

Tools of Bible study

Introduction

I have written various papers on this matter before but a new one will do no harm; hopefully this will be a fresh approach.

It is very important that the Bible student approaches Bible study in the proper manner. It is the failure to do this which results in the common deceptions found everywhere because some fool¹ just used a Bible verse to speak from his imaginations and agendas and made the Scripture lie.

Many people that talk about studying the Bible refer to spiritual attitudes, such as: pray before you study, have a reverential attitude, ask for the help of the Holy Spirit and so on. I am not going to mention such things because a disciple should be doing such everyday as a matter of course. A disciple should be praying, worshipping God etc. whether he is studying the Bible or going to work. I will explain here the methods you need to employ to really study the text.

The basic tools, or methods, required

The tools of Bible study are really the mechanisms by which we, as 21st-century non-Greek/Hebrew/Aramaic people try to understand the text as the original reader would understand it. This means we must take into account vocabulary, grammar, historical context, cultural background and anything else that would colour the text. What would be the obvious meaning to the original recipient may be a complete mystery to us as we read a translation, especially if the translation is faulty.

So, proper understanding comes from applied work. There is no easy option; it requires work.

Now people that really do not have the ability, time or resources to do this work for themselves need to find a Bible expositor that they trust who has done this work. They can then benefit from the work of a good Bible teacher. Sadly, there are few of these today; however, there are plenty of historical books from very eminent Bible teachers that are available. I suggest reading more than one expositor to get an all-round viewpoint, 'in a multitude of counsellors there is safety', (Prov 24:6). [See 'Useful papers' later.]

¹ Yes we are able to call people 'fool' in the correct circumstance; especially in an indirect generic way, when we mean acting in an irrational manner. God does this many times (e.g. Lk 12:20, *aphron*); Jesus used it many times (e.g. Matt 23:17, 19) and the word appears in the Bible 68 times (in the NKJV). Paul uses the word frequently in dealing with the foolish Corinthian church (though sometimes sarcastically applying it to himself). James used an equivalent term, 'foolish man' (Jm 2:20). The prohibition in Matt 5:22 (*moros*) is due to the word translated as 'fool' really meaning assassinating a person's character by calling him a scoundrel (Bruce) or 'stupid and worthless'. It meant more than just doing something foolish; but was a severe contemptuous term. Some suggest that it means calling someone an apostate rebel against God (Clarke, Gill). It was a word not allowed by Jews. Jesus' point is to refer to a word that was illegal and worthy of severe corporeal punishment.

Exegesis

Exegesis is not usually defined adequately when it comes to its use in Bible study. A dictionary would normally define exegesis as: ‘*the critical explanation or interpretation of a text, especially of scripture*’.² This definition is not sufficiently different from ‘interpretation’.

The origin of the English word is in the early 17th-century from the Greek *exēgēsis*, which derives from *exēgeisthai* meaning ‘interpret’. It is made up from *ex-* ‘out of’, plus *hēgeisthai* ‘to guide, lead’. So the basic Greek word means, ‘to lead or guide out’ or ‘explanation’. It is like a mountaineer guiding someone up a foreign mountain. ‘Interpretation’ is describing the beauty of the mountain you have climbed.

The prime function of exegesis is to establish the critical meaning of the text. It doesn’t interpret what the text means in application, it simply determines the grammatical meaning of the words. [The word ‘critical’ here means the technical analysis of the literature under inspection.]

Very often preachers fail to do proper exegesis and then apply a wrong interpretation to a verse. People that do not perform a critical analysis of the text often preach a completely wrong application. For example, there have been people who use a text on ‘apostleship’ and talk about calling; in fact apostleship is all about sending.³ The failure to do exegesis meant preaching the very reverse message.

Example

Now the purpose of the commandment is love from a pure heart, *from* a good conscience, and *from* sincere faith. **1 Tim 1:5**

Many give an exposition of this verse and begin by affirming that the purpose of the law (commandment) is love.

This is often the sort of argument used by Covenant Theologians whose purpose is to emphasise the relationship of the Mosaic Law with the New Covenant and minimise their differences, and affirm that the OT law is the standard of righteous behaviour for the believer.

This argument is odd, for numerous reasons we cannot delve into here, but primarily because Paul immediately denies this in context: ‘the law is not made for a righteous person, but for the lawless and insubordinate, for the ungodly and for sinners, for the unholy and profane’, (**1 Tim 1:9**). The law is not the standard for Christian behaviour; Christ is.

