

Formational And Informational Reading: A Challenge In Biblical Research

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Abstract

The need for God is not just a wish to know about Him, but rather a quest to encounter Him, where people can experience and feel the divine. Prayer is one way to encounter God, and studying His words is another part of encountering Him. Both lie at the heart of spiritual formation. Most especially, those who study theology, tend to connote the study of God's words with scholarly examination of a text. To this analytical method, the rational and cognitive dynamics of human being go into full operation to analyze, critique, reorganize, synthesize, and digest the text they find appropriate to human agenda. In this sense many students, teachers, and church members delve into what they call exegesis. They perceive the text as an object of research and do not allow God to speak to the researchers out of the text. Exegesis is the process of discerning the meaning of the text by examining the words, context, and historical background. Although this process is not the whole, intellectual curiosity has nothing inherently wrong with it. The problem is, by being overbalanced in the cognitive direction, the readers shift everything through the cognitive process of researcher's mind while thinking that this is proper. This mood of method is called informative study of the Bible.

The study of God's words must move far beyond mere curiosity and intellectual knowledge. Had more people fixed in their minds a desire to know God and His will in their lives, the more spiritually productive and formative their study would have become. To this general mode of reading, readers allow the passage to open to human being in its deeper dimensions. It means the text itself becomes the subject of reading and human being serve as the object shaped by the text. This method is known as a formative study of the Bible. In summary, readers have a certain level of information about biblical passage such as original context of the text or historical data of a text. There must be a constant interplay between the informational and formational modes of reading. Transformation by God's words is the ultimate goal of scriptural reading.

Introduction

The writers of Scripture were inspired by God to reveal His intentions, teachings, and commands to govern volitional creatures. Thus, Scripture stands as the normative standard for faith and practice; and its "truth" demands a personal commitment in every aspect of human life.¹ In the light of that presupposition, biblical research aimed to construct and formulate the Biblical theology that should be internalized (cognitive aspect) and practiced (pragmatic aspect) in the life of Christians.² Nevertheless, in modern day, biblical research generally fell into two contradictive approaches to understand biblical text. First, researchers construct a methodology where they stand above the Biblical text. They put reason and informative data above revelation.³ This paper calls this phenomenon as an informational reading. On the other

hand, some interpreters/ readers hold that the methodology to understand the Biblical research should stand first under the Biblical authority. They accept inerrancy of the Scripture, it is source, and infallible standard of human life. However, they tend to minimize the role of informative data of the text. The question is that, what is the appropriate approach that should be utilized in biblical research? This research is not intended to review the development of biblical interpretation in the church history. It focuses specifically to review two different approaches that prevalently have influence biblical research. In that light, this research will indicate the characteristic of two methods and try to discover the interplay and balance of these two approaches in biblical research.

Purpose and Methodology of the Study

The purpose of this research is to review two different approaches and its characteristic in the light of Biblical interpretation. Biblical interpretation is intended to indicate how God's word have something to say to human's live. Thus, the goal of interpreters must include detecting how the scripture can affect human being. This implies that, biblical research cannot be separated from spiritual pragmatic purpose. It should be perceived as the integral part of Biblical research. This research employs a descriptive method in order to examine the challenge in Biblical interpretation. In order to achieve the above stated objectives, the following steps are followed consecutively: (1) Introduction; (2) The nature of informational reading; (3) The nature of formational reading; (4) Synthesis: Informational-formational interplay and balance; (5) Summary and conclusion of the result; and (6) Hermeneutical recommendation for biblical interpreters/readers.

The Nature of Informational Reading

Human cultures are increasingly shaped by an informational mode of being and doing. Modern culture seeks more information (new facts, new methods, new systems, new techniques) in order to improve their functional control of their world. The acquiring of knowledge, information, and method rather than serving to change the quality of human being is the primary purpose of enhancing human ability. In term of Biblical research, many of Biblical scholars, church leaders, and church members in 20th century have replaced belief in supernatural revelation with naturalistic philosophy that has been developed through the historical critical method.⁴ Here are some characteristic of informational reading:

First, *cover as much as possible*. Informational reading seeks to *cover as much as possible* and as quickly as possible to get the data needed to do what must be done. One of the adverse aspects of this characteristic of informational reading is seen in program designed to read the entire Bible in a brief period of time.

