

How Do You Think?

Increasingly I am surprised at how Christians *think* and *interpret* the Word of God. Even texts that make plain sense are twisted to accommodate one's logic, emotions or another theological system. Varieties of subjective thinking increasingly come into play. Some call it 'post-modern thinking' - where there are no longer any absolutes and thus allowing many different interpretations, whichever sits comfortably within the heart of man. Yet if one studies the commentaries of yesteryear, a uniformity of interpretation is found upon *most* passages of Scripture. Common ground was to be found on most occasions - even within the more 'difficult' passages. Not so in the 20th Century. At the root of why Christians increasingly interpret Scripture so differently is because Scripture no longer is something in which God is sovereign and man is subservient to God's word; but rather man is now able to interpret Scripture to satisfy himself. The issue here is the pride of man, but also it is arguably a subtle attack on the very inspiration of Scripture.

The Word is not subject to us; we are subject to the Word!

The change in thinking in modern times runs parallel with the lack of both expositional preaching and sound Biblical exegesis of Scripture. Expositional preaching or reading requires working through Scripture verse by verse and allowing the texts to speak for itself. This is different to 'topical' preaching or reading which has one selecting a topic and then applying relevant texts systematically to that subject. When travelling I do a lot of 'topical preaching' which can be helpful for teaching on various issues and in exposing error. But over the course of time in a local church I am convinced that expositional preaching will far outweigh topical preaching in its benefits for those wishing to delve deeper into what the Holy Spirit is *actually* saying.

Thinking - Exegesis or Eisegesis?

One of the reasons why thinking is today so varied in interpretation of Scripture is *the lack of exegesis* by those teaching and preaching. Exegesis is the discovery of what the original author meant at the time the text was written. It utilises methods that pull apart the text by studying words, phrases, the original grammatical and historical contexts and then putting the parts back together again to establish the true sense of the passage. It does not allow 'reading into the text' foreign, logical or emotional ideas. That is 'eisegesis'.

So much of today's *thinking* is eisegesis...

Example 1: A test I have used when teaching students in colleges is to ask questions that test the subjective, emotional and logical content of their thinking. For example, I ask: '*Do all infants that die go to be with the Lord?*' Answers usually vary: '*Yes, Scripture implies...*'; '*It would only be fair if they did...an injustice would be done if not*'; '*They must, because God is love*'. Then I enquire of them: '*But what does the Bible say on this subject?*' It soon dawns on them that Scripture is arguably silent on the matter. The great Charles Spurgeon admitted he could not establish from Scripture a belief that babies went to Heaven at death and he was not prepared to base a doctrine on it. His thinking was *Sola Scriptura*. The question that should guide our thinking in interpretation is '*What do the Scriptures objectively say?*'

Example 2: I have been amazed at what people do with the many and clear Scriptures that teach Hell to be an eternal punishment. Subjective and emotive thinking can reject *true* dichotomies. In Scripture we have an antinomy: the dichotomies of the anger/wrath of God *as well as* the love of God. Today's emphasis is on the 'love of God' whilst dismissing the truth of His justice, wrath and judgment upon sin. Thus, Hell and eternal punishment are now increasingly rejected by people logically and emotionally applying the 'love of God' in their studies - again this is *eisegesis*.

Modern arguments against an eternal punishment in Hell may be logical to *our way of thinking*. But this contradicts many *plain* and objective Scriptures dealing with this subject (Matt.18:8; 25:41,46; Mk.3:29; 2Thess.1:9; Heb.6:2; Jude 1:7)

Example 3: I have been amazed at what some will do with John 3:16 in an effort to anchor their belief that the phrase ‘*whosoever believes*’ is about ‘free will’ or ‘anyone who chooses’. Yet even a basic exegesis of the word ‘*whosoever believes*’ will show it literally means ‘all the believing ones’.* And John 3:16 nowhere speaks of human ‘free will’. An objective exegesis will show that the text says 1. God loved the world (His creation) 2. He gave His only Son 3. Those that truly believe in Him would not perish but have everlasting life. John 3:16 says *nothing* about ‘choosing’, nor the process that caused the ‘whosoever’ to believe. It simply says *those that believe will be saved!* Objectively John 3:16 says: God loves His creation; He gave His only son; that the ‘*whosoever believes*’ (literally ‘the believing ones’), will believe in Him and not perish but have everlasting life. *Anything beyond that is extra Biblical!*

Example 4: I have been amazed at the interpretive ‘gymnastics’ people will perform with texts that clearly teach that elders/pastors are to be male (1Tim.3:2; Tit.1:6; 1Tim.2:12, etc). Rather than take the *plain meaning* (which can be proved irrefutably by sound exegesis), many today will change the sense or revert to other passages (which often don’t primarily deal with the issue) and so end up espousing the very opposite view of what the text is saying! They have elders as being ‘*the wife of one husband*’ instead of the ‘*husband of one wife*’!

