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Human rights cannot be left to governments, legislators and jurists. They are the concern and responsibility of the man and woman in the street, of the labourer, the farmer, the office clerk, the student. Every name on every petition counts.”

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# Steak, Potato, Peas and Chopsuey Linear and Non-linear Thinking in Theological Education

Peter Chang

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*Is straight line thinking the only way to do theology or does this linear approach sometimes lead to a truncated form of biblical understanding? How important is the story, the parable, the mystical experience or the emotional response in understanding a truth of the Bible? Professor Peter Chang challenges our western epistemology. We hope that he will develop his chopsuey approach to theological understanding.*

(Editor)

Why do Chinese restaurants seem to be ubiquitous in the West? It is because an occasional chopsuey is a welcome change from steak, potato and peas or chicken and French fries. This may well have a lesson for theological educators.

The cry for alternatives in theological education is heard not only in many Third World countries, which are growing more and more uneasy about the imported Western system of seminary training. Western theological educators are also searching for new ways. Various proposals have been made and numerous innovative ideas are in the experimental stage. This essay is to share some “chopsuey” insight, which may contribute to the “Steak, Potato and Peas” dominated theological cookery.

Theological education evolves in the larger context of culture and is closely related to people’s thinking style. In the Western academic scene, linear thinking has been the dominant mode. It is largely analytical, objective, logical and systematic. In the following, we will see how such a thinking style is manifested in inductive Bible study, theology, homiletics and theological education. To see its pervasiveness and to understand its weaknesses will help us to reform and to innovate.

## THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE INDUCTIVE METHOD

In the West, the inductive method is perhaps one of the most prevalent ways for serious Bible study. Basically it consists of three steps: Observation, Interpretation and Application. It embodies the spirit of scientific inquiry as exemplified by the famous story of Louis

Agassiz, a zoology teacher, who required a new student to observe minutely a well-preserved fish on a laboratory dish for two whole months and make sketches from his observation. The moral of the story is that it pays to observe, to look, look and look closely.

The painstaking effort in studying nature is transferred to Bible study. The Bible is also regarded as an external object of inquiry. One is to use one's intelligence to observe carefully, to dissect and analyze the text, in short, to attempt to find out exhaustively all the textual phenomena. Then one is entitled to proceed to interpretation and finally to apply the truth thus gathered from the text.

The inductive procedure is actually the popular version of grammatical-historical exegesis: understanding what the text meant, making sure of the author's intended meaning before venturing to say what the text has to say today. One is admonished to remain objective in digging out the meaning of the text before letting the subjective part of application come in. A great number of variations stem from this basic approach and appear in different names such as Methodical Bible Study, Independent Bible Study, Effective Bible Study, etc.<sup>1</sup>

The inductive approach may carry the following implications. First, for the objective part, one does not necessarily need to have a faith commitment to what the text says. Or, to put it another way, an honest atheist should come up with pretty much the same observations as a Protestant, a Catholic or a Jew studying the same passage. Second, the step to find out the meaning then is distinct from the step of finding out the meaning now. Indeed, many respectable commentaries only deal with the former and leave the latter to the individual reader. Usually the more scholarly one gets, the more frequently the above two implications are put to work.

Personally, I have been trained in the inductive approach. However, a seemingly unrelated thought concerning marriage stimulated me to question the dominance of this method, and gradually an alternate and perhaps equally valid way emerged.

In the U.S. or Great Britain, nowadays marriage is normally preceded by dating and courtship. A young man or woman should get to know each other, i.e. to gather enough pertinent information. Then they should think calmly and rationally in spite of the involvement i.e. to interpret the other person in relation to oneself. If all is well, they get engaged and married. Hence, one may say personal application comes last as in the good inductive procedure.

However, in India, it is well known that one may get married by arrangement without ever seeing one's spouse before the wedding night. This seemingly risky and irrational custom does work. The Chinese also had the practice of *zhi fu wei hun*, the parents pointing to the fetuses yet in the womb and agreeing to have them engaged for marriage if they turn out to be of opposite sexes.

Such procedures are totally against the grain of inductive thinking. The inductive mind wants to have enough information before action. One must gather enough objective facts before personal involvement.

