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COMMON ERRORS IN BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION EXPOSED

BY BOB DEWAAY

“Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, handling accurately the word of truth.” (2Timothy 2:15)

The Bible, history’s most published, studied, translated and quoted book, is also its most misused and misinterpreted book. Cults and false religions use it to their own ends and others simply misinterpret it. That this occurs so often leads many to assume the Bible has no clear meaning. This is a false assumption. That any given passage is misunderstood, purposely or otherwise, does not demonstrate that the author of the passage had no clear meaning in mind. Nor does it follow that the readers cannot discern this meaning. In this article we will expose common errors in Biblical interpretation and show how to avoid them.

After Jesus rose from the dead, one of His first recorded acts was to interpret Scripture: *“And beginning with Moses and with all the prophets, He explained to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures” (Luke 24:27)*. The Greek word translated “explained” in this verse is a form of the verb *diermeneo* from which our English word “hermeneutics” is derived.¹ Clearly the proper interpretation of the Scriptures was important to Jesus and His apostles. Conversely, the failure to interpret Scripture properly is condemned in the New Testament: *“[A]nd regard the patience of our Lord to be salvation; just as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given him, wrote to you, as also in all his letters, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things*

hard to understand, which the untaught and unstable distort, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures, to their own destruction” (2Peter 3:15,16). Notice that Peter addresses two problems: being untaught and unstable. It is ironic that in our day many consider ignorance to be bliss when it comes to studies such as hermeneutics. They mock Biblical scholarship as if study were inimical to faith. These are the ones about whom Peter warns, and today many of them can be heard preaching on TV.

The basic idea in hermeneutics is that the author’s meaning is to control our interpretation. God the Holy Spirit inspired the human writers of Scripture, who used their own languages in their historical setting to convey their meaning. The job of the interpreter is to come to a clear understanding of that meaning. This means, most importantly, that we love the truth and have a heart to learn, even if what we learn is not what we hoped for or expected. When Jesus explained the Scriptures on the road to Emmaus, he told these disciples what they had not hoped for nor expected: that it was necessary for Messiah to suffer (Luke 24:26). Yet, properly interpreted, this is what the Scriptures taught.

Errors in Biblical interpretation have existed for centuries. Since they are common, we can identify them, learn from them and thus avoid them

in the future. Some of these errors have spawned huge movements. For example, the allegorical method, promoted by Origen (who taught many other errors), became the basis for the Roman Catholic church’s use of Scripture.² At the other extreme, hyper-literalism is commonly used by Mormonism to make claims such as that God has a literal body that looks just like a male person. Let us examine some of these errors and consider how to avoid them.

FAILURE TO CONSIDER THE CONTEXT

Imagine that someone read you one sentence out of the middle of a large book you had never read before. How likely would it be that you could properly understand the author’s meaning? If it were a novel you would not know who any of the characters were, what had happened to them previously, or what the plot was about. It would be an impossible task, one that we normally would never do. Yet often this is how the Bible is read. Since it is laid out with verse numbers (which have been added by editors, they were not in the original), we often falsely assume each verse is a little literary work of its own, disconnected from anything else. However, with no other information, it would be just as unlikely we would understand a single verse pulled out of the Bible as we would understand a sentence taken out of the middle of a novel. If we have a shared body of information, study the whole of Scripture, understand the Jewish background of the Bible, and understand the setting of each book of the Bible, then a verse quoted from a given book will make sense to us. Yet many never gain this information.

The context of a verse exists at

various levels — textual, literary and historical. The first is its immediate textual context. A word is found in a sentence, a sentence in a paragraph and a paragraph in a chapter, etc. Remembering that the chapter and verse designations were not in the original, one must read the entire section, preferably the whole book, before considering the meaning of a verse. This is merely treating the Bible as one would any other piece of literature.

It does not follow from the fact that the Bible is God's inspired Word that it has some mystical, unconventional way of communicating. For example, "You shall not steal," carries the same meaning if God says it as it does if said by a proprietor of a store. The fact that God's inspired Word says it lends the phrase more authority and assures its validity, but it doesn't change the meaning of the phrase. People err in assuming that because the Holy Spirit inspired the words of Scripture those words have some hidden, secret, mystical meaning. This is not the case. The Bible follows the same grammatical and literary conventions as other Jewish literature of its time. Its uniqueness is in its inerrancy and divine inspiration, not in how it is to be read and interpreted. So we must always consider a passage in its immediate grammatical context and not isolate it, looking for some obscure, cryptic meaning.

