



# HOW TO STUDY THE BIBLE

## Cultural Customs, Word Studies, and Interpretation

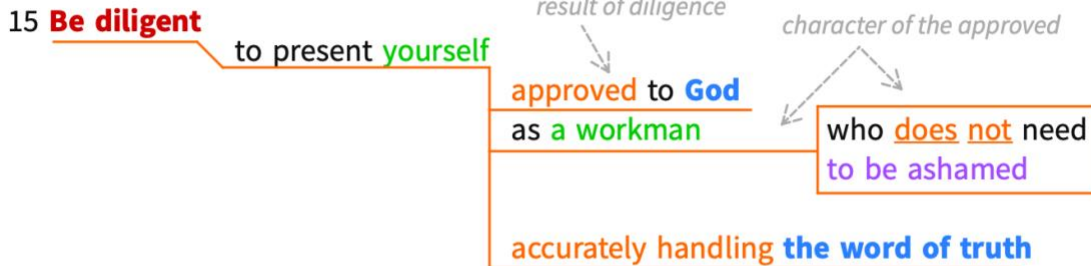
### Lesson #3

"The word written is the book out of which our evidences for heaven are fetched; it is the sea-mark which shows us the rocks of sin to avoid; it is the antidote against error and apostasy, the two-edged sword which wounds the old serpent. It is our bulwark to withstand the force of lust; like the Capitol of Rome, which was a place of strength and ammunition. The Scripture is the tower of David," whereon the shields of our faith hang."<sup>1</sup>

#### BEREAN BREAKDOWN

**2 Tim. 2:15:** *Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth.*

2 Timothy 2:15 (LSB)



#### "THE MARKS OF AN APPROVED WORKMAN"

1. BE DILIGENT TO PLEASE GOD
2. BE DILIGENT TO SERVE FAITHFULLY
3. BE DILIGENT TO HANDLE SCRIPTURE ACCURATELY

<sup>1</sup> Thomas Watson, *How to read the Scriptures for the Most Spiritual Profit*, pg. 64.

So far, you have learned the importance of discovering:

1. The literary type/genre of the text you are studying.
2. The historical background and context of the text you are studying.
3. The theme of the book of the text you are studying.
4. The outline of the book and where in it your text is located.
5. Far context and how your text fits into the flow of the book.
6. Near context and how your text fits into the context found before and after your text.

## I. **UNDERSTANDING CULTURAL CUSTOMS**

The hermeneutical principle of **cultural customs** differs from the **historical context** of a passage. The *historical context* is concerned with the broad historical setting of the book. The *cultural context* of a passage seeks to understand specific details mentioned within the passage that had specific meaning to the people in the culture to which the text was first written. Cultural customs are not present in every passage, but some texts can't be understood without knowing the cultural customs presented.

### A. **Examples:**

1. In **John 4:1-42**, this is the story of Jesus' interaction with the Samaritan woman. If you study the cultural background, you find out 1) why Jews do not normally pass through Samaria, 2) why Jewish men do not talk with strange women, especially Samaritan women, 3) and the background of the conflict between Jews and Samaritans.
2. If you study a text that mentions Jewish weddings (e.g. the parable of the ten virgins (**Mt. 25**), the parable of the wedding feast (**Mt. 22**), or the wedding feast at Cana (**Jn. 2**), you need to find out about Jewish wedding customs. It's important to know the details of the ceremony, the preparation, the wedding feast, and what is expected of the bride, groom, and guests who attend.
3. Where can you find info about cultural customs?
  - a. Bible dictionaries
  - b. Bible encyclopedias
  - c. Manners and customs books
  - d. Reliable AI platforms

“Reliable” is key — AI should only supplement, not replace, traditional sources. You can specify examples like: *AI study assistants that cite primary sources or standard reference works (e.g., Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia, ISBE, etc.).*

AI platforms can be a helpful tool for discovering background information, cultural customs, or word definitions, but they should **never replace Scripture or sound biblical resources**. When using AI, treat it as a **research assistant**, not an authority. Always verify what it provides against **trusted sources**—such as Bible dictionaries, encyclopedias, commentaries, or reputable conservative teachers.

Discernment is required to test every explanation or interpretation against the clear teaching of God’s Word.

## II. WORD-STUDIES

The original languages of the Bible are Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. Bible translators do their best to communicate what the original languages say and mean. Some Bible translations translate the original languages into English word for word, but some words need entire phrases, sentences, or even a paragraph to explain them. By doing word studies, you gain the meaning that some translations cannot achieve.

