

Interpretation or Paradigm

By

Former Pastor Dr. Joel Minto *

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A couple years back I read a fascinating article by Dr. Skip Moen entitled “Interpretation vs. Paradigm” (Hebrew word study, April 1st 2014) The interesting part of this article asks a very basic question...Do the facts make any difference. When it comes to interpretation of Scripture the answer no matter which circle you run in is a resounding NO. What we tend to gravitate to or rely upon is our particular paradigm to answer the questions. We all have them they are in everything we do or say and they generally dictate how we will respond to the world around us. Remember Copernicus, he was the one that went against all of the theological and scientific paradigms of his day. The basic theory of his day said the earth was the center of the universe. He postulated as a scientist and mathematician the sun was actually the center of the universe. This of course came under considerable criticism and in some circles even branded him as a heretic. In Roman Catholic circles, German Jesuit Nicolaus Serarius was one of the first to write against Copernicus's theory as heretical, citing the Joshua passage, in a work published in 1609–1610, and again in a book in 1612. In his 12 April 1615 letter to a Catholic defender of Copernicus, Paolo Antonio Foscarini, Catholic Cardinal Robert Bellarmine condemned Copernican theory, writing “...not only the Holy Fathers, but also the modern commentaries on Genesis, the Psalms, Ecclesiastes, and Joshua, you will find all agreeing in the literal interpretation that the sun is in heaven and turns around the earth with great speed, and that the earth is very far from heaven and sits motionless at the center of the world...Nor can one answer that this is not a matter of faith, since if it is not a matter of faith 'as regards the topic,' it is a matter of faith 'as regards the speaker': and so it would be heretical to say that Abraham did not have two children and Jacob twelve, as well as to say that Christ was not born of a virgin, because both are said by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of prophets and apostles. ‘

Paradigms are very strong we see the world we live in through these rose colored glasses and the culture in which we are raised. As Dr. Moen points out...**“That’s the way paradigms work. A paradigm tells you what the “facts” are before you begin to look. Consequently, you find what you expected to find, and then you assert that this proves your paradigm is true. But it should be obvious that all it proves is that you discovered what you wanted to find.”**

So if we just find what we are looking for based on how we were raised or the culture we are in what does that do to the way we interpret scripture. Unfortunately we have taken this same approach to the interpretation of scripture. Let’s say for instance we all believe that a person consists of a body, soul and spirit. So we then go find in scripture verses that hold that truth within it. I am certainly not trying to make an assertion here but let me ask this, how you would go about showing what you have been taught to be in fact reality? We depend on those with the higher learning in these things to tell us what to believe or we let a denominational stance dictate our theology. But all of these are based on specific paradigms that fit into a particular world view. Another example, when will the rapture occur? Well there are some who believe it will happen prior to the Tribulation period, some that hold it will occur at the mid-point of the Tribulation period and there are those who believe that the Church will go through the entire tribulation. So which can you defend from scripture? A brief history lesson, the pre-tribulation people have only been around for a couple hundred years. What in scripture changed to move them to that stance?

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We are a product of the way we have been brought up and taught. In other words we are the product of Greek thinking not Hebrew thinking. The entire scripture is written from a Hebraic world view. The Greeks viewed man as the sum of many parts, with reason at the center of these parts and a body trapped in this world trying to escape. The Hebraic view of man is in terms of relationships not components. Man is what he is because of his relationship with God. What does that do to your belief system? Let me end with this, our traditional way of thinking is that the Church teachings and doctrines are correct and should never be challenged. When you come across such a passage my advice is keep an open mind because the traditional church teachings are not always correct and often seek to apply promises to the church, or to believers generally where this is unwarranted and incorrect.

Here are my recommendations:

When studying a passage of Scripture ask yourself four questions:

1. Who is speaking, or who is behind the narrative? For example this may be God, the Lord Jesus Christ, a prophet, an apostle, a disciple;
2. Who is the recipient—who is the passage meant for?
3. Is the passage for the recipient only?
4. Does the passage have a wider application?

For starters that will at least keep us pointed in the right direction.

Tim LaHaye and Jerry B Jenkins give some very sound advice on the study of Scripture. They say this:

“Anyone can understand the major events of Bible prophecy if they spend a little time comparing Scripture with Scripture and if they avoid the temptation to spiritualize anything that at first seems complex. A good rule of thumb when studying any Scripture is found in the golden rule of Biblical interpretation—when the plain sense of Scripture makes common sense, seek no other sense, but take every word at its primary, literal meaning unless the facts of the immediate context clearly indicate otherwise.”

Sound advice for all of us.