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Interpreting the Bible With the Poor

— Larry W. Caldwell,
Sioux Falls Seminary



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by Larry W. Caldwell

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About the Author:

Larry W. Caldwell was Professor of Missions and Hermeneutics at Asian Theological Seminary for 20 years, five of those years serving as Academic Dean, and directed the Doctor Missiology program at the Asia Graduate School of Theology-Philippines. He also edited the Journal of Asian Mission for many years. He recently returned to the USA to become Director of Training and Strategy for Converge Worldwide and Visiting Professor of Intercultural Studies at Sioux Falls Seminary.

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Abstract

Good Bible interpretation is basic to the doing of good theology and missiology. It is foundational to individual and cultural transformation, especially among the poor. Such interpretation involves exegeting both the biblical text and the culturally-specific audience with whom the Bible interpreter is attempting to communicate that text. While the theory of this Two Step approach has dominated western and non-western theology/missiology, in reality the exegesis of the biblical text has far overshadowed the exegesis of the culture of the audience. This paper will attempt to better understand the interplay between textual and cultural exegesis in the context of ministry with the poor by asking: How might this Two Step approach be enhanced in order to help the poor do better Bible interpretation and thus theology/missiology? This question will be answered in three parts. Part 1 will set Bible interpretation in its worldwide context by examining the relationship between colonization and theological/ missiological education, followed by an examination of Bible interpretation and the constituencies it serves. Part 2 will focus on whether or not courses and curricula are truly contextualized for the worldwide church and the need for “lower-based” training programs and “border” pedagogies, including a case study from the Philippines specifically addressing the urban poor. Part 3 examines strategies for professors and institutions as they endeavor to exegete both the biblical text and the culture of the audience. The paper concludes with practical suggestions to help make Bible interpretation with the poor more relevant and engaging within their local contexts.

Introduction

Most of us would readily agree that good Bible interpretation is basic to the doing of good theology and good missiology. But in today's increasingly globalized world how does one determine which hermeneutical methodologies result in good Bible interpretation and thus good theology/missiology? In other words, what hermeneutical methodologies are appropriate for the church in both the western and non-western worlds, especially the church among the rural and urban poor?ⁱ It is especially this last question that this paper will address. For without Bible interpretation that considers the social dimensions of the people among whom the gospel is bearing fruit, truly holistic individual and cultural transformation will not happen. This is why it is so important to interpret the Bible *with* the poor.

Over the past few decades both the western and non-western (Global South or Majority World) church has been bombarded with a plethora of different hermeneutical methodologies or approaches to the Bible, which has also impacted the doing of theology and missiology. For most professors in most training institutions worldwide the hermeneutical methodology that has dominated the discussion is one that has two simple steps. Step One involves the Bible and is concerned with the question: How is a particular Bible passage to be best interpreted? Through an analysis of the original context of the Scripture passage—often using the tools of the grammatical-historical (or historical-critical) process—the interpreter attempts to ascertain, as best he/she can, what the Bible passage first meant to its original hearers; to understand what the passage meant *then*. Step Two follows on the heels of this first step. Here the interpreter attempts to answer the question: How is that Bible passage to be best interpreted for today? In Step Two the interpreter applies the results of the first step to the particular audience that he/she is ministering with

now. The interpreter is usually careful to make sure that the second step closely approximates the results of the first step. These two major steps make up what is known as the “Two Step” approach to Bible interpretation.

The methodology of the Two Step approach to biblical hermeneutics has dominated both western and non-western theology and missiology over the past fifty years and continues to dominate even today. Such domination is not a bad thing *if* it is an approach to Bible interpretation that is meeting the needs of the *whole* church. By the whole church here I am meaning the majority of the whole church—both western and non-western, rich and especially poor—that is predominately made up of pastors, lay leaders and lay people, most of whom will not have the luxury of learning the Two Step approach in training institutions worldwide.

The strengths of this Two Step approach are several: it takes the Bible seriously and allows the biblical text to always take precedence over the world of the interpreter and his/her culture; it deals honestly with the context of the original text and attempts to understand as much as possible the original author’s intended meaning; and it takes the best of scholarship and uses it for better understandings of the biblical text and its context. The weaknesses of this Two Step approach are also several: it assumes the universal nature of western hermeneutical methods that may not necessarily be applicable in all non-western contexts; it has grammatical-historical roots with a possible anti-God and anti-Bible bias; it is costly to implement and maintain (requiring books and libraries and/or access to them) and thus is oftentimes limited to more wealthy cultures; and furthermore, it is very complicated to learn, assuming a high educational level and taking years of advanced training to effectively handle the approach.ⁱⁱ These last two points are particularly relevant to the topic of this paper.

I believe that the weaknesses of the Two Step approach should cause us to re-think its usefulness. Though I do not believe the Two Step approach should be abandoned (and I still use it when I teach Bible interpretation classes), I do believe that some enhancement is necessary. The following question, therefore, is appropriate: How might this dominant Two Step approach be enhanced in order to help the poor do better Bible interpretation and theology/missiology globally? This paper will attempt to answer these questions in three parts. Part 1 will set the scene for Bible interpretation in its worldwide context by first examining the relationship between colonization and theological/missiological education worldwide, followed by a brief examination of Bible interpretation in relationship to the constituencies we serve. Part 2 will then more closely focus on the question of whether or not courses and curricula are truly contextualized for the worldwide church and the need for “lower-based” training programs and “border” pedagogies, including a case study from the Philippines specifically addressing the urban poor. Part 3 follows with some strategies for professors and institutions to understand as they endeavor to exegete *both* the biblical text as well as the culture of the people attempting to interpret that biblical text, especially those who are poor. The paper will conclude with six practical suggestions for professors and institutions to help make Bible interpretation with the poor more relevant and engaging for their local poor contexts.