A. Word studies help you interpret, explain, and apply the Bible. Knowing the precise meaning of a keyword or phrase helps you understand the passage better. There are many ways to do word studies. Bible software makes word studies very easy. If you don't have Bible study software, you can also find the information you need online at [www.blueletterbible.org](http://www.blueletterbible.org), [www.biblestudytools.com](http://www.biblestudytools.com), or [www.preceptaustin.org](http://www.preceptaustin.org). Below, we will describe how to do word studies with whatever resources you have available.

### B. Conducting a Word Study

For a larger text, word studies can be difficult because there are too many words to look up. For a medium-sized text, you may want to look up all the key verbs or action words. For a smaller text, you might look up all the words that you believe might have some important meaning. Two approaches to word studies are described below:

1. **Word Studies with Bible Software:** All Bible study software programs have a word search feature. However, searching for the English word usually doesn't give you an accurate understanding of the Hebrew or Greek word behind the English. **The key to doing a word study is to discover the meaning of the Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek that is translated into English.** For those with no knowledge of the original languages, the best way to do a word study is to find the Strong's number of the word you want to study. Every word in the Bible was

given a number by Augustus Strong. Strong's numbering system has become the standard and is used by most word study resources.

2. **Doing Word Studies Online.** There are some good Bible study resources online. However, there are also a lot of bad ones. Two good resources are [www.blueletterbible.org](http://www.blueletterbible.org) and [www.biblestudytools.net](http://www.biblestudytools.net). This does not mean that everything these websites teach is good. You must always be discerning and cautious when using any resource.

Helpful, easy-to-use Word Study books:

- (1) **Mounce's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words**
- (2) *Vine's Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words* is a very easy-to-use work coded to Strong's that uses English words and gives you definitions.
- (3) *Vincent's Word Studies in the New Testament*, goes through the Bible verse by verse and lists key English words in the King James Bible, and gives definitions for them.
- (4) *Robertson's Word Pictures in the New Testament*, like Vincent's, goes through the New Testament verse by verse, lists keywords and gives you information about them.
- (5) *Wuest's Word Studies in the Greek New Testament* is similar in form to Robertson's and Vincent's works. This is a multiple-volume set that contains most of the books of the New Testament but not all of them.

- C. **WARNING!** Remember that context gives meaning to words, not concordances, dictionaries, lexicons, or word study books. Word study books and resources only give you a range of possible meanings, but words derive their meaning from their context. For example, the phrase "**time flies when you're having fun**" has two different meanings depending on the context. Literally, it means that time passes quickly when you are enjoying yourself. But figuratively, it can also mean that you are not paying attention to the time because you are so engrossed in something.

**Example:**

**2 Sam 18:14** *Then Joab said, "I will not wait around here before you." So he took three spears in his hand and thrust them through the heart of Absalom while he was yet alive in the midst of the oak.*

- **Literal definition:** The physical organ that pumps blood.

**Proverbs 4:23** *Guard your heart with all diligence, For from it flow the springs of life.*

- **Figurative definition:** Heart= center of a person's thoughts, will, and emotions.

- D. Finally, not all passages benefit from word study. Sometimes a word in Greek or Hebrew means exactly what it does in English.

The dictionary and lexicons will give you the meaning of the words, or the range of the meaning of the words, context will be the ultimate determiner of the meaning!

### III. INTERPRETATION

Interpretation is determining what God intended the biblical writer to mean by what he wrote. Up to this point, we have been collecting data, not interpreting. We have:

1. Determined the genre of the text.
2. Discovered the theme of the book.
3. Discovered the major outline of the book and how our text fits into the outline.
4. Discovered the historical context and setting.
5. Looked up any cultural details in the text.
6. Examined the far context of our passage.
7. Examined the near context of our passage.
8. Performed word studies on keywords and phrases in the text.

We can now make a *tentative interpretation* based on our findings. Sometimes the meaning of a passage is very clear. Other times it may be very elusive. It is important to make a tentative interpretation **before consulting any commentaries**. If you look at commentaries first, they may fill your mind with presuppositions that could prevent you from seeing the correct interpretation.

