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Teaching the Bible as Scripture in an Academic Setting

Roger Mohrlang
Professor Emeritus of Biblical Studies, Whitworth University, rmohrlang@whitworth.edu

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A BIBLE TEACHER'S DILEMMA

Roger Mohrlang
Professor Emeritus of Biblical Studies
Whitworth University

My job is to teach the Bible to university students. It is a job I love. The Bible is my life, my passion, and my joy—and I never tire of the challenge of teaching it effectively and well. But I have often asked myself what it means to teach the Bible effectively and well in an *academic* setting.

As a professor of biblical studies at a Christian liberal arts university, I frequently feel as if I am living in two quite different worlds. On the one hand, I am an academic working at an academic institution. I constantly deal with critical questions as I teach my students to read the Bible with understanding and (I hope) some degree of sophistication. My job, in part, is to develop their minds.

On the other hand, I am a Christian believer, serving Jesus Christ, his Church, and the Christian mission of the university. I constantly deal with spiritual issues as I teach my students how to read the Bible as sacred Scripture, with reverence and open hearts. My job, in part, is to develop their spiritual sensitivities.

Academy and Church, mind and heart, human and divine: however is one to live in both worlds simultaneously? Perhaps Tertullian was right: "What has Jerusalem to do with Athens, the Church with the Academy . . . ?" [i] How are we to teach the Bible as sacred Scripture in an *academic* setting? The values of the two worlds are so different: the academic world, with its emphasis on critical inquiry, rational skepticism, and (now) the diversity of postmodern perspectives (feminist, ethnic, postcolonial, etc.), seems far removed from a believing community concerned with evangelism and discipleship, with its emphasis on wholehearted commitment to Jesus Christ and the transformation of the believer's heart and life.

I suspect some pastors face similar dilemmas in the church. How is one to teach the Bible to educated lay people who are fascinated with biblical criticism and the diversity of modern-day hermeneutics, when their deepest need is to hear the life-transforming Word? And how does one go about teaching Scripture to skeptics?

Let me tell you, very briefly, how I deal with the challenge of teaching sacred Scripture on a university campus. I begin with three basic assumptions: (1) the Bible has both human and divine dimensions to its composition; (2) good teaching of the Bible must take account of both, if the Bible is to be understood correctly; (3) the study of the human dimension must always serve the more ultimate purposes of the divine—the Word of God.

Because the biblical text was written by humans like ourselves, we have to read and analyze it critically, just as we would any other human writing. To understand a given text, we must do our exegetical homework. We have to assess textual variants. We have to inquire into the background and setting of the text, and its structure, grammar, semantics, style, and purpose. We have to look at it from both historical and literary points of view and examine its relationship to other texts. The human dimension of Scripture requires that we learn to read the text carefully, think about it rigorously, and ask a myriad of tough critical questions—and this demands exacting academic analysis. Here, the goal is to *understand* the biblical text and to avoid misunderstanding it.

But because the Bible is the Word of God and not simply a collection of human writings ("All Scripture is inspired by God," 2 Tim 3:16[ii]), we have to learn, above all, to listen to the voice of the living God speaking to us through it. The divine dimension of Scripture requires that we approach the Bible with simple, open hearts, that we read it reverently and prayerfully, and that we listen to it eagerly and obediently; and this demands a humble submission to its message and authority as sacred Scripture. Here, the goal is to *receive* the words of Scripture—to let them speak to us, convert us, transform us, and empower us.

Because of the dual nature of the Bible, then, evangelical teachers of Scripture must teach their students to approach it in two quite different ways, engaging two different epistemologies (intellectual and spiritual), if they are to read it rightly. *But precisely because the Bible is sacred Scripture, the study of the human dimension must always serve the more ultimate purposes of the Word of God.*[iii] Critical issues must be viewed as secondary, the divine Word as primary. Critical studies serve best when they facilitate the hearing of the Word of God—*that* is the primary goal. For the Christian teacher, the academic study of Scripture is never an end in itself; we pursue truth in order to grasp Truth, and to be transformed by it.

