



CONTROVERSIES IN MISSION

THEOLOGY, PEOPLE, AND
PRACTICE OF MISSION
IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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CHAPTER 13

TEACHING BIBLE INTERPRETATION IN INTERCULTURAL CONTEXTS

A Plea for Teaching Bible Interpretation Using Only the Bible

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INTRODUCTION

Sola Scriptura! This was the rallying cry of the Reformers as they battled against the hierarchy and dogma of the Roman Catholic Church. Sadly, this cry is seldom heard in Protestant circles today. This cry has instead been drowned out by a new hierarchy and dogma, much of it perpetuated in our Bible schools and seminaries. Of course most of us, as Protestants, would quickly give intellectual assent to the idea of *sola Scriptura*, but in reality our teaching and our curricula belie the fact. "The Bible alone" is in our creeds but not necessarily in our practice. We have come to rely instead upon the hierarchy of the critical scholars and the dogma of the historical-critical method. As a result, the cry of "the Bible alone" is seldom heard in our Bible school and seminary classes.

Another rallying cry of the Reformers was the idea of the priesthood of the believer. The Reformers believed that the average Christian did not have to rely upon the Catholic priest to be his/her intermediary or interpreter of Scripture. This is one reason why one of the very first acts of the reformed Luther was to translate the Bible, not into the high German of the intellectuals but rather into the low German of the common people. The Reformers believed that because all Christians were filled with the Holy Spirit they were able to both understand God's Word and interpret God's Word for themselves. Unfortunately, once again, the cry of the priesthood of the believer has largely been lost today as many Protestants rely upon their well-trained pastors, and the Bible scholars, to interpret the Bible for them.

This reliance upon the “experts” is the model perpetuated in most of our Bible college and seminary training programs.

My purpose in writing the above brief, and rather simplistic, summary is to set the stage for where we are now in regard to Bible interpretation, both in the West and the non-West. At least two questions arise. First, do we still really believe in *sola Scriptura* and the priesthood of the believer when it comes to our teaching of Bible interpretation in our Bible colleges and seminaries today? And, secondly, do we merely give “lip service” to these Reformation essentials while instead teaching a variety of things about Bible interpretation but dealing minimally with the Bible itself, alone and in its entirety? The answers to these questions have great implications for all of us who teach the Bible, especially those of us who teach the Bible in intercultural contexts, both in the United States and abroad.¹

On the whole, Bible colleges and seminaries desire that their students know how to “rightly handle” God’s Word (cf. 2 Tim 2:15). As a result, the curricula at most Bible colleges and seminaries worldwide include courses on hermeneutics. Most often, however, these courses focus more on how to “rightly handle” resources found outside the Bible by teaching students how to use (mostly western) commentaries, dictionaries, and language tools. Very little time is spent on actually teaching students how to “rightly handle” the interpretation of the Bible *by itself*—by that I mean studying the Bible primarily on its own—without the use of these outside resources. Though it is seldom talked about, such an emphasis upon the teaching of how to use sources extraneous to the Bible leads to dependency issues on a grand scale, especially for younger non-western churches.

Drawn from my own experience in teaching Bible interpretation courses for over thirty years in both Asian and North American contexts, this article argues for the need to re-examine what is currently taught—and why it is taught—in regards to hermeneutics courses in

our Bible colleges and seminaries, especially those found in intercultural contexts in both the West and non-western world. Without such a re-examination, the author contends that we may be training future generations of students who really do not know how to “rightly handle” God’s Word. Once this necessary background is given, an alternative teaching model will be proposed and examined at length.

THE CURRENT SITUATION: TEACHING ABOUT BIBLE INTERPRETATION

All of us involved in theological education must keep reminding ourselves that the overarching purpose of such theological education is, at its very core, a missiological purpose: to help equip others to better understand and communicate the truths of the Bible to a lost and dying world. In light of this missiological purpose we must continually ask ourselves the following questions: Are we adequately and aggressively training new generations of students to meet the challenges of bringing the gospel to today’s world, both locally and globally? Or, are we simply perpetuating old models of theological education that are increasingly irrelevant? (cf. Caldwell and Wan 2012; Caldwell 2013).

