



Article # 2

Six Blind Men & the Elephant of Context

There is an old Indian fable popularized in a poem written by John G. Saxe in the 1800's. It demonstrates how we can be so very wrong if we base our opinions on insufficient evidence gained by inadequate study. Each blind man in the poem walked up to the imposing elephant to investigate what it was like – but each touched only one part of the animal. The first man, falling against the elephant's broad and sturdy side was thoroughly convinced that the elephant was *"very like a wall."* The second, feeling a sharp tusk was equally convinced that the beast was like a spear. The elephant's squirming trunk convinced the third man that it was like a snake – and so on, the knee being like a tree, the ear like a fan, and the swinging tail like a rope. Each man had a faulty but very strong opinion of what an elephant was really like – and disputed the others with great vigor and volume. As Saxe wrote, *"Though each was partly in the right, and all were in the wrong!"* You may have a copy of that poem in an old book of poetry – I have it in two of my old favorites. Beware of some Internet postings of the poem that intentionally leave off John Saxe's last stanza, which reads,

*"So, oft in theologic wars
The disputants, I ween,
Rail on in utter ignorance
Of what each other mean,
And prate about an elephant
Not one of them has seen!"*

I taught a Bible study one night in a very upscale community – one with big expensive houses, views of the water, and luxury cars in almost every driveway. Most of the residents didn't drive their fancy cars to the city – a short train commute gave them added time to work. Many of the men were known by their first and middle initials. G.R. was at the Bible study, and so were E.M. and D.R. Most of the people in that community were reaping the benefits of fine educations and multiple degrees from universities of renown such as Brown, Stanford, and M.I.T. with a number of Harvard MBA's in the mix. They were very bright people – they really knew their stuff. Their educations were broad and deep – and they succeeded in business because of it. In the middle of the Bible study, one attendee said something very inconsistent with her history of educational pursuits. She said, *"I don't care what facts, or how many facts, you tell me – you will never convince me that what you are saying is true."* Don't jump to a faulty conclusion about her – don't be like those blind men. That bright, educated, and well-respected woman – she was a believer and leader in her church. However, she was under-educated in the Bible – but very opinionated in what she believed about it. She was so like too many Christians today in their theological opinions, effectively saying, *"Don't bother me with the facts, I already have my mind made up."* You and I would never be like that – or would we? That's a tough question that should make us squirm a little. Maybe it's time for a theology exam and some honesty about how we arrived at our answers.

The correctness of your answers for the following easy theological exam is important – but not for the purpose of this particular article. Let's assume that all of your answers will be correct. Mentally jot down your answers as you work your way through the following seven questions. #1: What method of baptism is right – dunking, pouring, or sprinkling? #2: Did Jesus have any brothers or sisters? #3: Is there going to be a rapture – and if so, could it be today – and what happens afterward? #4: Is pre-destination or free-will more correct? Question 5: Was it an

angel, Jesus, or God who spoke to Moses from the burning bush? #6: Can everyone with enough faith be healed? #6: Which is Biblical, private prayer tongues or public tongues – or both – or neither? #7 Will there be tears in Heaven? Wasn't that an easy exam? I'd say it would be a safe guess to say that you had a fairly confident answer to most of those questions. Wouldn't you agree? Most Christians would confidently answer those seven simple questions. However, I need to ask you some more difficult ones – penetrating ones. How did you arrive at your answers? Did someone else give the answers to you? I don't mean to imply that you were cheating on the exam – after all, it was an open-book exam (or should have been). I just wonder if you developed your theological opinions through detailed study and prayer – or did you just believe the answers that someone else gave you from the pulpit, Sunday school class, or Christian broadcast? Too many Christians too readily believe what they are told by someone wearing the uniform of leadership. And too many Christians gain their theology via osmosis from their Christian surroundings. Go back through each of those seven questions – and for each one, answer the question, *"How did you get your answer?"*

Context, context, and context are three of the most important aspects of Bible study. What does the whole verse or section say? What is the theme of the chapter or book? And how does that fit non-contradictorily into all that the Bible teaches on that subject? The six blind men developed strong opinions from insufficient data – just one data point per man. The elephant looked nothing like those men imagined. Some Christians are much like that – coming to theological conclusions from just one verse. We all look with skepticism at the person who blindly puts a finger down on one random verse for a critical message from God. But maybe we do the same thing when we base our theology on just one verse while, with our theological eyes covered, we blindly ignore the context of that verse or ignore other verses that clearly contradict our opinions? I have talked with many Christians who are, without recourse to study, of very strong opinion about certain theological issues. They often *"Rail on in utter ignorance of what the Bible really means, and prate about the elephant of context not one of them has seen."* In the past few decades, there has been a dumbing-down of Christians. More and more Christians know less and less about the Bible. God's Word exhorts us to study it. I like the KJV translation of 2 Timothy 2:15, *"Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth."* Would you be ashamed if God gave you a theological exam? Study to show yourself approved to God. Learn from a variety of good Bible teachers. But don't settle for second-hand truth. Study the Word for yourself – make it your own – get prepared for your part of the work of God. Study it for yourself – study and pray. *"All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work."* 2 Timothy 3:16-17. Do you need to embark on a serious program of Bible study?

The Blind Men and the Elephant

By John G. Saxe

Based on an old Indian fable

It was six men of Indostan
To learning much inclined,
Who went to see the elephant
(Though all of them were blind),
That each by observation
Might satisfy his mind.

The first approached the elephant,
And happening to fall
Against his broad and sturdy side,
At once began to bawl,
"God bless me! but the elephant
Is very like a wall!"

The second, feeling of the tusk
Cried, "Ho! what have we here,
So very round and smooth and sharp?
To me `tis mighty clear
This wonder of an elephant
Is very like a spear!"

The third approached the animal,
And, happening to take
The squirming trunk within his hands,
Thus boldly up he spake,
"I see," quoth he, "the elephant
Is very like a snake!"

The fourth reached out an eager hand,
And felt about the knee:
"What most this wondrous beast is like
Is mighty plain," quoth he;
" 'Tis clear enough the elephant
Is very like a tree!"

The fifth, who chanced to touch the ear,
Said: "E'en the blindest man
Can tell what this resembles most.
Deny the fact who can,
This marvel of an elephant
Is very like a fan!"

The sixth no sooner had begun
About the beast to grope,
Than, seizing on the swinging tail
That fell within his scope.
"I see," quoth he, "the elephant
Is very like a rope!"

And so these men of Indostan
Disputed loud and long,
Each in his own opinion
Exceeding stiff and strong,
Though each was partly in the right,
And all were in the wrong!

So, oft in theologic wars
The disputants, I ween,
Rail on in utter ignorance
Of what each other mean,
And prate about an elephant
Not one of them has seen!