

# *The Collegiate Letter*

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The passing of Pope John Paul II, and the process of choosing his successor, rekindled one of the oldest, most contentious and most enduring debates in the history of Christianity. Liberal clerics, intent on modernizing and reforming the Roman Church, lobbied to elect a “more progressive” Pope. Conservatives, seeking a Pope who would preserve the many traditional teachings they hold dear, fought to select a “theological purist” who would defend the doctrines they consider essential to **The Faith**.

**The question touches each one of us: which of our beliefs *actually are* immutable Christian truths, and which are subject to interpretation?**

Of course, most of us would respond almost immediately – without even thinking – that we base all of our beliefs on the Bible, so we’re quite confident that they are correct. Well, who wouldn’t like to think that every one of his spiritual convictions is absolutely true... a precise expression of empirical, biblical truth!

But if we are truly honest with ourselves, we’ll eventually have to admit that the Bible doesn’t give specific answers to every question we might want to ask. So where God’s Word is not explicit, we routinely do our best to arrive at good answers that are in keeping with the other teachings of the Bible. That’s not a bad thing. What else could we do?

The problem is that when it comes to interpreting the Bible, Christians do not always agree. In fact, you can almost always count on someone disagreeing! Sometimes they come to absurd, embarrassing and even destructive alternative conclusions. History has many examples of such things... a fact that is not lost upon those who want to attack the validity of all Christian beliefs.

Among the interesting “extensions” of dogma that moved beyond Scripture:

- Christians once refused to believe the world was a sphere because the Bible spoke figuratively about “the four corners of the Earth.”
- Pope John Paul II believed the Bible spoke so highly of Mary that he once

proposed elevating her to the status of “Co-Redemptress” – putting her on an equal footing with Jesus Christ (again raising the question of Papal fallibility!)

- Over the years, various groups have claimed to have a Scriptural basis for practicing racism, slavery, polygamy, genocide, Anti-Semitism, torture, betrayal, murder... and you can probably name a hundred more.

Throughout history, Christians have often promoted their private interpretations with the same unwavering certainty that they promoted the clear and certain teachings of the Word of God. Careless or uninformed study of the Bible, coupled with a willingness to speculate and dramatically expand upon Scripture, have brought a flood of extraneous teachings into the mix.

The problem is that, whether the interpretations were good or bad, the zeal with which some Christians promoted their conclusions began to blur the line between the inerrant teachings of the Bible and their own glorified interpretations. Teachings about cutting your hair, wearing hats and jewelry, playing mechanical instruments, drinking wine, eating meat, fasting and feasting, and a thousand other technicalities became entangled with the clear message of Scripture that salvation comes by faith in Jesus Christ.

To some, the sacrificial atonement of Jesus Christ was no longer sufficient. They felt they had discovered “additional commitments” and “proofs of our faith” they insisted were necessary to “add value” to the blood of Christ and thus assure our salvation.

As manmade traditions and human interpretations gradually came to be treated with the same reverence as Scripture, confidence in the unwavering truth of the Bible declined proportionately. How, after all, could you trust a Bible that you believed contained serious errors and was stuck in the past? And how could the average person be expected to know that most of the things he or she had trouble believing, were really just traditions... not Scripture at all?

In effect, what really happened was that, instead of elevating tradition and speculative teaching to the level of inspired Scripture, the authority of the Bible itself was undercut. People began to regard **all of it** as manmade and therefore negotiable. Some even got the idea that they could “rewrite” parts of the Bible they didn’t like or disagreed with, in order to help the Bible “conform to modern sensibilities.”

Today, most people don't fully understand what the Bible teaches... and they certainly don't have a clue as to where the literal message of Scripture ends and the hollow echoes of human interpretation and supposition begin. Many people have stopped believing in the Bible at all.

Because the Bible is the literal, verbally inspired, perfect message of God to mankind, it is vital to our own interests that we discover **what He is trying to tell us**. In order to give the Word of God the uncompromising acceptance it is due, we first need to learn how to identify the clear teachings of Scripture. Then, we can include the often-sincere efforts of those who try to interpret the Bible and evaluate what they say, always recognizing them for what they are - an attempt to provide answers to questions the Bible does not directly address.

- Being able to put your total confidence in what the Bible says is essential.
- Being able to separate human interpretation from Divine inspiration is liberating.
- Acquiring the skills and knowledge to be able to do that, biblically as well as in your secular studies, is one of the best reasons for receiving a modern education.

Perhaps the most important skill you can develop during your college years, is the ability to wade through mountains of conflicting information, accurately separating fact from fiction, honesty from hype, certainty from conjecture and proof from presumption.

In virtually every area of study, you'll be inundated with all kinds of information – much of which is skewed by the author's personal prejudices and preconceptions. Being able to discern where accuracy gives way to hyperbole will save you countless hours that would otherwise be wasted “chasing rabbits.” And it will help you decide for yourself what is real in this world, and what is simply wishful illusion.

This is Dave Weeden, wishing you fabulous experiences and many more amazing discoveries in the summer that lies ahead. God bless you! And please remember... tell your best friends about **The Collegiate Letter!**