Another factor is a passage's literary context. What I mean by this is that a verse from the Book of Proverbs should be treated as the type of literature it is, wisdom literature. Whereas a passage from Kings should be treated as historical narrative. The Bible is a collection of different books, written over many centuries. It contains various types of literature. Just as we would distinguish a written history of the United States from a technical journal on auto mechanics, we must treat a gospel as a different type of literature than an epistle. Common errors in interpretation result from a failure to do this. For example, when reading history, if the Bible says that so and so did this, it does not necessarily follow that it was good or bad. If the inspired account says that

David arranged for Uriah to be killed, it follows that this surely happened. That the Bible tells about this action is not an endorsement of it. In this case the Bible makes it clear it was wrong. In many instances the historical narrative does not comment on the moral quality of someone's act, but merely tells us about it. We may have to look elsewhere in the Bible, for example in didactic (teaching) sections, to find out whether such an act is good or evil.

For example Saul consulted the witch of Endor and Samuel was summoned (**1 Samuel 28:7-16**). It does not follow that the Bible endorses necromancy or that those who practice such things normally do contact the dead. On the contrary, the Bible forbids this practice (**Deuteronomy 18:10**). The passage in 1 Samuel gives us the historical record of Saul's sin. The teaching section of the Bible tells us that it is a sin. Often the historical sections do comment on the moral qualities of actions, but not always. The important issue is that we recognize the different types of literature (genre) and give this due consideration when interpreting a passage.

Another level of context is the historical context. A common error is to read contemporary ideas and issues into a situation in which they did not exist. I recently read an article about music for a Christian worship service. The article was based on this passage: "*Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord*" (**Colossians 3:16**). The writer of this article took the passage to mean we should sing songs that are the Psalms put to music, hymns such as found in hymnals, and contemporary songs and choruses. The problem is, the only one of those categories that existed when Paul wrote to the Colossians were Psalms put to music. They didn't have "How Great Thou Art" in the first century! Paul could hardly have been suggesting that the Colossians sing some of their music from 19th and 20th century hymnals.

The most blatant and common

example of failing to consider the historical context is the failure to acknowledge that the Bible, Old and New Testaments, is a Jewish book. It contains many Jewish idioms whose meaning was clear to the early Jewish readers but often misunderstood by contemporary readers. We need to educate ourselves about the Hebrew background to Scriptures. For example, a common Jewish idiom used throughout the Bible is the phrase "son(s) of . . ." Rather than use an adjective, as we would, the Jews would say, for example, "sons of light" (**1 Thessalonians 5:5**). This means "characterized by."

An example of a heresy that arose from mis-understanding this usage is the "serpent's seed" teaching of the Latter Rain movement of the late 1940's. The teaching was that Satan had sexual intercourse with Eve and produced the human race, as taught by a man named William Brahmam. Where do you get something like that? From passages such as this: "*You are of your father the devil, and you want to do the desires of your father. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth because there is no truth in him. Whenever he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies*" (**John 8:44**). This is an example of the Hebrew way of speaking of being the son of what one is characterized by. It was never meant to be taken that either the Jews or people in general are literal descendants of Satan. It would be to say that when we lie we are being "devilish." False teachers prey on ignorance and mislead the uninformed.

There are other historical matters that help us understand Scripture. These include geography, political structures of the time, customs of other peoples with whom the Jews interacted, etc. For an example of how this type of information helps us understand particular passages, see Ryan Habbena's article in this issue of CIC.

A final word needs to be said about context. The Bible is a unity, though written by dozens of authors over many centuries, the Holy Spirit inspired it all. The Bible has an amazingly clear and consistent message. This serves as part of the evidence for its

inspiration. Therefore, when interpreting a passage, we must consider how our proposed interpretation fits with the whole counsel of God as revealed throughout the Bible. For example, there are many passages that make it clear that Jesus was human, and descended from the lineage of David. Yet it does not follow from passages that teach this that Jesus was **only** human. Many other passages teach that He is God. The whole counsel of God on the matter is that Jesus is fully human and fully divine. This truth must inform our interpretation of any particular verse that speaks to us about Christ.

