Chapter 7: The Text and its Language

Introduction

On October 31, 1517, Martin Luther nailed a document in Latin to the door of the university church. He wanted to dialog with other professors concerning some important theological issues. The normal procedure for this was to post some theses on the door of the church (which was like a bulletin board at the time). Luther's document would later become famous as the "95 Theses."

Luther wanted a dialog. He got more than he bargained for. The 95 Theses fired the emotions of almost everyone who read them. Within a short time, they were translated and copies were printed using that relatively new invention, the printing press. All over Europe, people read the 95 Theses, studied them, reacted to them, hotly debated them. They became the spark that ignited the Reformation.

Whenever a person writes some kind of text, it takes on a life of its own. The text might fail to gain much attention; or it might become very popular indeed. In any case, people can read the text directly and try to understand what is being said, even without any direct contact with the author. In the case of the 95 Theses, some people certainly had contact with Luther either personally or through letters. However, many more people simply read the 95 Theses and formed their own opinions. The text was their only way of understanding what the author had in mind.

The Importance of the Biblical Text Itself

As we have seen, the historical context is important. Knowing some of the <u>real</u> historical situation helps us understand what each biblical author was saying. However, just knowing the historical context is not sufficient. Actually, we know very little about the biblical authors apart from what the Bible itself tells us. Furthermore, with some parts of the Bible (for example, some of the Psalms), we don't have any idea who the human author was or when he lived. We have little or no access to the human authors' minds, except through the biblical text itself.

This means that it is important for the interpreter to study carefully the biblical text: its words, its language, its genre, its literary context. The text follows normal conventions, common rules of expression that everyone follows in order to facilitate communication. These things give us access to the message of the Bible. Look again at the communication model:
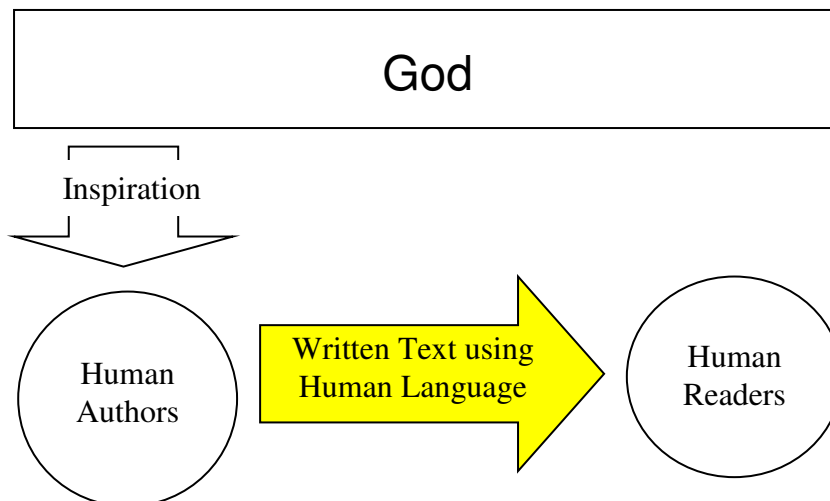
God used the written text of the Bible to communicate his Word. Our access to the human authors (and to God's Word) is through the text. For example:

1) The biblical text uses the conventions of human language (grammar, syntax, expressions, etc.) to communicate.

2) The biblical text follows the formats and rules governing different genres of literature (narratives, laws, letters, parables, prophecies, etc).

3) The biblical text makes sense in its literary context. That is, the surrounding verses help make clear the meaning of a given passage. The broader contexts of the entire book and of the entire Bible also shed light on what a passage says.

The more we know about each of these factors, the better we will understand the message that each author intended to communicate.

The Original Text that the Author Wrote

Before we investigate the language, genre, and context of a biblical passage, we need to consider one other issue related to the text. What in fact is the original biblical text? Today, we don't have the original scrolls written in the handwriting of the authors themselves. What we have are copies of the original scrolls. These copies were made by hand. Some of them were careful copies; others were not so careful. Sometimes the scribes who wrote the copies made mistakes.

Which of these copies are faithful to the original text, and which ones contain copying errors? On the one hand, there are a lot of hand-written copies of every book of the Bible, and many of those copies are very old, that is, they were written not long after the original manuscripts. In fact, we have more and better copies of the biblical books than of any other ancient book. Because of all this evidence, we can be confident of finding out what the original texts said.

