

Transcript 165

Shea Houdmann

Welcome to the Got Questions podcast. Today's episode we'll be discussing why are there so many different Christian interpretations. In a sense, this question goes to the heart of what Got Questions does. In a sense, if there weren't so many different interpretations, we wouldn't receive so many questions. There would be so many, so much confusion over versus versus, passages, theologies, doctrines, biblical passages, et cetera. A lot of questions we receive are someone who's been taught a certain way and then now either they're reading it a different viewpoint. Or they're reading an article on Got Questions that presents something different than what they're used to, or what they've always believed. And they're they're confused. They're coming to us, help us to understand this, but there's a lot of things that go into this question of why there's so many different interpretations, and we're going to be kind of surveying it.

Shea Houdmann

And with this said, please don't hear us as saying we are immune to any of these things. As much as we strive to do our absolute best to interpret the Bible literally, as it's written, in context, without tradition influencing us without preconceptions, without preconceived ideas influencing us. We are not immune to those things. We do our best. We pray for the Holy Spirit's leading. We study God's word. But we make mistakes too. So please don't hear us saying that we're immune to some of the things we'll be talking about today.

Shea Houdmann

Joining me today is Kevin. Kevin is the managing editor of Got Questions Ministries and Jeff, he is the administrator of bibleref.com. So gentlemen, thanks for joining us. What what in your observation are some of the things that you see about why there are so many different interpretations of the Bible?

Jeff Laird

I think a lot of it comes down to a few basic ideas, but first we have to remember what we're actually talking about when we talk about different interpretations. And a big thing to remember is that a lot of what we think of as different interpretations are not really different per say. In other words, they're they're they're differences that are relatively minor or they're over relatively minor issues. A lot of the differences in interpretation that people see are really about application more than they are about the principle that's behind it. So sometimes that that concept get's overblown by people who want to criticize faith or criticize Christianity by saying something to the fact that they don't even know what they believe. They can't even make up their mind. Well, the the core aspects, the basic ideas of Christianity, are pretty well broadly agreed on by people who define themselves as Christians. So that's the first thing that we got to remember.

Jeff Laird

Then we have to keep in mind that some of these things, again, they're application based. You can have people who read the scripture, they understand the lesson behind it. But then there's a disagreement about, you know, how do we apply that specific thing in in our context, or in every context or in in a

different culture or a different language. They're again, those are not really different interpretations they're just different applications. And a lot of the differences that we see are really just driven by that.

Jeff Laird

Now past that, we have issues that we talked about in one of the articles on our website, which is anything from people who simply are not believers, people who are not well disciplined, people who are immature. And to what you were saying is sometimes people just really cling to things like preference, tradition, culture, things like that. Or sometimes it's exactly the opposite, where there is just something they want that their tradition, their culture has not provided and so they just lean towards that more than they do towards the truth. And we see Biblical precedent for that. There's a man that Jesus talks to, who's wealthy. Jesus tells that specific man give up all your wealth and follow me, and the guy goes ohh no. And so he leaves. While all the other stuff God wanted him to do he was fine with that. That one thing he won't. And every once in a while there's a doctrinal issue or a social issue, or a personal issue that somebody is in that category with. Where that's the one thing I'm just not going to flex on and then that's what makes them stick to that.

Jeff Laird

So there's a lot of different reasons why people might have different interpretations. Most of them are not really that big of a difference. But some of them are rooted in issues that really don't have anything to do with the Bible but they have a lot more to do with the person in question and how they're choosing to approach it and how they're choosing to interpret it.

Kevin Stone

Yeah, I like that, Jeff, about what you said about a lot of these differences that we see among different groups of Christians has to do more with application than with actual interpretation of scripture. You know, we we know what the scripture says, but we we work it out different ways in our, in our own groups, in our own ways. And there's nothing wrong with that, of course. And it it lends to diversity and variety within the body of Christ. However, there are some times that church groups end up with very different interpretations of what should be pretty plain in scripture and this this can be a real problem. One of the reasons for that sometimes is the fact that we've got people who are standing in the pulpit or teaching in the seminary, who are not even believers themselves. We have the problem of unbelief as a root of of some of these different interpretations. And when we get into varied doctrines and and and things like that.

Kevin Stone

There was a study done in 2010 that got a a lot of publicity. It was. It came out of the Center for Cognitive Studies at Tufts University. It was study conducted by Daniel Dennett and Linda Lascola. And in this study, they noted that a lot of modern people who claim to be Christians have no specific theological content to what they are holding on to is the belief system. And the the leaders of this study actually kind of concluded that what people are believing should not be described as belief as much as a belief in belief. That is, they have a faith that faith is good somehow, but they don't actually hold to any specific beliefs concerning Christianity and yet they call themselves Christian.

