

BEULAH HEIGHTS UNIVERSITY

Clear and Critical Thinking Relationship to Theological and Biblical Research

An Essay

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Clear and critical thinking is a process that we should use on a daily basis. Sometimes, that is very difficult to do or understand why it should be done. The student believes the difficulty occurs because of the distractions of life, the inner conflict within us, and the lack of knowledge concerning the process, or the inability to see the sense in it all. “The intellectual roots of critical thinking are as ancient as its etymology, traceable, ultimately, to the teaching practice and vision of Socrates 2,500 years ago who discovered by a method of probing questioning that people could not rationally justify their confident claims to knowledge.”¹ Wright records, “In most situations, the average person does not use critical thinking. Most of us probably believe that we do, but it’s not our nature to think critically.”² However, critical thinking can be activated. “James J. Messina, PhD offers three ways to activate critical thinking: develop affective strategies, strengthen cognitive abilities and develop cognitive micro skills.”³ “Critical thinking is being able to build and understand a reasonable argument to apply to skeptics. Verifying the source of authority, we must educate ourselves. We must also know that our logical thinking must be greater than our emotions. (K. Branch, personal communication 2013)”⁴

"Critical thinking is best understood as the ability of thinkers to take charge of their own thinking. This requires that they develop sound criteria and standards for analyzing and assessing

1 Richard Paul, Linda Elder, and Ted Bartell, "A Brief History of the Idea of Critical Thinking," The Critical Thinking Community, March 1997, , accessed September 20, 2017, <https://www.criticalthinking.org/pages/a-brief-history-of-the-idea-of-critical-thinking/408>

2 Brunetter Ellis Wright, *How Critical Thinking can Change Your Life* (Conyers, GA: CYNET Publishing and Promotions, LLC, 2014), 23.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

their own thinking and routinely use those criteria and standards to improve its quality.”⁵ This may in some way be a general statement; however, it is extremely important as it relates to theological research and biblical research. The student believes that that the Bible supports the idea of clear and critical thinking. Juan Valdes writes in *A Biblical Foundation for Critical Thinking*,

Let us not be confused by the word “critical.” While this word is often associated with being negatively judgmental and faultfinding, that is not the only sense of the word. The type of critical thinking we need is about using all of our faculties to evaluate ideas in an attempt to discover their veracity or falsity. Paul seems to summarize it along with its practical application when he exhorts the Thessalonians to “*Test all things; hold fast what is good. Abstain from every form of evil.*” (1 Thes. 5:21-22 NKJV). Paul’s use of the verb “test” is synonymous with critical thinking. While the context of this exhortation pertains to prophecy, the terminology and the principles involved can be applied to critical thinking in general. Critical thinking is about testing all things (ideas). But how is this to be done today? One New Testament scholar sheds light on the process.

How were the Thessalonians to test all things, and how do we do that today? By comparing what we hear with the written Word, just as the Bereans did in Acts 17:11. This was no innovation: ‘To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, it is because there is no light in them’ (Isa. 8:20). We are to search the Scriptures in order to make sure that what we hear is biblical. Then we are to hold on to what is good: we are to remember it, note it down, add it to our store of biblical knowledge but, above all, if it is a practical exhortation in line with God’s Word, we are to put it into practice. Paul’s exhortation to the Thessalonians includes very practical applications for critical thinking. First, EVERY idea should be subjected to critical analysis (testing). Second, critical thinking helps distinguish between good and evil. In other words, it helps us identify those ideas that are biblical (good) and those that are contrary to what is taught in the Bible (evil). Third, critical thinking is of utmost important when deciding how to live our lives. We are to “hold fast to what is good” and we are to “abstain from every form of evil.”⁶

5 L. Elder and R. Paul, "Why we must transform our teaching," *Journal of Developmental Education* 18, no. 1 (Fall 1994):

6 "A Biblical Foundation for Critical Thinking," *Reasons for Hope*, accessed November 18, 2017, <https://www.rforh.com/resources/know-it/diving-deeper/a-biblical-foundation-for-critical-thinking>.

