

For a while, I was very resistant and antagonistic to church. Growing up I had been fed the party line about God, the church, and the Bible...but there came a time when I started asking some tougher and deeper questions. When they wouldn't or couldn't answer them it pushed me away. Some people are really good about "taking things on faith" and just "letting God be God." I haven't been given that ability.

One of the biggest problem became the Bible. Pastors and Sunday school teachers would talk about how the Bible had no errors and no contradictions...the problem was I could read. And the more I read and studied the more these contradictions and inconsistencies began to show up.

They often did what so many of are tempted to do when people start asking these kinds of questions, we get defensive and make assumptions. Not everyone who asks these kinds of questions are seeking to destroy the Bible or find support for their atheism. Many are simply asking questions. Some, who believe they are thinking for themselves, have simply never put any real study in.

The last few weeks we have been working through some questions about our relationship with God, and now we are turning our attention to a few questions that involve the Bible and interpretation issues.

One of the most asked questions concerns the contradictions in the Bible. Many who espouse atheism and agnosticism will immediately start to use this to "prove" the Bible is unreliable and problematic. Many in the church will automatically deny that contradictions even exist, and in doing so they create the backlash and "ignorant" response that many are looking for.

This morning, we are going to talk about how to reconcile some of these contradictions, or, to more accurately describe them, discrepancies. For some of you, this will help answer some questions about the text that you have had, but didn't feel the freedom to ask. For others, this will give you some foundation for speaking with others who might ask you about the contradictions in the Bible. Some of you, this won't matter at all. You take it on faith, and the Bible isn't to be questioned, simply believed.

So we are going to build a foundation of how to understand the Bible, and then look at couple of the more common contradiction and inconsistencies found in Scripture.

The Bible

The Bible contains 66 books written by approximately 40 different people over 1600 years...with stories ranging from 6-10,000 years in age. It is an amazing collection of poetry, parables, stories, myths, letters, sermons, historical documentation, religious manuals, legal documents, and much more.

The Bible is a truly amazing book! It is amazingly complex and simple. You can educate yourself with languages, theology, history, and more...and still not exhaust the power of

Scripture. You can be completely uneducated, and still find more than you can ever use. But more amazing is that in and through it, God, the God of the Universe, speaks to you and I, and He has been speaking, teaching, inspiring, and transforming people through its pages for millennia.

As with anything that has been so meaningful in our lives, it is often difficult to step back and treat the Bible objectively. To study it, not for God's voice, but to study it...to ask it some difficult questions...to challenge it...and, hopefully, to come out stronger on the other side.

When I first voiced a desire to go to college to study the Bible, one person came to me and said, "Don't lose your faith!" I thought it a ridiculous statement at the time, and while I understand the sentiment better now, I still don't think the two go hand in hand. The Bible can and has stood up to some of the deepest questioning...I had to give up some romanticized views about the Bible. I had to clear out some bad understanding of the Bible...But in approaching the Bible as a scientist would study something in nature or a historian would study a manuscript...I have been deepened in my faith.

The key verse everyone falls back on is 2 Timothy 3:16-17

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

Many in the Church having misunderstood this verse have attempted to make the Bible something it wasn't. They have made statements like, "The Bible is perfect and has no mistakes." And because the Bible does contain mistakes...they have set up a problem. It really comes because they have misunderstood this verse.

The Bible is God-breathed.

In Genesis 2 we see God breath life into the human. In John 20:22, Jesus breathes on His disciples...these two verses signify the giving of life to something...the giving of the Holy Spirit to it.

Some have believed the writers of the Bible were merely dictation machines for God to write down exactly what He wanted, but after years of study and reading, we can see that God inspired the writers, breathed life into their work, but didn't replace their style, their stories, their approach, their theological leanings, their culture...God speaks in and through these writers to reveal himself to people.

Another thing to notice in this verse is the purpose of the Bible:

The Bible is meant to lead us to righteousness.

We often get ourselves in trouble when we try to make the Bible do something it is not meant to do. See the Bible contains historical data, but it is not a history book. It contains some scientific observation of some people in certain cultures at particular

times, but it is not a book of science. It has stuff on parenting and relationships, but it doesn't contain all the answers we need to deal with all aspects of parenting, marriage, and friendship.

The Bible is meant to teach, rebuke, correct, and train us to live righteous lives so we can be thoroughly equipped to do the good works God has called us to do.

When we attempt to use it for any other purpose we have to twist the Bible into doing something it was never intended to do.

The Bible is subject to the real Word of God.

Because the Bible is a collection of stories and documents written down by men there are times when interpretation issues get in the way. There are times when God seems inconsistent with himself.

A few years ago, I was pondering this issue, and I realized that while we call the Bible the Word of God...the Bible refers to itself as Scripture or talks about the words of God. And because the Bible is inspired but influenced by human writers, I realized the Bible can never fully reveal God to us.

Words often fail us. The Bible while it is our ultimate guide to faith, cannot fully contain all that God is...and the writers of Scripture knew this as well. That is why when Jesus appeared on the scene John call HIM the Word of God.

John 1:1; 14

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.”

The author of Hebrews says it this way.

Hebrews 1:1-3

“In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word.”

If you and I ever have difficulty understanding a passage of Scripture...we should look to Jesus. Jesus is the lens through which Christians should interpret and understand all the rest of Scripture.

Even then, the irony is that we come to know the Word of God, Jesus, through the written word of the Bible.

