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Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth and Implications to Society: Guidepost for Biblical Hermeneutics in Contemporary Africa

By

Mipo Ezekiel Dadang, PhD and Fwangmun Oscar Danladi

Abstract

The message of the Bible, graciously transmitted to humanity from God through the children of Israel, was given in a world different from ours in many ways. When the Word of God came to men of old, they could easily understand it because it came to them enfolded in the sociocultural tapestries, nuances, and convention of their day. The church in Africa with its unquenchable thirst for the preached Word needs right people who interpret and apply the Word correctly. This paper presents some hermeneutical principles for effective interpretation of the Bible with emphasis on how Biblical hermeneutics in contemporary Africa can keep interpreters of the Bible faithful to the intended meaning of Scripture and helping them get away from allegorizing Bible verses that should be understood literally.

Key Words: hermeneutics, Africa, theology, history, canon, religion, Africa

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Introduction

In contemporary Africa today, however, some preachers of the word have had tremendous difficulties when reading and interpreting the Bible. These difficulties arise from huge cultural gaps that must be bridged. Readers and hearers of the Word preached in contemporary Africa have little or no access to the shared meaning conventions of biblical times, through which to understand everything that they read in the Bible. Also, they know little or nothing about how to properly interpret scriptures (hermeneutics). In addition to this dilemma, the ever-changing trends observable in the church and society today begs for the learning, unlearning and relearning of Biblical truth for effective engagement with the Scripture and correct application in everyday life in contemporary Africa. This paper presents some hermeneutical principles for effective interpretation of the Bible with emphasis on how Biblical hermeneutics in contemporary Africa can keep interpreters of the Bible faithful to the intended meaning of Scripture and helping them get away from allegorizing Bible verses that should be understood literally.

Statement of the Problem

The contemporary Africa church has tremendous difficulties when reading and interpreting the Bible considering the fact that there are huge cultural gaps between contemporary Africa contexts and when the Word of God came to men of old, who could easily understand it because it came to them enfolded in the sociocultural tapestries, nuances, and convention of their day. Also, the contemporary African church knows little or nothing about how to properly interpret scriptures (hermeneutics), and in addition to this dilemma, the ever-changing trends observable in the church and society today begs for the learning, unlearning and relearning of Biblical truth for effective engagement with the Scripture and correct application in everyday life in contemporary Africa. Thus, how can the cultural gaps be bridged? How can the readers and hearers of the Word of God in contemporary Africa be enabled to have access to the shared meaning conventions of biblical times, through which to understand everything that they read in the Bible today? And what are some hermeneutical principles for effective interpretation of the Bible with emphasis on how Biblical hermeneutics in contemporary Africa can keep interpreters of the Bible faithful to the intended meaning of Scripture and helping them get away from allegorizing Bible verses that should be understood literally?

Interpreting God's Word without Errors

God is capable of accurately relaying his Word to humanity in a way that they can understand. However, from time immemorial, several attempts at interpreting the Bible has led to both intentional and unintentional errors. Para-Mallam notes that, "the lack of understanding or correctly dividing the Word of truth can be said to be responsible for many errors" (Para-Mallam, 1996:17). It is, thus, crucial to know how to interpret Scriptures in an attempt to determine its intended meaning to avoid forcing ideas into the text.

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There is always a need for all generations of Christians to be like the Bereans who were commended by Luke for searching the Old Testament Scripture daily to make sure that what Paul taught was true (Acts 17:11). God desires for his people to know and understand his word, and he instructed fathers to teach it to their children in the home (Deuteronomy 6:4-9). Thus, Bible interpreters in contemporary Africa need clear Biblical hermeneutics principles to help them on how to interpret, and apply the Bible.

Biblical Hermeneutics

Biblical hermeneutics is the science and art of Biblical interpretation. It is a science because there are methods, rules, and recourse to a measure of objectivity to be adhered to when interpreting any text. But then, Biblical hermeneutics is not just a science. It is also an art in the sense that proper Biblical interpretation is a skill that is learned. The word hermeneutics comes from a Greek word, *hermenuo* which means to interpret. It is a branch of theology that focuses on identifying and applying sound Biblical principles for interpretation. Some scholars have explained clearly the meaning of hermeneutics. Berkhof notes that, “hermeneutics is the science that teaches us the principles, laws, and methods of interpretation” (Berkhof, 1981:11). Kaiser and Silva in describing hermeneutics say that “it is the discipline that deals with principles of interpretation (Kaiser & Silva, 1994:15).” McCain notes that “hermeneutics is the study of the principles and methods of interpretation, understanding and applying the Bible properly” (Kaiser & Silva, 1994:15).

