

Just the other day, I spoke for a leaders' retreat for a ministry associated with a local church in my city. The topic assigned to me was challenging and I knew the content could work to disrupt some long-held assumptions of some or even most of the participants in the retreat. That was the key thing: handling the topic accurately could significantly change some of the leaders' current thinking.

Now, in this particular situation, I didn't truly know whether challenging mental or spiritual disruptions might happen, but here's the point: when you teach or mentor, you should be aware that sometimes you are just mostly confirming and affirming what the recipients largely already believe or practice. But my experience is that, nowadays, Christian audience members often come from quite different church backgrounds and adhere to quite different theologies, catechisms, and confessions. And those belief sets are often in conflict with each other...in conflict with the Bible...or in conflict with both!

So, the serious believer who's teaching must be sure to focus on the Bible as authoritative to the fullest extent possible for the topic involved. Yeah, *the Word of God is the true authority*, and it's accessible to all who would pursue following Christ in a place like America. But the Bible being authoritative is not what always happens. Actually, it's often true that it *doesn't* happen because there's often *bad filtering* in play. So, what does "*bad filtering*" mean, especially in the context of Biblical understanding?

Let's take a couple of examples. At the time of this episode's publication, AI—yes, Artificial Intelligence—is quickly capturing the imagination of millions and is becoming widely used in many organizations...all the way to being embedded in major software systems and the like. So, AI is already very influential and will surely increase in influence even more. But, of course, *AI is often still just a filter*. To that end, a few weeks ago, I typed an independent prompt about a Bible topic into a major search engine. Instead of giving me several links to click on and explore, their AI kicked in and gave me "the answer" to my question.

And, of course, AI gave me a neatly-worded paragraph as an answer—but that answer was really just an opinion that would be disputed by a majority of professing Christians, pastors, and theologians over the last 2,000 years. In fact, that opinion is considered brilliant by some...but is clearly Biblically flawed. But AI didn't really put a disclaimer on its output: it just displayed "*the answer!*" Well, let's just say the way it was presented left that strong impression. But AI clearly accessed its answer from a bad interpreter of the Bible...from a poor mediator, a biased intermediary—not from the Bible itself! That's bad filtering.

But, for centuries, many elected leaders in various churches believe *that approach* is just fine—as long as it's *their interpretations of the Bible that are firmly placed between the Bible and the audience!* For example, Catholics believe their Tradition—yes, their specific interpretations—must be considered as essentially paired with the God-breathed Bible (2 Timothy 3:16-17). But, of course, when it's supposedly "equal," that means tradition will trump or adjust Scripture. Mark 7:9 (ESV) quotes Jesus saying, "...You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish your tradition!"

Then, it's classic Protestants who historically claim *sola scriptura*: that's Latin for "by scripture alone." But wait, often those very same Protestants have their "customized" version of *sola scriptura*—yes, they insist various detailed catechisms, extensive formal "confessions," and summarizing creeds as key to their followers agreeing to *their* supposedly necessary understandings. But of course the elements of these various confessions and catechisms work to emphasize their specific interpretations over those of others!

Still other Christians believe that their interpretations of politics, cultural ideals, or social justice should rule—but these many interpretations are also often in direct conflict with one another, too! The point is this: the differences are clear—and all conflict in one way or another. *And that bad filtering turns into bad anchoring*. Hey, the interpretations and opinions of any one person or church must be consonantly aligned with the written Word of God—with *its primacy paramount!* But the track record of that is spotty, at best.

Of course, some make the case that interpreters were essential when vast swaths of citizens in medieval Europe were illiterate. But now vast numbers of folks *are* literate and have the God-given capacity for

Holy-Spirit-led learning of Bible truth for themselves. Jesus said this to his listeners in introducing His Father's giving of the Holy Spirit to believers in John 14:26: "The Holy Spirit will teach you all things."

