

**QUESTION #8** – What are the false ways and systems people use to interpret the Bible?

As we mentioned earlier, the Bible is the most butchered book in the world. Almost every person who owns a Bible thinks he is in some position to interpret it. The problem is there are many systems used and ways that the Bible is interpreted which actually are counterproductive to what the Bible really says.

Some pick up the Bible and say it teaches Arminianism and others pick up the Bible and say it teaches Calvinism. Some pick up the Bible and say it teaches premillennialism, postmillennialism or amillennialism. Those who do have their proof texts and they have some system of interpretation they follow.

What we are after is the truth. We are after true interpretation of exactly what the Bible says and means and obviously when there are contradictory viewpoints, someone is right and someone is wrong. Usually the matter is resolved in the system one uses for their interpretation.

There are at least eight false systems or false ways that the Bible is interpreted:

**False System #1** - The Allegorical System of Interpretation.

This system of interpretation believes that **the Bible says one thing literally but really means something else figuratively. The Bible does not really literally mean what it literally says.** The Bible is an inspired, figurative book of riddles and everyone must study to unravel the hidden riddles.

The Allegorical system of interpretation has its roots in Greek philosophy. Philo was a Jewish philosopher who lived in Alexandria, Egypt in the first 50 years of the first century. He tried to bridge the gap between the Bible and Greek philosophy so he promoted and preferred allegorical interpretation of the Bible. He took the position that there were deeper hidden meanings to everything in the Bible. He rejected a literal approach to the Bible.

For example, in Revelation 20:1-6, the Bible speaks of a period of time of 1,000 years. But the allegorist says that 1,000 years is just a riddle number for something else. When Revelation 7 says there are 144,000 Jewish men, 12,000 from twelve tribes of Israel, the allegorist says it really doesn't mean that literally, it is figurative for something else such as the Church. The dietary laws found in the Old Testament are not really literal dietary laws to be followed but they really represent bad types of behavior associated with that particular animal.

Around the year AD 100 there was a letter that showed up in a collection of Apostolic fathers called "*The Epistle of Barnabas*." Many believe this was the Barnabas that split from Paul. If it was him, he ended up with some strange doctrinal quirks. He interpreted all of the dietary Laws in Leviticus with various immoral vices that he "imaginatively associated with those animals." For example, the law against eating swine (Lev. 11:7) is actually a law that means don't associate with people who live like pigs.

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The law against eating rabbit (Lev. 11:6) actually means to stay away from people who are promiscuous (J. B. Lightfoot and J. R. Harmer, *The Apostolic Fathers, Second Edition, Epistle of Barnabas*, p. 174).

This allegorical system is one of the oldest systems of interpretation in the history of the Church. Clement of Alexandria (AD 150-215) believed that the Scriptures are written in such a way that the true meaning is hidden.

Origen (AD 185-254) believed that all of Scriptures was “one vast allegory” (Henry Virkler, *Hermeneutics*, p. 60). He taught there were three levels of interpretation to a Biblical text: 1) The flesh interpretation; 2) The soul interpretation; 3) The Spirit interpretation.

He was known for inventing some bizarre interpretations of passages of Scripture. For example, he taught that Noah’s ark story was a story that really represents the Church and that Noah represented Christ. When Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey, he said the donkey represented the Old Testament and the colt represented the New Testament.

In the parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:30-37:

- 1) The man robbed represents Adam.
- 2) The city of Jerusalem from where the man came represents Paradise.
- 3) The city of Jericho where the man was headed represents the world.
- 4) The priest who passes by represents the O.T. Law.
- 5) The Levite who passes by represents the prophets.
- 6) The Samaritan represents Jesus Christ.
- 7) The Donkey represents Christ’s physical body.
- 8) The wounds of the man represent his sins.
- 9) The Inn where he is to be cared for represents the church.
- 10) The Samaritan promise to return represents Christ’s second coming.

Martin Luther, who prior to salvation said that he was “an expert in allegories,” totally denounced this approach to the Bible after his salvation. He said, “Origen’s allegories are not worth so much dirt” (Cited from Roy Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation*, pp. 44-45).