Part 1: Bible Interpretation in Its Worldwide Context

The topic of theological education—especially Bible interpretation—is vast. I will thus limit the discussion here to two areas: 1) the historical realities of colonization out of which theological educational institutions worldwide—and the Bible interpretation methodologies that they teach—have emerged;

and 2) whether theological educational institutions worldwide are meeting the training needs of the various constituencies they serve, especially the poor. These two areas may seem quite unrelated, but in reality they are intimately linked, as I will explain.

Colonization and Theological/Missiological Education

The history of colonization throughout the world is “the elephant in the room,” so to speak, that few missiologists, and even fewer theologians, want to acknowledge. A vast number of the non-western nations have a history—for some, fairly recent—which includes colonization. Whether that colonization was British, Dutch, German, French, Spanish, Portuguese or American, it has often created among Christians in these nations a tendency to assume without question that the western theology—and the western hermeneutical methods—that came with the colonizers are still appropriate to use, even though the colonizers might have long gone.

Colonization—and the resulting paternalism that has oftentimes remained—has affected theological and missiological education in many ways, but primarily with regards to curriculum relevance and to dismissing local ways of teaching and learning. Recent ethnographic research has come to label the influence of colonization as “authoritative knowledge.” A result of colonization is that those who are colonized eventually take on as authoritative a certain way of thinking or knowing that was at first foreign to that particular culture. Anthropologist Brigitte Jordan describes what happens:

...frequently one kind of knowledge gains ascendancy and legitimacy. A consequence of the legitimization of one kind of knowing as authoritative is the devaluation, often the dismissal, of all other kinds of knowing.... The

constitution of authoritative knowledge is an ongoing social process that both builds and reflects power relationship within a community of practice. It does this in such a way that all participants come to see the current social order as a natural order, that is, the way things (obviously) are.ⁱⁱⁱ

The kind of theological and hermeneutical knowledge that has gained ascendancy and legitimacy in theological and missiological circles worldwide is predominantly western. And most of us naively assume that this is just the way it is. Such was my own situation when I first began ministry in Asia as a missionary three decades ago:

I was confronted with the shortcomings of western [...] methods when my wife and I first came to the Philippines in 1980. I was assigned to teach the Bible, theology, as well as the biblical languages, at my denomination's small Bible college located in a rural area on the northern tip of the island of Cebu. The school was isolated in every way: no electricity, no amenities whatsoever; nothing but some classrooms and dormitories located in the middle of a huge sugar cane field. Both the curriculum of this Bible college, as well as the content of most of the courses, were thoroughly western. I soon realized, however, that my Filipino students, obviously enough, were not western. Most were recent high school graduates from predominately poor, rural backgrounds. Though they knew English, many of the first-year students were hearing native English speakers (my wife and I) for the very first time. Nonetheless, in order to adequately understand the content of my courses these students had to think like I thought; in other

words, they had to learn to think in western ways. The burden was on *them*, not on me. And everyone at that Bible college, westerner and non-westerner alike, thought nothing of this. It was simply taken for granted.^{iv}

Back then I did not question the western dominance of both *what* was taught and *how it* was taught. I considered neither the four centuries of Spanish colonization of the Philippines nor the nearly fifty years of its colonization by the USA (up until shortly after World War Two).

What both western and non-western Christians throughout the world must come to see is that the way things currently are—the status quo—should not be accepted uncritically. What must be seen is that the world's colonial history has influenced both the understanding of how to do hermeneutics and theology/missiology as well as how they are taught. Stephen Brookfield's words, although written of critical learning about the natural sciences, apply also to the critical learning techniques assumed in the non-western Bible school and/or seminary classroom:

[Such learning] was developed in a specific context and disseminated through certain already-established networks of communication.... This does not mean ... that we automatically reject these criteria as inherently oppressive or exclusionary because they represent Eurocentric worldviews. But it does mean that we acknowledge that their position of preeminence has not been attained because they exhibit some sort of primal universal force or truth; rather, their acceptance is socially and politically created.^v

We must, therefore, at least acknowledge the fact that much of the hermeneutics and theology/missiology that is taught in the non-western world—as well as the educational techniques that are used—have come from the way the colonizers did it.^{vi} This should give us all pause, not least because, as educational anthropologist George D. Spindler notes:

a transcultural perspective on education is essential, for education is a cultural process and occurs in a social context. Without attention to cultural difference and the way education serves those differences, we have no way of achieving perspective on our own culture and the way our educational system serves it or of building a comprehensive picture of education as affected by culture.^{vii}

The implication of this social context for the doing of hermeneutics with the poor will be further explored in Parts 2 and 3.

Bible Interpretation and the Constituencies We Serve— Are We Truly Socially Engaged?

In 2005 educational expert Manfred Kohl released a devastating study, *The Church in the Philippines: A Research Project with Special Emphasis on Theological Education*. This work examined the relationship between the (primarily) evangelical seminaries in the Philippines and the various church constituencies they served. The Kohl Report, as it came to be known, showed that of the 50,000 Protestant churches in the Philippines at that time, about 55% either did not have a pastor (16%) or had a pastor without any formal theological training (39%).^{viii} And at the current rate that seminaries were graduating pastors, they would never be able to make up the shortfall. Furthermore, the churches of the

vast majority of the untrained pastors and leaders were located in poor areas, both rural and urban. Kohl concluded that if these institutions were to meet the theological training needs of their constituencies either a new model of theological education was needed or the existing theological school programs radically revamped.