Kevin Stone

This study gave several different examples just kind of anecdotal evidence for in their interview process, and one of them was this man named Darrell, who was a Presbyterian pastor. He calls himself progressive minded and he promotes a non doctrinal Christianity. And I think that says a lot right there, a non doctrinal Christianity. How do you have that? Well, he calls himself more of a pantheist than a theist, and he states his position very clearly. Darrell, this Presbyterian pastor says, quote, I reject the virgin birth. I reject substitutionary atonement. I reject the divinity of Jesus. I reject heaven and hell in the traditional sense, and I am not alone. End of quote and so why is, why is a man like this even in the pastorate? What's he doing preaching every Sunday? Well, he gave the answer to that. He said it's for financial reasons. He has to support his family and this is his job. It's his career. So he sticks with it.

Kevin Stone

So when you have unbelieving pastors and unbelieving professors in the seminaries, then you're going to end up with aberrant interpretations of scripture. Interpretations that depart from Orthodox Christianity. And people might look at this and say, well, why can't Christians get their act together? Why are why is this group over here teaching this? And this group over here is teaching something completely different, you know, concerning the virgin birth or whatever. And the answer might be that some of the people teaching some of those different interpretations are themselves not even believers. That's one explanation for some of the some of the more divergent beliefs that we see within the church.

Shea Houdmann

Absolutely. Both of you are hit the nail on the head with two of the things that we observe most whether it's someone making a super big deal about how a versus going to be applied. I can think of many examples of that. Whether it's how to do a communion service, whether it's, OK, the Bible teaches that elders are to be above reproach. What exactly does that mean? It's things that we agree with what the principle says, but how do we actually apply it? What does that mean in terms of how we select elders and those sorts of things? There's lots of verses like that we agree on.

Shea Houdmann

And then Kevin with unbelief, truly we love the fact that we get questions from unbelievers, but sometimes it would be really helpful if we knew for sure whether the people asking us a certain question really believe or unbeliever because that not only does that impact how we answer the question, but also to help us to know what the person is truly asking, or what's the background of it? Unbelievers masquerading as Christians or even people who truly think they're Christians but are not, have done great damage to the vast body of teaching out there by introducing ideas that are absolutely unbiblical, ungodly, completely foreign to the Bible. So those are two major points that drive a lot of the difference in interpretation.

Shea Houdmann

And one thing I've noticed lately, and a few episodes ago when I had Doctor Sandra Glahn on about women in ministry, she mentioned one of the things that makes that issue difficult, it's hard to discern when Paul is talking about a certain issue is that a local issue? For example in the Church of Ephesus? Or is this supposed to be a universal thing? And some of the Paul's epistles he's sometimes he's addressing a specific issue that's happening in a specific church, and other times he's addressing a universal truth.

Well, even when he's addressing a specific issue with the specific church, it has a universal application, but that universal application may not be the exact same thing as the application for that specific church. So right now, women pastors is incredibly controversy issue Southern Baptist Convention, CMA. It's been one of the most popular questions in the history of Got Questions. So it's a huge issue. So I see they're evangelical believers, my brothers and sisters in Christ, who hold completely different views on this one issue. I don't see the strength and the arguments on the other side. I understand what they're saying, but I don't see how they get there. I don't see why they hold it. And they will say the same thing of us, whether whether it's well, which scripture rules is it Galatians 3:28, which says there's neither male nor female in Christ? Is that First Timothy 2? It says I do not permit women to teach or exercise authority over men, which is, which is true? Well, clearly the three of us would say Got Questions would say both of them are true. It's the question of what are they specifically addressing? How do they work together? It's not. They're not contradicting each other, they both teacher principal that we need to apply correctly.

Shea Houdmann

So to me that's a different one is whether it's a cultural background of scripture that we're not fully understanding, or whether it's two versus that at first glance seem to maybe contradict. And then emphasizing one over the other can lead to differences in interpretation, when the actual answer is figuring out how do these verses work together? How do they agree because they do. Scripture does not contradict itself. There are no errors in Scripture. I'm seeing a lot of that, not just on this women in ministry issue, but a lot of issues where people are emphasizing one biblical truth too strongly to the point that they're neglecting other areas of scripture, and that leads to a lot of different interpretations.

