

[1972. Review of *Understanding the Scripture*, by A.H. DeGraaff and C.G. Seerveld. ("How to Let the Bible Confuse You"), *Episcopal Recorder* Feb.]

How to Let the Bible Confuse You

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Peter says that some of Paul's paragraphs are hard to understand; but this is not the type of difficulty discussed here. Peter may have had Romans 5:12-21 in mind. It is an intricate passage. But here is how to confuse yourself with perfectly plain verses like "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth," and "Thou shalt not steal."

First, let us not be confused with what confusion means. If a man thinks that Tallahassee is in Maine, he is not really confused: he is simply wrong. But if he thinks that Tallahassee is both in Maine and in Florida, he is confused. He is confused because he holds two contrary opinions at the same time. One of his opinions is correct; the other is false.

There is a booklet entitled, *Understanding the Scripture*, by A. H. Degraaff and C. G. Seerveld. Dr. Degraaff is confused. Some things he says about the Bible are true and good; some are false. Since he minimizes the true part and puts great emphasis on the false part, he will confuse you, if you let him.

Here are some of the good and true parts. He says, the Bible's "purpose is to proclaim, to preach, in this instance by telling us the *true stories* (ital. his) of God's mighty acts" (p. 10). This is good and true. But in the same paragraph he also says, "To ask therefore whether or not these stories actually happened in every detail and in the order in which they are presented is to ask the wrong question." This is false and bad. Barth, Bultmann, and other present-day dialectical theologians constantly tell us that the preaching and message of the Bible are just as valuable even if the events never happened. There was no Adam, but the story is a true message

about sin. Since so many contemporary theologians deny the events, it is not the wrong question. It is the right question: Did these events occur, or is the Bible on a level with Aesop's fables?

Dr. DeGraaff also speaks the truth when he criticizes some Sunday School and Vacation Bible School material as being dull, trivial, and even stupid. He tells the unfortunate truth when he says that some Bible School teachers do not know how to interest children. But then he slips away from the charge of stupidity and gives the impression that the content of the material is theologically wrong. He even casts aspersions on Louis Berkhof, whose great work on theology is neither stupid nor trivial, even though it is on a higher level than Vacation Bible School material. It is clear that Dr. DeGraaff dislikes Berkhof and Sunday School lessons, not because they are dull, but because they are "intellectual." He says, "The Bible is not to be read as a collection of propositional statements about God and man that we can memorize and master," (p. 21). Now, if the word "collection" implies some sort of random aggregate, then of course the Bible is not that. But aside from the idea of being disjointed and haphazard, the Bible is most certainly a collection of propositional statements about God. One such statement is, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." Furthermore, this statement can be memorized — and I hope all who read this have memorized it. Whether it can be "mastered" is hard to say, for Dr. DeGraaff does not tell us what he means by mastering a sentence.

One thing is clear, however. The sentence "God created the heavens" tells us something about God. But Dr. DeGraaff says, No. "You distort the Scriptures when you read them as a collection of objective statements about God and man . . . They do not contain any rational, general, theological statements about God and his creation (p.2) . . . The Scriptures know nothing about God's essence or about his incommunicable and communicable attributes. It is not the purpose of the Bible to inform us about the nature of God's being or his attributes" (p.9). Then, pray tell, why does the Bible say, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth..? Is this not a rational statement? Does it give us no information about the nature of God? No rational information at all?

Dr. DeGraaff asserts that there are no rational, general, theological statements in the Bible, "not even in Paul" (p.2). "The Bible wants to proclaim, not to explain. It is only in his actions that God's being and his attributes are revealed to us" (p.10). So he says. But could anything be farther from the truth? The Bible does indeed relate (in rational sentences) many of

God's acts. But usually it then gives an explanation of these acts. The crucifixion was an act, or an event. But the Bible wants very much to explain it. Romans 3:25 explains that Christ's death was a propitiatory sacrifice offered to God for our sins, so that God could be both just and justifier. Genesis tells us of Adam's first disobedience. Romans 5:12-21 is a rational, though intricate and lengthy, explanation. Remove from the Bible what is rational and what is explanatory and what is theological, and not much is left.

Dr. DeGraaff says, "The Scriptures are neither rational nor irrational in character." Here is confusion. Everyone knows that the statement, 'Today is Monday' or 'Wellington defeated Napoleon' is rational. We can understand it. On the other hand, it is irrational to say, 'Three equals two,' or 'onts skom bubbits.' But what example is there of a sentence that is neither rational nor irrational? Looking in a book to find a sentence that is neither rational nor irrational is like going to the Zoo to find an animal that is neither vertebrate nor invertebrate. To say that the Bible is neither rational nor irrational is one of the best examples of irrationality that one can find.

Once more, "Nor does it the Bible' contain moral applications that tell us how to live the good life — virtues that we share with the humanist." Here again is confusion. It is true that a Christian does not share any virtue with a humanist, because a humanist or atheist just cannot have any Christian virtue. But it is false to say that the Bible gives no moral rules. "A rationalistic and moralistic interpretation of the Scriptures always go hand in hand." Well, they should; and this is good and not bad. But Dr. DeGraaff objects to teaching boys and girls in Vacation Bible School moral lessons about purity, chastity, and Victorian, middle-class American standards. Instead of warning them against the prevalent loose view of sex, we should tell them about irresponsible deforestation, yellow smog, dirty water — and we should tell them these things in "a non-moralistic manner" (p. 26). Apparently dirty water is worse than a dirty mind.

In answer to the objections from many Christians, Dr. DeGraaff repeats, "The Bible does not teach us how to be good and how to avoid being bad" (p. 29). Speaking of the Ten Commandments (which he strangely says are not commandments at all — even though they are in the imperative mood) he says, "None of them can be literally followed or applied today, for we live in a different period of history in a different culture" (p. 35)

Imagine! It is impossible to follow or apply the command, Thou shalt not steal, because we live in a different culture. Thou shalt not commit adultery cannot be literally obeyed today because God commanded it in 1500 B.C. This line of argument is incredible. But check the reference, page 35, *Understanding the Scriptures*, DeGraaff and Seerveld, Association for the Advancement of Christian Scholarship, Toronto, Canada. Since none of the Ten Commandments can be literally applied today, Dr. DeGraaff suggests that we substitute for them agitation against police brutality (p. 36). Love your neighbor's wife — you cannot avoid it; but hate the police.