

Appendix

The Case for Context

A text without a context is a pretext for a proof text. – unknown

A Diagnosis

Words in Scripture have precise meanings – they always have and always will. Unfortunately, 2000 years of a Western worldview layered over with 300 years of modernity thinking, have taken a toll. This has caused us to increasingly become egocentric people who prefer analysis, categorization and “how to” answers when reading the biblical record. We have also been conditioned to prefer simplistic answers to deep questions. As a result,

- Spiritual narcissism is increasingly becoming the malignant condition of the church. This causes us to approach Scripture as if it’s all about me – my Jesus, my salvation, my gifts, my call, my ministry – rather than first and foremost about Him.
- We increasingly don’t know how to accurately read the Bible as it was meant to be read, let alone understand the original purpose and meaning of a passage.
- Unaware that we are often practicing existentialists, we tend to be more focused on what we think (or guess) a passage might mean rather than dig deeper to discern what the Holy Spirit intended it to mean.
- With our “microwave” orientation to life, we are all too often focused on trying to quickly discern the “principles” or application of a passage rather than its intended purpose (and meaning) as part of a greater whole.
- We have a distinct preference for quick, easy answers packaged in neat spoon-fed formulas accompanied by simple diagrams, e.g. three steps to humility, four steps to effective prayer, and five principles of righteousness.

- We much prefer dissection, analysis and quantification, yet the Bible is all about synthesis and integration. Thus, we can easily become so preoccupied with analyzing a leaf (verse) under the microscope, that we forget the leaf came from a tree (book), and the tree came from a forest (entire Bible).
- We take the theological facts we discover and put them into categorized cubbyholes. Then having put a label on them, we convince ourselves that we have now mastered these truths. However, being able to identify and list all the attributes of God does not necessarily mean we actually “know” God!

Far too often these westernized, modernistic tendencies are as true for the pulpit as they are for the pew. When taken together, they create an interpretation climate that is often alien to the world of the Bible! Because of this twenty-first century mindset conditioning, much of what the Gospel writers assumed their Middle Eastern readers would contextually know and understand about a passage is now missing from our comprehension. While we still have the words of the text, much of the assumed context of those words is gone. As a result, we often hear only part of the passage and therefore grasp only a part of its intended message.

It should be a “given” that if we are going to connect with the fuller meaning of a passage for today, we first have to know what those words meant to those we meet in the Bible. To do that, we have to adopt their mindset. As a result, understanding the cohesive context of a passage becomes essential for several reasons.

Words Have Meaning

Words have very precise meanings in Scripture. That’s why the biblical writers deliberately chose their words under the guidance of the Holy Spirit to communicate an intentional message. For the Gospels, insights into these word meanings include the

- **Historical context** they were rooted in, including the intertestamental and Roman occupation periods, as well as Israel’s own extensive history.
- **Geographical context** of the sites mentioned including their physical characteristics as well as their respective topographical, geological and climatic features.

- **Literary context** of the words used including their literary form, idiomatic expressions, linguistic meaning and their use in rabbinic teaching pedagogy.
- **Religious context** they were drawn from including the nature of observant Judaism, the Temple, Sabbath worship, the Oral Tradition, Rabbinic interpretive wisdom, Messianic themes and prophecy, as well as ceremonial feasts and ritual purification.
- **Village context** issues including Jewish social customs of mandatory hospitality and social reciprocity, as well as the agrarian nature of farming, shepherding, vineyard care and fishing life.

Such an integrated contextual approach allows us to get closer to what the biblical writers intended to communicate about whom God is and what God wants to reveal to us about Himself in His Word.

Context Enhances Connectedness

One of the issues that every Bible teacher struggles with is how best to get the hearers of a lesson or sermon to connect with the text. As pertains to Jesus' encounters with people, how to help the listeners relate to and identify with these lepers, tax collectors and prostitutes, real people with real issues, in a real culture that was hostile to them. An integrated context enhances our ability to help others connect with the text and meaningfully identify with those individuals whom Jesus encounters.

Context Sets Helpful Boundaries

One of the problems with many Bible messages today, so often crafted without the inherent constraints and illumination of context, is that a passage can easily be taken into metaphorical realms the biblical writers never intended. It can also be treated in allegorical ways that may actually violate the intent of the text. Carried over into small group Bible studies, this can easily slide into group thinking where we collectively listen to everyone's version of "What do you think it means?" and then vote on the best answer! That may be good representative democracy, but it hardly qualifies as a group that correctly handles the word of truth!