Jeff Laird

Good first to focus on the difference between the the really critical and non critical, but to the example that you're bringing up there, there are ways for people to have a high view of Scripture and to see what the Bible says and believe what it says about men and women in ministry and leadership but differ on opinions of OK, so what is what exactly very precisely does that mean in practice and how we actually do that? And there's a massive difference between two people who say, yes, we agree that the Bible is authoritative. We agree that God is in control. We agree about what he says. I just think when he says that, that means we should do this thing and somebody else says I think we should do that thing. So a lot of the issues are really in that category.

Jeff Laird

Where there's a danger that that people fall into, and this is believers, non believers all across the board, is we get into this sort of tribal mentality where things other than submission to faith, and submission to God, start to become the things that are really driving our thought process. And that to what you were saying, Shea, something that we have to remember that we are not immune to. It's really important for us to do that. In Scripture talks about things like searching the scriptures and not believing all the spirits. Acts 17:11, First John 4:1, Colossians 2:8, tells us that we're supposed to have this sort of cautious skepticism, but that's sort of an outward looking thing. We're also supposed to have that towards ourselves, 2nd Corinthians 13:5, First Corinthians 4:4, Paul says, just because my conscience is clear doesn't mean I'm right. God is the one who's going to judge. So we have to test ourselves, examine ourselves. And sometimes what happens is we have an interpretation that we associate with other

things, either tradition or we connect that doctrine to other doctrines and other ideas and when somebody questions that specific idea or interpretation, we see that as a threat to these other things that we hold to and we believe. And so we react by defending our interpretation, which in a sense is always the wrong way to do it. We don't ever want to be saying, well, I'm defending my interpretation. We always want to be trying to seek the truth. We want to be going for what God wants.

Jeff Laird

In theory, and as as controversial or triggering as it sounds to some people, in theory, everything I believe is subject to some level of falsification or change or alteration, not because I lack faith, not because I'm I'm not confident, but because I understand that I am capable of making mistakes. But faith comes in understanding that God has made some things very plain and very clear. And what he wants me to know and understand, if I'm sincerely seeking his will, I can know and I can understand. But that allows me the freedom to be able to say, you know what, just because I don't understand it fully doesn't mean it's automatically wrong. Doesn't mean it's incorrect. If if some new discovery comes out, some new ideas, some new concept, I can rightly divide the word of truth by looking at that thing to see how it compares to scripture. And sometimes we're going to come across and say, you know what? God is still God. And his word is still his word. But I was wrong about this.

Jeff Laird

And I the most classic example I can think of that would be the disciples themselves. Basically, nobody in Jesus's era during his earthly ministry was expecting, truly expecting, a Messiah who is going to show up and be a peaceful teacher and then be murdered. That was just not what they were expecting. For a lot of people, that was their whole argument against Jesus was no. But Scripture says it's going to be another David. It's going to be this. It's going to be that. And it wasn't. Was scripture wrong? No, scripture wasn't wrong, but the interpretation was incorrect. And that's a that's an extreme example, but it's possible for that to happen. So a lot of the differences that we have, a lot of the bickering that we see going on really just comes down to when things that we are looking at, things we are believing, things we're talking about, we're trying to defend our view, our opinion, our interpretation, our preference, and we're not really being submissive to what Scripture says and what Scripture is teaching.

Kevin Stone

Yeah, we need to always approach Scripture humbly, recognizing that scripture is the authority and we're not. And whatever frameworks or constructs that we try to filter our interpretation of Scripture through, these are secondary. We need to make Scripture primary always. Even if it means we've got to change our minds about some of the, you know, the human constructs that we have come up with.

Kevin Stone

Another very important thing is to always take a look at context when we are interpreting Scripture. And I think that a failure to do that is another reason why we end up with different interpretations of Scripture passages that are cause other people to say, well, what's going on? Why can't these Christians get their act together? I ran across a interpretation of one of Jesus parables the other day. It's from Luke 15. It's the parable of the woman who had lost the coin. She's searching for the one of the 10. So she's she's lost one of the 10 coins. She searches her house. She turns things upside down until she finds it, and then there's great rejoicing. Well, the interpretation in this particular lesson that I that I ran across

was that she was reclaiming her glory. And then the application for our lives was that we also need to reclaim our glory. So the glory of our family, the lost glory of our marriage, the lost glory of our career, or our job, we need to be reclaiming these things and have our full glory. And there was no mention of what Jesus actually said the point of that particular story was, which I'm going to go ahead and read verse 10 of Luke 15. Jesus ends it by saying in the same way I tell you there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents? So the point of the parable, according to Jesus, right there in the context, was the salvation of sinners and God's grace and God's persistence in pursuing the sinner. And bringing that lost one home to a saving relationship with himself. And how there is rejoicing in heaven when that happens and how we should rejoice as well over one sinner who repents. But all of that was missing from this particular lesson because of just the fact that the context was ignored. And I think just was an example of Isa Jesus versus exegesis as the the teacher was trying to bring in that teachers own ideas about how things were. And that leads to varied interpretations that we we just don't need.

