

"THAT'S JUST YOUR INTERPRETATION"

Dowlen Road, August 30, 2009 AM

INTRODUCTION:

- A. Have you ever had someone say during the course of a Bible study, "That's just your interpretation?"
 - 1. These words have ruined some promising Bible studies. I've been studying with people about salvation and seemingly making progress.
 - a. We would read John 3:16 and they would agree that we must believe in Jesus as our only Savior.
 - b. We would read Matthew 7:21 and they would agree that we must decide to stop living a life of sin and rebellion and start the will of God.
 - c. But then we would read Mark 16:16 or Acts 2:38 and I would point out that, to be saved from our sins, we must also obey Christ's command to be baptized. It would be precisely at this moment that, rather than agreeing, some people would sit back in their chair, fold their arms and say, "Well, that's just your interpretation."
 - 2. It's not just an objection raised in studies about salvation. Study what the Bible says about homosexuality (I Corinthians 6:9-11) and some will say, "That's just your interpretation." Study the statements of scripture about divorce and remarriage (Matthew 19:9) and still some will say, "That's just your interpretation."
 - 3. What really makes this frustrating is that often these words mark the end of the study. Once these words were spoken, there would be no interest in looking more closely at the text to be sure we understood its meaning. They didn't agree and there was nothing more to be said.
 - 4. It's a line that can really frustrate our efforts to help other people understand God's will for their lives. Our young people have encountered this because they specifically asked that we talk about it in one of our Bible studies a few weeks ago.
- B. If we are ever to effectively remove this evangelistic barrier, then we have to understand the mindset behind it.
 - 1. People who say this often fail to understand the nature of the Bible and the God who is behind it.
 - 2. If we are to remove this obstacle, then we must tackle the deeper issues.
 - 3. So, I want to pose this question: what do people really mean when they say, "That's just your interpretation?"
 - 4. Let's look at three deeper issues.

You have no right to interpret the Bible.

- A. People mean different things when they make this statement.
 - 1. Some are referencing scripture (**II Peter 1:20**). Some use this passage to argue that a person has no right to read the Bible and come up with their own explanation of what it means.
 - 2. Others go in a different direction. They would argue that common people like us are not qualified to interpret the scripture.
 - a. They believe the message of the Bible is really hard to figure out. A person has to go to seminary and spend years being taught by the experts before they will be able to really understand the message.
 - b. So what right does an average guy like me have to interpret the Bible?
 - c. I studied with a lady who was rebuked by a leader in her church for studying the Bible. He told her to stick with the literature published by their church and quit studying the Bible for herself.
 - 3. Jehovah's Witnesses take this even further. They believe their organization is God's channel for explaining scripture. The only way to rightly understand scripture is to read their literature.
- B. Several points of confusion need to be addressed.
 - 1. First, let's make sure we understand what it means to interpret the Bible.
 - a. To interpret the Bible simply means to figure out what it is saying. I read a passage and I try to understand what God is saying.
 - b. Not only does every person on the planet have the right to do this, we must do it!
 - 1) God tells us that we must obey His words (Matthew 7:21).
 - 2) He tells us that we will be judged by His words (John 12:48).
 - 3) In fact, our eternal destiny hangs in the balance, determined by whether or not we obey the words of God (II Thessalonians 1:8).
 - c. Every person must interpret the Bible – read it, figure out what it means and obey it.
 - 2. Second, what about the passage in II Peter 1:20?
 - a. A closer look at the context will clear up any confusion (**vs. 20-21**).
 - b. Peter is addressing the source of scripture – where it came from. He is saying that the prophets were not sharing their own opinions when they wrote. Instead, the Spirit was guiding them to speak God's words.

"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." (NIV)
 - c. This passage in no way forbids our efforts to read and interpret what the Bible says. As we have seen, we must do this.
 - 3. Third, this idea that the Bible is only for some intellectual class to explain is completely false.
 - a. Remember that the gospel was preached to everybody (**Mark 16:15**). This included educated people; but, it also included fishermen, jailers, and beggars – common people, people of average if not below average intelligence.
 - b. All were able to understand it and respond to it. But the easiest way to prove that we can all understand the Bible is just to study it. Even the parts that are admittedly tough can be figured out (teens and Revelation).