Example 5: I have been amazed at what some will do with verses that clearly teach *predestination*. Many will remove the ‘*pre*’ from the word so that it no longer means ‘*before the foundation of the world*’ (Eph.1:4). Therefore it now becomes something God will only do at a later stage based on what man *may* do with his supposed ‘free-will’. *The treatment of this subject is one of the most telling signs revealing the way we think!* Many Christians use emotion and logic when attempting to understand the doctrines of election and predestination. So called ‘difficult’ passages found in Ephesians 1 and Romans 9 are either ignored or twisted to show a bias toward the unbiblical notion that fallen man is able to ‘seek’ and ‘choose’ salvation of his own volition. Many simply cannot bring themselves to believe that a loving God might *will* to choose some and not others. However, election and predestination are objective facts revealed in Scripture, despite that they might in some minds appear to defy logical, subjective and emotional human thinking. The question that should rule our thinking is ‘*What do the Scriptures objectively say?*’

Most of the great divines (George Whitefield, John Newton, Jonathon Edwards, David Brainerd, John Eliot, John Paton, Tyndale, Carey...Charles Spurgeon, Martyn Lloyd Jones...the list is long and distinguished) all thought objectively on these doctrines. They simply believed what the Word of God said about these subjects and *held their own logic and reasoning captive to that Word*.

It was Pelagius of the 4th century who, in denying predestination and election, developed the thinking that an unregenerate man in himself was capable of obedience and could use his apparent ‘free will’ to achieve salvation. His thinking was humanly *logical* but not based on the objective truths to be found in the Biblical texts. In his humanistic thinking he confused the *free will* possessed by Adam and Eve before the fall, with their *enslaved will* after the fall. This thinking led to the denial of the depravity of man and original sin. Pelagius ultimately taught that man could earn God’s grace through salvation by his ability to operate a supposed ‘free will’ and his own merit. Pelagianism was unanimously condemned as heresy by the Council of Carthage in AD 418.

* ‘*Whosoever*’ has been arguably corrupted from its original English understanding. The literal translation for the Greek ‘*pas*’ (‘*whosoever*’) is ‘*all*’ or ‘*everyone*’. ‘*Pas*’ is translated over 1,000 times in the New Testament and is mostly translated ‘*all*’; ‘*every*’; ‘*every one*’. The Greek here for ‘*whosoever believes*’ is ‘*all the believing ones*’ - with the definite article ‘*the*’ (‘*pas o pisteuon*’). *The definite article* (‘*o*’ - ‘*the*’) *here refers to a definite number, quantity or entity*. The common misconception is that ‘*whosoever*’ is an indefinite phrase; but the definite article ‘*the*’ (‘*o*’) modifies a particular object - the object here is the ‘*believing ones*’. This is a definite group of people who will believe, not an indiscriminate or indefinite group! The verse is not about ‘anyone’ but literally about ‘*the believing ones*’.

It was Cassian who later developed 'Semi-Pelagian' thinking which taught that God *assists* men with their wills in striving to be saved. Semi-Pelagian thinking was also condemned as heresy at the Council of Orange in AD 529. (Roman Catholicism later adopted semi-Pelagian views). These views resurfaced in the Arminian controversy of the 16th century when 5 points were put forth again denying the widely accepted truths of predestination and unconditional election. It was refuted by 5 points at the Synod of Dort in AD 1619 which some now call 'Calvinism', (which sadly is today confused with 'hyper-Calvinism').

The 20th Century has seen the blind acceptance of all these *heresies*! But behind all of this is a problem in *thinking*! Whether our reasoning's and emotions can or cannot accept what the Scriptures objectively state, the *facts* remain the same: God chooses man in salvation. Man does not choose God (Eph.1:4,5; Jn.15:16; Rom.3:11) - yet our subjective *experiential thinking* when we 'came to the Lord' would tell us otherwise. Man is unable to come to God in and of himself for salvation unless the Holy Spirit draws him first (Rom.8:6,7; Rom.3:10-11; Jer.17:9; Is.64:6,7) and only by this drawing will the 'all' that the Father has given, come (Jn.6:37) - yet our subjective *logical thinking* would immediately ask: 'why does God not 'draw' all to salvation'? God elects, chooses His people of His own determination (Eph.1:5,9,11; 1Thess.1:4; Tit.1:1; Rom.8:33; Jn.6:37;5:21; Rom.9:15-18; Gal.1:15,16) - yet our *humanistic thinking* would ask: 'but man is not just a robot; surely man must have some power within himself to play a part in predestination or election?'

