

## A PASTOR'S PERSPECTIVE — On Interpreting the Bible

“Make My Interpretations Sweet” by Michael Hontz

Years ago, while serving as a youth pastor, I drove a school bus part time. One day, while driving my bus route, an event occurred that changed the way I interpret the Bible today.

While driving a group of high school students home one afternoon, I noticed in my driver's side mirror a wad of paper fly out of one of the rear windows of the bus. Someone had just littered. I checked the mirror to see if I could discern the guilty party. My eyes quickly locked with a boy who had "guilt" written all over him. If I had been given one guess, this boy did it. Past experience told me he was the likely culprit. And he just happened to sit around the place where I had seen the paper make its exit.

I stopped the bus and confronted the students, hoping the boy would own up to the crime. Nobody said a word. I added up the evidence again. I was convinced and had ample reason to write this student up for discipline, even though I didn't *actually* see him do it.

Later, as the boy stepped off the bus, he said, "FYI – I didn't throw that out the window; it was someone else." I didn't respond. In my mind his statement confirmed that I was right. He knew, that I knew, he was guilty, and he was trying to put doubt in my mind. At the final stop, I asked the remaining student if she had seen who threw the paper. She had. And to my surprise, it wasn't the boy I had pegged. It was the boy sitting in front of him.

How could I have been *so* wrong? My list of reasons seemed so conclusive.

I have often reflected on this event when considering my approach to difficult passages of Scripture that theologians often debate. In fact, God challenged me to consider how many other times I may have drawn wrong conclusion from limited evidence about Scripture. Could my list be prejudiced, limited, or flawed?

The following four principles keep me from being overly confident in my own fallible conclusions. They help me present my interpretations in a sweet and humble manner, lest I need to eat them later.

- 1) Remember that Scripture is intended to **change our thinking** about life, *not merely to confirm that we are already correct*. So often, we get to a place in our Christian life where we subtly assume we don't have much more to learn, or at least that everything we have already learned is right. Our tendency is to read Scripture like a bunch of proof texts to confirm how right we are, rather than to confront us for the sake of change.
- 2) **Commit to reading from authors outside of your own school of thought**. It's amazing how a particular view makes sense when it's the only perspective you consider. A wise man once said, "The first to present his case seems right, till another comes forward and questions him." (Prov. 18:17 - NIV)
- 3) **Realize we bring along a lot of presuppositions** when we read Scripture. We are never neutral or as fully objective as we may think. Our conclusions can be clouded by things like wrong understandings of other passages, a high regard for the ones who taught us in the past, our desire to have been right about a passage in the past, etc. These can cause us to overlook solid evidence that supports an opposing view.
- 4) Finally, wherever we may land, **we need to remain humble toward those with whom we disagree**. A time may come when we will change our minds about an interpretation. This should remind us that many intelligent, sincere, and godly people disagree about which interpretation is correct. No one has a corner on the "right view." We are all imperfect readers. Certainly there are essential truths that all Christ followers embrace if she is serious about honoring Scripture. But many of the debatable issues are secondary at best. If we try to see things from another's perspective, we can at least understand how someone with a high view of Scripture could conclude something differently than we on that topic.

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