With this foundation in mind, I want to look at a few

Common forms of contradictions and inconsistencies we see in the Bible.

Storytelling

The Bible was originally an oral document. Parents and leaders and priests shared stories passed down through the generations as they sat around the dinner table, by the fire in the evenings, in the midst of worship.

It wasn't until many years later these stories were written down. With this background in mind, it is absolutely amazing that there are not more contradictions and inconsistencies. I don't know if you have ever played that kids game Telephone. One person whispers something in the first person's ear, and by the time it makes its way down the line it is something completely different.

One of the more popular examples is the story of Noah. When reading the story of Noah there seems to be two stories interwoven together. Animals are to be put on the ark by 2, but in another section they are to take 7.

But one of the most common complaints is that the story of Noah is actually based on the Epic of Gilgamesh another story from the Babylonian culture.

Neither of these have to be a problem. In a story telling culture a common event would elicit people telling the story over and over again. And if you add in that the the Babylonians would tell the story and interpret it as connected to their god and the Israelites would tell it and interpret it in terms of Yahweh...that shouldn't give anyone pause in regards to the story.

Another source of what modern people see as contradictions and inconsistencies...are

Cultural

If you and I travel just a couple hundred miles in any direction, we will find people who have very similar ways of life to our own...but also some cultural things that we may never fully understand. In Europe that same distance would put you not only in a completely different culture, but also a different language. Stories and history and heroes would all be different.

If we are not careful, we forget the Bible was written almost 2,000 years ago in languages that are no longer spoken. Modern Greek and Hebrew are nothing like the languages of the Bible. It was written in a culture that had different values and different definitions of words.

Just think of how that plays out in our culture...

If I'm sitting in my doctors office and he says, "You're sick!" That means I'm about to get a shot, or medication or maybe worse.

If I'm at the BMX park or the Skate park and someone says, "You're sick!" That's a good thing. I just pulled some sweet trick that made people pay attention.

If I'm you are in a 3rd grade classroom and some girls tell a boy, "You're sick!" That means he probably just wiped a booger on someone.

You and I will find things in the Bible that take time to interpret and work through because we are dealing with a culture that is vastly different from ours.

They don't have our desire for preciseness. Sometimes numbers are not meant to be literal, but symbolic. They don't tells stories chronologically like we do; especially when writing a Gospel. They have one word that has several different meaning depending on tense and usage. Their verb usage is outrageous. And they don't have to arrange a sentence by subject and then verb...they arrange it by what is important....So when we translate and put it into English...there are going to be some things we have to wrestle with.

Another thing is

Style

One of the most common contradictions in Scripture is a flat out contradiction, but it is done with purpose.

This is very common in the book of Proverbs, but found throughout Scripture...even in Jesus teaching. Where one statement is directly contradicted by the following proverb.

Proverbs 26:4-5

Do not answer a fool according to his folly,
or you yourself will be just like him.

Answer a fool according to his folly,
or he will be wise in his own eyes.

The first one says, "Don't answer the fool or you will be just like him." The very next verse says, "Answer the fool or he will think he is wise because you didn't respond"

So which is it? Answer or don't? The answer is YES! Sometimes you have to keep your mouth shut and just let the idiots rage. At other times you need to step up and shut their argument down! So when do we do which of these? That is why this is placed in the Wisdom writings of Scripture...because it takes a lot of time, prayer, thinking, and growth to know when you do which one...it takes wisdom.

You will find these throughout Scripture. Jesus uses them.

Finally, contradictions and inconsistencies happen because of

EyeWitness Account

The most common place this happens is in the Gospel stories and in regards to the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus.

Just to give you a few:

Did Judas hang himself or fall from a cliff and explode? Depends on whether you read Matthew or Acts.

The stories of the Crucifixion and Resurrection have some discrepancies: Was it morning sunny or still dark? Were there guards at the tomb or none at all? Did Peter deny Jesus before the rooster crowed once or three times?

But none of this should surprise us...two people, standing right next to each other, witnessing the same event would have variations in the details and would remember them differently...the key thing to remember is that how a witness remembers the details doesn't mean the event did not take place.

Conclusion

There is far more to this topic than we are even able to cover. I took whole classes on interpretation and culture. We also have to remember that discrepancy is very different from contradiction.

Here is why this is a good thing to study: Some of you are going to have questions when you read this, and you need to know you are not the first person to find these. You also need to know there are reasonable explanations without being dishonest with the Bible. It is more than just some Christians trying to cover up a few problems so they can still believe. I found that the deeper I studied, I had to change my underlying foundations a bit, but the Bible stands up to educated scrutiny when understood rightly.

Some of you need this because you have others who are asking or have asked you questions. Simply telling them, "Well, I just believe!" is not good enough, and doesn't answer the questions they may have in a way that leads them closer to Jesus. This is where Proverbs and wisdom will help. Should we answer them? Sometimes no, they are being antagonistic and just trying to poke the bear. But sometimes, people who are seeking have genuine questions because they have heard and read things and simply want some possibilities.

Many want the Bible to be an all or nothing document. Either it is perfect or it is useless. That just isn't true. Inspired doesn't mean perfect. Imperfections and inconsistencies, even if unexplainable, do not negate the power of God working in and through the Bible to transform lives.

What it all boils down to...God gave the writers freedom to write within their style and culture and creativity...and breath His life into their work. He still does that today. He

gives you and I room to write and speak on his behalf. And then works through our words to do some some great things in the lives of others.

God wants to do some great things in your and my life through Scripture.