

Views That Can Radically Alter Your Christian Belief

When I was a new Christian, I naively thought everyone read the Bible the same way with virtually one interpretation that all born-again Christians would have. One of the biggest shocks I experienced occurred about six months into my walk with God, when I met a fundamentalist Baptist preacher who was trying to convince me that all Pentecostals were being misled by the devil.

In the years since my conversion, I have been greatly impacted by the power our paradigms or perspectives have in regards to how we read the Scriptures, why we read the Scriptures and how we interpret the Scriptures.

For example, if someone reads the Bible from the perspective of just wanting to have a blessed personal life, they will overemphasize everything in the word regarding God's blessing and apply it to themselves. But they may skirt over some of the conditions of those blessings and vice versa.

If a person reads a book like *Radical* by David Platt they can easily be moved from a prosperity paradigm or individual paradigm to a mission/discipleship-focused paradigm that emphasizes surrendering all for the urgency of making disciples, just like the original apostles did in the Gospels when they left all to follow Jesus. But those with a kingdom paradigm (like myself) will filter the great teachings of this book (*Radical*) so that it fits with the cultural mandate of Genesis 1:28 which can result in a contemporary application of getting a good education, developing our creativity and making disciples of marketplace leaders by infiltrating the systems and institutions of this world (which I am sure Platt would also make allowances for).

This can fit nicely with the Pauline epistles, which seem to advocate a quiet and slow, personal and cultural revolution in and through the mundane in our lives as we do everything unto the Lord (Col. 3:17; Eph. 5), not just radical experiences like selling all we have and moving to an unreached people group to preach the gospel.

The following are some of my opinions regarding 10 views and their resulting interpretations:

1. The Word of Faith Perspective. Those who have been taught in the tradition of Kenneth Hagin, Kenneth Copeland and others in the Word of Faith movement, which started in the 1950s and gained great popularity in the 1970s, read everything in Scripture with the lens of using their faith to access God's promises and Christ's finished work on Calvary to receive divine healing and prosperity. Because of this, they usually do not study much of the Old Testament except when they refer to passages regarding healing in the Pentateuch (e.g., Exodus 23:25, Psalms 103:1-5 and Proverbs 4:22).

They read the New Testament to see who they are or what they have "in Christ." Thus, it is an individualistic, rights-centered approach to Scripture that is very weak on the corporate nature of vision, purpose and prosperity. Also, this perspective lacks a biblical worldview when it comes to the application of the Old Testament law of God to civil society. In spite of its weaknesses, this perspective can still be effective when it comes to learning how to believe God for the miraculous!

2. The Liberation Perspective. Liberation theologians and their adherents emphasize the suffering of Christ because they read the Scriptures generally through the lens of class warfare, prejudice and victimology! Thus, the sufferings and cross of Christ (who was crucified by the majority culture) become a model for all suffering, oppressed people who believe Jesus has come primarily to give them economic and political

liberty from their oppressors.

The challenge regarding this view is its potential to reduce Christology to anthropology and Christianity to a mere geo/political/economic liberation movement.

3. The Perspective of Self-Empowerment. In the past two decades, we have seen the incredible rise of motivational speakers (e.g., Tony Robbins). Many preachers have used this perspective in their preaching. The result is that many sermons are based on the practical issues of the Bible related to hard work, faith, focus, understanding our unique gifts and calling, and how we are made in the image of God to do great works like God.

The challenge with this perspective is the lack of balance: Proponents often do not balance their message with other passages related to Jesus' teachings on self-denial, suffering, taking up the cross and forsaking everything to follow Him! Scripture teaches us that before we can save our lives, we have to lose them (Mark 8:35)! Also, the emphasis in Scripture on long-lasting blessing is tied to personal transformation through holiness, humility and dependence on God—not self-empowerment through confidence in our own natural abilities, even if they are given by God.

4. The Pietistic Perspective. The perspective of the pietist lends itself to searching the Scriptures primarily to bring inner transformation and a personal closeness to Christ. Holiness, walking in the Spirit, hearing the voice of the Lord, and denying ourselves are all emphasized (which is great and all true and absolutely necessary)!

The weakness of this perspective is that believers can become so contemplative and self-focused on their own emotional and spiritual transformation that they can neglect the proper emphasis Christ gave us when He called us to go to all the world to preach the gospel (Mark 16:15-18) and transform

culture as salt and light (Matt. 5:13-16).

