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**SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT
IN THE BIBLICAL HERMENEUTICS CLASS**

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INTRODUCTION

Since I began teaching Biblical Hermeneutics three years ago, it has been my aim and desire to enhance spiritual growth in the personal lives of students who go through the course. Most of the students who take this course are under training to be Pastors. I do not teach them for the sake of duty; I want them, while taking this course, to deepen, and strengthen their relationship with Jesus. I see that this will help them to incorporate Christian values in their day-to-day life experiences.

Statement of the Problem

One of the general concerns of the church today is that most Gospel workers place emphasis on matters that have nothing to do with the need for spiritual development. They are more concerned about attaining high positions, wealth, popularity, and job security. It seems that pastors-in-training lose their grip with God as soon as they graduate.

Purpose of the Essay

This essay focuses on two purposes:

1. To avoid teaching Biblical Hermeneutics as a mere academic exercise.
2. To sensitize students to experience spiritual development.

Limitation of the Essay

This essay is limited to Biblical Hermeneutics classroom where lecturers promote both academics and spiritual development.

BIBLICAL HERMENEUTICS: WHAT IT IS?

Before I go into all the ramifications of biblical hermeneutics, it is important to define hermeneutics. The word “hermeneutics” is derived from the Greek

hermeneuen, which means “to explain, to express, to translate, to interpret.”¹ “It is also a science of interpreting that seeks to establish the principles, methods, and rules needed for interpreting written texts, including the Bible.”² Plato the renowned Philosopher came up with a formula for the definition of hermeneutics: “he *hermeneutike techne* literally means the art of interpreting.”³ This means “the art of correctly apprehending something.”⁴ Dilthey’s definition became famous too. He defined it as “the theory of the art of understanding textually fixed living utterances” or again “the theory of the art of the interpretation of textual monuments.”⁵

DIFFICULTIES IN HERMENEUTICS

There are two reasons why Scriptures cannot be understood easily. The very first reason is “that finite human beings are unable on their own to comprehend the mind of the infinite one.”⁶ The following Bible texts confirm this idea: Job 11:7-9; Isa.55: 8-9; Eccl 3:11; Rom 11:33-34, etc. The emphasis here is “on their own.” The human intelligence on its own cannot understand the Scriptures. Human mind therefore needs something outside itself to understand God. It is not because the human mind is not intelligent, but it is because Scripture has to be understood differently than the usual way.

The Effects of Sin

Secondly, “sin has darkened and even blinded the minds of human beings so that they themselves are not capable of rightly interpreting God’s Word.”⁷ The following texts support this line of thought: Rom 1:21, 2:17-23, Eph 4:18; Matt 23:16-26; John 9:39-41.

¹ Samuel Koranteeng –Pipim, *Receiving the Word* (Berrien Springs, MI: Berean Books, 1996), 365.

² *Ibid*

³ Heinrici, G. “*Hermeneutik, bibische.*” *RE* 7(1899): 718-50

⁴ *Ibid*

⁵ Dilthey, *Schriften* V, pp 320,332.

⁶ Richard M. Davidson, *Principles of Biblical Interpretation*, (Berrien springs, MI: Andrews university Theological seminary, 1995), 10

⁷ *Ibid.*

It is possible for an individual to have a superficial understanding of Scriptures. But this does not help because his/her life is not blessed by God, who alone has the power to change the lives of men. Jemison, in his book Christian Beliefs expanded this thought when he wrote: “

One may know the facts about the Bible, about the principles of Christian living, and about God’s plan for the future, but not understand the meaning of these facts. He may be able to explain prophecies, and yet be unprepared for future events that will involve him personally.”⁸

Attitude towards God’s Word

What kind of attitude must we demonstrate whenever approaching the Word of God?

White gives us this Counsel:

We shall advance in true spiritual knowledge only as we realize our own littleness and our entire dependence upon God; but all who come to the Bible with a teachable and prayerful spirit, to study its utterances as the Word of God, will receive divine enlightenment. There are many things apparently difficult or obscure which God will make plain and simple to those who thus seek an understanding of them.⁹

Writing to the Romans the apostle Paul gives a formula for understanding the Scriptures. He says:

I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, Holy acceptable to god, which is your reasonable service. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God” (Romans 12: 1&2).

