

from Stand to Reason SOLID GROUND

November/December 2007

If you think you're on safe theological ground because of a pet verse, better look twice. Simple proof-texting has its perils. Here's how to avoid them.

PROOF-TEXTING PERILS

Dear Friend,

Virtually every Christian with a theological point of view thinks his view is scriptural. Why shouldn't he. He has a text he can quickly quote in his defense.

This kind of "proof-texting" happens all the time on our radio show. A caller gives me his opinion and cites supporting verses. I can almost hear him settling back in his chair and folding his arms.

My verses say one thing; his appear to say another. As long as he can find a verse that – at least at first glance – supports his view, he's satisfied. Whenever the issue comes up, he can simply quote his pet text. His work is done, or so he thinks.

CREATING CONTRADICTIONS

If you're not careful, though, simply picking out a verse that seems to support your view may result in pitting one text against another, creating an apparent contradiction. This may be satisfying for the moment because the verse affirms your pet doctrine. But your take on the passage may be wrong, and the conflict created with other texts undermines the authority of the Bible in general. When my verses say one thing and yours appear to say another, simply camping out on our verses ignores the contradiction.

So how do we solve this problem? We keep one goal in mind. Our question should be, "What does the *Bible* teach?," not simply "What does *my verse* seem to teach?" How do we learn what the Bible teaches? By choosing an interpretation *that makes the best sense out of all the relevant verses*.

That takes more work than simple proof-texting. If there's an apparent conflict, we must try to solve it. It is not enough to point to a verse that supports our position. If all of the Bible is God's Word and without error, then we must also consider the scriptural evidence that seems contrary to our theology and attempt to factor it into our answer.

If we are convinced God would not contradict Himself in the Bible – if we have a high view of Scripture – when something looks like a contradiction, we are going to try to resolve it in a reasonable fashion. We will try to find a legitimate way to harmonize what at first seem to be contradictory verses.

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ONE VOICE OR MANY?

Here is the principal way I resolve the problem of opposing verses: Determine whether the verses being cited are univocal or equivocal. Let me explain what I mean.

EXPANDING HORIZONS

QUICK SUMMARY:

- To solve the problem of seeming contradictions in Scripture keep one goal in mind: "What does the *whole Bible* teach?"
- We learn what the Bible teaches by choosing an interpretation that makes the best sense out of *all* the relevant verses.
- If we have a high view of Scripture and are convinced that God wouldn't contradict Himself, we will try to reconcile verses that seem to conflict in a reasonable fashion, looking for more than one possible meaning.
- Pay attention to the grammar. Sometimes it offers an alternative interpretation that resolves the apparent conflict between verses.
- When you do your homework on the full range of teaching on an issue in Scripture many distortions simply fade away.
- Find the view that brings the most harmony between the relevant passages. It's probably going to be the right interpretation.
- Sometimes questions remain so we should do our best to follow the evidence where it leads.

Univocal verses speak with one voice (“uni-vocal”) and are, therefore, unambiguous. Even after looking at the text from a number of different angles, it’s hard to imagine any alternate meanings.

Equivocal verses, on the other hand, have more than one possible meaning. One interpretation may appear most obvious, but upon further study others suggest themselves.

Noticing that the meaning of a certain verse or passage may be equivocal is a key to resolving the problem of apparent contradictions. Is it possible one or more of the proof-texts have more than one reasonable meaning? If so, then choosing one of the alternate meanings could remove the apparent contradiction. If one verse seems completely inflexible (univocal, or unequivocal), then adapt the more flexible verse (the equivocal one) to bring harmony.

Let me give you an example. Is baptism necessary for salvation? Is it necessary to be water baptized after one’s profession of faith before one can receive the gift of forgiveness and new life through regeneration? Or is baptism a proper act of obedience *after* one becomes a Christian?

In the first case, the order would be faith, then baptism, resulting in salvation. In the second case the order would be faith, resulting in salvation, followed by baptism.

PETER VS. PETER

Verses seem to support both sides. In Acts 2:38 we read, “And Peter said to them, ‘Repent, and let each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.’” If the repentant believer is baptized “for the forgiveness of sins,” then repentance and belief are not enough. The order here appears to be faith, then baptism, resulting in salvation.

This verse seems very straightforward. To some, simply quoting it is enough. The problem comes when one flips over a few pages to Acts 10:44-48. There we read:

While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who were listening to the message. And all the circumcised believers who had come with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out upon the Gentiles also. For they were hearing them speaking with tongues and exalting God. Then Peter answered, “Surely no one can

refuse the water for these to be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit just as we did, can he?” And he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked him to stay on for a few days.

Notice what’s happening. Peter – the same speaker in the Acts 2 passage – preaches the Gospel to Cornelius and his household. In the midst of Peter’s sermon, the Holy Spirit falls on those listening and they manifest spiritual gifts.

