

Misapplying Scriptures

My preaching professors in seminary were eloquent in the pulpit and thorough in the study. They demanded that every sermon submitted in class be thoroughly backed by at least five scholarly studies and that the subject and every supporting point rest on scripture. Style and presentation were left to the speaker, but content had to be biblically sound. In retirement I have heard many preachers and too many sermons that have little to do with the scripture read, even to the point of being outside sound doctrine.



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How do you read the Bible? Are you searching for a validation of what you already believe? Do you seek justification for what you want? Do you consider the Bible old-fashioned and unreliable in your world?

Some people think the Bible is a history textbook, but the writers were not compiling the evening news report. They were recording how God touches the lives of real people and the meaning of events in the flow of his purpose.

Neither is the Bible a scientific textbook. For instance, the Genesis creation account is written in the form of classic epic poetry, not a detailed scientific explanation.

Unnecessary arguments rage over this narrative text. Genesis is about whom, not how! The Bible is not a rulebook, designed to judge, condemn or threaten us into religious conformity. God is “redeemer,” not a “judge” who delights in punishing us. The laws of God are designed to protect us from harm and destruction, while pointing us to the God who offers us a full life based on truth, love and grace. Neither is the Bible a clever collection of truisms or formulas for success, a manual on how to be a winner in the competition of life. God’s Word shows us how to live a healthy, fulfilling and generous life through faith as we grow into the example of Christ.

Scot McKnight, in his book *The Blue Parakeet*, writes: “God gave us the

Bible not so we can know it but so we can know and love God through it.” This is known as a “relational approach to scripture.” My personal conversion experience came in a specific moment when the Holy Spirit spoke to me as I read scripture in the middle of the night. God speaks to us through the written Word, saves us through the “Word become flesh” (Jesus) and continues to work in us through the illuminating companionship of the Holy Spirit. Relationship!

Paul’s words to Timothy are not only timeless, they are vital in our contentious and confusing world. Paul warns us “not to engage in battles over words that aren’t helpful and only destroy those who hear them” (2 Timothy 2:14, CEB). I have witnessed the harm and destruction of godly men and women by others who presume they have the only true interpretation of the Bible. Paul’s response to such people is, “Avoid their godless discussions, because they will lead many people into ungodly behavior, and their ideas will spread like an infection” (v. 16).

The text warns against specific people, Hymenaeus and Philetus, described as having “deviated from the truth by claiming the resurrection has already happened,” which “undermined some people’s faith” (v. 17). This specific false teaching may have been another version of “live any way you please in this world” because Christ has already given us eternal life and the physical life no longer has a connection with the spiritual!

The answer to these false religious ideas cloaked in high-sounding language is: “Run away from adolescent cravings. Instead, pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace together with those who confess the Lord with a clean heart” (v. 22). The text is full of negatives describing those who teach false ideas: “foolish and thoughtless discussions...produce conflicts...argumentative. Perhaps God will change their mind and give them a knowledge of the truth...and, they may come to their senses and escape from the devil’s trap that holds them captive

Formations

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Scripture: 2 Timothy 2:14-18, 22-26;
2 Peter 3:15-16

to do his will” (vv. 25-26).

Too often the church has been harmed and divided by people who demand their ideas and authority be recognized as God’s will even though the example of Christ is far from them.

Having struggled with some of Paul’s convoluted sentences and theological words, I understand Peter’s comment that “Some of (Paul’s) remarks are hard to understand” (2 Peter 3:16). With the availability of multiple study resources and Bible versions, we can interpret scripture correctly. As you approach the Bible, build on sound principles. Ethical interpretation begins with God’s salvation through Jesus Christ. The key irreducible is Jesus Christ, God’s Son who died and arose from the grave and now sits at the right hand of God.

Study of the Bible requires discipline, the willingness to search and learn. Listen to the Word rather than impose your own thinking on it. Remember that the purpose of God’s Word is to give us hope, to shape our thinking and our doing in ways that help us reach others with the gospel and change the world. Like Jesus, our calling is not to condemn the world but offer life. Keep in mind that your focus in studying the Bible is not selfish, not an exercise in becoming better than others or more blessed (successful). Your goal is to become more like Jesus, to “Run away from adolescent cravings. Instead, pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace together with those who confess the Lord with a clear heart” (2 Timothy 2:22).

Like Timothy, we must diligently study God’s Word, seeking a greater understanding so we can honor God through our living. The Bible is not a fill-in-the-blank workbook. It is inspired, practical, thought-provoking and life-giving, if we open heart and mind to the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Retired after 45 years in pastoral ministry, Michael K. Olmsted enjoys family, supply preaching and interim work, literature, history, the arts and antiques.