

Biblical Truth

Or
“*What this means to me is...*”

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We are going to take a closer look at what is one of the most divisive issues within Modern Christianity: we are going to take a look at *Biblical interpretation*. There have been many books and articles written on this issue and I do not pretend to bring to the table insights and expertise not held by others. I would, however, have us examine this issue one more time because I believe it bears examination often.

Please understand that this question of the Biblical Truth is incredibly important for one primary reason: If God did not intend for Scripture to mean one thing and only one thing, and instead left Scripture to have multiple meanings, then there is no way to KNOW THE TRUTH about God, heaven and hell, salvation, or any other issue presented in the Bible. If Scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, then I can present and “prove” anything I want and you cannot tell me I am wrong. And this includes the article you are reading. If you believe the Bible is pretty much a matter of individual interpretation, or if you believe that Scripture can have more than one meaning, then you will disagree with this article. AND YET YOU CAN'T! Why? Because this is my interpretation, and by your own beliefs, you cannot sit in judgment as to the accuracy of another person's interpretation. So you are stuck with me and mine. Live with it!

I hope to avoid controversy as much as possible, but I know controversy will result from this short article. There are many people, some in Christian leadership and some not, who have a vested interest in leaving well enough alone. Many Biblical pastors and counselors, when asked about a particular passage in the Bible, or a particular Biblical issue, will not give an answer but will instead ask, “What do you think it means?” Many churches and even entire denominations practice or teach that there is no Biblical Truth, only Biblical interpretation. By that I mean that they hold to no definitive positions on many issues considered in the past to be of paramount importance to Believers. Often these people, churches, or even denominations do not offer a final determination to their parishioners or members on the existence of a devil, or on sin, or on hell, or on whether one can get to Heaven through anything or anyone other than personal faith in the life, death, and resurrection of the person of Jesus of Nazareth. It seems far more important to these people, churches, or denominations that people feel good about their beliefs or their church or their denomination than it is for people to know the truth. And yet Jesus stated a long time ago, “*Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.*”

[John 8:32 NIV] Perhaps Jesus was trying to say that there is no freedom in feeling good about what you believe, but only in knowing what the truth really is.

So, perhaps the issue being addressed here is more the question: *Do you want to feel good about your beliefs, or do you want to know the truth?*

Please understand that I do not want to step on anyone's toes. I do not want to have anyone feel bad or particularly inadequate for developing any specific opinion of any specific passage in particular or of Scripture in general. On the other hand, I believe it is far more important that someone understands what Scripture is saying than it is for them to feel good about what they THINK Scripture is saying.

And please note that I am not addressing here the act of reading the Bible for devotions, or even for pleasure. (Yes, it is possible to enjoy reading the Bible just like you would enjoy reading a book of historical fiction or military history.) Reading the Bible for fun or inspiration or devotional purposes is not the same as studying the Bible. You should seldom develop your understanding of any particular theology based on your devotional reading, but also you should seldom seek comfort and solace and encouragement from Bible study. They are two separate acts and have two separate purposes and two separate benefits.

I am aware of my bias on this question, so I will state it here for all to review and judge. I believe that God inspired sincere men to write specific things about specific concepts or specific events. These writings were intended by God to be inspired Truth. These Truths are totally consistent with each other, and can be properly understood when comparing the various writings of these men. In other words, there IS Truth, and then, separate from Truth, there is opinion. While the Truth is internally consistent and not at all in disagreement with itself, various opinions of the truth are not internally consistent and there are many disparities and disagreements between them. Most of these opinions have good intentions behind them, and many are excellent for devotions and for inspiration, and especially for instruction on how to live with others. But it is the Truth that is necessary in order to know and understand who and what God is, and in light of that, who and what we are.

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work. [II Timothy 3:16 & 17, NIV]

In this article, we will not so much be addressing the Truth on these matters, but on how to find the Truth on these matters.

Discovering the Truth – Issues Involved

Can Truth be discerned from the pages of the Bible? Is there one true interpretation to be discovered on each individual issue, concept, or passage?