How does this evidence from the Kohl Report relate to the colonization issue? It relates precisely at the point that the seminaries of the Philippines—and I daresay in most other places throughout the non-western world—have been built primarily on western models of what seminary education is supposed to be like. Such western seminary education is typically for those with advanced levels of education (usually B.A. degrees) and with adequate time and funding resources for several years of full-time training. As this same model of seminary education has become dominant throughout the world, it is increasingly difficult to critique the status quo and analyze whether it is truly meeting the needs of the church worldwide. It thus begs the question: As educators, how well are we really holistic in our social engagement? The Kohl Report shows that this western model is not working in the Philippines in so far that it is not truly supplying sufficient numbers of pastors for the churches of the Philippines, the vast majority of which are among the poor. My travels in the region indicate that this is probably true for much of Asia, if not for most of the non-western world.

Some will argue that the purpose of seminary education is to train those who are indeed at higher educational and social levels so that they can then train the rest. This reasoning is faulty for at least two reasons: First, those at higher educational and social levels often are not able to adequately relate to, and be relevant for, the majority who are at the lower levels. Second, most of those who graduate

from seminaries do not even try. More often than not they are recruited by higher-level churches and thus neglect the leadership needs of the poorer churches. This is a natural outgrowth of a colonial mentality that assumes that the education and other benefits at the higher levels will eventually trickle down to the lower levels. Unfortunately, trickle-down theory does not work in economics nor in theological/missiological education. The poor are usually left out of seminary education at many levels; thus the need for other “poor friendly” educational alternatives.

Part 2: Are Courses and Curricula Truly Contextualized for the Worldwide Church?

The Need for “Lower-Based” Training Programs and “Border” Pedagogies

When confronted with the task of making ministry training relevant for the poor, we must ask this question: Are the courses and curricula in our training institutions truly “socially engaged” for rural and urban poor contexts?^{ix} I maintain that to offer courses and curricula for the rural and urban poor ministry contexts worldwide will mean a radical reconsidering of what the rural and urban poor situations really are and what it is that our pastors and ministry workers really need to learn as they are, or will be, working with the poor.^x

In considering socially relevant courses and curricula, we can benefit from recent development theory; especially what is known as “participatory rural appraisal” (PRA). Though PRA was begun with the rural poor in mind, its principles apply as well to majority world urban ministry situations, especially among the urban poor. PRA is the new field practice of putting the first last; in other words,

recognizing the natural abilities and giftings of poor people.^{xi} This practice confronts the dominance of those called “uppers” as opposed to the vast majority of the people who are the “lowers.” The uppers see grass-roots programs flourish through empowering the lowers to do them.

According to Robert Chambers, one of the early proponents of PRA, top-down systems have “brought bad practice: dominant and superior behavior, rushing, upper-to-upper bias, taking without giving, and arousing expectations which are not met.”^{xii} New lower-based training programs are necessary. Yet such new paradigms

imply and demand changes which are institutional, professional and personal. Institutional change needs a long-term perspective, with patient and painstaking learning and reorientation. Professional change needs new concepts, values, methods and behaviors, and new curricula and approaches to learning. Personal change and commitment have primacy, and can be sought experientially. Learning to change and learning to enjoy change are fundamental.^{xiii}

These new paradigms are a major challenge for “upper” seminaries and faculty whose courses and curricula are based on “top-down” systems.^{xiv} As a result, the poor—and the training that they need—have been neglected. A total rethink is necessary here.^{xv}

A Case Study from the Majority World: Asian Theological Seminary, Manila, Philippines

This is precisely where I have been most challenged in recent years. When I was the Academic Dean at Asian Theological Seminary (ATS) in Manila, Philippines, one of my

priority projects was to help develop a new program in urban poor ministries. But how could we do this in an “upper seminary” with a “top-down” system? The answer eventually turned into the ATS Center for Transformational Urban Leadership that offers courses leading to a Diploma, Graduate Diploma or M.A. in Transformational Urban Leadership (TUL). Built on a foundation of Bible, evangelical theology and applied social sciences, the TUL curriculum includes a majority of courses that are specifically made for Christian practitioners among the urban poor to help them more effectively minister in urban poor contexts. The courses bring together a team of national and international academic and “hands on” experts currently working with the urban poor. All the TUL courses are combined with extensive field internships among the urban poor.^{xvi}

For example, the M.A. in TUL, a 45 semester-unit program of study, includes the following courses:

Core Courses:

Doing Hermeneutics with the Urban Poor

Theology 1

Bible Introduction

Urban Spirituality

Theology and Practice of Community Economics

Urban Poor Church Planting

Leadership in Urban Movements

Theology and Practice of Community Transformation

Specialized Courses:

Services to the Marginalized

Urban Reality and Theology

Educational Center Development

Entrepreneurial and Organizational Leadership

Primary Health Care

Advocacy and the Urban Environment
Language and Culture Acquisition (for non-Filipino
students)
Diaspora Missiology

Field and Research Courses:
Research in Church and Ministry
Urban Reality and Theology
Thesis/Project
Field Supervision 1 and 2

Notice that these courses in the M.A. TUL program are not found in the catalogs of typical majority world training institutions (nor of most seminaries in the West).^{xvii} In fact, from a typical seminary's point of view they are indeed quite radical. Where are the classical disciplines?! While we did keep three classical courses in the TUL curriculum (Bible Introduction, Theology 1, and a modified Hermeneutics course) we felt that it was imperative that ATS offer courses that were really needed for effective urban poor ministry and that they be taught by those who were actually "doing the ministry." This caused some headaches for our upper resident faculty, but eventually the TUL program was approved as a separate Center of ATS. The main concerns related to government recognition and accreditation issues. However, eventually the government regulating body for education was highly impressed that a seminary was offering such a practical program.

