Sapientia Global Journal of Arts, Humanities and Development Studies (SGOJAHDS), Vol.3 No.4 December, 2020; p.g. 179 – 186; ISSN: 2695-2319 (Print); ISSN: 2695-2327 (Online)

AN EXEGESIS OF 2 TIMOTHY 2:14-18 AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR BIBLICAL INTERPRETERS IN AFRICA.

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Abstract

It is widely acknowledged that the church in Africa is well established but one of her challenges is the misinterpretation of the Bible. This has posed a serious threat for them to maintain sound teaching. This paper opined that interpreters are solely responsible for the right or wrong interpretation of the Bible. It is profitable for the church when the interpreters interpret the Bible rightly and it is dangerous and harmful to Christian faith and living when the interpreters fail to do it rightly. This paper examines the admonition of Paul to Timothy as the interpreter of scripture in 2 Timothy 2:14-18 as a guide for Biblical interpreters to handle correctly the Bible and not to distort it. Exegesis -descriptive method was adopted in carrying out this study. It was discovered that to be a competent interpreter of the Bible, one needs a variety of qualifications, both natural and acquired. When these are lacking or deficient in an interpreter, it will affect his approach to the Bible. Therefore, it is recommended that 2 Timothy 2:14-18 should be a model in terms of task, lifestyle and training for Biblical interpreters in Africa.

Keywords: Church, Interpreter, Bible, faith, Africa.

Introduction

The task of interpreting the scripture is the primary responsibility of the church. Kaiser quoted John Albert Bengel's observation on the church's responsibility to interpret the Bible and its importance.

> The church is the guardian of Scripture. When the church is in strong health, the light of the scripture shines bright; when the church is sick, scripture is corroded by neglect…As a rule, how Scripture is being treated is in exact correspondence with the condition of the church (Kaiser, 1981:7).

The church has handed this responsibility to her ministers. Though every reader of the Bible is an interpreter but not all are skillful interpreters. The church ministers are expected to be skilled interpreters. They have the responsibility to preach and teach scripture accurately and also ensure the people on their own can interpret the scripture and detect misinterpretation of any text when listening to a sermon or Bible teaching.

To be a good interpreter of the Bible, one must possess certain qualities. Therefore, this paper examines Paul's admonition or charge to Timothy as an interpreter of the Bible in 2 Timothy 2:14-18 and its implications to contemporary interpreters of the Bible especially in Africa.

Exegesis of second Timothy 2:14-18.

Second Timothy is one of the three epistles designated Pastoral epistles. These three books (1 and 2 Timothy and Titus) of the canon of Scripture form a distinct unit known as the Pastoral Epistles. The name was first applied to 1 Timothy in 1274 by Thomas Aquinas, who said, This letter is as it were a pastoral rule which the apostle delivered to Timothy . . . in the second letter he deals with pastoral care which should be so great that it will even accept martyrdom for the sake of the care of the flock (2Timothy-cottrell.pdf, 4/9.2013). The title really came in 1726 when a scholar named Paul Anton gave a series of lectures in which he referred to 1 & 2 Timothy and Titus as the Pastoral Epistles (2 Timothy-cottrell.pdf, 4/9.2013).

The traditional view is that Paul the apostle was the author of the letters, but, beginning in the nineteenth century, many critical scholars began questioning this accepted position. It is the position of this paper that Paul is probably the author 2 Timothy, and that he wrote it after he was released from prison and was then arrested a second time. 2 Timothy is a personal letter; Paul did not expect the church to read it as he did 1 Timothy (2 Timothy 4:22).
The Text

Greek Version of 2 Timothy 2:14-18
14 Ταῦτα ὑπομίμνῃσκε, διαμαρτυρόμενος ἐνώπιον τοῦ κυρίου, μὴ λογομαχεῖν, ἐπ᾽ οὐδὲν χρήσιμον, ἐπὶ καταστροφῇ τῶν ἀκουόντων. 15 σπούδασον σεαυτὸν δόκιμον παραστῆσαι τῷ θεῷ, ἐργάτην ἀνεπαίσχυντον, ὀρθοτομοῦντα τὸν λόγον τῆς ἀληθείας. 16 τὰς δὲ βεβήλους κενοφωνίας περιΐστασο · ἐπὶ πλεῖον γὰρ προκόψουσιν ἀσεβείας, 17 καὶ ὁ λόγος αὐτῶν ὡς γάγγραινα νομὴν ἕξει · ὧν ἐστιν Ὑμέναιος καὶ Φίλητος, 18 οἵτινες περὶ τὴν ἀλήθειαν ἠστόχησαν, λέγοντες ἀνάστασιν ἤδη γεγονέναι, καὶ ἀνατρέπουσιν τήν τινων πίστιν.

