

THINGS HARD TO BE UNDERSTOOD



A Handbook of Biblical Difficulties

David Cloud

Things Hard to be Understood
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“The more thoroughly I have investigated the subject, the more clearly have I seen the flimsy character of objections made against the Bible. Every difficulty in the Bible is, and will yet be seen to be, capable of a fair and reasonable solution.”—George W. DeHoff, 1962

“When we meet with seeming discrepancies in other writers, we try to find some way of explaining them without charging the author with inaccuracy, especially if he has shown himself generally trustworthy. With regard to many matters in ancient history which cannot be satisfactorily explained, we suppose that if other facts were known to us, the difficulties would be cleared away. But, unfortunately, it is the habit of many to treat the Scriptures in exactly the reverse way. They magnify the difficulties; they ignore or reject all attempts at explanation; they jump at once to the conclusion that the writers are mistaken. Now, surely this is most unscientific. If it is possible to find a way of explaining the difficulty, we are bound to do so; and if, after all, we are not sure that the difficulty is removed, we surely ought, in view of the general trustworthiness of the Bible historians, to believe that if we knew other facts, which are now hidden from us, all would be clear.” —A. McCaig, 1923

“The difficulty is not with the infallibility of the Bible, but with the assumed infallibility of the critics who do not understand it. The incompetence of the critic, not the incompetence of the Scriptures, makes the trouble.” —John Champion, 1924

“It is especially the height of presumption if we exalt our little intellect above the wisdom of the great God. What is needed above everything else in dealing with so-called Biblical discrepancies is the spirit of reverence, which bows submissively when the ‘King eternal, immortal, invisible ... who alone is wise’ (1 Tim. 1:17) has spoken. Whoever approaches the Scriptures with this attitude will be granted to understand many things that to the irreverent, haughty critic are like a book sealed with seven seals.” —Robert G. Hoerber, 1987

“You will soon have I know not what of doubt and difficulty and bitterness upon your soul if you must needs know the unknowable, and have reasons and explanations for the sublime and the mysterious. Let the difficult doctrines go down whole into your very soul, by a grand exercise of confidence in God” —Charles Haddon Spurgeon.

Introduction

A word about how this volume differs from other works on Bible difficulties:

(1) WE DO NOT QUESTION THE BIBLE. In the process of researching this book, I have collected many volumes, both old and new, which address Bible difficulties. Many of these approach the Bible's difficulties from a naturalistic or partially naturalistic viewpoint. They tend to find "difficulties" where none exist when the Bible is accepted for what it claims to be—the infallible, inspired Word of God. These would attempt, for example, to find explanations for the "difficulties" presented by Old Testament miracles such as the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah by fire from heaven or the crossing of the Red Sea or Lot's wife turning into a pillar of salt. An example of this is *A Handbook of Biblical Difficulties* (1889). In explaining the alleged difficulty of an evil spirit from the Lord troubling Saul (1 Samuel 16:14-15), the author comments: "The ancients were not able to distinguish cases of mental disease, of mania or epilepsy, from cases of devil-possession. Their unscientific explanation of idiocy and madness is not to be accepted by us as inspired truth." This could not be more wrong. For the Bible believer, these events are not "difficulties" and they do not require "explanations"; they merely require faith. There are many books on Bible difficulties which fall into this category, and they do not build confidence in God's Word. We believe the Bible is the inerrant, verbally-plenarily inspired Word of God. We do not doubt even one word of it, and we would never question it.

(2) WE DO NOT QUESTION THE AUTHORIZED VERSION OF THE BIBLE. We will go even further. We do not question the English Authorized Version of the Bible. Many of the books on Bible difficulties find solutions to alleged discrepancies by claiming scribal error and by attempting to correct the God-honored Old Testament Masoretic Hebrew and New Testament Greek Received Text and the English Authorized Version with modern critical opinions. We believe the King James Bible is an accurate translation of the preserved Word of God. We do not believe it needs to be corrected; we believe it needs to be studied and explained!

(3) WE DEAL WITH A WIDE VARIETY OF PASSAGES WHICH ARE MISUSED BY CULTS AND OTHER FALSE TEACHERS. A third thing that sets this volume apart from others written on this topic is its practical nature. We desire to help protect God's people from the false teachers that abound in these last days. They raise nagging questions and doubts by misusing passages of Scripture to support their specious doctrines. Examples of passages considered in this context are verses misused by Seventh-day Adventists to support their doctrines of soul sleep and annihilation, verses misused by the Roman Catholic Church to support its doctrines of Mary and the Papacy and purgatory, verses used by ecumenists to justify their unscriptural goals, verses used to support infant baptism and baptismal regeneration, and verses misused by those who deny the doctrine of eternal security.

A word about the author's fallibility. We are not deluded into thinking that we have the final word on the Bible's difficulties. The comments in this book are intended to help fortify the hearts of God's people against today's fantastic onslaught of error and skepticism. We are convinced the Scriptures are accurate in every detail, and though our particular answer to every problem might not be the right one, we have seen enough to know that there IS an answer to every problem. Robert Hoerber wisely observes: "It is important to remember that in solving alleged discrepancies it is sufficient that a possible way of harmonizing the two texts in question be pointed out. More cannot in fairness be asked. An alleged contradiction disappears the minute a possible method of bringing the respective propositions into agreement is suggested. If several possible explanations are suggested, it becomes all the more unreasonable for one to contend that a discrepancy exists."

I readily admit that very little in this volume is original with me. Though I have studied the Bible intensely for more than 38 years, I acknowledge my dependence upon those who have taught me and those who have written the many books that have helped me better understand God's Word. I also acknowledge that there are things in the Word of God that I do not understand and cannot explain clearly.

A word about the type of Bible difficulties we address in this volume. In a sense, any passage in the Bible can be difficult IF THE READER DOES NOT UNDERSTAND IT! Unless I know what an ephod is, for example, any passage that mentions an ephod will be difficult for me to understand. Likewise, if I don't know the meaning of justification or propitiation, I will not understand the meaning of verses that use these terms. Thus, for the new Christian, the Bible is literally filled with difficulty. As the child of God applies himself to study the Bible and as he submits himself to the teaching ministry of a sound New Testament assembly, the difficulties gradually melt away. It is therefore impossible, in the compass of a book such as this, to address every potential Bible difficulty. This volume cannot take the place of a Bible concordance, a sound Bible dictionary, and good commentaries. What we have done, rather, is to consider those passages that are ESPECIALLY difficult or that contain apparent contradictions or that seem to teach strange doctrine or that are misused by false teachers. One goal has been to address passages and difficulties that are sometimes passed over in the commentaries.

