

Exegesis of Paul's Writings: A literal and Pragmatic Approach to Philippians 3:12-14

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Abstract: The world has gone religious and is thirsty for preachers who analyze and interpret the Bible in essence and truth. Exegesis resolves biblical interpretive problems in the text so as to determine its meaning and significance. This study focused on the exegesis of Paul's Philippians 3:12-14 using a qualitative research design. The researchers applied exegesis, that is, a careful investigation of the meaning of the periscope of the study, Philippians 3:12-14, in its historical and literal context. This analysis used the Literary Criticism technique concentrating on semantics and pragmatics. Results showed that the message in Philippians 12 to 14 can be summarized as *Reaching for God's heights: Pressing towards God's Goal*. Paul brought out the important aspect of the profit-and-loss account of life where things of former value no longer count in view of Christ. Paul kept his eyes at the end of his life where he wanted to attain Christlikeness. This shows that Paul pursued his goal with absolute determination. He gave humanity a Formula: forgetting what is behind; the failures and mistakes of the past and forgetting even the successes of the past, then focusing on the life goal avoiding side-tracking. Humanity should also stop worrying about the illusions of the future. It's only the present that matters and this should be our focus. God therefore calls us all to reach out to higher ground where He dwells.

Key Terms: Exegesis; biblical interpretation; Literary Criticism

I. INTRODUCTION

In the recent decades, people have become religious; it's now norm for many to go to church and congregate while listening to a preacher. Christian churches have mushroomed everywhere in the world, Zimbabwe included. There are variegated preachers with diverse approaches to Bible analysis and interpretation during preaching. Scholarly preachers usually use systematic approach to their preaching, for instance, exegesis.

Exegesis, a biblical criticism approach, has been described by Just (2009) as a careful investigation of the original meaning of texts in their historical and literary contexts the word having been derived from a Greek verb meaning "to lead out of" (Greek "*ex*" = "out"; "*agein*" = "to lead/go/draw"). That investigation process involves asking analytical questions about various aspects of the considered texts and their contexts. Smith (u.d.) defined it as an in-depth, inductive examination of a text of scripture in which the exegete systematically applies established hermeneutic tools (exegetical methods) to discover the meaning and implications of a text of a biblical text (or group of texts). On the same note, Libguides (2016) said that exegesis is the process by which one comes to understand a Biblical text. Just (2009) contrasted exegesis to *eisegesis*, which means "*reading [your own opinions] into*" the text which he said is not a good approach to biblical studies.

Smith (u.d.) came up with presuppositions of evangelical exegesis; three of which can be associated with this study. These are: The Bible should be interpreted literally (at face value) according to the normal rules of communication (that is, grammatical historical exegesis); although a text has only one meaning, it may have many valid applications (the applications derive from the one meaning; they are concrete applications of the same timeless truth). Finally, exegesis must be relevant and valuable to today's believers, hence an exegete must move from interpretation to application, from the past to the present and from the there-and-then to the here-and-now.

There are various strategies of doing biblical exegesis; these are also called biblical criticism methods. Each of these strategies has a specific goal and a specific set of questions; some strategies are more historical, others more literary and still others more sociological, theological, and so on. Just (2009) argued that biblical criticism does not mean criticizing the text, that is, saying what you don't like or don't agree to; rather, it means asking critical questions based on criterion that is as clear, careful and objective as possible.

Westminster Theological Seminary (2014) classified the biblical criticism methods as follows:

Source Criticism seeks to understand on what written sources the author of a particular text depended when composing a text.

Form Criticism proceeds on the assumption that most biblical books existed orally before being written down. Form criticism therefore seeks to reconstruct that oral stage and locate it in the *SitzimLeben* (life setting) in which it originally arose and functioned.

Redaction Criticism seeks to understand how various ancient versions of biblical texts were edited and compiled by a later redactor. This approach seeks to discern how the redactor shaped the final form of the text to make particular theological points.

Genre Criticism identifies the literary genre of a text. This is done by comparing the text with similar ancient texts to discern how the original author and audience would have understood it.

Historical Criticism seeks to reconstruct the world in which a text was first written and read. It shows how investigation of historical background can shed light on the Bible.

Tradition Criticism is concerned with how a text has been understood by various traditions contained in the Bible, for example, how was Moses understood by the communities of Josiah and Ezra?

