

A Closer Look
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2004

THE SCALPEL IN THE CHAPEL
(... IS REALLY AN AXE !)

Catchy title, don't you think? Hopefully, it's not all downhill from here!

Methinks the church has embedded itself in a deep, deep rut, and the harder it tries to move ahead, the worse things become. When the most needed solution is to back things up a bit, take a fresh look, and have the courage to break the mold, the mainstream church refuses to do so for fear that it will be the first step onto the slippery slope of heresy.

Unfortunately, in an attempt to contend for the faith once delivered to the saints, many present-day church leaders have actually positioned themselves so as to deserve that stinging accusation Jesus brought against the Pharisees: making the word of God of no effect through your tradition which you have handed down.

Today, most places of Biblical learning - seminaries, Bible colleges, church schools, even the pulpit - transfer to the listener an attitude that is more suited to a museum curator than to a seeker of truth. It's as if all the truth about God has already been learned, and the number one task at hand is to preserve that neat, tidy box in which the truth is packaged. It is actually quite convenient to have all the truth already unearthed for us. After all, we modern-day Christians are a busy people. Who has time to explore truth anyway? And who has time to pursue God? Besides, there is security in simplicity. And life is good.

It is very sad to be told in effect that there ain't no more gold in them thar hills. There is no more need to dig for something that no longer exists. There is no more work striving to draw out the revelation of God. Of course, there are also no more cries of eureka! either. And there is no more intrigue or anticipation. Once you have the contents of the theological box down pat the journey in God becomes pretty dry and uninteresting. And absent is the thrill that comes only when you have wrestled with the word of God until it yields its priceless treasure of truth, the Holy Spirit teaching you every step of the way.

And so we peons in the pews are content to eat whatever choice morsels are dished out to us. We tote our Bibles about like the good, faithful Christians that we are, but when we open them up, the cold, wintry blast of old news

seems to slap us in the face. In this way, we are more to blame than the literal peons in the pews of the Middle Ages. At least they had valid excuses: they could not read, Bibles were not available even if they could, and the church adamantly taught that only the priests were allowed to study the Scriptures.

We, on the other hand, simply refuse to study, and our mindless, unquestioning acceptance of the teaching of others reflects naivety, ignorance, laziness and a lack of courage. But God bless us, we still think that we will somehow turn the world upside down for Christ.

There is a big difference between childlikeness and childishness.

Bible Bugs

As bad as the picture I am painting seems to be, it actually gets worse. You know those morsels the church leaders are feeding you? Many of them are missing serious spiritual calories. Worse still, they often contain poisonous seeds. This is not simply a knock on Christian leadership; most of them are as unwittingly victimized as the people in the pews when it comes to Bible study and teaching. Too often they are working with deficient understanding without even realizing it. They are deriving conclusions based on what is before them in their Bible versions and subsequently passing those conclusions on to us.

Before the days of Louis Pasteur, disease spread unchecked within society. This was not due to a lack of solving the problem; this was due to a failure to recognize the problem even existed. The problem was microbes. Little invisible buggies were spreading from person to person unknown and unchallenged, taking with them oftentimes fatal illnesses. They were the biological version of the modern-day computer virus, until finally being discovered by Pasteur. It is no different in the church today, and it starts with our Bibles.

There are deadly ?microbes? in our English Bibles - and God did not put them there.

There are basically four or five Bible translations that are used by most Christians today, and every one of them is flawed. These Bible versions are accepted across the board as accurate English renderings of Old Testament

Hebrew and New Testament Greek. After all, didn't God-fearing experts produce these translations? Didn't they know their work?

Guess what? Modern Bible versions are rife with inaccuracies - translation inaccuracies - and we simply assume our Bibles are perfect renderings of the word of God. We trust them while deadly language "microbes" consistently make their way into our understanding, and we have no idea it is even occurring. As a result, our friendly, local Bible teachers, as well as ourselves, are arriving at interpretations that are often doomed to be wrong from the start because they are based upon faulty information. Bummer, huh?

How could this be? The practice of sound Biblical exegesis has become a lost art.

Enter The World Of Exegesis

Exegesis (pronounced ex-e-jees'-is). Cool word, isn't it? Feel free to toss it about at parties and family gatherings. (And look smart when you do so!) I love Biblical exegesis. You would too if you knew what it was, right? I am so fanatical about sound Biblical exegesis that one good friend has dubbed me "Exegeek." It has since been shortened simply to "X", which I truly appreciate because it's like having a name one notch above, say, "Malcolm X." Plus, it's easy to spell. (Of course, it's also easy to forge!)

