

Chapter 7 – Who Says So?

"Cease, my son, to hear the instruction *that causeth* to err from the words of knowledge" (Prv 19:27).

"Unjust in the Least"

The five case studies have shown the benefits of using a method of assessing truth on biblical issues that is in accord with the counsel of God's word. The real test, however, comes when biblical correction confronts us on a subject or a practice which is near and dear to us, for then the temptation is to take offense at the truth.

When people are confronted with evidence that calls into question something they thought was true, they can avoid dealing with those facts by giving themselves an excuse to ignore them. Sometimes people do this by declaring a subject to be a minor issue or a secondary matter, while saying they prefer to focus on major issues or more important matters. But is it really okay to ignore God's word on issues *we deem* to be minor?

In Luke 16:1-13 when he spoke "unto his disciples," Jesus tied the concept of faithfulness to the little things with these words, "he that is faithful in that which is least is faithful also in much" (v 10). In calling his disciple's attention to things men consider "the least," Jesus did not stop there. Jesus gave no wiggle room for those who are tempted to downplay things *they* deem to be the little things or minor issues –for he also said, "he that is unjust in the least is also unjust in much," and that does not suggest it is okay for men to disregard God's word on issues *they* consider to be minor or irrelevant.

Integrity is rooted in consistency. A consistent respect for the truth begins with a willingness to submit to the authority of scripture on every issue. This cannot change simply because we think something is a minor issue. Some will act as if they can be faithful in '*the majors*' while they ignore what scripture says on issues which they deem to be '*the minors*.' However, the words of Jesus indicate being unfaithful to the truth in little matters means it is also occurring on larger issues.

When we are challenged by something in scripture, do we honor God if we brush aside the matter and say it is not a 'major' issue? Instead of looking for an excuse to ignore details in scripture when they are contrary to something we believe, we need to strive to be consistent in our regard for the authority of God's word.

The Authority of Scripture

James 2:10-11 emphasizes the unity and the authority of God's word:

"For whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one *point*, he is guilty of all. For he [God] that said, Do not commit adultery, said also, Do not kill. Now if thou commit no adultery, yet if thou kill, thou art become a transgressor of the law."

Why is a person "guilty of all" if they "offend in one *point*" only? Sadly, those who misunderstand this idea will often use the term '*sin is sin*' (which falsely implies all sins are equally bad), because they assume this verse justifies simplistically lumping together all offenses against God or others. But it does not. Rather, the passage actually highlights this principle: God's word comes from God.

James 2:11 has this line of reasoning: "he that said" 'x' "said also" 'y'. "He" must refer to God because it was "God" (Ex 20:1) who said "thou shalt not kill" (Ex 20:13) and "thou shalt not commit adultery" (Ex 20:14). Thus, the 'he who said this also said that' line of reasoning tells us a man who ignores what God said in one area of the law is "guilty of all" because he has shown disrespect for the authority behind the law. God stands behind every word of God, so an offense on any point is an act against the authority of God. This is the focus of the passage.

Although the verses in James explicitly mention the "law", the same logic would apply to anything else God has said. What God said in "the whole law" has the same authority as any other words of God because they come from the same source. Since God is the source of God's word, we must be consistent in our regard for scripture if we truly want to honor God.

"God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets" (Heb 1:1) and "all scripture *is* given by inspiration of God" (2 Tm 3:16) are just two of the verses that tell us God is the source of scripture. Those verses also let us know the authority of God's word is not diminished when it is faithfully communicated through the mouth or pen of a man (because the source of the words is not the messenger, it is God).

The Integrity of Our Method

Jesus told the Jews of his day, "For had ye believed Moses, ye would have believed me: for he wrote of me" (Fourth gospel 5:46). What does this tell us about the Jews? It proves they were deceived. How so? Did the Jews of that day *think* they believed Moses? Surely, they did. But *thinking* they believed Moses did not make it so. People can think they know the truth when they do not. To be deceived is to believe a thing is true when it is not. The words of Jesus show the problem with the Jews was **they did not believe Moses**. Undoubtedly, they were convinced they *did* believe Moses. Yet, scripture proved they had deceived themselves (because their belief was not consistent with the word of God).

In the passage in question, Jesus went on to say they could not believe his words because they did not believe the words of scripture: "But if ye believe not his writings, how shall ye believe my words?" (Fourth gospel 5:47) Here we see showing respect for all of God's word is critical. When people ignore God's word in one area, the problem is not limited to one issue.

"A little leaven leaveneth the whole lump" (1 Cor 5:6, Gal 5:9). We find this principle stated twice in scripture, but the lesson it teaches is seen in many other passages, including James 2:10-11. The moment someone disregards what scripture says on *one* topic, then they have given themselves permission to do so on any topic. Thereafter, they are not under the authority of God's word; they have put themselves over it (because any authority scripture has comes from them, since they decide when it matters and when it can be ignored).

Leaven has a permeating effect on dough. This pictures what occurs whenever a person takes a pick and choose approach to scripture on any issue. If we are not consistent in our respect for God's word, then our method of assessing truth will produce inconsistent results.

An Ongoing Effect

Jesus' statement, "had ye believed Moses, ye would have believed me: for he wrote of me" (Fourth gospel 5:46) highlights a truth we need to ponder. The Jews' failure to believe Jesus was rooted in their failure to believe Moses and this indicates disregarding scripture in one area has an ongoing detrimental effect.

When we fail to respect God's word in one area, we show disrespect for God, who is the authority behind it all. Believing or not believing the words of Moses has an effect which is not limited to only that part of scripture, as Jesus noted when he went on to say, "But if ye believe not his writings, how shall ye believe my words?" (Fourth gospel 5:47). This principle also applies to other prophets besides Moses, as we see in this verse: "If they hear not Moses **and the prophets**, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead." (Lk 16:31).