We have all heard the story of the man struggling with certain personal demons who turned to the Bible. "God," he cried out, "Show me what you want me to do!" The man

opened the Bible and flipped through pages until it seemed to fall open on a particular page. He read, "*Judas went out and hanged himself.*" "God, not that!" he cried louder, flipping more pages. This time he read, "*Go thou and do likewise.*" The man moaned in frustration and flipped even more pages. The last Biblical passage ever read by that man was, "*Whatever you do, do it quickly.*"

Sometimes it is not good to develop a doctrine or a course of action based on a superficial reading of the Bible.

No one I have ever discussed these issues with has taken the position that every issue in the Bible is a function of each individual's personal opinion. Everyone I have ever discussed these issues with has always maintained that unfettered opinion is not the thing on which good Biblical Theology is founded. And yet most people have developed opinions on most Biblical issues without much personal study, and often without much personal thought, and usually without much personal prayer.

Is there one Truth to every Biblical passage, or is the meaning of that passage as varied and individual as the man or woman reading it? Obviously, most people fit somewhere in between those two extremes. But we must ask if the Bible give us the option of being somewhere in between.

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.

[II Peter 1:20-21, NIV]

What does this passage mean? Is there no room for personal interpretation in reading (or writing, for that matter) Scripture? Does this passage only apply to Scriptures that are clearly prophetic, or to the whole Bible? How can we know the Truth of this or any other passage?

And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others. [II Timothy 2:2, NIV]

Was Paul telling Timothy to pass on whatever he personally believed Paul meant when he was teaching, or did Paul intend that Timothy pass along only what Paul himself had declared that he meant when he taught these concepts?

Let's consider a parallel for a moment.

The Constitution for the United States of America was written by a roomful of men over many days of discussion, and even argument. It was reduced to writing to assure that future generations of Americans would see what was written. And then the Founding Fathers added many articles and essays on the issues involved in the Constitution so that future generations of Americans would understand what was intended. Yet today many of our political leaders want us to believe the Constitution for the United States of

America is a “living document” whose meaning changes from one generation to the next, and even from one individual to the next. This renders Constitutional Law fluid and Constitutional guarantees negotiable.

Is the Bible intended by God to be a “living document?” Is Biblical truth negotiable?

These questions and many more come to the minds of most people when pushed to declare the meaning of the above Biblical passage, and most other passages.

Allow me to use an argument presented by C.S. Lewis in his powerful and insightful book, *Mere Christianity*. Let’s say that you and I are asked about our views of some imaginary city. We offer our views, and they are distinctly different, even opposite. If the individual asking was considering a visit to this imaginary city, then your opinion would be equal to mine; your opinion would be considered equally accurate and equally valid since both of our opinions refer to an imaginary city.

But there *really is* a NYC, so there is a reality against which your opinion and mine can be measured. And since there *really is* a NYC, your opinion and mine, if different, are not and cannot be both accurate. While everyone has a right to their own opinion, and everyone has the right to believe what they want, not every opinion is equally accurate. Specifically, you have your opinion as to whether New York pizza is better than Chicago pizza, or if New York delis are better than any other delis. My opinion might differ. But it is no longer a matter of opinion when we state *as if it were fact* how many restaurants are on Broadway. Further, the individual asking is considering a vacation to that city, so he inquires how many times we had been there. You claim that you have visited NYC at least a dozen times, three of which were extended stays of a month or longer. I admit that I had been there once on a 2 day business trip. On which view of NYC should the individual place more credibility? Which view is probably more accurate?

I am sure everyone would agree that your description of New York, being based on many and varied visits, would be more accurate than my description, based on 2 days in a convention hall. Should I be hurt or offended if the individual decides that your description is more accurate than mine? Should I claim that I am somehow diminished if someone were to discern that my opinion is incomplete, especially when compared to the views of someone who might be considered more knowledgeable about the city? Do I have a right to demand that I should have my views equally respected regardless of how incomplete or unconsidered those views? Can I claim that you cannot judge me or my opinion because the Bible tells us to not judge?