Second, *informational reading is linear*. The readers *move from the first element to the second until the end*, thinking

that reading is little more than the process of moving thorough parts (see for example, the chronology of events in Rev. 17-22).

Third, *seek to master the text*. In informational reading, readers/ interpreters seek to grasp the text in order to get their minds around it, consequently bringing the text under human control. Having done this, they then seek to justify their interpretation and defend it against any other interpretations. Thus, readers can use the information to impose their agenda on the world. This approach involves a rational process that utilizes the reasoning powers of the human intellect.

Fourth, *the text is an object*. In informational reading, the text is "out there" for interpreters/readers to control and/or manipulate according to their own purpose, intentions, or desires. Interpreters/ readers back off and keep themselves at a distance from the text. This approach has pervaded whole learning process and perceptual framework, that human beings are subject and any other else are object they choose to control. Placing text as an object of analysis, the interpreter utilizes reason as a priority in hermeneutics. In this case, interpreter tends to place reason above faith. This implies that human reason prepares the interpreters to willing to deny the evidence of faith if it appears to dispute some rational presuppositions.

Fifth, *analytical, critical, and judgmental*. This is the outgrowth of standing back and running what interpreters read through the filters of their own perceptions, their own desire, and their own needs. All they read is evaluated for enhancement of their "false self"—that self-reference structure of life that seeks to mold the world in its own image. At this point there is the application of the cognitive, rational, intellectual approach. Human presuppositions in this approach directly affect interpreter's theology. It obvious, there is no room for Biblical text to teach interpreters its own essential message. Hasel rightly indicates the chief characteristic of this approach which is, for example, *pride*. In reference to the story of Jesus, because their

proud claim that “they can see” was a hindrance to recognizing God’s self-revelation in Jesus (John 9:39-41; 12:43).⁵ The other characteristics are, *doubt*. Angeles said that the one who doubts is “inclined to disbelieve the truth of an assertion.”⁶ Doubting is part of a critical methodology which diminishes the conviction of faith and never able by itself to come to a saving and sanctifying knowledge of God’s truth. The other characteristic is *disobedience*. It is unwillingness to follow God’s revealed will.

Sixth, *problem-solving mentality*. In informational reading, interpreters/readers tend to read in order to find out something that will work for them, whether reading an instruction manual in an attempt to repair broken equipment or to read some spiritual instruction manual so they can make some changes in their spiritual life at points where it is not “working properly.” This approach to reading is really a subconscious activity.

The Nature of Formational Reading

Formational reading is considered as a radical alternative to interpreter’s normal orientation to reading and study. Robert Mulholland said that “we have not yet come to the point where we can begin to think about methods. Instead of methods, our motive is primary. Our motive will shape our approach to the scripture.”⁷ Mulholland’s premise has overlooked one aspect of hermeneutical requirements that is *prayer and reading*. Prayer and reading is the initial step of interpretation to understand the scripture, thus, they are part of methodology. The reason is that, God centered-methodology will control the motives of readers or interpreters not vice versa. Informational and formational readings are two different methods to Scripture. Here are some characteristics of formational reading:

First, *the quality of reading*. The object is not to cover as much as possible as and quickly as possible; reading for formation avoids quantifying the amount of reading in any sort of way.

Interpreters/readers may find themselves in a “holding pattern” on just one verse, or one paragraph, or perhaps as much as a whole page, but probably never more than that. Interpreters are not concern with getting through the book. The point is meeting God

in the text. If interpreters/ readers find themselves thumbing through a book to see how many pages are left in the chapter they are reading, they are trapped in a symptom of informational reading. The best way to do is that, readers have to find the deeper meaning and meditate on them.

Second, in formational reading interpreters/readers seek to *allow the passage to open to the interpreters* its deeper dimension and its multiple layers of meaning. At the same time, interpreters/readers seek to allow the text to probe deeper levels of human being, disclose deeper dimensions of their flawed “word,” disturb the foundations of human false self. It means that, instead of rushing on the text sentence, paragraph, or chapter, interpreters/readers seek to move deeper into the text. In this approach, they allow the text to begin to become that intrusion of the Word of God into their life, to encounter readers at deeper levels of his/her being. If they don’t take time like this with a text, the Word cannot encounter them in it; the word of God cannot form them through it.

