

TOO MANY OPINIONS

By Jim Wilson

Over the years I have heard the comment that small group Bible studies were events where each member of the group “shared his ignorance” with the other members. This has gotten a defensive reaction from me because I did not think it was true. That is why I thought I was defensive. Probably the real reason I was defensive was because it was true, or true enough, to warrant a reaction.

The person who attacks small group studies as “sharing ignorance” is a person who wants a teacher. However we have a problem with this. Teachers also have been known to “share ignorance” or false teaching with students. Having a teacher is no guarantee of getting true Bible teaching.

In Acts 17:11, Luke speaks of the people at Berea as having “a more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true.” The people were commended because they did not receive the teaching from the teacher as absolute. They examined the Scriptures for their final authority.

When people in a small group share ignorance with each other, it is because they are sharing opinions, many of which previously came from a teacher. The small group is not to share opinions but to examine the Scriptures. When we learn how to examine the Scriptures, we will be able to judge the teaching of teachers and the opinions of people.

Perhaps your group has this problem. When there are many opinions, there is always a lively discussion. Sometimes there are several discussions going on at once, in which case it is probably too lively!

You may not think this is a problem, for participation is good and is sometimes difficult to get. But participation is only a means to the end. The ultimate object of group Bible study discussion is to:

1. Learn the content of the chapter.
2. Make personal application of the content.
3. Motivate people to read the Bible daily.

An opinion discussion does not necessarily accomplish any of these three objectives—in some cases it may make it all but impossible to realize these goals.

A personal opinion is based upon a personal experience, a previous prejudice, an arbitrary opinion or guess, or a previous doctrinal position. Strictly speaking these are not valid means of Bible study, nor are they legitimate in the discussion.

Opinions are generally encouraged by a leader who wants to get the silence broken. He starts out by saying, "What do you think verse one means?" It works! In a matter of seconds a discussion is going, with everybody giving his opinion on the meaning of verse one. However we do not want everyone's opinion on verse one. In fact we do not want anyone's opinion.

How are we going to have a discussion without individual opinions? First, we can limit the number of opinions by refusing to ask the participants what they think verse one means. Second, we can ask questions which do not allow for differences of opinion, such as, "What does verse one say?" Someone may answer by simply reading verse one over again. This is not bad; it can be the beginning of content study.

Questions can be more specific: "What is the subject of the first sentence?" "List the people mentioned in the chapter." "What does the chapter teach about obedience?" "Are there any imperatives in the chapter?" These and many other "what" questions will keep everyone's eyes on the text, searching the Scripture.

The discussion will not be so excited: egos will not be involved. People will find out what the chapter says.

To ask for the meaning is to ask for an interpretation. Unless the grammar is unclear or definitions are not understood, an interpretation is not valid. If grammar and definitions are understood, then we can read a sentence and understand what it means, for it means what it says.

If you speak French and I speak English, we will need an interpreter in order to converse. We would authorize the interpreter only to translate French grammar into English grammar and French words into English words having the same definition. He would not be allowed to throw in his own opinions or his own ideas of what you really wanted to say. That would not be honest.

If you and I both speak English, we do not need an interpreter. If a mutual friend decides we do need one and volunteers, he can only twist and inhibit the conversation. Each time I complete a sentence, he would say, "Joe, Jim means this..." With your reply, he would say, "Jim, Joe means this..." After three sentences, we would both ask him to leave the room.

We have a similar situation in Bible study. We have English Bible s and we understand English. If we do not understand what it says because the grammar is unclear, we can read form an English version which brings the grammar up to date. If the definition of a word is not clear, we can use another English translation or look up the word in a dictionary. Once we understand what it says, we need no further interpretation.

We can illustrate the point further. If I said to you, “Joe, go jump over the Missouri River,” you might have several reactions:

1. I understand what he said, and apparently, he isn’t kidding. If he were kidding, he would probably say, “Jump in,” not “Jump over.” (That is your prerogative; you neither have to believe nor obey, but you do understand.)
2. I understand what he said, but he is not over me in authority, so I do not have to jump over the Missouri. (This is also an honest, consistent answer.)
3. I understand what he said. Since I believe he is over me in authority, and since I do not know how to jump over the Missouri River, I will take jumping lessons and learn how!
4. I understand Jim to say, “Joe, go jump over the Missouri River.” But since I do not know how, he could not possibly mean, “Jump over the Missouri.” He must mean, “Jump off the front porch.” (This last is not honest. It is adding interpretation to a sentence which is already understood, and it definitely changes the meaning. It interprets according to the previous experience of the individual, conforming the originator’s sentence to the capability of the individual.)