While all theological disciplines must take these questions very seriously, I believe that the discipline of hermeneutics is particularly vulnerable to scrutiny. Why do I say this? Because I believe that interpreting God’s Word for others, as well as training others to correctly interpret God’s Word, is the heart of theological education, whatever the individual discipline. Good Bible interpretation methods should result in the communication of the good news more effectively in any cultural context, especially in our increasingly complex intercultural world. Unfortunately, the Bible interpretation methods of the past two centuries have not adequately equipped the Protestant church for gospel presentation in our world today. My bookshelves, for example, are filled with hundreds of books on Bible interpretation. Most were written during the past three decades. Of these hundreds of books, however, few directly address the complexities of interpreting

1. By using the word, “intercultural,” I am referring to contexts that assume some movement from one culture to another, as well as contexts that are already multicultural and/or multigenerational.

the Bible in intercultural contexts. Furthermore, these hundreds of resources tell us much *about* the Bible and its interpretation—with various layers of complexity—but not necessarily how to interpret the Bible *without* the use of these, and other, outside sources. In my opinion, these are serious deficiencies.

Examining how we teach Bible interpretation, especially in intercultural contexts, gives us all much to think about. Most of us have had extensive training in Bible interpretation. We have had courses in Old and New Testament backgrounds, Greek and Hebrew, exegesis, and so on. And I dare say that not many of us have seriously questioned the need for all of this extensive training. We bought into the system. We merely assumed that it was the way we should learn to better interpret the Bible. But my point is that it is imperative that we do indeed question the appropriateness of such extensive training, not only for our own lives but for the lives of our students. Yes, some of us will need to be scholars, and some of our students will need to be scholars. And yes, our students will need to be aware of some of the complexities of the biblical text and consequently will need a basic familiarity with the tools that can help answer those complexities. But the bottom line question comes down to this: *how many* and *how much*? *How many* of our students need to be able to exegete a text in Greek and/or Hebrew? *How much* Greek and Hebrew needs to be required for ministry purposes? *How many* need to be able to write library-based papers comparing and contrasting the views of several commentators on a particular text? *How much* emphasis should be placed on the mastery of the viewpoints of professional scholars? Yes, a small percentage of our students will need to learn a lot of this information, but not everyone; in fact, if we are truly candid, not many at all. What everyone really needs—and this is crucially important—is the necessary training that will equip them to relevantly interpret the Bible in the complicated intercultural contexts of our world today.

At the same time, we usually assume that the Bible interpretation methods that work for us will also work for others. We seldom call into question the possibility that what works for us may not work for others.

We simply take for granted that our way is the correct way. I must hasten to add that this assumption is usually made innocently enough, though at times we consciously refuse to question it since we have so much invested in a particular method. If it works for us, why would we, or should we, question whether or not it will work for others?

Is it possible, however, that the Bible interpretation methods that work so well for us may not work as well for others? In light of the complexities of our intercultural world today it is imperative that we ask this question. We no longer have the luxury to assume that *our* way is the best way or the *only* way.² In fact, to make such an assumption today may make our biblical message irrelevant to the very people we are trying to influence with the truths of Scripture. There may, indeed, be other valid interpretation methods available to us that will help the Bible come alive to those individuals who do not share our particular theological heritage, training or worldview. As a result, both western and non-western Christians facing the complexities of making the Bible relevant in their own various contexts need to face this question head on (cf. Caldwell 1999; 2012a; 2012b).

For the past three decades I have been actively seeking how best to interpret the Bible in intercultural situations. What I have discovered, as a result of my quest, is that the western hermeneutical methods in which I have been trained are indeed good methods. Most of these western hermeneutical methods are centered upon historical criticism and the tools of the historical-critical approach. This approach stresses that a biblical passage must be understood in light of at least three factors: (1) the syntax of the words used; (2) the context in which the words are found; and (3) the underlying historical setting behind the

2. Saying this does not mean that I am advocating a pluralistic approach to interpreting the Bible. There are indeed “better” and “worse” interpretation methods. Evangelical scholars are under obligation to point out the strengths and weaknesses of the various methods as well as to advocate the use of methods that are founded upon a high view of Scripture as God’s inspired Word to humankind.

words.³ Bible interpreters who use historical criticism, for the most part, are conscientiously attempting to interpret what the Bible means for us today based upon what it first meant to audiences in its original historical setting. While the end results of western theologians may differ widely, most have genuinely attempted to make the biblical text as relevant for today as it was in its original historical context. I, myself, have been helped by historical criticism, both by the results of others who have used and taught historical-critical methods, as well as by my own use of these tools in my personal Bible study and my Bible teaching.

