

What About ... The statement: "That's Just Your Interpretation!"

By REBECCA S. MAY

"That's just your interpretation" implies that meaning resides with the reader. The argument is, because different people understand words differently, different interpretations should be both expected and accepted. It's true that people understand words differently, but meaning exists not in how a word is defined by a dictionary or understood by a reader but in how it is used by the author.

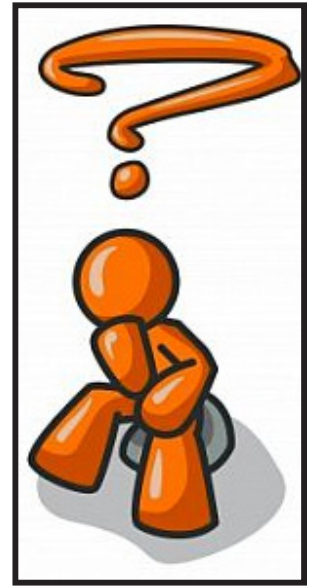
Because the definitions of words change (depending on people, places, or times) people wrongly assume that the meaning of a text changes or depends on people, places, or times. But if people are free to interpret my words as it suits them (based on their culture, their religion or their mood) then what would be the point of my writing anything? Why speak or write if what I want to say is going to change depending on who reads it? In other words, it would be both impossible and pointless to communicate if the reader controlled the meaning. For example, "Suppose I receive a letter but, afraid of what it might tell me, decide to burn it without reading it. It could be argued that since the very reader for whom the letter was intended never read it, there was no meaning at all. Yet the objective reality of the communication is not undone by my reaction—and it certainly would be folly to think that I am personally unaffected as a result of the decision to not read the letter—which happened to say, "You must come in for an operation this Friday or you will die" (Walter C. Kaiser, "An Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics," page 247).

"When we speak of verbal communication, we have in mind not simply the transmission of information through the symbols of language, but especially the sharing of meaning between an author and a reader. Biblical hermeneutics involves studying the way that information is conveyed from the author (what he says, how he chooses to say it, and why) so that the reader will understand what the author intended to communicate" ("Expository Hermeneutics," Elliot Johnson, page 9-10).

When words are used to communicate, the meaning is whatever the author intended when the words were originally used. So words have meaning not based on how they are received, but how they were used to communicate. This puts limits on the possible meaning of the words used. Those limits are the ties which bind the meaning of the words to the mind of the author. In order to have meaning, then, we must have an author.

"To banish the original author as the determiner of meaning is to reject the only compelling normative principle that could lend validity to an interpretation."
(E.D. Hirsch, "Validity in Interpretation," 5)

By the way, since the biblical writers wrote within the framework of the possible usages of words at their time, and since that time is complete, the possibility of new definitions of their words has ended.



As the reader or interpreter I must look at a text with the idea that it was written for a purpose. I must try to discover what the author intended to communicate. And I must try to do that without my own biased opinions and with his definitions not mine. There is no guarantee that I will be able to determine what the correct interpretation is. But assuming my interpretation is correct because it's mine is both foolish and arrogant. God's Word is His—they are His words. He is not making His Word available to us to be used as it suits us. He has His own purpose for writing.

For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, And do not return there without watering the earth And making it bear and sprout, And furnishing seed to the sower and bread to the eater; So will My word be which goes forth from My mouth; It will not return to Me empty, Without accomplishing what I desire, And without succeeding in the matter for which I sent it (Isaiah 55:10-11).

"That's just your interpretation" takes the control of words away from the author and gives it to the reader. When this is done, the means of determining the meaning of a text is abandoned. This approach to Scripture implies that the Bible has meaning when it is discovered by a reader. But the meaning has been there all along. Dr. Dan Wallace calls this "Scripture Twisting" because it, "does not honor the human authorship of the Bible." He goes on to say, "When Paul wrote to the Galatians, he wrote a coherent, holistic message. He never intended for someone a couple millennia later to rip verses out of their context and wield them any way they chose!" ("Scripture Twisting," bible.org).