

Mastering God's Word



A local reporter recently called me to get some background information on certain issues which have been hotly debated within the largest church body of the Lutheran denomination in Canada. During our discussion, it became evident to the reporter that the issue came down to how the two sides of the debate interpreted certain key verses of Scripture. The reporter was quite right; at the heart of the issues we discussed, and all issues debated by Christians, is the interpretation of Scripture. How the Holy Bible is interpreted, however, is driven by how the interpreter views the Holy Bible.

There are many who interpret the Bible in a very academic or scientific way. They apply the same tools of interpretation to the Biblical text as are applied to all other ancient texts academics seek to interpret. They treat the Bible the same way they treat Homer's Iliad or the Odyssey, Beowulf or Shakespeare's plays and sonnets. Those who interpret ancient texts like Beowulf, and Old English heroic epic poem, understand them as products of human imagination. They understand that these ancient texts would have been shaped and influenced by many things, including the authors' culture, religious belief, moral belief, political belief, personal likes and dislikes, and personal life experiences. They believe these influences are buried in the text and need to be exposed. Academic interpreters use the text as a vehicle to get into the mind and the world of the author. They believe that there is a meaning to the text that even the author was not conscious of when he or she wrote the text.

These same principles are applied to the academic study of the Biblical text. Ancient handwritten manuscripts of a Biblical text are examined for inconsistencies. The Biblical text is compared to other forms of literature from the same time period. The historical context is derived from findings produced by historians and archaeologists who have studied the era during which the Biblical text was to have been written. Principles of the study of all literature are applied to the text. The academics seek to reconstruct the author's world. It is assumed that the author's world would shape the author's mind and what the author wrote. The author would be seen as using Biblical text to either defend the author's culture, and that culture's religious and moral beliefs, or to oppose that culture's religious and moral beliefs.

Academics declare that there is a driving force behind the text and that driving force is the world and the society in which the author lived; a force that shapes the text and how it was interpreted in the author's day. The problem inherent in this method of interpretation of Biblical text is that it assumes the text is a 'dead' letter. The text served the interests of a particular people at particular time in history, and the knowledge that the people of that time had about themselves and their world. The message of the text is hampered by the knowledge and sophistication of the author and the author's culture. For the text to have relevance today,

it must be brought back to life. Just like an emergency room physician, academics apply the paddles of a defibrillator to the text, using our modern understanding of ourselves and our world to reinterpret the text, so that it is brought back 'to life' by matching our modern understandings and culture.

Academics are not the only ones who believe there are hidden things in Biblical text. At various times during the history of God's people, under the Old and the New Covenant, individuals have looked at the text and have seen a thread of reasoning, a hidden message or code, and insight that no one else has seen. These prophets have published their works and made converts. Most recently, Harold Camping discovered a hidden code in the Bible. He claimed God had revealed to him that Jesus would return on May 21, 2011. When that day came and went, he declared God made a spiritual judgement on May 21st and was going to reveal that judgment physically on October 21st of this year.

Both these interpretations can do violence to the text and the faith of those who faithfully read their Bible. My years at seminary were preoccupied by the scientific study of Biblical text. I mastered the academic interpretation of the text, but resisted it. I demonstrated to my professors that I understood what they call the historical critical method of Biblical interpretation, but then would state my rejection. I would rail against those like Harold Camping, who'd apply their own completely personal method of interpretation, pointing out that, "They seek to master the text and use the text to their end."

However, having said that, I have to repent. I have to admit that I too always sought to 'master' the text, to understand it, find its true meaning, apply the meaning of the text to my life in the way that I saw fit, and then to encourage others to apply the text to their lives in the same way. I realized that I needed a new perspective on the Bible, its study and application. I got this new perspective from the Letter to the Hebrews: *"In the past, God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word."*(Hebrews 1:1-3)

These verses very clearly say that there *was* a force behind the words written by the authors of the Old and the New Testament. The force was not the life and times of the writers; it was the God who created the universe. The very first Chapter of the Book of Genesis says it all: God spoke words into the formless void and those words transformed the void and the chaos into what we see today with our own eyes and through the eyes of the technology we have produced. There is power in God's word because God is behind it. Jesus said, "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away." (Matthew 24:35) Jesus declares that His Word transcends historical context. Each era of human history passes away, but Jesus' Words (who was with God at creation - John 1:1-4) will never pass.

I am thus resolved to no longer attempt to master God's Word but to be mastered by His Word¹. God's word is powerful and creative by its very nature. It shaped and formed the

universe and can shape and form something new in me: a deeper and more abiding faith in God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. God's Word made mountains and God's Word moves them. God's Word can create faith in me and move me to think in new ways and to live my life in new and wonderful ways. God can teach me to love Him and my neighbours in the way He wants me to.

In Christ, Pastor Ed

¹ With reference to the Bible, CALC's *Confession of Faith* declares that this Association "joyfully submits" to "the divinely inspired, revealed, and inerrant Word of God... as the only infallible authority in all matters of life and faith". In his essay, "*Lessons from Luther on the Inerrancy of Holy Writ*" [<http://www.mtio.com/articles/bissar37.htm>], author John Warwick Montgomery makes this vivid distinction between how historical or higher critical scholars and Luther approached Scripture: "While Higher Criticism poses its questions in a posture of rationalistic dominance over the text, Luther asks his questions of God's Word on his knees. The contrast could hardly be sharper."