A word about the attack upon the Bible. The critical onslaught against the Bible began in the late 18th century but did not begin to receive wide attention until the late 19th century. **Modernism**, with its unbelieving approach to Scripture, grew up together with Darwin's theory of evolution and Marx's theory of communism. Modernists view the Bible as a human book. "Inspiration," to them, is more akin to the "inspiration" of a Shakespeare or a Milton. They question the miracles of the Bible. They theorize that the Bible grew up as a product of the evolving religious convictions of the Jewish people. In other words, they are saying that the God of the Bible did not create the Jews; the Jews created the God of the Bible. By the early part of the 20th century, Modernism, in its

endless manifestations, had made deep inroads into the mainline Protestant and Baptist denominations. The **Fundamentalist**-Modernist controversy arose when Bible-believing men stood against modernistic unbelief and separated from the denominations that were committed to the same. New denominations and associations were formed by the militant Fundamentalists. Many of the children of these old-time Fundamentalists, though, lacked the conviction of their fathers and rejected biblical separation and what they labeled as the unnecessary “negativism” of their fathers and formed the **New Evangelical** movement in the 1940s. This was a spirit of neutrality. New Evangelicals claimed to love the truth, but they did not hate error. They practiced infiltration of the modernistic denominations and organizations rather than separation. New Evangelical men, in their enthusiasm for credentials and recognition, in their zeal to meet the Modernists on their own turf, trained at the feet of Modernists. The Bible warns that a little leaven leavens the whole lump. The Bible also warns that it is by their good words and fair speeches that false teaches deceive. It is no surprise, then, that the New Evangelical movement was soon influenced by Modernistic thought. New Evangelicalism, with its positive orientation, became immensely popular and spread throughout the old Evangelical world. Large ecumenical parachurch evangelistic ministries, such as the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association and Campus Crusade for Christ and Youth for Christ, wielded massive influence and spread the New Evangelical philosophies far and wide. The result is that most of that which is labeled evangelicalism today is New Evangelical in its positivistic orientation.

The New Evangelical approach to the Bible is very confusing. On the one hand, New Evangelicals usually claim to believe that the Bible is the infallible Word of God. On the other hand, many of them recommend the writings of Modernists and entertain modernistic theories. Large numbers of men who claim to be Evangelical use the historic-critical approach to the Old Testament, which denies the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch. Others entertain the “form criticism” approach to the Gospels, which claims that the authors based the gospels upon various resources such as oral tradition and various unknown documents. Great numbers of Evangelicals have also allowed the term “inspiration” to be cleverly redefined to allow for error. This has been documented in books written by key Evangelical leaders. Consider the following statements:

"A GROWING VANGUARD OF YOUNG GRADUATES OF EVANGELICAL COLLEGES WHO HOLD DOCTORATES FROM NON-EVANGELICAL DIVINITY CENTERS NOW QUESTION OR DISOWN INERRANCY and the doctrine is held less consistently by evangelical faculties. ... Some retain the term and reassure supportive constituencies but nonetheless stretch the term's meaning" (Carl F.H. Henry, "Conflict Over Biblical Inerrancy," *Christianity Today*, May 7, 1976).

"This change of position with respect to the infallibility of the Bible is widespread and has occurred in evangelical denominations, Christian colleges, theological seminaries, publishing houses, and learned societies" (Harold Lindsell, former vice-president and

professor Fuller Theological Seminary and Editor Emeritus of *Christianity Today*, *The Battle for the Bible*, 1976, p. 20).

"Most people outside the evangelical community itself are totally unaware of the profound changes that have occurred within evangelicalism during the last several years—in the movement's understanding of the inspiration and authority of Scripture, in its social concerns, cultural attitudes and ecumenical posture, and in the nature of its emerging leadership. ... evangelical theologians have begun looking at the Bible with a scrutiny reflecting THEIR WIDESPREAD ACCEPTANCE OF THE PRINCIPLES OF HISTORICAL AND LITERARY CRITICISM ... The position—affirming that Scripture is inerrant or infallible in its teaching on matters of faith and conduct but not necessarily in all its assertions concerning history and the cosmos—IS GRADUALLY BECOMING ASCENDANT AMONG THE MOST HIGHLY RESPECTED EVANGELICAL THEOLOGIANS. ... these new trends ... indicate that EVANGELICAL THEOLOGY IS BECOMING MORE CENTRIST, MORE OPEN TO BIBLICAL CRITICISM and more accepting of science and broad cultural analysis. One might even suggest that THE NEW GENERATION OF EVANGELICALS IS CLOSER TO BONHOEFFER, BARTH AND BRUNNER than to Hodge and Warfield on the inspiration and authority of Scripture" (Richard Quebedeaux, author of *The Young Evangelicals* and *The Worldly Evangelicals*, "The Evangelicals: New Trends and Tensions," *Christianity and Crisis*, Sept. 20, 1976, pp. 197-202).

"A SURPRISING ARRAY OF EQUALLY DEDICATED EVANGELICALS IS FORMING TO INSIST THAT ACCEPTANCE OF HISTORIC CHRISTIAN DOCTRINES DOES NOT REQUIRE BELIEF IN AN INERRANT BOOK. ... What has made it a new ball game today is the emergence of a new type of evangelical. These persons accept the cardinal doctrines of Christianity in their full and literal meaning but agree that the higher critics have a point: there are errors in Scripture, and some of its precepts must be recognized as being culturally and historically conditioned" (G. Aiken Taylor, "Is God as Good as His Word?" *Christianity Today*, Feb. 4, 1977).

"WITHIN EVANGELICALISM THERE ARE A GROWING NUMBER WHO ARE MODIFYING THEIR VIEWS ON THE INERRANCY OF THE BIBLE SO THAT THE FULL AUTHORITY OF SCRIPTURE IS COMPLETELY UNDERCUT. But is happening in very subtle ways. Like the snow lying side-by-side on the ridge, the new views on biblical authority often seem at first glance not to be very far from what evangelicals, until just recently, have always believed. But also, like the snow lying side-by-side on the ridge, the new views when followed consistently end up a thousand miles apart. WHAT MAY SEEM LIKE A MINOR DIFFERENCE AT FIRST, IN THE END MAKES ALL THE DIFFERENCE IN THE WORLD ... COMPROMISING THE FULL AUTHORITY OF SCRIPTURE EVENTUALLY AFFECTS WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A CHRISTIAN THEOLOGICALLY and how we live in the full spectrum of human life" (Francis Schaeffer, *The Great Evangelical Disaster*, 1983, p. 44).

"MY MAIN CONCERN IS WITH THOSE WHO PROFESS TO BELIEVE THAT THE BIBLE IS THE WORD OF GOD AND YET BY, WHAT I CAN ONLY CALL, SURREPTITIOUS AND DEVIIOUS MEANS, DENY IT. THIS IS, SURPRISINGLY ENOUGH, A POSITION THAT IS TAKEN WIDELY IN THE EVANGELICAL WORLD.