In addition, in this statement Jesus let us know the word of God is the standard by which people will be judged:

"He that rejecteth me, and receiveth not my words, hath one that judgeth him: the word that I have spoken, the same shall judge him in the last day. For I have not spoken of myself; but the Father which sent me, he gave me a commandment, what I should say, and what I should speak." (Fourth gospel 12:48-49).

What did the words of Moses and the prophets have in common with the words of Jesus? The authority of God was the unifying factor.

Those who do not believe the word of God that came via Moses or the prophets, will not believe Jesus' words, for the source of the words (God) is the same in both cases. This is why those who love the truth must exercise a **consistent** respect for the authority of scripture.

The following words were written to Timothy, but they also offer good counsel to every believer: "Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth" (2 Tm 2:15). [The word "study" translates a Greek word that is more often translated as "be diligent," "give diligence," and "do thy diligence" (cf. 2 Tm 4:9 & 21, Titus 3:12, 2 Pt 1:10, 3:14). Therefore, the Greek lets us know "rightly dividing the word of truth" involves a diligence that goes beyond the idea of 'study' which is promoted today.]

How can a person confirm they have rightly divided the word of truth? A formal education cannot guarantee a person will not be deceived. "The chief priests and the scribes and the chief of the people sought to destroy" Jesus (Lk 19:47). "The Pharisees and lawyers rejected the counsel of God against themselves" (Lk 7:30). Jesus told his disciples to beware of "the doctrine of the Pharisees and of the Sadducees" (Mt 16:12), so this proves being counted among the educated elite is not the same as being "approved unto God."

Saul of Tarsus, Be Ashamed

Jesus warned his disciples, "the time cometh, that whosoever killeth you will think that he doeth God service" (Fourth gospel 16:2). Jesus was talking about men like Saul of Tarsus.

Saul was a member of the educated elite, "a Hebrew of the Hebrews; as touching the law, a Pharisee" (Phil 3:5), but he was not taught the truth of God's word. He learned to think like his teachers (a method of discerning between truth and error which is fundamentally flawed).

We can learn a lot about how to "be not deceived" by considering Saul of Tarsus before he received his wake-up call on the road to Damascus. No doubt Saul *thought* he knew God's word, but he was using a wrong measure of truth.

When people use their current beliefs as their measure of truth, it will not help them see when they are in error. Saul likely felt very assured because he agreed with highly regarded religious scholars. Yet, this false measure could only help to keep him in bondage to deception.

At that time Saul was in ignorance. He himself later said he had been "a blasphemer, and a persecutor, and injurious: but I obtained mercy, because I did *it* ignorantly in unbelief" (1 Tm 1:13). Surely, he could have recited the words of scripture. So, what can explain his ignorance at that point? Did the words of scripture confuse Saul and cause him to be in ignorance and unbelief? Or was he blind to the truth in scripture because he put confidence in man and learned the teachings of men which make void the word of God?

Saul of Tarsus had not been "rightly dividing the word of truth" prior to his encounter with Jesus on the Damascus road. He was wrongly dividing God's word. He needed "to be ashamed" of his false beliefs and of the method of assessing truth which led him to think he was doing good when he was doing just the opposite. Yet, after he learned the truth on the Damascus road, Saul did not dig in his heels and continue to resist the truth (as was the case with the religious leaders who knew Jesus had risen from the dead and still would not repent).

Deception Inside of the Church

Those in the church can also be deceived and the verses warning believers to "be not deceived" (cf. Lk 21:8, 1 Cor 6:9, 15:33, Gal 6:7) along with other passages make this clear. The opening words of Galatians 3, "O foolish Galatians, who hath bewitched you, that ye should not obey the truth" is just one of the many places where the writers of the New Testament dealt with errors among believers.

In our day, the tolerance of error is fostered when people value unity above truth and those who contend for truth are said to be 'divisive'. Tolerating falsehood was a problem that brought a strong rebuke to the church in Corinth. They tolerated those who held contrary ideas on the resurrection, which earned the church this reprimand: "If Christ be preached that he rose from the dead, how say some among you that there is no resurrection of the dead?" (1 Cor 15:12) Contrary ideas cannot both be true, so when believers agree to tolerate falsehood, they are not fostering a love of the truth [more on this later].

When the people in Elijah's day worshiped both the LORD and Baal, he did not call for tolerance. Rather, he offered this rebuke: "How long halt ye between two opinions? if the LORD *be* God, follow him: but if Baal, *then* follow him" (1 Kgs 18:21). Keep in mind Elijah's rebuke of those who were "between two opinions" as we consider a rebuke to the church from Jesus himself.

The words, "He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches" show up seven times in the Book of Revelation (Rv 2:7, 11, 17 & 29, 3:6, 13 & 22), so followers of Jesus should ponder what was said to the churches. For now, though, notice what Jesus said to "the angel of the church of the Laodiceans" (Rv 3:14):

"thou sayest, I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing; and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked" (Rv 3:17).

If people think they are "rich" and "have need of nothing" when their actual condition is "poor, and blind, and naked," clearly their beliefs are not a model for others to follow. Jesus' rebuke was not directed to pagans or unbelievers; it was to the church! This should act as a shot across the bow to warn us not to assume our view, our church's view, or beliefs in the so-called 'early church' are necessarily correct.

Escaping the Bonds of Deception

As was noted earlier, the words "ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free" (Fourth gospel 8:32) were directed to people who "believed on" Jesus and would "continue in" his word (Fourth gospel 8:31). So a consistent respect for God's word is set forth as a condition for those who want to "know the truth" and be set free by it. Since "the fear of the LORD *is* **the beginning of knowledge**" (Prv 1:7), "the fear of the LORD" must be the foundation of our efforts to find the truth.

