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301 - Interpreting The Bible

1. Introduction

Whether we're discussing the Bible with other believers or non-believers the talk generally stalls when we reach a point at which the participants are no longer willing to consider the other's viewpoint. We frequently hear someone say, "that's just your interpretation". The phrase implies that what we believe is based on our personal opinion and isn't relevant to anyone else. Coupled with that is the idea that there's no universal truth. In this lesson we'll discuss **Interpreting The Bible** and how we can make sure that what we believe and teach is scripturally sound.

2. Facts, ideas & opinions

There's an old phrase that reminds us not to discuss politics or religion. And why is that? The answer is due to the fact that both areas are very personal. They define us and reflect our values and view of life. Relationships and our interaction with the world around us is heavily dependent on our ideas about those two areas. Politics and religion connect with what we think, how we think and what we feel. When someone disagrees with us in those areas a frequent reaction is anger. We may feel personally insulted or devalued in some way and that leads to arguments or the dissolution of a relationship. On a larger scale conflicts in these areas have led to wars and persecution when one group decides they don't like what the other group stands for. These are realities that don't need a lot of explanation. Everyone is aware of these conflicts on a personal and historical level.

People are always going to be divided in their ideas about these areas. When we talk about spiritual things as Bible believers we realize the necessity of understanding the Bible well enough that we grasp what it teaches. We need to be able to present what we believe in a way that reflects what the scriptures teach and avoid injecting our personal opinions that are based on what we feel about a particular subject. To some that's an impossible task and view the religious world and filled with conflict. The resolution adopted by many is to agree to disagree and not alienate anyone. Discussions are avoided especially in regard to certain issues that remain controversial. Anyone insisting on biblical truth at some point will be accused of being dogmatic, or labeled a legalist and avoided.

These attitudes are outgrowths of interpretations of the scriptures that aren't based on doctrinal reality. They're rooted in personal beliefs and attitudes, the influence of prominent theologians, pastors and other leaders whose followers are impressed with their apparent knowledge or charisma. The fact that someone is an eloquent speaker, has a lot of knowledge and is able to motivate people in itself isn't a bad thing. It can be very powerful and bring about positive changes. In the religious realm there are individuals with these qualities who inspire others and are a pleasure to listen to but if their interpretation of the scriptures deviates from the doctrine we have recorded, the end result will be disastrous for themselves and their listeners. Understanding the process of interpretation, what to avoid and the proper attitude will go a long

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way toward helping us grasp the essential character and teaching of the Bible.

In this lesson we'll discuss:

1. What it means to interpret something and the process of interpretation
2. Types or methods of interpretation
3. The relationship between facts, interpretation and truth
4. Attitudes expressed regarding objective interpretation

Let's take a look at each of these.

3. The definition and process of interpretation

The idea of interpretation, especially applied to the Bible, may cause some to immediately avoid the discussion. A large number of people regard the Bible as being difficult and beyond their capabilities to understand. Most rely on their pastors, priests or highly educated theologians to tell them what the book means. Our first task is simple. We have to simplify the idea of interpreting the Bible so we see it as a natural outcome of study. Simplification will steer clear of complicated concepts and terms, such as hermeneutics, to see that the task of interpreting and therefore understanding the scriptures is a skill that all students of the scriptures must develop. We also need to emphasize that we need to think for ourselves and not become dependent on the thoughts of respected authorities to the extent that we don't evaluate their particular positions. As you'll see the entire process is basic, not complicated and is a skill that we'll learn and develop over time.

First let's define the word interpret:

- a. To explain or tell the meaning of; present in understandable terms
- b. To conceive in the light of individual belief, judgment or circumstance
- c. To represent by means of art; bring to realization by performance

Now let's extend that to the definition of interpretation:

- a. The act or result of interpreting: explanation
- b. An instance of artistic interpretation in performance or adaptation
- c. A teaching technique that stresses appreciation and understanding by combining factual with stimulating explanatory information

If we look carefully at these statements we'll see two types of interpretation identified. The first involves fact based explanation and presentation and the second merges the personal attitudes and ideas of the interpreter. Both are valid forms of interpretation but there's a difference in how and when they should be used.

