

Bereans, Backgrounds, and the Body of Christ

By Jane Titrud

When serious Christians share a mutual love for God's Word, it can be a wonderful thing. It can open up all sorts of possibilities for positive fellowship in the LORD. However, different backgrounds and beliefs, different stages of spiritual growth, and different levels of skill in handling the Word of God can lead to division in the Body of Christ when questions arise over proper doctrine.

In traditional denominations, doctrine tends to be set by the church hierarchy. That is even though different denominations tend to disagree over various "issues." Teachers are told what to teach. The "faithful" are taught what to believe. The result is little conflict. This is an effective tool for promoting unity and uniformity within a large body of churches. However, people oftentimes fail to see the need to know the Bible for themselves under such circumstances. Church leaders can also end up usurping the role of Jesus Christ by acting as spiritual heads of the Body.

The goal of a Berean church, on the other hand, is to let Christ be the sole head of the body. This involves letting God's Word determine doctrine. In order to accomplish this, adherents try to uphold the example of the Bereans, as found in Acts 17:11. These were people whom the Bible describes as being "*noble-minded*" because they neither rejected nor blindly followed the Gospel Paul presented to them. Instead, their reaction to his preaching was to "*examine the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so.*" If everyone in the Church were to follow their example, then perhaps all could be of the same mind with one another and with Christ as well. At least, that is the hope. God is not divided.

The trouble is that it is not at all uncommon for people to bring other ideas to the Bible. Indeed, the more a person's beliefs are subject to outside influences, the more the Bible tends to be interpreted accordingly. It is just part of the way we are as human beings.

What this means in practice is that even in a Berean setting, teachings are not always presented or evaluated purely in light of God's Word. Instead, they are often rendered or received according to a person's prior beliefs and *interpretations* of Scripture that coordinate with those beliefs. This, in turn, can lead to division in the Body of Christ when people hold to different points of view.

Disagreement is never very pleasant in a church setting. Christians are supposed to love, respect, and submit to one another. Besides, the very same Scriptures are oftentimes used to support opposing viewpoints, so one can come away feeling that there is no solution to such dilemmas. Everything seems to come down to differences over various definitions of terms within opposing systems of thought. Hence, people oftentimes "agree to disagree." This is held to be the respectable thing to do. Otherwise, people just end up promoting endless strife and fleshly division — right?

The truth is that even if people are silent about their differences, the Body of Christ can still be divided. So, is there is no way to move beyond this point without being disrespectful? Is there no hope for achieving true unity in Christ? Or, is the ultimate truth that we can never really be sure of the truth, even when it comes to important issues that matter?

Certainly, the Bible teaches that "*we know in part, and we prophesy in part; but when the perfect comes, the partial will be done away...For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face; now I know in part, but then I shall know fully just as I also have been fully known*" (1 Corinthians 13:9, 10, 12 NASB). In other words, we do not know everything yet, nor will we until we come into the presence of the LORD. Nevertheless, we must also bear in mind the sufficiency of Scripture. The Bible says: "*All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.*" (2 Timothy 3:16, 17). This would certainly cover the basic essentials of the faith. These include the person and work of Jesus Christ and the Gospel of salvation by grace through faith. The Bible is sufficient to both teach sound doctrine and counter every heresy when it comes to these fundamentals. Indeed, the only way to define heresy is according to what God's Word says about such things.

But there are other important teachings in the Bible that Christians need to understand as well. Practical sanctification is a good case in point. False teaching in this area can lead to all sorts of personal difficulties. Failing to understand what God has provided by way of overcoming the power of sin, for example, can leave a Christian feeling defeated and condemned by the law, trapped in fleshly works without victory or perhaps even unsaved. Such Christians can then likewise become vulnerable to the wisdom of the world in their efforts to achieve victory. Either that or they can acquire a fleshly attitude of complacency toward sin. Hence, one can see the importance of understanding that the Scriptures do indeed provide adequate teaching on this subject. That is even though understanding in this area is commonly characterized by misinformation and dispute.

In cases such as this, definitions may indeed matter. Sometimes they need to be judged according to God's Word the same as the resulting doctrine. Extra-biblical definitions are often used as tools to draw people away from reliance upon God's truth. But as far as whether there is any real potential for understanding God's truth, His Word is clear. Paul told his younger charge, Timothy: "*Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, handling accurately the word of truth*" (2 Timothy 2:15). There must therefore be some way of accurately handling God's Word. It may take some work by way of diligent study, but it is possible.

One may point out that there is such a thing as prideful arrogance. Indeed, there is. A verse that immediately comes to mind is 1 Corinthians 8:1-3: "*We know that we all have knowledge. Knowledge makes arrogant, but love edifies. If anyone supposes that he knows anything, he has not yet known as he ought to know; but if anyone loves God, he is known by Him.*" Yet, Paul was coming against a particular application of knowledge here, apart from love, which was causing people to act against their own consciences. The context has to do with eating things sacrificed to idols: "*Now concerning things sacrificed to idols...*" (v. 1). Love was certainly more important than a prideful display of knowledge in this case. But he was *not* teaching that the need to exhibit love generally precludes the need to know and teach truth. On the contrary, Paul prays for the Philippians: "*That your love may abound still more and more in real knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve the things that are excellent, in order to be sincere and blameless until the day of Christ*" (Philippians 1: 9, 10).

One may similarly note that we all have an anointing from God that allows us to understand the truth for ourselves (1 John 2: 27). We do not have to submit to any sort of "super-spiritual elite," for "*no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one's interpretation*" (2 Peter 1:20). This is true. But if we take that attitude to the extreme, we can become a law unto ourselves. Anyone can be wrong. Hence, there is no place for complacency or presumption in regard to our own abilities. We *all* need to continually pray, study God's Word, and humbly seek His guidance when it comes to properly understanding and applying His truth. Otherwise, we can become a contributor to division ourselves.

There are rules pertaining to the proper interpretation of Scripture as well as rules of sound reasoning, and it is not prideful to insist upon following them. If we do not, we cannot be sure of knowing anything. Logic based upon speculative extensions of reason is to be avoided. Paul told Timothy to "*refuse foolish and ignorant speculations, knowing that they produce quarrels*" (v. 23). Even so, Timothy was subsequently exhorted to "*preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires; and will turn away their ears from the truth, and will turn aside to myths.*" Paul would never have said such a thing if it was impossible to rightly understand the Scriptures. Timothy had to make sure that he was accurately applying such truth.

Proper doctrine is not what divides. *False* teaching is what does that. Hence, an important goal of ministry is to help the Body understand proper doctrine in order to attain to the full unity of the faith (see Ephesians 4:11-16).

We must not be ignorant of Satan's devices. He not only wants to bring division in the Body of Christ, but He also wants to keep people from knowing and teaching the truth. Our actions, therefore,

must reflect the will of God instead of the enemy. This means that in addition to “*speaking the truth in love*” (Ephesians 4:15), we must also “*be subject to one another in the fear of Christ*” (Ephesians 5:21). Such is the proper functioning of the Body of Christ. And to Him be the glory!