Jesus rebuked the scholars of his day for "making the word of God of none effect through your tradition" (Mk 7:13), and their failure to show a consistent respect for God's word was at the root of the problem. Those men passed along their beliefs, instead of bearing witness to God's word and upholding it as the standard of truth.

Encouraging people to trust the teachings of men goes against the counsel of God's word. Thus, it is a telltale sign when one has to cite the teachings of men in order to make their case.

Those who have let the teachings of men serve as the foundation for their beliefs may think the statement, "in the multitude of counsellors there is safety" (Prv 11:14, 24:6) defends the practice of looking to the opinions of men when one wants to learn the truth on biblical issues. Yet those words cannot possibly be encouraging people to think they can avoid being deceived by believing ideas which are espoused by a large quantity of people.

If people trusted the multitude of religious experts and educated men to tell them what to make of Jesus, would that have helped them to discover the truth about Jesus? No. Rather, the teachings of those men prejudiced people against Jesus and caused many to be blind to the truth. Popularity is not a proper measure of truth. So those who think the quantity of people who hold a belief is a good indicator of whether or not that idea is true are using a false balance. Moreover, a multitude of common, everyday people can also be wrong.

When Jesus asked his disciples to tell him who people said he was, they told him, "John the Baptist; but some say, Elias; and others say, that one of the old prophets is risen again" (Lk 9:19). When people hold opposing views on a matter, would their counsel offer "safety" if they constituted a multitude? At one point in Paul's ministry "the multitude of the people followed after, crying, Away with him." But their unity and their number did not mean their words were wise. Also, we read in Exodus 23:2, "Thou shalt not follow a multitude to *do* evil." So, one cannot say going along with the crowd is encouraged by scripture.

Safety in Numbers?

Groupthink and the wisdom of this world tells people '*there is safety in numbers.*' Being aligned with a large number of people can provide a degree of security in some situations. It is a fallacy, however, to take this as a universal principle. Still, because of this kind of thinking, many do assume following a multitude of people is the best way to avoid error on intellectual issues even though scripture indicates this is not a wise practice.

Verses have already been cited in this regard, but consider two other passages. Acts 14:4 says, "the multitude of the city was divided: and part held with the Jews, and part with the apostles." Another passage also reports a dispute which occurred among some people who were listening to Jesus teach: "There was much murmuring among the people concerning him: for some said, He is a good man: others said, Nay; but he deceiveth the people" (Fourth gospel 7:12). Would those who stood with the majority in those disputes be more likely to be correct?

If we think the number of people who hold a belief is an indication of whether or not the belief is true, then we are using a wrong standard. If a multitude of people believe something, all it does is prove those people *think* the idea is true. There are large groups of people who believe false ideas, so their numbers cannot mean those beliefs are worthy of consideration.

If people believe something, that does not make it true. If they reject an idea, that does not make it false. Acceptance by a person or group is not what makes something true. Citing the number of people who say 'x' is true in order to convince others to believe the idea, is not a God-honoring way to make an argument.

When we make a case on a biblical issue using a measure of truth which is not compatible with the counsel found in scripture, then we are asking others to rely on a false measure. People are taught to rely on an unbiblical method when they are led to believe an idea is likely true if a large number of people believe it. The majority is not always wrong, but they are not always right either.

It Gets Better with Age?

When people are deciding whether something is true or worthy of consideration, another factor they often look to is time. If an idea '*has been around for a long time*' or it '*was written about long ago*' this tends to make it more credible in the eyes of men. The question is: Does the length of time since an idea was first advanced hold up as a reliable indicator of whether or not an idea is true? No. Consider two examples that show this to be the case.

Example #1: there were reports written almost a hundred years ago which promoted '*Dawson's dawn man*' as a great scientific find and cited it as proof of monkey-to-man evolution. This idea was believed in the past, so does this make it credible? Because it was promoted in respected publications and peer-reviewed literature, does this give it more credibility? What if a majority of scholars accepted this idea? What would all of this prove?

Neither time, nor agreement among men, nor acceptance by experts are reliable measures for assessing truth. So, even if a person has all of those things, they would still be using a false method if they based their judgment on those things. It turns out '*Dawson's dawn man*' (aka '*Pittdown man*') was, decades later, exposed as a fraud. But what of the writings of men in all the peer-reviewed literature and textbooks which promoted this as truth? All those experts and all their writings worked to deceive everyone who relied on them!

Some will say a '*time-tested*' idea happens only over a longer period. However, the beliefs of men who lived long ago might be false, since men who lived in the past could make mistakes and/or be deceived, so knowing *when* a statement was made (or the fact that a belief was held by people who lived long ago) does not tell us if it is true or not. Moreover, the passage of time will never make a false statement true because, unlike wine, error does not improve with age.

Example #2: for over 2000 years most Jews have believed Jesus was not the Messiah, which is why they do not follow him. But even though a large group of people has accepted this idea for a very long time, they are still deceived nonetheless.

Tradition?

Does scripture indicate ideas that are called 'tradition' are more likely to be true? No. Earlier we considered the time when Jesus rebuked the religious experts of his day for "Making the word of God of none effect through your tradition, which ye have delivered" (Mk 7:13). Yet, it is fairly common to hear teachers refer to a belief as 'tradition' when they want to give an idea *an air of authority*. But, teaching people to put confidence in the traditions of men is not a biblical method.

Read what Jesus said about the traditions of men in Matthew 15:1-9 and Mark 7:1-13. Colossians 2:8 offered this caution to the brethren of that day, "Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ."

Some things that honor God are called tradition, so not all tradition is bad. How can one tell a God-honoring tradition from a tradition which makes the word of God of no effect? Test it!

