

What is the Bible? (IV) – Relationship-based interpretation

Thanks for walking with me on my journey as I've travelled through from wondering 'does God exist even?' to challenging 'what I've always been taught but was unhappy about', through to 'now this I really **can** believe' and the joy that this has brought to me and to Sue.

Actually, I haven't said, but Sue too has been on a journey – a separate and different journey – starting while I was on my wild goose chase in that sect. We've come through to a togetherness that we've not really known before, and we are both happy now to recommend to anyone this 'more beautiful gospel'.

Over the past six months, I have tried, as a non-theologian, to make sense of both 'what I've always been taught' and 'what I am now beginning to believe', and although words are inadequate I've tried to share them. So here's where I've come to, as far as the Bible is concerned:

God IS relationship (love) – three persons in one God. We are invited into that relationship. Over the generations, God has tried to **tell** us about this relationship, but '*in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son*'.

So, what is the main purpose of the Bible? – To point us to Jesus.

What is the main purpose of the Old Testament? – To point forward to Jesus.

The main purpose of the New Testament? – To tell us all about Jesus.

The main purpose of the Gospels? – To 'tell out the good news': what Jesus said and did.

The main purpose of the rest of the New Testament? – To tell us more about relating to Jesus.

Sadly, we humans tend to view the Bible as showing us 'what's right and wrong'. Tragically, this has occupied much of church history, and has resulted in persecution, hatred, wars and torture, all justified by our (wrong?) interpretation of the Bible.

Who can blame people for rejecting Christianity when they see just how much pain and suffering has been caused by people in the name of 'what the Bible teaches'?!

But clearly it's not 'what the Bible teaches', but rather it's how we **interpret** what the Bible teaches. That must be so, by definition, because sometimes it's two groups of Christians killing one another on the basis of 'what the Bible teaches'.

OK, so all the Bible gives us is a bunch of words on the page. Words are very powerful, but they can be misleading, because they have to be interpreted by humans to work out their meaning.

It seems to me there are two main ways to come to a **wrong** interpretation: metaphor and culture.

Metaphor: '*If your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off.*' or '*If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters – yes, even their own life – such a person cannot be my disciple.*' **Error:** taking it too literally. All writing is metaphorical to some extent, simply because words aren't the real thing; they are symbols on a page, trying to express truth. And if we're trying to explain 'what God is like', the difficulty is even greater.

Culture: *'Does not the very nature of things teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a disgrace to him?'* **Error:** taking advice given in one era, in one culture, in one country, and trying to apply it literally here and now, in today's culture.

A linked error (probably more controversially) is not being willing to take account of the knowledge that humankind has accumulated. We need to be willing to say, 'Years ago people didn't realise the damage that such-and-such can do to people, so they thought it was OK. Now we know better, so we need to change our interpretation.'

But if we're to avoid these errors, we need to know **how** to interpret any given passage: how literally should we take it, and how much did the cultural setting affect the author's viewpoint?

The key to good interpretation is God, is the nature of God, is the nature of God-as-relationship.

For me, Jesus is the only 'Word of God', and he trumps our interpretation of scripture. So if a passage seems to show God in any way **other** than the character of Jesus, or in any way **other** than the character of the Father that Jesus told us about, then our interpretation must be wrong.

So if, for example, I see some scripture apparently portraying God as wrathful or vengeful, then my interpretation must be wrong because Jesus was not wrathful or vengeful, and neither was the Father he told us about.

The 'wrath thing' was probably my biggest sticking point in understanding the Bible, hence I've already written three articles about it (8, 14 and 18), and while I've come to a personal place of peace about it, I still think I need to do some more work on it. (Any feedback would be much appreciated.)

Finally, if we're to go down this road of relationship-based interpretation, we're going to have to do a lot of questioning; we'll need to read scripture and challenge what it **seems** to be saying, or to challenge what we've always been told that it means.

And if you're in a church that frowns on challenging (this church's view on) the meaning of scripture, then I'd say it's time for you to look for another church. (Gasp!) How can it be wrong to faithfully (meaning: having faith in Jesus) challenge scripture? You are challenging it in order to understand it better, in order to grow closer to Jesus and to make Jesus better known. We need to be in the kind of relationship with fellow believers where we can agree to disagree about aspects of the meaning of scripture without feeling others' disapproval.

I have only been able to grow in my faith because I found myself in a church that actively encourages creative engagement with the meaning of scripture.

Forty-eight years of 'being right' didn't do me half so much good as two years of being willing to be wrong!

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