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THE TASK OF BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION IN NIGERIA: PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS

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Abstract

One of the challenges of the Church in Nigeria is the misinterpretation of the Bible. The interpretation of biblical texts continues to be a matter of great interest and significance in the life of the church and the Christian faith because the Bible is fundamental to Christian faith and practices. This paper focuses on the current trends of Biblical interpretation in the Nigerian church. The historical-Survey method was employed in carrying out this study. It was discovered that it is profitable for the church when the Bible is interpreted correctly and dangerous and harmful to the Christian faith and living when it is not done rightly. Therefore, the church in Nigeria as a matter of urgency must give attention to adequate training of its ministers on the art of Biblical interpretation.

Keywords: Holy Bible, Biblical Interpretation, Nigerian Church, Christian Faith, Current Trends.

Introduction

The task of interpreting the scripture is the primary responsibility of the church. Kaiser (1981,1) 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.

Interpreting the Bible accurately is a challenging task and yet the Bible is meant to be understood and applied in the daily lives of Christians if it is to be a guide for faith and practice. Today, there are lots of doctrines and practices among Christians as a result of different approaches to Biblical interpretation. Mary Getui (2001, 182) observed that the Bible and its interpretation have made it a divisive factor in African Christianity and responsible for the springing up of denominations. New denominations are springing up today in various countries in Africa. In Nigeria for instance, there are funning names of churches such as; Run for your Life Ministry, Helicopter of Christ Ministry, Laboratory Church of God, Elshaddai shall not die Ministries etc. Biblical interpretation is the soul of theology. Christian theology, therefore, succeeds or fails in direct proportion to its ability to render true interpretations of the written word of God (Vanhoozer, 2005, 89).

The Nigerian Church is in the midst of a dynamic revival. Gary Maxey and Peter Ozodo (2017, 40) noted that Nigeria has witnessed the emergence of a vibrant church that is self-governing,

self-propagating, self-financing and to a large degree self theologizing since independence. Nigeria has emerged as the fastest-growing church and the most vibrant. Today, Nigeria has the largest number of Christians in Africa (Gwamna, 2008, 189). Despite this growth, observations indicate that the growing trends of popular theology and hermeneutical blunders pose a serious challenge to Christianity in Nigeria. These trends manifest in Christian songs, prayers, sermons or preaching, teachings, stickers, posters, and literature among others (Gwamna, 2008, 189).

The Task of Biblical Interpretation

The Greek word translated "interpret" in Luke 24:27 is related to the English word " Hermeneutics" Hermeneutics is the science of interpretation. The terms 'hermeneutics and interpretation' are often used interchangeably to refer to the process of determining the meaning and significance of a text. Biblical hermeneutics is the study of the basic principles and procedures for faithfully and accurately interpreting God's word. So the two terms could be regarded as the same and the concept of one could be viewed as the concept of the other. Sinclair Ferguson (1998, 117) considered Biblical hermeneutics as part or an aspect of the field of hermeneutics. According to him, Biblical hermeneutics is the study of the principles of interpretation of the book of the Bible. It is part of the broader field of hermeneutics, which involves the study of principles of interpretation for all forms of communication. Anand Spencer (1997,157) affirmed that hermeneutics is a science which helps in establishing the rules, principles and methodologies for the interpretation of religion and its Scripture, and also its relation to society. Therefore, biblical hermeneutics is the art or technique of interpreting the biblical text to understand its original context and then find its contemporary meaning.

The primary and basic task of Biblical interpretation is to discover what God has said in scripture; to determine the meaning of the Word of God. It is a search for "the plain meaning of the text"(Fee and Stuart, 1989, 14). The ultimate is to determine the meaning of a passage in its original context and Contextualization of the same. Berkeley Mickelsen (1963, 5) expressed that "the task of interpreters of the Bible is to find out the meaning of a statement (command, question) for the author and the first hearers or readers, and thereupon to transmit that meaning to modern readers". The task of discovering the original intended meaning is called exegesis.