However, there do exist small differences among the various copies. These differences are called **variants**. Normally, the variants are small and it is easy to see which variant reflects the original writing. For example:

1) **Skipping**: When a scribe copied a biblical text, sometimes he skipped over a letter, a word, or a line. This usually happened when the same letter or the same word was repeated in one verse. This error is easy to recognize and correct.

2) **Duplicating**: Sometimes instead of skipping something, the scribe wrote a letter, a word, or a phrase twice. This error is also easy to recognize and correct.

3) **Substituting**: In ancient times, often one scribe would read a text aloud while other scribes wrote copies. Sometimes the writing scribes didn't hear correctly and wrote a different word that sounded similar. Other times, the scribes made spelling mistakes. In some cases (particularly in Hebrew) there are two or three ways of spelling the same word, and different scribes spelled it differently. Again, these errors are usually easy to recognize and correct.

4) **Changing**: Sometimes a scribe simply changed some words that were in the original text. He might have eliminated words, added words, or changed words.

   Unintentional Changes: Sometimes the changes were accidents due to carelessness or simple human error. For example, perhaps a phrase in Matthew sounded very similar to a phrase in Mark, and the scribe was distracted or tired enough that he unintentionally

changed the phrase in Matthew so that it would be the same as the phrase in Mark. This would happen if the scribe was very familiar with the book of Mark, so that when he copied the book of Matthew, his brain simply followed the known phrase from Mark.

Intentional Changes: Other times the scribe changed some words on purpose. Perhaps the scribe wanted to change a phrase so that it would be less offensive, or so that it would support the scribe's own theological ideas. Perhaps he would change it so as to give more information about a particular event.

These errors are a bit more difficult to recognize and correct. However, usually there is good evidence among the variants which helps us find the original wording.

So how can we tell which variants (different readings) reflect the original text? **Text criticism** is the art of figuring out what the original writing was, based on the evidence of the different copies that we have in our hands. There are three main methods or principles used in textual criticism:

1) External Evidence: Some interpreters give a lot of weight to the "external evidence" in favor of the different variants. External evidence is the quality of the manuscript (or manuscripts) where the variant is found. For example, if the manuscript is very old, this means that it was written closer to the time of the original text. Thus, an older manuscript may be more likely reflect the original writing. Again, if a variant appears in various manuscripts in different geographic locations, this means that the variant is widespread, and therefore likely to reflect the original. Finally, some manuscripts were copied carefully (without many erasures or errors) while others were not. Variants in carefully-copied manuscripts are more likely to be original.

   External evidence is helpful, but not sufficient by itself. It is possible that some variants would appear in many good-quality documents in different geographical locations, but still represent copying errors. If an error was made in an early copy, it might be duplicated widely.

2) Internal Evidence: Some interpreters believe that the external evidence is almost worthless, since an error might have been made very soon after the original was written. Later, that error would be duplicated widely in ancient manuscripts. These interpreters prefer to use the "internal evidence."

   Internal evidence compares each variant with the style and language of the book where it is found. If the variant shows similarities to the rest of the book, it is likely to be the original. Internal evidence also compares each variant with the typical types of errors that scribes made. For example, if we find a word skipped or doubled for no apparent reason, it probably was a copying error. Scribes would also tend to fall into errors like making things easier to understand, or harmonizing one verse with another. Thus, shorter variants and the more difficult variants are more likely to be original.

   Internal evidence is helpful, but it is also not sufficient by itself. Sometimes the internal evidence could be taken different ways. Suppose one variant includes a certain word while another variant does not. Which of the two was the result of a scribal error? Did the scribe accidentally skip a word? Or did the scribe add the word so that the verse would make more sense?

   Most textual critics use a combination of external evidence and internal evidence as guidelines.

3) <u>Majority Text Method</u>: Some interpreters believe that God not only inspired the original writings, but also "providentially preserved" the true, original text and made it available in every age. These interpreters think that both the external and the internal evidence is suspect. They assert that the variants that appear in the majority of the manuscripts are the ones that reflect the original.

The Majority Text Method would seem to make things simple. Just find out which variant occurs in the majority of the manuscripts, and that's the original. Unfortunately, things are not quite that easy. We have more copies that date from the Middle Ages than truly ancient copies. The copies of the New Testament from the Middle Ages sometimes have very clear errors that can't be denied. Thus, the scholars who advocate the Majority Text often find that they have to make exceptions to the "majority rule."