#### A. The 101 of Interpretation

1. With the data you have accumulated so far, ask yourself, "What was the author trying to say in this text?" **Do not ask yourself**, "What does it mean to me?" You will consider that later. Considering the context and any other additional information you have acquired, answer the question, "What did God and the biblical writer intend for their audience to understand?" When you discover this, you discover the interpretation or meaning of the text.
2. Once you have committed to a certain interpretation, you are ready to consult commentaries.

3. After consulting commentaries, you may want to change your interpretation, as commentators may reveal things in the text that you didn't notice or may supply information that cannot be gleaned in English. Modify or change your interpretation if necessary, but **always go with the interpretation that best fits the near context.**
4. **Three basic kinds of commentaries** can be consulted. Each has its own advantages and disadvantages.
  - a. **Critical/Exegetical commentaries** focus on the technical aspects of the text and the original languages. They are written by scholars and are intended for a more advanced audience, assuming knowledge of the original languages. So unless you have training in Hebrew and Greek these will not be helpful!
  - b. **Expositional commentaries** focus on explaining the meaning of the Bible text to a general audience. They are typically written in a more engaging and readable style, and they often include illustrations, applications, and devotional thoughts. These commentaries interact with the original text but do it in such a way that the normal, person, untrained in the original languages can understand what is being said.
  - c. **Devotional commentaries** are not technical at all. They give you the interpretation and application of the text but don't discuss details of the text or problems. They are usually easy to read and application-oriented.
  - d. **What Commentaries should you buy?** Here is some basic wisdom.
    1. Don't ever purchase a commentary without a recommendation from someone you know and trust, like a pastor! Remember, no commentary is perfect.
    2. If you can only get one commentary, get a good expositional one. If you can afford several, get two or three expositional ones.
    3. Don't buy commentaries on books you aren't currently studying. Collecting is a burden and you'll end up filling other people's libraries!
5. Example of working towards an interpretation. **Jer. 17:9** says, *"The heart is more deceitful than all else And is desperately sick; Who can know it?"*

- a. **Kind of book?** \_\_\_\_\_.
- b. **Historical context** - Judah is rebelling against God. The nation is about ready to be taken captive to Babylon as a judgment from God because of sin.
- c. **What is the theme of Jeremiah?** \_\_\_\_\_.
- d. **Far context/outline**
  - (1) Israel's sin (16:19-17:6)
  - (2) Blessing for trusting in God (17:7-8)
  - (3) Man's condition and God's discernment (17:9-11)
  - (4) Prayer of praise and request for the judgment of the wicked (17:12-18).
- e. **Near context** - 17:5-11 prophecy about man's condition and God's discernment.
- f. **Cultural background** - none mentioned in the text
- g. **Word-studies** -
  - (1) **Heart** - \_\_\_\_\_
  - (2) **Deceitful** - \_\_\_\_\_
  - (3) **Desperately sick** - \_\_\_\_\_
  - (4) **Who can know** - who can know by observing or reflecting (thinking), to find out and discern.
- h. **Write your interpretation** -  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

"I hold it to be an infallible rule in the exposition of Scripture, that when two texts seem to contradict one another, the less plain must give way to the more plain, and the weak must give way to the strong. That doctrine which reconciles most texts of Scripture is most likely to be right. That doctrine which

makes most texts quarrel with one another is most likely to be wrong.”<sup>2</sup>

#### IV. **HOMEWORK**

- A. Read the appendix at the end of this lesson entitled, “Precision, God’s Will for My Life,” by Dr. Robert Thomas.
- B. Apply the hermeneutical principles you have learned so far by answering the questions below. **For this lesson do not use any commentaries or books which interpret the passage for you until the very end of the lesson when it says to do so.**
- C. **Read all of 2 Timothy**, then answer these questions:
  - 1. What **kind of genre** is the book of **2 Timothy**?
  - 2. What is the **historical setting** of the book?
  - 3. What is the **theme** of the book?
  - 4. What are the major outline points of **2 Timothy**?
  - 5. What part of the general outline does **2 Tim. 2:3** fit into?
  - 6. Look at the theme and look at a detailed outline of the book. What are some of the sub-themes in the context leading up to **2 Tim. 2:3**?
  - 7. What is the near preceding context before **2 Tim. 2:3** talking about?
  - 8. What is the following near context of **2 Tim. 2:3** talking about?

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<sup>2</sup> Ryle, J. C. (2011-06-16). *Old Paths* (Kindle Locations 6806-6809). Heritage Bible Fellowship. Kindle Edition.