This is irrefutable evidence to Peter that these Gentiles have “received the Holy Spirit just as [he] did.” Other verses make it clear that possessing the Holy Spirit in the New Testament sense is proof of salvation (see Ephesians 1:13-14 and Romans 8:9).

After these Gentiles are regenerated, Peter announces that water baptism is now appropriate. The order in Acts 10 is faith, resulting in salvation, followed by baptism.

The problem is obvious. Acts 2 seems to teach that salvation comes after water baptism, and Acts 10 indicates it can come before baptism. This appears to be a contradiction. Unless these passages are harmonized, merely asserting one verse against another actually does violence to the authority of God’s Word.

This is when we must ask our question: Is either of the passages equivocal? That is, are there any legitimate alternative readings?

Here is my take. The Acts 10 passage seems completely inflexible in its meaning. It’s univocal. The sequence of events leaves no question (though I’m open to suggestions) that the order is faith/regeneration/baptism. Peter’s response is unmistakable.

Further, when the Jews later take issue with Peter about his involvement with Gentiles, he simply recounted the event and they were satisfied (Acts 11:1-18). In this passage regeneration clearly follows faith, not baptism. Note the wording:

If God therefore gave to them the same gift as He gave to us also after believing in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God’s way?” And when they heard this, they quieted down, and glorified God, saying, “Well then, God has granted to the Gentiles also the repentance that leads to life.” (Acts 11:17-18)

Notice baptism isn’t even mentioned here, only the salient details of regeneration: repentance, faith, and

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salvation. By all appearances, Acts 10 is unambiguous. Baptism is not necessary for salvation.

GUIDANCE FROM GRAMMAR

What about in Acts 2? Is it possible this passage means something different than it appears to at first? On closer inspection the answer is that it does. The key is in the grammar.

In Acts 2, the command to repent is in the plural, as is the reference to those who receive the forgiveness of sins (i.e., “All of you repent so all of you can receive forgiveness”). The command to be baptized, however, is in the singular (i.e., “Each of you should be baptized”).

This makes it clear that repentance, not baptism, leads to salvation, since an individual’s baptism cannot cause the salvation of the entire group. Individual (singular) baptisms do not result in corporate (plural) salvation.

As it turns out, then, the phrase “for the forgiveness of sins” modifies repentance, not baptism. A more precise rendering might be, “Let all of you repent so all of you can receive forgiveness, and then each who has should be baptized.”

If there is any question about which translation of Acts 2:38 is appropriate, Acts 10 and 11 give us the answer. Clearly, Peter’s Gentiles were not getting baptized in order to bring about their salvation. They were baptized as a result of salvation. The clear (univocal) teaching in Acts 10 and 11 informs the ambiguous (equivocal) nature of Acts 2:38.

The merits of the interpretation I have offered for Acts 2 now become obvious against its alternative. Not only is my take on the passage grammatically acceptable.

It resolves the apparent contradiction, restoring harmony to God’s Word.

If we are to be scripturally balanced, our theological views should take into account the full body of scriptural references when considering an issue. Only then can we hope to clear up any apparent contradictions in the text.

Sometimes even when we’re careful questions remain; everything does not fall neatly into place. In times like these we do our best to lay our biases aside, look carefully at all the data, and then follow the evidence where it leads. Find the view that brings the most harmony between the relevant passages. It’s probably going to be the right interpretation.

DOING YOUR HOMEWORK

Here’s a tip on how to get that done. Go to your Bible concordance and look up all the forms of the word “baptize” (e.g., “baptism” or “baptized”). Next write each reference on a 3x5 card or record it in a computer word processing file. This will allow you to look at all the references together and begin to group them according to content.

For example, many of the texts will be about John’s baptism. Put them in one group. Others will be about the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Put those in another. There are references to the baptism of Moses and to baptism by fire. Jesus refers to yet another, the baptism of trial (“Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?” Mark 10:38).

This is how to systematically study any doctrine or topic. Take all the verses pertaining to a particular issue

and look closely at what they say. Then begin drawing conclusions from that broad base of research – instead of proof-texting favorite verses – so you don't miss anything important.¹

The exercise takes a little time, but it can be a lot of fun and the results are very satisfying. Doctrines begin to unfold before your eyes, giving you a solid biblical understanding on any issue. By drawing instruction from the full counsel of God on the subject, you are able to make informed judgments that are biblically balanced.

You'll also notice that by surveying the full range of teaching in the New Testament on an issue (baptism, in this case) many distortions simply fade away.

HONORING INERRANCY

This approach to resolving Bible conflicts always takes biblical inerrancy for granted:² The Bible is the Word of God. God can't err. Therefore, the Bible can't err. When faced with apparent contradictions, we always look for a way to harmonize. We do this by employing a core precept of interpretation: Interpret the unclear in light of the clear.