5. The Evangelistic Missional Perspective. This perspective is all about winning souls and making disciples. Anything done by a church or believer that does not directly lead to converting and maturing people in Christ is jettisoned or viewed as unnecessary and lukewarm.

The weakness of this view is its tendency to be one-generational and not practical enough for the everyday lives of growing families. Also, it is not always conducive for those who have a long-term goal of producing wealth for the kingdom, and who want to put their children through the best universities for cultural credibility and access. There is also a possible lack of emphasis in regards to empowering influential marketplace leaders called to infiltrate the systems of the world like the prophet Daniel did.

6. The Reformed Perspective. Those trained in the Reformed system of interpretation will read the Bible deductively through the lens of the sovereignty of God. Although I resonate much with this system, I have also seen some go to extremes and become passive in regards to fasting and prayer related to winning souls and extending God's mission and kingdom on the earth, since some proponents of this perspective de-emphasize human responsibility more than Scripture does.

7. The Free Will Perspective. On the opposite extreme from the Reformed (Calvinist) perspective is a free will (Arminian) perspective that overemphasizes human responsibility to the extent that God's sovereignty is sometimes compromised.

This leads to superficially interpreting difficult passages regarding divine calling and election (Rom. 8:29; Eph. 1:4) by replacing predestination with foreknowledge (Calvinists don't really separate the two) so that God chooses someone based on Him already knowing that person would (of their own free

choice) choose Him in the first place! Also, an overemphasis on free will leads to process theology and open theism, which teaches that God doesn't really know everything in the future because much of it is unknowable!

This extreme emphasis on free will makes it very hard to trust in the relevance of scripture since, if God is still learning and growing as the future unfolds, it makes it extremely difficult to have a biblical worldview in economics, science, politics, law, ethics, morality, family and sexual orientation because of the inability to have trans-historical universal principles that we can trust! Also, if God is not sovereign then humankind is semi-autonomous which historically has flung open the doors to liberalism.

8. The Kingdom Perspective. The kingdom perspective interprets much of Scripture and biblical themes as emanating out of the original cultural commission as found in Genesis 1:27-28. The primary theme of the New Testament is not the church, soul winning or even discipleship; it is the kingdom of God, which is the rule of God over all creation.

This perspective motivates people to understand the sacred calling they have in regards to stewarding their God-given gifts and abilities to serve with excellence in the marketplace. Discipleship in this perspective does not just involve the teaching of individual sinners but the discipleship of whole nations in accordance with their interpretation of Matthew 28:19.

They believe that the gospel is holistic and should not only redeem sinners but also transform the systems of culture (politics, economics, art, law, ethics, music, family, education, science and so forth). The challenge for this perspective is the tendency to think we are doing God's kingdom work just by improving the quality of life in our communities, even if we are not winning souls and making disciples.

9. The Individualistic Perspective. This is a common perspective that can arise out of our national culture (rugged American individualism as personified in our iconic action heroes like John Wayne and Rambo).

The weakness of this perspective is that much of the Bible was written either to the nation of Israel (Old Testament) or the body of Christ (New Testament). Thus, we cannot fulfill our destiny and accomplish our mission in life merely by ourselves; we need to submit to a local church and function in the corporate context of scripture if we want to reap the fullness of the blessings of the promises of scripture.

10. The Ecclesial Perspective. Those with this perspective think that the church is the kingdom of God, that we are not called to infiltrate and disciple the nations of the world with the gospel but that we are to focus on building our own subcultures within our congregations. Those with this view have a great understanding of the corporate nature of Scripture. But many in this camp fail to understand how the church should be sent into the world as salt and light. In this view the church is to function as heaven on Earth (which I agree with).

But I believe they fail to understand the breadth of the mission of the church to bring God's kingdom and will *on earth* as it is in heaven (Luke 11:2-4). In conclusion, there are many more perspectives I could have mentioned.

For the sake of time, I have only mentioned 10 of the main perspectives I have seen influencing the people of God today in the global church. As stated earlier, these are only based on my observations and, because of this, it is limited by my own perspective and experience. I also realize that articles of this sort merely paint pictures with a broad brush and miss the nuances and overlap of many of these perspectives.

My prayer is that we will try to be more open as to the

interpretive system we bring to the table based on our perspectives, and that we ask God to help us see what ways we may be limiting our capacity to interpret the Word based on the biblical authors' original intent as inspired by the Holy Spirit.