However, in academia, biblical studies easily comes to be dominated by a focus on the human dimension. Even in evangelical Christian institutions, students may find their teachers more interested in studying the background and human origins of the Bible and the plethora of contemporary human approaches to interpreting it, than in reflecting deeply and reverently on its thought (i.e. on its life-giving theology). All too easily the critical questions become the primary focus—whether historical-critical questions, literary-critical questions, or postmodern hermeneutical questions.

I must confess that, as the years have gone by since the days of my doctoral studies, I have become less and less enamored with the study of biblical criticism per se. Once, it was all new and fascinating to me, and I enjoyed introducing my students to its challenging

perspectives. Now, less sure of many of its "assured results" and the practical usefulness of some of it for teaching Scripture from a canonical perspective (i.e. as sacred Scripture), I think of it as playing more of a background role. I have found myself increasingly troubled by the priority given to critical questions in introductory biblical textbooks and the teaching of the Bible in Christian academia—a sentiment some of my colleagues may dismiss as simply naïve or jaundiced. To me, it is simply a wrong priority.

This is not to say, of course, that critical questions are irrelevant or unimportant. It is essential to engage in serious historical and literary study of the biblical text if one is to understand it accurately. At its best, such study can be fruitful in illuminating the theology of the text. (As a simple example, think of how the interpretation of the crucial passage Rom 7:14-25 is shaped by one's understanding of the point of the surrounding context.) So critical questions do indeed have their rightful place in the curriculum, and serious students of Scripture can and ought to learn all they can from them. (Of course, all such study requires theological discernment in assessing the wide range of responses to these questions today.) However, when critical questions come to *dominate* the syllabus or the classroom, the result can be a loss of focus on the Bible as sacred Scripture and inadequate preparation of students for Christian life and ministry. Students may come to feel more at home in analyzing the text critically than in reflecting on its meaning theologically and spiritually.

In part, this problem arises because biblical studies in much of the world is commonly done in an academic context. We teachers of the Bible are ourselves trained in academic institutions and are the products of graduate programs that focus on critical issues; we have been taught to think critically. It is no wonder, then, that many of us who teach Scripture ourselves are more at home in the world of academic investigation than in the world of theological and spiritual reflection. In many cases, our graduate studies have prepared us poorly for the crucial task of equipping students for Christian proclamation and ministry. I am reminded of the striking words of Julius Wellhausen (originator of the documentary hypothesis) when he resigned from his academic post in Old Testament at Greifswald in 1882:

> I became a theologian because I was interested in the scientific treatment of the Bible; it has only gradually dawned upon me that a professor of theology likewise has the practical task of preparing students for service in the Evangelical Church, and that I was not fulfilling this practical task, but rather . . . was incapacitating my hearers for their office.[iv]

If our interest in the critical study of the Bible fails to serve the more ultimate concerns and purposes of holy Scripture—to communicate the revealed Word of God—we too may be "incapacitating [our] hearers for their office."

If we take seriously the ultimate nature and authority of the Bible as sacred Scripture, then there are important implications for our teaching of the Bible in an academic setting. Let me suggest four of these implications, as I see them.

(1) If the primary and essential nature of the Bible is sacred Scripture, then the dominant focus of biblical teaching should be on its *theology*—its life-giving message—and not simply on the critical issues.[v] When critical issues are addressed, they are best treated not in isolation but in relation to the theology of the text. (Our job, in part, is to help students see how critical study can help to illuminate the theological meaning of a passage.) Even in a secular setting, one could argue that it is the *message* of the biblical writers that is most important for students to grasp, not simply the critical background issues. (Would the same not be true of a study of the writings of Marcion, or Marx, or Muhammad?) Whatever else we do with the biblical text, the first and most important task is to come to an appreciation of its theological thought and its spiritual significance.

Moreover, if we view Scripture as the canonical Word of God and not simply a collection of disparate voices, we will teach the Bible in its canonical context, showing the theological relation of the different parts to one another and to the whole.[vi] We will not treat the individual parts in isolation, but will attempt to show how they relate to the ultimate center of Scripture—Christ and the gospel. As Jesus says, "The Scriptures point to me!" (John 5:39) Thus, for the Christian, the Old Testament cannot be taught simply as the Hebrew Scriptures, independent of the New Testament; the two are inextricably linked, and the theological relationship should be drawn out. But here we must beware of simplistic thinking and shallow surface-level harmonization; the connections must be drawn on a much deeper level and with theological sophistication. We must respect the diversity of the biblical writings (compare, for example, the earthy pessimism of Ecclesiastes with the otherworldly "hope" of Paul's Letters), even as we seek to articulate their deeper unity.