Only if I was a shallow and selfish person; only if I was far more interested in my acceptance as an equal to you than I was in someone else benefiting from my knowledge or increasing in their knowledge.

Don’t get me wrong – I believe that everyone has a right to his/her own opinions. And there are many questions which have, by their very nature, opinions as answers. To

those questions, you and I have equal rights to demand respect for our views. But there are times when TRUTH is more important than opinion.

I was recently channel surfing on my TV, looking for something worth watching for the short break I was taking for a meal during my typically busy work day. I came across a program reviewing the fashions worn by stars at a recent awards show. One particular dress was described by one “expert” as trashy and ugly. Another expert on the same show a few seconds later described it as beautiful and tasteful. Were both opinions correct? I know which opinion with which I agreed, but the *truth* here was more a matter of taste than fact. If the experts on that show could not agree as to which view was true, and watching it for only a few minutes established that they definitely could *not* agree, then who am I to decide which opinion was true? In this case, it was NOT a matter of truth but a matter of opinion.

Sometimes opinions are nothing more than trivial and unimportant expressions of personal taste.

But what about the Bible? Does God have a specific message to communicate in any particular passage, a “truth” to tell mankind? Or are all Biblical passages merely a matter of taste? Does it matter what God was trying to tell us in that passage? Or is our opinion of the meaning of any particular passage the most important concept we can carry away from our reading of Scripture?

Should we see Scripture as if it were New York City, or as if it were a dress?

If Scripture were more like New York City, are there ways we can discern the real truth, the real meaning, the message God wanted to communicate?

These are the questions I hope to address in this article, and to help you, the reader, to decide. These are the issues I hope to help you cope with more effectively.

Discovering the Truth – Methodology

The simplest method of discerning the meaning of any particular passage in the Bible is the OIA Method – Observation, Interpretation, Application. You begin with observing what is actually there. You then interpret what that passage means. And last, you decide how God wants you to apply that passage to your life that day. I realize that these steps are simplistic, and I realize that serious Bible students will be driven to deal with these issues more deeply using many other tools and methodologies. But for most of us, these steps will suffice to help us dramatically increase our our study of and our understanding of and Biblical Truth.

Observation is the process of seeing what is there *and* what those who were hearing the words 2000 to 3000 years ago actually believed they meant. On first reading, we are often quite limited in what we see. As we read a second and a third time, we will

usually see more. We might even use a Bible Dictionary or Concordance to understand certain words or concepts better, which would affect how much we see and what those hearing or reading those words 2000 years ago would see and hear. All these steps are part of the process of Observation. Until we observe what is being said and what those hearing it actually believed about what was said, we have not seen very much about that passage. No matter who we are, and no matter how much we know about Scripture, there should be very little difference between one individual and another on what is actually THERE in any particular passage.

We are almost always weak in observing. When asked to take 60 seconds and list 10 personal weaknesses, most of us can finish that list in the time allotted. But when we are asked to take 60 seconds to list 10 personal strengths, most of us will not have completed that task when the minute is up. There may be many reasons for this, but I believe it is almost always a lack of observation. Aside from the self-image or esteem “excuse” offered by most people in the mental health field, I believe that most of us would have a healthy self esteem if we had an accurate view of ourselves. But few of us have an accurate view of ourselves because we don’t look that closely. Weaknesses are often brought to our attention by others, but strengths usually require close self-examination.

Law enforcement and military training spends a lot of time on this lack of observation. When a cop or soldier kicks down the door to a room full of hostages, they often need to make instantaneous decisions as to who the good guys and bad guys are. Then they shoot. If they take too much time to observe, they or the hostages are shot. If they don’t take enough time to observe, they may end up shooting the wrong people. So they are trained to observe many details very quickly, and then act. Few of us can do that in life, and even less of us in studying Scripture.

