

Focus on the Absolutes of Scripture

In any place of worship, any group that meets, and certainly in the church of any given city, there are a wide variety of interpretations and deductions about what the Scriptures teach. How then are we to live the unity for which Christ prayed in John 17? John 17:20-23 (NIV) *20 "My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, 21 that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. 22 I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: 23 I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.*

Jesus equated the conversion of the world (believing Jesus was sent by God and loves them) with our unity and being in Christ and Christ in us. If we are not seeing conversions, perhaps the world is not seeing us in unity in Christ. Does that line up with this passage? Then we need to seriously consider it! The Great Commission is dependent on that oneness with one another and Christ.

If we are all so different in our interpretations, where is our unity? It is in the core of our beliefs. Being a Christian means you have accepted Jesus of Nazareth as your Lord and Savior. (1Jn 3:8, Eph 2:18) It means you believe that God sent Him to redeem you from your sins. Here is our central point of unity – the person and saving work of Christ Jesus.

We also hold in common that the Bible is our source of truth. (2Tim 3:16) It is the Word that reveals Christ. The Apostles gave witness to the resurrection, and the teaching of the early church was their witness of the life of Christ. If we believe in Jesus, then we believe in the words of those who lived with Him and relayed His life and teachings to us. That includes the Old Testament's divine inspiration since Jesus quoted from it as a source of truth.

These two things are common with every Christian church or they are not Christian. We might add that we also have in common the representation of Christ's death and atonement in communion. This then is the core of our beliefs. Since Jesus is the word made flesh, it is really all about Jesus! We gather around Jesus. If I want to find common ground with any other believer, I can talk on what Christ has done for me. As long as I focus there, we will share in unity. I can even read a Scripture passage and know they are valuing it as I do. We may not agree exactly on what that passage means, but we both value and rejoice over the Word of God. These are the absolutes. They are good for all cultures and all time. They are not subject to personal convictions, cultural trends or feelings. It doesn't matter how I feel, Jesus is still Lord! It doesn't matter what my culture teaches, the Bible is the revelation of God to man. It doesn't matter which denomination I am a part of, these truths remain the unchanged.

As we move away from the core values we find less and less in common because we are individuals from differing backgrounds. We are at different places in our walk with the Lord. Perhaps we come from different denominational teachings. Many of

our interpretations will be the same, but many will differ. That is because we go from what is written to what is understood through the filter of our training and experiences that are quite different from one another.

Moving out even more, our deductions from the interpretations will differ in an even greater way. That is because deductions involve even more of our mental and cultural filters. Give an example you are familiar with. i.e: Holy Spirit's ministry, end time theology, ways in which God speaks to us, etc.

Then we get out to where everyone differs and no two people are alike, that is subjective opinions, personal preferences, feelings and cultural norms. We must be very careful in being insistent upon our particular interpretations. A group of pastors had good fellowship with one another until one pastor insisted the ones that did not believe in eternal security were not saved. One pastor preached that those who did not believe in pre-tribulation rapture did not believe the Bible. Some insist that the KJV is the only valid translation. How do those statements go beyond the core beliefs to interpretation, deductions, and even personal preference? How do those statements fit with Jesus prayer in John 17? What favorite doctrines do I tend to harp on that divide and display my elitism instead of our unity?

Too often we confuse what the Bible actually says with what we think it means because our cultural and our subjective opinions influence our thinking processes. Consider this: Has your understanding of Scripture changed over the years? Do you no longer believe some things you once believe and believe things you once argued against? If you look over history, the church's opinion on interpretation has changed in many areas over the centuries, but the core is the same.

We are destroying our potential for impacting the world by highlighting our differences on nonessential issues. Celebrate your unique convictions, styles and opinions within the walls of your church. Outside the walls of your church focus on the core, that the world may see Jesus. Imagine if the testimony the world hears from every Christian regardless of denomination or group is that Jesus is the only solution to the problems they face, and that they can trust the Bible. They would hear it again and again and again. Instead they hear, "You have to use the name Jehovah, or you must believe you can't lose your salvation, or even, this translation is the only right one". Personally, I hear more Christians witnessing creationism than Jesus. Believing in creationism won't save the lost. It won't make a major difference in their lives. I believe it is true, but I need to share Jesus and all He means to me. They need a Savior, not my particular shade of beliefs. Bring them to Jesus and they will find their own beliefs based on the Bible. Christianity is about Christ!

Appreciate one another's respected interpretations of Scripture. Heresy is, of course, an all-together different matter and will ultimately violate our core beliefs. Support in speech and action other churches with differing interpretations. This will encourage the world to look seriously at Christ and help us work together for the Kingdom of God. Imagine the testimony to be able to say, "We don't agree on some side issues but we share our main beliefs."