Summary: Sometimes when people say, "That's just your interpretation," what they're really saying is that you have no right to interpret the Bible. Clearly we not only have the right, but it's among our most important responsibilities.

The Bible is confusing.

- A. Many are convinced that the Bible sends mixed signals.
1. For example, you might read the Bible and conclude that a person has to be baptized to be saved. But I might read it and reach the opposite conclusion.
 2. Some reason that the problem is with the Bible.
 - a. It does not speak with clarity to these issues. Thus, we end up with conflicting conclusions.
 - b. They would suggest that this explains why we have different and conflicting doctrines taught in different churches.
 3. Because this is true, they also conclude that all interpretations of a Bible passage are equally valid.
 - a. For example, if we can't really be sure what the Bible is saying on baptism, then it is arrogant to suggest that your conclusion is correct and another is not.
 - b. When some say "That just your interpretation," what they are really saying is that we cannot be certain about what the Bible teaches.
- B. But those who reason in this way have some much deeper issues to resolve.
1. They often fail to appreciate that they are actually bringing a charge against God.
 - a. You can't say something critical about a book without saying something critical about the author (**II Timothy 3:16**). To say that the Bible is confusing is to say that God made it that way.
 - b. Then consider that God also told us that we must understand and obey His will if we want to go to Heaven (**Matthew 7:21**). He requires that we be unified (**I Corinthians 1:10**).
 - c. Only a twisted, cruel God would demand that we understand His will, then record it in a book designed to confuse us. To say that the Bible is confusing is draw into question the very nature of God.
 2. Let me add that no one really believes that every interpretation of the Bible is equally valid.
 - a. For example:
 - 1) The Jehovah's Witnesses claim that the Bible teaches Jesus is just an angel and not divine.
 - 2) Some Pentecostals claim that the Bible teaches it is a sin for a woman to cut her hair or wear a wedding ring.
 - 3) One Episcopal bishop claims he can find evidence in the scripture that the apostle Paul was a homosexual.
 - b. Would anyone suggest that I am arrogant for saying that these interpretations are wrong? The Bible does not teach any of this. Those who claim it does need to do some more study.
 - c. But that's good counsel for all of us.
 - 1) When we hit a spot in our studies with others where we disagree about a passage, let's put the blame where it belongs.
 - 2) It's not with the Bible or God. It's with us; one of us is wrong. We need to get back to the book and do more study.
 3. But beyond this, when people contend that the Bible is confusing and too difficult to figure out, which passages are they talking about?
 - a. I realize that there are challenging passages in the Bible that take some careful study to figure out. But the fact that a text is challenging does not mean you can't figure it out.
 - b. But a good bit of our disagreement is over passages that aren't confusing (**Matthew 19:9**). If a guy goes away from this passage uncertain about what Jesus is saying, I don't think the problem is with the clarity of the text. It's more likely that he does not like what the text clearly says.
 - c. Which brings us to our final point...

I do not like this interpretation.

- A. Keep in mind that their objection may have absolutely nothing to do with whether or not the passage has been interpreted correctly. This isn't the issue. The real problem is that they do not like what it says.
1. Some do not like **Matthew 19:9** because it says that they are living in an unlawful relationship.
 2. Some do not like **Mark 16:16** because it goes against their religious heritage – everything they've always been taught.
 3. Some do not like **I Corinthians 6:9-11** because to believe the truth will put them in conflict with our cultures acceptance of homosexuality and make them appear out of step with everyone else.
 4. Some do not like **Matthew 18:15** because they would rather remain bitter and gossip to others about their enemy.
- B. There is a lot that can be said about this.
1. But it all comes down to this: It really doesn't matter how I feel about what God says. He's God and I've got to do what He said.
 2. It is interesting that, to the best of my knowledge, Jesus never asked His disciples, "What do you think of My teaching?"
 - a. He did ask, "**Who do you say that I am?**" (**Matthew 16:15**).
 - b. Then He added this question (**Luke 6:46**).
 3. If I really believe that the Bible is the will of God that I must obey if I want to go to heaven, this is what I will do:
 - a. I will study it.
 - b. I will be very meticulous to be sure I understand it.
 - c. I will diligently labor to live it every day in my life.
 4. This isn't just someone's interpretation. This is how it is!

Conclusion: Mark 16:16

No amount of reasoning and explaining can change what Jesus said. If you want to go to heaven, you must believe and be baptized. Have you done this?