I was especially challenged by the TUL program when I was asked to teach one of the core courses: "Interpreting the Bible With the Urban Poor." I had taught basic hermeneutics courses for 25 years, but I had little personal experience training the urban poor. I was challenged by the prospect of empowering local leaders of the poor and, as a result, seeing grass-roots Bible interpretation flourish as the poor did it themselves.

This required me to “go back to the drawing board” to develop a “border pedagogy”—the phrase termed by Old Testament scholar D. N. Premnath—that went beyond the traditional approach I had been so fond of:

The term “border” sharply captures the dominant tendency to establish borders or boundaries based on the either-or binaries within Western thought.... The dominant group defines, structures and thereby dominates all constituted as Other. Border pedagogy provides a pedagogical alternative for learners to identify and be critical of these borders that are used to set apart entities and peoples.... [It] seeks to create spaces for ... experiences to be expressed, valued, and thought through by students and teachers alike.^{xviii}

Border pedagogy allowed me to teach my students strategies for exegeting the text of the Bible while at the same time challenging me to help my students develop strategies for exegeting the culture of their urban poor audience. In this way they developed their own strategies for exegeting the text of the Bible with the urban poor.^{xix} This aspect of border pedagogy involves

the ability to expose the dominant definitions of reality. It enables the learner to recognize cultural codes and social practices that marginalize or even repress alternative ways of perceiving.... The models of the dominant culture need no longer be the sole basis for defining what constitutes proper knowledge.... As learners cross borders, alternative

forms of knowledge emerge and the dominant definitions of reality come under closer scrutiny.^{xx}

As I taught my students, and my students (who, in turn, had been taught by their urban poor communities) taught me, we arrived together at hermeneutical strategies that worked with the urban poor. In almost every class period my students would come back from leading Bible studies with their urban poor groups and report comments that some individuals had made, for example: “I never knew that the Bible was for me,” or “I never knew that I could interpret the Bible for myself.” It was exciting for me to see that our new approach to Bible interpretation was engaging the urban poor at a much deeper level.

Part 3: Strategies for Exegeting

Both the Text of the Bible and the Culture of the People

It is precisely this kind of interaction between professor, student, and the local church, delineated above, that is so necessary if Christianity is to make an impact among our world today, especially the world of the poor. Such interaction involves the realization, and appropriate use, of new strategies for exegeting the text as well as exegeting the culture of those people we are ministering with. In the past training institutions and curriculums have put great emphasis on exegeting the text (Step One of the Two Step approach), but comparatively very little on exegeting the culture (Step Two). It is in the exegeting of the culture where we increasingly will meet the needs of the church among the poor in the 21st century.

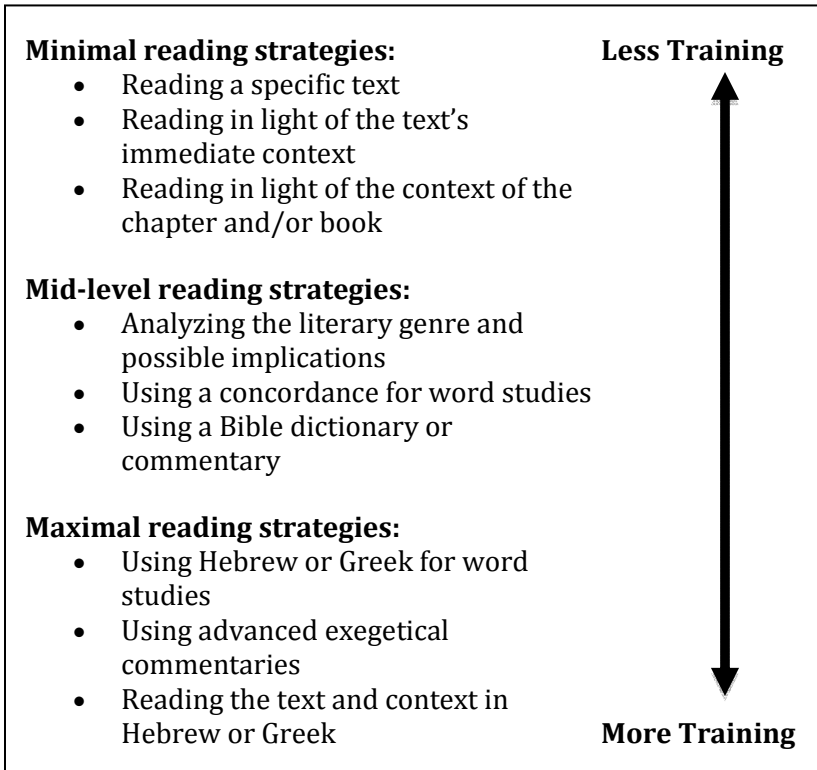
But just how does one practically use the Two Step approach when interpreting the Bible with the poor in order to do better theology and missiology globally? One answer to this question involves examining more closely the details of each step

and finding strategies for each step that are appropriate for good Bible interpretation. Here in Part 3 we will examine those appropriate strategies for exegeting the biblical text (Step One) as well as appropriate strategies for exegeting the culture of the rural or urban poor group that is receiving the biblical text from others and/or attempting to understand the biblical text for themselves (Step Two). Exegesis of both the text and the culture will help both the teachers and preachers of Bible interpretation, as well as the target group themselves, to arrive at appropriate interpretive strategies that will help insure good Bible interpretation. Furthermore, such comprehensive exegesis puts equal emphasis upon each of the two steps thereby viewing Bible interpretation as a holistic process.