The problem with such logic is that if extended it strays into extra-biblical thinking. An example is: If (A) God elects and predestines a people for himself; then (B) *He must unlovingly also elect, predestinate and damn the rest to Hell*; and (C) *if so, he unfairly loves only a select group of people*'. This thinking is (A) + (B) = (C). Yet (B) is not found in Scripture, which does not teach that God actually 'predestinates' people to Hell. The premise (C) then becomes the ground for a 'strawman', something which has no bearing on the topic and is then used to prove the original premise (A) to be 'false'. The problem with this human logic is that it bypasses and *adds* to the *original objective facts* of Scripture (A) - which states that God does elect a certain people to glory.

To show further the folly of 'strawman' thinking, consider such logic but *in reverse*. If God is unfair in such matters of election and predestination, then would He have been unjust in allowing *all* peoples after the fall of Adam and Eve, to go to Hell? By the *same logic* the answer has to be 'yes' - God would have been unjust in allowing such a punishment. Yet *objectively* it would have been deserved. Is Hell fair?...objectively, 'yes'. Otherwise, the same reasoning for God being 'unjust' in election and predestination must also be applied here! *This counter logic shows the need for an objective and absolute standard based on facts from God's Word.*

God has already anticipated this difficulty in our minds and He warns us: '***What shall we say then? Is there unrighteousness with God? God forbid. For he says to Moses, I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion. So then it is not of him that wills, nor of him that runs, but of God that shows mercy...Therefore has he mercy on whom he will have mercy, and whom he will he hardens. You will say then unto me, Why does he yet find fault? For who has resisted his will? Nay but, O man, who are you that replies against God? Shall the thing formed say to him that formed it, Why have you made me thus? Has not the potter power over the clay, of the same lump to make one vessel unto honour, and another unto dishonour? What if God, willing to show his wrath, and to make his power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath fitted to destruction: And that he might make known the riches of his glory on the vessels of mercy, which he had afore prepared unto glory***' (Rom.9:14-23).

These texts are not just about the sovereignty of God. They are about believing the objective facts of Scripture, even though our human minds might '*reply against God*' (vs.20) by questioning the reasons behind the actions of God! It's about warning us to *think* of ourselves as '*pots*' subject to the '*Potter*'!

Are we employing logic or emotion when studying Scripture? Or are we rightfully and objectively viewing and believing what is actually written? Again, there is nothing wrong with thinking in a logical or emotional manner. However, when dealing with Biblical 'doctrine' it is imperative that our thought processes firstly be *objective* to allow the facts of the text to be properly understood; and that we not allow subjective or emotive reasoning's to be added to that truth.

Subjective thinking with regards to doctrine is fraught with danger. For example, I may think something is 'beautiful' but the next person may disagree. Such is the nature of subjective thinking! *When dealing with doctrine, any logic must be based on objective facts and must not stray from that. Logic must not attempt to solve seeming contradictions in Scripture or questions in our mind; but must constantly be tested by only the objective facts of Scripture.*

Example 6: I have been amazed at what people will do with John 6:44 which clearly has an absolute *negative*: '*No man can come to me, except the Father which has sent me draw him: and I will raise him up at the last day*'. '*No man*' means '*no man*'! The word '*except*' means only those the Father draws; and all those '*drawn*' will be raised up. Every word is clear and precise! Although the verse might not make sense to our frame of understanding of salvation, nevertheless that's what the text says! It's not up to us to re-think these passages. It's God's sovereign right to state such concepts even if they do not make sense to our finite minds! No gymnastics or re-interpreting is necessary!

The problem often is that people cannot accept propositions that are not logical to their minds; or that two propositions that appear to be opposites may still be true. For example, the responsibility of man to repent of his sins and God's sovereign unconditional election are both stated clearly in Scripture. To some people these appear to be opposites, because *logically* why would God command people to repent if they were not predestined and elected? Yet Scripture is replete with verses that objectively teach that there is an *inability* of man to believe the Gospel unless the Spirit of God intervenes (Rom.8:7; Jn.6:44); yet the Gospel is to be believed! In an effort to harmonise or reconcile these seemingly opposing truths, many *re-think* the texts! But *it is God who must reconcile such opposing truths, not us!* And He does! To his own disciples who asked '*Who then can be saved?*', Jesus replied '*The things which are impossible with men are possible with God*' (Lk.18:23-27). Without the drawing by the holy Spirit man will *naturally* reject the Gospel (Rom.8:6,7; 1Cor.2:13; Rom.3:11; Eph.2:3). Hence the phrase in Jn.6:44 should be *believed* in its plain sense: '*No man can come to me, except the Father which has sent me draw him: and I will raise him up at the last day*' (Jn.6:44). The danger of denying or changing one or the other of seemingly opposing propositions is that the sovereignty of God is diminished, grace is less unmerited and God's Word is nullified!

