

TENSIONS IN THEOLOGY

“for now we see in a mirror dimly”

Key question

What are the major points of tension faced by the serious student who seeks to understand the Bible in the modern era?

Key text

I Corinthians 13:12

“For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face; now I know in part, but then I shall know fully just as I also have been fully known.”

Introduction

1. Although we would like to think that the Bible is a simple book that could be easily understood by every reader this is not the case.
 - a. The central message of the Bible is simple. It is a story of the ultimate reality that lies behind and gives meaning to the observations we make of the world around and within us. It is the story of Jesus, the Creator, Redeemer, Lord and the dynamic relationship between God, His creation, and His covenant people. The Biblical story is a meta-narrative against which Christians see reality.
 - b. The many details and specific teachings of the Bible are challenging to the sharpest minds, purist hearts, and most disciplined lives. **I Cor.13:12** “For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face;”
 1. The word translated “**dimly**” could be rendered “**as a riddle**”.
 2. The word translated “**seeing**” is found in Matt.13:14 “you will be ever **seeing** but never perceiving.” It is translated in I Cor.10:12 “**be careful** that you don’t fall.” The idea is one of looking at the data.
 3. The term “**mirror**” refers to polished glass or stone used by a craftsman to view the hidden side of an object. The mirror was seldom perfectly flat so the image was distorted a bit.
 4. The context contrasts the attitude of a child and an adult (vs.11), the distorted image of a mirror and the clear face to face image. The idea is one of incomplete understanding.
2. The Bible has much to say and it is often hard to understand.

II Pet.3:16 “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.”

The suggestion is that there are two needs if we are to understand the Scripture – the need to be taught and to be stable.

Heb.5:11-14 “Concerning him we have much to say, and **it is hard to explain**, since you have become dull of hearing. For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you have need again for someone to teach you the elementary principles of the oracles of God, and you have come to need milk and not solid food. For everyone who partakes only of milk is **not accustomed to the word of righteousness**, for he is a babe. But solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil.”

Here we learn that it is also important to apply or experience what we do know over a period of time before we can expect to understand other things.

3. It is the whole Biblical record that must be considered. **Ps.119:160** “The sum of thy word is truth, and every one of Thy righteous ordinances is everlasting.”
4. In these notes we will introduce some of the challenges that systematic theology addresses.

A. The tension between the Old Testament and the New Testament must be addressed by all who desire to seriously understand the Bible.

1. Nearly everyone who reads the Old Testament and New Testament is made aware of the tension within Scripture between 1) The law of God demanding performance from man with appropriate rewards and punishment following, and 2) The grace of God which rewards and accepts man unconditionally. This tension is most acutely focused in the following areas:
 - a. The **tension between the Old Testament and the New Testament** (especially the epistles).
 - b. The statements of **Paul** on the subject of law which appear to be contradictory or at least confusing:
 1. Have Christians died to the law and are they free from it (*Rom.6:14, 7:1-6, Gal.2:19, 5:1*) or do they uphold the law and fulfill it (*Rom.3:31, 8:4, 13:8-10, Gal.5:14*)?
 2. Is the law in contrast to faith and Christ (*Rom.2-4, II Cor.3, Gal.3-4*) or is it of faith (*Rom.3:27*) or of Christ (*I Cor.9:21, Gal.6:2*)?
 3. Is justification apart from works of the law (*Rom.3:20, Gal.2:16, 5:4*) or is it by works (*Rom.2:1-16, II Cor.5:10, Gal.6:4-8*)?
 4. When circumcision is one of the commandments of God in the Old Testament, how can Paul tell the Corinthians that it does not matter if they are not circumcised so long as they keep the commandments of God (*I Cor.7:19*)?
 5. If the law is the “holy law of God” (*Rom.7:10-14, 9:4*) how could Paul regard it as responsible for sin, curses, and death (*Rom.7:5, II Cor.3:6-9, Gal.3:10-13*)?
 - c. The confusion and crisis within the early church over the relationship of the **Gentile** believers to the **Jewish** church. (As in *Acts 15*)
 - d. The tension between the epistle of **James** and the letters of **Paul** (especially Galatians and Romans). (Note *Jas.2:14-26, Rom.4:1-25, Gal.3:1-14*)
 - e. We might summarize the issue by referring to **Romans 10:4** “*For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.*”- where the Greek word “end” (Greek - **TELOS**) can be understood as either 1) termination or 2) goal (a fulfillment).
2. **The practical implications of this issue are widespread and deep.**