English versions of 2 Timothy 2:14-18
14 Keep reminding God's people of these things. Warn them before God against quarrelling about words; it is of no value, and only ruins those who listen. 15 Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth. 16 Avoid godless chatter because those who indulge in it will become more and more ungodly. 17 Their teaching will spread like gangrene. Among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus, 18 who have departed from the truth. They say that the resurrection has already taken place, and they destroy the faith of some. (New International Version.NIV)

Background of 2 Timothy 2:14-18

2 Timothy 2:14-18 form part of the structure of 2 Timothy 2:14-4:8 which constitutes the second main division in the body of 2 Timothy. In 1:1-2:13 Paul has been speaking directly, personally, to Timothy on the ministry he has received from Lord. He concluded the section with the faithful saying (2:11-13) on faithfulness and danger of apostasy.

Paul moves into a specific discussion of the Ephesian church problem, the heretical teachers or interpreters. William D. Mounce noted that while Paul is thinking of the opponents and their teachings, he is thinking primarily of Timothy and how he should conduct himself (Mounce, 2000, 522), in other to refute the heretical teachers and their teachings. 2 Timothy 2:14-18 form a paragraph of instructions. These instructions are warnings (vs 14, 16-17)

commands or admonitions (vs 15) concerning his ministry, especially the ministry of the word.

There was a presence of false teachers who distort the Gospel with a wrong interpretation of the scripture and their character or conduct. Paul warns Timothy not to follow their evil ways. Graig Keener observed that in the early church the false teachers could easily have their way because only a few were skilled enough in the scriptures to discern truth from error for themselves, rather than dependent on others teaching(Keener,1993:627). There were interpreters but only a few were skilful to correctly interpret the scripture. The teachings of the false teachers are characterized by two things; disputing about the words (vs. 14) and godless chatter (vs. 16). Paul made mention of two such false teachers, Hymenaeus (1Timothy 1:20) and Philetus (vs 17). In response to the wrong handling of the scripture which resulted in heretical teaching in the Ephesian church, Paul exhorts Timothy to strive to handle the word of truth with correctness.

Exposition and Meaning

Vs 14. Ταῦτα ὑπομίμνησκε, διαμαρτυρόμενος ἐνώπιον τοῦ κυρίου, μὴ λογομαχεῖν, ἐπ' οὐδὲν χρήσιμον, ἐπὶ καταστροφῇ τῶν ἀκουόντων. "Keep reminding God's people of these things. Warn them before God against quarreling about words; it is of no value, and only ruins those who listen."

In the light of the call to perseverance and the consequences of the apostasy (2:11-13), Timothy is to charge the Ephesian Christians to stop their senseless quarreling about words. The reason for the charge is the result of the heresy, nothing beneficial is produced; it results only in the ruin of those who listen to it. Mounce noted the same idea of prohibition and result is repeated in vs 23(Mounce, 2000:523).The Ephesian heresy is pictured throughout Pastoral Epistle as having little substance being merely a quibbling about words. Paul is not saying that arguing is wrong but that Timothy should not argue about words that result only in uselessness and ruin. Special attention needs to be given to the word 'value' and 'ruin' in this verse (vs 14) because they are very significant in determining the essence of the verse. The word "value" as used in this verse only occurs here in the New Testament. The verse stands in contrast to Titus 3:8 which states that those who believe in God should devote themselves to good works and that the result of this good work is profitable.

The word, καταστροφῇ, "ruin or destruction" occurs elsewhere in the New Testament only in a questionable reading of 2 Peter 2:6, stating that God Condemned Sodom and Gomorrah to ruin. Etymologically it means "turning upside down" and hence is the antithesis of edification (Mounce, 2000:524). In LXX the word speaks of destruction or overthrown of men or cities (Vincent, n.d: 301). Therefore arguing about words ruins those who listen and participate in the arguments.