9. What cultural information helps you understand the hardships of being a soldier in **2 Tim. 2:3**?
10. What do word studies of the words below reveal?
- a. Suffer
  - b. Hardship
  - c. Soldier
- D. What is your interpretation of **2 Tim. 2:3** before consulting commentaries?
- E. Read as many commentaries as you can on **2 Tim. 2:3**. Write down any key bits of information you find in them and, if necessary, refine your interpretation. If your interpretation has changed, explain how it has changed and why.

#### APPENDIX A

"Precision as God's Will for My Life"  
Dr. Robert Thomas: 2 Timothy 2:15

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Below are the slightly modified sermon notes from Dr. Robert Thomas on **2 Tim. 2:15**. (Emphasis, bolding, and italicizing, have been added to emphasize keywords and statements. Having already studied the text of **2 Tim. 2:15** in the previous lesson, read the following sermon transcript:

- 1) Notice *the progression* from what the text says, to what the text means, to how the text applies.
- 2) Notice the amount of *information that can be gleaned from examining the near context* of **2 Tim. 2:15**.

- 3) Notice the amount of *information that comes from word studies and knowledge of the original languages* that cannot be seen from the English text alone.
- 4) Notice *how relevant cross-references are used* so that the Scriptures might be understood better by other Scriptures that speak to the same issue.
- 5) Notice how Dr. Thomas states at times *what the text does not say or mean* in order to help clarify what is being said and the true interpretation.
- 6) Notice that though the text was first written to Timothy, a pastor of the church of Ephesus during the first century A.D., and though seminary students are never mentioned in the text, *once Dr. Thomas discovered the principles from the text he is then able to apply those principles to anyone who studies the Bible.*
- 7) Notice *how illustrations and examples are used throughout to aid in understanding, relevance, and application of the text.*
- 8) Compare and consider what you discovered from **2 Tim. 2:15** with what Dr. Thomas discovered. *Consider areas you did well and areas you might need to improve.*
- 9) After reading through the notes below and making the observations suggested above, take some time to pray and ask God to help you become an “unashamed workman” in your study of the Scriptures.
- 10) Write down any other lessons you learned from reading the text below or any questions you have so that you can bring them up in class discussion.

### PRECISION AS GOD’S WILL FOR MY LIFE

#### 2 Tim. 2:15

Precision is the name of the game in many strategic phases of modern life:

- A. The people erecting block walls of the new building on campus are precisionists.
- B. Key-making is a job of precisionists. The key has to be very precisely cut or it won’t work.
- C. In operating a computer every stroke has to be exactly right or the computer will not respond with the desired operation. The operator must be precise.

Consider the urgency of the need for precision in biblical matters. **2 Tim. 2:14-18** is as good a place as any for this kind of study. At **2:14** Paul moves from discussing courage to face suffering while in the ministry of the gospel to talk about the character of Timothy’s teaching and of Timothy as a teacher. **“Solemnly charge them in the presence of God”**—this is strong language because purity is to be the subject of his strong adjuration (cf. **1 Tim. 5:21**). The people whom Timothy was

to remind are the ones to whom he was passing on the things he heard (cf. 2:2). “Stop word-fighting”—this is the substance of Timothy’s adjuration. There are two results of such wrangling over words. The first result: it is “profitable for nothing” —“good for nothing”. The second result: “the ruin (or subverting) of the hearers”—this is the opposite of edification.

Our relevant definition of precision comes from **2 Tim. 2:15**: to be so accurate in handling the word of truth as to earn divine approval as an unashamed workman. It is a Spirit-prompted impulse to want to be absolutely right in understanding and transmitting the gospel. Note several characteristics of biblical precision from this verse and its surrounding context.

### *1. The purpose of precision: purity (of doctrine)*

*People don’t often go heretical all at once. And they do not do so intentionally most of the time. They slip into it through shoddiness and laziness in handling the word of truth.* Hymenaeus and Philetos (**2:17-18**) had missed the mark with regard to the truth, not through deliberate effort to propagate falsehood as some have supposed, but through lack of a sound method. The fact that they “missed the mark” (i.e. “have gone astray”) implies that they had been aiming at it. The proper explanation is that they failed in the areas where Paul is commanding Timothy to excel in **2:15**.

