

Why Evangelicals don't agree about what the Bible says: the problem of Interpretation

Why do Evangelicals who are serious about their faith and living a Christian life come to very different understandings of the Gospel and Christian living? All who agree on the authority of the Bible can come to very different interpretation of what it says because they use different rules to interpret it. Hermeneutics is the study of the principles by which we interpret the Bible.

Nehemiah 8:7 [Ezra and other Elders] helped the people to understand the Law...8 They read from the book, ...clearly, and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.

Ezra and the Elders were doing Hermeneutics. What rules did they use? "They gave the sense" of the words that had first been clearly read.

Acts 8:28 he [the Ethiopian] was reading the prophet Isaiah. 30 Philip... heard him reading Isaiah the prophet and asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" 31 And he said, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. 34 And the eunuch said to Philip, "About whom, I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?" 35 Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning with this Scripture he told him... about Jesus.

Philip is doing Hermeneutics. He asked the question, "Do you understand what you have read?" Philip helps the reader start from the text and discover the writer's intent. Hermeneutics provides the tools to help people understand the answers to these questions-

- What did the writer mean? What was his intent?

- What was the meaning of the Text for the original readers (hearers- Scripture was written to be read aloud)?

- What does the Text mean for us today?

It has become common in recent years to focus on the historical, cultural (sociological), political, economic context of both the original writer and reader to determine "meaning". It has become common to focus more on the meaning today's readers import into the text ("What this means to me") rather than on the Writer's original meaning and the meaning found in the text by the original audience

Common Reasons for Disagreement

I. Proof-texting

Evangelicals tend to emphasize certain sections of the Bible or, worse, only certain verses. Many Evangelicals do not study the entire Bible systematically. What they believe it teaches depends almost exclusively on verses they are taught as new or young Christians. Those basic texts, those favorite doctrines, not the entire Bible, circumscribe their faith and behavior as Christians. A dozen years and several dozen "Bible studies" later, they are still in the same

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place.

The Bible is a collection of different types of literature, composed over centuries by many different writers for many different reasons. The Bible is not a single book, but actually 66 “books”. Nevertheless, there is unity and harmony within those “books” from first to last. It is internally consistent, never contradictory- all evidence of One Author. This means single passages must not only be read within their immediate context, but must be interpreted in light of the entire Book.

Single verses may be difficult or seem to be contradictory. The reader must learn to see how all verses fit together. Context, context, context- immediate and broad! this will eliminate troublesome proof-texting. Almost anything can be proven from the Bible when only isolated texts are used. Discussions are often nothing more than text dueling- not helpful!

The same problem is perpetuated when select, favorite passages or portions of the Bible are pitting against each other. The Law or the Prophets or the Wisdom Literature or Prophecies or the New Testament or the Gospels or the Letters of Paul must be harmonized, read and interpreted in light of each other. If we persist in giving primacy to one section of the Bible over all others, we greatly alter what the Bible can say to us. The same, of course, applies to portions within each section.

II. Reading the Bible through Grids

Evangelicals also disagree on what the Bible means because we look at the same Book through different “grids”- networks of interlocking presuppositions. Inasmuch as the content of the Bible is not presented in a clear-cut and systematic order, Evangelicals fit together and interpret verses and passages according to the grid they are using.

Over the course of Church History, three or four major systems (grids) for organizing texts of the Scripture have been developed into several theological systems and each has its current adherents who view the Bible and Christian life through that system (which they have grown up with or have learned from their faith community or favorite Bible Teacher or spiritual mentor). These systems cross denominational lines today and elements of Calvinism, Arminianism, and Catholicism along with Reformed Covenantalism, Dispensationalism, Anabaptism, pietism and Pentecostalism are intermingled. The increasingly popular practice finds Christians borrowing from the major systems, mixing and matching elements of each, to make their own, usually internally inconsistent or contradictory, personal system. When Evangelicals insist the Bible is their authority for faith and practice, they really mean: the “Bible-as-understood-according-to-my-theological-system” is my authority.