ALMOST ALL OF THE LITERATURE WHICH IS PRODUCED IN THE EVANGELICAL WORLD TODAY FALLS INTO THIS CATEGORY. In the October 1985 issue of *Christianity Today*, a symposium on Bible criticism was featured. The articles were written by scholars from several evangelical seminaries. NOT ONE OF THE PARTICIPANTS IN THAT SYMPOSIUM IN *CHRISTIANITY TODAY* WAS PREPARED TO REJECT HIGHER CRITICISM. All came to its defense. It became evident that all the scholars from the leading seminaries in this country held to a form of higher criticism. THESE MEN CLAIM TO BELIEVE THAT THE BIBLE IS THE WORD OF GOD. AT THE SAME TIME THEY ADOPT HIGHER CRITICAL METHODS IN THE EXPLANATION OF THE SCRIPTURES" (Herman Hanko, Professor of Church History and New Testament, Protestant Reformed Seminary, *The Battle for the Bible*, 1993, pp. 2, 3).

"At one extreme are those who have recoiled into Anglo-Catholicism in reaction to pietistic subjectivism; at the other are those who have taken their stand on the verities of old-time Fundamentalism as a way of rejecting evangelical softness. BUT IN BETWEEN THESE FAR SHORES LIE THE CHOPPY WATERS THAT MOST EVANGELICALS NOW PLY WITH THEIR BOATS, AND HERE THE WINDS OF MODERNITY BLOW WITH DISCONCERTING FORCE, FRAGMENTING WHAT IT MEANS TO BE EVANGELICAL. This is because evangelicals have allowed their confessional center to dissipate" (David F. Wells, Professor of Historical and Systematic Theology at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, *No Place for the Truth or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?*, 1994, pp. 128, 129).

These testimonies of the apostasy rampant within evangelicalism reveal why it is impossible to trust Evangelical scholarship today.

It is obvious that the Christian world has become permeated with confusion in regard to the Bible. Modernism has captured most mainline denominations. Roman Catholicism, never a friend of Scripture, today is largely denominated by modernistic approaches to the Bible. New Evangelicalism has captured much of the rest. The theories of inspiration held by theologians have continually shifted. *The bottom line is that all unsound theories of inspiration allow for errors in the Bible. Some allow for much error; some allow for a little error; but all allow for error. This identifies a false view of inspiration. If the Scripture is not the perfect inspired Word of God throughout and in every detail, it is not what Jesus Christ and the apostles claimed.* See Appendix 1—Bible Inspiration.

Part I

Suggestions for Dealing with Bible Difficulties

I. The Fact of Bible Difficulties

There are many things in the Bible that can be understood by a child, but there ARE hard passages in the Bible. “And account that the longsuffering of our Lord is salvation; even as our beloved brother Paul also according to the wisdom given unto him hath written unto you; As also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things; IN WHICH ARE SOME THINGS HARD TO BE UNDERSTOOD, WHICH THEY THAT ARE UNLEARNED AND UNSTABLE WREST, as they do also the other Scriptures, unto their own destruction” (2 Peter 3:15-16).

“No well-informed Christian denies that there are certain difficulties and problems connected with the historic doctrine of verbal inspiration. But the existence of such difficulties should not surprise anyone. On the contrary, we should expect them. A revelation coming down from an infinite Mind to finite minds must necessarily involve difficulties. This is true of all Christian doctrine. Take for instance the doctrine of God, or immortality, or the incarnation. There is no Christian doctrine altogether free from intellectual difficulties. (For that matter, there is no scientific doctrine free in this respect.) Once we begin to reject the doctrines of Christianity because they involve some intellectual difficulty, then we shall finally reject them all. But when we have done this, when we have sought refuge in atheism, we shall find ourselves no better off than before. For the intellectual difficulties of unbelief are immensely greater than those of Christian faith. Let us settle one thing right here—we live in a universe of thought, and there is no place in this universe of thought where we can escape from all intellectual difficulties” (Alva J. McClain, *The “Problems” of Verbal Inspiration*).

II. Categories of Bible Difficulties

1. There are difficulties caused by apparent contradictions between numbers. For example, Numbers 25:9 says those who died in the plague were 24,000, but 1 Cor. 10:8 says 23,000 died.
2. There are difficulties caused by apparent contradictions between names. For example, Moses’ father in law is called “Reuel” in Ex. 2:18, “Jethro” in Ex. 3:1, and “Hobab” in Nu. 10:29.
3. There are difficulties caused by apparent disharmonies in the Gospels. For example, Matt. 10:29 mentions two sparrows sold for a farthing, whereas Lk. 12:5 mentions five sparrows sold for two farthings.
4. There are difficulties caused by textual variants. For example, the Received Text has the word “God” in 1 Timothy 3:16, whereas the modern critical text removes this word.

5. There are difficulties caused by apparent doctrinal disharmonies. These problems are largely created by the misapplication of passages by false teachers. Examples are attempts to “prove” that Christ is not God or that baptism is necessary for salvation or that the believer is not eternally secure in Christ.

6. There are difficulties caused by not understanding the biblical culture and times. For example, Exodus 23:19 forbade the Jews to “seethe a kid in his mother’s milk.” This becomes clear when we understand that it was and still is customary for Arabs to stew a lamb in its mother’s milk. It is called *Lebn immu*—“Kid in his mother’s milk.”

7. There are difficulties caused by the incarnation of Christ. For example, John 14:28 says that the Father is greater than Christ. That seeming problem is caused by the fact that Christ took upon himself the form of a servant when he was on earth and this is explained in Phil. 2:7.

III. The Reason for Bible Difficulties

1. The Bible is God’s Word. “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts” (Isaiah 55:8, 9). It is not surprising that the Bible contains things hard to be understood, because it is the revelation of the omniscient, omnipotent, eternal God.

2. We are separated from Bible events by thousands of years and by vast cultural and linguistic differences. God gave the Scriptures for all people of all centuries and He was in control of the time and context of its giving, but at the same time it is not reasonable to expect there will be no problems in understanding the Scriptures.

3. Some things are purposely hidden from the scoffer. Contrary to popular belief, Jesus did not speak in parables to make the truth clear to simple people; He spoke in parables to hide the truth from willful unbelievers (Mat. 13:13-17). God is not mocked; He has ordained that men reap what they sow (Gal. 6:7). He has designed His Word in such a way that those who willfully reject Him are unable to discern the truth properly. George DeHoff wisely observes, “Even when there are several explanations for an alleged discrepancy (any one of which could be the truth) skeptics claim to be unable to find any of them.”

4. Proper Bible understanding requires spiritual perception (1 Cor. 2:12-15; Heb. 5:11-14). It is the unsaved and the spiritually immature who find inconsistencies in the Bible. God has ordained that it be so.

5. God requires man to study (2 Timothy 2:15; Prov. 2:1-6; 25:2). The Bible does not read like a morning newspaper because it is not a morning newspaper! It is the eternal Word of God, and God has ordained that a man must study it diligently or he will not understand it properly. The chief solution to Bible difficulties is diligent, believing STUDY of the Holy Scriptures!

6. The Bible is for all men and all times. It is possible that some things are difficult to understand because they are intended to be better understood by someone else in another situation. Many of the prophetic discourses fall into this category (e.g., Dan. 12:4).

