

An Exegetical Interpretation of the Greek Language in 2 Timothy 2:15 with Reference to Σπουδάζω (Study)
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Abstract

Σπουδάζω as used by Pau in 2 Timothy 2:15 has been variously translated by biblical interpreters. Therefore through lexico-semantics analysis which reveals , its root-words and word-stems and the various possible semantic categories created by the human mind, this paper claims that this word "study" in this passage does not mean to pursue knowledge by reading. Rather, it is the Greek verb "*σπουδάζω*," which means "make haste...to exert oneself, endeavour, and give difference". It involves much more than just taking in knowledge. This verb which is in the second person singular aorist imperative mood refers to Timothy, the primary recipient of the Epistle. It can be safely classified as cohortative as this strongly suggests and expresses a positive and direct command. It should be understood as the gnomic kind, which states a general timeless fact or principle. As a direct command, it must be binding on all Biblical scholars as any other command in the Scripture. As a general principle it should be observed as any other Bible principle. Therefore, a principle which is also being directly commanded is doubly binding. The idea of gnomic aorist suggests a general principle. Here in this verse is a general and also a guiding principle for believers in Christ.

Introduction

A preacher of the gospel occupies a central place in the life of a congregation. The nature of his work enables him to combine the roles of a counsellor, doctor, lawyer, engineer, architect and educator among others. In the modern world, it will look naive to remain with a little education only received at the time of preparation in theological institutions or other related institutions of learning. We live in a world of information where either secular or spiritual knowledge is renewed per second. It will always keep one on his toes in discovering and rediscovering knowledge, in order to be useful as one ministers life to the congregation. In view of that fact, biblical scholars use the opening verse of 2Tim.2:15 "study to shew thyself approved" to emphasize the fact that Christians are to study the Bible regularly. Though studying the Scriptures enhance Christian's strength and growth, unfortunately the word 'study' is being used out of context to prove their point. Some interpreters insist that 2Tim.2:15 means that we should read the Bible in an effort to understand it. While there is no doubt that studying in our current sense of the word is healthy for the Christian living, but is that all Paul meant? Moreover, what would be the value or lesson of this discovery for the preachers of the gospel? Hence the need for an exegetical interpretation of 2Timothy 2:15.

An overview of II Timothy 2

Paul probably wrote 2 Timothy in the fall of A.D. 67. There are two reasons for accepting this date. Firstly, according to Early church tradition, Paul suffered execution shortly before Emperor Nero committed suicide in June of A.D. 68. Secondly, Paul penned this last epistle fairly near the time of his execution, though before the winter of A.D. 67-68 (4:21). (Barker 1994,p.909).

2Timothy is unlike either 1Timothy or Titus. It is an intensely personal letter written to encourage Timothy in his difficult task and to ask him to come to Rome. Since it was written to one of Paul's best friends who knew his theology, and not to a church who did not know his theology (Titus) or to a church who knew his theology but was choosing to ignore it (1Timothy), one is not surprised if 2 Timothy does not sound like other letters. It was not intended to be a theological treatise (Mounce 2000.p. lxxvii).

In 2 Timothy 2:1-13, Paul continued to encourage Timothy to remain faithful to the Lord and to his calling by charging him to endure hardship. Then he stressed the importance of faithfulness in his public ministry and personal life (cf. 1 Tim. 4:6-16). According to Ironside, (1967,p.182) in this first section the subject particularly dealt with is the question of service and rewards. In 2Timothy 2:14-26 Paul turned from his emphasis on the importance of enduring hardship in the preceding verses (vv. 1-13) to continue the emphasis on Timothy's need to remain faithful to the Lord. He did this to motivate him to further persevere. Still on 2 Timothy 2:14-26, Towner

(1994,p.516) opines that “there is a shift in the didactic strategy from an emphasis on models to instruction with maxims and specific commands.” Therefore 2 Timothy 2:14-18 stresses faithfulness in public ministry.

Furthermore, Timothy should warn those over whom he does preside against emphasizing hair-splitting controversies in their ministries since these do more harm than good (cf. 1 Tim. 1:4; 4:7; 6:4-5). "In the end disputing about words seeks not the victory of truth but the victory of the speaker" (Ward 1974.p.171). In 2 Timothy 2:15 Timothy should be "diligent" ([σπουδάζω](#), which literally according to White (1910. p.165), denotes zealous, make effort, be prompt or earnest, to make sure that when he would stand before God he would receive the Lord's approval and not be ashamed (cf. 1 John 2:28).

Primarily in gaining this goal, he must teach God's truth consistently with God's intended meaning and purpose. Robertson (1931p.619) argues that the Greek word ὀρθοτομοῦντα elsewhere describes a tentmaker who makes straight rather than wavy cuts in his material. It pictures a builder who lays bricks in straight rows and a farmer who plows a straight furrow. The way a preacher of the gospel presents the word of God was of primary importance to Paul, the Apostle and it should be to Christians too. The Greek word ἐργάτην, workman, stresses the laborious nature of the task rather than the skill needed to perform it.