"Exegesis" comes from Greek and means "to lead out." So, picture the meaning of a text, along with the truth it holds, being trapped inside the words and your goal is to set them free. It's hostage rescue time and you, the translator, get to save the day! The derived meaning of exegesis, according to our good friend Webster, is "the critical interpretation of a text." "Critical" here means "exercising careful examination." Biblical exegesis, then, is "the practice of interpreting Biblical texts by exercising careful examination of these texts," and requires both the accurate translation of the text as well as the application of sound principles of interpretation to the text (a practice known as "hermeneutics").

It is virtually impossible to arrive at a sound interpretation of a Biblical text if the translation is inaccurate. Why? Because you are essentially being given disinformation from which you are attempting to derive a correct conclusion. It just won't work. Remember, "GIGO: Garbage in - garbage out." And the

garbage is there, folks.

Unfortunately, the damage does not stop with incorrect conclusions. If you happen to be one of those flaming radicals who actually seeks to put their beliefs into action, then a wrong understanding gets compounded by misguided behavior. And if you happen to be a Bible teacher, your wrong conclusion now implanted into others becomes a wrong conclusion and possibly wrong behavior multiplied several times over.

?My brethren, let not many of you become teachers, for as such we will incur a stricter judgment.? (James 3:1) Ouch! Still want the job?

To shed additional light on the subject, here is a quick review of how you got your Bible:

Step 1. The Canon

In the past, spiritual leaders determined which books were ?God-breathed? and thus

warranted being part of the ?canon,? the collection of divinely authored manuscripts;

the books that together form your Bible.

Step 2. The Manuscripts

None of the original manuscripts (?autographs?) exists today. What do exist are

manuscripts that are copies of copies, etc. Textual criticism is the field of study that

seeks to determine which manuscripts are most reflective of the originals.

Ultimately,

this is a judgment call based on determining which manuscripts are most reliable.

Step 3. The Translations

A Bible translation team, normally selected and funded by a Bible publisher, chooses

which collection of Hebrew and Greek manuscripts to use and then sets up committees

of translators to translate portions of the Bible. The practice of ?rule by committee?

is used to vote on the final translation of the delegated portions. All committees then

submit their final translations to a steering committee which holds veto

power. The

complete translation is then finalized, printed and published. And the bucks flow in.

(A note: Two of my former seminary professors served on the translation team for the

New International Version. I heard first-hand accounts of what the process involved.)

Please notice that theologically based interpretation is not meant to be part of the translation process. Unfortunately though, it has been - in a big way. Also of note, Bible translators are selected in part for their relative theological agreement with the views of the sponsoring publisher. Together with the financial incentives and the theological predisposition of the translators, the rule by committee approach causes a theological bias to influence the translation work itself.

Ultimately, this is how the spiritual ?microbes? get injected into the Bible version. Human frailty has made it anything but a pure process.

As ridiculous as the following example may seem, imagine working as a translator for the U.N. and always translating a foreign language into English by first inserting, say, your political views into the mix. The result would be to render a translation that is as favorably disposed to your political bias as possible, versus the one that is most accurate. Now imagine this same dynamic at work among theologically homogeneous translators who are being paid to represent the theological views of the publisher. Add a touch of ego and peer pressure, which abound in the rule by committee process, and voila!, you have your Bible translation - duly tainted. It might not be a conspiracy, but it is a reality.

And Bible teachers and Bible students are basing their Bible study upon this tainted work.

Honest Translation

Translation work must, to the highest degree possible, be based solely upon linguistic parameters. Even though some measure of interpretation is inevitable in the practice of translation, it is unacceptable when translation

work is unduly influenced by preset theological views and implications. Theological interpretation must follow, not precede, translation work; otherwise, the translation is less than accurate, which means it is less than honest, less than truthful.

Keep in mind that when God originally authored the Scriptures, He only had one meaning in mind, and this meaning conveyed the very truth of Almighty God. While the goal of translators ought to be to facilitate an arrival at the original meaning of a text as much as possible, in many ways Bible translators have instead trod all over the truth of God like stampeding cattle in their attempts to safeguard their pet theological views and personal interests. It is unnerving to discover this, especially since the church at large is so trusting.

It takes courage to translate the Bible honestly for it exposes the errors in long held views.