Our minds have to be “renewed” in order for us to understand God in Scriptures. The point of contact comes when we surrender wholly to him, the Source of all wisdom and intelligence. If we come to Him, He says, “All that the Father gives me will come to me, and the one who comes to me I will by no means cast out” (John 6:37).

⁸ T.H. Jemison, Christian Beliefs (Mountain View, California: Pacific press Publishing Association, 1959), 43

⁹ White, Testimonies to the Church Vol 5,(Mountain View, California: Pacific Press Publishing Association,1948), 704.

Contextualization

Here is to try to balance practical life and academics. This is not easy one to do, but it is dynamic. For example, in the Biblical Hermeneutics class I teach a lot about contextualization. The main lesson in contextualization is applying the message of the Bible to every day situations and experiences. I ask questions like: what does this text mean to us today? First, I want them to understand the context in which it was written and what it meant at the time of writing. Second, to apply it to today's settings. For example while talking about the Bible being inspired, I would say that the Bible has the same authority that it had at the time it was written.

HERMENEUTICS: AUTHORITY OF THE BIBLE

It is appropriate at this juncture to ask the question, does the Bible have authority? This question is important because it forms the basis of biblical hermeneutics. It would be futile to talk about hermeneutics when we are not sure whether the Scriptures themselves are reliable or not. To answer this question, first let us turn to the familiar scripture that states: "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3: 16-17) The words "all Scripture" are simple and clear. We just have to accept them as they are written. The words "all Scripture" are referring to the entire books of the Bible from Genesis to Revelation. Hasel elucidates this line of thought as follows: "

Every appropriate interpretation of the Bible must be grounded upon the principle that all of Scripture is inspired by the Holy Spirit, every Scripture from Genesis to Revelation is the Word of God without a qualitative difference in terms of inspiration." ¹⁰

God is the Author

The Bible has authority also because God is its author. How is God the author of the Bible? The apostle Peter answers this question when he writes:

¹⁰ Gerhard Hasel, Biblical Hermeneutics TODAY (Washington, D.C.:Biblical Research Institute, 1985),100.

And so we have the prophetic word confirmed, which you do well to heed as a light that shines in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning stars rises in your hearts; knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation, for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit” (2 Peter 1:19-21).

According to this revelation it is very clear that God is the Author of the Bible. He used human agents to reveal His will to men. Hasel illuminates this idea when he says: “It follows that the Bible is not the product of human genius or tradition. It is not to be handled or studied as if it were a mere human book.”¹¹

The Ministry of the Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit also illuminates the humble who want to understand Scriptures. How does He accomplish this? Jesus’ introduction to the ministry of the Holy Spirit before He ascended to heaven provided the answer to the question when He said: “But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all things that I said to you” (John 14:26). The Holy Spirit is not just the author of the Scriptures, but He also illuminates our minds to understand the Scriptures. It is important therefore to ask his help any time we study the scriptures. The epistle of James talks about the attitude God when we ask him, as follows: “If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him (James 1:5).

In writing to the Corinthians the apostle Paul emphasized the ability of the Holy Spirit to illuminate the students of the Bible as follows: “Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the spirit who is from God, that we might know the things that have been freely given to us by God” (2 Corinthians 2:12). The Scriptures are gifts from God and the Holy Spirit is willing to give us understanding whenever we ask Him to do so.

¹¹ Gerhard Hasel, Biblical Interpretation TODAY, 101.

God, in revealing Himself to people He created, did not do so in isolation. He used human agents like us. He entrusted them with the message of love for His people. Ellen White adds light to this line of thought:

God has been pleased to communicate His truth to the world by human agencies, and he himself, by his holy spirit, qualified men and enabled them to do his work. He guided the mind in the selection of what to speak and what to write. The treasure was entrusted to earthen vessels, yet it is, nonetheless, from heaven. The testimony is conveyed through the imperfect expression of human language, yet it is the testimony of God; and the obedient, believing child of God beholds it the glory of divine power, full of grace and truth¹²

BIBLICAL PRINCIPLES

Few Biblical principles have been selected as an example of how they can be used in interpreting any given passage of Scripture in the Bible. Fortunately, these principles are not self generated but are derived from the Scriptures themselves. It was after much study and prayer that the pioneers of the Adventist Movement developed these principles in the 1800s.