Now this wrong exposition could have been avoided if a better exegesis had first been applied.

The Greek word translated here (and also KJV and others) as ‘commandment’ is not referring to the Mosaic Law at all. The word is *paraggeli,a, paraggelia*, (Strong’s no. 3852) which means: an announcement, a proclaiming or giving a message to; a charge or a personal command.

The usual Greek word for ‘commandment’ in connection with the Mosaic Law is *evntolh,, entole* (Strong’s 1785), see, for example, its use in Eph 6:2.

² New Oxford Dictionary.

³ ‘Apostle’ = *apostolos* meaning: a delegate, a messenger, one sent forth with orders, one sent on a mission with full authority, a missionary.

Thus better translations appear as

- **American Standard Version:** But the end of the charge is love.
- **New American Standard Version:** But the goal of our instruction is love.
- **Revised Standard Version:** whereas the aim of our charge is love.
- **New Revised Standard Version:** But the aim of such instruction is love.
- **Darby:** But the end of what is enjoined is love.
- **Bible in Basic English:** But the effect of the order is love.
- **Young's Literal Translation:** And the end of the charge is love.

[This does not mean that I approve of these versions overall.]

Thus Paul is not talking about the Mosaic Law but a charge that he had previously made, a proclamation he had announced. In other words, Paul is referring to his Gospel message. It is the purpose of the Gospel to bring love, a good conscience, and sincere faith.

Note also that the translation implies that there is one result of the Gospel, love, that comes from a good conscience, and from sincere faith. But the word 'from' in, *from* a good conscience and *from* sincere faith, is not in the Greek text (hence the italic form). Thus there are three results of the Gospel:

- love from a pure heart,
- a good conscience,
- a sincere faith.

Thus exegesis is really a proper observation of what the Greek text is actually saying.

Exegesis is, therefore, necessary in order to make a proper exposition. If your exegesis is faulty, then your interpretation will be faulty and so your exposition will be faulty. If your exposition is faulty then the people that listen to you will absorb lies.

The great problem in modern preaching is a lack of exegesis.

Tools used in exegesis

There are various components and disciplines necessary for proper exegesis. Here the student is trying to establish what words and sentences actually mean in the original language.

Word definitions (semantics)

Semantics is the branch of linguistics (or logic) concerned with meaning. Lexical semantics is concerned with the analysis of word meanings and relations between them, such as synonymy and antonymy.

Morphology: the study of the forms of words, in particular inflected forms. Inflection means a change in the form of a word (typically the ending) to express a grammatical function or attribute such as tense, mood, person, number, case, and gender.

Words have to be broken down into their character (inflection):

- The tense (forms taken by a verb to indicate the time (and sometimes also the continuance or completeness) of the action in relation to the time of the utterance: past, present, future and others; in Greek the aorist tense is very important).

- The person (a category used in the classification of pronouns, possessive determiners, and verb forms, according to whether they indicate the speaker (first person), the addressee (second person), or a third party (third person)).
- The number (singular, plural or dual).
- The case (dative, genitive, accusative etc.).
- The gender (masculine, feminine, or neuter).
- The mood (a category of verb use, typically expressing fact (indicative mood), command (imperative mood), question (interrogative mood), wish (optative mood), or conditionality (subjunctive mood)).
- And also whether it is a figure of speech (many forms, such as metaphor).

All these have an impact on the word's meaning.

Grammar

The whole system and structure of a language or of languages in general, usually taken as consisting of syntax and morphology (including inflections) and sometimes also phonology and semantics.⁴

Syntax: the arrangement of words and phrases to create well-formed sentences in a language.

Parsing: resolving a sentence into its component parts.

Prepositions: a word governing, and usually preceding, a noun or pronoun and expressing a relation to another word or element in the clause (after, by, near, on, in, at etc.). These can be very important in the Greek text.

Adjectives: a word naming an attribute of a noun, such as sweet, red, or technical.

Adverbs: a word or phrase that typically modifies the meaning of an adjective, verb, or other adverb, typically expressing manner, place, time, or degree (e.g. gently, here, now, very). Some adverbs, for example sentence adverbs, can also be used to modify whole sentences.⁵

There are other forms (participles, conjunctions, gerund, gerundive etc.) but these are enough technicalities for our purpose here.

The good news is that there are many excellent reference works that do all this work (which is highly technical) for the ordinary student. There are lexicons, which will give you definitions of words. There are analytical lexicons which will give a breakdown of the character of the word (tense, number etc.). There are books that will explain the figures of speech used.

