Chapter 2: **Using "clear" passages to understand "difficult" passages.**

The universal exegetical principle that I have been referring to is that we ought to use the "clear" passages of Scripture to help us interpret the "unclear" or "difficult" passages of Scripture. Every denomination and every theological treatise I have ever read states this principle in one form or another. Baptists, Presbyterians, Lutherans, Catholics – it doesn't matter.

Before continuing, I need you to think about this principle. What could possibly be wrong with it? What does the principle presuppose? Take a moment to critically examine the principle. Do you see a potential problem?

The main presupposition of the principle is that there are "clear" passages of Scripture that have been neatly delineated for us. And in our insulated worlds, that assumption seems to play out pretty well. It seems eminently reasonable, therefore, to use such verses as the bedrock for our beliefs. For example,

> *... our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ* (Titus 2:13)

is pretty unambiguous in declaring Jesus to be God. At least to most of us. But we need to dig a little deeper. We just finished discussing how a major division in early Christendom did not believe that Jesus was, in essence, God. And even today the Jehovah's Witnesses will spin such verses to fit their theology about Jesus (they say it should be understood as "our great God, and the Savior Jesus Christ" - i.e. two separate entities).

A full understanding of the actual, practical problem that we face due to this principle will at the same time: 1) uncover the true scope of frustration inherent in our denominational differences, and 2) provide us with a deep understanding and love for our brothers and sisters in other denominations. In other words, we will at the same time be able to see how intransigent and humanly hopeless our disagreements are, but also understand that each player is acting out of true belief and reliance on their understanding of Scripture.

The truth is that we all have different sets of "clear" and "unclear" passages. That statement seems blasphemous. Again, I am not saying that the Bible is wrong or contradictory. I believe there is always one truth, and that truth often rests on the Both-And principle that I exemplified with the humanity/divinity of Christ theology and will continue to explain in the rest of the book. But the fact of the matter is that we all consider certain verses (or in general, certain ideas - like salvation by grace alone, or supremacy of the church) as our bedrock truth.

In the rest of this chapter I will summarize for you one example of this because it is especially illustrative of my point. I will take up a fuller description of this particular problem in the next chapter and then go on to other examples in the remainder of the book.

The problem I summarize here is the tensions between the bedrock beliefs of Calvinism compared to most other evangelicals. A Calvinist considers the following verse to be one of the bedrock, "clear" truths:

> *… neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.* Romans 8:39

As you will see in the next chapter, the "Five points of Calvinism" all more-or-less come from this bedrock.

Most other evangelical Christians take the following verse as one of their bedrock, "clear" truths:

> *For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.* John 3:16

In an exaggerated summary, the Calvinist believes that nothing can separate us from God, so we certainly can't separate ourselves from him, so God's call and grace towards us must have nothing to do with us, thus it must be irresistible, and thus those who are separated from God must be in that state because of God's will so that, in fact,

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God does not "love" the whole world in a literal sense, but only in some Calvinistic sense of the word "love" or "world."

And in another exaggerated summary, most other evangelicals believe that God loves the whole world and wants everyone to be saved. Now, most "other evangelicals" don't think much beyond that. But it logically follows that since not everyone is saved there must be some competing influence that causes some to be damned, and so, in fact, something *can* separate us from God, even if it is only our own rejection (or perhaps ignorance) of him.

A typical Calvinist will spin verses like John 3:16, and a typical "other evangelical" will need to spin verses like Romans 8:39. That is, they will need to talk around them so that they don't contradict their main, bedrock beliefs but (in the typical argumentation style) actually support them when "understood correctly." **The exegetical principle that allows each group to do so is this principle that we interpret "unclear" verses by understanding them in light of the "clear" verses.** I hope this one example highlights the problem that you might easily have dismissed at the start of this chapter: everyone has a different set of "clear" and "unclear" verses. To put it brashly, "clear" verses are those that unambiguously support your ideas, and "unclear" verses are those that seem to, on the surface, disagree with you.