Reading Strategies for Exegeting the Text of the Bible

When talking about strategies for exegeting the biblical text, what I am really referring to are *reading* strategies to use when interpreting the Bible. Reading strategies are simply the tools that readers need to properly understand the text. Such reading strategies range from minimal to maximal. *Minimal* reading strategies range from reading the specific biblical text alone, to reading it in light of its immediate context, to reading the surrounding chapters or even the entire book where the text is found. More *mid-level* reading strategies range from identifying the literary style (genre) of the text and the possible implications for interpretation, to comparing different uses of a particular word in the text using a concordance, to using a Bible dictionary and/or commentary to better understand the specific text and its context. *Maximal* reading strategies range from doing a word study in the original Hebrew or Greek, to using more advanced exegetical commentaries that refer directly to the original biblical languages, to reading the specific biblical text and context in the original languages of Hebrew or Greek. Figure 1 summarizes the range of reading strategies available when attempting to exegete the biblical text.

Figure 1: Reading Strategies



Note that there is a direct correlation between how advanced a reading strategy is and the complexity of training—informal and formal—needed to insure the best handling of the particular reading strategy. For example, the strategy of reading a specific text in light of the text’s immediate context—or even the entire chapter or book where the text is found—involves little training, can be done informally, and requires no outside resources. However, the strategy of reading a text and its context in the original Hebrew or Greek languages typically requires much formal training, time and a plethora of outside resources (teachers, books, facilities, and the money necessary to support such training).

So what reading strategies are appropriate for Bible interpretation done with the poor?^{xxi} I would suggest that the minimal strategies are the place to begin. While these minimal reading strategies may seem very basic, it is essential that they be mastered in order to insure that the poor will be able to interpret the Bible for themselves both with confidence and with fidelity to the text. Once these initial strategies are mastered then the more advanced mid-level reading strategies may be tackled, in no particular order. These mid-level strategies will all begin to use outside sources; by “outside” I mean outside of the text of the Bible itself. While the minimal reading strategies are taught by only using the Bible, the more advanced strategies will employ, at minimum, simple reference material on literary genre, a concordance, and an easy to read and understand Bible dictionary or commentary. More time will also need to be spent in training individuals in these mid-level strategies and such individuals will need to have reading skills that are suitable to the strategy, especially when using even a simple Bible dictionary or commentary. Use of such outside texts should be entirely dependent upon the local situation and the appropriateness of such a strategy for both the learner as well as for the hermeneutical community. Learning these mid-level

reading strategies will be especially important for the poor pastors and lay leaders.

I believe that it is not necessary to teach most Christians among the poor—including pastors and lay leaders—maximal reading strategies. This statement is in no way intended to be pejorative; I am certainly not speaking against the learning ability or possible educational attainment of individuals who are poor. However, though all individuals in any people group are certainly capable of advanced training in the maximal reading strategies, the following question must always be asked: Is it necessary that they be taught the advanced skills needed for maximal reading before good Bible interpretation can occur? Since individuals found within many of the rural and urban poor of this world have not finished primary school (and many of those who have are still functionally non-readers), maximal reading strategies are probably not appropriate for their hermeneutical context. Furthermore, to train pastors and lay leaders in such strategies will oftentimes bring them to a level of educational attainment that might, in the end, isolate them from their own community. As a result, we may do a disservice to the poor if we fail to take these realities into account.^{xxii}

Relating Strategies for Exegeting the Culture of the People

Exegeting the text of the Bible is one thing. Exegeting the culture of the rural or urban poor group receiving the results of the Bible interpretation in order to best communicate the text of the Bible is another. Once again, exegeting the text is highly stressed in most Bible interpretation programs; exegeting the culture is usually not mentioned much at all. It is a part of the overall exegetical task that has largely been neglected. Instead, any attempts at cultural relevancy are typically left to the very end of the Bible interpretation process, usually referred to as “applying” the text. While application of the biblical text is crucial