We can rightfully assert that the Bible is both a divine and a human book. It is the word of God through men to men. It is written by chosen and inspired men, at certain times over a period in history, at certain places on earth, and in certain ordinary, human languages. Beynon and Sach affirm that “by calling it a divine book, we mean simply that the Bible comes directly from God. Behind the various human authors, he is the ultimate author” (Beynon & Sach, 2005:20). Beynon and Sach believe that “these human authors wrote in different genres and had different vocabularies, personalities, cultural backgrounds, and social standing” (Beynon & Sach, 2005:20).

Sarma notes that “we need to find out the people, places, and events that make the story. It means, “exploring the time and culture in order to understand the text” (Sarma, 2015:48). The Holy Spirit moved each of these men to produce God’s inspired, inerrant, and infallible Word (2 Timothy 3:16; 2 Peter 1:21). Hall opines that “modern exegetes are to read the Bible holistically as one book in two testaments, read the Bible christologically, read the Bible within the context of life and prayer, worship, and spiritual formation” (Hall, 1998:223). He further alleges that “the difference between the presuppositions of conservative theology and the presuppositions of the other groups is that those of the former are provided by the Scripture itself, whereas those of the other groups are not” (Hall, 1998:223).

Pinnock observes that “God deals with people, where he finds them. If he finds them in paganism as he found Abraham and Melchizedek, he can communicate with them in that milieu” (Pinnock, 1980:110). Pinnock stresses that “God’s revelation is universal and the light is sufficient for those who respond to him” (Pinnock, 1980:110). Interpreting Scripture correctly before preaching in contemporary Africa can be appropriate like the Puritans who were impactful in preaching. Brown describes Puritans as those who gave more emphasis to preaching” (Brown, 2001:290). Smalley opines that such emphasis on Scripture led to “literal-historical sense of Scripture rose to prominence throughout the Middle Ages” (Smalley, 1994:448). Smalley argues that “it would not be out of place to demand that good

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hermeneutical manner, preparation, and delivery, should characterize the modern pulpit as well” (Samley, 1994:448). This means that Biblical interpreters in contemporary Africa need to abide by Biblical laws of interpretation.

Laws of Biblical Hermeneutics

The most important law of biblical hermeneutics is that the Bible should be interpreted literally. A person who sets out to interpret the Bible should seek to understand the Bible in its normal or plain meaning, unless the passage is obviously intended to be symbolic or if figures of speech are employed. The Bible says what it means and means what it says. For example, when Jesus speaks of feeding “the five thousand” in Mark 8:19, the law of hermeneutics says we should understand *five thousand* literally—there was a crowd of hungry people that numbered five thousand who were fed with real bread and fish by a miracle-working Savior. Any attempt to spiritualize the number or to deny a literal miracle is to do injustice to the text and ignore the purpose of language, which is to communicate. Listening to some interpreters of Scripture in contemporary Africa show that they make mistake in trying to read between the lines of Scripture to come up with esoteric meanings that are not truly in the text as if every passage has a hidden spiritual truth that we should seek to decrypt or unravel.

Biblical hermeneutics in contemporary Africa should keep interpreters of the Bible faithful to the intended meaning of Scripture and help them get away from allegorizing Bible verses that should be understood literally.

The second crucial law of biblical hermeneutics is that passages must be interpreted historically, grammatically, and contextually. Interpreting a passage historically means interpreters seek to understand the culture, background, and situation that prompted the original writer of a Bible text. An example is for an interpreter of a text to fully understand Jonah’s flight, (Jonah 1:1–3), such an interpreter should research the history of the Assyrians as related to Israel. Interpreting a passage grammatically requires anyone who interprets Scripture to follow the rules of grammar and recognize the nuances of the original language of transmission which are usually interpreted from the Hebrew, Greek or Aramaic languages to contemporary interpreters.

Interpreting a passage contextually involves considering the context of a verse or passage when trying to determine the meaning. The context includes the verses immediately preceding and following, the chapter, the book, and, most broadly, the entire Bible. The third law of biblical hermeneutics is that Scripture is always the best interpreter of Scripture. For this reason, interpreters of the Bible in contemporary Africa are required to do the needful to always compare Scripture with Scripture when making efforts to determine the meaning of a passage.

In contemporary Africa, one hears voices of certain people who avoid following laws of biblical hermeneutics because they think it will limit their ability to learn new truths from God’s Word or stifle the Holy Spirit’s illumination of Scripture. Their fears are unfounded because biblical hermeneutics is all about finding the correct interpretation of the inspired text and not presupposition what the meaning should be. Applying Biblical hermeneutics in contemporary Africa is needed most today because it is to protect interpreters from misapplying Scripture or allowing bias to color understanding of truth. God’s Word is truth (John 17:17) Interpreters of the Bible in contemporary Africa ought to seek to discover the truth, know the truth, and live the truth as best as they can. This is why biblical hermeneutics

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is vital. This explains why scholars have written to show the importance of biblical hermeneutics.

There is need for interpreters of the Bible in contemporary Africa to key into employing specific laws of Biblical hermeneutics for them to interpret Scripture appropriately. The following laws are necessary for good hermeneutics to continue to be sustained in contemporary Africa.