Context Allows Meaning to Emerge

Reconstructing the cohesive context of a passage is like staining a fine piece of wood. That approach does not change or alter the nature of its truth (its inherent grain). Quite the contrary, it serves to draw out the inherent grain (of the passage) so that its meaning and purpose can be more readily seen and understood. In this way, the revealed truth can be first seen, then internalized, and then lived out in the reality of every day.

Context Gets to the Heart of the Matter

When all the aspects of the Middle Eastern contextual setting of a passage get rewoven back together for our western mindsets, we see that some things have not changed in 2,000 years. People then and people now still struggle with the same relational issues of abandonment, humiliation and rejection. They are the timeless realities of the human condition. Integrated context allows these human issues to be more clearly drawn out of the passage for all to see. In doing so, the compelling narratives of the Scripture touch our hearts and connect us with the reality of both the text and our own life experience. As a result, we fall in love with Jesus more deeply.

Watching Jesus rescue and restore people from these human realities back then is to understand His non-changing heart for us today as we still struggle with all those same abandonment, humiliation and rejection issues. Post-modern people are still people with these same relational issues. Contextually restoring the Gospel encounters reveals the timeless truths of Jesus to be relevant to all ages, all cultures and all worldviews.

Context Enhances the Contemplative Disciplines

Several years ago I attended something called the Spiritual Formation Forum. The purpose of that conference was to encourage disciples of Jesus to devote more time and attention to the contemplative side of life. As I left that conference, it struck me that the contemplative needs to meet the contextualist. If the contemplative is going to meditate on the words of Jesus and His encounters with people, then it behooves us to meditate on as much of that encounter as we can – to see the whole scene in 3-D. Doing so gets

us closer to the intended meaning of the passage and therefore closer to the epicenter of its intended transformation.

The contextualist brings a wide-angle lens that can help the contemplative see not just the one-dimensional 21st century Western understanding of many passages, but also the fuller first-century Middle Eastern understanding of the text. The biblical contextualist always provides more for the contemplative to ponder.

Context Provides Boundaries for the Appropriate Use of Imagination

Jesus used the technique of imaginative story telling not only to reveal more about His Father, but to teach His disciples how to live, think, feel and act in the Kingdom of God. His imaginative use of stories allowed His listeners to remember His message together with its purpose and meaning. He is both The Story as well as the Story Teller. His parables were consummate narratives, rich with imaginative treatments of everyday images, situations and occurrences. His use of people's imaginations not only allowed his listeners to connect with the story, but also allowed them to remember it word for word so they could accurately pass it along to others.

In today's environment, using any form of imagination in some Christian circles runs the risk of being misunderstood. Today that word can also suggest meanings of fantasy, unreal, and make believe. That was the antithesis of how Jesus used His imaginative stories to connect with His listeners' lives. He used imagination to bring out both the truth and the meaning of what He was communicating.

In opening up a passage, we need to restore the rightful use of appropriate imagination in bringing out the fuller meaning of God's truth in memorable and transforming ways for pulpit, pew and culture. C. S. Lewis said in one of his selected essays that "reason is the natural organ of truth; imagination is the organ of meaning." For too long, evangelicalism has emphasized reason as the pathway to truth without also using appropriate imagination to bring the passage's meaning into clearer focus.

Context Allows Us to See the Whole Picture

All too often during our time spent in churches, we end up being given many theological, doctrinal and factual ornaments, but seldom

are we shown the tree on which to hang them. It's as if we have been handed hundreds of pieces to a puzzle, but no one has ever showed us what the completed picture on the top of the puzzle box looks like. We have emphasized the dispensing of facts without providing appropriate frameworks within which people can organize and understand the facts they have been given. I am convinced that the more we can reset a passage back into its original context, the more we will see the complete picture on the top of the box.

Contextual Resources

You can find our favorite Preserving Bible Times' (PBT) resources for studying the Bible in context on PBT's website www.preserving-bibletimes.org. Go to the "FAQ" section (top left side) of the home page, open that section and click on the first question you see: "What Other Contextual Resources are Available?" By clicking that link, you will find a helpful list of contextual resources for understanding the Bible in its context organized by area of interest.

*p*Ponderings

We know that context matters in everything we do and in everything we know. Yet somehow we seem to so easily forget that notion when we come to the Scriptures. Why is this? How did this come to be?

Without knowing it, how many ways might we be filtering the message of the Bible through our Western worldview perspectives? And then further massaging it so that it fits neatly within our framework of modernity thinking? Is it any wonder that sometimes we just don't "hear" or "see" what the biblical writers meant to communicate to us?