The source of a tradition is what makes the difference, as we can see from verses like this: "Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye withdraw yourselves from every brother that walketh disorderly, and not after the tradition which he **received of us**" (2 Th 3:6). Here again, we need to consider the source. A tradition taught by the God-inspired writers of scripture would have God's authority, while a tradition of men is simply that.

When the traditions of men are promoted, people end up trusting in the authority of men. This leads to the teachings of men being cited as the measure of truth and makes the word of God "of none effect."

Reliable Sources?

Many people look at a person's credentials when they are trying to decide what to believe. The problem with this is people will often drop their guard because they put confidence in someone's credentials. For example, those who think group 'x' promotes the truth will tend to adopt ideas that are taught by people who are affiliated with the group and/or by teachers who have been trained at an institution with ties to the group. Yet, those things provide no guarantee of truth.

Man-made institutions will grant degrees, bestow honors, and endow people with authority. When men honor other men, what does that tell us? Where a knowledge of physical laws or an application of them in a particular field is concerned, men issue credentials to others who learn the skills needed to be proficient in a given field. This helps to keep the public safe. In the case of pilots, electricians, architects, etc. this

system yields results that are fairly consistent and usually reliable. But, is it a good idea where God's word is concerned?

We expect no one will be granted a pilot's license unless they have learned what it takes to deliver the results which every pilot should be able to deliver (a safe flight from takeoff to landing). When it comes to God's word, do the credentials which are issued by men insure a similar degree of accuracy will be seen in the results? No. When men are asked what the Bible teaches on a given issue, some men who have been ordained or have PhDs will say 'x' is true and some of them will say 'x' is not true.

This same problem shows up in scripture when the teachings of men were used as the basis of a religious education. The Sadducees and the Pharisees were two of the leading religious groups of Jesus' day, and those two groups held contradictory views because they used different measures to determine what was true. Acts 23:8 tells us, "the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, neither angel, nor spirit: but the Pharisees confess both." They contradicted each other; so while both groups could be wrong, they could not both be right.

Were Pharisees Better than Sadducees?

Acts 23:8 lets us know large groups and powerful men can espouse beliefs that are not true. Therefore, it is never safe for one to assume a teaching is true simply because the teaching is believed by people who have been formally trained in religious matters. Worse yet, it is not safe to assume those who teach the truth on some issues will necessarily teach the truth on other issues. Those who assumed the Pharisees taught the truth because they affirmed the "resurrection" were wrong. Both groups undermined the authority of God's word. The Sadducees and Pharisees were not the only groups Jesus spoke out against, but he specifically warned his disciples about something these groups had in common and his point can still teach us today.

Jesus told his disciples, "Take heed and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and of the Sadducees" (Mt 16:6). After he had explained his words to them it says, "Then understood they how that he bade them not beware of the leaven of bread, but of the doctrine of the Pharisees and of the Sadducees" (Mt 16:12). Jesus used the picture of "leaven" to portray their "doctrine," and it applied to both groups. So what can we learn from his one warning regarding two very different groups?

Jesus spoke of "the doctrine of the Pharisees and of the Sadducees" as if it was something they had in common, and this points us to a trait or practice common to both groups. His warning was not against their teaching on particular issues, since they were not in agreement on many matters. Where do we see the unity in the doctrine of these two groups? It is found in the teachings of men – not in their views on various issues, but in *their practice of promoting the teachings of men in addition to God's word*, for both groups did this.

Keep in mind, "leaven" is something that has a permeating influence. This is why it is a perfect word picture for the practice of promoting the teachings of men. Scripture has authority because it is "of God" and this authority is usurped when the teachings of men are cited as an additional source of truth on biblical issues.

Practices which Undermine God's Authority

Both the Sadducees and Pharisees thought they were right and each group produced clones who were taught to trust in the teachings that were promoted by their group. Elsewhere, Jesus said the "Pharisees and scribes" were "making the word of God of none effect" through their tradition (Mk 7:13), so the teachings which are promoted by men and religious groups can actually counteract the effect of God's word.

As has been noted, Psalm 118:8 says, "*It is better to trust in the LORD than to put confidence in man.*" Those who think there is an exception to this verse so long as they only put their confidence in men who are highly respected should note the very next verse: "*It is better to trust in the LORD than to put confidence in princes*" (Ps 118:9).

Had people merely put confidence in the wrong group? No. While the Pharisees and the Sadducees differed on some of their beliefs, both groups undermined God's word by promoting the traditions of men.

"A little leaven leaveneth the whole lump" (Gal 5:9) and this is why even a little of the "leaven of the Pharisees and of the Sadducees" made the word of God of no effect to those who trusted in them.

Good Counsel? By What Standard?

When we seek the counsel of others, how can we tell if the counsel we get is good counsel? In 1 Kings 12 we see how one man made this decision. When Rehoboam took over as king, the people asked him to lighten the burden imposed on them by his father. At that point, he sought counsel as to how he should answer the people.

"And king Rehoboam consulted with the old men, that stood before Solomon his father while he yet lived, and said, How do ye advise that I may answer this people?" (1 Kgs 12:6). They advised him to lessen the burden, "but he forsook the counsel of the old men, which they had given him, and consulted with the young men" (1 Kgs 12:8).

The advice of the young men was just the opposite. They told him to greatly increase the burdens on the people. What did Rehoboam do?

"The king answered the people roughly, and forsook the old men's counsel that they gave him; And spake to them after the counsel of the young men" (1 Kgs 12:13-14).

The king got contrary advice from two groups, therefore, the counsel of both groups could not be good. Rehoboam did what men often do, he chose to listen to those men *who told him what he wanted to hear*. (Notice 1 Kgs 12:8 first says, "he forsook the counsel of the old men," and only after that does it tell us he "consulted with the young men.")