Canonical Criticism asks what meaning texts have in their final canonical arrangement. It is concerned with how the rest of Scripture elucidates a text and vice versa.

Literary Criticism refers to the application of literary theory to the study of the Bible. It includes, but is not limited to, analysis of rhetoric, plot, character development, themes, imagery and poetry.

This study triangulated the historical and literary criticism strategies.

II. PAUL AND THE BOOK OF PHILIPPIANS

Paul's biography has been summarized by Longenecker and Still (2014) as follows; Paul, also known as Saul was born in Tarsus to Jewish parents. He was a zealous follower of both the Lord (Yahweh) and of the law (Torah) and over time, he became a Pharisee and a persecutor of Jesus' followers. He had a life-altering encounter with the risen Christ while on his way to Damascus. He reevaluated his life and altered a number of his convictions and commitments. Having become fully convinced that Jesus is the living Lord, Paul proceeded to risk his life proclaiming the good news of Jesus' death and resurrection to people of various nationalities. His work as an apostle was widely disseminated and well established when he was ultimately put to death by the Romans.

When considering Paul's Epistle to the Philippians, Grey (2004) exposed that the church in Philippi was founded by the apostle Paul on his second missionary journey as recorded in Acts 16:1-40. Among other things, he wanted to update the church on how things were going for him in his imprisonment (Philippians 1:12-26) and what his plans were should he be released (Philippians 2:23-24).

The International Bible Society (2014) propounded that Paul's book of Philippians manifests a particularly vigorous type of Christian living which is characterized by: self-humbling (2:1-4); pressing toward the goal (3:13-14); lack of anxiety (4:6) and ability to do all things (4:13). On a similar note, Grey (2004) summarized (3:12-16) as: The nature of Paul's pursuit of Christ: Living in the "now/not yet"

III. RELATED LITERATURE

A number of researches have been done on biblical exegesis in general and on Paul's writings in particular. Other analytic studies of Paul's book of Philippians have been also done. Some of these works are treated in this section. Poythress (2012) argued that some exegetes analysis differ from one another not so much because the analyzers have seen different data but because they will be looking for different types of meaning. He therefore called for classifications of analysis types of texts. In his study he concentrated on one kind of classification, namely classification applicable to any kind of interpretation of language at any stage of history.

In his analysis, Poythress (2012) specifically used three elements, (a) a speaker, (b) the discourse which he produces, and (c) the situation in which it is produced. To these three elements there correspond three types of analysis namely, the speaker analysis, discourse analysis and situational analysis. Under speaker analysis questions he asks where 'What did the speaker want to say? What did he intend to say? What did he think he was saying? What did he mean?' Discourse analysis asks, 'What did the speaker in fact say, and what does it in fact mean?' Situational analysis asks, 'How did the situation alter in response to the speaker's discourse?' Poythress (2012) said that the most important part of the situation is the speaker's actual audience, that is, those who hear him; the important questions to ask are: 'What did the audience understand by the discourse? What did they think the speaker meant? How did they react to it?'

On the other hand, Naab (2014) made a study entitled *Apostle Paul and his message through the lense of post-colonial analysis*. He justified his approach saying that the writings of Paul are not an easy subject to study and should therefore be done through the post-colonial lens which, he argued, can bring a unique angle to Pauline studies if done properly. He directed that when putting Paul's writings into the post-colonial research perspective, they should not be regarded as a simplified opposition/revolution against the Roman society. However, it should be recognized that there is much more than a dualism in them, hence they can be considered in their broad and complex discursive nature.

Naab (2014) argued that the essence of the writings of Paul is defined by salvation by the gospel of Jesus Christ. His proclamation is based on the anticipation for the King prophesied of in the Old Testament; hence the religious as well as the political spheres of the society are dealt with. The resurrection of Christ and his elevation to the position of the supreme ruler embody contrasts and challenges to the Roman authoritarian order. This is because the resurrection, according to Paul, overrules everything else that could be achieved with the help of military power. Naab (2014) propounded that although Paul does not directly oppose the emperor and the Roman imperial order, he created a subculture that contains programmatic alternatives to the imperial propaganda, a presupposition that the argumentation of post-colonial biblical research and its anti-imperialist approach to Paul is based.