I happen to be among the fortunate ones who have studied Biblical Greek and Hebrew and I am able, by the grace of God, to perform translation work. Much to my discredit, as well as my loss, I set aside Bible translation for a long, long time. God had given me very valuable tools, a precious gift indeed, and I had wasted this gift terribly for a long time, and I will answer to God for that. But God gave me a clear correction a few years ago and I went back to work using those God-given tools.

What I found was indeed a rude awakening. By way of personal research and translation work lasting 18 months, and with a totally open mind, I came to reverse my conclusions concerning what the Bible taught regarding a major doctrine. I was dumbfounded. How was it that I had not seen this before? The answer? By setting aside those tools. And by not looking. One rarely finds what he is not seeking - the truth included.

Much to the chagrin of many, I am not a person to keep his mouth shut when a major discovery has been made, and I have been taking the heat for it ever since. It would seem that church leaders are not necessarily fond of having their major doctrinal views challenged, even if it is done with humility. (Who knew?!) But as it turns out, I am either very courageous, very stupid, or very thick-skinned. Either way, what I had learned, and have since attempted to share, almost defied credibility, and motivated me to put all doctrinal teaching under the exegetical microscope and thoroughly scrutinize it; which I have been doing ever since. And for doing so, some have branded me a heretic.

It is not enjoyable to be branded a heretic, especially when you are specifically and positively emphasizing the authority and infallibility of Scripture (the original autographs, that is), and not the opposite.

If you recall, the first one to testify of the Lord's resurrection was not Mary Magdalene, as is often stated, but the angel of the Lord. His basic message was quite simple: "Come, see. Go, tell." That is precisely my challenge to all believers, leaders in particular. Check it out for yourself, thoroughly and with an open mind. Do not simply accept what the respected expositor offers as truth. You alone will answer for the light you were given by God. And once you have grappled with the truth, have the courage to share it with others. The church desperately needs truth grapplers.

Despite the heat I am receiving, I am having the time of my life. On the one hand, I feel like an investigative reporter, the non-sleazy brand. On the other hand, I am enjoying a new excitement as I venture on in my exploration of God. It is a wonderful journey, indeed. There is nothing like an explosion of truth to get the spiritual juices flowing.

A friend once asked me if I was intimidated by the fact that I was countering a view held by so many great heroes of the church, past and present. I responded that perhaps I would be if I weren't so angry at the way the Bible was being butchered, and by the manner in which people were being sucked into a tradition of teaching that was replete with errors. All that is required is to look honestly, using the tools available to do so, and you will see it as well. There is evidence to be seen, even if you haven't studied Greek and Hebrew.

Lab Time

There is one particular Bible passage that speaks directly to this issue. In 2 Timothy 2:15, Paul says the following to young Timothy: "Be eager to present yourself tested to God, an unashamed worker, straightly dissecting the message of the truth." (Translation mine)

Please consider this passage to be the patron text of Biblical exegesis.

"Straightly dissecting the message of the truth." Let's use this final portion of the text - since it is the one most applicable to our discussion - and conduct our own little translation lab. (You won't need your Bunsen burners, so leave

them in the closet!)

If concentration isn't your thing, I strongly encourage you to make a special effort to hang in there during this lab. Not many folks will explain to you the concerns I am raising here; therefore, it is essential that you absorb the information and see the proof for yourselves.

First we will compare several Bible versions' renderings of these words. In an extreme twist of irony, what you will discover is that the majority of the Bible versions below violate the very exhortation of the text they are translating. Observe the differences.

?'straightly dissecting the message of the truth?'	(my translation)
?'rightly dividing the word of truth?'	(King James, New King James Bibles)
?'handling accurately the word of truth?'	(New American Standard Bible)
?'and who correctly handles the word of truth?'	(New International Version)
?'who properly presents the word of truth?'	(Williams' New Testament)
?'as he teaches the Word of truth in the right way?'	(Beck's New Testament)
?'know what his Word says and means?'	(The Living Bible)

Perhaps at first reading your reaction is: 'What's the big deal?'

Stay tuned. This particular example is relatively mild compared to some other translation miscues. For example, what if I were to tell you that the word 'hell' does not belong in our Bibles? Neither do 'damn,' 'damnation,' nor 'forever and ever.' Most of the times you see the words 'torment' and 'condemnation,' they are mistranslations. And here is a biggie: the words 'eternal' and 'everlasting' are used 71 times in the King James New Testament, and only twice - twice! - are the translation accurate. Got your attention? Want to hit me?!