Choosing the counsel that suits us is a lot like a practice Paul warned about in 2 Timothy. He described people who "will not endure sound doctrine" but who prefer teachers who say what they want to hear – "after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears" (2 Tm 4:3). If we seek good counsel, then our preference cannot be our standard of measure.

A Multitude of God's Counsel?

We find another instructive passage on seeking counsel in Joshua 9. The inhabitants of Gibeon crafted a cover story and made it look as if they had come from a far country in order to deceive the children of Israel into making a deal with them:

"They did work wilily, and went and made as if they had been ambassadors, and took old sacks upon their asses, and wine bottles, old, and rent, and bound up; And old shoes and clouted upon their feet, and old garments upon them; and all the bread of their provision was dry and moldy." (Jos 9:4-5).

It worked. "And Joshua made peace with them, and made a league with them, to let them live: and the princes of the congregation swore unto them" (Jos 9:15). They were deceived because they chose to lean on their own understanding instead of seeking the LORD's counsel. "And the men took of their victuals, and asked not *counsel* at the mouth of the LORD" (Jos 9:14).

If someone who was as in touch with the LORD as Joshua can make the mistake of failing to check with the LORD because he trusted in his own ability to make a reasonable inference, then we need to learn from his mistake! When it comes to issues in scripture, since we know men can *think* they are promoting God's truth when they are not, the wisest thing to do is to seek the counsel of the LORD on every issue.

Seeking counsel is encouraged in verses like, "Where no counsel is, the people fall: but in the multitude of counsellors there is safety" (Prv 11:14) and "Without counsel purposes are disappointed: but in the multitude of counsellors they are established" (Prv 15:22). Yet a verse like, "For by wise counsel thou shalt make thy war" (Prv 24:6) shows us all counsel is not the same. So, how can people know if the counsel they get is "wise" or not?

In speaking to the brethren in Ephesus, Paul said he had not failed to declare to them "all the counsel of God" (Acts 20:27), and this is more than merely advice on a concern we may have at a given moment. Scripture gives us God's counsel, so those who heed the word of God could say what the author of Psalm 16:7 said: "I will bless the LORD, who hath given me counsel."

Bad Unity

"The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the LORD and against his anointed, *saying*, Let us break their bands asunder, and cast away their cords from us" (Ps 2:2-3).

They "take counsel together" and have a unity of purpose, but surely this was not "wise" counsel. The idea is so ridiculous that it merited this response: "He that sitteth in the heavens shall laugh" (Ps 2:4).

Bad unity and counsel of men that is foolish or evil shows up in many other verses. 1 Kings 12:28 says, "the king took counsel, and made two calves of gold." A king of Israel should have known such counsel was not good (even if a multitude of 'experts' advised him to do so). Was better counsel available? Yes, it was.

"Woe to the rebellious children, saith the LORD, that take counsel, but not of me" (Isa 30:1). So taking counsel is not good enough. The source of one's counsel makes all the difference!

When people do not want the LORD's counsel they find a substitute for it, as we see in this verse: "My people ask counsel at their stocks, and their staff declareth unto them" (Hos 4:12). That practice seems to have the same sort of effect as came from following the consensus of the religious leaders in Jesus' day – "The Pharisees and lawyers rejected the counsel of God against themselves" (Lk 7:30). Worse yet, when "the chief priests, and the scribes, and the elders of the people" (Mt 26:3) put their heads together, they "consulted that they might take Jesus by subtlety, and kill *him*" (Mt 26:4).

The Wisdom of This World

This world's wisdom tells us to esteem experts, value their opinion, and heed their advice. Endless honors are bestowed by men (and the organizations they run) upon those who meet their standards. So, is putting confidence in men who are honored by other men a wise thing to do? Does a theology degree or ordination by some religious group make a person less susceptible to deception?

God's word does not encourage people to value the opinions of men. Scripture takes a dim view of the world's measure of wisdom and the honors bestowed by men:

- "hath not God made foolish the wisdom of this world?" (1 Cor 1:20);
- "in the wisdom of God the world by wisdom knew not God" (1 Cor 1:21);
- "not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, *are called*" (1 Cor 1:26);
- "the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God. For it is written, He taketh the wise in their own craftiness. And again, The Lord knoweth the thoughts of the wise, that they are vain. Therefore let no man glory in men" (1 Cor 3:19-21);
- "**How can ye believe**, which receive honor one of another, and seek not the honor that *cometh* from God only?" (Fourth gospel 5:44).

Honor? From What Source?

Jesus linked belief to honor when he contrasted the two sources of honor: "How can ye believe, which receive honor one of another, and seek not the honor that *cometh* from God only?" (Fourth gospel 5:44). Jesus put those two sources of honor in opposition to each other. [Note: the word "can" refers to ability, so men who "receive honor one of another" instead of seeking "the honor that *cometh* from God only" may be jeopardizing their own ability to "believe."]

Seeking the honor that comes "from God only" would be in line with the choice Moses made (cf. Heb 11:26), and in line with the requirement that those who come to God must believe God "is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him" (Heb 11:6).

Scripture also says, "before honor *is* humility" (Prv 15:33, 18:12) and this parallels what we read in James 4:10 "Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and he shall lift you up." Those words were written to the "brethren" (Jas 3:1). James contrasted the very different results of pride and humility when he gave this bit of counsel:

"God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace unto the humble. Submit yourselves therefore to God" (Jas 4:6-7).

Peter made the same point when he wrote to "the strangers" (1 Pt 1:1) who were "elect" (1 Pt 1:2) and said:

"all of you be subject one to another, and be clothed with humility: for God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble. Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God" (1 Pt 5:5-6).

This tells us how we respond to God's word makes all the difference (cf. 1 Th 2:13).