Law of Revelation

As a key framework necessary for good hermeneutics, we must understand that the word of God is God's revelation of himself. This is important because God is transcendent, distant and he is hidden though he is very well immanent, thus, a person can know and understand God only if God reveals himself through it. We depend on God's revelation of himself in order to know him. The Bible is supernatural in character and also natural in character. This is the paradox. Pinnock affirms that "God's revelation of himself is universal and the light is sufficient for those who are to respond to God" (Pinnock, 1980:110). The Bible is both a divine and a human book. It is the word that came from God through men to men. It is a divine book because it came directly from God. It is an affirmation that behind the various human authors, God is the ultimate author.

Consequently, contemporary interpreters of the Bible in Africa are challenged to depend on God's revelation to know him. However, because God has used human authors through the inspiration of His Spirit, they must use interpretive tools that can help them to find out the people, places, and events that provide complete Bible story. Every person in contemporary Africa who seeks to interpret the Bible is equally encouraged to endeavor to examine the time and culture of each writer of the Bible to be able to interpret the text appropriately. It is a requirement for an interpreter of the Bible to ask whether there is any historical information that can help such a person in understand how to interpret a text within its right context. An important step for interpreting Bible is for a person to ask probing question such as, where can one get right information? Does it come from a passage of Scripture one is interpreting or from the entire Bible? These are valid questions offer Biblical framework for formulating the right principles of Biblical hermeneutics.

Indeed, the Bible is not an ordinary book because it embodies "revelations" from God. It tells the truths and facts God wants anyone who interprets to know. These revelations from God are categorized into general and special revelation. Erickson notes that general revelation is God's communication of himself to all persons, at all times, and in all places" (Millard, 1993:112). General revelation is God's revelation of himself to every human being. This happens mainly through creation. Every person has general knowledge of God from Creation. The Psalmist declares that "the heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands" (Psalm19:1). Erickson further explains that "special revelation is God's manifestation of himself to particular persons at definite times and places, enabling those persons to enter into a relationship with him" (Millard, 1983:144). My understanding of special revelation from scriptural point of view is that Special revelation is sourced in Jesus Christ, the Living Word and in the holy Scripture (John 1:1-14; Hebrews 1:1-2) This revelation is not on-going but is completed.

Paul wrote to the Church in Rome with the perspective of general revelation saying that "for since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities and his eternal power and divine nature have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse" (Romans 1:20). Because it is God's revelation, the Bible cannot be

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interpreted just as any other book. God's thoughts are not human thoughts (Isaiah 57:7, 8). Divine thoughts cannot be comprehended entirely by human reason (1 Corinthians 2:9, 10). Revelation is "revelation" it has truth that is beyond the scope of human reasoning. It is also true that a person cannot understand the truth of the Bible without using the faculties of human reason. Yet, revelation from God must be interpreted in a spirit of humility (Luke 10:20, 21).

From Biblical point of view, simplicity with faith is the needed preparation for receiving truth from God (Acts 4:13). Palmer notes that, "the Bible is God's revelation to us" (Palmer, 2015:14). Palmer opines that "the church throughout centuries has consistently taught that Scripture is the Word of God. Scripture is the clearest revelation of God" (Palmer, 2015:14). When God's revelation is taken into consideration in biblical hermeneutics, inspiration is the next law to apply in interpretation.

The Law of Inspiration

The Bible is not an ordinary book. It came by the inspiration of God. Paul notes that "All Scripture (*graphe*) is God-breathed (*theopneustos*), (2 Timothy 3:16). The Old and New Testaments Scriptures are inspired. The canon during the time of Jesus was the Old Testament, but the early church subsequently recognized that the New Testament writings are part of the canon. Theologically, the Canon are the books of the Bible accepted as inspired by the Holy Spirit, and retained for the transmission of God. Grudem notes that "the canon of Scripture is the list of all the books that belong in the Bible" (Grudem, 1993:54). Therefore both the Old Testament and the New Testament are Scripture (*graphe*) and are inspired by God.

Inspiration literally means "*breathing in*". It is the *Greek theopneustos* which means "God-breathed" or "Inspired by God." The inspiration of the Bible was the work of the Holy Spirit who guided the writers of the Bible in what they wrote. Kunhiyop notes that "Scripture is inspired in the sense that God breathed his word to the writers of Scripture" (Kunhiyop, 2012:29). From a Biblical point of view, Peter explains the process of how inspiration happened. Peter affirms, "For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Peter 1:21). What this essentially means is that men traveled on the journey of "speaking" and "writing" God's words using revelatory signposts infused into their intellects by the Spirit of God. Milne confirms this saying that "over the ages, various theories have emerged seeking to describe the process of interpretation" (Milne, 1982:36, 37, 39). Dictation theory says that the Holy Spirit simply dictated the words of the Bible to the authors. But Palmer argues that "this theory does not give full attention to the human personality of the authors" (Palmer, 2015:19). Milne points out that, "God accommodated the limitation of the human authors." (Milne, 1982:37).