Shea Houdmann

And Kevin, that's I've seen to some questions just recently from someone in the sense taking a allegorical approach to scripture. That rather than reading the passage and what it says is what it means. Looking for the hidden meaning behind it, always wanting to find what's the spiritual meaning of the passage. OK, I know it says this. Yeah, and that has an application, but there's more to it than that. Obviously, we believe the Bible is a divine book. It is a spiritual book. We do not deny that God has hidden certain things for a time. He even mentions that in several passages that God purposefully Jesus spoke in parables at times to purposely to hide the message from certain people, reveal it to those who believe. So there's mystery in Scripture. I I get that. But interpreting the Bible literally, that's why it's so important. Because once you throw out literal interpretation, then it becomes the viral becomes subject to our own imaginations. It can mean basically whatever we want it to mean depending on what mood we're in. And that often results in a person trying to they have this idea that they want to teach and then forcing that idea on a passage really doesn't teach that. Which then warps the interpretation, which then warps the application. And then we end up with the whole new interpretation of something that's actually not there in the text.

Shea Houdmann

So literal interpretation, we say literal, we're not talking about not recognizing the fact that there are figures of speech. Jesus says I am the door. He does not literally mean that he is a physical door. It means he is the way of entrance for the sheep to enter, receive salvation, enter heaven, et cetera. So, recognizing figure of speech, recognizing that there are word pictures, even the times, some allegories, parables. Literal interpretation means interpreting the Bible as the words meant when they were written. The authors intent. Not looking for a secret meaning, a special meaning, a spiritual meaning behind everything. Not looking for Bible codes or Bible mysteries in every single passage. No. God wrote his word, inspired his word, breathed out his word to be understood, and a key aspect of understanding is saying what you mean and meaning what you say. Literal understanding the Bible literally, normally, plainly, what it says is what means. Ask for the Holy Spirit's guidance. Pray that ask him, is there anything about this passage I'm missing? Am I emphasizing the wrong point? But none of those things impact the fact the Bibles to be read and understood and applied literally, unless it is absolutely clear in the context in the passage that a more figurative or allegorical meaning is the authors intent.

Jeff Laird

There's good evidence that we see that a lot of the different interpretations start with those personal issues. And then what happens is a person or persons misinterpret something. They find other people to agree, and after a while it turns into a tradition slash sect or group all by itself. We want to make sure that we emphasize the idea that one of the other tools that God gave us in order to help with this whole thing is discipleship. The Great Commission that Jesus gave was not going to the world and print Bibles. Read it and you'll be good. There's lots of places in Scripture where it specifically says, he says go and make disciples. And a tremendous number of misinterpretations of scripture come from things that are all under the umbrella of poor discipleship. They're people who are inexperienced, or they don't know, or they don't understand, and they take an idea and they run with it.

Jeff Laird

A colossal example of this is the entire group that we refer to as Jehovah's Witnesses. That was literally founded by a gentleman who wanted to teach when he was a teenager and his church told him you're not only not ready, but you believe some really strange things. And rather than submitting to some form of discipleship, he basically just said no. I'm sticking with this. And he took all those ideas and doctrines and ran with it, and eventually that turned into what we are now referring to as Jehovah's Witnesses. And there's other examples of that where it starts with something that maybe isn't even very sincere, and then it pulls in other persons into it. But God asks us to disciple each other, so a lot of the problems that we have with this happen when a person basically says no, it's just me. Just what I think, just what I believe, that's all that matters. That's all I need is just this. Or if I can't possibly accept it, it couldn't possibly be true. So when we look at these different interpretations, we do need to make sure that we emphasize that you know the issue here is not that the Bible is insufficient. The idea is that sometimes human reason, human logic, human ability, all by ourselves is definitely insufficient. That's why we need each other. We're supposed to rely on those who are more experienced. Those who are more knowledgeable. Who do have evidence of the Holy Spirit in their lives as we go through this. So it's not just a question of saying, you know it the all the Bible is just so impossible to understand, no. Sometimes the issue is just that we don't like what it says and we don't want to listen to people who maybe know more about it than we do.