Their heresy: interpreting the doctrine of the resurrection in an ethical or spiritual sense only: “Never mind a gospel to die by. The thing that counts is a gospel to live by, my present relationship with Christ. I died and was raised with Him when I became a Christian, and that’s all that is relevant. The historical basis of this teaching doesn’t matter as long as believing it helps me.” This is similar to the error of **1 Corinthians 15:12** which Paul refutes. Their reasonings evidence the inroads of pagan dualism which said that everything spiritual is good and everything material is evil, and hence, the body being material will not be raised. This element of teaching later found its way into the second-century heresy of Gnosticism. Here was an attempt to integrate the Bible with a then-contemporary philosophy. Harmless? By no stretch of the imagination.

*All it takes to start the road to heresy is a craving for something new and different, a flashy new idea, along with a little laziness or carelessness or lack of precision in handling the truth of God.* All around us today are startling reminders of doctrinal slippage and outright failure. In case after case someone who should have known the truth of God better failed in upholding that truth.

The challenge that Timothy was facing in Ephesus was that of halting the slide that had ended in heresy for these two men. Others were beginning to wane under their influence (cf. “upset the faith of some,” **2:18**). The beginning is to shave the edge off the truth slightly, a wrong emphasis on a correct teaching, for example. To offset this, Timothy’s first job was to sharpen his own hold on the truth. Only then could he hope to have an impact for God.

### *2. The practice of precision: patience*

Everyone will not appreciate precision and willingly assent to its importance. We live in a world that would have us to be satisfied, in certain cases, with rough estimates, particularly when it comes to theological matters. It takes a lot of patience and “thick skin” to put up with the criticism and outright opposition that will come when God’s servant insists on accuracy. Timothy faced the same resistance in his day and Paul encouraged him to handle it with patience. Notice the language in **2:24**: “gentle”—be affable, easy to talk to, and approachable in your demeanor. Also in verse 24: “patience when wronged”—bear evil without resentment; when people are unfair and unkind, be patient towards their foolishness and tolerant of the flaws in their character. Paul continues this line in verse 25: “with gentleness” (2:25)—this is the wise man who remains meek in the face of insults, the Judge who is lenient in judgment, and the King who is wise in his rule; this quality stands in opposition to unbridled anger, harshness, brutality, and self-expression.

With 2:24-25 carrying such an emphasis upon the patience with which precision is to be practiced, the “youthful lusts” (remember, Timothy was in his late 30’s or early 40’s by now) probably refer to the qualities of partiality, intolerance, and quickness of temper that characterize headstrong people who are inclined to follow secular methods of using force to win an argument. The approach of patient teaching may very well yield positive results: note the

“repentance” of 2:25. This must be repentance from novelty and false teachings and conversion to sound doctrine in this context. This is the pay-off of patience.

### 3. *The path to precision: persistence (or hard work)*

**2 Timothy 2:15** prescribes the path one must pursue to realize precision: *“be diligent”*—this term speaks of persistent zeal, eager striving, exerting oneself earnestly. It entails strenuous moral effort, a ceaseless and serious output of zeal. “Do your utmost” is the rendering someone has suggested. After you have already reached your limit and gone beyond, this is a command to push a little more to gain a better mastery.

Add to the strength of the word the absence of a conjunction to provide a transition from the previous verse and the aorist imperative form of the command, and you have a very emphatic and urgent course of action that Timothy is to adopt. This was an emergency situation! Furthermore, the needed diligence was not to be just a

sporadic surge now and then, but was to cover a whole lifetime (a constative aorist). It is, of course, singular in number and addressed to Timothy alone. It reminds him that it is one thing to charge others solemnly (**2:14**), but it is another to take oneself in hand (**2:15**). Neglect of the latter will radically reduce one’s effectiveness in accomplishing the former.

*“Present”* is the same word as the one used for presenting oneself for service in **Romans 6:13-16, 12:1-2** and for judgment in **1 Corinthians 8:8**. Both ideas are involved here. The presentation is to be *to God*. Instead of canvassing for men’s approval, God’s estimate is to be sought because it is always accurate. Before the bar of God’s judgment, after thorough examination, this kind of workman stands approved. The approval of God, not men, is what counts (contrast the heterodox teachers and their ear-tickling novelties). Nothing short of conscious integrity before God will suffice. Where this is lacking, there can be no boldness in rebuking the evils of men.