Supervision theory holds that the Holy Spirit guided the writers of the Bible as they wrote the books of the Bible (2 Peter 1:20, 21). The Bible is the Word of God. It is totally reliable in its teaching. Its infallibility and inerrancy affirm the utter reliability of the Bible. Erickson opines that "the Bible, correctly interpreted is fully truthful in all that it affirms" (Millard, 1983:233) Palmer points it out that, "exegesis is the process of interpreting the meaning of the text." (Palmer, 2015:9). This is a challenge to Bible interpreters and preachers in contemporary Africa that the task of exegesis is in tandem with the law of inspiration. Because the Bible is inspired by God, adequate exegesis is required to correctly understand and interpret the inspired revelation of God for all humanity all through generations. In

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Biblical hermeneutics, applying the authority of scripture is equal to revelation and inspiration.

The Law of Authority

During the time of Christ and the apostles they quote Scriptures to settle the matter (Matthew 4:4, 6, 10), asserting the fact that Scripture is authoritative. The New Testament writers did not leave any doubt about the trustworthiness of the Old Testament. New Testament interpreters quoted from almost every Old Testament book. The interpreters saw the Old Testament as the basis for the Christian message (Luke 24:27, 44). In one of the debates with the Jewish teachers, Jesus said that the Scripture (*graphe*) cannot be broken (John 10:35). The law of Authority, holds that in an attempt at interpretation, the Bible is the final authority over human beliefs and practices. Kato drew attention to the absolute centrality of the Bible for life and theology in expressing Christianity in the context of Africa. He notes that “the Bible must remain the absolute source addressed to Africans and to all peoples.” (Kato, 1985:43). Bray, in tandem with the position of Kato, notes that “the Bible is the normative command witness of the spiritual truth which has been revealed to the Church.” (Gerald, 1996:19). He further opines that “there was no source comparable to it and no human authority can supersede or contradict it” (Gerald, 1996:19).

The Law of Unity

Another element that is needful in Biblical hermeneutics is the unity of the Bible when interpreting it. The law of unity of the Bible is essential in interpretation. Mears builds on the fact that “the Bible is made up of sixty-six books. Written by forty different writers, during a long period of approximately 1600 years” (Mears, 1978:1). Mears categorically states that “It is in reality the Bible is one book, knit together by the oneness of its truth and content.” (Mears, 1978:1). In sum, the Law of Unity means that the books of the Bible form a complete organic unity. The proofs of this unity are established in the authorship of the Holy Spirit (John 5:55; Romans 3:2; 2 Peter 3:16).

The law of revelation, inspiration, authority and unity of the Bible are valuable for Biblical hermeneutics. These are essentially acceptable tasks for good Biblical hermeneutics. How then did Biblical hermeneutics developed?

Development of Biblical Hermeneutics

Throughout the centuries, individuals and religious groups have adopted various ways of Scriptural interpretation. For example, Palestinian Jews regarded the Bible as the infallible word of God. Berkhof notes that, “they considered even the letters as holy and their copyists were in the habit of counting them lest any of them should be lost in transcription” (Berkhof, 1981:14). Berkhof alleges that the Jews held the “law in greater esteem than the prophets. Interpretation of the Law was their great objective” (Berkhof, 1981:15). Palestinian Jews distinguished between the literal (*peshat*) and Bible exposition (*Midrash*) when they interpreted it. Box intones that “one controlling motive and feature of Midrash was to investigate and elucidate, by all exegetical means at commands, all possible hidden meanings, and applications of Scripture” (Box, 2015:75-82). Box explains that “the Interpretation of a legal character that dealt with matters of binding law was held in a strict legalistic perspective (called Halakkah) (Box, 2015:75-82), while the “(*Haggadah*) was an interpretation of a free and more edifying tendency covering all the non-legal parts of Scripture” (Box, 2015:64). Berkhof list the rules for such interpretation: (i) light and heavy;

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(ii) equivalence; (iii) deduction(iv) inference from passages; (v) inferences from general to special;(vi) analogy from context and (vii) inference from the context (Berkhof, 1981:16). However, Gilbert opines that “these rules naturally opened the way for all kinds of misinterpretations” (Gilbert, 2016: 44-45). This gave rise to a method of hermeneutics from Alexandrian Jews. Alexandria was an important center for learning where Jewish religion and Greek philosophy congregated. These philosophies influenced each other to the extent that students in this learning center obtained harmonized instruction in religion and philosophy. According to Luke’s record in Acts, allegorical interpretation paved the way for the first pagan philosophers (stoics) to influence scriptures (Acts17).