Hermeneutical methods based upon historical criticism do work. But are they necessarily the *only* ways to interpret the Bible, especially since they tend to teach us more about *how to approach the Bible than how to interpret the Bible itself*? I was a seminary teacher in the Philippines for many years. Before I first came to the Philippines I did not stop to think that perhaps the hermeneutical methods that worked so well in my own cultural context may not work as well in another cultural context. It was only when I was confronted by individuals for whom historical-critical tools were oftentimes irrelevant and/or incomprehensible that I realized that historical-critical tools may not be the “be all and end all” of proper Bible study and that western methods are not necessarily universal. Furthermore, in a more practical vein, historical-critical based hermeneutical methods typically involve the use of expensive books and highly literate advanced training. Our world today—a billion of whom live in oral cultures and another two billion who are only functionally literate—may not be prepared socially or economically for the use of western hermeneutical methods, especially those based upon historical criticism (cf. Chang and Lovejoy 2013). We must, therefore, re-evaluate the appropriateness of

3. Historical criticism is also known as the grammatico-historical method. Both phrases, historical-critical and grammatico-historical, fall under the rubric of biblical criticism: “the study which attempts to determine the true meaning of the Bible by using techniques applied to other written documents” (Erickson 1986, 21).

transporting oftentimes expensive and elitist hermeneutical methods into such cultures.⁴

Consequently, for the over thirty years now that I have been teaching hermeneutics, I teach it without allowing my students, whether in western or Asian contexts, to use any source other than the Bible itself. And it works! I still throw in careful handfuls of information based on the historical-critical tools, but in subtle ways that will help my students as they use the Bible as their only source. Such “Bible only” teaching, however, is not without controversy. In fact, at the Philippines seminary where I have taught hermeneutics, the mostly Asian (and western-trained) faculty soon made my “Bible only” hermeneutics course a requirement for all missions and Christian education students (the “practical” majors) while all other students were required to take a very western-based hermeneutics course where they learned lots about Bible interpretation, including, at the time, many readings on the topics of biblical criticism, Barth, Bultmann, and black theology. While not opposed to learning about these topics, I continue to wonder how appropriate such learning is for the training of Asian pastors and church workers in Asia.

All of us need to rethink what theological training is truly appropriate. There is much talk of appropriate technology and of appropriate development; it is time we seriously talk of appropriate theological education, including how we teach the Bible. Do we teach the Bible or do we spend most of our time teaching *about* the Bible, with much of our time spent on the historical-critical tools? For me, it all comes down to the question of “Who says?” Who says that historical criticism is appropriate for serious, and even scholarly, study of the Bible? Who says that it is important for Bible college and/or seminary graduates to master historical criticism? Who says that the historical-critical tools,

4. It should be noted here that historical criticism has come under much scrutiny even in the West and by western theologians over the past forty years. See, for example, Maier (1977); Stuhlmacher (1977); Linnemann (1990) and (2001); Wainwright (1982); Zehr (1986); Harrisville and Sundberg (2002); Sparks (2008); and Hays and Ansberry (2013).

with all of their attendant baggage, are appropriate for those ministering in our world today, especially in non-western contexts? I believe we need more biblical studies courses that will help our students come up with answers from the Bible concerning questions that they themselves face in their current ministry contexts, or will face in future. Are we really training our students for ministry success in our world today? Perhaps it is time to look for alternatives.