- a. Does “grace” mean that I am truly acceptable apart from my performance or is the “fine print” legalistic where grace gives me the power to obey (which is the real issue).
- b. How am I as a Christian to apply the Old Testament law’s ceremonial, dietary, and Sabbath demands? Why and how do I pick and choose what I obey?
- c. The interpretation of the Old Testament’s relationship to the New Testament is perhaps the single most important hermeneutical (interpretation) issue facing the church.
- d. What is the significance of the parable of the wine and wineskins. Is it proper to use Old Covenant worship structures (altar, priest, temple, sacrifice, confession of sins, etc) in a New Covenant context?

3. **Biblical scholars have tried to resolve the OT / NT tensions in many ways.**

- a. Some have emphasized the **CONTINUITY** between the Old Covenant and New Covenant, the Law and the work of the Holy Spirit under grace. Matt.5:17-19, Mk.7:1-23, Rom.7:12,14,22, I Tim.1:8
 1. This usually involves **toning down the harshness of Paul's criticism** of “the law.”
 2. Some have concluded that there is a distinction in Scripture (especially within Paul's letters) between a) **the Law** as the revelation of God's abiding will (which is eternal), and b) **legalism** - the law misused by man to establish his own merit. The context must dictate whether the text is referring to legitimate law or legalism. For example, some have suggested that “*the works of the Law*” were in Paul’s mind, restricted to the signs of identification with the covenant - circumcision, Sabbath keeping, and ceremonial cleansing.
 3. In the Calvinist tradition there is an unhistorical trend which leads finally to the extreme of relating Old and New Testaments in the fashion of two concentric circles.” The New Covenant is seen as an expansion or upgrade of the Old.
 4. Some have also suggested that there is a distinction between the moral law of Moses (which abides for today) and the ceremonial law of Moses (which was terminated in Christ). Matt.23:23, I Sam.15:22. There is no such distinction mentioned in Scripture.
 5. This position usually involves a **balancing of law and grace** with an emphasis on the grace in the Old Covenant and the law in the New Covenant.
 6. This is the position held by many in the **Reformed tradition**.
- b. Some have emphasized the **DISCONTINUITY** between the Old Testament and New Testament, the law (especially of Moses) and the grace of Christ. Rom.6:14-15, 10:4, II Cor.3:3,6-18, Phil.3:7-9; **Acts 11:15** suggests that the coming of the Spirit was “the beginning” (of a new era).
 1. This often involves an emphasis upon the New Testament over/against (or superceding) the Old Testament dispensation.
 2. In this position, the New Covenant is seen not as an “upgrade” of the Old Covenant but a new system altogether.
 3. The Old Testament is to be understood through the lens of the New Testament.
 4. This is the position of **Lutheran and Dispensational traditions**.
- c. Some have concluded that the Biblical material is **INCONSISTENT** and self-contradictory.
 1. Historical critical approaches to the Bible emphasize the natural, social, economic, cultural, and political forces behind the Biblical text. The tendency is to see the Bible

as more the work of man than the work of God in any supernatural way. (See notes on Historical Criticism 6c)

2. The tensions within the text are to be expected as differing points of view are expressed. Attempts to harmonize these tensions are not only futile, but counter productive to a true understanding and respect of the text.
3. This is the position of **Liberal churches**.

