them" (**Acts 18:11**). It is hard to see how preachers can come up with the theory that Paul abandoned reasoned Bible teaching in favor of a "signs and wonders" approach when he came to Corinth. The book of Acts shows just the opposite. He spent many months there teaching them the word of God.

God's Power Changes Lives

The error in the thinking of those who take various passages of **1Corinthians 2** to be an argument against scholarly Bible study is to equate "persuasive words of wisdom" (**verse 4**) with Bible teaching and "demonstration of the Spirit and of power" with unusual supernatural occurrences. Earlier in this epistle Paul shows what he means by "power" in this context. "For the word of the cross is to those who are perishing foolishness, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God" (**1Corinthians 1:18**).

The power of God transforms lives through the message of the crucified Messiah, though this message is mocked and considered foolish by those with worldly

"wisdom." Paul even contrasts the power of the cross with signs and wonders, showing that these are not what he means by power in **1Corinthians**: "For indeed Jews ask for signs, and Greeks search for wisdom; but we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block, and to Gentiles foolishness, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God" (**1Corinthians 1:22-24**).

Clearly Paul's message and method was the preaching of the cross. To take **1Corinthians 2** and divorce it from what Paul said in **1Corinthians 1** is misuse of Scripture. The "words of wisdom" Paul shunned were Greek philosophies that lack the power to change anyone's life. He was not warning against Bible study. The Scriptures contain the wisdom of God, not the false "wisdom" of the world.

Other verses in **1Corinthians 2** seem to lend support to those who think that sound hermeneutics and reasoned study of Scripture are grievous to the Holy Spirit and likely to produce spiritual death.

"Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might know the things freely given to us by God, which things we also speak, not in words taught by human wisdom, but in those taught by the Spirit, combining spiritual thoughts with spiritual words. But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God; for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised" (**1Corinthians 2:12-14**).

It is supposed that "words taught by the Spirit" is a reference to personal revelations or those of modern day prophets. "Words taught by human wisdom" are taken to be Biblical teachings that take seriously the author's intended meaning. The contrast would then be between Biblical scholarship and spiritual revelation.

A major problem with this interpretation is that it ignores the fact that nowhere in the context is Paul warning Christians against Bible study. The "natural man" has the spirit of the world and not the Spirit of God. That is what makes him spiritually dead. A person who has repented, confessed Christ as Lord, received the gift of the Holy Spirit, and has the assurance of eternal life is not the natural man, devoid of the Spirit, unwilling to

accept the things of the Spirit of God just because he seeks those things in God's Word rather than through personal revelation.

The natural man who rejects the things of God is typified by the Athenian philosophers who heard of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, rejected this truth, and mocked Paul's message. As in **2Corinthians 3**, the issues are faith, repentance, conversion, and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. If these are absent, the mere hearing of the message preached or reading it in Scripture will not bring the spiritual life of God. In fact, those who reject Messiah will not listen long to His message nor long search the Scriptures for the truth that sanctifies (**John 17:17**).

There is nothing incompatible about Paul's teaching that one needs the Holy Spirit to have Godly wisdom and discernment ("the mind of Christ," **1Corinthians 2:16**) and the study of the Scriptures that the Holy Spirit inspired. Also, these passages do not require that the Holy Spirit's inspiration of Scripture and presence in the lives of Christians who study Scripture mean that the words of Scripture have hidden or secret meanings, or meanings that are incomprehensible through the normal study of language. The natural man's rejection of Paul's message was not due to an inability to understand what it means for there to be one God who created the universe, coming judgment by that God, and a man who was resurrected from the dead.

