

“That’s Just Your Interpretation!”

David Flatt

If you have ever come to a stalemate in a Biblical discussion, you have probably said or had someone say, “That’s just your interpretation!” This statement is said when someone refuses to accept a certain Biblical interpretation as right and correct. This accusatory phrase can also be a defense mechanism of a lazy mind and dishonest heart.

Today, people increasingly feel they are entitled to their own set of facts. If the facts contradict how we feel or fail to justify our preconception, we have to find a way to dismiss the truth and strengthen our position. This is dangerous.

When two people try to discern information, Biblical or otherwise, they will likely reach different conclusions. Biblical disagreements are inevitable; yet, we must work toward the right interpretations. Let’s consider how this works.

About Biblical Interpretation

1. Biblical conclusions are the result of interpretation. I have heard Christians say, “We don’t interpret the Bible, we just do what the Bible says.” Or, “We don’t interpret the Bible, we apply the Bible.” Just the word “interpretation” makes some uncomfortable.

Interpretation is the process of explaining the meaning of information. When we take a text of Scripture and explain what it says in its context, we are interpreting the Bible. When we draw conclusions about what a text says and make an application of it in our lives, we are interpreting the Bible. “That’s just your interpretation” is a true statement. We need to be determining the validity of an interpretation. If the interpretation is accurate, we must adopt it to our lives.

2. The Bible is intended to be interpreted. God intended the Bible to be read and applied. For example, Ezra interpreted the law for Israel. When Israel was being reestablished following the Babylonian captivity, the Bible says, “So Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could understand what they heard, on the first day of the seventh month. And he read from it facing the square before the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand. And the ears of all the people were attentive to the Book of the Law... They read from the book, from the Law of God, clearly, and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading” (Neh. 8:2-3, 8). Ezra explained the meaning of the law to Israel. Ezra interpreted the Scriptures.

On one occasion, Jesus was asked a question by a rabbi. The rabbi asked what he needed to do to inherit eternal life. Jesus asked the rabbi, “What is written in the Law? How do you read it?” (Luke 10:26). Jesus wanted to know how the rabbi interpreted the law. The rabbi answered. Jesus approved of his interpretation (Luke 10:27-28).

Lastly, consider what the apostle Paul wrote to the Ephesians: “When you read this, you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ” (Eph. 3:4). Paul expected the Ephesians to understand God’s plan for saving the Gentiles by rightly interpreting his letter.

3. The Bible can be wrongly interpreted. The Bible can be misread and wrongly applied. This was the major problem of Israel regarding the Messiah. The Jews had misinterpreted the Scriptures concerning the Messiah. Paul explained this to the Jews of Antioch of Pisidia: “For those who live in Jerusalem and their rulers, because they did not recognize him nor understand the utterances of the prophets, which are read every Sabbath, fulfilled them by condemning him” (Acts 13:27).

Misinterpreting the Scriptures can be deadly. A wrong interpretation of the Scriptures contributed to the murder of the Messiah. As shocking as this may seem to us, we can misuse the Scriptures to our peril. Concerning the writings of Paul, Peter wrote, “...There are some things in them that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures” (2 Pet. 3:16).

Peter said some of Paul’s writing was “hard” to understand, not “impossible” to understand. The challenge of Paul’s writing was not responsible for how some misused them. Ignorance and instability of some led them to twist Paul’s writing. The ignorant and unstable that Peter writes about sound like those today who angrily protest, “That’s just your interpretation!”

4. The Bible can be rightly interpreted. God has consistently communicated with humanity for the sake of being understood and obeyed. God never revealed His will to humanity as a trap to trick us. God gave a written law to Israel. God expected Israel to comprehend the law. Jesus spoke in parables to be understood. When people had questions about His parables, Jesus gave answers. James commanded his readers to be “doers” of the word, not just “hearers” (Jas. 1:22). In other words, they needed to rightly interpret the Bible.

Rightly interpreting the Bible takes diligence and honesty. When we have disagreements about the Bible, we need to peruse truth and reconciliation. This requires time and the right attitude towards the Bible and one another. Receiving the word with meekness enables us to become “doers” of the word (Jas. 1:21-22).

Conclusion

As long as God has revealed His word to humanity, people have been arguing about what God said and what God meant. It’s as old as the Garden. The debating and arguing about the Bible demonstrates our internal struggle between our will and God’s will.

Unless and until we are prepared to obey God, we will find a way to disregard His word. Intellectual dishonesty, one method of self-deception, is a powerful weapon to warp our minds and harden our hearts. With an open mind and willing heart, we must strive to rightly interpret the word of God.

“Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth.”

2 Timothy 2:15