Kevin Stone

I think discipleship is so important. And wasn't Apollos discipled in a way, as Priscilla and Aquila took him under their wings and taught him the way of God more completely. So Apollos needed that community, and so Priscilla and Aquila were there to provide that further training that he needed. I wanted to throw out this quote too, you guys. This is from Rupertus Melodious from 1627. This quote has been it shows up everywhere now, but as far as we can tell, it goes back to Rupertus. And he said this in essentials unity, in non essentials liberty, in all things charity. And we're going to have diversity of opinion and different interpretations of various passages within the church. And to a certain extent that's OK. And when we come to different applications, you know, by all means, God may be telling one group that they need to be living out the truth this way. Another another group may be providing a different method for going into all the world and making disciples. Whether or not we agree with another group of Christians, we do need to have that charity. And on the essentials we need to be working toward that unity with what God has clearly said.

Jeff Laird

I think that's really a good way to put it that we have to work towards that unity. Unity does not require sameness. It does not mean that we are all supposed to be exactly on the same wavelength with all things. But it's important for us as believers and important for us to demonstrate to non believers that there are going to be some things that the Bible calls doubtful issues. We are limited. As human beings there's only so much information I can contain. Only so many things I can understand. Doesn't matter how clearly God put everything in the Bible, I'm not going to be able to retain perfect knowledge of everything in the entire universe all at once. So he gives me the things that are really important. Makes those be clear. And then basically says, look, the stuff that's not really, really clear in here you guys are going to kind of have to figure out. And in the end, those things in and of themselves don't really matter. Now, that's not to say that these these interpretive differences never matter. Some of them matter very much. Some of them have very big implications. But when when Christians are sincere and they're leading for the Holy Spirit and we recognize what the real consequences are behind these doctrinal differences and we're able to say, you know what you have this perspective on exactly how God does this. I have that perspective. We both have the same agreement. Ultimately, it doesn't really change how we witness, how we live, or what's going to happen in eternity. It's OK to just to agree to disagree. Well, that takes away a lot of the heat in the conversations. It makes it easier for people to understand that some of these things are they're they're truly just doubtful issues. They're things that are not the core. They're not the the center, and they're not as important as what some people make them out to be,

Shea Houdmann

It's interesting and very the the final point that I wanted to talk about was the undue emphasis on tradition. So earlier, Jeff, you spoke of the origin of the Jehovah witnesses where a young man doesn't want to listen to those more experienced, more knowledge of God's word and goes off. So he's he's exploring, he's searching, he's thinking on his own. And you get the opposite extreme where someone refuses to accept anything unless it's been exactly what their church has taught their entire lives or taught for the past 500 years, or however long with a particular denomination. Some people so trapped by well, that's the way it's always been taught that they're not even willing to really think, say, OK, yes, that's an old doctrine, but is it biblical? So there's both both sides of that. Our Roman Catholic friends so many church traditions that they have added over the course of millennia at this point that have no basis whatsoever in the Bible. But the Roman Catholic Church is not the only one with traditions. Every denomination has its traditions, and once we start making traditions into doctrines, that's where it becomes dangerous. We always have to go back to Scripture. There's nothing wrong with traditions if they're biblically sound. If they're either based on Scripture or at least not contradictory with Scripture. But once we start making traditions, it's the whole argument about I've never done it that way before. That that's that's a reason to think through second guess, do more research. But its not a reason to accept or reject the doctrine. So you get both sides, someone rejecting everything their church is ever taught because they have this new and great idea and people so locked into a tradition that may or may not be biblical. They're not even willing to look in Scripture to see if these things are so, like the Bereans did in Acts 17.

Shea Houdmann

So guys, great discussion today. Obviously way more things we could discuss and things we've observed in our history, our experiences at Got Questions about why there's so many different interpretations. I like the emphasis on being able to agree to disagree, to focus on the essentials, not giving in to hobby horse, soap box type issues. Not making minor issues the end all be all of our faith. So many more things we could discuss, but this should give you a good feel for why there are so many different Christian interpretations. And truly if we all approach scripture without bias, without preconceptions, if we all truly listen to the Holy Spirit, fully submitted our hearts and minds to him, we would not have this problem. But the problem is we're sinful human beings. We make mistakes, and none of us is perfectly capable of always doing that. Thus all the different Christian interpretations.

Shea Houdmann

Hope our conversation today has been encouraging to you and may if Jeff, Kevin and I would point you to anything, may it be study God's word, search the scriptures, submit your heart and mind to what God's word says and ask the Holy Spirit for wisdom, for guidance for discernment, and all of your belief.

Kevin Stone

That's right.

Shea Houdmann

All of us could do that more than we do. This has been the Got Questions podcast on why there's so many different Christian interpretations. Got questions? The Bible has answers. We'll help you find them.