B. **The lack of clear harmony between some Biblical texts cannot be denied.**

1. **Some examples:** (See notes on Inerrancy #211)

a. THE USE OF THE OT IN THE NT

1) Paraphrases

Matt. 15:7-9 (Isa. 29:13) “You hypocrites, rightly did Isaiah prophecy of you, saying, ‘This people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far away from Me. **But in vain do they worship Me, teaching as their doctrines the precepts of men.’**”

Isa. 29:13 in the OT - “Then the Lord said, ‘Because this people draw near with their words and honor Me with their lip service, but they remove their hearts far from Me, **and their reverence for Me consists of traditions learned by rote,**’”

2) Changing the text while quoting from the OT

Matt. 2:6 (Micah 5:2) “And you, Bethlehem, land of Judah, **are by no means least** among the leaders of Judah; for out of you shall come forth a Ruler, who will shepherd My people Israel.”

Micah 5:2 in the OT - “But as for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, **too little to be** among the clans of Judah, from you One will go forth for Me to be ruler in Israel.”

3) Ascribing a text to a different source

Mk. 1:2-3 (Mal. 3:1) “As it is written in Isaiah the prophet, ‘**Behold, I send My messenger before Your face, who will prepare Your way;** the voice of one crying in the wilderness, ‘make ready the way of the Lord, make His paths straight.’” (Note that Matthew (3:3) corrects this “mistake” by leaving out the quote from Mal.3:1.)

b. INTERNAL CONSISTENCY

There are some numerical discrepancies in the Old Testament. For example, in one report David killed **700** in battle, while in another report he killed **7000** in the same battle (**II Sam.10:18; I Chron.19:18**). One source says David paid **fifty** shekels of silver for a threshing floor; another says that it cost him **600** shekels of gold (**II Sam.24:24; I Chron.21:25**). The book of Chronicles often seems to contain inflated figures. We might also note I Chron.11:11 versus II Sam.23:8; I Kings 4:26 versus II Chron.9:25; II Chron.36:9 versus II Kings 24:8.

c. LANGUAGE

Ps.78:69 “the earth which is founded **forever**”

II Pet.3:10 “the earth and its works will be burned up”

2. **These problems are addressed by evangelicals in a number of ways.** (See notes on Inerrancy #211)

a. Ignore them (Warfield)

- b. Forced harmonization (Young)
- c. Humble harmonization (Harrison)
- d. Errant source (Carnell)
- e. Errancy (Beegle)

C. The tensions between modern learning and the Biblical text should not be ignored.

1. There has been a massive shift in the way liberal learning has viewed theology.

Classic theology	Modern liberal theology
Theology = the queen of the sciences	The science of religion
Study of God	Study of man
God's character and will	Existential analysis of man's anguish and aspirations
Natural theology	Mystical awareness
Formal proofs	Proof of ineffable subjective experience.
Exclusivity of Christian gospel	Equality of all world religions
Evangelization	Dialogue and cooperation in social, economic, and political arenas.

2. There are three different approaches that theologians have taken to resolve this tension.
 - a. **Transposers** - They ignore the questions raised by the modern world and tend to reiterate the message as it came to a previous generation - Fundamentalist Christians.
 - b. **Transformers** - They feel obligated to change the Biblical message to make it compatible with modern liberal learning - Liberal Christians. The culture = Kingdom of God, resurrection = renewal, sin = existential alienation, redemption = liberation, ransom = moral influence.
NOTE: This is the place where most of the theological trends of our time have developed - Liberation theology, Feminist theology, Black theology, Form criticism, Redaction criticism, Historical criticism, etc.
 - c. **Translators** - They respect the questions and issues raised by modern liberal learning and try to faithfully translate the historic Biblical message in a way that can be understood by the modern mind (contextualization) - Evangelicals who strive to be both faithful to the Bible and flexible with our culture. Examples from the NT. - The four gospels, Acts 17, I Cor.9:20-21.
3. **How should we view higher critical methods in theology?**
 - a. **Anti-supernatural assumptions.** (The resurrection from the dead did not happen because it could not happen.)