Third, *allow the text to master the interpreters/readers*. In reading the Bible, interpreters/readers come to the text with an openness to hear, receive, to respond, to be a servant of the word rather than a master of the text. Such openness requires an abandonment of the false self and its habitual temptation to control the text for its own purposes. According to the Biblical worldview, the human rational power, reason, or mind consistently is characterized as impacted by sin (Jer. 17:9; Eph. 5:3, 4; 1 Cor. 2:14). Thus, a renewal reason in Biblical interpretation is required for a person to understand properly the will of God (Rom 12:2). Paul equates the renewing of the mind with the “regeneration by the Holy Spirit” (Titus 3:5). E. G. White said, “The grace of Christ is needed to refine and purify the mind” (RH, Sept. 23, 1844, p. 609).

In some fashion, it is good to take account of criticism through rational analysis (see 1 Pet 3:15), however interpreters/readers have to recognize the value of personal faith, experiencing the selfauthenticating power of the Holy Spirit upon mind. In connection to this point, E. G. White said, “God never asks us to believe, without giving sufficient

evidence upon which to base our faith. His existence, His character, the truthfulness of His word, are all established by testimony that appeals to our reason; and this testimony is abundant” (SC, 105).

Fourth, *text becomes the subject of the reading relationship*. Readers are the object that is shaped by the text instead of the text being an object that readers control and manipulate according their own insight and purpose. With respect to biblical reading, interpreters/readers willingly stand before the text and await its address. This is one reason formational reading cannot be quantified. It requires waiting before the text. Here interpreters/readers have to take time with it in order to hear what the text says. If the text stands as the subject of interpretation, then interpreters must place faith above reason and deny the evidences of the human senses if empirical phenomenon appear to dispute some Biblical teaching (see Matt. 24:24-27; GC, 625).

By placing text as the subject of the reading relationship, God will enable interpreters/ readers by two powerful entities. First, God commissioned His angels to give understanding the word of God (see Dan. 8:16; 9:22, 23). E. G. White said, “If you come to the study of the Scripture in humility, with earnest prayer for guidance, angles of God will open to you its living realities” (ST, Sep. 18, 1896, p. 6). Second, the Holy spirit guides the hermeneutical process. Jesus said, “when He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all the truth” (John 16:13). These two arguments imply that Scripture is not to be subjected to an alleged higher authority such as human tradition or human reason, since Holy Spirit directs the Bible study.

Fifth, *formational reading requires a humble, receptive, and loving approach*. It contrasts to the analytical, critical, judgmental approach. This approach requires a radical reorientation of the inner posture of human being. Readers can probe more deeply into the text. Reader can even begin to view the text as addressing to readers/interpreters, without any substantial shift of reader’s perceptions. Instead of making some adjustments to reader’s informational mood that allows the false self to maintain its control, they come to genuine openness and receptivity to the word. Here readers begin to

hear the call to spiritual disciplines of a deeper order.

As far as interpretation is concerned, it is important to note that, *a God-centered theology demands a God-centered-methodology*. Any human presupposition that denies the supernatural dimension to whom it clearly testified in Scripture is alien to the Bible. It is an accepted truism that interpreters/readers cannot dives themselves from their own past, resident ideas, and preconceived opinions. However, all of them must be modified and reshaped by the power of Holy Spirit. Hasel rightly argues that the interpreter has to realize that an understanding of the Bible increases through the reshaping of the mind and of the heart by reading Scripture or text repeatedly.⁸ This mode of method enables interpreters to think *with* the biblical text rather than just think *about* the text of the Bible.⁹

Sixth, the problem solving mentality is the characteristic of informational reading. The characteristic of formational reading is an *openness to mystery*. Interpreters/readers come to be open to God and come to stand before and allow Him to address readers/interpreters. Through this approach, they may discover that tremendous problem-solving dynamics emerge out of the encounter. Formational reading requires time to “enter down” to become still, to relinquish, and to let go of human life in the presence of God.