Satan's use of Scripture in the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness serves as an illustration of the importance of the whole counsel of God. Satan quoted Psalm 91:11, "*For He will give His angels charge concerning you, To guard you in all your ways.*" (Luke 4:10). Examining only Psalm 91 would show that yes, it is a promise of God's protection for His people. However, Satan urged Jesus to take the foolish action of throwing Himself from the temple, based on Psalm 91:11. Jesus' response was to quote Deuteronomy 6:16. The larger Biblical context includes everything God has said that is pertinent to the issue. The promise of protection does not mean that we should take impertinent actions to test God. Those who do not study the whole Bible are vulnerable to those who like Satan would lead them astray.

ALLEGORIZING SCRIPTURE

As mentioned in the introduction, allegorizing Scripture has a long and destructive history. Though it was practiced by some early church fathers, it existed elsewhere in the ancient world. Some Jewish writers, such as Philo, practiced allegorizing Scriptures. It was found that the teachings of Moses and the Greek philosophers could be integrated by using this method.³ The Greeks too had used allegorization of their own ancient texts.⁴ The main "benefit" of allegorizing is the ability to remove real or apparent contradictions between Scriptures and current beliefs.

The reason many have been sold on the allegorical method is the false assumption that since the Bible is a spiritual book, inspired by the Holy Spirit, that it therefore contains hidden or secret meanings. The idea is that the truly spiritual person can discern meanings to passages of the Bible that are hidden from the unenlightened. There are even passages of the Bible that can be cited to seemingly justify this idea, such as **1Corinthians 2:14**. However, it should be noted that the "things of the Spirit of God" that the natural man "cannot understand" are clearly revealed in the context of this passage. They concern the fact that central to God's plan of salvation was a crucified Messiah, foolishness to Gentiles and an offense to the Jews (**1Corinthians 1:18-29**). The problem was not that a person couldn't grasp the words that Paul preached — that Jesus Christ was crucified, died, and rose from the dead. The claims of the gospel were clear enough. The problem was that the natural man refused to accept God's wisdom. So this passage does not teach a secret meaning to Scriptures that can be extracted by a clever allegorist. If so, then why not say Jesus didn't really die and rise again, it's just an allegory? Paul taught a literal cross with literal words.

Many contemporary preachers are quite adept at allegorizing passages of Scripture. According to them, Jesus can be found teaching modern success theories, positive thinking, liberation theology (Marxism), Unitarianism, the New Age, or anything else. Remember that the key reason for the allegorical method's existence was to integrate the Bible with Greek philosophy or whatever other contemporary worldly ideas that seemed popular and desirable. The resurrection can be allegorized into the new hope that springs into being with the cycles of nature: bunnies, and green grass. Or it can be allegorized as something analogous to ugly larvae changing through metamorphosis into butterflies.

Preachers are prone to more "benign" versions of allegorizing. What I mean is taking passages that are not

really about what we want to preach on, but lend themselves nicely nevertheless. For example, I have before me the bulletin for a seeker sensitive church that had a marriage enhancement seminar put on by psychologist for their Sunday morning service. One of the passages cited was (**John 10:10**), "*I have come that you might have life, and have it to the full.*" The context of this passage is that Jesus claims to be the true "Shepherd" of Israel as opposed to the false religious leaders who were motivated by self interest and did not concern themselves with the welfare of the flock. It is quite a stretch to take this passage as proof that we should use modern psychology to enhance our marriages. This passage is not even saying, "come to Jesus so you can have a more fulfilling marriage." This belittles the true claim of the passage. The claim is that Jesus Himself is God, whom the Jews knew to be the only true Shepherd (**Psalm 23:1**). Only God incarnate can lead us through the valley of the shadow of death into everlasting life. Modern hearers rarely find out the true impact of powerful passages like this, they are merely interested in listening to a modern man who can make their lives a little more pleasant. Allegorizing the Bible lends itself to this end.

I do not mean that the Bible never uses allegory or that the Bible never uses non-literal terminology. What I am addressing is the ignoring of the intent of the original author and using mysticism or allegory to read one's own meaning into various passages. If the Bible uses metaphor or allegory, it still has one meaning, the meaning of the author. An author uses an allegory to make a particular point.