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4. Types or methods of interpretation

From the definition we just read there are two methods or perspectives we can employ in interpretation. I divide these into an **objective** method, and a **subjective** method. As I noted a moment ago both of these are valid but need to be understood and applied where and when appropriate. We'll start with some examples we're familiar with.

Interpreters for the hearing impaired community are bound by a code of ethics to accurately interpret or translate what is being said. Interpreters are bound by this code to not inject their own ideas and attitudes. They're prohibited from omitting things or misleading their audience. We can see the problems that would arise if someone did that. We'll come back to this concept in a moment as it stresses a critical aspect of interpretation.

Those who serve as interpreters for those who don't speak foreign languages are also bound to observe these guidelines as well. Can you imagine the havoc that would result should interpreters mislead world leaders during a critical negotiation? We know what would happen. International tensions would rise and perhaps start a war that would get a lot of people killed. Once more we understand the need for accuracy with this type of interpretation.

Both of these examples demonstrate **objective interpretation**. We understand that in one language, whether it's American Sign Language or Japanese, there are words that will convey the same meaning in both languages. Interpretation is therefore the process of objectively listening to spoken or signed words and then rendering them with the same meaning in the other language. We don't have a problem understanding that because the words, objective facts in these examples, have a distinct and unique meaning. Misinterpretation can be easily detected and corrected.

What about something that's not quite as obvious. We can borrow concepts from the scientific method to illustrate this. The steps are usually presented as -

- a. Formulate a hypothesis
- b. Conduct tests and gather data
- c. Analyze the data
- d. Draw conclusions based on the data

This process as employed in laboratory research is similar to the steps we need to take to investigate and interpret something objectively. We start out by asking a question or identifying a subject that we'd like to know more about. We then collect our data, in this case passages from the Bible. We then examine and analyze the data by comparing them and noting what's actually stated. When we have a sufficient amount of research data collected, we're able to reach a conclusion based on the scriptures that will answer our question or educate us on a particular subject.

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It's important to note that when we begin such an exploration we have to remain neutral. Our preconceptions, prior experience and emotional needs are elements that can cloud our understanding. In order to remain objective we need to set aside a desire to reach a specific outcome. In that way we allow the scriptures to speak for themselves. Our conclusions that we reach using this approach will be free from personal bias and apparent discrepancies between passages will be resolved as we study the passages we've collected. This isn't an impossible task, but it's one that many don't follow and experience confusion and problems later on as a result.

The second method of interpreting something is **subjective**. Subjective interpretation is based on a couple of basic perspectives. The first is an emotional or personal need to be reassured or feel something. This may be the result of life events we're struggling with or a general need to bolster our sense of identity. The second perspective begins with a need to prove or confirm something we're sure we already know. This might be something we've been taught or an idea that's formed from exposure to those who have influenced us in some way. This type of investigation into a subject is characterized by a search for information that confirms what we think we already know. Those who approach a subject like this are biased by their personal preconceptions. Approaching a subject like this will prevent us from coming to a clear understanding of what we're studying.

Subjective interpretation is flawed by emotional attachments to an idea or practice. This might come about as the result of a personal experience that makes an impact on our lives. We may have a tendency to come to a conclusion that something is true based on how the event or experience made us feel. It's common to evaluate the relative credibility of an idea on how it makes us feel. Someone might conclude that something is right if we feel good about it and conversely, if something makes us uneasy it must be wrong. After all if something was wrong we wouldn't have a good feeling about it. The problem is that emotion becomes the deciding factor about whether something is right, wrong, good or bad. Religious beliefs are sometimes accepted because they're "better felt than told" or perhaps it's something their parents or grandparents believed and is therefore "if it was good enough for them, it's good enough for me."

Subjective beliefs are often reinforced by personal testimony. Individual experience in the form of perceived blessings and opportunities is often used to verify the credibility of certain ideas. The final confirmation that one is correct doesn't necessarily come from the scriptures but from the mass consensus of a group. I've heard some reason that since so many people believe something it can't be wrong.

