

Finally, the long-awaited day arrives. You find yourself discussing that very important issue again, perhaps even with the same person with whom you disagreed before. As the discussion begins, you get excited, because you know that this time—you have the ultimate weapon in your arsenal. You wait for the perfect moment, open your Bible to the correct page, and recite the magic verse that proves you are on the side of God.

As a result of your secret weapon's irrefutability, you expect your opponent to stumble backward and fall to the ground, admitting, as he gasps for his last breath, that he was siding with the devil all along. But that's not what happens. Much to your surprise, your opponent opens his Bible and does the unthinkable—he quotes a Bible verse that refutes *your* Bible verse! Knowing that your opponent's Bible verse is inferior to your Bible verse, you decide to take the only possible course of action: you say your verse again, but louder and more emphatically this time. Your opponent fires back with some sort of evil gibberish, but you are no longer listening to what he is saying, because his arguments might lead you to side with the devil, too. So you repeat your verse again; but this time, you follow it with the ultimate accusation, "Are you telling me the Bible is wrong? Are you saying that the word of God is lying?"

Welcome to the world of Bible-based Christianity. Not every disagreement between Christians is as dramatic as the one I just described, but I'm sure this example gives you a sense of Bible-based Christianity's great dilemma. We have a Bible that we believe to be the word of God. We believe that God gave us this Bible, because He wants us to have all the right spiritual answers (the Bible doesn't say that, however). Yet, we disagree on numerous spiritual issues, even though we all base our beliefs on this very same book.

How can this be? Does the Bible contradict itself? I've heard many non-Christians say that it does; most Bible-believing Christians say it doesn't. If we take the Bible at face value, believing that every verse is directed toward today's world, and the original context in which it was written is not taken into consideration, then the Bible does indeed contradict itself. But most sensible Bible-believers understand that we have to look at the historical background of the Bible's various books in order to understand them. Usually, when we examine the context and historical background of what appear to be conflicting verses, we realize that they don't contradict each other after all.

Even though many of our disagreements and misinterpretations of the Bible are the result of the fact that we have imperfect minds and an imperfect

knowledge of the context in which each book of the Bible was written, we owe many of our misinterpretations to the fact that we are merely Bible-based Christians. Being Bible-based does not necessarily mean that we search the entire Bible to seek the truth. Instead, being Bible-based often means that we focus on the verses that appear to support the beliefs we want to hold, and we ignore the verses that might lead us to change our minds if we were to seriously consider them. Let's face it: the Bible is a big book. If we search long enough, we are bound to find a verse that supports whatever we want to believe. When we take this approach, we are likely to paddle upstream against God's will.

Here's an example of the Bible-based approach gone wrong: It involves **1 Corinthians 6:19**: "Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own?" Over the years, I have witnessed numerous occasions in which Christians have used this famous verse to support their man-made physical health agenda. My earliest memory of this is from the late 70's, when a recently *born again* relative pulled out the Bible, recited this verse, and told my parents that they would spend eternity in hell if they continued to smoke cigarettes. Other Christians have used the "body is a temple" verse to campaign against eating fatty foods, or even meat, despite the fact that the Bible records God commanding the eating of meat on several occasions.

Fortunately, in this case, we don't have to look very far to find the true meaning of verse 19. The verses immediately preceding it command the members of the church to avoid prostitution. **Verse 15** states, "Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I then take away the members of Christ and make them members of a harlot? May it never be!" So when verse 19 tells us the "body is a temple," it does not address eating, smoking, or exercise at all; it addresses sex with prostitutes.

Isn't it astounding that Christians regularly distort the "body is a temple" verse, even though the verses surrounding it explain its meaning? How much more will we distort verses that are not so easily defined by the verses surrounding them? With most Bible verses, we must examine other chapters and books of the Bible to gain a proper understanding of the issue at hand. If we don't look elsewhere, we might venture down the wrong path by building errant beliefs out of a misinterpretation of a solitary verse.

An excellent example of how we could do such a thing is found in **Luke 14:26**, where Jesus is quoted as having said, "If anyone comes to

me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, even his own life, he cannot be my disciple.” Here, an explanation of what this verse means is not provided in the same paragraph as it was for the “body is a temple” verse. We have to look elsewhere in the Bible to better understand the meaning of Luke 14:26. I’m not going to cover every family relationship verse in the Bible at this point; but we know from the 6th commandment saying, “Honor your mother and your father [**Exodus 20:12**]” to the Apostle Paul’s plea of “Husbands, love your wives, [**Ephesians 5:25**]”, that we are called to love our families as well as everybody else. Jesus even instructed us to love our enemies (Matthew 5:44).

Fortunately, I’ve never known a Christian to misuse this verse to insist that we are to hate our families. Most Christians believe that Jesus wants our love for our families to pale in comparison to our love for Him, and that we shall not turn away from Him at our family’s insistence.

Okay then, so are we to love our families or hate them? The answer is that we must love our families—the exact opposite of what Luke 14:26 appears to say, if we read it without examining the rest of the Bible! Yet with so many other verses, many of which we will examine in upcoming chapters, we do make the mistake of building an entire theology out of one or two specific words found in them. And if anybody presents biblical evidence to the contrary, we simply repeat the verse again and claim that our view is the indisputable, exact word of God.

If we choose to hang on every word of a given verse that supports our beliefs, and do so in the name of perfect adherence to every word of the Bible, then we must hang on every word of every Bible verse, not just the ones we like. So let’s take a look at several Bible verses where we just might fall short of this lofty ideal.

Exodus 23:10-11, “And you shall sow your land for six years and gather in its yield, but on the seventh year, you shall let it rest and lie fallow, so that the needy of your people may eat; and whatever they leave the beast of the field may eat. You are to do the same with your vineyard and your olive garden.”

Analysis: If we follow the Sabbath day, why do we Christians not follow the biblical Sabbath year? I say we all take next year off!

Exodus 23:14-16, “Three times a year you shall celebrate a feast to Me...the feast of Unleavened bread [vs. 15]...The Feast of the Harvest of the first fruits [vs. 16]...The Feast of the Ingathering at the end of the year [vs. 16].”

Analysis: Okay, the first one is Passover, which we still celebrate, but what happened to the other two feasts? You could say we replaced them with Thanksgiving and Christmas, but these two holidays were not created for that reason.

Leviticus 19:13, “The wages of a hired man are not to remain with you all night until morning.”

Analysis: As a former sales rep, I have often had to wait nearly two months for my commissions. I can’t recall knowing anyone in our society who has received pay the same day in which they worked.

Leviticus 19:19, “You shall keep my statutes. You shall not breed together two kinds of cattle; you shall not sow your field with two kinds of seed, nor wear a garment upon you of two kinds of material mixed together.”

Analysis: I can proudly say that I have never broken the cow-mixing rule. However, I can also say that I have never known a Christian to have a garden comprised of only one kind of plant; and I have known plenty of Christians, including myself, who wear cotton-polyester shirts.

Leviticus 19:27, “You shall not round off the side-growth of your heads, nor harm the edges of your beard.”

Analysis: Maybe the Amish are onto something here. Then again, maybe God wanted the Israelites to look nothing like the clean-shaven Egyptians, whose oppression they had just escaped. God may have wanted the Israelites to have an identity of their own, as He was preparing to make a mighty nation out of them. He most likely did not want them look and feel like a spin-off of Egypt.

Deuteronomy 8:10, “When you have eaten and are satisfied, you shall bless the Lord your God for the good land He has given you.”

Analysis: Looks like we got this one backwards, since we give thanks before we eat, not after.