In spite of the different methods used, in most cases all the different interpreters are in agreement with regard to which variants accurately reflect the original text. Thanks be to God! The fact is that 95 % of the New Testament, for example, is indisputable. Of the variants, with most it is crystal clear to anyone which must be original.

Nevertheless, there <u>are</u> a few places where there is doubt. The biggest examples are John 8:1-11 (the story of the woman caught in adultery) and Mark 16:9-20 (the very end of the book of Mark). Here we have two cases of an entire passage that is found in some ancient copies but not in others. (There is no other place where an entire passage is in doubt.) Were these passages added later? Or were they deleted for some reason? Or could it be that a scroll was damaged (by fire or water or something else) and later copied?

If you have a study Bible, any time there is any doubt whatsoever about the original text, there should be a footnote at the bottom of the page. You will find that the very few variants that are doubtful do not change any Christian doctrine. For this, we can give thanks to God.

As you wrestle with interpreting the Bible, you will probably not have to worry much about text criticism. Other people, who are specialists, have already examined the evidence in great detail. You don't need to duplicate their work. Just appreciate the accuracy of the biblical texts that we have and take note of the few instances where there might be doubt. However, as an interpreter of the Bible, you do need to be aware of the principles behind text criticism, because in recent years some people have tried to rewrite the Bible by attacking the accuracy of the text we have today.

"Revisionist" Textual Criticism
You will remember how "historical critics" revise biblical history according to rules that destroy the credibility of the Bible itself. (For example, they deny the possibility of miracles.) "Text critics" are different. They don't invent sources and traditions without evidence. Or at least they haven't done so until very recently. Over the past 20 years, some text critics have begun to use their imaginations to revise the history of the copying of the Bible. For example, Bart Ehrman, whose books have appeared on the New York Times bestseller list, claims that many of the variants came about because the church deliberately and systematically changed what the Bible said in order to promote the official theology. In other words, the Christian church suppressed the original text of the Bible.

What's wrong with this picture? First of all, we should note that the different variants are not as contradictory (or as important doctrinally) as Ehrman makes them out to be. Very few variants

would make any difference to basic Christian doctrine, and those few do not have good external or internal evidence in their support.

Secondly, Ehrman conveniently forgets that the ancient Christian church was not in a position to suppress anything. It was a persecuted minority. Nor did the church have a central bureaucracy. It was a collection of individual congregations in different countries speaking different languages and having different perspectives on many issues. It is more likely that any doctrinal changes occurred when the original readings supported traditional Christian doctrine and certain scribes changed a word here or there because the original didn't quite fit with their unorthodox teachings.

We can't do justice to all of Ehrman's ideas here. However, it is clear that Ehrman and others are pushing their own version of textual criticism, based not on external evidence or traditional internal evidence, but on their own anti-Christian ideology. They speculate that the original Bible was corrupted and the only way to reverse that corruption is to give preference to the non-orthodox variants. It's possible that people in your church will see Ehrman (or others) on the news and ask you about them. As with the historical critics, Ehrman sometimes manages to make a valid point. However, in order to find it you have to sift through a mountain of unfounded speculation.

Paying Attention to the Rules of Language

Text criticism can assure us that the Bible we have today is the same as what God originally led the human authors to write. But what does that biblical text actually <u>mean</u>? In order to interpret the Bible, we need to pay attention to what it <u>says</u>.

Now, you would think that understanding a written text would be easy. If you know English, you should be able to read one of my sermons and understand exactly what I had in mind, right? And yet sometimes we <u>don't</u> understand what someone else has written. Why is that?

In order for communication to be successful, there needs to be some common ground between the author (or speaker) and the reader (or hearer). If an English-speaking author writes the letters "c-o-w" in that order, separated from other groups of letters, the reader needs to know that "cow" in this context refers to a certain large, four-footed, hooved, horned farm animal that "moos." If the reader does not know English, he or she will not be able to understand what the author means by "cow."

A *language* is a set of guidelines or conventions that a group of people follow in order to enable communication. We are so immersed in our own language that its guidelines just seem "natural." We don't even think about them, until an English teacher starts correcting our grammar. However, the language guidelines that we use are not "natural;" they simply represent a common ground used by a particular group of people. Different languages follow different conventions. If we were speaking Spanish instead of English, the letters "c-o-w" would not make sense. That particular farm animal would be called a "vaca."