Allegorical Interpretation

Gooding notes that “allegory is when someone takes a work that was intended by its author as history or as straightforward narrative and interprets as if the author intended it as allegory, when all the while the original author intended no such thing” (Gooding, 2013:223). Gooding believes that “such allegorical interpretation has had a long and none reputable history” (Gooding 2013:223) Olyott alleges that “people have been studying the Bible in an allegorical way ever since the earliest centuries of the Christian church” (Olyott: 2007:33). Thus, Kunhiyop affirms that allegorical method is one of the oldest forms of interpretation” (Kunhiyop, 2012:33). He adds that “the major proponent of this approach was Origen of Alexandria (c.AD 185-254) who taught at the famous Catechetical School of Alexandria in Egypt” (Kunhiyop, 2012:33). Farrar notes that “Philo’s principles of interpretation negatively say that the literal sense must be excluded when anything is stated that is unworthy of God; when otherwise a contradiction would be involved; and when Scripture itself allegorizes” (Farrar 2004:22, 39). Farrar, further explains that “positively, the text is allegorized, when expressions are doubled; when superfluous words are used; when there is a repetition of facts already known and when an expression is varied” (Farrar 2004:22,39). Allegorical interpretation teaches that the true meaning of a passage is spiritual rather than literal. It believes that “under the letter” lies the real meaning of the text. Kunhiyop noted that the problem with allegorical interpretation is that it “Obscures the true meaning of the Word of God” (Kunhiyop, 2012:33).

Mystical Interpretation

Those who hold on to a mystical method of interpretation seem to have a narrowed minded view of the physical realms of the universe. Ram argues that “those who undertake the mystical approach to interpretation instead focus primarily on direct, personal, intimate communion with God” (Bernard, 1980:80). This is to say that Scripture should be interpreted on the basis of how it suits one’s personal mind through prayer, meditation and intimate communion with God alone. In other words, the individual needs a personal search of the Scripture. There are interpreters of Scripture who promote the spirit interpretation.

Spirit Interpretation

The mystical and spirit methods of interpretation place emphasis on personal communion with God rather than on the careful study of the word of God. This is the method many contemporary preachers especially in Nigeria employ in their everyday preaching. It is lamentable that most of such preachers are not trained in any evangelical theological seminary. They insist that the Holy Spirit has taught them the Bible passage in their closets so there is no need to investigate what the text means for a modern congregation. Bible

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interpreters in contemporary Africa are required not to deviate from procedure of Biblical hermeneutics. There is the literal-grammatical interpretation.

Literal-grammatical interpretation.

The literal-grammatical interpretation approach was employed at the School of Antioch. Historically, this school was a rival to the one in Alexandria. It used the normal grammatical meaning of the text in interpreting Scripture. The literal-grammatical interpretation was, however, not done without dependence on the Holy Spirit. Farrar opine that “the Reformation era Renaissance was of great importance for the development of sound hermeneutical principles” (Farrar 2004:46, 47, 48, 49, 50). This shows that the issue of hermeneutics revolves around the Reformation teaching of perspicuity. And to understand the import of the Reformation era and the prevalent teaching during this period on perspicuity, and on the art and science of hermeneutics.

Reformation and Biblical Hermeneutics

The Protestant Reformation was not just about breaking away from the power of the Roman Catholic Church. Dadang notes that, “The Reformation was a theological movement. It started around 1517 and ended around 1650. It was an effort to recover and clarify the gospel” (Dadang, 2018:169). Dadang opines that “ecclesiastical traditions had obscured the gospel and there arose the need for a proper understanding of matters with regards to the right interpretation of God’s Word” (Dadang, 2018:169). Dadang states that “it was about reforming the church through a return to Biblical teachings” (Dadang, 2018:184).

In the area of theology and hermeneutics, the reformers did not set out to reform hermeneutics. Rather, they utilized the existing hermeneutical practices of the Roman Catholic Church until their reading of Scripture changed their theology. At that point, they had to adopt new hermeneutics that would correctly interpret Scripture in consonance with the praxis of the early Christian church. And it is these principles, together with the teachings of the early Christian church, rather than the medieval teaching of the Roman church, which became the test of correct interpretation. Early Reformation hermeneutics, however, were mixed. While some Reformers favored the practice of combining the reformation style hermeneutics with the allegorical method (especially when they were faced with difficult texts), others used the tropological (moral) method; others, still, used only the literal method. Over time, nevertheless, the literal reading of scripture came to prevail because it best produced the teaching of the early church.

The Reformation hermeneutical approach of reading the text literally came to be referred to as the grammatical reading. It was the Puritans who promoted the use of this approach in their interpretation of Scriptures. Brown notes that it was “Puritans who gave more emphasis to the Scripture in their life and preaching than their various ecclesiastical traditions” (Brown, 2001:290). It means a literal reading emphasizes the text just as it reads. Lindberg opines that “Consensus has it that it is this hermeneutical approach by Zwingli that laid the foundations for a return to expositional preaching during the Reformation” (Lindberg, 2000, 103,104,105).