It is impossible to be simply an “Evangelical” or a Christian “only”. All need to recognize this and be up front about where they are coming from theologically. Because we all, including me, use different systems or grids when we approach Scripture, equally serious and sincere evangelical Christians hold different views about many subjects, e.g.- the Mosaic Law, the Sermon on the Mount, war and pacifism, Capitalism, poverty, the role of civil government, Justice and Human Rights, the nature of the Kingdom and the Church, the nature of Man and Salvation, and even

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the meaning of the Cross and Christ Himself.

III. Where we enter determines where we come out.

I am especially concerned with the growing number of those Evangelicals who are supporting their desire for social activism with an appeal to the person of Jesus whom they believe they have found in the synoptic Gospels. Such Christians insist on the centrality of the life and teaching of Jesus as their primary authority (they often call themselves “Red-letter” Christians).

Jesus himself never wrote anything, let alone using red ink. Our primary source for Jesus’ teaching and life is the Apostles. The New Testament letters written by Paul came first. Galatians 48 AD, Thessalonians late 50 AD, First Corinthians Spring 54 AD, Philippians late 54 AD, Second Corinthians 56 AD, Romans early 57 AD, Colossians Philemon Ephesians 60-61 AD, Pastorals 62-65 AD. Much later, other Apostles (or their representatives, “apostolic men”) wrote what are called the Gospels (referring to a literary genre, not to “The Gospel” itself). They did this over the 30-70 years after the crucifixion [33 AD], primarily for the benefit of Believers and local churches: Mark and Luke may have been written 60-65, Matthew 80-100 and John 90-110 AD [all debatable]. The Writers incorporated what was known of Jesus’ life and sayings according to the theological purpose of each Writer. What they wrote are not biographies of Jesus.

Readers who focus on the person and teaching of Jesus found in Matthew, Mark and Luke will usually have a different understanding of what it means to be a Christian than those who start with either John or Paul. Readers who go into the Bible through the Gospel of John tend to hold a view of Salvation different than those who enter the Bible through the Book of Romans. I did the latter for years. My views changed greatly became committed to being a whole Bible Christian. They have changed even more since I began entering the Bible through Genesis and began to see the Story of Redemption beginning there.

IV. Not being honest when using Bible words

Jesus quoted Deuteronomy 8:3 “(man lives) on every word that comes from the mouth of God” (Matt 4:4)

We can not under estimate the importance of definitions. When it comes to the Bible, it is especially crucial, that we use the words we find there as they were intended. Holding a high view of Scripture must mean we also have a high view of the words in the Book. People who use the words of the Bible must abide by the meaning and use of the words according to their original intent.

It is not acceptable to use the words taken from Scripture to establish something alien or contradictory to the original use or meaning of those words in the Scripture. It will not do for people to use a Bible word with a very different definition of that word than it has in the Bible and lead others to believe the hijacked word says what they are saying it says.

Words such as “born again“, “conversion“, “kingdom“, “Gospel“, “righteousness“, “grace“,

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“discipleship“ and “church” are often used in ways that are not faithful to the original intent of the writers using those words or concepts in the Bible. This is dishonest. What a writer or speaker actually tries to say may or may not be valid or true or important; but, naïve, trusting or ignorant people will be misled into thinking the writer or speaker is getting his message from the Bible. He is not if these Bible words have been purloined and are not used by a writer or speaker today in the way they are used and intended originally.

A similar problem arises from so-called “word studies“ so popular among evangelicals. In these, the effort is supposedly made to use words exactly how they are used in Scripture, but they often they are not. This can be as misleading or dishonest as creating new meanings for the words. “Word studies” are often unreliable primarily because the person doing the word studies simply compiles verses with the word in them from a concordance and is often ignorant of or neglects context, variations of meaning caused by grammatical issues in particular sentences and the way the word itself may have changed meaning over long periods of time or even the differences in language and translations (not knowing the original). Surely we can and most use a variety of study helps, but if we believe all Scripture is inspired by God, then it only makes sense that we begin our interpretation of what is written in Scripture, including specific words, with the Book itself and with the intent of its several writers as our primary guide.