IV. The Authority of the Bible

We approach the Bible as the verbally-inspired, infallible, inerrant Word of God. This is the position held by Bible-believing Christians of all ages. The Second London Confession, 1677, defines this doctrine:

“The Holy Scripture is the only sufficient, certain, and infallible rule of all saving Knowledge, Faith, and Obedience. ... Under the Name of Holy Scripture, or the Word of God written; are now contained all the Books of the Old and New Testament. ... All which are given by the inspiration of God, to be the rule of Faith and Life. ... The Authority of the Holy Scripture for which it ought to be believed dependeth not upon the testimony of any man, or Church; but wholly upon God (who is truth itself) the Author thereof; therefore it is to be received, because it is the Word of God.”

In this Confession, the Bible is called “certain and infallible,” “the Word of God,” “the rule of Faith and Life,” “infallible truth.” We hold the same conviction about biblical inspiration. It is absolutely and totally the Word of God without error. We do not hold this view merely because it is the traditional, historic Christian doctrine, but because (1) the Bible itself claims this (Psalm 12:6-7; 2 Timothy 3:16-17). By my own count, terms such as “thus saith the Lord” appear nearly 2,500 times in Scripture. (2) In a great variety of ways the Bible has proven itself to be the infallible Word of God (e.g., fulfilled prophecy, its truthful statements about man and his world, its power to change lives, its universal application and acceptance, Jesus Christ’s resurrection, etc.). We do not believe the Bible errs in any statement whatsoever, whether it be religious (so-called) or scientific (so-called). If the Bible is undependable in its science, it is certainly not what it claims to be, which is the very Word of God.

V. The Dependability of the English Authorized Version

God has promised to preserve His Word, and we believe we have the preserved Word of God in the English language in the King James Bible. Its underlying text is dependable. Its language is simple and powerful. Its translational techniques produced an accurate rendering of the Greek and Hebrew text. It underwent a process of purification which has never been equaled, beginning with Tyndale’s masterful English translation in 1524 and proceeding through a number of careful, scholarly revisions, culminating in the Authorized Version of 1611. The new versions, with their textual corruptions and linguistic innovations, create far more problems than they solve. The difficulty of understanding the King James Bible can be overcome by a little study. We recommend the *Way of Life Encyclopedia of the Bible & Christianity*. This volume, which is based upon the Authorized Version, contains a comprehensive dictionary of the English Bible, including the definitions of words that have changed meaning. It is available from Way of Life Literature.

VI. The Interpretation of Bible Difficulties

The following are necessary in order to understand the Bible properly:

1. SALVATION (1 Cor. 2:12-16; 1 John 2:20, 27). Those who are unregenerate cannot interpret the Bible correctly; they will find conflicts and problems because they do not have

the indwelling Holy Spirit and therefore do not have a spiritual mind. Before I can understand the Bible properly, I must humble myself before God as a needy sinner and receive Jesus Christ as my only Saviour and Lord. This is how one is born again. Spiritual life is imparted; the darkened mind is enlightened; and the individual is sealed with the Holy Spirit who becomes his spiritual Teacher (Ephesians 1:13; 2:2). "The deepest biblical scholar, if he fails to find Christ, knows less of the real meaning of the gospel than the humblest Christian who is living in the faith of the Son of God" (Pulpit Commentary).

2. FAITH (Heb. 11:6). Many of the emerging church teachers glorify unbelief, but God rewards faith.

3. OBEDIENCE (John 7:17). The Bible is not merely a book to study as an intellectual exercise; it is first and foremost the Word of God to obey. Unless I am saved and walking in obedience to the will of God, I will not grow in knowledge and truth. The Christians at Corinth did not grow properly in understanding because of their carnality and worldliness. "And I, brethren, could not speak unto you as unto spiritual, but as unto carnal, even as unto babes in Christ. I have fed you with milk, and not with meat: for hitherto ye were not able to bear it, neither yet now are ye able" (1 Cor. 3:1, 2). The same was true for the Christians addressed in the book of Hebrews (Heb. 5:11-14). "But strong meat belongeth to them that are of full age, even THOSE WHO BY REASON OF USE HAVE THEIR SENSES EXERCISED to discern both good and evil" (Heb. 5:14). The Lord Jesus Christ taught that the one whose heart is set to obey God is the one who will know true doctrine (John 7:17). A Christian who is worldly and spiritually careless, who is unfaithful to the house of God, who is not busy in the service of the Lord, will not have a strong understanding of biblical truth. Such a one is also vulnerable to the wiles of false teachers, who "by good words and fair speeches deceive the hearts of the simple" (Romans 16:18).

4. DILIGENCE (2 Tim. 2:15; Prov. 2:1-5). If you desire to understand the Bible properly, you must set out to obtain a thorough knowledge of it from beginning to end. You must learn to rightly divide it. You must learn to exercise spiritual discernment. You must obtain the necessary tools and use them diligently. It is one thing to own concordances and commentaries; it is quite another thing to use them! You must apply great diligence in this endeavor. You must be willing to read and study a passage repeatedly. The practice of reading the Bible through at least once per year is important because it keeps the Scriptures fresh in one's mind.

5. PATIENCE AND PERSISTENCE (Proverbs 25:2; John 8:31-32). The Bible is the Word of the eternal God, and it is not possible that we will understand all of it in a short time. It is designed to be the Book of a man's entire life, and no man will ever exhaust its treasures.

6. HUMILITY (Luke 10:21). "What will a pious, obedient, loving child do when he hears the father make a remark which on the surface appears objectionable? Instead of criticizing him and condemning his utterance as wrong, the child will ask him for an explanation. If we find stumbling blocks in the Holy Scriptures, let us take the attitude of such a loving child" (William Arndt).

7. SPIRITUAL PASSION (Prov. 2:3-6). To understand the Bible properly, one must seek God and His truth passionately, "crying out" for understanding.

8. TOOLS. Every workman has his tools, and we have been blessed with some wonderful tools for Bible research in these end times. It was not until the 16th century that the Bible even contained verse divisions, and think of how difficult it would be to study the Bible without verses. Without verses, you could not use a concordance or lexicon or even a detailed commentary. In the last two hundred years, we have been blessed with many other wonderful study tools. The three most important, in our estimation, are these: One, the *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance* of the Authorized Version. This one tool alone, if used diligently, can help the student of the English Bible gain a mastery of its words. Two, the *Treasury of Scripture Knowledge*. The best commentary on the Bible is the Bible, and the *Treasury* consists of hundreds of thousands of cross references which enable the Bible student to compare Scripture with Scripture. Three, the *Way of Life Encyclopedia of the Bible & Christianity*. In our estimation this is the best Bible dictionary available. It is based upon the King James Bible and is written by a Fundamental Baptist. All of the words in the KJV which have changed meaning are defined. Not only does it contain a comprehensive dictionary of Bible terms and doctrines, but it is a handbook on such topics as prophecy, the denominations and cults, social issues, the church, Christian living, Bible versions, and Old Testament typology. [For more about helpful Bible study tools, see the article "Foundational Bible Study Tools" under the Bible Study section of the End Times Apostasy Database at the Way of Life Literature web site - <http://www.wayoflife.org>.]