When all is said and done, there still may be apparent contradictions. Though time and scholarship have resolved many problems, some still remain. At that point we should acknowledge the difficulty and choose the view that in our opinion is best supported by the relevant passages, being open to better alternatives if they present themselves. Then we should be charitable and understanding to those who disagree.

Your partner for the truth,



Gregory Koukl
President, Stand to Reason

PUTTING YOUR KNOWLEDGE INTO ACTION

- ✓ Picking out a verse to support your view of a certain issue in Scripture may result in pitting one text against another, creating an apparent contradiction.
- ✓ Remember to keep one goal in mind: Ask, "What does the *Bible* teach?" not "What does my *verse* seem to teach?"
- ✓ Look for the interpretation that legitimately harmonizes what at first seem like contradictory verses.
- ✓ Do your homework, using a concordance to look up all passages that contain the word or concept in question and then group them according to content. This will help you to be scripturally balanced, taking into account the full body of scriptural references when considering an issue.
- ✓ Carefully look at the grammar for clues to the meaning of the passage.
- ✓ Don't forget that this approach to resolving Biblical conflicts always takes inerrancy for granted.
- ✓ In the rare instance when apparent contradictions still exist, choose the view that is best supported by the relevant passages in your view. Always be charitable and understanding to those who disagree.

¹ Find examples of this on our web page at www.str.org. Check under "Quick Studies" for a summary of business principles from the book of Proverbs, a look at the evangelistic messages of the Apostles in Acts, and a thorough analysis of the New Testament teaching on prayer.

² Establishing biblical inerrancy is a separate task.

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- We praise God for the growth we've seen this year. Please **pray** for wisdom as we plan for 2008 that the Lord would help us make the best use of our resources to train more ambassadors for Christ.
- Please **pray** for Greg, Steve, Brett, and Alan that they would be productive and effective speakers, equipping many more Christians to have an answer for the hope within.
- Please **pray** for Greg as he works to finish his book on *Tactics in Defending the Faith*.



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STR SPEAKERS' SCHEDULE

Greg Koukl

NOVEMBER

- 4 Wheatstone Academy, Chino Hills, CA 6:30 p.m. Topic: TBD Contact: (562) 690-1027
- 6 Reasons to Believe chapter meeting, Boston, MA 7 p.m. Topic: TBD Contact: dmccarthy@pensionc.com
- 7 Boston Trinity Academy chapel, Boston, MA
- 29 Christian Fellowship Club, Olympia, WA 12 p.m. Topic: *The Intolerance of Tolerance* Contact: (360) 701-3591 or johnisaacson@reachone.com

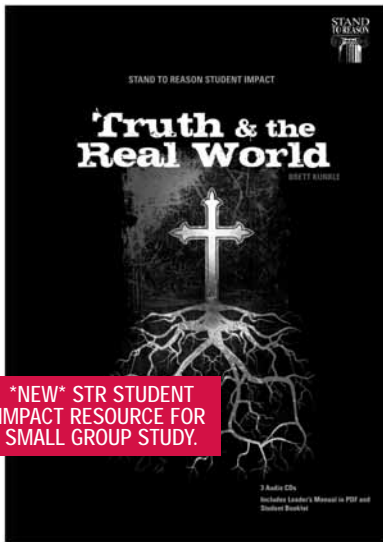
Brett Kunkle

NOVEMBER

- 4 Wheatstone Academy, Chino Hills, CA 6:30 p.m. Topic: TBD Contact: (562) 690-1027
- 5 North Coast Church, Vista, CA 7:00 p.m. Topic: How to *Witness to a Mormon* Contact: (760) 724-6700 or www.northcoastchurch.com/ncu/
- 16-17 Evangelical Philosophical Society Apologetics Conference, San Diego, CA Topics: *Moral Truth: True for You but Not for Me?* and *Is One Way the Only Way?* Contact: (888) 332-4652

As additional dates are scheduled, they will be posted on our web page at www.str.org

“I do not feel obliged to believe that the same God who has endowed us with sense, reason, and intellect has intended us to forgo their use.” - Galileo



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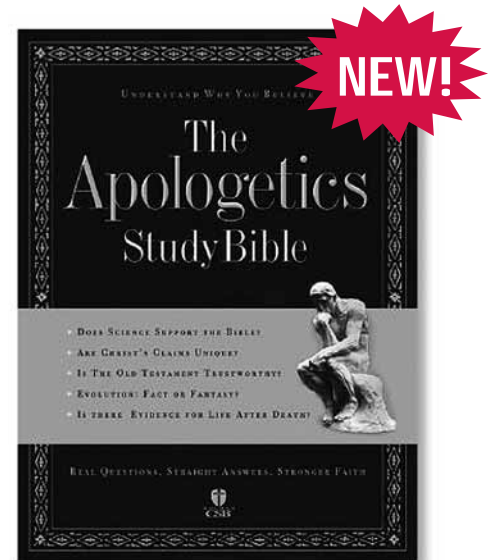
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