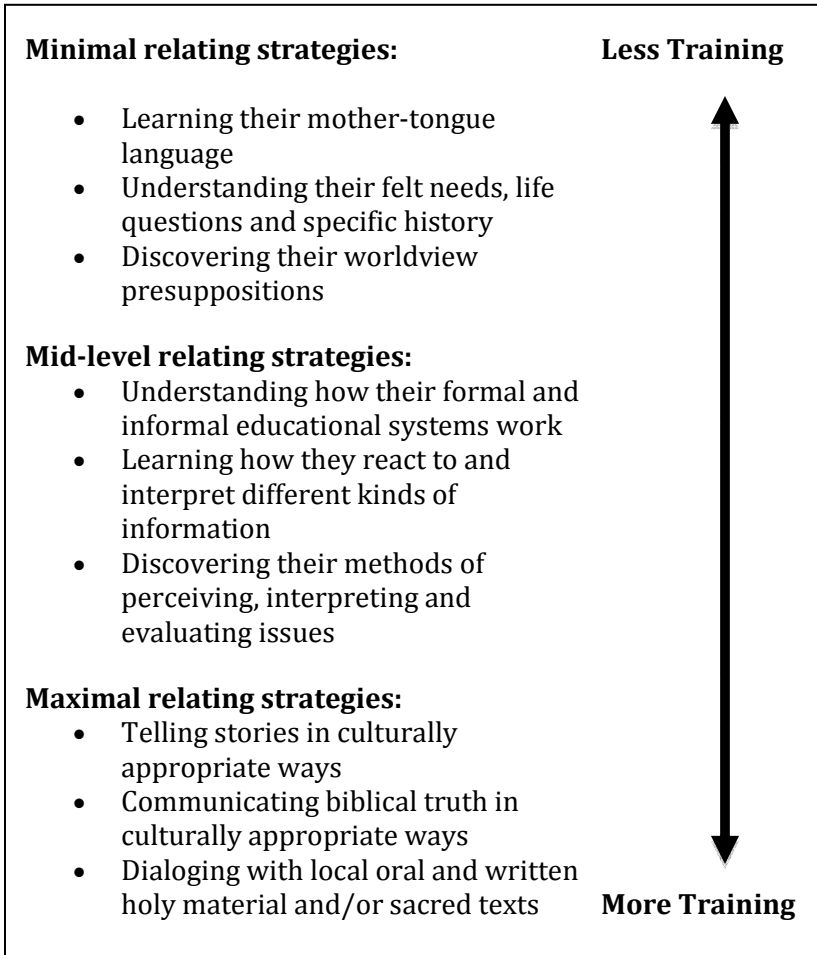
to any good Bible interpretation, application is but one aspect of exegeting the culture. By using the phrase “exegeting the culture” I mean that the Bible interpreter understands his or her target culture so well that the results of the reading strategies used in the process of exegeting the text will be clearly communicated in culturally appropriate ways. Such application, now in the form of the appropriate communication of the biblical text, helps complete the overall task of Bible interpretation.^{xxiii}

When talking about strategies for exegeting the culture, what I am referring to are *relating* strategies to use when interpreting the Bible with a particular people group. Relating strategies are simply the tools that interpreters need to properly communicate the understood text to the people with whom they are ministering. These interpreters include both those who are insiders to the culture as well as those who are outsiders. The insiders need to consider these relating strategies to insure that the Bible is indeed communicated in ways that are appropriate to their own culture. The outsiders need to learn and understand these relating strategies so that they communicate the Bible in ways that the insiders can truly understand.

Such relating strategies, once again, range from minimal to maximal. *Minimal* relating strategies range from learning their mother-tongue language, to understanding their felt needs, life questions and specific history, to discovering their worldview presuppositions. More *mid-level* relating strategies range from understanding how their formal and informal educational systems work, to learning how they react to and interpret different kinds of information, to discovering their methods of perceiving, interpreting and evaluating issues. *Maximal* relating strategies range from telling stories in culturally appropriate ways, to communicating biblical truth in culturally appropriate ways, to dialoging with local oral and written holy material

and/or sacred texts. Figure 2 summarizes the range of relating strategies available when attempting to exegete the biblical text.

Figure 2: Relating Strategies



Once again, note that there is still a direct correlation between how advanced a relating strategy is and the complexity of training—informal and formal—needed to insure the best handling of the particular relating strategy. For example, while it is acknowledged that learning another language is a difficult task, most outsiders to any people group—including the poor—are able to succeed at this relating strategy, as well as with the two other minimal relating strategies. However, many outsiders fail to adequately advance on to the mid-level and maximal strategies. Why? Because most outsiders, while provided with basic language and culture learning strategies, are usually not provided with the tools to dig more deeply into the culture of the people group. They simply lack the proper training to carry out these necessary mid-level and maximal strategies.^{xxiv} This major oversight is not necessarily the fault of the outsiders themselves. In many cases it is the fault of their training institutions that have an inadequate number of “relating” courses in their curriculums. In other cases it is the fault of the agencies that are sending the outsiders who—in the name of expediency, cost, and oftentimes hyper-evangelistic missiological views—consider any more extensive “relating” training unnecessary.

So what relating strategies are appropriate for Bible interpretation done with the poor? Of course the poor are already masters of their own culture and already relate well within it. However, when it comes to their own Christianity, or to their interpretation of God’s Word, they have sometimes not been allowed to use those strategies that make up the very essence of who they are. Or they have been afraid to use their own strategies because they feel that somehow their strategies must be inferior to those from the outside. As a result, the poor in many cases have not used their own relating strategies as a part of their Bible interpretation process. They have oftentimes been disenfranchised from their own rich cultural inheritance in regards to both understanding the truths of the Bible and

communicating those truths in ways that will be relevant for themselves and for their people. Such a travesty must be addressed both by the poor themselves as well as by those outsiders who work with the poor.

Conclusion: Towards Bible Interpretation With the Poor

How well are we, who are mostly non-poor, truly engaged with the poor in regards to Bible interpretation? This paper has suggested that we are on the right track, but there is still some way to go to truly meet the needs of the rural and urban poor of the worldwide church. The challenge for professors teaching at theological and missiological training institutions worldwide is recognizing the authority of God's Word while at the same time being relevant in specific cultural contexts. Though the Bible must always take precedence over any culture, in the final analysis we want our students, upon graduation, to be able to rightly handle the Bible with relevance in the various contexts in which they will be ministering, especially when those contexts will be with the poor.