AN ALTERNATIVE PROPOSAL FOR *DOING* BIBLE INTERPRETATION: USING *ONLY* THE BIBLE

I began this article with reference to the Protestant Reformers. What follows is an attempt to do Bible interpretation that follows the Reformers by using the Bible only (*sola Scriptura*) and equipping every Christian to do Bible interpretation for him/herself (the priesthood of the believer). The emphasis is upon making the biblical text “come alive” both for the interpreter as well as for his/her ministry audience, whether church, small group, or individual disciple(s). To make this happen, a good interpreter, when studying a Bible passage, will ask the following seven questions. I call these questions the “Seven Steps to Make the Bible Come Alive!”⁵

- Step 1: What kind of literary form is this Bible passage and what are the implications of this?
- Step 2: What are the contextual boundaries of the Bible passage?
- Step 3: What was God saying through this Bible passage to the original audience back then?
- Step 4: What is the general principle that God had in mind through this Bible passage for all peoples and all cultures?

5. For more information concerning these “Seven Steps,” see my forthcoming book, *Doing Bible Interpretation*.

Step 5: What is God saying through this Bible passage to you today?

Step 6: What is God saying through this Bible passage to your community of believers today?

Step 7: How will you communicate the truths of this Bible passage to your community of believers?

Some will simply look at this “Seven Steps” approach and call it just another way to do inductive Bible study. Typically, inductive Bible study deals with three steps: observation (what does the text say?); interpretation (what does the text mean?); and application (what does the text mean for my life?). On the one hand, this assessment is correct since, like inductive Bible study, the “Seven Steps” deal primarily with the biblical text itself. On the other hand, this assessment is too simplistic since this “Seven Steps” approach takes both the original context and the application process much more seriously than does typical inductive Bible study. I like to think of the “Seven Steps” as a more in-depth and holistic approach.⁶

Note that in these “Seven Steps” the first four steps relate more to the biblical text while the last three steps relate more to the interpreter and his/her particular context or culture. Another way of saying this is that the first four steps relate to exegeting the text while the last three steps relate to exegeting the culture.⁷ While the “Seven Steps” draw upon some of the strengths of historical-criticism—especially the emphasis on literary form or genre (Step 1), setting contextual

6. I would place the more recent Discovery Bible Study (DBS) process in this same inductive Bible study category. The DBS emphasis upon “read,” “obey,” and “share” is excellent for both individual and group Bible study, and it can be used in both oral and literate cultures. However, like inductive Bible study, DBS does not give the original context nor the application process the emphasis that they deserve.

7. For more information concerning the distinctions between exegeting the text and exegeting the culture see Caldwell (2013). In this article, I examine Bible interpretation done specifically with the urban and rural poor, especially doing Bible interpretation that considers the social dimensions of the local people using “lower-based” training programs and “border” pedagogies.

boundaries (Step 2), and what the passage meant to its original audience (Step 3)—such historical-critical emphasis is minimal. And even here Steps 2, 3 and 4 are based upon the context of the Bible passage itself and not upon the use of outside resources—like study notes, commentaries, and so on—to help determine answers to these steps. The overall emphasis is to let the Bible text speak for itself first, of course through the guidance of the Holy Spirit.⁸

Steps 5 and 6 relate to what the biblical text is saying today to the interpreter, first in light of the interpreter him/herself (Step 5), as well as in light of the interpreter's community of believers, in other words his/her church or small group (Step 6). Step 5 shows that the heart of all Bible interpretation is personal. If the Bible interpretation does not impact and change the life of the interpreter, then it is incomplete interpretation. And if it impacts the life of the interpreter it will also impact the lives of others in the interpreter's community of believers (Step 6). But what is true for the community of believers should *first* be true for the interpreter. Step 5 builds off the work that has already been done in Steps 1 to 4, especially Steps 3 and 4. Step 6 demonstrates that the Bible interpreter is not learning how to interpret the Bible just for him/herself. Rather, Bible interpretation is being done so that the local community of believers can better understand the Bible passage and how it applies to their daily lives. Here in Step 6, the results of Steps 3, 4 and 5 are applied to the local community of believers. To summarize Steps 5 and 6: good Bible interpretation should change both the life of the interpreter as well as the lives of his/her people.

Step 7 answers the question: How will you communicate the truths of this Bible passage to your community of believers? While Step 6 deals with the actual truth of the Bible passage and what God

8. External Bible study tools—like study notes, commentaries, and so on—can be helpful, especially with Step 3. I am not against outside resources *per se*. However, my desire is for the interpreter to exhaust his/her own attempts to understand the Bible passage *first* before going to the external tools. Unfortunately, many Bible interpreters have lost this Bible-first discipline.

is saying to the interpreter's community of believers through that passage, the emphasis of Step 7 is different. Step 7 is where the Bible interpreter tries to best *communicate* those truths. Here the Bible interpreter attempts to pass on the truth of the Bible passage as clearly and relevantly as possible, in ways that the people will best understand. Here is where an understanding of the local community of believers and their local context is so important.