Vs 15. σπούδασον σεαυτὸν δόκιμον παραστῆσαι τῷ θεῷ, ἐργάτην ἀνεπαίσχυντον, ὀρθοτομοῦντα τὸν λόγον τῆς ἀληθείας. "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth." This verse is the central focus of this paper with the emphasis on the word "ὀρθοτομοῦντα" *orthotomeo*. While verses 14, 16-18 are considered as the immediate context.

Paul's main emphasis in this verse is on accurate representation of the Gospel (vs15) in contrast to the empty words and its dangers. (14, 16-18).

As for Timothy, he was to do his best to do three things, get God's approval, be an unashamed worker and to correctly handle the word of truth. The word "best" literally means " to be zealous"(Walvoord and Zuck eds,1983: 754). "make haste" (Vincent, n.d: 301). King James Version uses "study" in place of "best" which is considered misleading in today's English (Mounce, 2000:524). This misleading was explained by Donald Guthrie that the word "study" misses the notion of the persistent zeal of the word σπούδασον (Guthrine, 1989:147). The word 'study' means to read or study a book but the Greek word used here is '*spoudazo*', which literally means zealous or make haste. Timothy is to be zealous or make haste to do the three things required of him. He was to present himself as an unashamed worker. The word "present" is only used here in Pastoral Epistles and 2 Tim. 4:17.

Timothy is to take pains to present himself before God as one who has been tested and found to be genuine. The word "ἀνεπαίσχυντον" "does not need to be ashamed" means "not made ashamed as in Philippians 1:20"(Guthrine, 1989:147). A workman whose work does not disgrace him. Paul had spoken of shame before men (2 Tim. 1:8, 12:16); far worse is a shame before God. Donald Guthrie noted that the shame that any workman feels when the incompetence or shoddiness of his work is detected is used as a figure for the Christian ministry. He concluded that a workman that does not need to be ashamed must be understood in the sense of a Christian teacher who can unblushingly submit his work for God's approval, like the men in the parable of the talents who had gained other talents (Guthrine, 1989:147).

The word "ὀρθοτομοῦντα" *orthotomeo* "who correctly handles the word of truth" is the main emphasis of this passage and the most difficult issues in the verse as observed by Mounce is the precise meaning of it (Mounce, 2000: 525). It denotes figuratively to dissect (expound), correctly (divine message), rightly dividing, to cut straight (Zodhiates, 2008; 2202). Its synonym is "to be true" while its antonyms are "to pervert, twist, to lead astray, to deceive by falsehood, to distort" (Zodhiates, 1993:1057).

The word *orthotomeo* occurs in the Greek Bible only at Prov. 3:6; 11:5 and 2 Timothy 2:15. Underlying it is the phrase *temno hodon*, "to lay down away", to open a way", " to build a road"(Bromiley,1985: 1170). It is used in Prov. 3:6 and 11:5 in connection with cutting a path in a straight direction, the idea is that of cutting a path through a forest or difficult terrain so that the traveller may go directly to his destination (Brown, 1978:352). In later Jewish writings *orthotomeo* does not occur but other terms covey the idea of the right way, now more closely equated with the commandments (Bromiley, 1985: 1170). Colin Brown noted that the phrase may be compared with Plato, Laws 7, and 801E: to proceed along the way of legislation which has been cleared by our present discourse" (Brown, 1978: 352).

Orthotomeo is used figuratively in this verse to mean to handle correctly, skillfully, to correctly teach the word of truth (Zodhiates, 2008; 2202).Handling the Word of Truth in an upright fashion, carefully, skillfully, and correctly as distinct from those who engage in useless theological chatter, Timothy is to do what is right relative to the word of truth. The meaning of this could be to guide the word of truth along a straight path, like a road that goes straight to its goal.

Two basic interpretations of the word "ὀρθοτομοῦντα" fit the contextual needs of Timothy's stance contrasted with the Ephesian myths and opponents. First, the right interpretation of the gospel. This is the primary contrast between the rightness of the gospel as interpreted by Paul for Timothy and the wrongness of what is taught by the opponents arguing about words. Second, the right behaviour in line with the gospel. The emphasis is on Timothy's behaviour, that it be in line with the gospel and that it be in contrast to the opponents (Mounce, 2000: 525).