Let me take a moment and relate a short story that I read many years ago that helped me tremendously with this concept of observation. It seems to me it was a story about Socrates and one of his disciples, but it might have been Aristotle. The story revolved around a a disciple and a fish. The teacher told the student to go observe the fish and come back and describe it. The student went into the kitchen and looked at the fish lying on the table for a minute or so, and went back to report. After speaking for a couple of minutes, the student was quiet as if that were all he had to say, a confident expression on his face. The teacher quietly said, “Go and take another look and come back and report what you see.” The student felt humbled, even a little impatient, and decided to look so closely that he would be able to come back and report everything about that fish there was to report. After half an hour of close examination, the student came back to the teacher and took ten full minutes to describe in detail everything he had seen. The teacher said, “Go back and look more closely.” The student was terribly embarrassed, and perhaps more than a little irritated, but he went back to the kitchen like he was told. A couple hours later the teacher looked around for the student and saw that he was no where to be found. So the teacher walked into the kitchen and spotted the student bending low over the table. But there was something clearly different about the student. This time there was no arrogance, no irritation, nothing of

the feelings that were under the surface when he was first tasked with what he perceived to be the simple, almost meaningless, assignment of observing the fish. Instead, there was intensity and even excitement in the young man's manner. He looked up when he sensed the Teacher walking into the room, his eyes bright with discovery. "Tell me what you see," the teacher quietly asked. "Oh, teacher, wait until I tell you all that I have seen!"

Another example of the lack of observation involved with interpretation comes from a discussion I had with a Muslim. He was engaged in spreading the belief to several people that Jesus never claimed to be God, nor did he claim to be the Son of God, all for the stated purpose of promoting the belief that Muslims and Christians all worship the same God – Allah of the Koran was God of the Bible. One of the men involved in the discussion was somewhat at a loss and asked me for input. I said without caution, "The only way someone could believe that is if they do not understand what they are talking about." I then directed the group to one passage in particular. In the 2nd Chapter of the Gospel according to Mark, Jesus had just claimed to have forgiven the sins of a man in the presence of many witnesses, including a number of Scribes and Pharisees. The negative response from the religious leaders prompted Jesus to say:

Why are you thinking these things? Which is easier: to say to the paralytic, "Your sins are forgiven," or to say, "Get up, take your mat and walk"? But that you may know that the Son of man has the authority on earth to forgive sins... He said to the paralytic, "I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home." He got up, took his mat and walked out in full view of them all. This amazed everyone and they praised God, saying, "We have never seen anything like this!" [Mark 2:8-12, NIV]

The Muslim man immediately pointed out that Jesus never claimed to be God in that passage. I corrected him by saying, "Actually Jesus made the claim that he was God very clearly and powerfully, by both healing the man and forgiving his sins. No mere man can heal someone like that, and no mere man would dare to forgive his sins. And if you really don't accept that, then you have to realize that you are in the minority. If you look again, you will see that even the Pharisees there understood that Jesus was claiming by his actions that he was God when they stated immediately following the claim by Jesus that he forgave the man his sins:

"Why does this fellow talk like that? He's blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?" [Mark 2:7, NIV]

The scribes and Pharisees there did not believe that Jesus was God. But they clearly believed that Jesus CLAIMED to be God, and they accused him of blasphemy for it!

Observation requires that we understand more than what was stated – we must also understand what people at that time *believed* was stated. And everyone there believed that Jesus had just claimed to be God.

Believe me when I tell you that if you offer your opinion of a Biblical passage after only reading it through once, you have not begun to understand that passage! And if you have not studied until you are excited about what you have seen, then you have not yet seen what God has for you in that passage.

Where there are differences in opinions as to what Scripture says, I have almost always found them to be differences in observing what is actually in the passage.

Interpretation is the process of discerning more meaning from the passage. Often we will need to cross-reference other books, such as dictionaries or concordances, in order to flesh out what that passage means. We especially need to consult other verses to check our interpretation and to assure that we don't understand that passage to mean something different or contrary to what the rest of Scripture might say on that issue or topic. We must remember that Scripture was written about events far back in the past, and Scripture was written by people who had a particular set of beliefs and experiences on which to base their words as they wrote. So a man who understood farming as it was practiced several thousand years ago might understand the words Jesus used when he told the Parable of the Soils, sometimes known as the Parable of the Seeds, quite differently than a man who spent his entire 20th Century life in a major American city. Without the same frame of reference, and without the same understanding of the concepts being discussed, the modern man would never gain the same insight.