Further, when focusing on the theology of the biblical text, we must explore it as deeply as we can. We who teach must not be content simply to repeat the wording of the text or to elaborate its specific teaching, but must reflect deeply on what it says or implies about God himself. Good teaching of the Bible is theologically rich teaching—and that requires that we not focus simply on the surface level of the text, but that we probe the depths of what it implies about the nature of God behind it. The paucity of good teaching and preaching today reflects the failure of contemporary teachers and preachers to reflect deeply on the theology of the Bible, and what it says or implies about God.[vii] Not all that goes by the name of "biblical teaching" is either theologically rich or deep; much that might be considered thoroughly evangelical is also thoroughly shallow.

(2) As sacred Scripture, the Bible should be taught with conviction and a desire to see hearts converted ("Speak as one who speaks the very words of God," 1 Pet 4:7), and not simply with a detached concern for scholarly issues and academic excellence. If we truly believe that Scripture is the Word of God, then our students need to sense that conviction in us. This will affect the entire dynamic of our teaching. (Note, however, that this does *not* mean that

Scripture is to be taught in a dogmatic, authoritarian, or simplistic way.) Our teaching will only be compelling to the extent that we ourselves find the biblical message compelling. If we speak of the Bible casually, or in a detached, nonchalant way, we fail to communicate its essential nature and leave our students wondering whether we really believe it ourselves. If the Word of God is indeed of ultimate and eternal significance, how can we not teach it with passion, challenging our students with the need to respond to it personally?

Even in a secular academic setting, one could argue that students will best come to a true understanding of biblical faith and its significance if they hear it taught competently by an insider, not an outsider, with the full conviction of one who truly believes it as the early Christians did. If we wanted to understand and feel the real spirit of militant Islam, we would probably learn more from an able, self-confessed Muslim radical, speaking passionately about his convictions, than from a neutral observer, dispassionately lecturing about the subject academically. In the same way, students who want to learn the real essence of Christian faith will be best served, generally speaking, by learning it from a convinced believer who speaks about it with personal conviction—and who teaches it well.

(3) As sacred Scripture, the Bible should be taught prayerfully, with reliance on the Holy Spirit, and not simply with flashy rhetoric or polished teaching-preaching techniques. Describing his teaching of the gospel, Paul says:

> When I came to you, proclaiming God's "mysteries," I didn't come with impressive words or human wisdom, but with a simple focus on Jesus Christ and the cross alone. I felt weak—I was fearful and trembling—and my message and my preaching were very plain. It wasn't the persuasive power of my own words or wisdom that convinced you, but the power of God's Spirit that was so evident—so that your faith might be grounded not in human wisdom but in the power of God. (1 Cor 2:1-5)

As Paul makes clear in this passage, "hearing" the Word is not so much an academic exercise as a spiritual one—and God is the one who must give the "ears to hear." So our teaching of Scripture should always be bathed in prayer, acknowledging that God himself is the ultimate Teacher, the real communicator of divine Truth. Charles Fritsch, Professor of Old Testament Literature at Princeton Theological Seminary (1937-79), regularly began his classes with the simple prayer, "O Lord, take the things of Christ and make them real to us." By prefacing our teaching with humble prayer, we teachers of the Bible model for our students a spiritual epistemology that is true to Scripture, and thus teach them where to turn for ultimate illumination.

The Apostle goes even further, suggesting that Christian teachers must look to God for the very words they need to communicate God's Truth:

> When we speak, we do not use words that come from human wisdom, but words given to us by the Spirit, as we communicate spiritual truths to those who have the Spirit. (1 Cor 2:13)

If ultimate Truth is essentially spiritual truth taught by God's Spirit, then perhaps, as teachers of that Truth, we are much more dependent on God's guidance and work than our typical pedagogical assumptions allow for.

