

“Rightly Handling The Word Of Truth”

In 1999, in the town of Attleboro, Massachusetts a young couple by the name of Jacques and Karen Robidoux allowed their 11 month old son, Samuel, to die of malnutrition. This came about because the couple, part of a cult by the name of *The Body*, believed a revelation from God was received that led them in this direction. Here is what happened.

Body member Michelle Mingo believed she received a revelation from God about Karen Robidoux in early 1999. According to journals the group kept, God was angry with Karen for being "vain." As a penance, she was to drink a gallon of high-fat almond milk. She was also to stop giving solid foods to her 10-month-old son, Samuel, who was still nursing.

It soon became apparent that Samuel was not getting enough nourishment, and he slowly lost weight during the next six weeks. When Karen...began to ask questions, members told her that Satan was tempting her to doubt. According to one journal entry, God asks Karen: "When are you going to believe me? It would please me if you took Samuel and left him in the palm of my hand. Fear not and believe. I don't care about Samuel. I don't care about the flesh. I don't care about Samuel right now. I'm working with you to believe without doubt."

Samuel died a few days before his first birthday in April 1999.

-From Christianity Today, May 21, 2002

This is a very sad example of the dangers of misunderstanding the Bible. Most likely, somewhere along the line, this cult believed that the Bible gave them the direction to receive extra-biblical revelations that would end up in death for their children (about this same time another child in the group died from an illness since they don't believe in utilizing medicine). Certainly, most of our misunderstandings of the Bible will not end so drastically. However, a careless handling of the scriptures leads us away from God's will and wisdom and often toward confusion and heartache. Because of this, it is very important that we learn how to understand the Word of God properly.

The Apostle Paul writes in 2 Timothy 2:15: "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth." How do we rightly handle the word of truth? We must keep in mind four keys which together form the acrostic COMA.

"If I were the devil...I should broadcast doubts about the truths and relevance and good sense and straightforwardness of the Bible....At all costs I should want to keep them from using their minds in a disciplined way to get the measure of its message."

-J. I. Packer, Forward in R. C. Sproul, Knowing Scripture

Context: As we read a paragraph, chapter, or a psalm, we should learn to think in terms of the thought-flow in the near context and also of the overall argument in that section of the book. Additionally, it is also often helpful to know something about historical context and why the book was written. These kinds of details are covered well in a good study Bible, such as The Reformation Study Bible. Additionally, we should have a good overall grasp of the entire Bible. This can be gleaned through a tool such as Wayne Grudem, Elliot Grudem, Christian Beliefs: Twenty Basics Every Christian Should Know, as well as reading through the entire Bible.

Observation: Students and readers of the Bible need to learn to look carefully at the text in front of them. Is there parallelism? In other words, are there two or more lines which either say the same thing utilizing different terms or the opposite thing (one of the key marks of Hebrew poetry)? Are there certain words or concepts repeated for emphasis? Can we discern a clear flow of argument in the passage? Are there figures of speech present and if so what do they mean? What kind of literature are we reading, a letter, poetry, historical narrative, and how does this impact the passage? All of these issues have a tremendous bearing on understanding the Bible.

One of the best ways to learn how to do this is to read a good book on Bible Interpretation (Hermeneutics). One of the best is How To Read The Bible For All It's Worth by Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart.

Meaning: One of the realities we face in the time in which we live is that the approach to understanding any literature has become muddled as the focus has moved away from "What did the author intend to say?" to "How does the text impact me and what does it mean to me (which may very well be something different than it means to you)?" This is deadly to the understanding of any literature, including the Bible. The result is that, for example, we do not come to find out what Matthew, under the inspiration of God, intended to say to his readers through the beatitudes in Matthew 5:3-11. Instead, we end up reading into that text what we would like for it to say. The inspired intended message is lost. We all must learn that each sentence, strophe, and paragraph in the Bible has only the intended meaning that the author first had when writing. Our goal is to find out what he intended in that text. We may not always agree with other Christians on what the meaning is, but

"Do you recall what Martin Luther said of his experience at the Reformation? When asked how he had done it all, he said, 'I simply taught, preached, wrote God's Word: otherwise I did nothing.... The Word did it all.' The Word of God brings Life!" -Mark Dever, "Sermon: Expository Preaching As A Mark Of A Healthy Church," Southern Baptist Journal Of Theology, 3, 2 (Summer 1999): 65

that must remain our goal. Once we know what the author intended to say to his original readers, then we can move on to the last step of our study.

Application: The author may have only one intended meaning for a sentence or paragraph, but there will be multiple applications to the various readers who come in contact with the text. It is still true that the sky is not the limit in how many applications there will be. After all, the applications must truly derive from the meaning. Yet, it is true that many various applications will derive from the intended meaning and may very well differ based upon the person reading the text and their situation. Bottom-line, reading and study of the Bible should have as a goal the transformation of life (cf. Rom. 12:1-2; 2 Tim. 3:16-17; James 2:14ff.). As such, Bible intake is not complete until we wrestle with application.

Family Discussion

1. What are the four keys to understanding the Bible we must remember and practice?
2. What are some ways we can put these keys into practice?
3. Has there ever been a time when you believe you misunderstood and misapplied a Bible passage? If so, what do you now believe was your mistake?

“A new church is making a place for itself in the Hall County community. Christ First International Christian Community Church is Gainesville's first to cater to gay, lesbian and transgender Christians. Its members believe in helping the disadvantaged in the community, but often have found their offerings rebuffed by groups opposed to homosexuality. Many members said Sunday that such refusals don't bother them. If anything, they said, it bolsters their desire to perform good works and lead by example. ‘Our first mission is just to be a church,’ said founding member Christine Ledford.”
 -Example of misunderstanding and misapplying the Bible from *The Gainesville Times*, Apr. 11, 2005