*“Unashamed”*—a similar word in classical Greek referred to one who was not ashamed when he should have been. This cannot be the force here where it must refer to one who is not ashamed because he has nothing to be ashamed of, i.e., he is not forced into shame by the infallible disapproval of God. He is not incompetent or slothful in the way he performs his task, so he has no reason to apologize for his work. This is different than the shame involved earlier in **1:8, 2:3, 9** where Timothy’s shame was caused by the nature of the gospel message or Paul’s imprisonment, a shame caused by cultural pressures, an undeserved but necessary source of tension. Here it is a deserved shame because of not making use of all the resources and energies at one’s disposal, to learn the Scriptures as thoroughly as possible. The workman should never be put to shame by the quality of his own workmanship.

*“Handling accurately”*—“cutting straight,” literally. This clause carries the weight of Paul’s command to Timothy. The means by which Timothy was to satisfy the expectations set by “approved to God” and “unashamed workman,” how they were to be achieved. This contrasts with the crooked methods of chopping up the word of truth by the false teachers.

Suggested figures behind the word for “handling accurately” include: cutting material straight in making tents (Paul’s background), the work of a stone-mason cutting a stone to just the right shape, a farmer in plowing a straight furrow, or building a straight road as the word is used in **Proverbs 3:6** and **11:5**. Some look on a decision between these possible meanings as an example of the “word wars” mentioned in **2:14**, and see no need to decide between them. But as long as our motives involve precision in understanding the Scripture and not some purpose of self-vindication, it is actually an exercise in understanding the Scripture more precisely to try to decide which of these figures Paul had in mind.

*“The word of truth”*—not the 66 books as we know them, but more generally the gospel, the Christian message. “Truth” highlights the difference between God’s unshakeable revelation and the worthless chatter of the errorists. Contrast “profane babblings” of **verse 16**.

Precision, then, is a compelling desire to master the truth of God in more definitive terms, to facilitate a more accurate presentation of that truth to others and to safeguard against doctrinal slippage that leads to error and false doctrine. Seminary days are the most precise time of life for most who enter the Christian ministry. After seminary, because of ministry pressures, precision goes downhill for all but a small percentage of God’s servants. So it is important that a high standard be set while in school. Experience has proven that high goals in mastering the details of the gospel while in school lead to very fruitful ministries after training is completed.

What precision is not:

- A. perfectionism, yet it has perfection as its goal
- B. a substitute for caring for people and meeting their needs
- C. a cause for pride
- D. a clone-maker (it will not demonstrate itself in your life in exactly the same way as it does in the lives of others)
- E. a substitute for the Holy Spirit's ministries of illumination and teaching through God's servant
- F. an overnight achievement. It results from sustained effort and growth.

There are two contrasting articles in February 3, 1989, *Christianity Today*: One by Kenneth Kantzer about a deceased English teacher. He describes Doris Roethlisberger in this way: "She carried a permanent, militant grudge against mediocrity...Dissatisfaction is too weak a word for it—a holy revulsion against the status quo possessed her soul. She hated the second best with a perfect hatred—even when the second best was very good... 'Work a little harder,' she urged. 'Press on to the very best'...She wanted students to study harder, and she told them so. She wanted good teachers to teach better, good writers to improve their skills, a good college to be a better college. Doris wanted the bricklayer to lay his bricks a little straighter; she wanted the preacher to focus on the text a little more sharply; she wanted the evangelist to communicate the gospel a little more clearly" (page 13).

The other *CT* article is written by the man whom many would consider the top missiologist [those who study missions] of this generation. He tells what's wrong with seminaries today and what they should be doing. At the end he writes, "The goal must not be mere academic excellence. It must be Christian effectiveness." (page 29).

Note the effect of the latter statement in the context of the whole article: "You must either be a scholar or an effective servant of Christ." This establishes an absolutely false dichotomy through the emphasis that it brings. It is not a matter of "either...or" but "both...and." In fact, the path to a more effective ministry is through a more thorough and painstaking attention to the Scriptures. Dr. Kantzer's English teacher is the winner in this comparison. "*Work a little harder. Press on to the very best.*" This is the formula that will work.

There are too many "ball park" interpreters and expositors today. The theological atmosphere of evangelicalism is saturated with a dense fog of uncertainty and misplaced emphases in handling the Word of God. Many churches are on the rocks because of careless hermeneutics [Bible study principles], ignorance of biblical languages, and unsystematic theology. Rough estimates as to what this or that passage means will not do. We need qualified expositors who will take the time and make the necessary sacrifices to do their homework well and bring clarity to the minds of God's people as they read and study God's holy Word.