Example 7: I have been amazed at what people read into Romans 8:29-30 '*And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose. For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren. Moreover whom he did predestinate, them he also called: and whom he called, them he also justified: and whom he justified, them he also glorified*'. The '*foreknow*' is today *commonly* interpreted that 'God foreknows *who will accept or reject him in the future*' and thus His '*predestination*' is based on that ability or '*free will*' within man. Again, this thinking is rooted in the early heresies of Pelagian and Cassian. However, *there is*

no 'free will' or any mention of man doing anything in this text! There is absolutely nothing about unsaved man choosing salvation in this text. The text does not say God foreknew *any action* by man but that He foreknew *the person* ('whom' is the object of the verb 'foreknow'). And every action in Romans 8:29,30 is *by God* and taken *before the foundation of the world!* The word '**also**' in Romans 8:29 ('**For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate**') links foreknowledge to predestination. Neither one is conditional on the other.

The Heart of the Issue:

A departure from sound thinking can be traced through the various eras of culture down through the centuries. The era of 'Modernism' was heralded by the 'Renaissance' period which exalted man and his abilities. The 'Enlightenment' period which began in the 1600's exalted human reasoning.

The 'Industrial Revolution' from the 1700's to the 1800's saw great advances in technology and again caused man to depend on and esteem his own abilities. This arguably caused him to think inwardly to self and *away from absolutes*. 'Darwinism' then furthered this 'ability' of man and helped him to explain away his beginnings and thus his destiny. But it is 'Postmodernism' in the late 20th century that has cemented this shift in thinking. Truth no longer existed in any absolute sense. Modernism has brought in the thinking that truth can be discerned by reason and logical argumentation...truth is not objective. *It is this thinking that has pervaded the church today in the area of doctrine and interpretation.*

No doubt people have brains that are 'wired' different for thinking processes. Some are more logical, more emotional, or more subjective. Some are 'sequential thinkers' and process information in an orderly, linear way. Others may be 'random thinkers', more 'creative' and divergent in their thought processes and thus prone to stray to alternative interpretations 'outside the box'. Some are 'abstract random thinkers' who will meditate, reflect with feelings and emotion and personalise; they love theories and the abstract. I often have people ask me about various theological theories they have developed which are not plainly stated in Scripture. Even though their theory may be logical and even a possibility, my Sola Scriptura answer is sometimes annoying to them when I say: '*I don't know...I cannot find anything in Scripture to support your theory*'.

No matter what kind of thinking you have, sound exegeses requires some critical thinking and the use of skills of accuracy and precision. (We are not here referring to 'higher criticism' which has questioned the inspiration of the original texts). Such objective critical thinking observes the words and the evidence of the text closely and then judges according to the facts. One must be objective and set strict boundaries in leaving behind ones tradition and theological bias. Also, we do not have to immediately understand every text!

Conclusion:

Objective Biblical thinking designates a mode of reasoning based on the reality of the Bible being the God-breathed inspired and inerrant Word to man. The knowledge that comes from this thinking is based on objective evidence - *the facts of the text*. The objective thinking that is necessary to avoid serious error in doctrine is similar to the diagnostic thinking that is required of a medical trauma team in the event of a life and death situation; or the thinking required by NASA in the life and death event of equipment failure of a space shuttle full of astronauts - the thinking required in these situations needs be *objective*, dealing in *facts*; it cannot afford to be mixed with emotive or subjective reasoning.

‘Rightly dividing the Word of Truth’ (2Tim.2:15) is similar to Bible translation. Translating from Greek to other languages is a serious, exacting and fearful task because we are dealing with God’s own Word! So, why is interpreting and reading Scripture any less grave? Both translating and interpreting are well defined ‘sciences’ with hermeneutical principles that require objective and exact thinking. There is no room for conjecture, bias or ‘free thinking’ in these fields.

The problem with much Christian thinking today is the *lack of discipline* to think objectively and to *see what is only in the text*. Subjective and emotional thinking rules the day in many minds. When dealing with doctrine and interpreting Scripture, the difference between objective and subjective thinking is so vital that wrong thinking can lead to an outright denial of Scriptural truths.

I urge the reader to believe what is read objectively in Scripture as fact. When it is plain language, then accept it. A Bible believing Christian must have all thoughts ultimately *objectively* filtered through a conscience that is captivated by *facts* within the written Word of God. The subjectivity of today’s eisegesis must be brought under control, lest truth be abandoned and God’s Word nullified. ***‘Study to show yourself approved unto God, a workman that need not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth’*** (2Tim.2:15).

Terry Arnold