A difficulty with this approach is that individuals generally have a poor grasp of the scriptures. That doesn't mean they don't know a lot of verses and can carry on a discussion about the Bible. It generally manifests as misunderstandings of biblical content that I've covered in previous lessons. Those who hold to this type of subjective base are prone to restrict discussions to a limited range of passages in the Bible or rely more on a preacher or teacher to provide the

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interpretation that they've decided is correct because of how they feel about it. The downside to this approach is that subjectively invested Bible believers are often quick to become angry or avoid scriptural discussions completely. In the latter case we frequently hear someone say that we'll just have to agree to disagree which is meant to end the exchange.

Subjectively oriented approaches to the Bible are also heavily reliant on charismatic or energetic speakers and teachers. Some interpret the energy expended by these individuals as proof of the Holy Spirit working. Their feelings, the personality of the speaker and consensus of a group, combine to immerse believers in an environment driven by emotionality and personal satisfaction regardless of what the scriptures teach. At an extreme some so called Christian groups have abandoned the Bible completely relying on what they believe to be an ongoing revelation of God to them directly. We'll discuss that in a later lesson, but for now we need to understand the difference between these two approaches to learning.

A final word has to be added about the role of emotion and coming to an understanding of God's word. A criticism of those who favor an objective approach to the Bible is that they avoid emotional expression. Such believers are seen as being stiff, formal and are characterized as lacking spirit. The emphasis with the objective approach is to allow what we know shape how we feel not the other way around. Subjectively oriented approaches draw conclusions based on how one feels no matter what the scriptures have to say. This leads to rejection of anything that conflicts with personal feelings, opinions and attitudes which have become the yardstick measuring the credibility of a belief. The problem is that emotions and subjective thinking is personal. We don't all feel the same way about the same things. Our experiences aren't always the same nor are our reactions to those experiences. We personalize what we like and believe and since we're all different reliance on a subjective approach creates a wide range of interpretations.

5. The relationship between facts, interpretation and truth

Approaching interpreting the Bible, or any subject, objectively or subjectively impacts our attitude toward facts. This in turn has an impact on the idea of truth. In our time there are many who don't accept the reality of universal truths. Everything is relative and by extension no one has a right to impose their ideas on anyone else. The idea of a personal truth is something that is prevalent in our world and it's not a new idea. When Christ was questioned by Pilate he explained that he had come to bear witness to the truth to which Pilate asked "*what is truth?*" (**John 18.38**). That's the question of the age. What is true. How do we know it's true. Who's right and how do we know they're correct and what difference does it make anyway? Sound familiar? We've discussed approaches to interpretation now let's proceed by defining what a fact is. We can define a fact as:

- a. A piece of information presented as having objective reality
- b. The quality of being actual
- c. A thing done or occurrence

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Let's take a look at these elements and examine how they relate to the scriptural text.

A piece of information presented as having objective reality: Our discussion of doctrine in this series isn't a study of evidences so I'm working with the assumption that those listening to this accept that the Bible is the word of God. Accepting that we see that the body of facts exists in the words recorded and presented in the books of the Bible. In other words the facts we'll be dealing with start with what's stated, not what we think about it, but the actual words used. We'll treat the words in the scriptures as evidence, or data, from which we'll be able to draw conclusions.

The quality of being actual: How does this part of the definition fit our discussion? We'll restrict our inquiry to the words and information presented in the scriptures as they appear. We won't add anything to them or try to inject something that isn't there. Each piece of data will be regarded as complete and subject to analysis

A thing done or occurrence: The Bible tells stories. We can't just take a look at disconnected words on the pages. They connect with each other and relay information. At times we'll focus on a single word while at other times we'll take a look at an event or group of passages. In either case, whether we're discussing a single word, sentence, paragraph or story, we'll let the book speak for itself.

Facts are objective. They are what they are. When we approach something objectively we assemble the facts and allow them to guide us to conclusions that match the factual evidence. On the other hand if we approach things subjectively we may have a tendency to reject facts when they conflict with our ideas. An alternative to complete rejection is to acknowledge the factual evidence but alter its meaning which in itself is a form of subjective interpretation. In science, medicine, engineering and other disciplines that dictate close adherence to facts this type of thinking ends in failure in advancing one's knowledge.

Truth, and the idea of truth, then is closely related to our acceptance of facts and an objective grasp of them. When we acknowledge factual evidence in a manner that's consistent with those facts we've established a truth. Laboratory science and the validity of the scientific method depends on verification of outcomes and conclusions. Truths can be verified when multiple objective analysts examine the same facts independently of each other and draw the same conclusions based on the evidence.

