

Why Do People Interpret The Bible Differently?

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Reading Time: 4 minutes

One man is a member of *this* church because of *this* Biblical reason, another is a member of *that* church because of *that* Biblical reason. One man believes or practices *this*, another believes or practices *that*.

Why do so many people study the same New Testament, but draw different conclusions?

Concerning interpreting the Bible, G.H. Schodde writes,

A person has interpreted the thoughts of another when he has in his own mind a correct reproduction or photograph of the thought as it was conceived in the mind of the original writer or speaker. It is accordingly a purely reproductive process, involving no originality of thought on the part of the interpreter. If the latter adds anything of his own it is eisegesis and not exegesis. The moment the Bible student has in his own mind what was in the mind of the author or authors

of the Biblical books when these were written, he has interpreted the thought of the Scriptures. (1489)

If God is the author of Scripture, it is true (John 17:17) and anyone who disagrees with truth believes myths (2 Tim. 4:4). And if Scripture is true, then it does not contradict itself. There is only one systematic message in it; there is “one faith” (Eph. 4:5). God never intended for us to have different interpretations. Instead, His desire is “that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment” (1 Cor. 1:10, ESV).

If I interpret the Bible differently than you, it is either because God was incapable of giving us a book that we could agree upon, or because there is a problem in how one (or both) of us is studying it. I choose to believe the latter.

If God is the author of the Bible, then all diligent students who read the Bible *correctly* will eventually come to the same conclusion. God does not in one place teach that baptism is *essential* to be saved, while in another place teach that baptism is *optional*. God does not teach in one place that we can *choose* to obey Him, and then in another place teach that He nebulously predestines to save us *individually*. God does not in one place teach that a Christian can “fall from grace,” while in another place teach that a Christian can never lose his salvation. **How could we have confidence in a man - let alone a God - who so contradicts himself?**

The idea that there are equally valid different interpretations of Scripture has caused many to disbelieve that the Bible is the Word of God (cf. John 17:20-21).

If the Bible is really the Word of God, then we must believe that the problem of different interpretations rests not with the Bible, but with the people doing the interpreting.

Consider some reasons why there are so many different interpretations:

Ignorance

Both Jesus and the Jewish leaders accepted the Old Testament as the Word of God, but they had different interpretations about the subject of the resurrection. Jesus told them, “You are wrong, because you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God” (Matt. 22:29). Even the disciples of Jesus did not expect Him to rise from the dead because “they did not

understand the Scripture” (John 20:9).

Many today - even religious leaders and scholars - know only the passages that seem to teach what they already believe, but have not fully considered the context of those passages or have not studied other passages that would reveal the full truth.

Disbelief

Many refuse to believe in the power of God. They do not believe in the miracles recorded in Scripture, and the sovereignty of God over the physical world. Like the Pharisees who denied the irrefutable miracles of God (cf. Matt. 12:24-31) or the spectators who mocked the prophecies of Jesus as He hung on the cross (cf. Matt. 27:39-44), many rationalize away the supernatural power of God. This explains the ridiculous interpretations of the account of creation in Genesis 1 or the great flood in Genesis 6-7.

Sensationalism

The disciples had different interpretations about whether or not Jesus said John would never die (cf. John 21:21-23). The apostle John wrote, “yet Jesus did not say to him that he was not to die, but, “If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you?” Why did some think Jesus said that John would never die? They wanted to believe the sensational.

Love for sensationalism is what drives many different interpretations. The “Left Behind” books and movies are popular because the false teaching of a supposed “rapture” is sensational. Great crowds will show up to churches to hear about “The Meaning of 666,” “The End Of The World Is Near” or “The Anti-Christ and Israel,” even though such predictions or supposed signs are proven wrong over and over again.

Not Loving Truth

Satan, the “father of lies” (John 8:44), had a different interpretation of Psalm 91:11-12 than Jesus, taking it to mean that Jesus could jump from the temple and not be hurt (Matt. 4:5-7). Satan pursued a lie, whereas Jesus loved the truth of God’s Word (John 6:38).

Today, there are plenty of people who simply do not love truth. As a result, they “twist to their own destruction” the Scriptures (2 Pet. 3:16) and will be eternally lost (2 Thess. 2:9-12).

Bad Attitudes Toward Scripture

Many differences in religion are *not* a result of differing interpretations, but as a result of a low view of the *exclusive* authority of Scripture. To defend many of the different religious names people wear, the different churches they attend, and different practices they perform, they appeal not to Scripture, but to their own preferences. “Man can do whatever he wants in religion so long as the Bible does not specifically forbid it,” they say. How arrogant! These differences are not due to interpretation, but due to human additions to Christianity.

Conclusion

While many are honest in their interpretations, it is still possible that they are honestly mistaken. The most important requirement in correctly interpreting the Bible is the desire to know and do God’s will. Jesus said,

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied. (Matt. 5:6, ESV)

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Sources

Schodde, G.H. “Interpretation.” *International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia*. Chicago: The Howard-Severance Company, 1915. Vol. 3.