The Reformers believed that the Scriptures were comprehensible to all, not only to the priests and scholars of the church. The “plain meaning” of the text could be made available to everyone by translations that were faithful to the original autography. It was necessary to study the grammar and the vocabulary of the original languages to do this, and no one doubted that this was an objective science that did not depend on one’s theological

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orientation. This theological orientation led the Reformers to the importance of a faith context.

The Reformers believed that the Bible needs to be read in a theological context, whether the context was imposed from without or discovered from within. This reflected a coherent system of thought, namely, the faith of the church. A critical attitude toward the text was regarded as a sign of unbelief and was not acceptable. It was later that a critical attitude toward Scripture develops (during the 18th century Enlightenment). The key issue that separated Protestants from Catholics was whether Scripture interprets itself (*Suilpsius Interpres*), or requires the teaching authority of the Church to interpret it correctly. The Roman church had long taught that only those invested with the teaching authority of the church could correctly interpret Scripture, but the Reformers taught that Scripture was self-interpreting and could be understood by any careful, believing student of Scripture.

The exegetical principles that were worked out by Erasmus were adopted by the Reformers and used to counter the allegorical, philosophical and other interpretations. Basic to the historical-grammatical method was the principle that the meaning of a word must be determined from its literary context beginning with the local context and moving outward to its canonical context to confirm that its rendition is in harmony with the theology of Scripture. It was assumed that the Biblical text made sense both to its writer and to its original readers. Scripture is understood to be a self-interpretive unity authoritative in religious matters and consistent in its teaching.

While the Reformation was imperfect and incomplete, its Biblical principles were ordained of God and need to be brought to completion. The 1986 method of Bible study document is grounded in the historical-grammatical method. Hence all theologians in contemporary Africa who interpret the Bible are expected to apply Biblical hermeneutics.

Applying Biblical Hermeneutics in Contemporary Africa

Applying Biblical hermeneutics in contemporary Africa is necessary and paramount for Bible interpreters more than ever because it helps in the application of the grammatical; historical; and theological methods when interpreting Scriptures.

Biblical hermeneutics must agree with the established rules of grammar

Good Biblical hermeneutics must be grammatical right because since the books of the Bible were written by men in certain ordinary, human languages, no interpretation of Scripture is to be accepted which does not agree with the established rules of grammar. The interpreter's primary and chief aim should be to ascertain the meaning of words according to the (*usus loquendi*), the meaning in actual popular usage. This is necessary because the etymological meaning of a word may or may not have been retained in popular usage.

The meaning of a word according to the meaning it most generally carries in common/popular usage (*usus generalis*) is to be preferred unless there are sufficient reasons to compel the exegete to accept some other meaning. I must sense that a speaker or writer would use his words in that context in which those to whom he speaks or writes are accustomed to using them. The exegete must take into consideration, during his exposition of a biblical text, any variations used in a broader or narrower sense.

Biblical interpretation must agree with the biblical context

The exposition of a passage must agree with the context –Immediate and Remote. Roberts wrote, "Each verse needs to be understood in the context of the chapter in which it appears

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and each chapter in the light of the book as a whole” (Roberts, 2002:19). Roberts opines that “the immediate context is more important and usually decisive” (Roberts, 2002:20). Every word in the Holy Scripture can have only one intended meaning in any one place and in any one relation. The intended sense is one which enunciates a fundamental law of human communication, without which intelligent communication would be impossible.

Biblical Hermeneutics must take the literal meaning seriously

The literal meaning (*sensus literae*) of a word should in all cases be accepted as the one intended sense (*sensus literalis*) unless sufficient reasons prompt the interpreter to accept a trope (the figurative use of a word, or figurative speech).

The reason for departing from the literal meaning of words is usually provided in the immediate context and /or in the analogy of faith. In this connection, the literary genre (kind of literature, literary form) of a Bible book or periscope (passage) should be taken into consideration. This at the outset of the study will help the exegete decide whether to interpret a passage literally, figuratively, or symbolically. Since a figure never completely coincides with the thing to be illuminated or clarified, the important thing in the interpretation of figurative language is to discern the chief point of comparison (*tertium comparationis*), and then not to carry the comparison beyond that point (*tertium*), *Ne tropus ultra tertium*. The context will make the *tertium* clear. In the case of the extended simile, the parable, all the details in the parable cannot be expected to have, or be interpreted as having a counterpart in the reality illustrated.

The books of the Bible were written at certain times over a 1550-year period of history and at certain places on earth and for various purposes and groups of readers, biblical interpretation must be historical. McKim notes that “the exegete must carefully consider the historical circumstances under which each bible book was written, as well as the historical contents of each book as he proceeds with his interpretive task” (McKim, 2007:1106). O’Keefe and Reno make observations on the need for modern interpreters of the Bible to apply it in context of “the rule of faith and spiritual discipline in patristic exegesis” (O’Keefe and Reno, 2005:156).

