**The Problem**

We don’t agree. I am amazed at the different places Christians of good heart find themselves. Not only do denominations not agree, but hardly one person agrees with another in depth. It is like going to a smorgasbord where everyone is choosing from the same variety, but no one comes up with the exact same assortment.

Why do we have such across the board divergence in Christianity? We’re talking a large range, a broad road, and a massive highway of beliefs, all claiming to be proper interpretations of Biblical truth. How is it possible? Some have resigned it to human capacities to justify, rationalize, and reason fallibly, and of course we are talking about the other guy. Many claim it is poor scholarship, unfaithfulness to context, and a willful spirit (often caused by personal hurt, pain, and rejection).

Then the broad road includes a whole scope of interpretations based on reason, experience, and tradition, sometimes *over* the scriptural text. In some cases, liberal scholars claim that the Bible itself is fallible. However, to deny scripture’s testimony in any one place is like opening Pandora’s Box. When this occurs, what then are the constraints? Where do we draw a line of authority for sustaining our beliefs?

When does it become “anything goes” (what is best in our own eyes)? It is when scripture is no longer authoritative, or when it is piecemeal applied. We are all guilty of emphasizing some scriptures over and against others. Quite frankly, the Bible is too big, too much, and too deep for any one of us to interpret it on our own.

Proverbs 27:17 “As iron sharpens iron**, so a man sharpens the countenance** of his friend.”

Certainly, we must all realize that our finite understanding is dependent upon the contribution of others. It’s like the four blind men who described what it was like to touch an elephant: one touched the tail, one touched the trunk, another blind man touched the ear, and the last one touched a leg, each adamantly insisting they were correct (and they were!); yet, each totally different in describing what they experienced. Obviously, the need to collaborate, and bring their descriptions together, would give them a far better grasp of what an elephant is.

That is simple enough, but the struggle I’m describing now isn’t about touching different parts of scripture. It is about addressing the same places. We are describing the same issues, teachings, scriptures, and coming away adamantly insisting we are correct, and finding many disagreements. The result of which is often an impasse—the tension between us.

The impasse has many aspects. There is the human pride of being right. There is the assumption that the way we see things is the way they are (Pr. 14:12). There is the semantics problem of meaning, and sometimes redefining it. There are preconceived ideas. Not to be forgotten is our own background, upbringing, imprinting, and embracing of truth, because of what we were taught, and by whom.

In other words, virtues such as loyalty, faithfulness, trust, emotional attachment to a person, a church, and a teaching, are sometimes the hindrance to understanding and openness to truth. “My father is a great man, he couldn’t be wrong!” Replace “father” with any person, a church pastor, a church, a denomination, and our emotional attachments sometimes blind us, preventing growth in our understanding.

The tension causes us to withdraw from, distrust, disassociate, discontinue discussion, and emotionally distance ourselves from others. We all need affirmation, confirmation, a sense of belonging, and a place of agreement; it’s not hard to understand why our differences lead to denominations, independent churches, and isolation for individuals. As my father once jested, “I’m still looking for a Bible I can agree with!”

I think we struggle so much with our beliefs because we are ignorant, easily confused, and easily misled—all of us. I think this is the “sheep” syndrome that Jesus referred to when He proclaimed He was the “good” shepherd. Sheep may be cute to some, but they are not the sharpest animal God created. Shepherds must be diligent to watch over them, for they easily stray away.

This is compounded by the fact that we compare ourselves among ourselves. There are smart sheep, intelligent, well educated, and very arrogant sheep; there are some who think they are no longer sheep, they are now shepherds. When did they stop being a sheep? When did their natural heart stop being deceitful, and desperately wicked? I remember hearing one Seminary professor make the claim, “We are all seeking truth!” Maybe so; I just find it hard to believe. Remember Pilate’s lamentation to Jesus? “What is truth?” What some consider truth is very relative; while others are absolutely positive they know it all.