The same is true for parables. Parables are not allegories, but short stories that make one or more points. For example, the "parable of the prodigal son" is not an allegory about backsliding. It is a story that illustrates the hardness of heart of the Jewish leaders who were offended at the fact that unworthy sinners were coming to Jesus (**Luke 15:2**). The key person is the older brother, whose attitude was that of the Jewish leaders of the time. Perhaps

one could argue that allegorizing this into a sermon about backsliding does no harm, people are motivated to come to Jesus. But think about this: whenever we fail to show the author's intent when interpreting a passage, we show a lack of respect for the Bible. If the Holy Spirit inspired the human writers to convey His meaning to us, how do we improve on that by ignoring the Holy Spirit's meaning and supplying our own? When we do, we subtly create a disrespect for the Bible in the minds of our hearers.

HYPER-LITERALISM

The "flip-side" of allegorizing Scripture is hyper-literalism. This means taking figures of speech and making them literal when they were not meant so by the author. The possible errors are numerous. "If your hand offends you cut it off." Imagine the misery if we thought that was a literal command for self-mutilation. By the way, if we did, we would not solve any sin problems, sin arises from the heart (**Matthew 15:8**).

I have talked to people who claim that God is a male person who looks just like us. This is a Mormon heresy. They read passages such as **Isaiah 53:1** and assume God has an arm. They ignore clear passages such as **John 4:24** and assume that God has a literal body with all the attendant limitations. Yet, if they were to be consistent they would have to claim God has wings and feathers: **Psalms 91:4**.

All human languages use figures of speech. Failure to understand this can be quite humorous. For example, a couple of months ago I called a motel in a town in Iowa to get a room for my wife and me for our stay there during a family reunion. I was told, "all the motels in this town and the surrounding ones are full that weekend, we are having 'hog days.'" So, I gave up and made other arrangements. I called my mother in Iowa and told her about this. A few days later she heard on the news that a hog convention in another nearby town had been canceled due to a hog disease, and moved to Illinois. So she decided to call the motel that I had called and see if any rooms had opened

up. When she told the lady about the hog disease, the lady said, "this is a rally for Harley Davidson motorcycle owners." These Harley motorcycles are figuratively called "hogs," but they don't get diseases! Failure to realize that a figure of speech was being used led to this confusion.

The Bible uses many figures of speech, mostly based on Hebrew idiom. For example the "evil eye" of **Matthew 6:23** is a Jewish figure of speech for being stingy (see **Proverbs 28:22**). However, some have shown no willingness to learn about these, or else purposely have ignored them in order to deceive many people. One famous, blatant example is **Mark 11:23** in the KJV: "*For verily I say unto you, That whosoever shall say unto this mountain, Be thou removed, and be thou cast into the sea; and shall not doubt in his heart, but shall believe that those things which he saith shall come to pass; he shall have whatsoever he saith.*" Kenneth Hagin and his many followers have created a huge movement based on a hyper-literal interpretation of this passage. They suppose that we can have literally anything we say, if we believe it, speak it, speak nothing but it, and have no doubts. They refuse any limitations to "whatsoever" since we, like God, can create reality with our words.

This interpretation falls into several of the errors we are discussing. It fails to consider the context, it fails to consider the whole counsel of God on the matter, it fails to consider textual issues (the last phrase is not in the better Greek manuscripts), and it is certainly guilty of hyper-literalism. Let me explain. Moving a mountain is a figure of speech for the impossible. That God will do the impossible (from a human perspective) for His people of faith is true, the passage teaches this. However, there is no incident in history where a person literally spoke to a literal mountain and it was thereby thrown into the sea. None of the faith teachers have done this, so if they really take this literally then they too must not have faith. Secondly, the claim that we can literally have "whatsoever" we say if we have faith is also patently false if taken literally. Laying aside the textual

issue of whether this phrase was in the original, clearly people do not have anything they say and believe.

For example, I have talked to people who were institutionalized who apparently literally believed certain things, and consistently said them. I have talked to more than one who, as far and anyone can discern, literally believed they were Jesus Christ and refused to say anything different. Yet they were not Jesus Christ. So taking this phrase in **Mark 11:23** hyper-literally and demanding that no limitation whatsoever be put on it creates an absurdity. A person could believe that God promised him that he would be the King of England, consistently say it, refusing all doubts, and not thereby become the King of England. Even limiting it to the favorite topics of the "faith" teachers, health and prosperity, does not solve the problem. The vast majority of the people who go to churches who teach this and who apply it as best as humanly possible, are not always healthy and wealthy. They would be better off to go back and examine the passage in its broader context and determine the author's meaning.