John Calvin said that those who interpret the Bible allegorically are “torturing the Scripture in every possible sense, from the true sense” (*Ibid.*, p. 47).

Augustine (AD 354-430) came up with a list of solid rules and guidelines for the handling of Scripture. One of them was “The literal and historical meaning of Scripture should be held in high regard.” He stressed that the job of an interpreter of Scripture was to determine the meaning of the Scripture and not to bring meaning to it. But then later he got into allegorizing the Scriptures. For example, he taught that the four rivers named in Genesis 2:10-14 are really four virtues and that Noah’s drunkenness (Gen. 9:20-23) really represents Christ in His suffering and death.

Many people today allegorize the Bible in the way they interpret it. For example, when God promised Israel a land, a king and kingdom, there are many who teach He really didn't mean that, He meant something else.

There are some major problems with this method of interpretation:

- 1) If God doesn't mean what He says, how can we ever know what He means or what to believe?
- 2) How do we know who has the correct interpretation, if it is not based on literal words?
- 3) One person says a passage means one thing and someone else says another and how would one ever know truth based on Allegory?

Robert Palmer said, "If the Bible does not mean what it says, there is no way we can know what it does mean" (*How to Understand the Bible*, p. 44).

**False System #2** - The Mystical or Devotional system of interpretation.

This is another system of interpretation that has been around for a long time. This approach to the Bible came about as a reaction against the cold, intellectual, dead, religious orthodoxy that developed between the years of AD 600 - AD 1500.

This is the system of interpretation that says **it really doesn't matter what the Bible says or means as long as it warms your heart and you have some type of feeling experience**. There is no need of precise understanding in your grasp of the Bible, as long as it warms your heart and touches your heart.

This system of interpretation believes that people can get direct knowledge from God through their experiences and feelings apart from Scripture (Roy B. Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation*, p. 50). In fact, **this system of interpretation rejects the objective analysis of Scripture and elevates the subjective analysis of Scripture**.

Don't worry about the words or grammar or doctrinal differences because the important thing is that the Bible speaks to you and you feel good in your heart.

Often times these people talk about their experiences and you hear things like "God told me" or "God revealed to me" or "God really spoke to me." There are several problems with this view:

- 1) God did not give His word to warm hearts; He gave His word to transform and develop sound minds (Rom. 12:1-2; Eph. 1:15-18; Philippians 1:9-11; Col. 1:9-11).
- 2) A heart that is truly rightly warmed is one that is right with God and that means one is after an accurate understanding of God's written word.
- 3) When God challenges His people to "accurately handle" so that one is unashamed before Him, His own focus is not on emotion but exegesis (II Timothy 2:15).

- 4) Without a proper accurate grasp of God's word, there will never be a proper development of emotions. Emotions will tend to be emotional, irrational and sensational until they are Biblical.

**False System #3** - The Liberal or Rationalistic system of Interpretation.

In the late 1800's what was called the "Scientific Age" began in Europe and by the 1900's it had spread to the United States. Men began to discover things and invent things and they became proud of their intellectual achievements.

A pride began to seep into man when it came to the Bible. They began to approach it from a very intellectual and rational way. They would only accept and believe the Bible if their minds could rationally figure it out or explain it.

Actually this was not a new system to the late 1800's because Thomas Hobbs (1588-1679), who was an English philosopher, taught that the Bible was only true if man's mind could reason it and if man's mind can't reason it, then it is to be rejected. Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677), was a Dutch Jewish philosopher who taught the same thing. He taught that human reason was totally separate from Biblical Theology.

**In the Liberal or Rational method of Bible Interpretation, the words of the Bible are not the authority; man's mind is the authority. The Bible may only be accepted and believed as long as it does not violate human reason or logic. This system totally rejects the supernatural so man's mind determines what is significant in the Bible and what isn't.**

This system of interpretation postulates many false views:

- 1) There is no such thing as miracles because miracles go beyond the boundaries of our minds and beyond the boundaries of what we can scientifically prove or reason. The feeding of the 5,000 was really a story of a young boy who shared his lunch so others saw this and shared theirs. It wasn't a real miracle of Jesus.
- 2) The Bible is a history book, but not an inspired book.
- 3) Man is basically good and if you give him a good education, he will turn out fine.
- 4) When the Bible says something with which we don't agree or understand, we reject it. i.e. Such things as depravity, sin and hell are rejected.

