

A Matter of Interpretation

My objective in writing these essays is to assist you in understanding the important and necessary message from God contained in the Bible. Today there are a wide variety of conflicting religious traditions and teachings that on the surface appear to be based on biblical principals. The conclusion that the Bible may be correctly interpreted to support all of these various opinions or, to put it more simply, "it's just a matter of interpretation" is a dangerous point of view. It is dangerous to use this point of view as a reason to dismiss the clear instructions contained in the Bible and not investigate for yourself what the truth is. The truth is these various and conflicting traditions and practices are the result of straying away from the teaching of the Bible over the years. You can understand what the Bible says. It is not just a matter of interpretation. The apostles Paul and Peter write:

For we do not write you anything you cannot read or understand...¹

In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ,²

Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord's will is.³

Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation.

For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.⁴

Why then is there so much disagreement? The answer is that these various religions are not carefully following God's instructions contained in the Bible. They have strayed from the truth and are instead following the teaching of various men. The Bible contains many warnings against this very thing:

So be careful to do what the LORD your God has commanded you; do not turn aside to the right or to the left.⁵

"These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.

They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men."⁶

On the positive side the Bible talks of the benefits of correctly understanding the word of God. The book of Psalms contains many examples of this. Here is an excerpt from Psalm 119:

Let me understand the teaching of your precepts; then I will meditate on your wonders.

My soul is weary with sorrow; strengthen me according to your word.

Keep me from deceitful ways; be gracious to me through your law.

I have chosen the way of truth; I have set my heart on your laws.

I hold fast to your statutes, O LORD; do not let me be put to shame.

I run in the path of your commands, for you have set my heart free.

Teach me, O LORD, to follow your decrees; then I will keep them to the end.

Give me understanding, and I will keep your law and obey it with all my heart.

Direct me in the path of your commands, for there I find delight.

Turn my heart toward your statutes and not toward selfish gain.

Turn my eyes away from worthless things; preserve my life according to your word.⁷

My objective here is not to make you see things my way but to assist you in understanding God's way. It's not about dueling religions. You need to see beyond the differing opinions of people and see God. God's word is truth and not a matter of interpretation. Jesus said in his prayer to the father:

Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth.⁸

¹ 2 Corinthians 1:13

² Ephesians 3:4

³ Ephesians 5:17

⁴ 2 Peter 1:20-21

⁵ Deuteronomy 5:32

⁶ Matthew 15:8-9 (Quoting Isaiah 29:13)

⁷ Psalm 119:27-37

⁸ John 17:17

I have been concentrating on the major principles that are firmly established and repeated again and again in God's word. Some place a great deal of emphasis on easily disputable ideas. Some ideas are easily disputable because they are based on scant references. To put it another way very few words written in the Bible. The major principles are easy to understand because they are thoroughly covered in God's word. There is a proper way to handle scripture. The apostle Paul writes to Timothy this advice on teaching the word of God:

Keep reminding them of these things. Warn them before God against quarreling about words; it is of no value, and only ruins those who listen.

Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth.

Avoid godless chatter, because those who indulge in it will become more and more ungodly.

Their teaching will spread like gangrene. Among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus, who have wandered away from the truth. They say that the resurrection has already taken place, and they destroy the faith of some.⁹

Notice even in the time of the apostles, false teaching creeping in. Paul does not mince words when he refers to this teaching as "godless chatter" and warns that it will "spread like gangrene". The apostle Paul warns Timothy to avoid it. He does not consider it a matter of interpretation. Either a teaching is true or false.

Another method for false teaching to creep into religious instruction is covered by the apostle Paul in his first letter to the church at Corinth. This example highlights two principles that need to be understood. Some members of the church at Corinth were focusing on individuals rather than God. This is a common problem today. The teacher becomes the focus and this causes competition because each group tries to prove they are better than the other. This was not the instruction they were given so Paul uses this as an opportunity to remind them of the instruction, "Do not go beyond what is written."

Brothers, I could not address you as spiritual but as worldly-- mere infants in Christ.

I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready.

You are still worldly. For since there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere men?

For when one says, "I follow Paul," and another, "I follow Apollos," are you not mere men?

What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe-- as the Lord has assigned to each his task.

I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow.

So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow.

So then, men ought to regard us as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the secret things of God.

Now, brothers, I have applied these things to myself and Apollos for your benefit, so that you may learn from us the meaning of the saying, "Do not go beyond what is written." Then you will not take pride in one man over against another.¹⁰

"Do not go beyond what is written." The apostle Paul saw the divisions that were creeping into the church as outside the teaching from God that was delivered to them through the apostles. The same is true today. There are divisions because some teachers have not heeded the warning, "Do not go

⁹ 2 Timothy 2:14-18

¹⁰ 1 Corinthians 3:1-7, 4:1, 6

beyond what is written." I'll present a very simple example to illustrate this point. In the gospel of John, the third chapter begins with these verses:

Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council.

He came to Jesus at night and said, "Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him."¹¹

These verses tell us that Nicodemus came to Jesus at night. Suppose in teaching a lesson from these verses I say that Nicodemus came to Jesus at night because he was afraid of the other Pharisees that wanted to kill Jesus (a reasonable inference), many years go by and this inference by repetition becomes an integral part of this lesson. A visitor comes by who had been taught for many years that Nicodemus came to Jesus at night because he wanted to catch him alone (also a reasonable inference). Now a dispute arises that neither side can win because all the Bible says is "He came to Jesus at night". Both teachers did wrong because they did not heed the instruction, "Do not go beyond what is written." Now there is a dispute that the casual observer might classify as a matter of interpretation but we can see from this simple study that neither side is supported by the text. This is exactly what often happens today people go round and round quoting the Bible and disputing with each other, neither side can prevail because both sides have strayed away from the clear and easy to understand teaching contained in the Bible.