Vs 16.τὰς δὲ βεβήλους κενοφωνίας περιϊστασο · ἐπὶ πλεῖον γὰρ προκόψουσιν ἀσεβείας, "Avoid godless chatter, because those who indulge in it will become more and more ungodly" This verse is one of the three verses that deal with warning instructions about what Timothy should not do or avoid in his attempt to combat the heretical teachers. Part of correctly handling the word of truth is avoiding the Ephesian heresy, the arguing about words, which is really chattering. Reason to avoid them is that the heretical teachers are moving toward ungodliness and will carry their followers with them. On this Chrysostom as quoted by Mounce emphasizes that what appears to be a single error will produce multiple evils, hence advancing. For it appears indeed to be solitary evil, but see what evils spring out of it (Mounce, 2000: 526).

The word "avoid" Originally means, to place round; to stand around. In the middle voice, to turn one's self about, as to avoid something.(Vincent, n.d: 300). The word is parallel to Jesus' statement "Do not throw your pearls before swine" (Matthew 7:6) in certain situations are avoided. Paul uses the same phrase "godless chatter." In 1 Timothy 6:20 about "the opposing arguments of what is falsely called 'knowledge. It describes talk that is in direct opposition to God. It is synonymous with senseless babble (1Timothy 1:6), profane and silly myths (1Timothy 4:7) and empty words. They describe the Ephesian heresy, emphasizing its lack of content, and as elsewhere Paul encourages Titus to stay away from it. (Titus 3:9). Their speech is "irreligious and frivolous hairsplitting"(Mounce, 2000: 526).

Vs 17. καὶ ὁ λόγος αὐτῶν ὡς γάγγραινα νομὴν ἕξει · ὧν ἐστιν Ὑμέναιος καὶ Φίλητος, "Their teaching will spread like gangrene. Among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus" Another reason Timothy and the Ephesian church must avoid the godless chatter of the heretical teachers is because the sickening effects of their teaching will spread throughout the church as if it were gangrene in a body. The false teachers are advancing in ungodliness, and their teaching is eating away the spiritual flesh of the church. Gangrene is an infection of the bloodstream that not only spreads rapidly through the body but smells horribly. Foul, suppurating wounds keep increasing in size, so that it is one of the most difficult problems to handle, medically. God's view of a church squabble is that it spreads like gangrene. It smells bad, it spreads quickly, and a whole congregation can be infected by it. To prevent the spreads of this infection in the church Walvoord and Zuck suggested that "they must be amputated instead"(Walvoord and Zuck, 1978: 754.) Paul identified two of them by name: Philetus and Hymenaeus. Nothing is known of Philetus but Hymenaeus is mentioned in 1Timothy 1:20, whom Paul had already delivered over to Satan for chastisement. The two names were singled out presumably they were the leaders of the heretical group.

Vs.18 οἵτινες περὶ τὴν ἀλήθειαν ἠστόχησαν, λέγοντες ἀνάστασιν ἤδη γεγονέναι, καὶ ἀνατρέπουσιν τήν τινων πίστιν. "who have departed from the truth. They say that the resurrection has already taken place, and they destroy the faith of some."

This verse is a continuation of vs 17b, here the actions and teaching of Philetus and Hymenaeus were mentioned. This is one of the few places in Pastoral Epistles where the content of the heresy is specified and it functions as an example of the spread of the opponents diseased teaching(Mounce,2000: 526). Philetus and Hymenaeus have departed from the truth which means concerning the truth they have missed the mark regarding the crucial doctrine of the resurrection. The preaching of the bodily resurrection is the central element in Paul's theology. To deny the bodily resurrection is to deny Christ's resurrection, and if Christ is not raised, the gospel message is empty (1 Cor.15:12-17). To deny the resurrection is to deny the truth of the gospel. The Greek Philosophers typically viewed the soul as immortal and the body as its temporal prison. The idea of physical resurrection of the body for both Christ and Christians was therefore foreign and difficult for them to accept. Hence there was a natural tendency toward heresies of bodily resurrection. Therefore, the heresy of Philetus and Hymenaeus probably involved the idea that the resurrection was a purely spiritual affair which occurred at conversion or baptism (Walvoord and Zuck, 1978: 754).