Matthew Henry's Commentary(u.d.) commended on Philippians 3:12-21 and highlighted the simple dependence and earnestness of soul of the apostle when he mentioned that he had not yet gained the prize but he said that he forgot the things which were behind in order not to be content with past labors or present measures of grace. Instead, he reached forth, stretched himself forward towards his focus in his bid to become more like Christ. Paul emphasizes that he who runs a race must never stop before the end but press forward to eternal life which is the gift of God through Christ Jesus. The commentary emphasized that the life of a Christian is in heaven, where his Head and his home are and where he hopes to be shortly; he therefore sets his affections upon things above; and where his heart is, there will his conversation be.

Krell (2010) made an analysis of (Philippians 3:12–16) which he headed, *Pursue God's prize*; he highlighted that Paul likens the Christian life to a race in the ancient Isthmian games whose goal was to win the prize. This race metaphor depicts sanctification. In other words, those who enter this race are believers who are called to spiritual maturity. Unfortunately, it is very easy for one to become so preoccupied with the tyranny of the urgent that one misses what is most important. It is therefore imperative for one to decide what matters most and focus on it.

Krell (2010) pointed out that Paul, whose focused life made him a literal world-changer, shares his personal experience when he is quick to assert that he has not yet reached the goal described in 3:10 and 11—the prize of knowing Christ and being rewarded by Him. This can become a relief to a common man to realize that even Paul did not reach perfection in this life and, if this is true of Paul, how much more can it be true of a common man. Krell (2010) concluded that God's goal is not just to “get you in the door” for He is not merely looking to “save” you and provide you with “fire insurance.” Instead, He is working to transform you by moving you toward Christ-likeness.

Statement of the Problem

The world has taken up the religious route and the congregation trust and value the sermons of its pastors. However, quite a number of preachers analyze the Bible using common sense and personal opinions (eisegesis) an act that Just (2009) labeled as an inappropriate approach to biblical studies. A pastor should therefore use exegesis in order to resolve biblical interpretive problems. This study had therefore the following objectives: to make an Exegesis of Philippians 3:12-14 so as to determine its meaning and significance to today's Zimbabwean congregation.

IV. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study used a qualitative research design. The researchers applied exegesis, that is, a careful investigation of the meaning of the periscope of the study (Philippians 3:10-14) in its historical and literary context. This analysis included the Literary Criticism technique. Alrenga (2016) propounded that people use sentences to convey information about themselves and about the world in which we live. Meanings encoded and expressed in these sentences can be analyzed through the study of semantics, which is the study of the literal meaning carried by words and sentences, and pragmatics, which Martinovski (u.d) described as a field of linguistics studying communication which concentrates on the dynamic aspect of language use and meaning in context. This includes analysis of the speaker, addressee, context, message choice and means of expression as well as the goal of the speaker, interpretation and impact of the message. One main interest of pragmatics is defining the principles for the determination of the intended meaning.

For this study, both semantics and pragmatics were employed. Concentration was on the words used and their meanings in today's context; images and symbols used as well as what they stand for and signify. Rhetorical analysis (which is an aspect of Literary Criticism technique) was also employed. Focus was mainly on the message conveyed by the periscope, how it applies to today's congregation, how it was conveyed as well as the goal of the writer, that is, whether to instruct, inspire, defend or persuade.

V. ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

The pericope of the study is Paul's Philippians 3:10-14 which reads:

... that I may know him and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of his sufferings, being conformed to His death; ¹¹in order that I may attain to the resurrection from the dead.¹² Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected; but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me. ¹³Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, ¹⁴I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

The essence of the above verses, specifically 12 to 14 can be summarized as *Reaching for God's heights: Pressing towards God's Goal*. It brings out the important aspect of the profit-and-loss account of life where things of former value, that is, Paul being one who was circumcised on the eighth day, a stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, thus, a Hebrew of Hebrews, and a true Pharisee who was blameless before the law, no longer counts. This means that former gains became loss in view of Christ. At this point, Paul counts all things loss when compared to the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus his Lord, the King that Naab (2014) proclaimed.