What difference does it make? After all, as Shakespeare said, "A rose by any other name would smell as sweet." This is true; however, if you want someone else to understand what you are saying, you need to use the name that they will be familiar with. And if you want to understand the Bible, you need to know the language guidelines followed in the Bible.

To make matters worse, even within the same overall language (like English), there are different guidelines for different situations. When I speak informally with my friends, I may use slang that

is very inappropriate for a formal dinner speech. Furthermore, among English-speakers there are special guidelines for different sub-groups of people. For example, people from the United States would generally refer to an "elevator" while people from England would call it a "lift." Or again, my wife (who is Hispanic) found it very difficult to understand the accent and word choices of an African-American teacher at her school in St. Louis.

These differences do not make it impossible to communicate, but they do complicate things. We can't think of our way as the only "natural" way to speak. We need to be aware of the context in which words are written, and understand as much as possible of the language conventions that are being used by the author.

Understanding the Words Used in the Bible

Sometimes we have trouble interpreting a biblical text because we don't fully understand some of the words used. Almost all words can have several different meanings, depending on how they are used. For example, the word "run" might refer to a person or animal moving on foot faster than a walk. (For example, "He went on a run before breakfast.") However, it might also refer to a competition to see who can reach the goal first on foot. ("She won the 200 meter run.") It might also mean a financial panic. ("There was a run on the bank.") Or it could mean that someone has to do a lot of errands. ("I had to run around all day.") Any word has a "matrix" or "field" of different possible meanings. How can you figure out what any word in a text means? You have to pay attention to how it fits with the other words around it.

Moreover, words sometimes change their meaning(s) with time. Years ago, "gay" meant simply "happy." Today, "gay" means "homosexual" (usually male homosexual). Centuries ago, the Greek word "catholic" meant "universal." The Apostle's Creed (written in Greek) stated "I believe… in the holy catholic (universal) Church…" Today, the word "catholic" is used almost exclusively for the Roman Catholic Church, which is big but certainly not the universal Christian church. So, as an interpreter of the Bible, you need to pay attention to the matrix of meanings that the words had at the time when they were written.

To make matters even more difficult, the biblical books were written in Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek, not English. Whenever we try to translate something, a word in one language often doesn't correspond exactly with any one word in the other language. For example, John 1:5 says, "The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not <u>understood</u> it." (NIV) But some translations say, "the darkness has not <u>overcome</u> it." Which is correct? Actually, the Greek word "katalambano" (καταλαμβάνω) has a field of meaning including "grasp," "understand," and "overcome." Either translation could be correct. Or perhaps the author (John) chose that word deliberately because both meanings are correct: the darkness neither understands nor overcomes the light.

In any case, you can see that it is a big help to understand at least a little Greek and Hebrew. If you don't know either language, then make sure to read several different English translations – and consult a commentary – when you're studying a Bible passage.

Here are a couple of very simple examples. Genesis 3:20 says that Adam "called his wife's name Eve, because she was the mother of all living." (ESV) This makes no sense in English, because in that language "Eve" is a short form of "evening" and has nothing to do with being a mother of all the living. However, in Hebrew "Eve" (חַוָּה or chavah) is very obviously derived from the word for "life" or "living" (חַיָּה or chayah in its feminine form).

Here's a second example: In Matthew 1:21, an angel tells Joseph to call Mary's child "Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins" (ESV). Again, in English "Jesus" is just a name. In Hebrew, however Jesus (or Yeshu'a) means "Yahweh saves" or "Yahweh is salvation." (Note that the book of Matthew is written in Greek, but Jesus' name comes from the Hebrew. Now we're working with <u>two</u> languages!)

A good interpreter will investigate the meaning of **key words** in the biblical text. Key words are those that a) play an important role in the Bible passage, b) appear frequently in the Bible passage, or c) are crucial to the message of salvation in Christ. (Martinez p. 136, citing W. C. Kaiser) How do you look these words up? Use a <u>Bible dictionary</u>, a <u>Bible lexicon</u>, or a <u>Theological Wordbook</u> (a collection of word studies). If you have certain computer programs (Bible Works, Logos, etc.), it is even easier – just type in the word. Some study Bibles also give you some help. For example, the Lutheran Study Bible includes a list of key terms and phrases in Paul's Epistles (see pages 1901-1904). This is extremely helpful for you as an interpreter!