Exegesis of 2 Timothy 2:15

The Greek New Testament of 2Timothy 2:15 says: Σπούδασον σεαυτὸν δόκιμον παραστήσαι τῷ Θεῷ, ἐργάτην ἀνεπαίσχυντον, ὀρθοτομοῦντα τὸν λόγον τῆς ἀληθείας. (Aland,et.al 2001 p.555)

The same passage in the KJV says “Study to show thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth”.

This particular verse has three verbs in the Greek text: two of the verbs are in the aorist tense while one is in the present participle. The first verb in the aorist tense is σπούδασον, which, literally translated, to be diligent (KJV – study). The second verb, which is an infinitive (verbal noun), is παραστήσαι, and may be translated as: to present. The last verb, which is a participle (verbal noun) is ὀρθοτομοῦντα, which is commonly translated rightly dividing (Tenney 1973,p.388). This study will touch on the usage, meaning and the syntax of these verbs; that is, the proper arrangement, mutual relation and functions of the verbs in this particular verse. Each of the verbs is studied separately and applications spelled out.

1.Σπούδασον. This is aorist imperative and it is variously translated "be diligent," "be eager," "make every effort." The term according to Gunther. (1971, pp.559-68) usually implies both sustained effort and deep-rooted, serious, ethical motivation. He also adds that it could be translated "Make this your highest priority," or "Pour yourself into this task." Wommack (2012) further adds that this Greek word is used ten times in the New Testament and this is the only time it is translated "study." It was translated "forward" (Gal. 2:10); "endeavouring" (Eph. 4:3); "endeavoured" (1 Thes. 2:17); "endeavour" (2 Pet. 1:15); "do. . .diligence" (2 Tim. 4:9, 21); "diligent" (Tit. 3:12, 2 Pet 3:14); and "labour" (Heb. 4:11). The King James Version here reads "Study to show [yourself] approved." This gloss has been criticized as an inaccurate translation of the verb [σπουδάζω](#). Firstly, [σπουδάζω](#) according to Verbrugge (2000, p.536) is not restricted to mere study. It involves the whole person—heart, soul, and mind. Secondly, to translate this verb as "study" implies that the "word of truth" is a synonym for Scripture. Most likely, however, "word of truth" refers to the good news of Jesus Christ, which Paul had passed on to Timothy in oral instruction. Nevertheless, King James Version should be defended here, for the word "study" in 1611 English meant very much what idiomatic "pour yourself into this task" suggests. Only in later English usage did "study" take on a strictly cognitive sense (Hornby 2005,p.1470). But since the word has changed in its meaning, it communicates something quite different from what Paul intended (Wallace 2012).

Σπούδασον, Second person singular, aorist imperative, refers to Timothy, the primary recipient of the Epistle. This verb is in the imperative mood. Mood relates the verbal idea to the speaker's attitude or purported attitude. It presents something either as a fact or a possibility. Wenham (1988,pp.11-12) establishes that there are four classifications of mood. The first is the indicative, which is the mood of assertion; second is the subjunctive, which is the mood of probability; third is the operative, which is the mood of possibility and the last is the Imperative mood, which is the mood of intention.

This particular verb is in the imperative mood making it a command. There are four basic uses of the imperative mood, namely: the cohortative, which makes a positive and direct command; the prohibitive, which makes a negative command; the entreaty, which expresses request rather than a direct command, and the permissive, which is the use of the third person imperative and needs the English auxiliary verb “let” to make its meaning clear (Casido 2012). *Σπούδασον* can be safely classified as cohortative as this strongly suggests and expresses a positive and direct command. The tense of this particular verb is aorist. Aorist tense, basically, is indefinite as to time; when conveying abstract ideas, they express timeless truth. This peculiar tense to the Greek grammar was found to correspond closely to the English form often called “simple-present”, which is really an English aorist, or indefinite form referring to a timeless fact or principle. Casido (2012) suggests that there are about eight kinds of the aorist tense, such as the ingressive, constantive, gnomic, epistolary, for example, *σπούδασον* is of the gnomic kind, which states a general timeless fact or principle.

This particular verb expresses both a direct command and a timeless general principle. The idea of gnomic aorist suggests a general principle. Here in this verse is a general and also a guiding principle. The most common way this verse is interpreted is to say that: if we study well, God approves of us and what we have done. It is more correctly interpreted that through our study, persevering and careful in work, hard-working, industrious, that which is done with carefulness, steadfastness and painstakingly, we prove to ourselves that we have been approved or accepted of God through the Lord Jesus Christ.

2. *παραστήσαι* (to present). This is first aorist infinitive. An infinitive is a verbal noun. As a verb, its purpose is to express the goal of the verb to which it stands related. In this case, it expresses the goal of the main verb *Σπούδασον* (give diligence). This infinitive is exegetical, that is, it clarifies and completes the thought of the main verb. This infinitive answers the question, “be diligent to what?” The aorist tense reinforces the idea of it being exegetical. Being a qualifier and modifier of the main verb this word must therefore agree with the tense of the main verb, hence the aorist tense. (Casido 2012).