Biblical interpretation must be theological

While there is the need to have a right relationship with God to be able to interpret the Scripture well, this relationship does not guarantee *a right* reading thereof. Thus, a need arises for interaction with extra-biblical disciplines. Silva believes that “God has and will guide and preserve his people by his Spirit and through his Word, no matter the difficulties inherent in the interpretation of ancient texts” (Moises, 1987:136). However, the canonical books of Scripture are the Word of God, thus biblical interpretation must also be theological. All hermeneutical principles employed in their interpretation must be in agreement with or derived from the Scripture themselves. Interpreters of Scripture in contemporary Africa are to affirm that only the converted, believing exegete can practice valid Biblical hermeneutics and come to a true understanding of the contents of Holy Scripture (I Corinthians 2:14,15).

Biblical hermeneutics must uphold the unity of Scripture

Scripture is of divine origin and it is the verbally inspired Word of God. It is wholly without inconsistency of thought or speech, without contradiction, without the slightest error in the original manuscript (John 17:17; 2 Timothy 3:16; 2 Peter 1:21; I Corinthians 2:13; Psalm 119:16; John 10:35). The Bible is the inscripturated Word of God and as such presents the

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truth in ordinary language in all matters which it treats. The kind of truth the Bible claims for itself is correspondence to reality (the correspondence theory of truth). The Bible has one divine Author, and as it is the verbally inspired Word of God, it has an essential unity. This unity exists between its two testaments as well as within them. Scripture (not human reason, personal feeling, church, or tradition) is the sole source and norm of true doctrine in the sphere of religion and theology.

In addition, the interpreters in contemporary Africa are reminded that Scripture is inerrant. It follows that all passages from both the Old and New Testaments which deal with the same matter, and to the extent in which they treat the same matter, must be considered as being in full agreement with one another (having “real parallelism”). This principle may be referred to as the Analogy (agreement) of Scripture. Any exposition of a passage, therefore, which does not agree with all its parallels, is untenable.

A point to note is if a distinction is made between the Analogy of Scripture and the Analogy of Faith, the former term may be regarded as referring to historical and other external matters; and the latter, to Bible doctrines which constitute the foundation of Christian faith. The less clear or plain passages of Scripture must be interpreted in the light of the clearer passages, which method of procedure must never be reversed. Interpreters in contemporary Africa are to observe that while engaging in the task of interpreting Scripture they are to take into cognizance that Scripture interprets Scripture (*Scriptura Scripturam interpretatur*).

Dockery challenged contemporary interpreters to use “synthesis hermeneutical method for exegetical process” (David, 1992:248). When this is applied holding unto the principles of interpretation, fresh and dynamic applications are brought to the task of transmitting God’s words showing that they (Scriptures) are active and living.

Having discussed things to consider for applying Biblical hermeneutics, interpreters in contemporary African Society should also keep in mind the major pitfalls of Biblical hermeneutics when interpreting the Bible.

Pitfalls in Biblical Hermeneutics

There are certain pitfalls that can be avoided when interpreting God’s word. The first pitfall is application without exegesis. In a theological sense, exegesis is an approach use in interpreting Bible passages by utilizing critical analysis. The Word itself comes from a Greek word which means, “to lead out of.” It is the thorough investigation of Biblical text within their various contexts to discover the original intent of a word. Exegesis is the opposite of eisegesis and it aims to read into a particular text. Thus, exegesis is a critical interpretation of text. Exegesis that is correctly conducted uses several tools in order to arrive at what the writer is trying to convey to the reader. Exegesis additionally includes comprehensively analyzing of the literal context of Biblical verses and using them to compare with verses elsewhere in Scripture to determine what God is saying. This is to say a text cannot mean what it never meant; a text cannot mean today something that it never meant in its original context. When an interpreter applies the Bible without understanding its original intended meaning is *eisegesis*.

A second pitfall in biblical hermeneutics is called proof texting. Proof texting is trying to find a verse that supports a person perspective. For example, a young man is reading his Bible and his sister comes up to him and he says, “Do not bother me. I am looking for a verse of Scripture to back up one of my preconceived ideas.” This shows that he knows what he believes. He is not going to Scripture to understand what it means but to use Scripture to

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defend his own perspective. But such a person might never hear God speak unless he allows the Bible to speak for itself, and this will only happen when he seeks to understand Scripture on its own terms. Proof texting is trying to apply God's word before understanding it. That is not really how to apply Biblical hermeneutics.