Translation mistakes like these have dramatically influenced major doctrines of the church, as well as the behavior such doctrines spawn. And the reproductive inbreeding continues. It is the rare church leader who is willing to consider that such translation errors even exist. There is a felt safety in the majority view, and 'false teacher' is not exactly the kind of reputation a church leader is seeking. Peer pressure is a nasty, nasty dynamic at times.

Now keep in mind that our text is one of the fundamental exhortations

consistently given to church leaders as they enter into ministry, as was the case with me. So, whatever the church leader understands these words to mean will directly impact his approach to the Bible; and there will be a domino effect put into motion as the leader instructs others.

It's All Greek To Me

Here is the rendering in Greek with my translation:

orthotomounta ton logon tays alaytheias.
straightly dissecting the message of the truth.

Please notice:

My translation is the only one that incorporates the definite article "tays." A big deal? Possibly. First of all, it is present in the Greek. Oftentimes, the article is not present before a noun, in which case the presumed English article is either indefinite ("a" or "an"), possibly definite, or absent. Normally, when the definite article is present, as here, there is a good reason. In this case, its presence places a strong emphasis on specific truth.

"The truth" is not the same as "(a) truth." The former forces the reader to ask "which truth?" whereas the latter does not. Also, without the definite article, the emphasis is placed more on "logon" than on "alaytheias." This is simply inaccurate. The emphasis should at least be equal. Emphasis sways interpretation, and interpretation sways behavior.

The Living Bible, in an attempt to be relevant and readable, is not even close to being an accurate rendering.

3. I am the only one who translates "logon" ("logos") as "message." The other versions translate it as "word." The primary definition of "logos" is "something said," either verbally or in writing. Any other definition is derived, such as "word," "message," "saying," "utterance," "communication," etc. The Greek word that most means "a word" is not "logos," but "rayma." "Logos" places an emphasis upon the complete

content of what is said, and is not limited to Scripture. ?Word? can at times convey a limited, even biased, meaning, whereas ?message? renders the idea of the complete content of a communication.

?Orthotomounta.? This is the biggie, folks. I will unabashedly state that among the other translations, only the King James and the New King James are acceptable renderings of this word. All the others miss it by a mile. Why this is important I will mention below, but first, let?s put ?orthotomounta? under the microscope.

The base word is ?orthotomeo.?

?ortho?: from ?orthos,? meaning ?straight,? ?right,? or ?correct? - as in: ?orthopedics,? the straightening of skeletal deformities, and ?orthodontics,? the same for teeth.

?tomeo?: from ?tomoteris,? meaning ?to make a straight cut, especially as if by a single stroke,? versus ?kopto? which means ?to chop repeatedly.?

So, literally, you have the words: ?to make a straight cut straightly? (or ?correctly?). First and foremost, the meaning ?to cut? must absolutely be part of the translation. Anything different misses the whole point of this Greek word. For example, the use of ?handle? by the NIV and others is simply incorrect. ?Handle? is much too broad in meaning and leaves the door wide open, wrongfully, to incorrect interpretation. My own testimony below will show you one example of how this erroneous translation made a behavioral impact.

Of note, ?orthotomeo? is used only once in the entire New Testament - in this text. It is used on purpose and for a reason. Thus, we must pay special attention to its definition. The number of times a Greek or Hebrew word is used in the Scriptures impacts the ability to arrive at its best translation. When its use is limited, greater attention must be given to that word?s root meaning. The translation ?handle? above exemplifies a failure to do this.

Scalpel, Please

I chose "dissection" as the best reflection of the meaning of "tomeo." Why? To make a successful, straight cut you need a very sharp, fine instrument. The cut is intentional, it is clean, it has purpose; it is not an accidental slice. This is where the concept of "correct" comes in, "correct" meaning a "straight" cut. The scalpel is the best known instrument for this purpose; hence, the title of this article. In dissection, the cut produces cleanly severed pieces that can be further examined, as happens in surgery or an autopsy - and in exegesis.

An axe, on the other hand, would mangle the specimen with its chopping cuts if it were used. Sad to say, it is all too often the tool of choice, figuratively speaking, in textual analysis, causing poor examinations, poor translations, and poor interpretations. Sloppy specimens are consistently presented as "The Word of God" to the trusting student-reader.

All Greek and Hebrew words have primary or root meanings, most of which are known. (Strong's Concordance highlights these, by the way.) Many, if not most, of the words translated into English, however, are derived meanings. This in itself is understandable since derived meanings are fairly common in language. What is not so understandable, however, is the arbitrary manner in which Bible translators often select which derived meaning best fits the specific Greek or Hebrew word. This is the point at which preset theological bias interferes with translation, injecting misleading meaning into the text.