9. SOUND TEACHERS. "And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ" (Ephesians 4:11, 12). "Remember them which have the rule over you, who have spoken unto you the word of God: whose faith follow, considering the end of their conversation" (Hebrews 13:7). God has given gifted men to the churches for the edification of the saints, and it is crucial that Christians benefit from this wisdom. It is not God's will for a Christian to be a "lone maverick." The biblical pattern is for a Christian to join himself to a sound Bible-believing church. That is emphasized throughout the New Testament. It is particularly in the church that the Christian is to hear the Word of God. Seven times in Revelation chapters two and three we read that we are to "hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches." We believe there is a special sense in which God speaks to the believer in his own assembly through his own pastors. As the Lord had a special message for each of the churches of Asia Minor in the first century, he has a special message for each church today. Each church is a body, and the members are to be taught and edified together by the Lord through the pastors and teachers. In addition to this, the Christian can avail himself of other sound teachings through books and tapes. He should take advantage of every avenue of sound teaching available to him, but the first place for sound teaching is in his own church body, assuming, of course, that the church is doctrinally sound and spiritually healthy.

10. THE LITERAL SENSE of Scripture must rule. If the literal sense of the Bible is not correct, no one can be certain what meaning is correct. The Bible contains symbolism and poetry, but, as in normal language, these are identifiable and can be interpreted in context and by comparing Scripture with Scripture. A wise man said, "If the literal meaning of Scripture makes good sense, seek no other sense."

11. CONTEXT is all important in defining words and passages. Consider the alleged contradiction between James 2:24 and Romans 3:24 and 4:5. The apparent contradiction between James and Paul disappears when we consider the context. Paul was addressing the subject of salvation, of how a lost man can be made right with God, and he tells us that the sinner must trust exclusively in the grace of Jesus Christ for salvation. James, on the other hand, is addressing the subject of Christian service, of how a saved man can please God in this life. He tells us that true faith is evident by works. There is no contradiction if one considers the context of each statement. Paul is addressing the unsaved sinner's perspective. The sinner must trust Jesus Christ exclusively for salvation; he must reject his own filthy works (Isaiah 64:6) and all self-righteousness (Romans 9:30-33) and lean totally upon the Lord Jesus Christ, trusting wholly in His perfect and complete redemption. James, on the other hand, is addressing the Christian's perspective. The Christian claims to have faith in Jesus Christ. He is therefore to diligently serve God and to walk in His commandments. Those who live in rebellion and who ignore the Word of God demonstrate that they do not possess true saving faith, that they are deceiving themselves.

12. CLEAR PASSAGES interpret the less clear. The overall teaching of the Bible cannot be overthrown by single passages. For example, some use Acts 2:38 to teach that baptism is necessary for salvation in spite of the fact that hundreds of verses teach that salvation is by faith alone through God's grace alone, and that works do not save us. Many other verses also teach that baptism is merely a symbolic act which follows salvation. Acts 2:38 must not be interpreted privately, by itself, but in light of the teaching of the entire Bible. Thus we see that the baptism for remission of sins means baptism *because* one's sins have been remitted by faith in Jesus Christ.

13. PARABLES do not define doctrine, but illustrate doctrine. It is a mistake to build doctrine upon a parable. Parables illustrate doctrine and usually have one central teaching. This is illustrated in the parable in Luke 18:1-8. The parable has one main point: "men ought always to pray, and not to faint" (verse 1). It teaches the importance of perseverance in prayer. If one tried to look deeply into the parable to find other teachings, he could go into error, because the parable contains more contrasts with reality than similarities. The judge depicts God, and the woman depicts the believer coming to God in prayer. Consider the contrasts between the woman and the judge and the believer and God: (1) She came to an unjust judge; we come to the righteous Father (Jn. 17:25). (2) She was kept at a distance; we come boldly (Heb. 4:16). (3) She had no friend to plead her case; we have an Advocate (1 John 2:1). (4) She seldom had access; we always have access. (5) She had nothing to encourage her; we have many promises (1 Pet. 1:4). (6) She was no relation to the judge; God is our Father (Rom. 8:15). (7) The judge only complied because he was wearied by the woman's persistence; God answers our prayers because He loves us (Rom. 8:32). The parable was not given to teach doctrine about God or salvation or the Christian life; it was given to illustrate one main truth about prayer. This is true for all of the parables, and failure to understand this can lead to all sorts of error. See Appendix 3 for more about the interpretation of Bible parables.

14. CAUTION solves many seeming discrepancies. Read the Bible very carefully and note every detail. Many seeming discrepancies are solved in this manner. (1) Do not depend on your memory. Look up the passages in question and pay close attention to every word. (2)

Demand the precise details of any challenge that is made to the Bible's accuracy. If someone challenges the Bible, require that they be absolutely specific in their challenge, so the exact problem can be examined. It is not enough for someone to claim, for example, that there are contradictions or problems with the genealogies of Matthew. Determine the precise nature of the alleged contradictions or problems.

We dealt with rules for the interpretation of the Bible in the Advanced Bible Studies Series course *How to Study the Bible*, which is available from Way of Life Literature.

SAMPLE

Part II

Hard Passages Commentary

Genesis

GENESIS 1:1-2 — *“In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.”*

IS THERE A GAP OF TIME BETWEEN GENESIS 1:1 AND GENESIS 1:2?

The following is from *Willmington’s Guide to the Bible* (used by permission):

Did something horrible take place between the first and second verse in the Bible? Many believe something terrible indeed occurred, and that something was the fall of Satan. The following arguments are offered to support this.

1. Supporters of the gap theory say the phrase in Genesis 1:2, “without form and void” (Hebrew: “tohu wa-bohu”), appears elsewhere in Isaiah 34:11; 45:18 and speaks of judgment. However, in other passages it simply means space. (See Job 26:7; Deut. 32:10; Job 6:18; 12:24; Ps. 107:40.)

2. Supporters of the gap theory say the verb translated “was” in Genesis 1:2 (Hebrew: “hayetha”) should be translated “became.” Scriptural evidence, however, would deny this. The Hebrew verb “hayetha” is found 264 times in the Pentateuch, and of these, in 258 instances the word is correctly translated “was.” See, for example, Jonah 3:3.

3. Supporters of the gap theory say there is a difference between the verbs “bara” (“created,” Genesis 1:1) and “asah” (“made,” Genesis 1:7). But to the contrary, these verbs are used synonymously. Note:

“And God created [bara] the great whales...” (1:21).

“And God made [asah] the beast of the earth...” (1:25).

“Let us make [asah] man in our image...” (1:26).

“So God created [bara] man in his own image...” (1:27).

4. According to supporters of the gap theory, the “darkness” in Genesis 1:2 is symbolic of evil. This is not always the case, though, as seen in Psalm 104:20, 24: “Thou makest darkness, and it is night, wherein all the beasts of the forest do creep forth...”