A third pitfall is interpretation without contextualization. I teach contextualization course at graduate and undergraduate levels at ECWA Theological seminary Nigeria for consecutively seven years. Based on my teaching experience I have come to define contextualization as "Explaining the unchanging Scripture into unique and changing contexts of human worldviews, customs and their languages without changing the biblical meaning of the divine Word of God" (Revelation 7:9). It is a dynamic process that finds points of entrance when interpreting and explaining the message of the Bible to connect the text within different human contexts in such a way that the interpreted Word penetrates hearts with Christ in their own local contexts as Paul did to philosophers of his days (Acts 17:16-34; I Corinthians 9:19-23). Conn notes that "indigenization of Christian faith validates all human languages and customs before God as legitimate paths for understanding his divine meanings" (Conn, 2000:481). Additionally, Fleming opines that "the bridging between the text and context to a large extent depends on hermeneutical method of the text" (Fleming, 2005:67). Allen advises that "when people [those who interpret Scriptures] refuse to contextualize in their environment, they become modern-day Judaizers requiring others become like them before they can come to faith" (Allen, 2012:197).

Fee notes that "the Bible is meant to be read, interpreted and comprehended by everyone from armchair readers to seminary student" (Fee, 2014:27). Gaining insights into the Bible can clear up a lot of misconception when it is interpreted accurately. Fee explains that "it helps a reader of the grasp the meaning of Scripture and its application to twenty-first century life." (Fee, 2014:28). Mburu offers foundations for contextualization in such a way that it brings together the interpretation heights. Mburu opines that "Christians in Africa must contextualize the interpretation of the Bible by using known categories of interpretation in context of Africa" (Mburu, 2019:5). These ideas are derived (with few amendments) from world class scholars who commented on Elizabeth Mburu's book, *African Hermeneutics*, arguing in favor of a contextualized hermeneutic for a solution to a transformed lives of Christians in Africa, Mburu notes that "people sometimes speak of hermeneutics as if it has principles that are set in stone" (Mburu, 2019:5). From Mburu's point of view, "contextualized hermeneutics is necessary because we cannot hope to experience genuine transformation, if we lack the knowledge and skills to effectively interpret the Scripture" (Mburu, 2019:5).

In favor of a contextual theology through right interpretation, Hasselgrave asserts that, "In contextualized interpretation, the process should uphold the revelation of God's truth in the author's language use and audience's understanding. Interpretation of the interpreter's own tradition and that of the text (should be upheld) and application in his own socio-customary environment, logical implications are understood and accepted" (Hasselgrave, 2003: 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20).

Thus, the center for contextualized interpretation lies in the application of critical contextualization. This will help Christians in Africa live transformed lives. Hiebert notes that "there are four steps for contextual interpretation of the Bible" (Hiebert, 1985:33, 34, 35). Hiebert explains them as follows: (i). Exegete the local beliefs and practices through phenomenological approach. (ii). Exegete the Scripture and employ hermeneutical bridge.

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(iii). Use the interpreted text to teach Christians to take decision concerning how to respond to spiritual attacks (Hiebert, 1985:33, 34, 35). Hiebert believes that new Christians should be allowed to “critically evaluate its beliefs and practices in the light of the Bible. Then they can apply solutions based on new Biblical truth discovered in handling spiritual problems they may be facing” (Hiebert, 1985:33, 34, 35). Hiebert notes the fourth is to “develop a new interpretive contextualized response that can lead to transformation of their old beliefs and practices if they were against Scripture” (Hiebert, 1985:33, 34, 35). This can help Christians in Africa to practice faith as a way of life. It can also help the community of believers to deal Biblically, theologically, and practically with Spiritual challenges which lure them into split-level Christianity. We must therefore conclude that anyone who interprets the Bible needs to have a basic theological training to be able to follow the processes of interpreting the Word with integrity.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The place of hermeneutics cannot be overemphasized because the transformation of Africa depends on the faithfulness to the truth of God’s word. Biblical hermeneutics is the only antidote to the unbiblical merchandized gospel that seems to be promoted and propagated in African church today.

We emphatically assert that only biblical hermeneutics can guide and keep interpreters of the Bible to the intended meaning of Scripture avoiding the pitfall of *eisegesis*. Sarma asserts that “the foundation upon which the Christian faith rests is that the Bible is a reliable historical record of God’s salvific purposes for the world because it is God-breathed (2 Tim 3:16-17)” (Sarma, 2015:237). Thus, the need for biblical hermeneutics in upholding the reliability of God’s word is much needed in our secularized society order to bring to life the truth of God Word to confront the ills destroying the African society.

This paper therefore submits the following recommendations:

1. The readers and hearers of the Word of God need to be guided by the principles of biblical hermeneutics, because how the word is interpreted will determine how it is applied.
2. Integrity to the context of scripture matters for proper interpretation of scriptures (hermeneutics).
3. The ever-changing trends observable in the church and society today begs for the learning, unlearning and relearning of Biblical truth for effective engagement with the Scripture and correct application in everyday life in contemporary Africa.
4. Finally, the African church must return to Biblical hermeneutics which has the ability to keep interpreters of the Bible faithful to the intended meaning of Scripture and helping them bring to life the truth of the word of God for the transformation of Africa.

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