Since James also told the brethren, "draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you" (Jas 4:8), believers who say they want to be closer to God need to begin moving in that direction. One way believers can do this is to "let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus" (Phi 2:5). Jesus himself expressed this mind in these words: "as I hear, I judge: and my judgment is just; because I seek not mine own will, but the will of the Father which hath sent me" (Fourth gospel 5:30).

Instead of seeking his own will, Jesus sought the will of the Father and he said that meant his judgment was just: "my judgment is just; because I seek not mine own will, but the will of the Father." Thus, if we want our judgment to be just, we should let this mind be in us.

Reality Check

Also, notice what Jesus said after he spoke about honor from God:

"How can ye believe, which receive honor one of another, and seek not the honor that *cometh* from God only? Do not think that I will accuse you to the Father: **there is one that accuseth you, even Moses, in whom ye trust.** For had ye believed Moses, ye would have believed me: for he wrote of me. But if ye believe not his writings, how shall ye believe my words?" (Fourth gospel 5:44-47).

The Moses they trusted in was their accuser! How? The writings of Moses were preserved in scripture and his words showed they were dishonoring Moses and God, for they had not believed Moses' words. [Notice this shows how people can convince themselves they trust in the truths of scripture, even when words that are written in scripture testify against them. The same thing occurs when those who say they believe in Jesus hold beliefs that are contrary to the testimony of any of the God-inspired writers of scripture].

Their beliefs were based on the teachings of men. *By that standard they judged themselves to be Moses' followers.* However, they used a wrong measure, and false measures lead people to flawed results. When people judge based on a false standard they will be deceived, for they will assume their beliefs are correct, although they are not.

God preserved the writings of Moses in scripture and Moses' words accused them because his words proved they did not believe what he said. But they did not need Jesus to tell them they were deceived because scripture already did that.

When the "had ye believed Moses..." verse was considered above, we learned how it teaches the need to be consistent in our regard for all of scripture. Sadly, reading the Old Testament is avoided by many who claim to love Jesus. Yet he said, Moses wrote of him! So we can learn of him by reading what Moses wrote. Moreover, Jesus also said, "But if ye believe not his writings, how shall ye believe my words?" (Fourth gospel 5:47), for the authority of God was the same in both cases.

"According to the Scriptures"

In 1 Corinthians 15:1, Paul explicitly refers to "the gospel" and says:

"Christ died for our sins **according to the scriptures**; And that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day **according to the scriptures**" (1 Cor 15:3-4).

Twice he said, "according to the scriptures," so "the gospel" rests on the authority of the Old Testament.

Moreover, the phrase "it is written" appears in the Bible over and over, as Jesus and later the apostles cited the authority of God's word in regard to whatever matter they were dealing with at the time. If Jesus and the apostles linked their teachings to the words in scripture, then we need to be paying attention to the Old Testament.

Also, in Acts 26:22-23, Paul spoke the following words before Agrippa and indicated everything he taught about Jesus was already noted in the Old Testament:

"I continue unto this day, witnessing both to small and great, **saying none other things than those which the prophets and Moses did say should come**: That Christ should suffer, *and* that he should be the first that should rise from the dead, and should shew light unto the people, and to the Gentiles."

Those who believed in a *Moses* who was not the Moses of scripture should have known better, since the measure of God's word warned them against trusting in "lying words." Jeremiah had warned those of Judah who sought to worship the LORD, "trust ye not in lying words" (Jer 7:4) and "Behold, ye trust in lying words, that cannot profit" (Jer 7:8). Those words were spoken to people who had been deceived by the teachings of men. Therefore, we ought to consider the remedy he prescribed: "Thus saith the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, Amend your ways and your doings" (Jer 7:3).

Learn from Other People's Mistakes

Jeremiah had much to say on the topic of false assertions being attributed to the LORD and about people choosing the words of men over the word of God. Jeremiah 2:8 shows one should not assume it is safe to trust the men who are part of the religious establishment: "They that handle the law knew me not: the pastors also transgressed against me, and the prophets prophesied by Baal, and walked after *things that* do not profit." Other passages offer similar descriptions:

- "from the prophet even unto the priest every one dealeth falsely" (Jer 8:10);
- "Many pastors have destroyed my vineyard" (Jer 12:10);
- "the LORD said unto me, The prophets prophesy lies in my name: I sent them not, neither have I commanded them, neither spake unto them: they prophesy unto you a false vision and divination, and a thing of naught, and the deceit of their heart" (Jer 14:14);
- "Woe be unto the pastors that destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! saith the LORD" (Jer 23:1);

- "Thus saith the LORD of hosts, Hearken not unto the words of the prophets that prophesy unto you: they make you vain: they speak a vision of their own heart, and not out of the mouth of the LORD" (Jer 23:16).

If the words of men are assumed to be true, it can keep people from the truth in God's word that can turn them around, as in this passage:

"I have not sent these prophets, yet they ran: I have not spoken to them, yet they prophesied. But **if they had stood in my counsel, and had caused my people to hear my words**, then they should have turned them from their evil way, and from the evil of their doings" (Jer 23:21-22).

If they had stood in the LORD's counsel and caused his people to hear his words, then those teachers could have made a difference!

The LORD went on to say, "he that hath my word, let him speak my word faithfully" (Jer 23:28). Obedience to this principle put Jeremiah on a collision course with the religious establishment of his day because he spoke the word of the LORD "faithfully" (which showed they had *not* done so).

Those who attributed the ideas of men to the LORD were actually guilty of stealing the word of the LORD:

"I *am* against the prophets, saith the LORD, that **steal my words** every one from his neighbor. Behold, I *am* against the prophets, saith the LORD, that use their tongues, and say, He saith. Behold, I *am* against them that prophesy false dreams, saith the LORD, and do tell them, and cause my people to err by their lies, and by their lightness" (Jer 23:30-32).