If Christians are to be diligent about something, it must be in the realm of making themselves approved before God. Any practice that does not contribute to this intent must, by all means, be dismissed. To make ourselves approved to God is not a once-only task; it must be an earnest and continued effort.

3. *ὀρθοτομοῦντα* (rightly dividing). Accusative masculine, present participle of *ὀρθοτομέω* a late and rare compound (*ὀρθοτομος*, cutting straight, *ὀρθός* and *τέμνω*), here only in the New Testament. It occurs in Prov 3:6; 11:5 for making straight paths *ὁδούς* with which compare Heb 12:13 and "the Way" in Acts 9:2. Robertson (2006 p.619) explains it to mean: plowing a straight furrow. The metaphor is the stone mason cutting the stones straight since *τέμνω* and *ὀρθός* are so used.

ὀρθοτομοῦντα (present participle). A participle is a verbal adjective. Its verbal function is to participate in the action of the main verb. Being in the present tense, it indicates action, which is contemporary with the action of the main verb. The main verb in this verse is *Σπούδασον* (be diligent) and *ὀρθοτομοῦντα* (rightly dividing) is the participle. Hence, the idea being brought out is: as we diligently seek to be approved of God we must rightly divide the Word of Truth. In other words, the more we seek diligently God’s approval the more we must be occupied in or with the rightly divided Truth (Casido 2012).

On the issue of finding God’s approval there is no substitute for the rightly dividing of the Word. No amount of Christian practice will gain God’s approval apart from the right dividing of the word of Truth. Hence, any practice whatever or however sincere and faithful it may be will only result in God’s disapproval if not based on the principle of right division. To be approved of God may possibly require several and different ways and means, but what is most interesting in this passage is that the entire conceivable ways and means only one is mentioned, namely: the right dividing of the word of Truth. The reason seems obvious – our Christian practices or works are only the result of our knowledge of the word. In other words, we are no better than our theology. Hence, a knowledge based on the word not rightly divided will surely result in wrong practice. Therefore, to be a workman not needing to be ashamed is the result of the right division of the Word of Truth.

There are several lessons one can glean from this text, but effort of the researcher is limited to only three of them so that the meanings might be explicitly clear.

First, it seems apparent that one must study the Word if he is to please God, although that is not the primary meaning of the word “study” here. If any of the other verbs above is to be fulfilled, one must have a personal knowledge of God’s word before he can “handle,” “divide,” “interpret,” or “cut straight” the word. Therefore, we learn that we must study God’s word; that is, we need to read the Bible daily, and meditate on the words and meaning so that we have a grasp of what is being said and are able to put into practice what God would have us do (see Jos.1:8-9).

Secondly, the word “study” here means something altogether different. In addition to the traditional meaning of “study,” this word means that we must diligently apply ourselves to learning and to doing what we have learned. Merely knowing is not enough. The reason for this preparation is simple. We must do this to please God. He is not pleased with lazy children who are content to sit and do nothing. God expects His children to strive to please Him at all times, and to do that, we must be able to adequately discuss God’s Word. If we can do that, we have no reason to be ashamed of our workmanship, for a workman must be worthy of his wages if he is to please God.

Thirdly, the latter part of the verse means, we must know what the Bible teaches, and be able to teach others as God has spoken, not by some “ideas” we have. Not with some missal or some preacher’s interpretation. We must read the Bible, study the Bible, and investigate all verses relating to the same topic so that we have a clear idea of what God has said. Then, when we teach others, we are teaching the truth, and not our ideas.

Conclusion

2Timothy 2:15 is a guiding principle for every Christian to understand the Scriptures as a whole and be a workman approved before God. One will do well in his pursuit of God’s approval, if he seriously heeds this principle and its implications. Anyone who studies the Scriptures without this principle as a guide is not different from a man without a compass on uncharted seas. Disaster will surely be the destiny of such person. This verse which contains the principle of right division is quite known and popular among many biblical scholars and teachers. Indeed, the verse has even become trite in their quotation. It seems as if their understanding of this verse has never gone beyond the wording and it is evident that they have miserably failed to grasp its implications.

The implication of this verse could prove revolutionary to the popular methods of interpretation. The command to rightly divide the Word of Truth would tell us so much, if we would only stop, think and rid our minds of traditions. The direct command to rightly divide the Scriptures implies that the Scriptures as we have them are not yet rightly divided, but needed to be so. The Bible not being rightly divided is in a sense tantamount to it being incorrectly divided. The implication may seem poignant, but Scripture not rightly divided is Scripture wrongly divided. Therefore, the context of this statement is speaking about studying the Word of God for the purpose of proving to ourselves our righteous position in Christ. Once we comprehend and understand our acceptance of Jesus Christ, it will lead us to rightly divide all scripture in the light of this truth.

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