Does information always come by inquiry? For instance, a tourist visiting Hong Kong got up to the Victoria Peak, which overlooks the magnificent harbour, and exclaimed, "What a gorgeous view!" In order to do exegesis of his utterance, we may apply the battery of inductive questions and ask, "Who is that tourist? When did he go up there? How did he get

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Irving Jensen, *Independent Bible Study* (Chicago: Moody, 1953), Howard F. Vos, *Effective Bible Study* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1956) and Robert A. Traina, *Methodical Bible Study* (New York: Ganis & Harris, 1952).

there? Where is Victoria Peak? What is it famous for? What did he see? ...?" According to the inductive method, such fact-gathering is the prerequisite for knowing what the tourist meant by "What a pretty view!" However, as a resident of Hong Kong who has been up to the Peak, I can get to the meaning of his utterance without all those questions and may come close to understanding his meaning. This is a different way of knowing. It can be said to be empathetic.

The above has something to do with Bible study. For instance, take [2 Cor. 1:3b-4](#) (NIV), "the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God." To understand this passage inductively, we would ask, "Who wrote these words? When was it? Why did he write these words? Why is the author able to comfort those in trouble? What is the purpose of the trouble that the author went through?" A believer who had similar experience in the past can read this text and exclaim, "I can understand what it means!" Indeed, his understanding may surpass the exegete who has gone through the sweat and toil of grammatical-historical investigation while never having an existential experience of suffering and comfort from God. Of course, experience and analysis are not mutually exclusive. But, does analysis always need to be the first step in understanding the text? The basic assumption of the inductive method is that if one does not understand, observe more closely, analyze further, and gather more information. Is this the only approach to achieve understanding?

As a matter of fact, many great texts of the Bible turn out to be such that one can readily understand them without paying much attention to the W's questions. For instance, a believer who has experienced God's love in his life can come to [John 3:16](#) without going through questions such as, "Who is speaking to whom? Is Jesus or the evangelist the speaker? Where and when was this said? Why was it said?" etc., and may sincerely and justifiably say that he understands it. Whereas, can someone who has all the answers to the analytical questions concerning the text but sees absolutely no personal meaning in it really understand this verse? One can further reflect upon texts such as [Heb. 13:8](#), [Rom. 6:23](#), and [Pr. 3:5, 6](#). If the most influential texts may be fairly well understood without the inductive procedure, why is the inductive approach supposed to be the proper way to approach the Bible? Is it not a hangover from preoccupation with historical questions concerning the biblical documents? The inductive way is supposed to be a superior way to grasp the text, being able to prevent a lot of misuse such as allegorical interpretation and proof-text mentality.

One with inadequate schooling in analysis would find it difficult to follow such a scribal injunction of epistemological ritual, and can only be regarded as intellectually inferior and despised as '*am ha-*' aretz, though he may be skilled in other modes of knowing such as existential, intuitive, empathetic and Gestalt. However, he cannot get beyond the first hurdle of observation and analysis in the inductive scheme. For too long the analytical mind has presumed the guardian position of God's truth. Now, we need to question such monopoly.

## **NON-LINEAR APPROACH OF BIBLE STORIES**

When linear thinking is applied to theology, systematization would be perceived as a major task. The Bible is in many ways unsystematic. For instance, it does not say clearly in one place what attributes God has. Hence, theologians are to create order out of disorder, to prepare from nature a botanical garden where plants are properly labelled and grouped.

Historical events are regarded as raw materials. Theologians are to dissect, distill, extract and come up with principles and doctrines. The product would therefore be a rather systematic presentation of the various doctrines, where main concepts will be clearly defined and their inter-relationships carefully delineated.

C. S. Song sees the weakness of such linear approach. Using Cullmann's *Heilsgeschichte* as an example, he points out the weakness of straight-line theology, and says,

I seriously doubt whether a straight line can express the immense complexity of God's saving activity in the world. A straight line simplifies. It cuts off irregularities. It straightens out knotty problems. It geometricizes all.<sup>2</sup>

The major prerequisite to studying and understanding this type of theology is to have a clear mind. It takes intellectual effort to grasp what has been the work and product of great minds. But, it need not involve the whole person. The affective domain is largely left untouched. Actually, the abstract and technical language used in theology depersonalizes the text. Alonso-Schökel points out that propositional statements, commonly regarded as a higher form of expression, are actually a truncated form. They are less holistic.<sup>3</sup>

In the article, "The Bible: God's Storybook", Leland Ryken says that stories reveal truth and experience in a way that no other literary form does. The Bible recounts how God acts; whereas theological treatises enumerate the attributes of God. The Bible communicates something through our imagination that it does not communicate through our reason. We should respect the story quality of the Bible in our exposition of it.<sup>4</sup> Thus, stories are not inferior. Their linear transformation by theological scholars does not necessarily produce something better.

## ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES TO PREACHING AND TEACHING

In homiletics one could again see linear thinking in operation. The model sermon should have an outline with the main points clearly stated. The subpoints should be logically related to the main points and to one another. To be otherwise is to have a bad sermon.

After having been thus taught, I began to analyze many Chinese preachers and concluded that they did not know how to construct sermons properly. However, a Chinese pastor, well versed in both the American and Chinese ways, corrected me by an analogy concerning food. In the American meal, one has steak, potato and peas placed separately on the plate; whereas in chapsuey everything is mixed together. The latter is not without organization but only organized differently. It gradually dawned on me, that there is another type of thinking, which is non-linear.

Look at the streets of New York City; they are rather typically ordered in an X, Y-coordinate grid system. Even the names of the streets and avenues are quite systematic. They are easy to remember, easy to locate and efficient. However, when one comes to Paris, one finds an entirely different system in operation. There is little regard for the X, Y axes. At

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<sup>2</sup> "Many Peoples and Many Languages", *The Northeast Asia Journal of Theology*, No. 24/25 (Mar./Sept., 1980), 34.

<sup>3</sup> L. Alonso-Schökel, *The Inspired Word: Scripture in the Light of Language and Literature* (London: Burns and Oates, 1967), p.122.

<sup>4</sup> *Christianity Today*, XXII (October 5, 1979), 38.

the junctions, one seldom finds two streets meeting each other perpendicularly. Is one system better? Yes, in some ways. But each has its advantages and disadvantages. One represents linear thinking; the other, non-linear thinking. The linear mind should not always feel urged to straighten out the non-linear pattern.

Some books in the Bible such as Hosea and 1 John are notoriously hard to outline. There are many proposals to make sense out of their thought sequences and to outline them properly. However, a meandering river may be much prettier than a straight canal. The non-linear outline of a mountain range is far more pleasant than the linear silhouette of a concrete housing estate. Non-linear thinking is not disorder or non-thinking. The seemingly disorganized sermons I heard have patterns that escape my search for linear outlines and logical connections.

Kosuke Koyama has made a delightful comparison between these two types of thinking in his article, "Theological Reflections on the Bamboo room and the Oil Room". Concerning the two rooms he visited in Kuching museum in Sarawak, he says,

The Oil Room expresses the human mind which is (1) *straight* (look at the long, straight steel shaft); (2) *fast* (look at the power of the engine that rotates the enormous iron mechanism); (3) *self-assertive* (look at the sharp, aggressive drill head).

The Bamboo Room represents an almost exactly opposite type of human mind which is (1) *curved* (look at the graceful curves of the bamboo bird traps); (2) *slow* (look at the models of canoes and paddles); and (3) *dialogical* (look at all those bamboo products blending harmoniously into the surrounding nature).

The curved, slow, dialogical spirit is the indigenous spirit of Sarawak. Here mother nature is curved, slow, and dialogical. Her self-understanding is curved, slow, and dialogical. Her history is curved, slow, and dialogical. The Sarawak man, in his appreciation of the relationship between his spirit and the outside world, does not go in a straight, fast, self-assertive direction. He goes, on the contrary, in the direction of animism (curve), symbolism (slow), and integration (dialogue).

Then he goes on to say, "My observation of curved-spirituality was in fact stimulated by the strong impression the Oil Room imprinted on my mind. I felt the Oil Room was a threat directed at my personality."<sup>5</sup>

Linear thinking as applied to theological education tends to stress compartmentalization and specialization. Hence, we have Old Testament, New Testament, Church History, Theology and Practical Theology departments, each offering a gamut of courses. The professors are further specialized in their respective fields. This practice has its merits and facilitates the exploration of new frontiers of knowledge.

The major aim of theological education is to train future ministers, who are in a sense general practitioners. The virtue of specialization tends to force the specialists to their confined area of research. Thus they may become less and less qualified to produce integrated general practitioners. The whole is greater than the parts. A host of excellent specialists does not guarantee the effective training of capable generalists. The situation deteriorates with the pressure to publish.