That the Athenians, for example, understood what Paul meant is shown by the fact that some rejected and some accepted his message (**Acts 17:32-34**). Therefore, I take Paul's use of "understood" (**1Corinthians 2:8,14**) not to mean a complete inability to comprehend the meaning of the words he preached, but rather an inability to appreciate the wisdom of God revealed through the Gospel of the crucified Messiah. After all, Paul told the Athenians that God would no longer overlook ignorance about this matter because God had furnished proof to all through the resurrection of Christ (**Acts 17:30,31**). This means that sufficient evidence had been presented to make them liable for their response. They never "understood" God's wisdom about this not because the word "resurrection" could not be deciphered, but because they considered the idea of God Incarnate, crucified and raised from the dead to be

beneath their worldly sophistication. Never mind that they had no problem with pagan superstition, polytheism, dumb idols crafted by men's hands, and many other irrationalities. There is a moral problem at work here, not particularly an intellectual one. Their hand crafted, dumb idols never rebuked their worshiper's immorality like God does when he speaks to men.

God Speaks to us in Words

Nothing in **1Corinthian 1 & 2** justifies the modern practice of effectively muting God's Word to men's ears by claiming that it is secret, incomprehensible, changeable, full of multiple contradictory meanings, and accessible only by mystical impressions in the mind of man. What a horrible thing to do to the only changeless, authoritative, and eternal moral guidance that has ever been given. This modern approach results in every man doing what is right in his own eyes and claiming revelation from the Spirit of God as justification.

In the same epistle, Paul wrote, "Now these things, brethren, I have figuratively applied to myself and Apollos for your sakes, that in us you might learn not to exceed what is written, in order that no one of you might become arrogant in behalf of one against the other" (**1Corinthians 4:6**). Evidently written words can convey a message that sets a standard, creating a boundary to actions and beliefs. If so, anyone saying "the Spirit told me" is not free to teach or practice whatever he pleases.

In the same chapter Paul wrote two other verses that are used by those who would push Biblical scholarship out of the church to be replaced by displays of signs and wonders. "But I will come to you soon, if the Lord wills, and I shall find out, not the words of those who are arrogant, but their power. For the kingdom of God does not consist in words, but in power (**1Corinthians 4:19,20**). It is supposed that this means that words are not capable of conveying God's meaning and purpose. It is asserted that the message of Christ crucified if not accompanied by signs and wonders is a defective, truncated gospel. Again, this interpretation puts Paul at odds with himself in **1Corinthians 1:16-24** where he says just the opposite. The Jews seek supernatural signs, yet the message of Christ crucified

is the power of God for the salvation of those who believe.

The power lacking in the "words" of Paul's opponents was the power of God to change lives through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Words can convey lies and falsehoods as well as truth. The lives of those who believe the pleasant sounding words of the false preachers show the powerlessness of their message. Only the gospel is the power of God that can change people eternally. "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek" (**Romans 1:16**).

Also consider the following verses: "For our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. You also became imitators of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia (**1Thessalonians 1:5-7**). The power of the Holy spirit was shown by the lives of the apostles ("what kind of men we proved to be") and the lives of the Thessalonian believers ("you became an example to all the believers"). Again Paul used the word "power" in connection with the preaching of the gospel to denote changed lives through the indwelling Spirit of God. In none of these cases are supernatural signs directly referenced, though in the book of Acts they did often accompany the preaching of the gospel.

The attacks based on **1Corinthians 1 & 2** against the scholarly study of Scripture and the ability of the words of Scripture to convey God's unchangeable truth to man are seriously in error. By convoluting Paul's message, ignoring the context in **1Corinthians**, and failing to consult the passages in **Acts 17 and 18** that clarify Paul's meaning, they do mischief to the important message of **1Corinthians 2**. By importing meanings into Scriptures and then asserting that meanings cannot be confidently understood from Scripture they also do harm to basic rationality. One just as well read supermarket tabloids to find words from God if this process becomes the norm. The alternative is to seek the meaning intended by the author as conveyed by the words used (under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit) to share that meaning with

his readers.

The Holy Spirit's presence in the lives of believers shows that the power of God has been manifested through the "foolishness" of the message of the crucified Messiah. The Holy Spirit who inspired the Scriptures is not inspiring people to warn against their study or discourage the saints in seeking to understand their meaning. The Spirit of truth (**John 14:17**) by whom we are regenerated is also at work in our sanctification. The words of Christ, recorded in the Bible, will change us as they are understood, believed and obeyed. Jesus said, "It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing; the words that I have spoken to you are spirit and are life" (**John 6:63**).

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