Although traces of this theory can be found in Christian writings as early as the fourth century A.D., it was not until the ministries of Thomas Chalmers, Scottish scholar, and George H. Pember (1876) that the theory really caught on. In 1917 C.I. Scofield included it in his notes and its popularity was assured. These last two dates are significant, for by 1880 Darwin’s theory of evolution, as propounded in his book, *On the Origin of Species*, was universally accepted by the scientific world. This theory taught that the world was many millions of years old, as indicated by the vast fossil record and the claims of uniformitarian geology. The

Christian theologian was then confronted with a serious problem. How could all this be reconciled with Genesis 1? An answer was found—uncounted millions of years could be conveniently tucked into that bottomless hole which was thought to exist between Genesis 1:1 and 1:2. Thus the gap theory may be viewed in part as an attempt by the Christian theologian to appease the non-Christian evolutionist.

In summary, the gap theory faces a real problem in the New Testament, for Paul states in Romans 5:12 and 8:20-22 that man's sin brought about death, even of animals. But the gap theory would have Adam walking on top of a gigantic fossilized animal graveyard!

One may thus conclude that Genesis 1:1 is a summary statement for the first two chapters. In this verse God tells us what he originally did. In the remaining verses he then informs us how he did it.

IN CONCLUSION:

THE THREEFOLD PROBLEM OF THE GAP THEORY

1. *It is Unscientific.* The gap theory was (in part) a Christian attempt to reconcile the creation account with the long periods of time in the theory of evolution. But evolution itself as a theory is totally unscientific, defying the second law of thermodynamics [that the universe is in the process of decay and decline rather than in a process of evolving upwardly].

2. *It is Unscriptural.* The gap theory would describe Adam walking atop a gigantic fossilized animal graveyard. Paul, however, in Romans 5:12 and 8:20-22 states that man's sin brought about death, even of animals.

3. *It is Unnecessary.* The most natural interpretation of Gen. 1 and 2 is taking it at face value, without addition or subtraction. Gen. 1:1 thus becomes a summary statement of creation. In the first verse God tells us what he did. In the remaining verses He tells us how He did it (H.L. Willmington, *Willmington's Guide to the Bible*, Tyndale House Publishers, copyright 1984, used by permission).

GENESIS 1:26-28 — *“And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth. So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them. And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.”*

What Is the Image of God in Man?

1. The image of God is seen in man's moral nature. Man was created after the moral attributes of God, righteousness and holiness (Eph. 4:24; Col. 3:10). “And in what did this image of God consist? Not in the erect form or features of man, not in his intellect, for the devil and his angels are, in this respect, far superior; not in his immortality, for he has not, like God, a past as well as a future eternity of being; but in the moral dispositions of his soul, commonly called original righteousness (Ec. 7:29). As the new creation is only a restoration of

this image, the history of the one throws light on the other; and we are informed that it is renewed after the image of God in knowledge, righteousness, and true holiness” (*Jamieson-Fausset-Brown Commentary*). “He was upright, Ec. 7:29. He had an habitual conformity of all his natural powers to the whole will of God. His understanding saw divine things clearly, and there were no errors in his knowledge: his will complied readily and universally with the will of God; without reluctance: his affections were all regular, and he had no inordinate appetites or passions: his thoughts were easily fixed to the best subjects, and there was no vanity or ungovernableness in them. And all the inferior powers were subject to the dictates of the superior. Thus holy, thus happy, were our first parents, in having the image of God upon them. But how art thou fallen, O son of the morning? How is this image of God upon man defaced! How small are the remains of it, and how great the ruins of it! The Lord renew it upon our souls by his sanctifying grace!” (*John Wesley’s Notes*). 2. The image of God is seen in man’s creation as a spiritual being. God is a spirit (Jn. 4:24). 3. The image of God is seen in man’s ability to reproduce the very image of God in his offspring, unlike angels who cannot reproduce themselves (Gen. 1:27-28; Matt. 22:30). 4. The image of God is seen in man’s authority (Gen. 1:28). Man is not a mere robot; he was created with authority over one of the crown jewels of God’s creation, the earth. 5. The image of God is evident in man’s amazing creativity and inventiveness (Gen. 1:28).

Does This Mean That Man Is God or Is a Little God?

1. Man is not God now because he cannot accept worship (Matt. 4:10; Ex. 34:14; Is. 42:8; Acts 14:11-15), and when man worships himself he is condemned as an idolater (Rom. 1). 2. Man never will be God because he will always be subject to God (Rev. 21:3; 22:3).

GENESIS 2:4— *“These are the generations of the heavens and of the earth when they were created, in the day that the LORD God made the earth and the heavens.”*

Many Bible interpreters claim there is a contradiction between the accounts of creation in Genesis one and Genesis two. They point out, for example, that Genesis 1 says the animals were created on the sixth day before the man was made (Gen. 1:24-31), whereas Genesis two *seems to* say that God made the man and then made the animals and brought them to him to be named (Gen. 2:18-19).

1. The apparent contradiction disappears when one understands that the two accounts are meant to be complementary. They give two different perspectives of the account of creation. Genesis 1 is the floodlight, whereas Genesis 2 is the spotlight. Genesis 1 gives the big picture and describes the general events that occurred in the six days of creation. Genesis 2 focuses on man’s creation and was not written to give a specific account of the days of creation. Genesis 1 tells us precisely when the animals were made, whereas Genesis 2 shows the association between the animals and man and tells us what happened after the animals and man were made. Genesis 1 tells us that God made man male and female, and Genesis 2 tells us exactly how this was done.

2. What about the different style of writing found in Genesis 1 and 2? The theological modernist believes the different styles of writing that are found in various parts of the Pentateuch are evidence that they were written by different pens, but this is an unnecessary

deduction. “In reading this chapter one is impressed, even in the translation, by a marked difference in style between it and the first chapter of Genesis. How, then, do we account for this great difference in style? A sufficient and simple answer is that in every chapter the style corresponds to the subject matter. ... The first chapter of Genesis consists of terse, abrupt, sententious sentences, each as rugged as a granite mountain. The nature of the subject calls for that style. The second chapter, following the usual method of Genesis, takes up certain items tersely stated in the first chapter and enlarges or expounds the statement. This calls for a smoother and more flowing style” (B.H. Carroll).

GENESIS 2:17— “... for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die.”

Since Adam did not die physically that day, it has been alleged that this is a mistake in the Bible. In fact, though, Adam *did* die that day. Death means separation, and there are three deaths spoken of in Scripture. There is *spiritual death*, which is separation from God. There is *physical death*, which is separation of the spirit from the body. And there is *eternal death*, which is eternal separation from God and punishment in the lake of fire. Adam died spiritually the very day that he disobeyed God. His spirit died and he became separated from God (“dead in trespasses and sins,” Ephesians 2:1), and every individual who is born into the world is born in this frightful condition. This is why Jesus said that we must be born again in order to be saved (John 3:3). We must be born spiritually and receive spiritual life from God.