Modern critics increasingly deny the very possibility of discovering the original or intended meaning of a text. The problem is that while the original authors had a definite meaning in mind when they wrote, that is now lost because they are no longer present to clarify and explain what they wrote. The modern reader cannot study the text from the ancient perspective but constantly reads into that passage's modern perspective. Therefore, critics argue, objective interpretation is impossible and the author's intended meaning is forever lost to today's reader. Every community provides traditions to guide the reader in comprehending a text, and these produce meaning. That "meaning" differs from community to community, so in actuality, any passage might have multiple meanings, and each is valid for a particular reading perspective or community (Osborne, 2006, 22).

The secondary task is to bridge the gap between then and now. Peter Kuzmic (1995,16) refers to the gaps between the writer and reader as the "then and there"" here and now" then and

there in the sense of the writer's (original) place and time of writing and the 'here and now' in the sense of today's reader's place and time. Time and distance have thrown up barriers between today's readers of the Bible and the writers, which block the understanding of the biblical text. These barriers or gaps may obscure the message or the meaning of the writer from the reader. Therefore, to gain an understanding of the plain meaning of the text the barriers between the writer and reader must be removed which necessitated biblical interpretation.

The Bible was originally written to people who lived in a different place, in a very different culture, at a different time and period of history, and who spoke different languages. It also contains several different types of literature (called genres). To interpret properly the 'then and there' of the Biblical texts, one must not only know some general rules that apply to all the words of the bible, but one needs to learn the special rules that apply to each of these literary forms (genetic) (Kuzmic, 1995, 16).

Problems of Biblical Interpretation In Nigeria

Lack of Theological Training

The skill of Bible interpretation requires training, especially theological education. One of the main causes for misinterpretation of Biblical texts is the lack of Theological training. Many are involved in interpreting the scripture but are not trained to do so. Many perceived theological training as anti-Spiritual which accounted for the negative growth of the church. The belief is that once you have the Holy Spirit, you do not need principles for Bible interpretation. It is considered that the art of interpreting Biblical texts is not a spiritual but a 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, they are skills acquired through theological training (Jimoh, 2019, 138).

Anderson Allan (2004, 243) observed that the main criteria for selection and ordination of leaders/Pastors of Pentecostal churches are evidence of a call to the ministry and spirituality rather than intellectual abilities or ministerial skills. Lack of intellectual abilities especially in interpreting the Bible is making many commit errors in handling the scripture. When unqualified or untrained persons are given a platform to handle the scripture, at times they expressed their distorted views. In this way, wrong opinions of the Bible's meaning are perpetuated among the general populace and within local assemblies.

Laziness

Handling Biblical texts correctly requires time, mental alertness, the right judgement and effort in reading and studying the Bible. Some ministers and Christians are lazy and less than diligent when studying the Bible. Some are trained theologically but as a result of laziness still, misinterpret the Bible. Some depended more on their theological training and become lazy in their study. In other words, they are not growing in knowledge. Laziness brings procrastination, poor preparation in handling the scripture, faulty logic and lack of thoroughness. Many Pastors would prefer spending more time in prayers than studying the Bible and relevant materials that aid proper understanding of the Bible.

Environmental Conditioning

The unpleasant situation of the country may have contributed to the misinterpretation of Biblical texts by some Pentecostal ministers. The poor economy and insecurity in Nigeria demand attention. In attempts to solve problems, some ministers adapted scripture to address those issues without considering the context of the scripture being used. The situation of the country determines some people's interest in what kind of messages they listened to. They are not interested in sound interpretation but show more interest in the application of the scripture that will meet their immediate needs. Therefore some Pentecostal ministers take that advantage to tell them what they wanted to hear whether it is correct or not.

Personal Interest

Some out of self-interest intentionally distort the message of the Bible. They teach what they are paid to teach, whether it is right or not. Some have no integrity or regard for truth, so they handle the Bible dishonestly. Many are into church business, they are not in the ministry to teach the truth but using it as a means to get what they wanted. They can teach anything as much as they have their desire satisfied. This is collaborated by Olusegun Fakoya as quoted by Joshua O. Ayeni (2019, 51) He described some Pentecostals as

A modern-day commercial enterprise garbed in the cloak of religion with deception and exploitation at its foundation; its goal is the complete monetization of the ignorance of its multitude of adherents. It is nothing short of liberal market Christianity having prosperity from merchandising the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.