Another example of hyper-literalism was discussed in the last issue of CIC — the claim that God does not always know the future. This claim, as we saw, was based on taking certain passages in a crassly literal sense when the context indicated that they were not intended to be taken literally by the authors of Scripture.⁵

LOVING THE TRUTH

Perhaps the most important antidote to errors in interpretation is not a method, but an attitude. Consider this sobering passage: "[A]nd with all the deception of wickedness for those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth so as to be saved. And for this reason God will send upon them a deluding influence so that they might believe what is false, in order that they all may be judged who did not believe the truth, but took pleasure in wickedness" (**2Thessalonians 2:10:12**). The disciples on the road to Emmaus burned in their hearts with desire to learn the truth as Jesus

explained the Scriptures to them. Love for the truth is the watershed issue. Those who love the truth will become excited to hear it. They will avail themselves of any resource at their disposal to learn more about God's Word.

Sadly, many in our culture, even those going to Bible believing churches, have a distaste for learning. This was brilliantly documented in David Wells's book, *No Place for Truth*.⁶ There is an anti-scholastic bias that prevails, causing people to only concern themselves with what seems appealing. The passage quoted above tells us this can be fatal. It's one thing to misunderstand, its another not to care. Once some people find out some study is necessary to properly interpret Scripture they opt out immediately. They come up with excuses such as "people in China don't even have Bibles." Maybe some don't, but Christians there would give everything they had to have all the resources for Bible study we have. But we neglect our precious provision from God and let false teachers on TV do our thinking for us.

Ignorance is not bliss. We have every opportunity, being English speakers in this era of history, to be richly taught and powerfully equipped with the truth for the work of the ministry. We have such tremendous resources right at our fingertips. In the last one hundred and twenty years there have been great strides made in providing us with a rich knowledge of the Jewish background of Scripture. For example Alfred Edersheim's *Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* was first published in

1883. It is still a fantastic resource. As David Wells so powerfully showed, we are starving to death for the truth so needlessly. Many American Christians are starving in a house of plenty — starving because of lack of motivation, not lack of food.

The worst problem I have encountered is the "I don't care" attitude. You can sit down, and provide clear, incontrovertible evidence for certain Biblical truths, and some people could care less. They just want to keep their cozy ideas, gathered from the polluted streams of the current culture, and remain comfortably undisturbed. This is no different from some complacent people during Jesus' time. This was illustrated by the story of the rich man and Lazarus (**Luke 16:19-31**). The rich man when he died and ended up in torment thought he could go back and warn his brothers. He was told it would do no good: "*But he said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be persuaded if someone rises from the dead'*" (**Luke 16:31**). If we refuse to learn from the Scriptures, then our experiences will not lead us to God either. Being too proud or too lazy to learn can be spiritually fatal.

CONCLUSION

I conclude with this thought: are we disciples on the road to Emmaus, our hearts burning with desire to learn, to have the Scriptures explained to us? Or are we complacent, having the Scriptures but caring not what they really mean? If we truly love God and His Word, then we will rejoice to learn

the way of the Lord more perfectly. Week by week we will long to learn more about the whole counsel of God, the meanings of Biblical terms, the historical background of Scripture and the author's intent for the meaning of various passages. We will be like avid fishermen, knowing that there is more there in this ocean of truth than can be caught in a lifetime, yet everyday venturing out to sea for the joy of the day's catch.

END NOTES

1. Hermeneutics is the study of the principles of Biblical interpretation.
2. See Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1970) 1986 edition; 24-45 for a good discussion of the allegorical method, its development, and its use in Roman Catholicism.
3. *Ibid.* 25-28.
4. *Ibid.* 24,25.
5. Critical Issues Commentary, Issue # 58; May/June 2000.
6. David F. Wells, *No Place For Truth*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993)

HOT, COLD, AND LUKEWARM A Lesson in Historical Context

BY RYAN HABBENA

QUESTION: What does Jesus mean in Revelation 3:15-16, where He states, "I wish you were cold or hot. So because you are lukewarm, and neither hot or cold, I will spit you out of My mouth"? Is he saying that it is better to not believe (i.e. be cold) than to be indifferent (i.e.

lukewarm)?

ANSWER: This passage is one of the most misunderstood and misapplied in all of Scripture. I frequently hear the interpretation noted above. The misunderstanding of this particular passage is a great example of how contemporary ideas are often read into the Biblical text. In order to properly understand this portion of Scripture (and indeed all of Scripture), it is profitable to thoroughly examine the background and context of the passage.