In Jesus' time just as it is today there were a number of competing religious factions whose teachings conflicted. One of these factions was called the Sadducees. They did not believe in the resurrection of the dead or the immortality of the soul. They opposed the teaching of Jesus and came to Jesus with this ridiculous example. Notice the response Jesus gives them:

That same day the Sadducees, who say there is no resurrection, came to him with a question.

"Teacher," they said, "Moses told us that if a man dies without having children, his brother must marry the widow and have children for him.

Now there were seven brothers among us. The first one married and died, and since he had no children, he left his wife to his brother.

The same thing happened to the second and third brother, right on down to the seventh.

Finally, the woman died.

Now then, at the resurrection, whose wife will she be of the seven, since all of them were married to her?"

Jesus replied, "You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God.

At the resurrection people will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven.

But about the resurrection of the dead-- have you not read what God said to you, 'I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? He is not the God of the dead but of the living."

When the crowds heard this, they were astonished at his teaching.¹²

"You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God." Jesus does not respond by saying it is "a matter of interpretation" he tells them they are in error and why they are in error. So here is another method for false teaching to creep into religious instruction, just not knowing what the Bible actually says. We all need to know what the Bible says not what people say it says. The only way to accomplish this is to spend time reading the Bible yourself. Sometimes the popularly held understanding of what the Bible says is incorrect. I'll give you another simple example to

¹¹ John 3:1-2

¹² Matthew 22:23-33

illustrate this point: you have often heard people “quote the Bible” saying, “the love of money is the root of all evil”. This is what the Bible actually says:

For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.¹³

Notice, “...the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil” has a very different meaning than “the love of money is the root of all evil” which is how this verse is often quoted. Also you can learn what the apostle Paul’s specific meaning for this verse was by reading the surrounding verses and understanding who Paul was writing to. In this case the apostle was writing to a specific individual Timothy, a student of Paul’s and we can see the reason for this letter from the beginning verses of this letter:

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the command of God our Savior and of Christ Jesus our hope,
To Timothy my true son in the faith: Grace, mercy and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord.
As I urged you when I went into Macedonia, stay there in Ephesus so that you may command certain men not to teach false doctrines any longer nor to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies. These promote controversies rather than God's work-- which is by faith.
The goal of this command is love, which comes from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith.
Some have wandered away from these and turned to meaningless talk. They want to be teachers of the law, but they do not know what they are talking about or what they so confidently affirm.¹⁴

Arguments based on the misquoting of the verse about “the love of money” or arguments made not understanding the context are as Jesus said, “...in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God.” The casual observer may see disagreements arising from this error as “a matter of interpretation” we can see from this example that is not true. I’m including at the end of this essay the study guidelines I included with a previous essay to help you avoid some of these pitfalls.

A note about the Pharisees and the Saducees: in Jesus time the Jewish religious world was divided into many factions two major factions were the Pharisees and the Saducees. Both of these groups opposed Jesus. The Pharisees attempted to institute a strict observance of the law and also held to the large body of oral traditions that had evolved over the years. The Saducees rejected the oral tradition and had their own brand of strict observance of the Law of Moses. Jesus reserved his sharpest criticism for the religious establishment of that day:

"Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You shut the kingdom of heaven in men's faces. You yourselves do not enter, nor will you let those enter who are trying to.

"Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as you are.¹⁵

Today as in the time of Jesus many religious factions exist. We should all take these words of Jesus as a stern warning. Holding to a body of religious tradition even though it has been around for many, many years is no guarantee. In fact religious traditions by their very nature tend to stray away from God.

¹³ 1 Timothy 6:10

¹⁴ 1 Timothy 1:1-7

¹⁵ Matthew 23:13-15

When I write these various essays, I am trying to direct your attention to God's word. I am not attempting to create a new religion. I am trying to give you assistance in understanding the Bible. Your understanding must rest on God's word, not on my or anyone else's writings. Some religious teachers indeed do make the error of leaving you with the impression that their way is the only way. Their logic goes like this: God's way is the only way, we are teaching God's way therefore our way is the only way. This thinking does not acknowledge the possibility for error, which is present in every teaching. This is not what I am saying either. I am attempting to encourage you to seek God's way. His way is indeed the only way. The apostle Paul expressed an attitude that would be helpful for every teacher of the gospel to emulate:

Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners-- of whom I am the worst.

But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on him and receive eternal life.¹⁶

Study Guidelines

Four principles to aid in understanding the text and help avoid some of the common obstacles to understanding;

- **Context:** understand who is the writer, who is being written to, what are the circumstances at the time of writing including where, when and any special conditions present.
- **Definitions:** understand the meaning of any important terms. Be careful that you understand what the writer is saying. Definitions of many important terms have shifted dramatically over time. Understand how these terms apply to the culture at that time.
- **Inferences:** test any conclusions you come to against all other passages in The Bible and against other important sources. Be especially critical of your own necessary inferences.
- **Balance:** remember that many principles can only be properly understood as they relate to each other. Some instructions need to be balanced against other seemingly contradictory instructions. Also consider that the proper weight is given to the principle under consideration.

The meaning and importance of these principles will become clearer as you apply them to your reading. It is very important that you now do some reading and research and prove for yourself what the truth is.

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¹⁶ 1 Timothy 1:15-16