In Step 7 the Bible interpreter tries to answer two questions about the Bible passage: How can the original meaning be best communicated to my modern audience today? How can the original meaning be made relevant using modern words/terms/means/ways of understanding? It is in Step 7 where Bible interpretation is done at the level of the interpreter and the people in their local context. Steps 2 and 3 speak to the importance of the Bible context. At the same time, paying attention to the local context of the local community of believers in Step 7 is *equally important*. Bible interpretation does not occur in a vacuum. Rather, Bible interpretation, if done correctly, is always done *in community* with other believers. All Bible interpretation that is guided by the Holy Spirit should have an effect on the believing community in which the Bible interpretation is occurring, both as individuals and as a group. Step 7 allows this to happen.

It is important, then, that the Bible interpreter understands his/her community well. Among the questions the Bible interpreter should have answers to are these:

- Why do they believe the way they do?
- Why do they think the way they do?
- What are their core values?
- What are those things that shape their worldview (the way they think about the world)?
- What kinds of ideas influence them and their decision-making process?

In connection with the actual Bible passage being studied, here are some questions that should also be asked in Step 7:

- How does the local community of believers understand some of the same concepts/ideas/ways of thinking that are found in the particular Bible passage that is being studied?
- Have there been any recent local events or incidents that have occurred within the local community of believers in the recent past (6 months) that might give insights into how they might interpret a particular passage?
- How will the truths of the Bible passage actually be communicated to the community of believers? What media (movie, TV show, song, indigenous drama or story, and so on) will help explain what the Bible passage is speaking about?

As can be readily seen, there is much to Steps 5 through 7, especially Step 7. Usually something akin to Steps 5 through 7 is left to the so-called "Practical Theology" department and to homiletics courses. This, in my opinion, does a disservice to the entire hermeneutical task of the Bible interpreter. It bifurcates hermeneutics by making a distinction between the exegesis of the biblical text and the exegesis of the culture. Such a distinction puts undo emphasis upon the exegesis of the biblical text in most Bible college and seminary curricula. Instead, if we see the entire hermeneutical process as a holistic continuum from text to community (Steps 1–7), we will be better able to spend the time necessary for both a thorough exegesis of the biblical text as well as a thorough exegesis of the community of believers who will hopefully inculcate that text into their very lives.

CONCLUSION

The Reformation references to *sola Scriptura* and the priesthood of the believer that began this article are an appropriate way to end. How so? Precisely because I believe that we need a new reformation in our approach to hermeneutics and Bible interpretation today if we are to effectively reach the vast numbers of unchurched North Americans,

not to mention the billions of unreached and unengaged peoples, who have never heard the good news of Jesus Christ. In fact, I am convinced that until we reform our understanding of how to interpret God's Word—and how to teach others how to interpret God's Word—we will be sending out ministers and missionaries who are only partially trained for ministry.

The dual concepts of *sola Scriptura* and the priesthood of the believer ripped across the European continent five centuries ago and forever changed the course of Christianity. I truly believe that a recapturing of the incredible ramifications of these two concepts can help change the course of Christianity throughout the world in the third millennium. It is imperative that we missiological and theological educators equip our Bible college and seminary graduates to be able to discover and apply the truths of the Bible to their daily lives—and to the daily lives of their congregations and their disciples—without having to rely upon either the interpretational dogma of Protestant scholars and/or upon a scholarly priesthood trained to interpret the Bible for them.

I have raised some difficult questions in this article, but I believe we must ask these questions if we truly desire to make our students the most effective pastors, church workers, and missionaries that they can be. I challenge Bible college and seminary faculty to seriously consider some of the issues I have raised. My overall desire in all of this is that we be as effective as we possibly can be in training our students to "rightly handle" God's Word. The answers we find will help us to better bring the Good News of Jesus Christ to our world in the third millennium.

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