The Implications of 2 Timothy 2:14-18 for Biblical Interpreters

The following are clearly expressed in 2 Timothy 2:14-18 for Biblical interpreters.

The task of Biblical interpreters

Biblical interpreters have the task of accurate interpretation of the Bible, preservation of the truth of the Bible and guiding Christians to be able to interpret the Bible on their own. The word *orthotometho* foremost indicates handling the word of truth correctly. Many interpreters handle or interpret the Bible but not correctly. Many for obvious reasons misinterpret the Bible but Africa Biblical interpreters have a responsibility to accurately interpret it.

The emphasis on the accurate interpretation of the Bible is against heresy and the dangers of misinterpretation in the church. Preservation of the truth was of great concerns to the Apostles because of the danger that false teachers posed to the Christian faith. To preserve Biblical truths in the church false teaching through misinterpretation must be refuted. This can be possible just as Paul instructed Timothy, the interpreter must handle correctly the word of truth (2 Timothy 2:15) (Jimoh, 2019: 5).

Biblical interpreters have the task to train others in gaining understanding and simple procedure of interpreting the Bible. It should not be the exclusive responsibility of few but every Christian should be adequately equipped to interpret the Bible (Jimoh, 2019:146-147).

The lifestyle of Biblical interpreters

Another dimension of the word *orthotometho* is the conformity of the lifestyles of Biblical interpreters with the truth of the Bible. Their lifestyle must not contradict the gospel. Their life must demonstrate a strong faith in God. Many interpret the Bible but do not live by its principle. They are not just scholars of the Bible full of knowledge but those whose behaviours and characters reflect the truth. The interpreters must have deep desires to obey the Bible.

The skillfulness of Biblical interpreters

The task of interpreting the Bible requires skills in observing principles that lead or guide the process. Biblical interpreters in Africa must be acquainted with the required principles and processes to be able to relate the scripture to African understanding. Many have misinterpreted the Bible because such principle has been neglected just as Cletus C. Orgu noted that one of the reasons many have faltered in the task of interpreting the scripture is the assumption that it can be interpreted without observing the principles of interpretation (Orgu, 2019:15).The word *orthotometho* indicates that handling the word of truth correctly requires skills and principles to follow. Rightly dividing just does not happen by chance, but is a skill developed and mastered. These are required so that the hearers will not be led astray. There is a tendency that the truth can be distorted, people could be deceived and led astray, and the intended meaning and message of the truth could be lost if the skill and principles involved in handling the word correctly are not applied. The ultimate goal of biblical interpretation is to make plain the meaning of a text.

The training of Biblical Interpreters

The skill of Bible interpretation requires training especially Theological education. One of the main causes for misinterpretation of Biblical texts is lack of Theological training. Many are involved in interpreting the scripture in Africa that are not train to do so. Many perceived theological training as anti-spiritual that accounted for negative growth of the church. The belief is that once one has the Holy Spirit, he or she does not need principles for Bible interpretation. It is considered that the art of interpreting Biblical texts is not spiritual but mere academic exercise. It is quite true that the Holy Spirit is needed in Interpreting Biblical texts but not without the needed principles. The Holy Spirit does not give the principles; there are skills to acquire through theological training (Jimoh, 2019: 138).

The diligence of Biblical interpreters

The skill of interpreting the scripture requires commitment, mental alert, diligent and not to be lazy. The use of the word “do your best" by Paul in 2 Timothy 2:15 means to be zealous. It is marked by careful unremitting attention or persistent application. This implies that an interpreter of the scripture requires time and devotion in studying the Bible and other related materials. While other materials should not replace the Bible as Carl B. Gibbs advised, they provide information that one might not have the time, resources, or capacity to find otherwise (Gibbs, 1994: 39).

Conclusion

One of the pastoral duties of Timothy is teaching which involves interpretation of the Scripture. This made him an interpreter of the scripture. His role as an interpreter is to guide the word of truth along a straight path and not to turn aside into devious paths of deceiving interpretation and not to confuse the hearers. He was charged by Paul to put all his effort into achieving that responsibility. This has become a model and example for Biblical interpreters in Africa whose responsibility is not to change, pervert, mutilate or distort the Bible, neither do they use the Bible with the wrong purpose in mind.

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