These resources help you see the "field" of meaning that the word may have. The good ones help you understand what the original Greek or Hebrew word could mean in this particular context.

It is also helpful to consult a <u>concordance</u>. A *concordance* lists all the verses where a particular word appears. English concordances are helpful, but it is even better if the verses are listed according to the Greek or Hebrew words. Strong's Concordance and Young's Analytical Concordance are good for this. Again, if you have certain computer programs (Bible Works, Logos, etc.), you can see this just by typing in the word you want to look up.

A good interpreter will also investigate the meaning of any **unfamiliar words** in the Bible passage. For example, the word "propitiation" (Romans 3:25, ESV) is practically unknown in common English today. If you're not sure what that word means, don't just skip past it, look it up! When you interpret Romans 3 for other people, make sure to explain what that word means, because most of your readers (or listeners) will have no clue.

Some words are actually fairly common in the Bible, but many people do not understand what they mean. You or your readers/hearers might be unsure of what a "Pharisee" is, or a "publican" (tax collector for the Romans), or a "Samaritan," or a "Levite." What is an "expiation" and how is it different from a "propitiation"? Even words like "justification" and "sanctification" may be just theological jargon to many people. A good interpretation of a Biblical passage makes clear the meaning of difficult or commonly-misunderstood words.

Example: Meaning of Key Words
Romans 3:19-31: In this passage, the word "law" is a key word. Not only does is appear again and again in the passage, it is also crucial for understanding this part of the Bible and for understanding the message of salvation in Christ.

However, in this passage the author (Paul) uses "law" in several different ways. You could say that Paul makes a "play on words," using different meanings of the word "law."

Well, what does "law" mean? It could refer to:

    a)   The first five books of the Old Testament (the "law and the prophets," Acts 13:15).

    b) The whole covenant that God made with Israel through Moses (Romans 5:13).

    c) The commandments that God gave the people in the Old Testament (Romans 2:12).

d) The order or rules (principles) that God made when he created the world (the "law" of nature, Romans 1:27; the "law" of marriage, Romans 7:2).

e) The rule, authority, or governance of one thing over another (the "law" of my mind vs. the "law" of sin and death, Romans 7:21-23).

At first, Paul uses "law" in the sense of God's commandments (Romans 3:19-20). But then in v. 21 he "plays on" the word "law":

> "But now the righteousness of God has been manifested <u>apart from the law</u> (that is, apart from the keeping of God's commandments), although the <u>Law and the Prophets</u> (that is, the Old Testament) bear witness to it…" (ESV)

Later, in v. 27-28, Paul uses "law" in yet another sense:

> "Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of <u>law</u> (that is, what kind of rule, authority)? By a <u>law of works</u> (that is, by the principle of doing good works)? No, but by the <u>law of faith</u> (by the principle of trusting in Christ). For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from the works of the <u>law</u> (that is, keeping the commandments)." (ESV)

This Bible passage can only be understood if we know the "matrix" of meanings that the word "law" can have, and if we use the meaning that fits with each particular context.

For interpreting this text, it would also be helpful to look up the words "righteousness" and "faith" and "justified," as well as the difficult words "propitiation" and "redemption" and "circumcision."

Understanding How the Words Fit Together

Every language has certain conventions or guidelines for modifying words and putting words together. These guidelines are called "**grammar**." If you follow the conventions, other people will be able to understand your message. If you don't follow the conventions, the message will be misunderstood or at least it will be difficult to understand.

For example, if someone says, "Pool to girl is the the going," they will likely not be understood, because they have not followed the grammar guidelines of the English language. What they said makes no sense. However, if we put the words in a different order, things are different: "The girl is going to the pool."

Thus it is not enough just to know the field of meaning of different words; we also need to pay attention to how those words fit together.

People who study languages speak of "morphology" and "syntax." **Morphology** is the study of the different forms that a word can take, and the meaning of these different forms. For example, the verb "sit" can have different forms depending on who is doing the sitting and when they are doing it. If I am doing the sitting and it is happening now, I can say, "I sit" or "I am sitting." If someone else is sitting at the present time, I can say, "he sit<u>s</u>" (notice the change in the ending) or "he <u>is</u> sitting" (notice the change in the helping verb form). If I was sitting at some point in the past, I can say "I s<u>at</u>" (notice the change in form) or "I <u>was</u> sitting" (change in helping verb form) or "I <u>have</u> s<u>at</u>" (change in both forms). The form that words take give you clues with regard to how to put them together.