If we consider the whole context, then it becomes clear that not being faithful to the word of the LORD was equated to stealing it.

Choosing Falsehood over Truth?

The pastors, prophets, and priests of that day were not the only ones at fault. According to the LORD, the people wanted to hear falsehood: "The prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests bear rule by their means; and my people love to have it so" (Jer 5:31). The LORD also put it this way, "my people have committed two evils; they have forsaken me the fountain of living waters, *and* hewed them out cisterns, broken cisterns, that can hold no water" (Jer 2:13). [In scripture, terms like "the washing of water by the word" (Eph 5:26) show how water was used as a picture of God's word – and when people forsake the LORD ("the fountain of living waters"), they reject the truth provided by the word of the LORD and turn to a self-made system that does not hold water.]

Jeremiah was talking about a people who had a form of religion, yet they did not want the LORD's word, as the LORD noted when he said:

"To whom shall I speak, and give warning, that they may hear? behold, their ear is uncircumcised, and they cannot hearken: behold, **the word of the LORD is unto them a reproach**; they have no delight in it" (Jer 6:10).

Changing their beliefs on particular issues would not fix the problem. The LORD, speaking through Jeremiah said, "Amend **your ways and your doings**." (Jer 7:3 & 5, 26:13). They needed to change their methods and their behavior, because beliefs do not occur in a vacuum. People always use some process to decide what they will believe, and if they have believed false ideas, then they have relied on a flawed process, flawed data, or both. In any case, it is surely worse when a person turns away from the truth because it is something they want to avoid.

Why would a person not want to know the truth? No one likes to feel shame or embarrassment. If something leads us to feel awkward or embarrassed, we do our best to avoid it. So those who put

confidence in the opinions of men will tend to resist whenever facts arise that call their view into question, and this is not limited to the realm of religion, as the following example shows.

In the 1800s a man cited evidence that proved if surgeons washed their hands between patients it would save lives. However, those who trusted in '*established scientific and medical opinions*' took offense, for this would mean they were wrong to trust all the experts who said hand washing was pointless. They would have to admit their methods had resulted in harm. So they suppressed the truth, ridiculed the man and, thus, avoided embarrassment.

Many years (and deaths) later, further proof finally meant the truth could no longer be suppressed and, at that point, hand washing was adopted as standard practice.

Embarrassed by the Truth?

Scripture presents the standard of truth and beliefs can be tested by this measure to see if they line up with scripture. "The word of God *is* quick, and powerful" (Heb 4:12) and, if it is faithfully communicated, it can turn people away from errant beliefs and practices (cf. Jer 23:22).

What makes the difference when biblical correction is offered is how we react to it. When the truth shows we have been misled, are we thankful for it or embarrassed by it? Remember, the fear of men (i.e., their opinions and perhaps their ridicule) is something we must avoid:

"The fear of man bringeth a snare: but whoso putteth his trust in the LORD shall be safe" (Prv 29:25).

We will not be embarrassed by any truth presented by scripture if we love the truth. When Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life" (Fourth gospel 14:6) he identified himself with truth. So the way we treat the truth is an indication of how we would treat Jesus!

Still, some reject the love of the truth and we can see how dangerous this is in what 2 Thessalonians 2:10 says about "them that perish" – "they received not the love of the truth, that they might be saved."

Holding Contrary Views

Delay is one way people avoid biblical correction, and that seems to be one of the responses to Paul's talk on Mars' hill:

"And when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked: and others said, We will hear thee again of this *matter*. So Paul departed from among them. Howbeit certain men clave unto him, and believed" (Acts 17:32-34).

Scripture lets us know putting the truth on hold can be a risky thing to do, and on that day "some mocked," some "believed," and others put off a decision until later. Another way people deal with truth when it is contrary to their current beliefs is they put truth on par with error by acting as if it is okay to believe ideas which are contrary to one another, much like the people did in 1 Kings 18.

In 1 Kings 18:21 Elijah the prophet rebuked the practice of holding contrary views: "Elijah came unto all the people, and said, How long halt ye **between two opinions?** if the LORD *be* God, follow him: but if Baal, *then* follow him."

Amazingly, Elijah challenged them to "follow" Baal *if Baal is God*, so their divided loyalty meant they were not even following Baal.

His most critical barb was not against Baal worship. Rather, it was against their willingness to live in the space "between two opinions" (and act as if the truth does not need to be respected).

Elijah's premise is obvious. The LORD and Baal cannot both be God. So it is foolish to follow them both. The claims are mutually exclusive. If one is true, the other must be false. Nevertheless, the people were acting as if both could be true, and in doing so, they were tolerating obvious falsehood.

Acting as if contrary ideas are both true destroys respect for the truth! In order to accommodate the worship of other gods, scripture has to be set aside. However, the idea that people *can* worship other gods *and* believe God's word is not a problem for those who tell themselves it is okay to believe and/or tolerate contrary ideas.

It is unreasonable to worship the LORD and Baal because they cannot both be God.

Jesus said, "Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve" (Mt 4:10, Lk 4:8). Therefore, those who serve other gods cannot worship the LORD **according to the scriptures**.

'Agree to Disagree?'

Today many churchgoers will say, '*we will have to agree to disagree*' when they want to cut-off a debate over some Bible issue. This is not the same as when a person is seeking to learn the truth on an issue and they hear someone state a conclusion on the issue that may be contrary to scripture. When someone is seeking the truth on an issue, the fact that God's word has yet to show them the truth on that issue is something they want to remedy. Those in this condition who may walk away from a discussion are not 'agreeing to disagree,' for they have not yet been convinced they know the truth on the issue.