There is another phenomenon that happens among us. We get the idea that since we’ve got a handle on truth, as we see it in one area, that we have a handle on it in others. I’m a big fan of Focus on the Family, for example. There are a lot of solid, inspired, and faithfully true teachings regarding the family and marriage in that ministry; however, that doesn’t mean they are strong everywhere else in regards to church doctrines.

Some find certain preachers to be their favorite on the television, or radio, because they have learned so much. The problem is that we can become so enamored by one pastor that we’ll swallow everything they teach: hook, line, and sinker. Can one person really have the corner on the market? Can one ministry be so deep that everything they teach, or believe, IS gospel?

Paul admonished us not to become partial like this:

I Cor. 3:4-6 “For when one says, ‘I am of Paul,’ and another, ‘I am of Apollos,’ **are you not carnal**? Who then is Paul, and who is Apollos, but ministers through whom you believed, as the Lord gave to each one? I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase.”

We might not be saying I am of a particular person, but is there much difference in saying, “I’m Baptist,” or “I’m Methodist,” or “Catholic?” It helps us to understand in part where someone is, to appreciate their background or current place, but doesn’t it also hinder our walk as well? We do this in other ways when we proclaim this person’s book, or that person’s message or ministry, as great. I’m not condemning this practice; I’m trying to point out the difficulty we have in searching for truth. We become labels, we label others, and sectarianism is the result.

There is one more element that is the result of sectarianism. We can become fixed, dogmatic, self assured, cocky, even arrogant, and at the same time, determined to be right, defensive, threatened, protective, and argumentative. With this positional thinking, we cross over the ideas and concepts, *to attack the persons espousing them*. The idea isn’t wrong, the person is. The concept isn’t “idiotic,” the one teaching it is.

Fellowship is lost and community cut off as each circles the wagons so to speak, to keep the others out. We set up camps, associations, and connections with those we see eye to eye with. We denounce or deny the authenticity and authority of those we disagree with. We have our banners, we have our codes, and we have our lines and recognitions of the acceptable and/or unacceptable teaching.

We have boxed ourselves in so that we don’t compromise, pollute, or become tainted by heretics, the cults, and false teachers. I understand that we are to protect, guard, and be prepared to give a defense of the faith. I understand that we are to refute false teaching. My point is that we become so threatened by them, we don’t engage in discourse any more.

We are going to be surprised that many of our brethren, born of God (saved), have been in those *other* camps. Even cults have captured true children of God through their techniques and persuasion. How then does iron sharpen iron when we don’t meet? When we don’t engage, or talk to those who disagree with us? This means there is less fulfillment of helping each other learn, grow, and struggle through (as iron doesn’t sharpen iron).

The tension is caustic between us, because we removed it in our understanding of scripture. In a strange way, the tension is trying to balance us through each other. Most of the time, we’re too carnal, or stubborn, or headstrong, to be brought back to the true tension coming to us from the Bible through those we disagree with.

At the same time, it can be difficult to engage in discussion with some we disagree with, because emotional barriers exist. “I just can’t talk to so and so; I run into a roadblock.” Or, “The dogmatic unbending, self assured cockiness, is unbearable!”

There is no give, no openness, and no dialog; it is just a one way street of superior thinking, or position on *their* part. There is no acknowledgment of possible self deception, no sense of possibly being wrong, and no appreciation that one could actually see it differently, and be Biblical.

The temptation for a child of God experienced in the Word, with years of study, who spends much time in prayer, well traveled, exceptional mind and debater, is somewhere to cross a line that means he/she is no longer susceptible to error. We may have become so skilled at seeing the errors of others; yet, we have become blind to our own.

It is as if growing in Christ means learning how to be right about everything. That maturity spiritually means having the right answers, having sound doctrine, being abreast of truth, as a person who has it together. My experience has been somewhat the opposite. The closer I walk with God, the more filled with the Spirit I am, the more I identify with Christ—the more wrong I am in my natural man.

