

**“With SO MANY  
interpretations and  
denominations,  
who can  
say who is right?”**



**Sunday Bible study  
10:05am • December 13, 2020**

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# I Need An Answer

**“With so many interpretations and denominations, who can say who is right?”**

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## **Getting Started**

*Take a few moments to answer the following questions if indeed they apply to you. If they do not apply perhaps you could “pretend” and answer.*

- 1. If you belong(ed) to a different denomination(s) than the one which this classroom represents list it/them below:**
- 2. For the denomination(s) you listed above, list a key specific difference from the one this classroom represents.**
- 3. What does the term “denomination” mean?**
- 4. Tonight’s topic is *“How can we we expect people to take Christianity seriously when we are divided into so many denominations?”***

Answers people propose? Answer God gives?

- 5. Once upon a time, an audience member made the mistake of starting a sentence with, “The Bible says ...” Oprah was unusually abrupt: “I don’t pretend to know what that book means.”**
  - Not that Oprah represents the voice of every living being, but her words do echo a commonly held “approach” to the Bible ... what might that be?
  - If we haven’t uncovered it yet ... Oprah’s response is most likely a smoke screen to cover up something ... what MIGHT that something be?

## “How do I know it (*the Scripture*) means what you say it means?”

??? -- Is that a legitimate question to ask?

??? – If it’s a legit question ... what’s the answer you operate with?

How would you “interpret” the following statements?

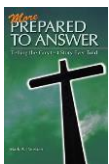
- a. “I’ll kill you if you don’t ...”
- b. “My car died on the side of 15”
- c. “It’s cold outside”
- d. “I hate the green slime that’s forming in the lake lately.”
- e. “My kids love participating in the Christmas program at church.”
- f. “I once was blind, but now I see.”

If any of these phrases was “used on you” and you weren’t entirely sure of the speaker’s intent what would you do?

- a) Complain that words are hopelessly unclear and not worth the trouble?
- b) Hunger to connect and therefore ask, seek, look to understand the words perhaps by asking the speaker to clarify.
- c) Abruptly proclaim “whatever it means to you ... I don’t pretend to know what the speaker means.”

**Now apply this to Biblical interpretation ...**

**AGREE or DISAGREE ...** “The matter of interpreting Scripture is sort of a mystical art that is inherently different from the interpretation of language in which you engage every day.”



### **Paustian builds a bridge with:**

The fact that God has condescended to communicate with us by the medium of human language does not somehow invite a “whatever it means to you” approach, but precisely the opposite. We are to keep asking about biblical revelation, What does God mean to say through the human authors who were “carried along by the Holy Spirit?”

p.113

## “Aha, so you take the Bible literally?”

**EVALUATE Paustian’s comments:**

And when you say “Ah, but do you really take the Bible literally?” as if we should all know better than that by now, I answer that I do. And this is what I take the term *literal* to mean: the literal interpretation takes the Bible as it plainly asks to be taken in any given context. By taking every

Scripture at face value, by studying sentences in their contexts, by exhausting the meanings of the words according to their usages in other places and the grammatical constructions in which they are found, we are always after the author's intended meaning. (Please distinguish this use of the term literal with being literalistic. That is to say, I certainly do allow for the countless times the biblical authors employ poetic imagery and colorful figures of speech.) What emerges from the literal interpretation is a startlingly lucid book about salvation in Jesus Christ.

## **Try your hand at it ... *What does God mean to say?***

*Is God speaking figurative or literal, symbolic or plainspoken fact?*

1. And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light.
2. Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and all that night the LORD drove the sea back with a strong east wind and turned it into dry land. The waters were divided,
3. For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.
4. Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved."
5. While they were eating, Jesus took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take and eat; this is my body."

## **One might say "what is there to figure out?"**



Mark Twain commented ...

*that what he found disturbing about the Bible was not the things he didn't understand but the things he did.*

**How is that a more honest comment than "that's just your interpretation"?**

## **Herma –whats? ... hermeneutics**

"the science and methodology of interpretation, especially of Scriptural texts"

**2 Timothy 2:15** Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and **who correctly handles the word of truth.**

To handle (interpret) God's word as it deserves to be handled ... one might just as well:

- 1) Let Scripture interpret Scripture
- 2) Be intent to believe the single, simple sense of each sentence he has graciously revealed in His Holy Word.
- 3) Wear a humble frame of mind, in a posture of readiness to learn and receive.

Isaiah 66:2

Has not my hand made all these things, and so they came into being?" declares the LORD. "This is the one I esteem: he who is humble and contrite in spirit, and trembles at my word.

**IF the Bible's message has pristine clarity the begging question becomes ...**

**“Then why so many denominations?”**

**Read through the list below and do two things ...**

- 1) Put a check mark in front of the denominations you've heard of.
- 2) Be prepared to share general observations ...