With this in mind, there are practical steps that professors and training institutions—in both the western and non-western worlds—can take to help make their Bible interpretation and, in turn, their overall theological and missiological education more relevant for their local contexts. These steps include:

1. Emphasize exegeting the culture. As we have already seen, while most students of Bible interpretation are very familiar with what is necessary to properly exegete a biblical text, they are often not prepared to effectively communicate the results of that exegesis to the people they are ministering with. While their exegetical results of the text are true to God's word, their results often are not very receptor oriented. As a result, it

is crucial that training institutions look carefully at their existing curriculums and ask the difficult questions concerning whether or not the training that they offer adequately equips their graduates to properly exegete their own culture, as well as the culture of the people group to which they will be ministering, especially if that group is the poor. This, in my opinion, is the “last frontier” of Bible interpretation that must be addressed in order to insure that truly relevant, applicable, socially engaging and holistic Bible interpretation happens.

2. Allow for the Holy Spirit and for the community of believers. The advocates of the Two Step approach have oftentimes left out two major elements crucial to good Bible interpretation: interpretation that relies totally on the Holy Spirit and interpretation that is done in community. These two elements—pneumatic and communal—are key, I believe, to any truly relevant Bible interpretation. On the one hand, a pneumatic hermeneutic helps insure that the interpreter is relying on God as he/she interprets a biblical text, and not primarily on humans (whether it is the interpreter him/herself or those resources upon whom the interpreter is relying on to interpret the text for him/her: Bible dictionaries, commentaries, other people’s sermons, and the like). A pneumatic hermeneutic also levels the playing field, so to speak, in that all Bible interpreters—regardless of their individual educational levels or academic expertise—have the same Holy Spirit to guide them in the Bible interpretation process throughout the two steps. On the other hand, a communal hermeneutic helps the interpreter make sure that his/her interpretation is truly relevant for the audience that he/she is ministering with. A communal hermeneutic also helps to ensure that all members of the

local faith community are being heard as together the community wrestles with how a particular biblical text speaks to them. Both a pneumatic and a communal hermeneutic will also help to insure that a particular Bible interpretation is not false or heretical.

3. Pay attention to local ministry contexts. Carefully evaluate local ministry contexts and develop courses and programs that truly meet the ministry training needs of the local churches in those contexts, even if this means radically changing an existing curriculum.

4. Partner with local churches. After paying attention to local ministry contexts this partnering will naturally develop, so that the pastors and lay leaders being trained by the particular institution are appropriately trained for these churches and their leadership needs. Creatively work with the churches to ensure that their training needs are enfolded into new or existing training programs: a “win-win” situation for both training institution and local church.

5. Enhance the faculty’s awareness of local contexts. Develop new faculty, and engage experienced faculty, who are intimately acquainted with the training institution’s local context and who ideally have ministered in local churches in that context. Make sure that tenured faculty stay intimately and actively connected with the local church scene.

6. Offer non-academic tracks and programs. Do not be afraid to offer non-academic tracks and programs to help meet the overwhelming leadership needs of the poor churches throughout both the western and non-western world. Only a very small percentage of pastors—and potential pastors and lay leaders worldwide—have the time, money and qualifications to take M.A. and

especially M.Div. programs. Our training institutions must be at the forefront in helping to equip the vast number of these “non-degree pastors” through programs and courses facilitated by existing faculty and masteral graduates.^{xxv}

We have covered much ground in this paper, from colonization and the resulting paternalism that has influenced theological and missiological education and Bible interpretation worldwide, to an examination of the relevance of the courses and curricula that we teach and implement, to strategies for exegeting the biblical text as well as the cultural context, to some practical steps to take in order to make our Bible interpretation more relevant. Certainly there is much for us to ponder as we truly seek to carry out Bible interpretation that truly engages the whole church in the 21st century, especially the church of the poor.

Notes

ⁱ In this paper I use the terms “poor,” “rural poor,” and “urban poor” interchangeably, though most everything in this paper relates in general terms to all those individuals and groups who are considered economically poor.

ⁱⁱ For a more thorough analysis of the weaknesses of the Two Step approach, especially in non-western cross-cultural situations, see Larry W. Caldwell, “Towards the New Discipline of Ethnohermeneutics: Questioning the Relevancy of Western Hermeneutical Methods in the Asian Context.” *Journal of Asian Mission* 1/1 (1999), 21-43.

ⁱⁱⁱ Brigitte Jordan, “Authoritative Knowledge and Its Construction,” in *Childbirth and Authoritative Knowledge*, eds. Robbie E. Davis-Floyd and Carolyn F. Sargent (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997), 56.

^{iv} Caldwell, “Towards the New Discipline of Ethnohermeneutics,” 25.

^v Stephen D. Brookfield, “Transformative Learning as Ideology Critique,” in *Learning as Transformation*, ed. Jack Mezirow (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 27.

^{vi} See Phil Jenkins, *The New Faces of Christianity. Believing the Bible in the Global South* (New York, NY: Oxford, 2006), especially Chapter 2. See also the works of R. S. Sugirtharajah, such as *Postcolonial Reconfigurations. An Alternative Way of Reading the Bible and Doing Theology* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2003); *The Bible and Empire. Postcolonial Explorations* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2005); and *The Postcolonial Biblical Reader*, ed. (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006).

