

LETTER vs SPIRIT

We all “know” that the *letter* kills ... but the *spirit* gives life.

Meaning that *legalistic, human scholarship* is just the *wisdom of men* that leads to *disputes, arguments, lack of true spirituality*. This is the way of walking by *human knowledge*.

Whereas the *spirit* means to be *lead* by God in *love, compassion, kindness* ... as the Spirit of God *speaks to our hearts*. This is the way of walking by *faith*.

*II Corinthians 3 - 4*Such confidence as this is ours through Christ before God. *5*Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God. *6*He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant—**not of the letter but of the Spirit**; for the **letter kills**, but the **Spirit gives life**.

Slight Problem

There is one *slight* problem with this interpretation of II Corinthians 3 ... it does *not* say that.

Read the *context*.

*II Corinthians 3 - 1*Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, like some people, letters of recommendation to you or from you? *2*You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, known and read by everybody. *3*You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on **tablets of stone** but on **tablets of human hearts**.

*4*Such confidence as this is ours through Christ before God. *5*Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God. *6*He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant—**not of the letter but of the Spirit**; for the **letter kills**, but the **Spirit gives life**.

*7*Now if the **ministry that brought death**, which was **engraved in letters on stone**, came with glory, so that the **Israelites** could not look steadily at the **face of Moses** because of its glory, fading though it was, *8*will not the **ministry of the Spirit** be even more glorious? *9*If the **ministry that condemns** men is glorious, how much more glorious is the **ministry that brings righteousness**! *10*For what was glorious has no glory now in comparison with the surpassing glory. *11*And if what was fading away came with glory, how much greater is the glory of that which lasts!

12Therefore, since we have such a hope, we are very bold. 13We are not like Moses, who would put a veil over his face to keep the Israelites from gazing at it while the radiance was fading away. 14But their minds were made dull, for to this day the same veil remains when the **old covenant** is read. It has not been removed, because **only in Christ** is it taken away. 15Even to this day when Moses is read, a veil covers their hearts. 16But whenever anyone **turns to the Lord**, the veil is taken away. 17Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. 18And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.

When you read this passage, you see that there is being made a *contrast* between *letter* and *spirit*.

If you read just a portion of this passage *out of context*, then you might get the impression that there is being made a *contrast* between *human wisdom* and *faith*.

What is the *letter*? Well, *books* are written in *words* ... and words are written in *letters* ... so it *must be* that *letter* means *books*.

Scholars write books.

Biblical scholars write *Biblical* books.

So *letter* is making reference to the *human wisdom* that tries to *study* the Bible ... i.e., *only* study, without having *faith*.

The Bible talks a lot about the *spirit* and being *spiritual* ... so this *must be* a reference to the simple Believer who *understands* the Bible *by Faith* ... without trying to *analyze* and *question*. After all, questioning and analyzing *leads to division* and *arguments*.

But before we go jump off the bridge ... let's take a look and see if there is anything else in this passage that we notice ... things that might help us better understand these two terms ... *letter* and *spirit*.

Notice the mention of,

- **old covenant**
- **ministry that condemns**
- **ministry that brought death**
- **tablets of stone**
- **engraved in letters on stone**
- **face of Moses**
- **taken away**

We will call this **Set A** of phrases.

Do any of those phrases *ring a bell*?

QUESTION – To *WHAT* are these phrases referring?

ANSWER – They are referring to the ***Old Covenant.***

Now look at **Set B** of phrases,

- ***ministry of the Spirit***
- ***ministry that brings righteousness***
- ***only in Christ is it taken away***
- turns to the Lord

QUESTION – To *WHAT* **Set B** of phrases referring?

ANSWER – They are referring to the ***New Covenant.***

If we now go back and look at *letter* and *spirit* again ... don't you *suppose* that **Sets A** and **B** are intended to explain *letter* and *spirit*?

QUESTION – To *which* **Set** would you *connect* the word *letter*?

ANSWER – Seems pretty clear to me that *letter* connects with **Set A**.

QUESTION – To *which* **Set** would you *connect* the word *spirit*?

ANSWER – Again, seems clear that *spirit* connects with **Set B**.

If this is the case ... then what is II Corinthians 3 really saying when it contrasts *letter* vs *spirit*?

It is *contrasting* the *Old Covenant* ... with the *New Covenant*.

Read the passage again with this thought in mind ... which *interpretation* of *letter* and *spirit* makes more sense ... and seems to be more in *harmony* with the rest of the passage?

As to the *dangers of studying* the Bible ... because *studying* means *human wisdom* rather than simply reading the Bible by *faith*.

Consider,

Acts 17 - 11 Now the Bereans were of **more noble** character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great **eagerness** and **examined** the **Scriptures** every day **to see if** what Paul said was **true**.

I Peter 3 - **Always be prepared** to give an **answer** to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with **gentleness** and **respect**, *16* keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander.

John 5 - 39 You diligently **study** the **Scriptures** because you think that by them you possess eternal life.

(KJV) *I Thessalonians 5 - 21* **Prove all things**; hold fast that which is good.

II Timothy 3- 16 All Scripture is God-breathed and is **useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting** and **training** in righteousness, *17* so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

There is nothing *unspiritual* about *studying* the Bible.
But this *study* must be done with *gentleness* and *respect*.

The Bible warns against *human wisdom*.

I Corinthians 1 - 17 For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel—not with **words of human wisdom**, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.

I Corinthians 2 - 13 This is what we speak, **not in words taught us by human wisdom** but in **words taught by the Spirit**, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words.

But this admonition does not suggest it is *unspiritual* to *study* the Bible ... but rather it is *unspiritual* to **substitute** *study* of the Bible **with** ideas concocted up **outside** of the Bible.

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