GENESIS 2:7-9,18-19 — “And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul. And the LORD God planted a garden eastward in Eden; and there he put the man whom he had formed. And out of the ground made the LORD God to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight, and good for food; the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of knowledge of good and evil. ... And the LORD God said, It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him an help meet for him. And out of the ground the LORD God formed every beast of the field, and every fowl of the air; and brought them unto Adam to see what he would call them: and whatsoever Adam called every living creature, that was the name thereof.”

There are many Bible interpreters today who claim there is a contradiction between the accounts of creation in Genesis one and Genesis two. Genesis one says the animals were created on the sixth day, before the man was made (Gen. 1:24-31). Genesis two says God made the man and then made the animals and brought them to him to be named (Gen. 2:18, 19). The seeming contradiction disappears when one understands that the two accounts are meant to be complementary. They give two different perspectives to the account of creation. In chapter one the Holy Spirit looks on the big picture and at the general events which occurred in the six days of creation. In chapter two He focuses in on man’s creation and gives us the details of how man was actually formed and how there came to be male and female. Genesis 2:19 does not say that God made the animals after He made the man. It simply states that He made the animals for the man. Genesis 1:24-25 tells us precisely when the

animals were made. The supplemental information in Genesis 2 does not contradict this, but complements it.

GENESIS 2:7 — *“And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.”*

Seventh-day Adventists and others use this verse to support their doctrine of soul sleep. They claim that man is a soul, that the soul is the entire man, and that man does not have a soul which is a separate part of him and which leaves the body at death. They believe death is a cessation of man’s existence until the resurrection. They also deny that the soul of man is eternal. They claim the unsaved will be burned up and consumed in the lake of fire and will not endure eternal torment.

This doctrine is a perversion of Scripture. False teachers build their doctrine on verses which appear to support them and they bend the rest of Scripture to fit their pet definitions. The word “soul” has different meanings in Scripture. Sometimes it refers to the whole man (Gen. 2:7). Often, though, it refers to a conscious, immaterial part of man which exists beyond death apart from the body. Bible words must be defined by the context in which they are found, since almost all Bible words have various usages and definitions in different contexts. This is true with words in normal language usage in or out of the Bible.

OLD TESTAMENT TEACHING ON THE SOUL. O.T. examples of the soul as an immaterial, conscious part of the man are seen in Gen. 35:18 and 1 Ki. 17:21-22. In Gen. 35 the death of Rachel is recorded, and we learn that her soul departed when she died. “... as her soul was in departing, (for she died)...” In 1 Ki. 17 it is recorded that a young boy died and was raised again through Elijah’s ministry. The Bible plainly says his soul departed and returned again to him: “... O Lord my God, I pray thee, let this child’s soul come into him again. And the Lord heard the voice of Elijah; and the soul of the child came into him again, and he revived” (1 Ki. 17:21, 22). Here we see that even in the Old Testament the Bible teaches that man has a soul which departs at death.

NEW TESTAMENT TEACHING ON THE SOUL. In the N.T., the word “soul” is also used to describe a spiritual part of man distinct from his body. “... I pray God your whole spirit and soul and body be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Th. 5:23). Here we are told that man has three parts. Paul did not say man IS a soul; he says man HAS a soul.

See Job 14:10-12 for commentary on death as a journey. See Job 27:3 for commentary on man’s spirit which is a distinct part of him which departs the body at death.

GENESIS 3:15 — *“And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel.”*

Roman Catholic theologians have used this verse to support the dogma that Mary participated in salvation. The Catholic Douay Rheims version mistranslated the verse in this way: “I will put enmities between thee and the woman, and thy seed and her seed: she shall

crush thy head, and thou shalt lie in wait for her heel.” Thus instead of Mary’s seed, the Lord Jesus Christ, bruising the serpent’s head, this Roman Catholic translation has Mary herself bruising his head. As noted by former Catholic James McCarthy, director of Good News for Catholics: “This imagery, however, is based upon a faulty translation of Genesis 3:15 from the Latin texts of the Vulgate Bible, the official Bible of the Roman Catholic Church since the fourth century. Until recently the Latin Vulgate served as the base text for all Roman Catholic translations, including the English Douay Rheims Bible. In the Hebrew text, the original language of the Old Testament, the subject of Genesis 3:15 is masculine, not feminine. ... Though recent Roman Catholic translations have corrected the error, Roman Catholic theology remains uncorrected” (McCarthy, *The Gospel According to Rome*, p. 209). Hebrews 2:14 confirms what Genesis 3:15 predicts, that the Lord Jesus Christ (not Mary) through his death destroyed the devil.

GENESIS 3:17-19 — *“And unto Adam he said, Because thou hast hearkened unto the voice of thy wife, and hast eaten of the tree, of which I commanded thee, saying, Thou shalt not eat of it: cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life; thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee; and thou shalt eat the herb of the field; in the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.”*

Following is a question we received from a student in our gospel correspondence school: “I understand that man received the penalty of death due to his disobedience to God. But if we look around, every living being, both animals and plants, die. Even non-living things like galaxies, mountains, etc. once come into existence and finally disappear, which can be compared with death. Have all of them disobeyed God?”

That is a good question and there is a two-fold answer to it, as follows.

First, the Bible says that Adam was the head of creation and when he sinned, he fell from that position and the entire creation was thrown into turmoil. Because of Adam’s sin, the entire creation will die. Currently the creation is in pain because of man’s sin. “For we know that the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now” (Romans 8:22). Jesus Christ came not only to redeem mankind but the creation as well. Ultimately, the old creation will be destroyed and there will be a new heaven and a new earth. That is the teaching of the following verses in 2 Peter 3:10-13 and Revelation 21-22.

Second, the Bible teaches us that God cursed the ground because of man’s sin. This is the cause of so much of the trouble that we have in this life. Sometimes it seems like the world is against us, and in fact it is, and that is because of God’s curse. This is what we see in Genesis 3:17-19.

GENESIS 4:15 — *“And the LORD said unto him, Therefore whosoever slayeth Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold. And the LORD set a mark upon Cain, lest any finding him should kill him.”*

One question which arises in regard to Cain’s punishment is, Why didn’t the Lord require the death penalty from Cain as He required from murderers later in man’s history (compare Genesis 9:5, 6). The following is an interesting explanation for this:

“The point which we require to see clearly is, that no law for the punishment of a crime can be promulgated until the crime has been committed. ... We act precisely on this principle in family life. There is no house law concerning some kind of fault, because no member of the family has committed it. But one of the boys does the wrong; and at once a law is made, with appropriate threat of punishment. But no parent could fairly make the first sinner bear the penalty which he fixed only after the sin was committed. It may be necessary to inflict some punishment, but not the severe one which was henceforth to exert a graciously deterrent effect. This should be applied to the case of Cain” (Tuck).