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<sup>5</sup> *Anticipation*, No. 16 (March, 1974), 8–9.

What we have been describing concerning linear and non-linear thinking turns out to have a physiological basis. Research has shown that our brain is double, having two hemispheres, each capable of functioning independently in some degree from the other.<sup>6</sup>

... the organization and processing of data by the right hemisphere is in terms of complex wholes, the minor hemisphere having a predisposition for perceiving the total rather than the parts. By contrast, the left hemisphere is seen to analyze input sequentially, abstracting out the relevant details and associating these with verbal symbols.

... the scientific and technological aspects of our civilization are products of the left hemisphere, while the mystical and humanistic aspects are products of the right.

Such discovery has serious implications for education.

If there is any truth in the assertion that our culture stresses left-hemispheric skills, this is especially true of the school systems. Selection for higher education is based predominantly on the ability to comprehend and manipulate language ... If the right hemisphere does indeed process data in a manner different from the left, we may be shortchanging ourselves when we educate only left-sided talents in basic schooling ... Many problems can be solved either by analysis or synthesis; but if people are taught to habitually examine only one approach, their ability to choose the most effective and efficient answer is diminished.<sup>7</sup>

Our exegesis, theology and theological education are reflecting the same dominance of left hemisphere. It is high time that we should appreciate and exercise more non-linear thinking to upset the lopsidedness and work out a more balanced approach.

## CONCLUSION

This paper, though by no means the first of its kind, challenges the hegemony of linear thinking. As a mode of thinking, linear thinking has its contributions and handicaps. Therefore, we need different modes to complement and to shed light on the blind spots of the other mode. For instance, in Bible study, objectivity avoids the danger of reading one's own mind into the text, but the empathetic approach leads the whole person into the passage instead of remaining aloof while analyzing it. A balanced combination of both approaches might be in order.

In communication, it is important to deliver the message in the audience's thinking style. In other words, no matter how good the content is, it will do the audience little good unless they comprehend it. For non-linear thinkers, a linear message may not even guarantee its accurate reception.

In conclusion, though non-linear thinking is less explored and utilized, as even manifested in the "non" prefixed terminology, it may well represent a considerable slice of cultural phenomena. Hence, more sensitivity, respect and utilization of this mode of thinking should be cultivated in generating exegesis, theology, homilectics and theological education programmes in the future.

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<sup>6</sup> Joseph E. Bogen, "Some Educational Implications of Hemispheric Specialization", in *The Human Brain*, ed. M. C. Wittrock (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1977), pp.133 and 136.

<sup>7</sup> Robert D. Nebes, "Man's So-called Minor Hemisphere", in *The Human Brain*, pp.102, 104 and 105.

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# St. Augustine on the Education of a Preacher

John Peace

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*St. Augustine's sermons taken down in shorthand and later published influenced the preaching and theological education in the Church for 1000 years. His reflections on how to study the Bible still have a message for today. This article is the second part of a paper on Augustine's view of theological education.*

(Editor)

Among the most hotly-debated topics concerning theological education today, the content of the curriculum stands high. With more and more courses being compressed into the brief span of three years, we would do well once again to reconsider the question, 'What exactly does the modern preacher need to know in order to expound the Scriptures?'

Augustine not only presided over what may be called the first real theological college, but taught them so well that the leadership of the North African church was almost monopolized by his students in later years. What does he have to tell us about the curriculum of such a school?

## ON UNDERSTANDING THE BIBLE

First of all, of course, comes knowledge of Bible content: "The first rule ... is to know these books even if they are not understood, at least to read them or to memorize them, or to make them not altogether unfamiliar to us." Presumably, this kind of approach lies behind the practice of many schools of requiring a rapid reading of the whole Bible at the beginning of theological training, followed immediately by general Bible survey and introduction courses.

Then follows a step which is likewise imitated today: "Then those things which are put openly in them either as precepts for living or as rules for believing are to be studied more diligently and more intelligently, for the more one learns about these things the more capable of understanding he becomes." Could this be where our beginning Systematic Theology and Ethics courses originated? At least, the principle is the same.

Now comes the main theme of Book Two of *On Christian Doctrine*—which, we recall, may also be translated as "On Christian Education" or "On Theological Education".

"Having become familiar with the language of the Divine Scriptures, we should turn to those obscure things which must be opened up and explained, so that we may take examples from those things that are manifest to illuminate those things which are obscure,