The book of Revelation is one of the most unique books in all of Scripture. It combines the elements of an epistle, of prophecy, and of apocalyptic literature. The passage at hand occurs in the midst of the Lord's commanded exhortations to the 7 churches of Asia.¹ Each church was exhorted in different matters and in various ways. The church in Laodicia is the church to which Jesus gave the "hot," "cold," and "lukewarm" rebuke. A careful reading of Jesus' admonition reveals that this particular church had become focused on riches and wealth,

with pride and spiritual complacency being the result. This is the general context and background of this passage.

What, then, does Jesus mean when He says He wishes they were either “hot or cold?” First, we must discover *what* Jesus is referring to here. When we examine the entirety of the preceding verse, Jesus clearly presents what He is specifically speaking of. He proclaims: “I know your *deeds*, that you are neither cold nor hot” (Revelation 3:15a). Therefore, it is clear that the analogy of “cold, hot, and lukewarm” is directly related to their deeds. Yet, how are we to relate this analogy to “deeds”? An understanding of the historical background of the city of Laodicia in the first century sheds much light on this issue.

The city of Laodicia was located between the cities of Heiropolis and Colossae. Both of these cities were known for pure waters that flowed through them. Nearby Heiropolis had a spring flowing with hot, medicinal water. Nearby Colossae was known for its cold, refreshing mountain springs. Laodicia, on the other hand, was renowned for its dirty, lukewarm water, which visitors almost immediately spat out after tasting. In light of this, we can see that both “hot” (like a hot shower) and “cold” (like a refreshing drink) were considered both good and useful. Yet, the “lukewarm” water of Laodicia was of little good use.²

When we apply this background to the admonition Christ gave the church at Laodicia, it is evident He was using the “waters” as an analogy to their own spiritual situation. Instead of being useful in service for the Lord, as the hot and cold waters of the area were useful, they were comparable to the virtually useless water of their own city, and the Lord was about to rebuke them by “spitting them out of His mouth.”

In popular evangelical culture “hot” is often used to convey an idea of great spiritual fervor (i.e. ‘on fire for Jesus’). “Cold,” on the other hand, is often used as to describe one as spiritually dead or unfeeling (i.e. ‘what a cold-hearted person’). These ideas, then, are incor-

rectly read into this text. The original audience would not have had such presuppositions. Rather, both “hot” and “cold” were considered good and useful, it was only “lukewarm” that had an overtly negative connotation. Therefore, Jesus is not stating that He would rather have the Laodicians overtly reject Him. Since “hot” and “cold” were considered good and useful, Jesus rebuke was directly related to their “lukewarmness” – their spiritual slothfulness.

It is clear the potential rebuke in this passage is intended for discipline, not punishment. This is made clear when we read further, Christ states: “Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline; be zealous therefore and repent” (Revelation 3:19a). We read of God’s disciplining love in Hebrews 12: “My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor faint when you are reproved by Him; for those whom the Lord loves He disciplines, and He scourges every son whom He receives” (Hebrews 12:5b-6).

God will not tolerate sin and spiritual slothfulness in the lives of His children. This discipline may come in a variety of forms. We are not told exactly how Jesus disciplined the Laodicians. Given the severely admonishing tone of the letter, if they refused to repent it appears the discipline would have been nothing light. This passage should serve to both motivate and comfort us. It should motivate us in the fact that we have a Lord that will not tolerate spiritually slothful children. The Scriptures are clear that our God and Savior practices discipline. Yet, this should also comfort us. Our Lord will not allow sin to go unchecked in our lives – He is working to conform us into His glorious image.

He disciplines us for our good, so that we may share in His holiness. All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness. (Hebrews 12:11)

End Notes

1. There has been considerable debate as to how the admonitions and exhortations to these 7 particular churches relate to the prophetic and apocalyptic nature of the book. A current popular interpretation views the 7 churches as representative of the various “ages of the Church” leading up to the Second Coming. This interpretation fails on many levels. In my opinion, the best interpretation of the 7 churches is they are indeed historical churches addressed in the first century. However, they were chosen to represent the collective states of the “church in general” throughout church history, especially immediately preceding the time of the Second Coming. In my estimation, this is the only interpretation that preserves both of the “near” and “far” elements evident in these admonitions and exhortations.

2. See: Robert H. Mounce, *NICNT The Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) pp. 109-110

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