We teachers of the Bible must remember that there is a power in the Word itself, beyond all the powers of human rhetoric—a power that is able to break down walls of resistance and convert the human heart:

> "Does not my word burn like fire?" says the Lord. "Is it not like a hammer that smashes a rock to pieces?" (Jer. 23:29)
>
> Just as the rain and snow come down from the heavens . . . watering the earth and making crops grow . . . so it is with the word I speak. It always produces results, accomplishing everything I want it to do . . . (Isa 55:10-11)
>
> For the word of God is alive and powerful, sharper than any double-edged sword. It pierces right into our soul and spirit . . . (Heb. 4:12)

If Scripture is indeed the Word of God, then God can be trusted to speak his Word to the hearts of those who hear. This is one of the reasons I assign the Bible itself (rather than some other book) as the primary textbook for all my biblical-studies classes, and why I do most of my teaching directly from the Bible. I want my students to have a direct encounter with the Word of God itself in all its power.

The Bible's emphasis on the *spiritual* aspects of hearing the Word raises troubling questions about the popularity of theologically deficient Bible teachers with charismatic personalities who have the reputation of being dynamic communicators. Some of our contemporary thinking about what defines good preaching and teaching of the Bible, shaped by our media-driven culture, seems quite shallow and superficial, compared to biblical perspectives. (Have we forgotten the power of the Word that "smashes a rock to pieces"?) Of course, this is no excuse for shoddy pedagogy; Christian teaching of Scripture must be of the very highest standard. But Bible teachers must remember that the real power lies in God's Word itself, and that superficial pizzazz and clever artistry are no substitute for theological depth and spiritually rich exposition.

(4) Finally, those of us who teach the Word of God must not simply talk about it, but must model in our own lives the devotion and obedience to Scripture that we seek to inculcate in the lives of our students. As Paul encourages Timothy in his role as a pastoral teacher,

> Be an example to the believers in how you talk, in how you live, in your love, your faith, and your purity. (1 Tim 4:12)

Those who teach the Bible should exemplify a prayerful, reverent, listening, obedient approach to Scripture, and a passionate love for it; indeed, their whole life should reflect the Word they

teach. They should be living examples of what it means to be faithful disciples, seeking to be conformed to the likeness of Christ by that Word.

Our students learn as much from our lives as from our words; it is our lives that validate or deny the reality of our words. Hypocrisy in teachers and preachers is the failing that students and congregations are most quick to notice, and the failing that God is most quick to judge.

In summary, as teachers of the Bible in academia, our job is to help our students learn to read it well—and that means, first, that they must appreciate the complexities of understanding and interpreting it; they must take the academic study of the Bible seriously. But if we take seriously the authority of the Bible as *sacred Scripture*, we must encourage them to go beyond the academic study of the Bible to learn, above all, to listen to the voice of God speaking to them through it; they must learn to give priority to the life-giving theology of Scripture, the Word of God.

As those who instruct and mentor them, we serve our students best when we (1) focus our teaching not primarily on critical academic questions, but on the life-transforming theology of the Bible; (2) teach Scripture prayerfully and with conviction, relying on the power of the Spirit; and (3) model in our own life the words we teach, expressing genuine love for those we instruct. Our job is to help our students see that biblical theology is not dry, dusty stuff of the past, but powerful, life-transforming Truth that is vitally relevant to every part of their lives today—indeed, *the most important thing in all of life*.

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[i] Tertullian, *De Praescriptione Haereticorum, 7.*

[ii] Scripture quotations are from my own translation of the biblical text.

[iii] "The historical-critical method of Biblical investigation has its rightful place . . . But, were I driven to choose between it and the venerable doctrine of Inspiration, I should without hesitation adopt the latter, which has a broader, deeper, more important justification." Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933), 1.

[iv] R.J. Thompson, *Moses and the Law in a Century of Criticism Since Graf,* Vetus Testamentum Supplements 19 (Leiden: Brill, 1970), pp. 42-43.

[v] See, for example, Roger Mohrlang, *Paul and His Life-Transforming Theology: A Concise Introduction.* Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2013.

[vi] See the writings of Brevard Childs especially.

[vii] Many modern-day critical commentaries are of little help here. For depth of theological reflection, the classical commentaries of Luther, Calvin, and Matthew Henry—and the growing number of recent *theological* commentaries—have more to offer.