

That's Not What It Means to Me

By Patrick Swayne

You've probably heard the above words before – maybe while sitting at a café, having a chat with a friend; maybe at an in-home Bible study; maybe even in an adult Bible class on a Sunday morning. Regardless of the setting, the scene plays out predictably. Someone, maybe even the teacher in those settings that acknowledge one, points out what the meaning of a Scripture in light of its historical, cultural, and textual context. Someone else, unable to deny the logic of what the first person has pointed out and unable to defend his own belief regarding the Scripture (which differs from what the first person has just said), simply says, “That’s not what it means to me,” or, this statement’s twin, “I just don’t see it that way.” In some settings, these words are followed by further (sometimes heated) discussion; in others, these words bring an end to the discussion. In either case, the second person often leaves the setting unchanged and yet satisfied in his belief.

The second person in this oft repeated exchange is guilty of applying what is sometimes called a “reader response” approach to Scripture. For those who may not be familiar with this term, a quick Google definition is that reader response is an approach to written works “that ignores both the author and the text’s contents, confining analysis to the reader’s experience when reading a particular work.” Yes, you read that right: it doesn’t matter what the author meant and it doesn’t matter what the text says; all that matters is what the reader thinks and feels as he reads.

Reader response is not totally without its merits. The Bible was written to and for its readers. At its heart, the Bible is a persuasive document designed to bring about change in its readers; it is a living message that delves deep into the hearts and minds of those who read it (Hebrews 4:12). However, to suggest that the Bible is a pliable document that can be shaped into the whims and wishes of its readers is to undermine the fact the Bible was not written by human authors alone, but through the inspiration of a God who wished to communicate (2 Timothy 3:16). In fact, it undermines the very nature of language as a vehicle for communication and flies in the face of what the Bible says as clearly as it possibly can.

The Bible abounds with warnings against its misuse or alteration. The text is bookended and bookmarked with three clear warnings against adding to or taking away from the Word of God (Deuteronomy 4:2; Proverbs 30:5-6; Revelation 22:18-19). References to and warnings against false teachers and false prophets abound in both the Old and New Testaments; how could one possibly prophesy or teach falsely if his message could be altered by those who heard/read it? Peter spoke of those who twist the Scriptures “to their own destruction (2 Peter 3:16). Paul spoke of the danger of preaching or receiving a different gospel, which was not the Gospel by virtue of

the fact that it was different (Galatians 1:6-9). On and on the list of examples could go.

The fact is that if the Bible says whatever a reader thinks it says, it falls under the truth of an adage: what says too much says nothing at all. If all points of view in approaching Scripture are valid, then the Bible both commands murder and forbids it; it condemns stealing and commends it; it would have man do anything, everything, and nothing all at once. If this were the case, it would be better for the Bible not to exist, as all it could possibly do would be to confuse the inner promptings of its readers.

Sometimes the water of this issue is muddied when people reflect on the nature of the Word of God as a message given life by the Spirit of God. They assume that their heartfelt conclusions represent Spirit-led convictions. Once again, the Bible speaks plainly to such thoughts. God is not the author of confusion (1 Corinthians 14:33). He does not show partiality in His dealings with man, nor does He accept conflicting standards of truth and righteousness (Acts 10:34-35; Romans 2:11; Ephesians 6:9; James 3:17; 1 Peter 1:17). While there are certain aspects of the Law of Liberty designed to be adapted to time and space, what it requires of man and forbids for man transcends time and space.

If you can help it, don't allow conversations of which you are a part to end with the statement, "That's not what it means to me." Humbly and gently, remind the person who says this of what God says in the above passages. Ultimately, we will be judged by God, not based on what it means to me or to you, but what it means to Him.