The attitude of humility expresses the willingness and modesty to submit one’s beliefs to a higher authority. Through humility the highest and deepest knowledge of God is gained, namely the awareness that one is dependent upon God to gain true knowledge, that he/she is not the final measure of everything. Instead, the interpreter/readers are open to be led and to be led and taught by the Holy Spirit. Humility expresses the unassuming insight that God and His Word are greater than our human reason and greater than our current understanding. E. G. White said, “...When we come to the Bible, reason must acknowledge an authority superior to itself, and hear and intellect must bow to the great I AM” (SC 109110).

Informational and Formational Interplay and Balance

The primary aspect of biblical interpretation is method and motive. These two aspects shape the approach of interpreters/readers to the scripture. Informational and formational are two different methods for reading. Thus, the real issue in biblical research is not only a matter of which approach is better, but also what posture toward the mystery of God can bring us into formational possibilities. If we come to the informational aspect of reading with this inner posture of openness to God, the informational task will then lead interpreters/ readers to the formative dynamic. It means formative reading is not considered an alternative for informative reading since there is interplay between them.

Interpreters/readers have a certain level of information about the biblical passage. Some sense of the meaning of the text in its original context, some says what God has said to the intended readers before it can become formational. This is the informational dynamic, and it is important, but there is also for formational dimension whereby the text becomes an experience of encounter with God. The meaning of the text passes from information to the formative incarnation of that meaning in the daily life of interpreters/readers. In the terms of spiritual formation, although there is interplay between the informational and formational modes of reading, informational stands as the point of entry into deeper encounter with the Word of God toward wholeness in the image of Christ. In informational dynamics, interpreters/readers must be sensitive to the need moving to the formational dynamics of reading. They must allow themselves to become open and receptive to the intrusion of the living Word of God into the garbled “word” they are. Only in the formational mode, where the shift of the inner posture of human being takes place, can interpreters/ readers become listener. Only in that mood can we become receptive and accessible to be addressed by the living Word of God.

As far as method of interpretation is concerned, the interpreters/readers have to read the scripture in a way that opens them to transforming encounter with God, and then their preconceptions about the scripture must be modified and reshaped by the power of Holy Spirit.¹⁰ This is to anticipate an issue

where interpreters/readers have developed cultural ideal about the Bible that usually entrench them within a set of preconceptions that keep the scripture “safe” under their control. Here they seek to read the Bible to find support for their status quo or to explain away anything that is uncomfortable to interpreter’s false self. This is part of the analytical and problem-solving dynamic of the informational mode, where the text is an object to be controlled and manipulated.

The corrective for a basically informational approach to the scripture is the openness to serious personal involvement with God in it. It is more than assent to theological concepts. The interpreters/readers need to involve themselves personally, intimately, openly, receptively in that which they read. In connection to that, they need to be *honest* (MYP 260). Honesty aims at the motives with which the interpreters/readers approach the biblical text and also includes an openness to use the proper methods for interpretation. It opens up the possibility of overcoming the subjectivity of interpreter by letting God speak to himself/himself in and through the text of Scripture. Moreover, interpreters/ readers must have *faith*. It is faith that opens up the spiritual truths of God’s word to the reader. It is much more than just an intellectual recognition. Honesty and faith on the part of interpreters/readers mostly generate *obedience* to God. To achieve all these purposes, interpreters/readers need to spent time on *praying*. Prayer helps the interpreter to explore the Bible from a different perspective.

Summary and Conclusion

Cognitive, rational, and analytical methods are so hyper-developed in the modern culture.

Biblical researchers or theology students have differed in their methodology to understand Biblical text. They agreed on one point, that they have deeply ingrained way of reading in which they are the masters of the Biblical text. They come to a text with their own agenda firmly in place and adapt the message of the text to human agenda. Interpreters/readers then control their approach to the text by grasping it with their mind. To this analytical method of reading, the rational and cognitive dynamics of human being go into full operation to

analyze, critique, dissect, reorganize, synthesize, and digest the text they find appropriate to human agenda. This general mode of reading is to perceive the text as an object of research.

