

One Bible – Why So Many Different Beliefs?

There are several so-called ‘holy’ books in the world. Sceptics ask what is so special about the Bible. They also ask, *“If the Bible really is true why are there so many different interpretations of it?”* This is a very pertinent question: in fact it is a great shame that there is so much disagreement over God’s Word. This article suggests reasons for this confusion, and warns about the implications.

The Authority of the Bible

Some people believe that our knowledge has evolved with time, so writers of the Bible were limited by their primitive beliefs. They argue that with our superior knowledge in the 21 century we know better than the Bible. The outcome is that there is wide disagreement about what is ‘truth’. This is the sort of chaos that was prevalent in the times of the judges of Israel (Judges 17:6, 21:25). The Bible claims to be the Word of Almighty God, who is not restricted by human knowledge, so people who think like that do not believe the Bible.

Another issue is that many people do not regard the Bible as the ultimate authority for spiritual and moral matters. They see ‘good’ in other religious systems, and so mix Bible teaching with non-biblical teaching: they combine worshipping Almighty God with worshipping false gods. This is exactly what the Jews did, which resulted in their being taken in captivity away from their land (e.g. Ezekiel chapter 6). The Bible states categorically that there is only one God, that



religions do NOT all lead to the same place or to the same god, and it warns against all compromise. If the Bible is God’s Word then its message cannot be compromised. Any belief, however appealing, which contradicts the Bible must then be wrong.

Misuse of the Bible

Some people simply cannot believe certain aspects of the Bible. For example, the Old Testament teaches about the resurrection from the dead. Nonetheless, in the time of Jesus the Sadducees denied this doctrine. Jesus criticised them for their lack of belief (Matthew 23:23–33).

On the other hand, another religious group in the days of Jesus had added to the Law given by God. God had strictly forbidden this (Deuteronomy 12:32). The Pharisees in great zeal had embellished the Old Testament by trying to explain laws and adding to them in ways not endorsed by God Himself (Mark 7:1–13).

Sadly, some people base their beliefs on only part of the Bible, typically the New Testament and especially the Gospel of John. This causes mis-

understandings because the New Testament writers were nearly all Jews, and the words and ideas they wrote need to be interpreted in the context of the Old Testament. Biblical expressions have biblical meanings, not 21st Century Western ideas. So we cannot correctly interpret the Bible by only studying parts of it.

Similarly, others take verses out of context and force a meaning on words that was never intended. We can be guilty of this in everyday life: misrepresenting what someone has said by failing to quote a preceding question or the full response given by the person. Biblical words had an original meaning and have lessons for us, but we need to examine the context in which they were written.

Finally, even people who believe in the unequivocal authority of the Bible genuinely disagree about certain aspects of interpretation.

Errors can be serious

Some beliefs are correct. Any others that contradict these must then be incorrect. For example, it cannot be true that the hope of eternal life is both on earth and in heaven. If belief must precede baptism and if both are necessary then infant christening cannot be valid. Dead people cannot be unconscious for ever and also have immortal souls.

Certain terms are non-biblical – they cannot be found in the Bible at all. Examples are:

- ❖ that God is a Trinity,
- ❖ that we have an immortal soul,
- ❖ that purgatory exists,
- ❖ the practice of christening.

Non-biblical terms lead to non-biblical teachings which in turn can lead to non-biblical behaviour.

The Apostles' Creed in the second century A.D. uses biblical language, but later creeds, like the Nicene and the Athenasian Creed add non-biblical language and are so dogmatic that they foolishly insist that belief in them is essential. We cannot be certain about matters that are not discussed in the Bible. Conversely, if something is taught in the Bible then we have no right to alter it. Moreover, if God has revealed it to us then we need to take notice of it.

Tragically some religious groups discourage their members from asking questions or even reading the Bible. Instead they encourage people to believe what the church leaders say, without questioning it. The apostles warned against believing doctrines other than those which they, by the Holy Spirit, taught (Galatians 1:8, I John 4:1). The believers in the northern Greek town of Berea (now known as Veria) were commended for checking the apostle's teachings against the Old Testament Scriptures (Acts 17:11).

The present confusion of religious beliefs is a terrible state of affairs which, understandably, puts off many people. But the problem lies entirely with us and not with the Bible. We must read the whole Bible and try to understand its message, because it really does matter what we believe. We should not be influenced by tradition, teachers, words of hymns or any human arguments, but read the Bible as a whole to establish truth.

Anna Hart