**There are obviously many fallacies with this heretical way of thinking:**

- 1) Man's reason becomes superior to God's written Revelation  
i.e. Darwin's theory of evolution is better than the Bible, A day in the Genesis creation story cannot really be a day because man's mind has figured out the earth is billions of years old.
- 2) Man's reason is the authority for what we believe and do and not God's word.
- 3) Man's reason must determine which parts of the Bible are acceptable and which are not.

**False System #4** - The Neo-Orthodox or Existential System of Interpretation.

In the early 1900's, liberal and fundamental clashes occurred concerning the Bible. World War I (1914-1918) proved that man was not good and that man could not solve world problems. When the Great depression hit, it proved that man could not solve economic problems and that liberalism could not give any answers or solutions.

There was a huge gap between liberals and fundamentalists. Some developed a new system that was called "Neo Orthodoxy."

**Neo-Orthodoxy taught that the Bible is not the inspired word of God by the words written, but it becomes the word of God when a person by faith experiences it. The Bible is the word of God when it is experienced. When the Bible touches a reader's heart, it becomes the word of God.**

There was no need to worry about words or doctrine but only whether or not it touches your heart. That is what makes it God's word to you. **This system rejects the objective and elevates the subjective.**

There are many problems with this view:

- 1) It denies the Bible is inerrant.
- 2) It denies the Bible is infallible.
- 3) When the Bible touches someone's heart, it is the word of God.
- 4) Things may be interpreted as myths - creation, fall of man, resurrection. These myths aren't important but personal experience is important.

**False System #5** - The Ecclesiastical System of Interpretation.

**The Ecclesiastical system of Bible Interpretation is a system that says it does not matter what the words of the Bible actually say, what matters is what the church believes and says.**

This position says some things are more important than other things and the church is our authority for what we believe or think.

This system of interpretation is prevalent among many today.

The Roman Catholic Church is known for its emphasis on the churches ability to give true interpretation. Church teachings and church traditions are far more important than God's word.

Back in 1925, a Catholic writer named Andrea Fernandez invented what he called the “sensus plenior” which means fuller sense or deeper meaning. The Catholic Church took the position that to get the true interpretation of a passage there must be an authoritative guide, which was the Roman Church officials. They became the guide to all kinds of distortions of God’s word.

There are many Reformed and Christian Reformed Churches who are guilty of the same kind of thing. They become the authority base for trying to put people back under the O.T. law. They read the commandments and regardless of what a book like Galatians or Romans teaches, they try to keep people under the law. They even call Sunday the Sabbath Day and they are authoritative in the way they do that.

There are Baptist Churches that are the same way. They become the authority for all kinds of things from versions of the Bible to what people can or cannot do. At times, it doesn’t matter what the actual words of Scripture say and mean, they are disregarded and the church gives its own interpretation. One example we may give of this is that most Baptist churches use Romans 6:3 and Colossians 2:12 as a basis for their promotion of water baptism. Neither of these passages is dealing with water baptism, but spirit baptism. But the church says otherwise.

In an Ecclesiastical system, the Church becomes the authority and not the literal word of God.

**False System #6** - The Dogmatic System of Interpretation.

**The dogmatic system of interpretation says it does not matter what the words of the Bible say, but what matters is what I dogmatically believe and will continue to believe and I will not change my mind.** One’s own system of belief becomes more important than the actual words of the Scriptures.

In this method of interpretation, a person has his own beliefs and then goes to the Bible in an attempt to find verses that support the beliefs. This method often uses isolated verses as proof texts for what they believe.

One illustration of this is the Roman Catholics who go to Matthew 16:18-19 to support their position that Peter was the first Pope. They have their dogmatic view and use this text to support it, when in fact it is not teaching that at all.

Another is the Jehovah’s Witness who go door to door promoting the 144,000, a number they get from Revelation 7:4; 14:1. When you show them the truth of the number, they dogmatically hold to the dogma of the religion.

In this system the individual is the authority and not God’s word.