If we don't understand the concepts and people and places being discussed, then we can never presume to come to the conclusion the writer intended.

That kind of misinterpretation is our fault – not God's fault and not the specific Biblical author's fault.

If we believe that God is the Creator of all that exists, and if we believe that he knows everything, and if we believe that he wrote the Bible to communicate to us, then we cannot believe that God made errors or that he disagrees with himself. If God cannot get it right, then he is NOT the God of the Bible! The Bible doesn't disagree with itself. And the Bible doesn't have several different meanings for the same verse or passage. It cannot, unless you believe that God is a capricious god who is just passing around confusion and grief and frustration. The passage you are reading, if properly studied, means what God intended it to mean and not what you or I decide that it means. If we have different conclusions as to what a particular passage means, then one or probably both of us need to study that passage some more.

Get a good Bible dictionary and other reference books, and use them. When you read about Jesus going "up to Jerusalem" from a location to the north of Jerusalem, you can conclude that there was an error in writing or in translating, or you can learn that Jesus was walking south but climbing more than a thousand feet in elevation to what was one of the highest cities in the country. So Jews went "up" to Jerusalem regardless of what direction they were traveling.

Get a good concordance or Greek lexicon. When you read where the Bible tells us not to judge and also read where it tells us to judge with righteous judgment, then you can conclude that the Bible disagrees with itself. Or else you can expend a little more time and effort and discover that one passage says don't judge whether a man is going to heaven or to hell based only on external actions or internal attitudes, and that another passage uses an entirely different Greek word and tells us to discern if an individual is exercising godly character or actions.

I have found that most differences in interpretation usually result from differences in knowledge of the Bible and of the historical context. In other words, the more we study a particular passage, the closer we will agree about that particular passage.

Application is the process of asking God to tell us how to use in our personal lives that which we have just learned from Scripture. Application of any given passage or truth can be quite different from individual to individual, and usually is. Application is the "what this means to me" part of understanding Scripture. But application isn't what that passage means, it is how God wants me to apply that particular passage. Differences in application are as myriad as there are differences in circumstances and personalities.

When we read the story of the Battle at Jericho, we can read it superficially and then try to discern how God wants us to individually apply the truth of that passage. A shallow reading might result in someone developing military tactics based on walking around an enemy in plain sight, while another might decide that we can face all our problems and defeat them if we only have a trumpet, and still another might decide that when they move to a new town God wants them to kill their neighbors. Most people would suggest that these are examples of rather stupid conclusions. I would submit that when anyone merely reads a passage superficially, without serious study, and jumps immediately to how God wants them to apply that passage, then they run the risk of jumping to equally stupid but hopefully less disastrous conclusions.

While no one can ever say "never" in reference to what God might decide to do in the future, it is fairly safe to conclude that you do not find God's specific will for your life by dropping your Bible and allowing it to open to some apparently random page and then blindly stabbing your finger at a specific verse. The more you study a passage or a concept or an issue, the more clearly you understand what is actually meant by those words or that story. As your understanding increases, God can shape your attitudes and your actions, your life, in ways that you might never see until after the fact, maybe even years later. Miles J. Stanford, in his awesome book Principles of Spiritual Growth, stated that God takes a hundred years to grow an oak tree, and six weeks to grow a turnip. The more you study Scripture and the deeper your understanding of it, the more clearly you will see God apply his Truth to your life, and the more deeply you will grow in that life.

Most of us skip the Observation and Interpretation parts and jump immediately to the Application part. And this is why there are so many different views on parts of Scripture and so many disagreements on what Scriptures mean. Truthfully, I see very little real

differences between what people actually believe that Scripture says once those people take some time to see what is there. Let me give an example of what I mean by this, and then attempt to explain it a little better.