There are areas in life where we can subjectively interpret things without negative consequence. When studying any subject that demands close attention to detail and the preservation of the nature of the evidence presented subjective approaches result in a failure to develop an accurate awareness of the subject. That's not hard to avoid but it takes a willingness to abide by a few rules or principles as we enter new subject areas.

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One of the problems, exemplified in Pilates question, “*what is truth*” is exactly that. What is truth. We live in a world that focuses on the individual’s right to decide what to believe and therefore the idea of truth is subjective. We hear references to personal truths, or one may be asked “what’s your truth?”. These statements and questions deny the existence of consensual reality. If something is an objective truth it can and will be recognized by others who objectively examine it. The idea of a personal truth doesn’t prove that consensual or objective truths don’t exist. It emphasizes a priority placed on personal subjective interpretation and opinion about the fact or facts in question. That isn’t new. There are areas in life where we can have those personal views but critical subjects demand an objective grasp of fact, truth and reality.

The problem in the first century, and today, is that many reject the idea of a consensual reality. To them everything is relative. In application of everyday life we understand there are fixed realities that can’t be altered no matter how much we dislike them. When we encourage Bible readers to consider these principles there are some attitudes that surface at some point.

6. Attitudes expressed regarding objective interpretation:

Encouraging someone to accept what the Bible has to say in its own words is sometimes a challenge. Over the years I’ve made the point that we’re all sloppy thinkers until we learn to discipline our minds. Computer programming is a good example of this. Beginning coders experience problems with applications or routines when debugging. Most of the time the error is incorrect syntax or poorly structured statements. When the program runs the error creates a fault and everything stops. It doesn’t matter what we think about how it should run the fact is the program won’t recognize something that the language interpreter isn’t made to accept. We can apply this to anything that requires a specific approach. Gasoline engines can’t run on diesel no matter how many times we might fill up the tank with the wrong fuel. It just won’t work.

Bible study is the same way. Some spend years reading the Bible unaware of their misconceptions or incorrect interpretations. When we try to offer guidance there are some typical responses that we hear. One of the most common is the remark ‘well that’s your interpretation’ meaning we’re expressing our subjective ideas that are no better than anyone else’s. Another response when trying to present a doctrinal position objectively is “you’re a legalist”. That statement implies that we see the Bible as a rulebook that has to be enforced for the sake of the rules. That’s really not our intent, and those who present that argument usually don’t like the idea of having to adhere to any rule, code or law anywhere. They believe in their freedom of choice and exercise of free will regardless of what anyone says.

These are only two ways that people respond there are others. The reason why this happens falls into one of two categories. Either the person has just been presented with facts they recognize but don’t want to admit and respond out of fear and insecurity. The second response is often encountered when dealing with someone who has their own strict list of shoulds and should nots. Their rigid stance on the Bible and its doctrine is set in their minds. They’re heavily

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invested in it mentally, emotionally and spiritually. No one is going to change their minds and they have a number of barriers to throw up to prevent the truth from getting in.

A final response is sometimes not stated openly but is more of an attitude toward an objective approach to the Bible. There are believers who are sincere, honest and energetic who fear losing the emotional reward of believing. They see an objective approach as being void of emotion, or what they believe to be the Spirit moving in them. Approaching the Bible objectively doesn't limit our enjoyment of study or the joy of learning something new from God's word. The only difference is we don't evaluate the scriptures on how we feel. We feel because we have the confidence that we understand what God wants us to know.

As we proceed in our study of biblical doctrine we're going to treat the word as a body of evidence. We'll gather our facts, perform an analysis and draw conclusions based on what we've learned. After that we'll continue to evaluate our conclusions and compare them to the scriptures to make sure we have a good understanding of them. We'll also find that misconceptions are resolved, misinterpretations corrected and understanding deepens as we follow this path. A study of the doctrine of the Bible is an advanced topic and one that requires concentration but its not as hard to figure out as some think.

7. Next

A study of biblical doctrine begins with identifying the nature and characteristics of the information presented. In the next lesson we'll discuss the Bible as **The Word Of Faith** and it's critical role in shaping our understanding of God's will.