For example, it was the decided opinion of most of the translators represented above to translate the second half of our compound Greek word "orthotomeo" by English words such as "handle," "present," and "teach." (I'll kindly ignore the hideous rendering offered by the Living Bible translators.) The root meaning of "tomeo," as we have noted above, is "to cut." We have also mentioned that this text is the only time "orthotomeo" is used in the entire New Testament. This means that the translators had no other uses in the Bible to rely upon as justification for their renderings.

So that raises the \$64,000 question. How did they determine that the English translations should be the words listed above? How many levels of derivation are required to get from "to cut" to "to handle," "to present," or "to teach"? The fact is, these renderings are so far removed from the root meaning that they are beyond watered down; they are utterly invalid. And yet, there they are in black and white in somebody's Bible being touted as "The Word of God."

Again, this is a mild case; other examples have caused unspeakable damage to the presentation of God's truth, and have misled countless numbers into

misguided efforts.

In contrast, the way we are "dissecting" the word "orthotomeo," as well as the entire clause, is an excellent example of sound exegesis. We are cleanly dividing the phrase, and this word, and looking at the parts that comprise it in order to draw out the truest possible meaning. When you recall that the word "straight" also means "honest" and "truthful" as in "giving a straight answer," then you realize that "straightly dissecting" means not only "correctly cutting," it means "honestly cutting."

On the positive side, here is a question. Don't you just love the strong aroma of fresh coffee grounds when the can has just been opened? Even non-coffee drinkers enjoy it. Well, it is the same when you "straightly dissect" Scripture. The words are opened up and the fresh scent of truth emerges. Peeled oranges and newly opened coffee cans have nothing on the sweet aroma of truth produced by sound exegesis.

So, what would be a proper interpretation of our text based on the translation we have concluded? How about this: The unashamed worker needs to perform an unbiased, careful examination of the parts of the Biblical message in order then to determine an accurate interpretation of its meaning - which is its truth.

Notice I did not include "translation" into my interpretation of the text. When Paul wrote these words to Timothy, translation was not an issue; they spoke the same language. It would have been an unfair interpretation on my part to infer that this text specifically calls for sound translation. It does not. However, it does call for a clear, correct understanding of the text's words, and this requires sound translation if a foreign language is involved, such as the Biblical languages of Old Testament Hebrew and New Testament Greek.

Sour Milk

Here's my personal experience with the Bible-gone-bad. During seminary one of the emphases was on the preparation and delivery of sermons, a study known as homiletics. Again and again, we were exhorted to "accurately handle the word of truth." However, this exhortation was not directed at textual exegesis, but at principles of preaching. The use of "handle" paved the way for this allowance. This very text was time and again applied to homiletic

skills, not textual analysis.

So it was that I left seminary fully ingrained with the idea that the "word of truth" was my sermon, regardless of the sermon's content. The assumption? That what I taught would be truth since I would invariably be using one or more Bible verses. My resulting behavior reflected this wrong understanding of the text - and my listeners paid the price.

The final tally? Potentially, thousands of graduates have since walked in the same wrong understanding and the same misguided behavior that I did, and have since reproduced the same erroneous understanding thousands of times over in others; as I did. Truth is part of the very nature of God; part of his "DNA." As such, it serves to heighten the urgency of accurately deriving His truth from Scripture; and for this only a scalpel will suffice.

In John 8:31-32, Jesus said, "If you remain in my message ("logos") you are truly my disciples, and you shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free." Sadly, and incorrectly, Bible teachers and learners understand this passage to mean something akin to "make sure you keep reading your Bible." The assumption, of course, is that reading the Bible equates (1) to "remaining in Jesus' message," and (2) to "knowing the truth."

However, it is fully accurate to state, and to state very strongly, that unless you first set the truth free, the truth will be powerless to set you free - because the truth itself is kept under wraps. Untold numbers of Bible believers are reading and learning Bible verses that continue to hold the truth hostage instead of setting it free - due to lousy translation work. In turn, the truth is then prevented from doing its marvelous work of liberation.

In contrast, sound exegesis sets the truth free.

In testimony to the beauty of God's divine harmony, the wise use of the exegetical scalpel unleashes a force that is the most cutting of all. "For the message of God is alive and at work and sharper beyond any two-edged sword and penetrating as deep as the separation of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrows, and is a discerner of the inmost feelings and thoughts of the heart; and no creature is unexposed before it."

Need we say more?