The Historical-Grammatical Method of Interpretation

Because Evangelicals believe that God has revealed Himself and that this Revelation is objective and unchanging and because we believe that this Revelation, the Word of God, is rational, verbal and propositional and contained and conveyed within the words of the entire Bible, in its original manuscripts, therefore several things have been important to them.

Evangelicals are very interested in recovering and preserving the original manuscripts. Evangelicals specialize in Textual Criticism for this reason. We study the original Biblical languages. We use scholarly tools to determine the content of the original documents. We care about the transmission of those documents through various versions and translations over the centuries. We are committed to having a Bible in our hand that preserves the meaning of the original language and content as much as is humanly possible. We do this knowing that language itself changes in translation and usage. This is why we value “word-for-word” versions of the Bible (NAS, ESV), as well as “meaning for meaning” translations (NLT) and paraphrases (The Message). The popular NIV is a combination of these approaches.

However, we know we are influenced by contemporary values and personal biases when we come to the Bible. Some one who is fascinated by the City or the Poor or Racism or Missions or the End Times or the Environment will find all kinds of passages that are relevant to those interests in the Bible- or more accurately, will interpret all kinds of passages in the light of those interests brought to their reading of the Bible. Someone with other interests will tend not see these topics in the Book. Someone who is depressed or struggling with tragedy or marriage or money problems or seeking forgiveness of sins and assurance of Eternal Life will come to the Bible and read it with these issues in mind.

Someone who is an Artist or a Scientist or an “Intellectual” or a CEO of a large business who

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has traveled extensively will certainly approach the Bible differently than those who have limited formal education or life experiences. People of various age and ethnic groups from various parts of the world, speaking different languages, extremely poor or extremely wealthy, people with power and those without bring different expectations and assumptions to their Bible study.

If a reader believes all these variables and influences and biases make objectivity impossible, for the original writers and readers as well as himself, the effort to understand any book, not only the Bible, is completely undermined. The would-be reader is left with total skepticism. For all the above reasons, the conservative Evangelical continues to use the time honored “historical –grammatical” method.

The historical-grammatical method is a good bulwark against this negative outcome. It enables the reader to recognize personal bias and resist subjectivity when we study the Bible- if we use it! Here are the basic rules:

1. Seek the original words [learn and use tools to understand the original language]
2. ...in their original settings (sentences and paragraphs) and context (immediate, larger and ultimately the entire Bible)
3. ...taking those words at their original, common sense face value, which means following time-tested grammatical structure and usage, according to genre.

We can not properly interpret Scripture without understanding types of literature (genre): poetry, history, apocalyptic, prophecy, etc Each one has different sets of rules for interpretation. This applies to the original languages as well as to the language being used today. The student also needs to understand figures of speech, grammar and sentence structure, modifiers, diagramming, etc. So-called “word-studies” often are not linguistically sound and are but another form of proof-texting. However, securing accurate definitions of all words, as they are used in a specific text and genre (both originally and in translation), is essential to interpreting the text well.

4. Finally, test tentative conclusions using

- Thought- Reason and reputable scholarship. A good Library is essential.
- Tradition- Compare your understanding of the passage in question with that of the Church catholic, past and present.
- Testimony- Listen to the Holy Spirit within (having the Spirit, being a Believer, is the first requirement for understanding the Word of God) and do this in fellowship with a faith-community.

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All four of these standards are absolutely essential in determining what the Bible means and what God is revealing to the reader. But they must be kept in this order, never reversing them, as has become common today. Simply accepting the opinion of our Church Leaders or favorite Teachers and mentors is not the best way to interpret the Bible.

Our ultimate object in approaching the Bible, is not to simply understand the printed page. God awaits to reveal Himself to us and receiving that revelation is our ultimate goal. The writers of the Bible manuscripts are long gone, but the Author remains. It is Him we seek beyond the printed page.

When we open the Book, our prayer always must be, "Speak, Lord, for your servant listens"- 1 Samuel 3:9