This may be a new challenge for some: if I haven’t discovered new revelation where I thought *I was right*—something is wrong. I’ve been a Christian for over forty-six years, and I’m still waiting to arrive where instruction and reproof are not the way of life (of course I’m arguing that day will never arrive).

We are to teach and practice sound doctrine. That doesn’t mean that we have arrived, and no longer need to be taught. Truth stands alone, and need not be attended by any one person—because God is truth. If a matter is truthful, whether or not we see it, defend it, *or think we own it,* is immaterial. The line that gets crossed is *ownership*.

We think we own the idea, concept, doctrine, teaching, or truth. What do we have that we didn’t receive? And if we received it, why would we think we must defend it? It’s God’s truth, not ours. And if it is God’s truth, what makes us think we got it all? Do we all acknowledge Paul’s teaching?

I Cor. 13:9 & 12 “For we know in part and we prophesy in part.” And then, **“For now we see in a mirror dimly**, but then face to face, **now I know in part**, but then I shall know just as I also am known.”

Somehow, we believe we know more than in part. Somehow, we see more than in a mirror dimly. We believe we know what we know, we are sure of it, we see it clearly, we are spiritual, and we are mature; yet, Paul, the apostle, who wrote much of the New Testament under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, said this about himself too—the “we” included Paul.

A check and a guard: do we really believe we know in part? Do we really believe we see only dimly? When we compare ourselves to others, we are convinced then that we know more, and see more clearly. We cross over and start declaring heresies of those who are basing what they believe in the Bible. We cross over and declare others mishandling the Word of truth, because we know we are not mishandling it. It is ugly stuff when we are so certain, that we begin to put down the others as false, erroneous, stupid, so irrational, and accuse them of being deceivers—of practicing ill-will.

I find myself emotionally charged when engaged in discourse, reading, or studying issues that I find hard to believe, or understand, especially if others *own the issue*. I can feel it tensing up within me. I’m threatened, and I’m bothered, angered, bewildered, why anyone would embrace such an opposing view. The more I seek to grasp the other’s position, the more uncomfortable I can feel.

It is a burden and a struggle; I’d rather not take it on. My reluctance is real, my personal pain, or anguish, is real; where does it come from? Is it pride? Is it insecurity? Is it iron sharpening iron (which I’m trying to avoid)? When we think of iron sharpening iron, wouldn’t there be sparks? Wouldn’t iron sharpening iron create much friction?

However, I’m comfortable where I am. I don’t want to be bothered; besides the fact that I’ve studied it before! I’d rather not experience the discomfort, and by removing it, I can find myself off to the left or to the right, generally speaking.

I share all of this to say that no one has all the truth. I remember being rebuffed by a brother in Christ, when in college, with those very words. I can still feel the dismay over thinking it through. I hadn’t realized that my religious training led me to believe, or least act like, we did have ALL the truth.

As I see the scriptures today, the more I think I know, the more I realize I don’t. God is too much; I am grateful for the nuggets and for the revelation that I hold onto now. Even so, I must keep from becoming closed about them. I can know in part, I can see dimly, and I am grateful; yet, to claim that is all there is, is misguided.

Which brings me to what we can trust, what we can rely on, what I believe God placed in scripture to help us with this problem. The problem of so much diversity, of disagreement, of arrogance and pride, of owning our understandings, of cutting others off, of being threatened, of declaring authority and being right, while all the time knowing in part, and seeing dimly.

**God knew we’d be in this malaise of human opinion and divergence—we are all so flawed (in our natural man).** God knew that our sin nature would insidiously mislead us. God knew that our understandings of scripture, would lead to fights, separations, and caustic behavior. What can we trust? What can we rely on? What is the help?

An answer: **God placed tension in scripture to keep us on the straight and narrow, rather than on the broad wide roads of the left and right.**