First Biblical Hermeneutics Principle

In the first place I would like to use the famous biblical hermeneutics principle that states that the “Bible consists of 66 canonical books that make up the Old and new Testaments.”¹³ Jesus called the Old Testament “writings” in the following Bible passages: Matt 4:4,6,10; 11:10, 21:13; 26:31 etc. The New Testament, too, called the Old testament “writings” (Matt 26:54; Mark 14:49; Luke 24:27; John 5:39, et al). What does this mean? It means that the Scriptures cannot be broken as confirmed by Jesus in John 10:35. And this also means that the New Testament recognized the authority of the Old Testament. Hasel elucidates this line of thought when he writes: “The New Testament books did not become canonical by virtue of authorization of the church or their inclusion in canonical lists; rather, these 27 books of the New testament were included in the canon because they were divinely inspired, had apostolic authority, and were so recognized under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.”¹⁴ Since all the 66 books of the Bible are

¹² Ellen G. White, The Great Controversy, vi - vii

¹³ Hasel, 102

¹⁴ Hasel, 102

authoritative, that is the Old and New Testaments, I give an assignment to the students to find in the Bible the number of times the given characters or topics appear, and what circumstances surrounded their being mentioned in each of the passages found. The aim is to help students in the process of searching to enhance their spiritual growth and development. The topics are carefully selected to meet the identified need for pastors-in-training. Some of these are: find people in the Bible with problems of adultery; find the usage of the word money in the Bible. Another question is how did Abraham maintain spiritual vitality with God? As soon as the students complete the assignments, I set a time to discuss them in class before they hand them in to me. The idea is that in the process of discussion, I give practical examples of how pastors left ministry due to lack of spiritual growth, neglect of their families, and misappropriation of funds. This assignment earns the student ten percent of the final grade. It is interesting to see the energy and interest students show in these lectures. These lectures help them to seek a richer experience with Jesus. On top of what they learn from the research and discussions, I challenge them that Jesus was “tempted in all points yet without sin”. We can also overcome by totally depending on Jesus.

Second Biblical Hermeneutics Principle

The second biblical hermeneutics principle states, “The Bible is its own interpreter.”¹⁵ How does this principle bring about the spiritual development of the students? Let me explain what this principle is all about: “It means that Scripture interprets Scripture in that one portion of scripture interprets another, becoming the key to other passages. This procedure involves the collection and study from all parts of the Bible, passages dealing with the same subject so that each may aid in the interpretation of the other.”¹⁶ The students can develop spiritually by writing a ten page essay on either of the following topics: (i) Time management in the Bible, (ii) weakness and strengths of King David, etc. This assignment carries about twenty percent of the final grade. The aim of this requirement is two-fold: First, I want the students to discover the effectiveness of biblical hermeneutics that states that the “Bible is its own interpreter.” Secondly, I want them to

¹⁵ Hasel, 102

¹⁶ Hasel, 103

develop spiritually while doing an assignment. How? In the process of examining passages of Scripture on the specific topics, they will be able to contextualize and reflect on their lives, hence bring about spiritual development.

Third Biblical Hermeneutics Principle

The third principle is called “empty head.”¹⁷ What is the principle about? It is a principle that denies preconceived ideas of the Bible before approaching it. In other word it teaches that a person should go to the Bible without any worldviews. Unfortunately, this is not possible because everybody approaches the Bible with some kind of view. This is not a problem if individuals are willing to submit themselves to the authority of the Bible and do away with worldviews. The problem comes from those who are not willing to surrender their worldviews to the leading of the Holy Spirit. How does this principle bring about spiritual development in a student’s life? I tell the students that everybody goes to the Bible with a worldview. That is all right. But when arriving at Biblical teachings one should be willing to surrender preconceived ideas in order to embrace the Bible truth. I refer to two Bible texts: The first one is the one that talks about Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane where he prayed to the father: “Father if it be your will, take this cup away from me; nevertheless not my will, but yours be done” (Luke 22:42); the second one deals with Jesus’ statement regarding those who will be saved from the world. He said: “not everyone who says to me, Lord, Lord shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father in Heaven” (Matt 7:21).

