

What I Most Want My Students to Know About Biblical Studies

By Jeffrey A. D. Weima

As a professor, I have the privilege of teaching in the area of biblical studies. And when I reflect on what I most want my students to know, I am drawn to the challenge that another teacher, Paul, gave to his pupil, Timothy: "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth" (2 Tim. 2:15). **My chief goal as a teacher of biblical studies, therefore, is to ensure that graduates "correctly handle the word of truth."**

What kinds of things are involved in dealing with the Bible in a correct manner? What principles should one follow in properly interpreting scripture? The technical term for this subject is hermeneutics. Such a topic, of course, is a highly complicated one about which much can be said. Here, however, I limit myself to a very brief overview of five hermeneutical principles that I hope my students will take with them into ministry.

The Holy Spirit Principle

The first thing that every reader of scripture ought to realize is that the same Holy Spirit, who inspired the biblical writers to record the words found in the Bible, needs to work in our heart and life today if we are to interpret those words properly. Jesus talked about this illuminating work of the Holy Spirit when he said: "But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things..." (John 14:26; see also John 16:13). Paul similarly refers to the Holy Spirit as the revealer of God's truth in his letter to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 2:10-11). These and other texts led the Reformers to emphasize the illuminating work of the Spirit in causing believers to interpret the Bible properly. John Calvin, for example, states: "We must come to the Bible] with reverence, we must wait entirely upon God, knowing that we need to be taught by his Holy Spirit, and that without Him we cannot understand anything that is shown to us in his Word" (Sermon on 1 Timothy 3).

The first way, therefore, to "correctly handle the word of truth" is to call upon the Holy Spirit to illumine our sin-darkened minds so that we can properly understand God's truth as we meet it in the Bible. **I want my students to have a powerful awareness of their dependence upon the Holy Spirit for a right interpretation of God's word.**

The Grammatical Principle

As any person who speaks a foreign language knows, it is impossible to go from one language into another in a perfect manner. You always lose something in the translation. That is why the Italians have the proverb "*Traduttore traditore*," which means, "The translator is a traitor." No matter how gifted the translator may be, something is always lost in translation. The translator inevitably betrays the original text.

The same thing is true of Bible translation. The Old Testament was originally written in Hebrew and the New Testament in Greek. And when the Bible is

translated into our modern languages, something is lost. As Haim Nacham Bialik, a Jewish poet, put it: "Reading the Bible in translation is like kissing your bride through a veil." You can do it, but it is not as good as the real thing! Similarly, one can certainly profit from a study of scripture in English, but it is not as helpful as looking at the text in its original language. The interpretation of scripture often depends on the meaning of particular words or the grammar and syntax of a particular text.

The second way, therefore, to "correctly handle the word of truth" is to study God's word in the ancient languages. **I do not want my students to be limited to translations but to be fully equipped to study God's word in the languages in which it was originally written.**

The Literary Principle

The Bible is literature and as such ought to be approached from a literary perspective. This involves an appreciation of the different forms of writing found in scripture: historical narratives, law codes, poetry, wisdom sayings, gospels, parables, letters and apocalypses. Each of these writing forms has its own unique characteristics and each should be interpreted accordingly.

For example, when Jesus says: "If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and throw it away" (Matt. 5:29), it is important to know that this is an hyperbole--a deliberate use of exaggeration to drive home a point in a memorable manner. Jesus never intended this saying to be taken literally and it would be wrong to interpret it in this way.

Or when the writer of Proverbs says: "Do not answer a fool according to his folly, or you will be like him yourself," and then proceeds in the very next verse to say: "Answer a fool according to his folly, or he will be wise in his own eyes" (Prov. 26:4-5), it is important to know that this is a wisdom saying. Unlike law codes (such as the Ten Commandments) that are to be universally applied in all situations, wisdom sayings provide general guidelines by which we can live in a right relationship with God and our neighbor. Thus, the writer of Proverbs is not contradicting himself. He is rather stating the important truth that sometimes it is wiser to ignore a foolish person than to draw attention to his foolishness, while at other times it is wiser to rebuke a fool than allow other people to be misled by his folly.

The third way, therefore, to "correctly handle the word of truth" is to approach the Bible from a literary perspective. This involves not just a knowledge of the different forms of writing in scripture, but also an appreciation for how information is communicated through the sophisticated artistry and aesthetic quality of the biblical texts. **I want my students to preach and teach in a way that is faithful to the various literary forms employed by the biblical writers. And I want them to interpret scripture properly by taking into consideration the text's rich literary features.**

The Historical Principle

The Bible, of course, did not fall down from heaven in the King James Version with maps in the back. Instead, God chose to reveal himself and his work of

redemption in very specific historical events. This means that modern readers of scripture must always work at thinking themselves back into the ancient world of the biblical authors--into their history, language, geography, and culture. For example, one needs to know how salt was used in the ancient world in order to appreciate Jesus' statement that believers are "the salt of the earth" (Matt. 5:13). Paul's lengthy discussion of meat offered to idols (1 Cor. 8:1-11:1) should be understood in the light of sacrifices offered at pagan temples. James' discussion of faith (James 2:14-26) needs to be heard in a specific context where church leaders were discriminating against poor Christians--an historical situation quite different from the problem of legalism lying behind Paul's discussion of faith in Galatians.

The fourth way, therefore, to "correctly handle the word of truth" is to take seriously the historical and cultural context of any biblical passage. **I want my students to dig deeply into the ancient world and culture of the Bible so that they make scripture as understandable and relevant for modern readers as it was for its original hearers centuries ago.**

The Theological Principle

Although the Bible has many secondary authors who were led by the Holy Spirit to record their message in different forms of writings and in different historical situations, it has only one primary author and that is God. As Louis Berkhof noted in his book on hermeneutics: "Scripture contains a great deal that does not find its explanation in history, nor in the secondary authors, but only in God as the *primary author*... In view of all this, it is not only perfectly warranted, but absolutely necessary, to complement the usual grammatical and historical interpretation with a third. The name 'Theological Interpretation' deserves the preference, as expressive of the fact that its necessity follows from the divine authorship of the Bible" (*Principles of Biblical Interpretation*, 133-134).

The fact that God is the primary author of the Bible highlights the unity of scripture. There is ultimately one divine voice speaking in the Bible. This means that we must not read certain passages in isolation from others but interpret the passages in light of the whole. As it is often put, this means "interpreting scripture with scripture." This also means that the interpreter must know the broad themes that serve to unify the message of scripture such as the Covenant and the Kingdom of God.

The fifth way, therefore, to "correctly handle the word of truth" is to approach it theologically. **I want my students to avoid "proof texting" and taking verses out of context but instead to base their theological doctrines and world-and-life view on the whole of what God reveals in his word.**

The church's members and especially its leaders need to know how to interpret the Bible properly. We need ministers who preach and teach the biblical text from a Holy Spirit, grammatical, literary, historical and theological perspective. In short, the church needs godly kingdom workers who "correctly handle the word of truth."