

LESSON 5A – Bible Skeptics Talking to Christians



(based on pp. 149-201)

Introduction

The events of recent years (i.e. COVID, the lockdowns, online education, etc.) have shaken the public trust in institutions, authorities, and “experts”: in government, in medicine, in education, in the media, in the church. With the rise of instant and open information via the internet and alternate news sources people can find their own information (or as often the information/answers they WANT TO find). People are on guard and question what they are told. They are hesitant to trust any “top-down” information or answers for fear that they are being lied to or manipulated by those in traditional seats of power. We can understand people’s hesitation and skepticism when two Christians read the same passage and come up with opposite understandings. Which one is correct—or are both true? When it is taught and believed that the world has evolved over time, many apply the same principles to religion and claim that Christianity (and the Bible text itself) have been changed over time for the sake of institutional power. In our upcoming lessons we will make it our objective to answer some very important questions:

- How can we know for sure if we are correctly understanding/interpreting the Bible?
- How can we be confident that the Bible text itself is true and correct?

How can we know for sure that we are correctly understanding the Bible?

What Bible skeptics say:

When we read about controversial subjects that interest us, we usually read material written by people with similar opinions as ourselves. Even if we study material from different perspectives, most of us fail to identify and overcome our hidden biases. However, we should not be discouraged by complex problems.

—David
Quick to Listen, p. 151

In short, it [the Bible] is a kind of ...inkblot test. It can appear to be whatever the beholder wants it to be. If you want to own slaves, the Bible can support you; if you want to emancipate slaves, the Bible can support you; if you want to persecute homosexuals, the Bible can

support you; if you want to fight for gay equality, the Bible can support you. Are you looking for guidance regarding abortion? gun control? women's rights? democracy? how to deal with a witch? Whatever your position on whatever topic, the Bible can support you. That could be one of the secrets of its success, if numbers of copies is a measure of success.

—Richard
Quick to Listen, p. 164

1. What are among our starting assumptions as we approach God's Word, so that we know we are understanding it correctly?

Isaiah 66:2 "This is the one I esteem: he who is humble and contrite in spirit, and trembles at my word."

Psalms 25:4-5 Show me your ways, O LORD, teach me your paths; guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are God my Savior, and my hope is in you all day long.

Psalms 119:105 Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path.

Psalms 119:96 To all perfection I see a limit; but your commands are boundless.

1 Corinthians 1:25 For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom.

Psalms 111:10 The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom; all who follow his precepts have good understanding. To him belongs eternal praise.

Genesis 15:5-6 [The LORD] took [Abram] outside and said, "Look up at the heavens and count the stars—if indeed you can count them." Then he said to him, "So shall your offspring be." Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness.

Deuteronomy 32:47 "They are not just idle words for you—they are your life."

2 Peter 1:21 For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.

John 10:35 "The Scripture cannot be broken."

Psalms 119:160 All your words are true; all your righteous laws are eternal.

John 5:39 "You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me."

Ephesians 2:19-20 [You are members of God's household] built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone.

2. How might we respond to the skeptic who says that these assumptions are nothing more than expressions of our own personal biases?

3. What is the purpose of the Old Testament?

Luke 24:44 [Jesus] said to [his disciples], "This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms."

4. What is the purpose of the New Testament?

John 20:30-31 Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

John 14:26; 15:26-27 "The Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you. ... When the Counselor comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father, he will testify about me. And you also must testify, for you have been with me from the beginning."

5. What is the purpose of both testaments?

2 Timothy 3:15-16 From infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

Revelation 14:7 [The angel flying in midair] said in a loud voice, "Fear God and give him glory, because the hour of his judgment has come. Worship him who made the heavens, the earth, the sea and the springs of water."

6. Read Hebrews 13:8 and Matthew 5:17-18. What do these passages tell us about the Bible? Why might some people find that disconcerting? Why do we find comfort in this truth?

Matthew 5:18 "I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished."

Matthew 24:35 "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away."

Malachi 3:6 “I the Lord do not change. So you, O descendants of Jacob, are not destroyed.”

Hebrews 13:8 Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.

9. People have long attempted to change God’s Word to suit their own fancy. Why is this so tragic?

John 14:6 Jesus answered, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”

2 Peter 3:16 [Paul] writes the same way in all his letters, speaking in them of these matters. His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction.

We can be sure that we correctly understand the Bible by following these basic rules of interpretation, which we naturally follow in reading any document.

- We look at a word’s meaning in its context and grammar, taking each word literally unless the context indicates that it’s to be taken figuratively.
- We understand the figures of speech figuratively. Figures of speech are simile, metaphor, personification, anthropomorphism, hyperbole, metonymy (attribute for whole), and synecdoche (part for whole).
- We compare one section with another when both are on the same topic.
- Some narratives are descriptive. They describe what someone did, which isn’t necessarily what we should be doing. Other narratives are prescriptive and tell us what we should be doing. We know which narratives are prescriptive from context and the fact that they are repeated in other places in the Bible.
- When the Scriptures clearly state two opposites, we are to believe both (e.g. election and falling from faith) .

By following these rules of interpretation with the principles outlined above, diverse people achieve the unity of beliefs that God wants all Christians to have. Paul writes, “I am making an appeal to you using the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. I ask that you all express the same view and not have any divisions among you, but that you be joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment” (1 Corinthians 1:10).

- Catholic theologians will claim to follow the same rules of interpretation, but they add another point. They say the pope is the final interpreter of the Scriptures, so then Bible teachings are added to, subtracted from, or changed.
- Liberal theologians also claim to follow the same rules of interpretation, but they add another point as well. They say the revelation of the Bible must be discovered by interpreting

through the worldview lens of its first recipients. In this way, liberal theologians feel justified in adding, subtracting, or changing one Bible teaching after another.

- What these fail to understand is that the Bible is God's revelation. Beginning with Genesis, God revealed his eternal plans for us by gradually pulling back the curtain to reveal more and more information about himself for us—until Christ came and caused the New Testament to be written. Thus the Old Testament adds depth to our understanding of the New Testament, and the New Testament adds fullness to our understanding of the Old Testament (cf. the Emmaus disciples in Luke 24).

Next Time: Listening to Bible Skeptics: Our confidence in the integrity of the Bible text