I tell them that the above two Bible texts demonstrate to us how spiritual development occurs in our lives when we surrender our will to God. I give the students an assignment to identify areas in the New Testament where Jesus surrendered his will to the Father. This assignment earns the students five percent of the final grade. The purpose of this assignment is to help the student develop spiritually.

¹⁷ Hasel, 102.

Fourth Biblical Hermeneutics Principle

The fourth biblical principle states, “The Bible’s absolute uniqueness as the Word of God is the vehicle through which the Holy Spirit acts today in order to bring about faith in its teachings and message.”¹⁸ This is profound biblical truth. In any attempt to interpret scripture we must recognize the ministry of the Holy Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit who illuminates our minds when we seek understanding. This is the same reason the apostle Paul said these words: “But the natural man does not receive the things of the spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned” (1 Corinthians 2:14).

Therefore the students should understand that the Bible is not like any other book. It requires the Holy Spirit in the life of a student to understand its teachings. The main emphasis here is to help the student to develop spiritually by surrendering to the ministry of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit as Jesus puts it “teaches all things”. This is the aspect of the Biblical Hermeneutics class where the students are confronted with the need to surrender their lives to God. The Bible cannot be understood without the aid of the Holy Spirit. In order to help the students to capture this important principle I give them an assignment to prepare devotional talks to present in class five minutes before the lecture. The students are supposed to ask wisdom to understand from the Holy Spirit through prayer before they read the Bible to prepare to talk. In class they are supposed to share their experiences gained after reading the passage according to instructions as given. The aim here is to help students know that spiritual growth is a serious matter and that it requires the presence of the Holy Spirit in their lives.

TEACHER AND THE SUBJECT

A lecturer plays a major role in teaching Biblical Hermeneutics. His influence on the students of theology cannot be overlooked. The apostle Paul confirms this when he gives the list of spiritual gifts: “And He himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of

¹⁸ Hasel, 104.

ministry, for edifying of the body of Christ” (Ephesians 4:11-12). The spiritual gift of a pastor is also teaching and vice versa. The pastor and teacher have the same role, function, and ministry. They can either influence the students positively or negatively. They must be guided against bringing negative impact upon the students.

Maintain a Genuine Relationship

The theology lecturer must develop and maintain a genuine relationship with God. This is important because the moment this relationship sours with God, his theology also changes. When you hear a theology teacher teaching strange doctrines or sometimes heresy, you know that the root problem is his/her relationship with God. Most likely he has lost his grip on God and as soon as that happens the positive attitude to theology disappears. Unfortunately, human beings are not static; they can change in one minute from positive to negative and vice versa. This is the same reason why the apostle Paul admonishes us to “pray without ceasing” (1Thessalonians 5:17).

Minds Totally Under The Holy Spirit

It is essential for the theology teacher to have his mind totally controlled by the Holy Spirit in order to maintain a sound theological stance. His mind should focus on things that are spiritual. The Apostle Paul explains this line of thought this way: “For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of flesh, but those who live according to the things of the Spirit, the things of the Spirit. For to be carnally minded is death, but to be spiritually minded is life and peace”(Romans 8:5-6). Therefore, the Holy Spirit must propel the theology teacher in order to transmit sound and biblical theology.