The Amish	Liberal Catholic Church International
Apostolic Christian Churches of America	Lutherans
Assemblies of God	Mennonite
Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church	Messianic Judaism & "Jews for Jesus"
Association of Vineyard Churches	Methodists
Baptist Bible Fellowship International	Missionary Church USA
Bible Fellowship Church	Moonies
The Brethren	Moravian Church of America
Calvary Chapel	Pentecostal Church of God
Catholic Church (Roman Catholic)	Pillar of Fire
Charismatic Episcopal Church	Presbyterians
Children of God	The Process
Christadelphians	Progressive National Baptist Church
Christian Science	Quakers (Society of Friends)
Church of Christ	Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day
The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons)	Saints: Now called the Community of Christ
Church Universal and Triumphant	Roman Catholic Church
Community of Christ: Formerly the Reorganized	Salvation Army USA
Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints:	Seventh-Day Adventist Church
Disciples of Christ	Seventh Day Baptist Churches
Eastern Orthodox churches	Society of Friends (Quakers)
Episcopal Church	Southern Baptists
Evangelical Congregational Church	Two by Twos ("The Jesus Way", "The Church with no Name", etc)
Evangelical Free Church of America	Unification Church
The Family (David Berg), (a.k.a. Family of Love)	Unitarian-Universalism (About 10% of UU members consider themselves to be Christian)
Fellowship of Christian Assemblies	United Pentecostal Church International
Fire Baptized Holiness Church of God and of the Americas	United Church of Christ
Free Reformed Churches of North America	Unity School of Christianity
Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints	Urantia Book
The "Garbage Eaters": common derogatory name for The Brethren	Victory Outreach International
Gnosticism	Wesleyan Church
Grace Brethren Church	World Council of Churches
Greek Orthodox	World Pantheism
Independent Baptist Network	Worldwide Church of God
Independent Christian Churches	The Way International
Jehovah's Witnesses	
Jewish Reconstructionist Federation	

# **3 things to notice and heed ...**

- 1) **Recognize that when there are stark differences in their teachings, these do not come from supposed ambiguity in the Bible but from each denomination's different views about how far and how seriously to take the teachings.**

Who could/should be blamed for that?

- 2) **Please don't say that the differences among denominations are arguments about nothing!**

Give an example of something you believe from Scripture is taught differently elsewhere and indeed the last thing you would say is ... "ah, we're just "arguing" about nothing."

- 3) **Do not naively dismiss the "immensely formidable unity" of Christendom across the world and across the ages.**

Put that point into simpler words --

# Practical Task

Read through the following correspondence and evaluate on the basis of

1. How well did the respondent handle the inquiry?
2. Where does this little example illustrate points made during tonight's topic?

***I recently read an article describing the branches of Christianity involved in television ministry as: Evangelicals, Fundamentalists, Pentecostals and Charismatics. Where does our synod fit in such a classification?***

Pigeonholing people, theology and churches has never been an exact science. The four categories you mention, together with such labels as "liberal," "mainline" and the catchall "Protestant" reflect contemporary blurring of historic differences among denominations. These labels describe loose groupings based on a combination of doctrinal convictions and emphases and historical, ecclesiastical and even political agendas. Ironically such groupings outline an innate concept of church fellowship without any clear biblical theology of fellowship. The Wisconsin Synod doesn't fit into any of the categories mentioned.

We can appreciate the Fundamentalists' insistence on a verbally inspired and inerrant Bible. But their literalism fosters millennial heresy and legalism. Their history explains their denial of the sacraments and a conditioning of God's grace. And their politics offend our sensitivity to Scripture's differentiation of church and state roles. The very label refers to the somewhat arbitrary distinction between "fundamental" doctrines and those in which disagreement is no barrier to fellowship.

We can appreciate the Evangelicals' emphasis on salvation alone in Jesus Christ, their aggressive sense of mission and spirit of joy and love in discipleship. We were an Evangelical Lutheran Church before the label became popular. But a false theology of conversion, reflecting an inadequate understanding of justification, coupled with an indistinct position on Scripture's inspiration and a Protestant indifference to the sacraments prevent us from identifying with the so-called "Evangelicals."

We may thank God that the "Charismatic Movement" has restored a sense of sin and grace to some within liberal Protestant denominations and has emphasized Bible study for some Roman Catholics. But excessive subjectivism in their emphasis on supernatural "gifts" and their acceptance of widely divergent beliefs keep us from any affinity for "Charismatics."

Because Pentecostals combine the errors of the Fundamentalists with the excesses of the Charismatics, there is little common ground for Evangelical Lutherans and this rapidly growing group of churches.

## Rev. Paustian's Devotional Thoughts ...

A majestic peak just across the northern border of Israel, Mount Hermon affords a panoramic view of the Promised Land. Jesus and his closest --- Peter, James and John --- climbed to this place he had chosen.

There was something he wanted to show them.

Like the sun finding a sudden opening in a cover of clouds, the glory burst out from his human face. His clothes became "dazzling white." The signal of the almighty God's presence in the wandering days of the Hebrews, the Shekinah cloud, embraced them all. For the second time, the Father abandoned his restraint.

"This is My Son, whom I love. Listen to him."

Jesus was showing the friends he had made who he is, giving them something to remember while they watched him die. It was a combination of events -- really seeing Christ and seeing him really crucified -- that Peter would never quite get over.

But there was one interesting moment after the glory was hidden back inside the flesh. Jesus' face looked like any face again and his clothes like any clothes. As they were walking down the mountain, Jesus "gave them orders not to tell anyone" about what they had witnessed until he had "risen from the dead."

It is here that we are treated to the sight of Peter, James and John discussing what "rising from the dead" could possibly mean. They scratched their heads and searched out an interpretation of the deep, dark, mysterious words.

"I will be crucified" --- I wonder what he means by that.

"I will be put to death and be buried" --- What do you suppose he's driving at?

"On the third day, I will rise to life" --- Sorry, Jesus, but you're losing me.

So it went. The light shined into the darkness so that the night was like the day, but the darkness just could not understand.

*Let's each and all read Mark 9:2-10 to ourselves.  
(Rev. Mark Paustian, Prepared to Answer, pp.111,112)*