It is true that this method, in a certain point, contradicts the genuine spiritual formation. However, it is unfair to say that there is anything wrong with informational or analytical mode of reading.

Interpreters/readers need to utilize cognitive, intellectual, and rational faculties to the best of our ability.

The problem is that, readers shift everything through the cognitive process of researcher/readers mind. They are overbalanced in the cognitive direction, and tend to think that this is proper. They respond to the scripture, but often their response is simply that of reading themselves into the scripture at some level rather than allowing God to speak to us out of them.

In contrast to the analytical mood of reading (informative reading), formation reading emphasizes more on the meeting God in the text. Interpreters/readers allow the passage to open to human being in its deeper dimensions. At this point, interpreters/readers allow the text to master human being. Here text itself becomes the subject of reading relationship and human stand as the object that is shaped by the text. The requirement of this formational method on the part of human being is humbleness, openness to the mystery and loving approach. However, interpreters/readers have a certain level of information about biblical passage. The informational aspect whereby the text becomes an experience of encounter with God must be constant interplay between these two methods. It means interpreters/readers must be sensitive to the need to move to the formational dynamics of reading. Only in that mood can they become receptive and accessible to be addressed by the living Word of God.

A Hermeneutical Recommendation for Biblical Interpreters/ Readers

First, presupposition of interpreters mostly denies the supernatural dimension, thus the presuppositions of interpreter must be modified and reshaped by the Holy Spirit. In doing so, the Bible must be given room to teach the interpreters its essential message. This implies that interpreter's source of

information about God is His own personal revelation (See Heb. 1-1-3; Rom. 16:26). Biblical truths are always greater and fuller than what our language can express. Thus, interpreters dealing with divine mysteries should beware of the hermeneutical error of assuming that the interpretation of a passage stands for the whole truth on that subject.

Second, the image of God in man is distorted by sin and has radically altered the holy relationship with God and it has corrupted every aspect and dimension of human existence, including human mind and thoughts. This phenomenon affects to the interpretation of scripture, for example “*doubt*” means “inclined not to believe the truth of an assertion”.¹¹ Interpreters need a true faith to gain an understanding of His word not criticism and doubt. E. G. White heightened this point when she said, “Brethren, let not a mind or hand be engaged in criticizing the Bible...for Satan will lead to any length they may follow in their criticism, and they see something to doubt in the whole Scripture” (1 SM, 17, 18). The negative effect of cognitive criticism is unwillingness to follow God's revealed will.

Third, hermeneutics involves a *rational* process that utilizes the reasoning powers of the human intellect, thereby assigning a central role to human reason in the Biblical research. On the other hand, *faith* plays a role in Biblical research. According to the Biblical worldview, rational power consistently is characterized as impacted by sin. To this fact, apostle Paul admonishes his listeners to “be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what the will of God is, which is good and acceptable and perfect” (Rom. 12:2). This implies that a renewed reason is required for a person to understand properly the will of God. Paul equates the renewing of the mind with the “regeneration by the Holy Spirit” (Titus 3:5). The place of reason or mind in hermeneutical process should be “captive to” the power of God's word or faith. Using military metaphorical language, Paul admonishes his hearers to bring “every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ” (2 Cor. 10:5). In favor to this presupposition, Baldwin argued that placing faith above reason prepares the Christian to be willing to deny the evidences of the human senses if empirical phenomena appear to dispute some teaching of Scripture (cf. Matt. 24:24-27).¹² For this reason, Jesus

places the Holy Spirit in basic charge of the hermeneutical process to discover the truth (cf. John 16:13).

Fourth, to anticipate misinterpretation or emphasis on informational reading, here I give 4 guidelines constructed by Ganoune Diop for an inter-textual reading of Scripture. First, interpreters should familiarize themselves with the content of the whole Bible. A regular reading of the Scripture is highly recommended. Second, study passages with similar context. Carefully compare the original setting of a passage and its use in the new context. Third, define the meaning of the key terms through word studies. Lastly, study the context and acquaint yourself with the OT world to obtain a better understanding of the NT.¹³

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