- b. **Circular reasoning.** (The cultural setting dictates that Paul’s view of women was a response to Gnostic heresy. Gnostic heresy must have been present given Paul’s statements about women.)
- c. **Unwarranted inferences.** (If an idea expressed by Moses existed in ancient Egypt then it was Moses who borrowed it not vice versa.)
- d. **Political fads.** (It is common to read modern notions of liberation and economics (our agenda) into texts that may have little to do with our present agenda.) Is the exodus really about political and economic justice for example?
- e. **Conflict between faith and science.** (It is often assumed that people of faith had no interest in being historically accurate. It is also often falsely assumed that religious views are grounded in faith while non religious “scientific” views are not.)
- f. **Probability not certainty.** (Literary criticism is a new science which is vulnerable to subjective values.)

4. **God’s Kingdom and the modern American system are in tension at a deep level.**

The Kingdom of God	The American system
Community	Individuality
Interdependence	Personal autonomy
Transcendent authority	Pluralism

D. **The tension between church authority and the grammatical - historical method of interpretation by the individual are important.**

NOTE: This is basically the issue of the Protestant Reformation.

- 1. **Roman Catholicism** - The church is the seat of authority with respect to doctrine.
- 2. **Lutheranism** - The text of the Bible and reason are the seat of authority.
- 3. **Calvinism** - The logical extension of Luther’s work to the formation of a wholly distinct system of theology is the ground of authority.
- 4. **Anabaptists** - The radical and complete break from ecclesiastical authority and tradition puts the emphasis upon each individual believer’s reading of the text.

E. **There are degrees of authority in theological statements.** It is helpful to respect the following distinctions in our reading of the Bible.

Clear and Fundamental (Resurrection of Jesus)	Unclear and Fundamental (Trinity)
Clear and not Fundamental (Gender roles)	Unclear and not Fundamental (Congregational government)

Doctrinal statements fall into four categories, which in turn can be divided into statements of primary and secondary importance.

EXPLANATIONS What constitutes Christian beliefs?	ETHICS What constitutes Christian behavior?	EXPRESSIONS What constitutes Christian patterns?	EXPERIENCES What constitutes Christian experience?
Primary importance Christ is both Divine and human	Primary importance Respect for human life	Primary importance The requirement of water baptism for believers	Primary importance A dynamic power to follow Christ
Secondary importance The technical relationship of Jesus' two natures	Secondary importance Political response to abortion	Secondary importance The mode of water baptism	Secondary importance A Pentecostal experience of the Spirit.

- F. **Biblical texts differ in their contribution to systematic theology.** The Epistles play a more important role than the Old Testament in defining our theology. Didactic and historic narratives play a more important role in defining our theology than Poetry.

Literary context and genera – “When approaching a document such as the Bible, the concept of truth must vary in relation to the “language game” at hand.” Anthony Thiselton
The literary form of the text should be allowed to determine the form of inerrancy that is maintained for the text.

Kinds of Biblical literature	Priorities in Biblical literature
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Didactic treatises - Romans • Historic narrative - Joshua • Poetry - <i>Psalms</i> • Apocalyptic documents - <i>Daniel</i> • Legends - <i>Rich man & Lazarus</i> • Figures of Speech - <i>“I am the door to the sheep”</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Epistles - interpretation • <i>Acts - descriptive</i> • <i>Gospels - transition</i> • <i>Old Testament - background</i> <p style="text-align: center;">(progressive revelation)</p>

- G. **The Bible contains both occasional and universal teaching.** All Scripture is written FOR us but not TO us or ABOUT us. Some parts of the Bible are addressed to specific historic (occasional) situations and are not meant to be applied universally.