There are also computer programs and apps that contain all these resources in one place.

Historical context

The historical context can have an influence on word meanings, word usage, grammatical usage and so on. This is because words and formats are not set in stone and change over time.

⁴ New Oxford Dictionary.

⁵ New Oxford Dictionary.

A modern example would be the word 'gay'. Hardly anyone would now use that word to describe themselves as being happy. Also, looking back into history, we must not determine that because a poet said that he was gay that meant that he was homosexual.

This is actually quite important in studying the Greek. For example, very many people have analysed 'God loves a cheerful giver' (2 Cor 9:7) and found that 'cheerful' is the word *hilaron* from *hilaros*; from which we later got the word 'hilarious'. The Greek word at that time meant happy or cheerful as a quality of benevolence. Yet modern preachers have transferred the modern meaning back into the past and said that the verse means that God loves a hilarious giver. That is not what the text says. This is called an exegetical fallacy. The word does not mean 'hilarious' but 'cheerful benevolence'.

Idioms: these are words established by common usage that have a meaning not deducible from the text (e.g. being 'over the moon'). It is very difficult for foreigners to a language to understand these idioms unless they are told. Idioms are a reflection of historical and cultural context.

Idiomatic expressions used in the Bible, especially the OT include:

- A definite number is sometimes given for an indefinite one.
- Threats are sometimes conditional.
- The order of events is sometimes ignored.
- A difficulty is often spoken of as an impossibility.
- Something is said to be done when it is only promised.
- Plural nouns are often used for the singular.
- 'Father' and 'mother' sometimes mean 'ancestor', while 'son' and 'daughter' sometimes mean 'descendant'.
- The word 'god' is sometimes used to refer to men, angels, prophets, judges, idols and leaders.
- There are many examples of play on words (e.g. Amos 5:5, 8:1-2) which are usually only noticed in the original language.

Cultural context

This is another aspect of historical context but particularly applied to local social traditions that have a bearing on the text.

Thus some Biblical commands require an understanding of local culture, such as baptism or breaking bread.

Some words are derived from a certain culture.

- For example Hebraisms (e.g. amen, *acaldama*, *corban*, *ephphatha*).
- Latinisms (e.g. praetorium, legion, forum).
- Syriacisms (*Rabshakeh*, *Tartan*, *Rabsaris*). [Aramaic is a Syriac language.]
- Hellenisms (Greek: e.g. *Areopagus*, *ekklesia*, *paidagogos*).

These are often used in the original text without translation. E.g. *Rabshakeh* means a captain, vizier or chief cup-bearer; *Tartan* is the commander-in-chief or field marshal; *Rabsaris* is a chief eunuch.

Sometimes cultural events are referred to that mean something different to the modern meaning of the term. For example, a Jewish betrothal is not like an English engagement at

all, but as much a commitment as an English marriage.

Summary

Clearly there is much work to do in analysing the text to identify what it really means.

The basic principles of Biblical exegesis in Protestant churches has been described as the Historical-Grammatical method, for obvious reasons.

Principles of interpretation

Now you can find very long books that cover this in highly technical terms identifying hundreds of principles with long explanations and multiple examples. I'm not sure that such a work would do the average person any good at all.

In reality, there are a series of basic rules of interpretation (formally known as hermeneutics) which can be broken down into less than a dozen important ones and perhaps a few more that are less important.

In reality there are two essential rules that will serve everybody well. These are:

Be careful to observe the context

That is the immediate context in the verse and the surrounding verses, the greater context in the writings of the same author and the whole context in terms of the Bible. For example, taking a verse by Paul and making it mean something foreign to his theology expressed elsewhere means that you have wrongly interpreted that verse. You have taken it out of context.

Interpret Scripture by Scripture

That is, understand a difficult text on the basis of what the whole Bible teaches. Scripture will always help you to understand another Scripture.

Here it is important to understand the principle of progressive revelation. Later texts should be used to interpret earlier texts because they are part of a progressive revelation. For example the suffering of the Messiah was not fully understood in patriarchal times. The indwelling of the Holy Spirit was not understood before the New Covenant began after the cross.

Also mysterious, poetic, apocalyptic, prophetic, symbolic, allegorical texts should be interpreted by simpler, easy to understand texts.

Other rules

Without a detailed explanation, we could mention a few other useful rules of interpretation.