On the side of loss, are all former values while on the side of gain, is one thing, "Christ." When Paul turned away from Judaism to accept Christ as his Lord, he lost his heritage; family, friends, professional associates all turned away from him. However, he counted all these things as dung for all he wanted was more of Christ as shown by verse 10 and 11 which reads: *that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death, if, by any means, I may attain to the resurrection from the dead.*

One should notice the sequence of words used: *resurrection, suffering and death*; also the statement, *Being made conformable to His death*. The Greek word translated *conformable* means to be shaped or formed after another, to be patterned after another. Paul is therefore saying that when his life comes to an end, he wants his death to be formed after the pattern of Christ.

Paul kept his eyes at the end of his life. The same call is extended to everyone even today to keep eyes fixed on the final destination. Like Paul, humanity should follow the pathway of the Master, Jesus so that humanity can reach out for God's dream.

Verse 12 says: *Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected; but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me.* This shows that Paul pursued his goal with absolute determination so that he might lay hold of that for which Christ lay hold of him. This can be illustrated by an anecdote of Johnny who wants to reach a ripe mango up on the tree, but he is too short. Daddy holds him up so that he can reach the mango. This means that the reaching of the ripe mango has been made possible. This brings in Paul's Formula: forgetting what is behind; the failures and mistakes of the past and forgetting even the successes of the past. Then focusing on what is in front, the life goal. Putting forth every effort and avoiding side-tracking. Paul said: *Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, ¹⁴I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus*"

As Poythress (2012) propounded, the most important part of the situation in Literal Analysis of the biblical text is the speaker's actual audience, in this case, Paul's readers who are called to be extraordinary. It can be argued that the difference between the ordinary people and the extraordinary people is in the word *extra*.

The extraordinary people can hear the upward call of God which is from God, a call that leads upward. It bids them to abandon what is lesser for something better. One should say that s/he is too small to become the agenda her/his life but God's agenda is bigger and better. This is why White (1904) said, "The Christian life is a battle and a march. In this warfare there is no release; the effort must be continuous and persevering. It is by unceasing endeavor that we maintain the victory over the temptations of Satan. Christian integrity must be sought with resistless energy and maintained with a resolute fixedness of purpose".

The scenario that Paul portrays can be likened to Guy de Maupassant (1850-1893)'s story entitled "A Piece of String". The story tells of the farmer, Maitre Hauchecorne, who, on his way from the village to the market one day, sees a piece of string on the ground and bends to pick it up. His enemy in the village sees him bend to pick up something. That same day a wallet with some money was missed along the same road. The farmer was accused of having picked it. Later the wallet was brought by another farmer's worker who had picked it. Maitre Hauchecorne, in wanting to clear his name, put so much focus on it that he ended up almost insane and eventually died.

The following questions can be asked to today's congregation:

- What piece of string are you holding onto?



- How much energy, time and mental/emotional resources do you put to that piece?
- How many forward opportunities are you losing on account of backward hurts and losses?
- What should we do with our piece of string?
- If our hands are holding out our strings, can we handle anything else effectively?

Humanity should stop being fixed to a piece of string, that is, the tyranny of the past.



Humanity should also stop worrying about the illusions of the future as Krell (2010) advised. Buddha said, “The secret of health for both mind and body is not to mourn for the past, worry about the future, but to live in the present moment wisely and earnestly”. Another anonymous wise saying reads, “If you worry about what might be, and wonder what might have been, you will ignore what is.” This means that it’s only the present that matters and this should be the focus.

We also should be able to forgive the injustices of the past, as Rhonda Pickard rightfully says:



We should follow into Paul's footsteps; New Life (2010) said that Paul was not lumbered with past regrets or even past triumphs but his focus was onward and upward. God's call today for humanity is therefore to reach out to higher ground. He calls people to forget their smallness and reach up to His greatness: reaching out to God.

VI. CONCLUSION

The message in Philippians 3 verses 12 to 14 can be summarized as *Reaching for God's heights: Pressing towards God's Goal*. Paul brings out the important aspect of the profit-and-loss account of life where things of former value no longer counts in view of Christ. Paul kept his eyes at the end of his life where he wants to attain Christlikeness. This shows that Paul pursued his goal with absolute determination. He gives humanity a Formula: forgetting what is behind; the failures and mistakes of the past and forgetting even the successes of the past, then focuses on the life goal avoiding side-tracking. Humanity should also stop worrying about the illusions of the future. It's only the present that matters and this should be their focus. God therefore calls all to reach out to higher ground where He dwells.

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