

Interpreting the Scriptures

Disclaimer (repeat): What I have written here is my interpretation of the theological books I've read. I'm not a theologian, so I've probably (undoubtedly) got bits of it wrong, so please bear with me because its import has transformed my whole view of life, and I hope it might be of help to others who are desperately struggling, as I was, to build a credible faith in a loving God, a faith that I can happily share with my friends and families.

Does the church you attend believe in the Bible? Yes, so does ours! So do most Christian churches, I'd imagine... and so do the Jehovah's Witnesses. Every time I read John's gospel especially, I think "How can the JW's not see that Jesus is claiming, on page after page, equality with God?!" The trouble is that I'm reading a translation, and not the original text, and translation and interpretation are intimately linked. Translation is certainly not an exact science, as much as we'd like to think that the Bible we read each day gives us "a solid foundation on which to base our faith".

Let's go back a stage and ask: what's the purpose of the scriptures (= sacred writings)? If you've read my earlier missives, you'll know what I think. The scriptures are graciously given by God to help us know how to live in a loving relationship with him and with one another, and **not** to give us a sure knowledge of "the truth", i.e. what is right. For 48 years, I'd have made a good Pharisee (although I'd like to think I was a bit nicer than they were!): I could interpret the scriptures and I knew what was right, and I tried to teach it other people.

So have I now gone all wishy-washy? Do I not stand up for the truth anymore? Well, I still believe strongly that the Bible was inspired by God and that he will inspire us, as we seek to interpret it, but I no longer believe in "the truth" (as defined by whom, anyway?). So I don't believe in the infallibility of the Bible – it was written by humans – and I don't really like calling the Bible "the word of God", because only Jesus is The Word of God. And even then, to know what Jesus said and did, we have to rely on (translations of) the accounts written by fallible humans.

So, I'm sorry, but I don't think God has given us "certainty" on which to base our relationship with him. But anyway, do you **need** 100% certainty to have a relationship with someone? Of course not; a relationship is based on trust, on faith. And I think that constantly striving for certainty is actually a mark of unfaith, of insecurity; if we're secure in our relationship with the Lord, we don't need to "know" everything.

But I do believe that we need to read the Bible and interpret the Bible in order to know how to relate to God, the Holy Trinity (*I love saying that!*).

So, for starters, we need to decide if a given bit of the Bible carries literal truth ("God rides upon the wind"?) or metaphorical truth – the latter being no less "true" than the former. And even more difficult, we need to decide if what's written is culturally conditioned ("Does not the very nature of things teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a disgrace to him?" says my namesake!).

But in a sense the whole Bible is culturally conditioned: it was written by a range of different authors, at different times, in particular cultures; that is something we need to factor into our interpretation, to avoid coming to conclusions that damage people's lives.

So what tools do we have, to help us in our interpretation? My Christian upbringing sees biblical exegesis as foundational. And we take on board what we are learning from archaeology, biblical scholarship, linguistic analysis (and probably more things, but I'm not a theologian); and all of these are giving us more and more help. Great!

However, there two other strands that I have come to value of late. The first is to view the scriptures with contemplation, meditation, absorption, immersion. I believe that if we "sit with" scripture, God will apply it to us and bring to our minds and hearts those things that will help our relationship grow and flourish.

Secondly, following on from my thinking about how we handle the difficult bits of the Bible – the OT especially but also to a lesser extent the NT – I'd say that we have to apply some sort of moral tests to the scriptures, to decide whether certain bits are right or wrong. (Did God really tell them to slaughter every single man, woman and child?!) In any case, the scriptures take the form of a discussions, or even arguments, so we're carrying on in that tradition. In a number of cases, the authors disagree among themselves, e.g. "it pleased the Lord ... to ruin and destroy you" (Deut 28:63) as against "I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked" (Ezek 33:11. (And if you have an "answer" for that apparent disagreement, I can find you some more.)

So once again, I believe that we need to engage in "faithful questioning" – having enough faith/trust in God to be willing to question the scriptures. We don't want "unquestioning obedience" – and in any case, if we wanted the latter, someone would have to give us a definitive statement of what we needed to obey, so we're back again to human interpretation; back to Phariseeism.

So, if you feel moved to do so, let's grapple with some of the difficult bits of the scriptures. But not all the time – it's OK to revel in God's love as revealed in the scriptures and especially in Jesus!

And to end with, here's a non-Christian thought (which I've adopted): "*The most important thing you wear each day is... your expression*". And if we're worried each day whether we're "getting it right", we'll be wearing a constant frown and will project that to those we meet. But if we can rest in the Lord's love, trusting him for the difficult bits and revelling in his love and forgiveness, we'll have an open expression on our faces (but not necessarily grinning all the time!), because of our inner assurance, and that will rub off onto those around us.

May God bless you with his incredible love and make you a blessing to everyone you meet today.

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