On the other hand, if people who claim to know the truth on an issue hold contrary views on that issue, they cannot both be right because contrary ideas cannot both be true. In this situation, if one of those parties says, '*we will just have to agree to disagree*' in order to cut-off discussion of that issue, is that person seeking the truth? No. But it is a way to avoid having one's view subjected to the test of scripture. 'Agree to disagree' is an empty phrase that is meant to sound virtuous even as it is being used to set aside the question of truth. While this keeps up the appearance of unity, it does so at the expense of truth.

In effect, those in Elijah's day who worshipped the LORD and Baal had adopted the 'agree to disagree' model in their own minds. It does not make holding contrary ideas right or logical, but it does avoid having to choose between one belief and the other.

A 'spirit of unity' is a primary goal for some church groups in our day. This can lead members of the group to resist the truth when it calls into question some belief or practice which is promoted by the group. While promoting a 'spirit of unity' may sound like a good idea, it is not a biblical idea. It is wrong because it makes unity the goal.

Instead, we should be "endeavoring to keep the unity **of the Spirit**" (Eph 4:3), and we dare not switch the order of those words!

"The unity of the Spirit" is not the same as 'a spirit of unity.'

'A spirit of unity' might exist at a ball game or a Baal worship meeting. "The unity of the Spirit," however, has truth as a built-in condition – because "the Spirit" is "the Spirit **of truth**". So we need to evaluate the basis of the "unity" that is being promoted or sought.

"The Spirit of Truth"

Jesus talked about "the Spirit of truth" (Fourth gospel 14:17, 15:26, 16:13) and told his disciples, "when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth" (Fourth gospel 16:13). Scripture also tells believers about "salvation through sanctification of the Spirit and belief of the truth" (2 Th 2:13). Passages such as those teach us "the Spirit" and truth go hand in hand. Therefore, a unity established apart from truth cannot be "the unity **of** the Spirit."

Moreover, the truth causes division! It distinguishes itself from error, and it calls our judgment into question when we have believed ideas that cannot stand up to the light of truth. As has already been noted, Jesus identified himself with the truth. Yet, he also told of the division he would bring: "Suppose ye that I am come to give peace on earth? I tell you, Nay; but rather division" (Lk 12:51). So if truth causes division, how is "the unity of the Spirit" even possible?

It is possible because the truth divides those who do not have or want the truth from those who do – while, at the same time, the truth unites those who have a love of the truth. Where we end up depends on us.

Psalm 86:11 says, "Teach me thy way, O LORD; I will walk in thy truth: unite my heart to fear thy name." This suggests a heart committed to a respect for the authority of God is linked to:

- (A) being taught by God, and
- (B) a willingness to heed his word and conform our walk to it.

In the passages where believers (i.e., the brethren) were said to be of "one accord," their unity was not achieved by downplaying truth. It was the result of them being taught by "the Spirit of truth." [The term "one accord" does not by itself imply a love of the truth, for it was also used of those who unified against the truth, such as when "the Jews made insurrection with one accord against Paul" (Acts 18:12).]

What was the focal point for the unity among the brethren? It was their willingness to follow Jesus in submitting to the authority of God. This is what Jesus indicated he had done when he made statements such as:

- "I do nothing of myself; but as my Father hath taught me, I speak these things" (Fourth gospel 8:28);
- "I have not spoken of myself; but the Father which sent me, he gave me a commandment, what I should say, and what I should speak" (Fourth gospel 12:49).

Truth or Opinion?

Jesus once said, "No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other" (Mt 6:24), and this principle needs to shape how we see things. For example, when the people of Elijah's day worshiped the LORD and Baal, were they serving two masters? No, they were despising the LORD **by** worshipping Baal. Even if they told themselves they *were* serving the LORD *and* Baal, their belief did not make it so, for "No man can serve two masters."

Similarly, one does not serve the cause of truth by holding on to error. Still, some will try to suppress the discussion of biblical evidence that is contrary to their view on an issue, and saying it '*causes division*' is one of the ways this is done. But, when this or other excuses are used to dodge the issue of authority, the truth is sacrificed in the process.

The process of distinguishing truth from error is too often clouded by faulty reasoning. For example, there is a difference between disputes over what color to paint a wall or the volume of the worship music, and a debate over what is true on some biblical issue. The difference should be obvious, but it is sometimes ignored.

When people cannot justify their belief on some biblical issue, they naturally want to avoid discussions that would require them to do so. Some will do this by acting as if the issue that is being discussed is a matter of personal preference, because the standard in such matters is one's opinion, not truth.

Whenever someone acts as if what scripture says on a biblical issue can be treated as a matter of preference, please remind that person that what is written in scripture is not a matter of personal preference, it is a matter of truth. Some issues do involve a matter of conscience, but scripture tells us what those are; it is not for us to pick and choose.

Heeding Jesus Regarding New Things

In seeking to discern the truth on biblical issues, we must consider the idea of compatibility. If we join two things that are not compatible, the result will not be good, and Jesus taught this idea in these words:

"no man putteth new wine into old bottles; else the new wine will burst the bottles, and be spilled, and the bottles shall perish. But new wine must be put into new bottles; and both are preserved." (Lu 5:37-38).

"New wine" needs "new bottles" [leather wineskins] that can stretch and, since "old bottles" could not do so, putting "new wine" in them was an exercise in futility. Likewise, truth that is learned by trusting in the authority of scripture is not compatible with the practice of judging truth according to the teachings of men. Those methods of truth seeking are incompatible, for one desensitizes people to the virtue of God's authority.

"The servant is not greater than his lord; neither he that is sent greater than he that sent him" (Fourth gospel 13:16). So, what men say about God's word cannot be more important than God's word itself. If we have held wrong ideas because we put confidence in men, then we need a new way of deciding what is true on biblical issues.