Syntax is the study of the <u>relationships</u> between different words in a phrase or sentence. For example, in the sentence "The girl is going to the pool," the "girl" is the subject (that is, the one who acts). "To the pool" is a prepositional phrase indicated the place to which the girl is going.

In English, generally the <u>order</u> of the words is very important, since there are a limited number of <u>forms</u> that the words can take. In Greek and Hebrew, words can be modified to make many more <u>forms</u>; so morphology is often more important than word order.

Of course, although there are rules to follow in every language, there is also a certain amount of freedom. Normally in English the "subject" comes first in the sentence. For example, in the sentence "She goes to the pool," "she" is the subject, the one doing the action, and thus "she" comes first in the sentence. However, we <u>could</u> change the order in order to emphasize the <u>place</u> where she is going: "To the pool she goes." This change of word order might sound a bit strange; it alerts us to a different emphasis in the sentence. Thus, there is a certain amount of freedom in language which allows each author to have his or her own style and creativity. It may even happen that an author will deliberately break a particular grammatical rule in order to give his words more force. However, if someone breaks the rules too liberally, no one will be able to understand his or her message.

It's also important to pay attention to the literary expressions, the figures of speech, which pop up in different Bible passages. A figure of speech is a phrase (usually short) which is well-known and not meant to be taken literally. An example in English would be: "I'm so hungry I could eat a horse!" It's not physically possible for a human to eat a whole horse in one sitting. This is "hyperbole" (exaggeration). However, most English-speakers have heard this expression at one time or another. It is a figure of speech emphasizing the strong feelings of hunger on the part of the speaker.

One figure of speech from the Old Testament is the phrase "May God do so to me, and more also, if…" (see for example 1 Samuel 3:17, 1 Kings 2:23, etc.). This is a way of swearing to the truth of something being said, or swearing to do something no matter what. Perhaps an equivalent in today's English would be "I swear to God…" Of course, Jesus tells us not to swear lightly (Matthew 5:34-36), but to let our "yes" be "yes" and our "no" be "no." E.W. Bullinger has a list of many of the Bible's literary expressions in his book "Figures of Speech Used in the Bible."

Obviously the best possible situation would be if we all spoke ancient Greek and Hebrew (and Aramaic). Perhaps this will motivate you to start or continue studying the Biblical languages. This is why traditionally in the Lutheran Church, all pastors have been required to know at least a minimum of Greek and Hebrew.

However, not all of us can be language scholars. Even many pastors forget most of their Greek and Hebrew as soon as they graduate from the seminary. The next best thing is to consult a good commentary that explains in plain English the significance of the Greek and Hebrew syntax.

There are a lot of good commentaries that can help with the language of the biblical text. In fact, this is one area where even the historical critics may contribute something useful! When they put aside their fanciful revisions of history and focus just on the grammar of the biblical text, they often have helpful insights. Nevertheless, let me give you a word of caution with regard to commentaries. First of all, remember that the commentaries are <u>not</u> the Word of God. Even the best commentary may make mistakes. In particular, remember that not everything that you read

on the Internet is true! Secondly, make sure at least one of your commentaries comes from an author that respects the Bible and follows good, solid Christian teaching. The Concordia Commentaries, for example, are good for this.

To summarize, the ninth guideline for good biblical interpretation is:

1. **Pay attention to the language of the Bible passage: the meaning of key words and figures of speech, the grammar and syntax (how the words fit together).**

In order to put this into practice, a good interpreter will:

1) Read several different translations of the Bible passage (or consult with the original, if he or she knows Greek and Hebrew).

2) Look up words in Bible dictionaries, lexicons, and/or concordances.

3) Consult commentaries that explain the language issues in plain English.

Examples: Rules of Language
John 20:17
On Easter Sunday, Jesus appeared alive to Mary Magdalene. After she recognized him, Jesus said, "Do not hold on to me" (NIV). Or did he really say, "Stop clinging to me" (NASB)? Or was it "Touch me not" (KJV)? The Greek phrase is "me mou haptou" (μή μου ἅπτου). In Greek, the negative "me" combined with a present tense imperative (like "haptou") usually means to stop or cease doing something. This would mean that Mary was already grabbing hold of Jesus, which is what we would probably do also if someone dear to us was found alive when we thought he was dead. That's the way that the NASB translates the verse.