- Interpret brief statements by means of fuller ones.
- Note any limitation.
- Carefully note the use of figures of speech.
- Observe the special rules that apply to poetry and psalms.
- Observe the special rules that apply to prophetic writings; such as, do not just interpret it literally unless that is the clear intention (note how the NT interprets it). Many prophecies have two or more phases of fulfilment.
- Observe the special rules that apply to apocalyptic literature.

- Interpret typology, numbers and symbols with caution and with reference to the rest of scripture.
- Interpret parables in a simple way. Most parables make a single point by means of an illustration or story.
- Interpret allegories within the limits of the text.
- Important words can often be illuminated by studying the first mention in Scripture.
- Names often imply character.

While exegesis will establish the grammar of a verse and tell you the technicalities of what is being said, interpreting the verse means to discover the message that the verse is telling you.

An illustration is perhaps a painting. Exegesis equates to the analytical process used in the painting: the type of canvas used, the type of paint, analysis of brushstrokes, analysis of composition and so on. Interpretation is equivalent to see the story told by the painting.

Exposition

The job of exposition is to shine (expose) a light on to the text and to make its message manifest to others for their edification. Essentially, exposition is explanation and application.

This is often spoken of in the context of preaching, but that is not a ministry used in the edification of the church but a ministry to outsiders in the proclamation of the Gospel. The idea of a man riffing on a text⁶ is not suitable for teaching the flock of God, yet it is all too often what happens in churches.

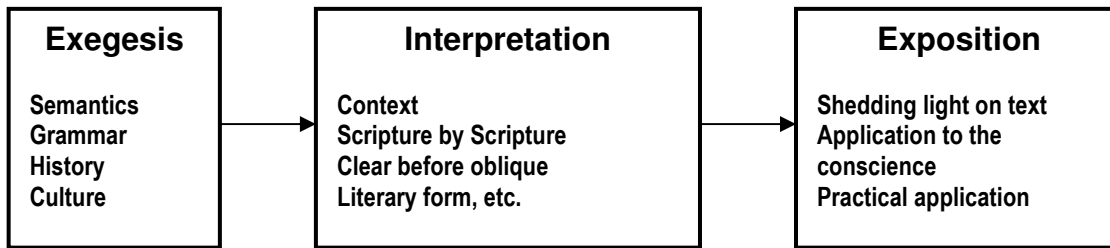
The job of church leaders is to teach the flock: to instruct them (didactics), to edify (build up) them, to encourage them, to console them, to comfort them, to nurture them, to admonish them, to exhort them and to enable them to defend the faith (apologetics). Sadly, this is not what is happening in many churches.

The way that this is done is by the word of God being explained to them so that they are inwardly changed. The leader doesn't change people but the word of God transforms people. When a leader truly teaches God's word, people are really changed, and sometimes dramatically changed. In order to do this the teacher must have first analysed the text properly by exegesis and sound interpretation, then he can use that knowledge to help people.

The job of building people up belongs to the Holy Spirit and the Spirit works on the basis of the word of God. The teacher is merely the channel through which God's word is explained then the people believe that word and the Spirit acts within them for sanctification.

Unless the Bible is properly interpreted, then nothing good can happen.

⁶ Too many preachers simply use the text as a peg for their thoughts and ramble on according to their agenda or ability. They don't expose the text for spiritual application but speak whatever is in their mind, based on the text. I have heard verses used to support: New Ageism, worldliness, greed for money, power play, anger, occultism, mysticism and so on. This is men / women speaking from a false heart pretending it is Biblical doctrine.



Conclusion

There is no task on earth that is more important for the disciple of Christ than studying the word of God. After the spiritual exercises of prayer, intercession, meditation and worship the more mundane task of reading and studying the Bible comes before almost anything else. Of course, necessity to save or sustain life⁷ may be, temporarily, a more important task but in the normal run of things Bible study is more important.

Yet how many people spend hours watching the TV, watching video games, watching sports, reading newspapers, reading novels and not studying Scripture at all?

How many devote their best time to trivial pursuits: playing various sports for many hours in a week; doing mindless puzzles and games (unless a necessary part of medical therapy); focusing on social events and so on?

Those who invest quality time in trying to study Scripture will develop in Spirit the most and be able to do good to others.

Useful papers

Check the website of the author for resources that give additional information for those wanting more understanding. For example, see the papers:

- *Bible Language Resources.*
- *Choosing commentaries.*
- *A basic list of important principles of interpretation.*
- *Bible study techniques.*
- *Principles of interpretation* (full edition).

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⁷ Such as working to provide for your family.