GENESIS 6:1-4 — *“And it came to pass, when men began to multiply on the face of the earth, and daughters were born unto them, That the sons of God saw the daughters of men that they were fair; and they took them wives of all which they chose. And the LORD said, My spirit shall not always strive with man, for that he also is flesh: yet his days shall be an hundred and twenty years. There were giants in the earth in those days; and also after that, when the sons of God came in unto the daughters of men, and they bare children to them, the same became mighty men which were of old, men of renown.”*

The attempt to identify “the sons of God” in this passage has produced considerable variety of opinion through the centuries. There are three common interpretations: (1) angels, (2) the godly line of Seth, (3) kings and aristocrats. We will consider each of these views.

View # 1 — The sons of God were angels

The following support is offered for this view: (a) The term “sons of God” is elsewhere used of angels in the Old Testament (Job 1:6; 2:1; 38:7). We must hasten to add that the term “son of God” is also used of Adam (Luke 3:38). (b) It is possible that the New Testament refers to this event in 2 Peter 2:4 and Jude 6-7. Jude describes the fallen angels as having “left their first estate” and he connects their sin with that of sexually immoral Sodom and Gomorrha. “And the angels which kept not their first estate, but left their own habitation, he hath reserved in everlasting chains under darkness unto the judgment of the great day. Even as Sodom and Gomorrha, and the cities about them in like manner, giving themselves over to fornication, and going after strange flesh, are set forth for an example, suffering the vengeance of eternal fire.” This description appears to fit the events of Genesis 6. Pastor David Moore of Belfast, Northern Ireland, comments on 2 Peter 2:4 and Jude 6-7: “Angels who were mingling the supernatural world with the natural could certainly be accused of ‘not keeping their first estate and leaving their own habitation.’ Also, we add in support of this view 2 Peter 2:4. ‘For if God

spared not the angels that sinned, but cast them down to hell, and delivered them into chains of darkness, to be reserved unto judgment.’ Clearly not all fallen angels are in hell today, so some must have been made a special example of. What was their sin? It can only be that given in Jude 6-7 and Genesis 6.” (c) The union between the sons of God and the daughters of men appears to have produced giants (Gen. 6:4). If indeed this was the case, it appears that these strange offspring were destroyed in the flood of Noah’s day, and the fallen angels were consigned to imprisonment in “everlasting chains” (Jude 6).

The arguments for the angel view have merit and I once held that view, but I have come to reject it. Following are the problems with it. (a) The Bible says angels do not marry (Matt. 22:30). Yet Genesis 6 says the “sons of God” “took wives.” It does not say that the “sons of God” merely had sexual relations with women, If they were demonic spirits, they would have had to have taken permanent physical bodies and settled down into marital relationships in this world. I do not believe the Bible taken as a whole supports this possibility. Nowhere else in Scripture are we told that angels cohabit with the human race. (b) The Bible says that kind reproduces only after its own kind (Gen. 1). For the angels to be able to cohabit with human beings and to reproduce offspring would appear to be contrary to this law of nature. (c) Genesis 6:4 does not specifically say that the giants were the product of the union between the sons of God and the daughters of men. The verse indicates, in fact, that the giants were already in the land. The union between the sons of God and the daughters of men is specifically said to have produced men of renown. Thus there is no reference to an unnatural product of this union. (d) Even if the offspring were giants, this does not necessitate the view that the sons of God were angels or that the union produced something monstrous and unnatural. Giants are mentioned in the Old Testament after the Flood without any hint that they were the product of an angelic-human union (Deut. 2:20; 3:11). Giants and midgets are both possible within the genetic limitation of mankind, just as giant dogs and tiny dogs are possible within the genetic limitations of the dog family. Currently, the shortest man in the world is about two feet tall and the tallest is over eight feet. The tallest man in modern recorded history was Robert Wadlow, at 8 feet 11 inches (died in 1940). Goliath was 9 feet nine inches (1 Sam. 17:4, the cubit was 18 inches). Og of Bashan had a bed that was 13.5 feet long (Deut. 3:11). (e) While the term “sons of God” does refer to angels in the Old Testament, it appears only to refer to good angels, not fallen angels. This would appear to argue against the use of “sons of God” in Genesis 6:2, 4 being a reference to fallen angels. (f) As for Jude 6-7, it does not connect these fallen angels with Genesis 6. Jude does not tell us who the fallen angels are. He merely says that they rebelled and left their own habitation. A habitation is not a marital state; it is a place. The angels’ own habitation refers to heaven where the holy angels lived before the Satanic rebellion. According to Jude 6, some of the rebel angels are in chains, whereas we know that others are roaming the earth today with Satan (1 Pet. 5:8). We don’t know for sure why some of them were put in chains and some weren’t. (f) Genesis 6:4 doesn’t say that the giants were half-men/half-angels. It says they were “men.”

View # 2 — The sons of God were the godly line of Seth

Matthew Henry describes this popular view: “The sons of God (that is, the professors of religion, who were called by the name of the Lord, and called upon that name), married the daughters of men, that is, those that were profane, and strangers to God and godliness. The

posterity of Seth did not keep by themselves, as they ought to have done, both for the preservation of their own purity and in detestation of the apostasy. They intermingled themselves with the excommunicated race of Cain.”

The following support is offered for this view: (a) Genesis traces two genealogies in chapters four and five, the godly line through Seth and the ungodly line through Cain. Genesis 4:26 says that the line of Seth was the line of men who called upon the Lord. The Bible also speaks of the two seeds—the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent (Gen. 3:15). According to this view, the sons of God refers to the godly lineage which took daughters of the ungodly families and thereby intermingled the two seed. Since a little leaven leavens the whole lump, the entire human race quickly became corrupt because of the lack of separation. (b) The sons of God could not have been angels because of Matthew 22:30 and the law of kind reproducing after kind. The conclusion is that the sons of God must have been men. (c) While it is true that the term “sons of God” refers to angels in the book of Job, it appears only to refer to good angels. Thus for “sons of God” in Genesis 6 to describe fallen angels is unprecedented in Scripture. (d) The flow of the context from Genesis 4-6 describes the downward progress of the human race, and to insert something about angels into this context would be peculiar.

View # 3 -- The sons of God were men who were possessed by demons

I believe it is possible that demons inhabited or possessed men and this resulted in great wickedness and confusion. Thus, demons did not have direct sexual relations with women but they controlled wicked men and thereby corrupted individual families and society at large as a whole. The result was what we read of in Genesis 6:5. This fits with what Paul says in Ephesians 2:2.

Each view has difficulties, and it is impossible to say for sure which one is true, but the main lessons of the first few verses of Genesis 6 are as follows:

If the sons of God are angels, the chief lesson is that God hates unnatural sexual relationships, no matter if it is men with women outside of marriage, or men with men, or women with women, or men with angels. It is a warning to this present immoral generation that believes it is free to pursue any form of perversion as long as it “feels good” and as long as the partners “love one another.”

If the sons of God are the godly line of Seth who intermarried with the ungodly line of Cain, the chief lesson is the danger of mixing truth with error, godliness with ungodliness. It teaches us the importance of the Bible’s command to “come out from among them, and be ye separate” (2 Cor. 6:14-18). The main reason that churches are ruined is that the Christians do not separate from the world and are therefore corrupted by the world and the spiritual power of the church is destroyed.