Jesus talks about rich people and heaven in Matthew 19:24. *“Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.”*

If we skip a thorough process of Observation and Interpretation, and immediately move to Application, we are stuck with the fact that rich people won't be in heaven. Most of us will not accept that at face value, so we back up to the Interpretation stage and decide that Jesus was trying to make a point and not necessarily trying to state a fact. It is a little hard, even unsettling, to have to “explain away” the clear words of Scripture, and this is one of many passages that require explaining away. So we might feel a little uncomfortable with these words of Jesus, especially if we intend on improving in our wealth over time. But if we take the time to look into what Jesus was actually saying in the passage, we will find a number of enlightening facts. The broader context of the passage involved the religious leaders trying to trap Jesus into saying things that will get him into trouble with the established theology. The more narrow context involved a rich man literally asking Jesus how to get to heaven. Jesus gave some specific instructions to that man resulting in the man leaving in hopelessness and despair.

But what was Jesus actually declaring to the man, to those around him, to us today? It might be discovered by doing a little research in a Bible dictionary or another reference book that Jerusalem, like most cities at that time, had a wall built entirely around the city. And there were many gates in that wall, both large and small. One of those gates was quite small, allowing only foot traffic. It was called the Needle Gate. And Jesus could be saying that rich people need to get off the wealth that they are using to get around in life and depend instead on God. Another fact that might be discovered, when one actually studies the passage, involves the high mountains of the region. They were very steep and rocky, with a very few passes where people can travel through them. One pass was very steep and very rocky, making it almost unused and only passable on foot. It was called the Needle Pass. So Jesus was very possibly making a point and not stating as fact the concept indicated above. Or maybe Jesus knew the heart of that particular wealthy man and gave him a clear message which revealed his heart and its hypocrisy to the man himself, and to the people there. But unless we do some research on the passage, we are forced to change the clear meaning of the words of Jesus. It is one thing to see that Jesus might very well have been using a metaphor. It is another thing entirely to have to explain away or ignore this particular teaching and its message.

Please allow me to clarify something that I believe to be important. I believe there are two parts to our relationships with God. One is theology and one is doctrine. And as I understand it, theology is who and what God is, and in light of that, who and what I am. Doctrine is, in light of my theology, how do I expect to live and how do I expect others to live. Between Christians, and even between denominations, I see very little differences in theology, but a lot of differences in doctrine.

An example would be baptism. Almost all Christians see the spiritual importance of being baptized as a public and personal declaration of a personal relationship with God. This is the theology part.

The differences between Christians and denominations lie primarily in how wet you should get. This is the doctrine part.

If we concentrate first and foremost on Observation when we are studying the Bible, the rest of the process becomes a much more simple issue. As we take the time to see what is actually there, and what those hearing or reading it *at that time* actually believed was being stated, then our differences in how to live out that Truth become much less divisive and much more constructive.

A clear example of this concept comes from the first letter from Peter:

Corresponding to that, baptism now saves you—not the removal of dirt from the flesh, but an appeal to God for a good conscience—through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who is at the right hand of God, having gone into heaven, after angels and authorities and powers had been subjected to Him. [1 Peter 3:21, NASB]

There is also an antitype which now saves us—baptism (not the removal of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God), through the resurrection of Jesus Christ... [1 Peter 3:21, New King James Bible]

One simply CANNOT understand the full meaning of this passage unless one first reads and understands the teachings of Paul on spiritual baptism described in Chapters 6-8 of his epistle to the Roman Christians.

But few of us take the time to observe what is actually there in the text, or comparing it to the text in other Scripture discussing the same issues. In our world of microwaves and faxes and Twitters, we tend to assume that a quick review of any passage will give us enough knowledge to decide what was meant and how we should live it out. And, naturally, we are very protective of our views. If another Christian does not agree with how I view and apply Scripture, I tend to get defensive. Maybe it is the fact that I am insecure in my knowledge of the Bible, or in my relationship with God, or in my beliefs, or in my intelligence - maybe a lot of things. But if we are truly interested more in what God was saying to 4000 years of humanity than we are in being seen as spiritual and knowledgeable, we should take the time to see and understand what is actually there.

This is the purpose of Bible study. And, hopefully, this is your purpose in Bible Study.