Characteristics of	Characteristics of
---------------------------	---------------------------

Occasional teaching	Universal teaching
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Isolated to particular time and place - <i>concubines</i> • Meaningful in a narrow context - <i>meat offered to idols</i> • Rare references with little illustration of actual practice – <i>foot-washing</i> • Violation of clearly stated principle - <i>baptism for the dead</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consistency across Biblical cultures - <i>sanctity of life</i> • Universal setting - <i>water baptism</i> • Appeal to a permanent factor - <i>marriage</i> • Both commanded and practiced consistently - <i>evangelism</i> • Final position within progressive revelation - <i>Sabbath, tithing</i>

H. **In Protestantism there is a tension between Calvinism and Arminianism.**

“Calvinism emphasizes divine sovereignty and free grace; Arminianism emphasizes human responsibility. The one restricts the saving grace to the elect; the other extends it to tall men on the condition of faith. Both are right in what they assert; both are wrong in what they deny. If one important truth is pressed to the exclusion of another truth of equal importance, it becomes an error, and loses its hold upon the conscience. The Bible gives us a theology which is more human than Calvinism, and more divine than Arminianism, and more Christian than either of them.” *Philip Schaff, History of the Christian Church, vo. VIII:815-6*

I. **Tolerance of legitimate differences is needed in seeking the truth.**

1. “Nietzsche claimed that if men took God seriously, they would still be burning heretics at the stake.” Two types of people agree with this statement.
 - a. **Ordinary bigots** – “That’s why we should burn heretics.”
 - b. **Reactionaries** – “That’s why we should suppress the public expression of belief in God.”
2. Tolerance cannot be neutral about what is good, for its very purpose is to guard good and avert evils. What is tolerated depends upon what is viewed as the ultimate good or concern.
3. Tolerance is a moral virtue between the two vices of:
 - a. **Soft-headedness** – We stand for little and fall for anything. When radical tolerance is the only virtue, we must dignify every form of human expression no matter how weird, as beautiful and noble.
 - b. **Narrow mindedness** - We cannot see beyond our own preferences which we mistakenly assume are also God’s standards.
4. Tolerance involves right judgment in the protection of ends against mistaken means.

ILLUSTRATION: Political conservatives and Liberals often share a common core goal (liberty and justice for all). They however have very different ideas as to how that goal is reached and preserved. The danger is that the means of reaching the goal can be so closely identified with the goal itself that to challenge the means is to be understood as a challenge to the goal. Those who do not share our means to reach the goal are assumed to be motivated by something other than reaching the goal. That “something other” is usually pretty ugly, selfish, and un-American.

5. Tolerance needs an ultimate concern as an end.
6. Christians are to be tolerant for four reasons.
 - a. God does not want unwilling worship.
 - b. We see in a glass dimly. I Cor.13:12
 - c. We are all in process.
 - d. There is a Biblical precedent for it in **Rom.14:5** “One man regards one day above another, another regards every day alike. Let each man be fully convinced in his own mind.”

The Point

While the central message of the gospel is simple, the Bible is complex and not always easy to understand.

Response

Head

I am to understand that:

The Bible is a challenge to the brightest minds and purest hearts with the result that there are understandable differences in how people understand it.

Heart

I am to believe that:

I am closer to the truth when I understand and appreciate the different perspectives that good Christians bring to their understanding of the Bible.

Hands

I am to behave by:

Showing respect to those who may not share my perspective on areas that are controversial or open to differences in understanding in reading the Bible.

Pastoral advice

How should one resolve these conflicts?

1. I favor a “neo dispensational” approach to the OT / NT tension. I am influenced by Paul’s strong distinction between Law and grace especially in Galatians.
2. With respect to apparent inconsistencies in the text take a view similar to Harrison’s “humble harmonization.”
3. With respect to relating Scripture to modern liberal learning, take a “translator’s” posture.

4. With respect to the role of church authority I tend to be an Anabaptist placing less official authority in external church hierarchy to define doctrine.
5. Major on majors and minor on minors.
6. Respect the unique nature of the various types of literature and styles of writing that are found in the Bible.
7. Appeal to “occasional” explanations of Biblical texts only when it is obvious.