It may be the originator will not be believed or obeyed. But nevertheless, the hearer should conform his understanding to the originator’s words. If I do not mean what I say, there is no possible way of knowing what I do mean. Your ability or inability to carry out my command has no bearing on what I mean.

How does this affect our study of the Scriptures? Suppose we come upon 1 Thessalonians 5:17, “Pray without ceasing” (KJV) and “Pray continually” (NIV). If we ask the group what they think it means, there will be much discussion, largely based upon the prayer habits or abilities of the people in the group. Any discussion which maintains that it could not possibly mean what it says because none of us knows how to pray continually (or because, knowing how, we do not do it) will be invalid. If that line of reasoning dominates the discussion, there will be very little to say when we come to personal application of the passage. We will have already conformed the Scriptures to our experience, so we do not have to conform our lives to the Scripture. There is no possibility of making any application.

Instead let us see what the passage says. We go back to verse fourteen for the subject, “And we urge you, brothers.” The subject of verse seventeen is “you, brothers.” The verb is “pray,” and the adverbs “without ceasing” or “continually” modify the verb, “pray.” If we understand the definitions and grammar, we now understand the sentence, for the function of sentences is to convey meaning. If God did not mean, “Pray continually,” then he would not have said it. If he did not mean what the passage says, then there is no possible way of knowing what he did mean.

Now, if we accept the passage's meaning as we stated, we have much to discuss concerning the application, including how we must increase our prayer life. We acknowledge our need of praying lessons.

Unless our experience already conforms to Scripture, we cannot interpret Scripture in the light of experience. As long as our experiences fall short, we will be constantly tempted to pull Scripture down to our size, which may not be very big.

Whenever someone volunteers, "This is what verse two means," you can suspect he is going to change it slightly to fit his own experience and/or theological position. This is not honest. He is attempting to hold to the inspiration of the Scriptures and also to a certain doctrinal position. Since he does not want them to be inconsistent with each other, he changes the Scripture rather than his doctrine. The same man would be very literal with a verse that seemingly agreed with his position. He would put his finger on the key words and say authoritatively, "That's what it says!"

We must bear in mind that we cannot expect to completely understand all the passages of Scripture right now. Understanding increases only as we act and grow according to what is already clear.

Suppose we were working on a jigsaw puzzle, and after getting the square framework, I get a fixation upon a place that needs a certain shape and an odd shade of green. After looking impatiently for a while, I start trying pieces that are almost that shape and almost that shade. Finally I persuade myself that I've found the right one. I must have an answer now, so I pound it in, a forced fit. Unless I undo my work I am going to run into trouble later on.

True, I will get a picture. It will not be the right one but it will be a picture. I might not recognize the oddness of the picture because I have gotten used to it, and because of my pride, I will not admit I am wrong. When I finally come across the real piece that belongs in the position, I am forced to say it belongs some place else.

Foolish, isn't it? Yet the same thing goes on in our Christian beliefs. Jigsaw puzzles have many complicated looking pieces. Nevertheless they all fit together simply and easily but not all at once. It is only when we want everything to fit together right now that we will get a wrong picture.

In our study of the Scriptures let us recognize that even complicated portions fit together easily and simply, though not all at once. We need not have the whole theological picture fitted perfectly together in order to study one chapter. We do not have to have all the answers right now, nor do we necessarily have to fit every single verse into the whole. Because we do not know how or where a verse fits does not mean it doesn't fit. It may be enough to recognize the apparent meaning and act upon it as God enables us. It is better

to have a few loose passages than it is to force any one passage into an inadequate theology now.

At this point you may be thinking, “If all we are going to do is find out what the chapter says, it will be too simple.” Well, in some ways, Bible study ought to be kept simple. But determining what a passage says will not be as easy as you might think. It will take real effort on the part of all members of the group to keep from interpreting the Scripture in the light of experience and to keep from forcing Scripture into their previous doctrinal framework.

It will also take effort on the part of the leader to formulate objective questions on the chapter. As a guide to forming questions, it is good to remember that questions beginning with who, what, or where, ask for factual answers. The answer will be somewhere in the text. Avoid questions beginning with why or how. These questions generally lead to opinion discussions not to end the study because each person wants to have the last word. The people involved are more interested in who is right, rather than what is right.

The last part of every discussion should be spent on personal application of the truths learned.

[Inter-Varsity Press publishes a book entitled Search the Scriptures. It is a book that has a series of objective textual questions about every chapter in the Bible. It gives no answers. The answers are in the text being studied.]