^{vii} George D. Spindler, *Education and Cultural Process. Anthropological Approaches*. Third edition (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 1997), 272.

viii Manfred F. Kohl, *The Church in the Philippines. A Research Project with Special Emphasis on Theological Education* (Manila, RP: OMF Literature, 2005), 19.

ix Of course we must also ask if our faculty are adequately trained for rural and urban poor realities; see Larry W. Caldwell, "Riots in the City: Replacing Nineteenth-century Urban Training Models with Relevant 'Urbanized' Training Models for the Twenty-first Century" in *Reaching the City. Reflections on Urban Mission for the Twenty-first Century*, eds. Gary Fujino, Timothy R. Sisk and Tereso C. Casiño (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library), 102-103.

x Though coming from the standpoint of working towards the contextualization of good theology in Asia, the following articles are helpful starting points for relevant rural and urban poor ministry training: Todd S. LaBute, "Beyond Contextualism: A Plea for Asian First Level Theology," *Asia Journal of Theology* 20.1 (2006): 36-56; and specifically for the Philippines context see Timoteo D. Gener, "Re-visioning Local Theology: An Integral Dialogue with Practical Theology: A Filipino Evangelical Perspective," *Journal of Asian Mission* 6.2 (September 2004): 133-166, and Larry W. Caldwell, "Towards an Ethnohermeneutical Model for a Lowland Filipino Context," *Journal of Asian Mission* 7.2 (September 2005): 169-193. Cf. Jeri Gunderson, "Rethinking Holistic Ministry: Reflections on the Struggle Against Poverty in Asia," *Journal of Asian Mission* 10.1-2 (March-September): 3-15.

xi See Robert Chambers, *Whose Reality Counts? Putting the First Last* (London: ITDG Publishing, 1997).

xii Chambers, *Whose Reality Counts?*, 210.

xiii Chambers, *Whose Reality Counts?*, 210.

xiv See Steven J. Friesen, "The Blessings of Hegemony: Poverty, Paul's Assemblies, and the Class Interests of the Professoriate," in *The Bible in*

the Public Square. Reading the Signs of the Times, eds. Cynthia Briggs Kitteredge, Ellen Bradshaw Aitken and Jonathan A. Draper (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008), 117-128.

^{xv} For a more thorough analysis of the type of rethink that is needed see Larry W. Caldwell, "How *Asian* is Asian Theological Education?" in *Tending the Seedbeds. Educational Perspectives on Theological Education in Asia*, ed. Allan Harkness (Quezon City, RP: Asia Theological Association, 2010), 23-45.

^{xvi} For more information see the Asian Theological Seminary's Center for Transformational Urban Leadership website at <https://sites.google.com/site/atscourseofferings/center-for-transformational-urban-leadership-ctul>.

^{xvii} Exceptions to this include those institutions connected with the Encarnacio Alliance of urban poor movement leaders, under the direction of founder Viv Grigg. Three currently affiliated institutions are: Asian Theological Seminary in Manila, Philippines; Hindustan Bible Institute in Chennai, India; and Azusa Pacific University in Los Angeles, USA. For more information on how a North American university is creatively meeting the need for relevant urban ministry workers see Azusa's website at www.apu.edu/clas/globalstudies/urbanleadership/courses.

^{xviii} D. N. Premnath, *Border Crossings. Cross-Cultural Hermeneutics* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2007), 6.

^{xix} Cf. Larry W. Caldwell, "Interpreting the Bible *With* the Poor," in *The Church and Poverty in Asia*, ed. Lee Wanak (Manila, RP: OMF Literature, 2008), 171-180. See also Hans de Wit, et. al, eds., *Through the Eyes of Another. Intercultural Reading of the Bible* (Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 2004) and Caldwell, "Towards an Ethnohermeneutical Model for a Lowland Filipino Context."

^{xx} Premnath, *Border Crossings*, 7.

^{xxi} In this paper I am specifically limiting myself to those rural and urban poor groups that are at least marginally literate and who have the Bible, or portions of it, translated into their own language. Oral poor groups demand entirely different strategies in terms of Step One of the Two Step approach, although the initial minimal reading strategies listed above can also be done in listening to the text.

^{xxii} Elsewhere I have argued at length concerning the pros and cons of some of the maximal reading strategies for Bible interpretation done today in non-Western cultures, especially those cultures that oftentimes do not have a history of such maximal reading strategies. I will not reiterate my points here except to say that I am increasingly of the opinion that such maximal reading strategies are sometimes highly overrated—except for academics—and come directly from the dominance of the West in Bible interpretation and theological education worldwide. See my “Towards the New Discipline of Ethnohermeneutics” and my “A Response to the Responses of Tappeiner and Whelchel to Ethnohermeneutics.” *Journal of Asian Mission* 2/1 (2000), 135-145. Of course a small number of individuals within any people group, including the poor, should be taught and be able to competently handle the maximal reading strategies for two reasons: first, to help their hermeneutical community (i.e. local church) avoid possible heretical interpretations; and second, to be able to effectively dialogue with advanced readers from other groups who also have these maximal reading skills.

^{xxiii} I am well aware that there is much debate among scholars as to whether interpretation (exegesis) is limited to Step One, and that it is application that we are really referring to in Step Two. However, I believe that we need to increasingly see that interpretation (exegesis) is also needed for Step Two. If we only look for application in Step Two we may be limiting the relevancy of the entire interpretation process.

^{xxiv} For more information on how to dig more deeply into a culture see Caldwell, “Towards an Ethnohermeneutical Model for a Lowland Filipino Context.” Cf. Tom A. Steffen, *Reconnecting God's Story to*

Ministry. Cross-Cultural Storytelling at Home and Abroad (Waynesboro, GA: Authentic Media, 2005) and Leonora Tubbs Tisdale, *Preaching as Local Theology and Folk Art* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1997).

^{xxv} For example, Sioux Falls Seminary, where I teach, is currently working on a non-academic training track that will help equip recent refugee arrivals in Sioux Falls and the dozens of small ethnic churches that have recently sprung up in the area. The majority of these urban poor refugee pastors and lay leaders have limited formal academic training but nevertheless have a calling to serve the church and need the opportunity to be equipped for such service.