End Time Syndrome

The misinterpretation today is one of the signs of the end time. Paul has warned that "For the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths" (2 Timothy 4:3-4, NIV). This is the end-time Paul spoke about when a segment of the Christian community is not only losing their appetite for sound doctrine but developing distaste for it. The desire is toward a distinct taste for a doctrine that is unwholesome, preferring a self-help style of teaching over the teaching of sound doctrine. The craving and demand for these fanciful messages by those with "itching ears" are producing large numbers of newly fashioned teachers with restyled messages. The mixture of truth and falsehood that these teachers are delivering is leading a large segment of people into a distorted perception of who the Christ of the Bible is.

Lack of Basic Tools for Interpretation

Many ministers lack the needed tools for interpreting Biblical Texts such as studying Bible, exegetical commentary and Bible dictionaries. It is believed that the Bible and the Holy Spirit are sufficient and there is no need for assisted materials to aid sound interpretation. They lack materials that will assist in understanding the historical background, context and Biblical languages. It may not be possible to have all tools but the ministers must have the basic ones. Many are ignorant of these tools, and when the right tools are not used it will be difficult to get some information that will lead to sound interpretation.

The Prospects of Biblical Interpretation in Nigeria

Upholding the Authority of the Bible

Biblical interpretation in Nigeria will enable the church to uphold the authority of the bible for faith and practices. An accurate interpretation of the Bible affirms its authority but is eroded when not properly interpreted. According to Wilund (2022), the authority of Scripture means every word and stroke of the Bible possesses the authority of God and the right to rule the hearts, minds, and bodies of every inhabitant of the earth.

The right interpretation of the Bible should guide matters of doctrines and practices, not administrative principles. The church in Nigeria should leave the matter of doctrines, issues that have no clear postilion based on cultural differences, and theological issues to those who are competent Biblical interpreters. Theological issues in the church should not be left in the hands of laymen to decide for the church.

Sound Preaching and Teaching

The church in Nigeria must be reinforced and strengthened by consistent, accurate preaching and teaching of the scriptures. This requires not only a commitment to the Bible study but also careful attention to the principles of interpretation of Biblical texts that expand one's mind to understand the truth and restrict imagination from going beyond it.

Ministers will not only depend on the Holy Spirit for preaching and teaching but will develop the skill of interpreting the scripture. The task of interpreting the Bible requires skills in observing principles that lead or guide the process. Many have misinterpreted the Bible because such a principle has been neglected. As Orgu(2019,5) 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.

Sound teaching should reflect in church teaching material, manuals for discipleship, literature, prayers and music The Church should ensure that those in charge of curriculum development, writers of Sunday school materials and discipleship materials are trained theologically, especially in the art of interpreting the scripture. This is necessary because they write for the church on the spiritual maturity of members. If the writers are not knowledgeable in principles of interpretation, there is a tendency for them to mishandle the scripture. Any error committed by them will make many commit the same.

Equipping Christians with the skills of interpretation

In the Middle Ages in the history of the church not all had access to study the bible by themselves. Bible interpretation was exclusively the responsibility of the Priest. Every bible reader is an interpreter but not all are competent interpreters. Churches should ensure their members and leaders know the principles of interpretation. This should involve training them in interpretive techniques. The training content should include the basic concept of interpretation, basic tools for interpretation, principles of interpretation and process of interpretation.

Christians should read and study Bible personally and be interested to know the meaning of the scripture. They should be able to detect wrong interpretations when listening to sermons,

teachings, prayers and songs. All Christians should have theological training not necessarily to become a pastor but to be able to understand and interpret the scripture.

Conclusion

The Bible is the foundational document of the Christian faith. As in any kind of communication, understanding the message is critical. The Bible communicates in various ways and serves many purposes. But if the Bible is to retain its integrity and potency as God's communication to his people, one must understand the intention of its message. To comprehend this revelation the Bible account must be interpreted accurately. This will enable one to discover the knowledge and insight that God wanted for mankind.

Sound interpretation of Biblical Interpretation is beneficial to the church while misinterpretation is harmful to Christian faith and life. The benefits are evidenced in sound teaching, godly and righteously living, a proper understanding of God's demands, spiritual formation of the Christian life, a better understanding of worship and preservation of doctrinal values. It checkmates false teachers. When the truth of the Bible is distorted as a result of ignorance or self fish reasons it brings harmful effects such as an ungodly lifestyle, improper understanding of God and erroneous beliefs and practices.

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