The use of this (critical or criticism) word has become an unavoidable convention in biblical interpretation. Within academic contexts this word is not used in a negative sense. It does not mean "to say something bad about something or someone." It is used more in the sense of "to analyze closely" or "to evaluate."⁷

In order to determine how to use biblical exegesis as research and how to determine the sources; the researcher has to be well informed of the processes for exegesis and the type of sources available. It is imperative, that the researcher approaches the exercise/process with a clear and critical thought pattern. "The elements of critical thinking are interrelated and frequently overlap. They include description, analysis, framing an interpretation, judgement and response."⁸

"According to a chart from Glass 2014, some of the characteristics of a critical thinker are that they are honest about what they do not know, recognize their limitations, seek understanding, work through complexity, base decisions on evidence, read and listen attentively and be skeptical of extreme views."⁹ Although, this list is not inclusive of every characteristic it does hone in on the discipline that is required to apply critical thinking. This is the discipline that the student chooses to call the mirror talk or self-awareness lens.

Exegesis- a Critical Analysis

"In a theological sense, the word Exegesis is used to denote an approach to interpreting Bible passages utilizing critical analysis. It is the thorough investigation of Biblical text, within their various contexts, to discover their original meaning. The word itself comes from a Greek word

7 Mark McEntire, "A Guide to Biblical Exegesis," Academia.edu - Share research,, accessed November 18, 2017, https://www.academia.edu/1924512/A_Guide_to_Biblical_Exegesis.

8 Howard W. Stone and James O. Duke, *How to think theologically* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 114.

9 Ibid

delineating 'to lead out of.'¹⁰ In order to have critical analysis, one must be able to engage in clear and critical thinking when approaching the scripture or text.

Nancy Vyhmeister and Terry Dwain states, "Biblical exegesis is not usually listed as a type of research."¹¹ They further state, "an important part of biblical research is your attitude. You need to begin by asking yourself: Am I seeking to grow in my knowledge of God? Am I working for a grade? Do I accept God's word in human language? Or do I understand the Bible as spiritual stories or advice written by humans and perhaps modified over time?"¹² The authors of our textbook did present steps for the exegetical process. However, the student used in her research some other guidelines.

In order to use Biblical exegesis as research, one should follow some specific guidelines. "The initial approach would be to look at context, paraphrase (Greek or Hebrew if knowledgeable), check for textual variances and address your (set of questions) fundamental issue. The next approach would be to analysis the text by genre, grammar, syntax, word list, use critical methodologies for the study of history or literature, review major commentaries, journals and encyclopedia articles. The final approach would be to synthesis your research by putting it all together."¹³ Jeannine K. Brown provided some additional steps in her guidelines. Those guidelines were "to integrate conclusions with larger biblical-theological story, delineate relevant implications for today and to rethink presuppositions: Are we being transformed?"¹⁴

Conclusion

10 "Exegesis Definition," EXEGESIS Definition, accessed November 19, 2017, <http://www.biblestudy.org/beginner/definition-of-christian-terms/exegesis.html>.

11 Nancy J. Vyhmeister and Terry Dwain. Robertson, *Your guide to writing quality research papers for students of religion and theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), 11.

12 Ibid

13 "Guide for Writing on Exegesis on a Biblical Passage," Austin Graduate School of Theology, accessed November 18, 2017, <http://www.austingrad.edu/>.

14 Jeannine K. Brown, *Scripture as communication: introducing biblical hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 279-280.

In conclusion, “exegesis as a form of research may be frowned on by some who think of research in terms of surveys, experiments, or archival searching. Nevertheless, an exegesis paper allows the exegete to show excellent research techniques and style. It also contributes to the fund of biblical knowledge. And if that is not research, what is?”¹⁵ The student agrees with the paraphrase of the authors Nancy and Terry for 2 Timothy 2:15. Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth. Ultimately, for the student, that is the purpose of the journey. The education process will not be fulfilled with its greatest impact without the ability to have clear and critical thinking about every part of life. “Critical thinking elevates thinking to analysis and logic. It’s about knowing how to think, not what to think. Critical thinking is personal development that has personal familial and societal impacts.”¹⁶

15 Ibid

16 Ibid

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