However, there are a couple of examples in Greek literature where "me" plus the present imperative means to continue not doing something. This would mean that Mary had not yet grabbed hold of Jesus and should continue to refrain from doing so. That's the way the KJV translates the verse. Based on the grammar, it is not the most likely translation, but it is possible. The NIV, on the other hand, is ambiguous. It could mean either "stop" or "continue to refrain."

John 1:1
"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." (NIV) The Jehovah's Witnesses do not accept that Jesus (the "Word") was truly God. They have a problem with Bible verses like John 1:1. In the Jehovah's Witness version of the Bible (the "New World Translation," John 1:1 is revised to read that "the Word was a god." In other words, Jesus was god-like, but not the one true God.

The Jehovah's Witnesses point to the Greek text as support for their translation. In the Greek, the first time the word "God" appears, it has a definite article ("the"). Thus, "the Word was with the God." The second time the word "God" appears, it does not have the definite article. Thus, "the Word was a god." Are the Jehovah's Witnesses correct in their interpretation?

The Jehovah's Witnesses are confusing the grammatical rules for English with the grammatical rules for Greek. In English, there exists a definite article ("the") and an indefinite article ("a"), and almost all regular nouns have one or the other. In Greek, there is no indefinite article. Furthermore, in a Greek paragraph, once a noun has been introduced with a definite article, there is no need to repeat the definite article every time the same noun appears. At that point, the word "the" is optional in Greek; yet it is still understood that the noun is definite. This means that the correct translation comes from the NIV, not the Jehovah's Witnesses.

If you didn't quite follow that explanation, don't worry. It just means that the Greek language rules (not just the translation of a word or two, but the grammar) support the NIV translation. The Jehovah's Witnesses clearly either do not know their Greek grammar or are ignoring it in order to try to find some way to change what this verse is saying.

1 Timothy 2:15
Here is another problematic verse that can be cleared up if you consult a good commentary that helps you with the Greek.

1 Timothy 2:15 says, "But women will be saved through childbearing--if they continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety." (NIV) This sounds like women will be saved <u>by means of</u> having children – which would be a contradiction of the rest of the Bible.

The phrase "through childbearing" in Greek is "dia tes teknogonias" (διὰ τῆς τεκνογονίας). Some Bible interpreters have tried to make sense of this verse by seeing "teknogonias" not as general "childbearing" but as "the birth of the Child," that is, the birth of Jesus. So "women will be saved through the birth of the Child (Jesus)." That would fit with the rest of Scripture, but it seems a little awkward in Greek.

There is a simpler explanation. The word "dia" (διὰ) in Greek does often mean "through" in the sense of "by means of;" however, it can also mean "throughout" in the sense of "during." The grammar books call this meaning "attendant circumstance" (See Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich and Danker, <u>A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament</u>, "dia" III. 1. c.) Thus, "women will be saved (even) during childbirth…" The Common English Bible has a good translation: "But a wife will be brought safely through giving birth to their children…"

This fits with the rest of the Bible, and it fits with the immediate context. 1 Timothy 2:14 speaks of Eve when she fell into sin. As a consequence of her sin, God "multiplied [her] pain in childbearing" (Genesis 3:16). But even when the woman suffers through the pain of childbearing, the stigma of her ancestor's sin, she has the assurance of salvation through faith in Christ.

Conclusion
Martin Luther, the author of the 95 Theses, passed away centuries ago. We can no longer talk to him directly – he is in heaven. However, the texts that he wrote – including the 95 Theses – are still with us. Through the texts, we have access to what Luther wanted to say in 1517. We are fortunate to have lots of copies of the 95 Theses, as well as translations and comments on that text. We can be sure that we have a very good idea of what Luther originally wrote. The language of the text – the words Luther used, his grammar and syntax – gives us the key to understanding his message.

In the same way, the authors that God guided to write the Bible all passed away centuries ago. We can no longer directly speak with Isaiah or Daniel or John. However, the texts that they wrote – the books of the Bible – are still with us. Through those texts, we have access to what the authors wanted to say – and thus, what God was guiding them to say. We are blessed to have lots of copies of the biblical books, much more than any other ancient text. We can be sure that we have a very good idea of what the authors originally wrote. By paying attention to the language of the text – the words in their context, the grammar and syntax – we can understand the message that the authors (and God) want to convey.