The common rebuttal to that type of thinking is a condescending brush-off—asserting that there should be no "private interpretations" of the Christian faith. The problem with that assertion is simple: sooner rather than later, all ecclesiastical authorities operating as official officeholders in institutions fall short with their more supposedly more-authoritative interpretations.

This is nothing new, it's been happening since the era of the early church. Here's what Paul wrote to the Galatians in his opening words (1:6-9): "I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed." Yes, a *different* gospel! *It happened then...has happened since...and is happening now!*

Yes, if the Apostle Paul had this problem in the early church by people contending to have their truth, the universal church will experience this problem until Jesus's Second Coming. Even then, some will surely dispute Jesus Himself because He doesn't fit into their theology...just the like the Pharisees did!

Look, a reliable test has always been what Jesus said: "You will recognize them by their fruits." (Matthew 7:16) And this fact is huge: when we accurately dig, we have the full history of the church at our disposal today. So then. Just how many churches and denominations have worked to truly obey the command of Jesus to go forth with the gospel and truly make disciples of all nations? Yeah, what percentage would you estimate? The answer? Very few churches...very low percentage. And the true test of good theology and right belief is the fruit that it brings. And God's Great Commission is commanded by *Jesus Christ!*

So, here's the point. Traditions are filters. Catechisms are filters. Confessions required for membership are filters. Interpretations are filters. You might ask: but are they good or bad? You must answer that. But that may be the wrong question—the real question should be: are these things necessary and are they clearly consonant with the Bible? The sad historical truth is that a very large percentage of these efforts often distort the Scriptures in some key way or another...frankly, often in many ways, the record shows.

But what about Christian-website disclosures like "Statements of Faith" or "What We Believe." Well, those can be helpful, simply because they can quickly reveal problems to a browsing visitor. But beware: many untruths can and do hide behind broadly-worded truths. Again: beware...test the spirits...discern!

But this reality remains: what are we to do with preachers and teachers...or actually, *what are we personally to do in our roles* as parents and disciplers and teachers and preachers? And so we go back to my story related at the start of this episode, and take it from there: when I taught that day, I started with a couple of real-world observations and then handed out and discussed a one-pager with seven Scripture verses compiled to work to rightly, contextually, to fully address and corral the topic as much as possible.

And I essentially said this: "take these seven Scripture passages with you as your foundation and ask that God's Holy Spirit teach you all things pertaining to this issue." Yes, God will be faithful when you pursue His truth that's revealed in the written Word of God. My opinion doesn't really matter. Instead, the written Word of God must be the foundation that everything else can rightly build upon. Otherwise, all our carefully-orchestrated interpretations and our works will burn up at the Judgment Seat of Christ as not being built in the foundation of Christ (1 Corinthians 3:9-16).

So I told them to work to take out all filters, including me! As to that topic, I may be a good filter...or I may be a bad filter. Same, too, with all pastors, theologians, and church teachings on various topics. But the Word of God stands forever. And, for each of us, the Holy Spirit is the ultimate in receiving and rightly interpreting the written Word of God. So, be wary, be discerning...then joyfully implement the truth!

A&A: Application & Action

1. No denomination, no church, no pastor, no teacher apart from Christ is perfect: the Word of God stands alone in truth and authority. Do you believe both parts of that statement? Discuss.
2. Quoting from this episode addressing Christians' obedience to Jesus's direct command to His disciples regarding His Great Commission: "Look, a reliable test has always been what Jesus said: "You will recognize them by their fruits." (Matthew 7:16) And this fact is huge: when we accurately dig, we have the full history of the church at our disposal today. So then. Just how many churches and denominations have worked to truly obey the command of Jesus to go forth with the gospel and truly make disciples of all nations?" Do you agree or disagree? Why or why not? Discuss.
3. Describe a recent time that you discerned a bad filter was hampering your correct understanding of a key spiritual truth. Describe the situation and how you removed or overcame that filter. Was that bad filter a person or a church that's generally still in authority over you? Discuss.