TEACHER AND THE STUDENTS

The audience for my presentation is students. The students are in two groups: some are married and others single. How do the lectures of biblical hermeneutics help them to develop spiritually? Before we look at how they can develop spiritually it is important to refer to Holmes insights on spiritual growth:

Spiritual growth is maintaining unreserved commitment to God and his purpose for us in the world, a confidence in the Gospel, and a self-giving devotion, these

that the apostle calls faith, hope, and love. They bring to the life of the mind purposefulness, expectation, humility.”¹⁹

Spiritual growth also should be looked at through the eyes of the Bible. In Galatians 5:24-26, just after listing the fruits of the spirit, Paul winds up this section by saying these words: “and those who are Christ’s have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live in the spirit, let us also walk in the spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking one another, and envying one another.” Therefore, spiritual growth is striving daily to walk in the Spirit. That means we will avoid the works of the flesh such as fornication, adultery, heresies, selfish ambitions, drunkenness, and envy which are some of the problems the students of Biblical Hermeneutics face.

The Married Students

How can married students develop spiritually in the biblical hermeneutics class? The married students face some challenges while they are engaged in pursuing an education. Some of the challenges they face are maintaining faithfulness to their spouses; balancing between time to study and time to be with the family; and how they can correctly handle financial issues in the home. Finally he has the responsibility of nurturing others and himself so that he does not die spiritually. The Biblical Hermeneutics class can help them to put into practice the spiritual lessons from such stories like Joseph’s refusal to have sexual relationship with Portiphar’s wife, several Biblical insights on family life and stewardship.

The Single Students

The single students too have challenges, but slightly different from those of the married students. They face challenges such as avoiding sexual misbehavior. They have to stay focused on academic achievement and excellence. It is important also to know how to handle finances properly. Sometimes students are given money by their parents for tuition but some end up using the money for something else. How can this kind of student

¹⁹ Arthur F. Holmes, *The idea of a Christian college*, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Ferdmans publishing Company, 1987), 102

be helped by the lectures of Biblical Hermeneutics? The Biblical Hermeneutics course will help the student to develop a program for spiritual development so that he avoids spiritual death, which is not good for him especially as a pastor-in-training.

Beginning With Prayer and Bible Reading

Before the beginning of every lecturer I read a Scripture, mostly from the Psalms, and I pray. I do not read a long and boring passage of Scripture. I normally read one or two verses, thereafter I comment on that verse or verses applying it to practical life. For example I would read Psalms 75: 1, which reads: “we give thanks to you, O God, we give thanks! For your wondrous works declare that your name is near.” My comment on this text before prayer would be, “my friends, it is important for us to give thanks to God for all that He has done for us. He gives us food, clothes, money, shelter, etc. the list is endless.” after this I pray a short prayer like this: “Dear heavenly father, we thank you for everything you have given us. We thank you for the gift of education. I invite you at this time to be our teacher. In Jesus’ name I do pray, Amen.” This is how the devotion ends. It normally takes five minutes and yet it is very effective. In this prayer I try to show students that I am not the main teacher but God is.

Respect and Dignity to Students

During and after the lecture I try to treat these students with respect and dignity. How do I do this? Firstly, I try to address them as colleagues using the term brother to males and sister to females. They develop a sense of acceptance and freedom in the lecture. Their attitude towards me changes; they look at me as a friend. As we get to know each other, they come to meet me not only for academic issues but also for personal issues.

Secondly, when they ask a question, I do not rebuke them by saying this is a foolish question. I appreciate them for the questions and then I lead them to discover the answer together with me. I do not just tell them the right answers immediately. Next time whenever they have a question they feel free to ask because they know that I have a positive attitude towards them.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

So far I have written with how I deal with a variety of students I teach Biblical Hermeneutics to. Two of the methodologies I use have to do with beginning every class with Bible reading and prayer. Finally treating them with respect and dignity as colleagues during and after class is my other way of enhancing spiritual development.

In the main sections of the essay, I have defined hermeneutics. I tackled the topic of how to understand the scriptures. I discussed the authority of the bible. I also talked about how a lecturer can maintain a sound biblical stance in his teaching of Biblical Hermeneutics, and finally how to help students develop spiritually in the Biblical Hermeneutics class.

Assuming that the students who take Biblical Hermeneutics course have a meaningful relationship with God is a mistake. Spiritual development is not a one-time experience; it is a process that needs to be enhanced from time to time. Therefore, it is important in every class presentation to find small windows to deepen faith in the lives of our students because the goal is not just to prepare them for the jobs of this world, but to help them to attain eternal life in Jesus Christ.

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