

“What it Means to Me...”

By: Walt Russell (Biola University) from *Christianity Today*, October 26, 1992

The weekly Bible study began with comfortable predictability. After the customary pie, the members got cups of coffee and settled into their familiar niches around the room. Charlie, the leader, cleared his throat to signal that things were starting. As he did with merciless regularity each week, he began with the question, “Well, what do these verses mean to you?”

The discussion followed a familiar pattern. Each responded to what the verses meant to him or her, and the group reached its weekly general consensus—at least on the easier verses. They all knew what was coming, however: another stalemate between Donnell and Maria. Donnell had been a Christian for several years and was the self-appointed resident theologian. For some reason he always seemed to lock horns with Maria, a relatively new Christian, yet an enthusiastic student of the Bible.

The scene repeated itself every time they came to difficult verses. The passage would elicit conflicting interpretations. Donnell would argue vehemently for the interpretation of his former pastor, which usually seemed a bit forced to the rest of the group. But it was Maria, being new and perhaps more straightforward, who would challenge Donnell. Because she didn’t know the Bible that well yet, she would relate the difficult verse to her Christian experience in a way that contradicted Donnell’s interpretation. Donnell would only redouble his efforts.

The stalemate usually ended with Charlie, the leader, or Betty, the resident peacemaker, bringing “resolution” to the discussion. One of them would calmly conclude by saying, “Well, this is another example of how reading the Bible is a matter of personal interpretation and how a verse can mean one thing to one person and something else to another.” The group members would leave with a vague, hollow feeling in their chests.

A recent Barna Research Group survey on what Americans believe confirms what this brief scenario illustrates: we are in danger of becoming a nation of relativists. The Barna survey asked, “Is there absolute truth?” Amazingly, 66 percent of American adults responded that they believe that “there is no such thing as absolute truth; different people can define truth in conflicting ways and still be correct.” The figure rises to 72 percent when it comes to those between the ages of 18 and 25.

Before we stoop to cast the first stones, we evangelicals might ask if we are without sin in this matter, especially when it comes to our approach to interpreting the Bible. I believe we may unwittingly contribute to the widespread malaise of relativistic thinking. Indeed, our big educational standbys—Sunday school, the adult Bible study, and the sermon—may help spread the disease.

A Mouthful of Confusing Signals

“What does this verse mean to you?” It is stunning how often we use this cliché to signal the beginning of the interpretive time in Bible studies and Sunday-school classes. But the question may send a mouthful of confusing signals.

First, it confuses the “meaning” of a passage with the “significance” of the passage. This point has been cogently made by literary critic E.D. Hirsch, Jr., in his book *Validity in Interpretation*. Hirsch asserts that “meaning is that which is represented by a text; it is what the author meant...Significance, on the other hand, names a relationship between that meaning and a person, or a conception, or a situation, or indeed anything imaginable.”

The meaning of a text never changes. Our first goal is to discover this fixed thing. In contrast, the significance of that text to me and to others is very fluid and flexible. By confusing these two aspects of the interpretation process, we evangelicals approach the Bible with an interpretive relativism. If it means one thing to you and something contradictory to me, we have no ultimate court of appeals. We can never establish and validate “the one correct interpretation.” In fact, our language and approach suggest that there is no such animal.

In conservative Christian circles this has tragically led to people seeing the authority of God residing in the most powerful preachers of his Word rather than in the Word itself. This explains Donnell’s appeal, “But my pastor says....”

Second, the question “What does this verse mean to you?” reflects a drift in determining meaning that has been going on for a century in literary circles. The classical approach was to focus on the author and his or her historical and (later) emotional setting in life. Earlier in the twentieth century the focus shifted to the text, and authors lost their special rights to explain what their text meant. Texts allegedly take on a life of their own apart from their authors.

However, the drift has not stopped at the text. The focus for determining meaning is now on the interpreter. The reader allegedly “creates meaning.”

Applied to biblical study, interpretation becomes not discovering the absolute truths of God’s Word, but winning others over to what the text “means to us” because our system for explaining it is the most internally coherent and satisfying. The best we can hope for us to persuade others to join our interpretive community, at least until a more coherent and satisfying interpretation comes along.

Within academic circles, this emphasis on creating meaning has been broadly labeled “reader-response criticism.” It has had an enormous impact on many disciplines within both the university community and our broader culture, from the interpretation of literature to the interpretation of the U.S. Constitution.

Avoiding Relativism

What can we do to avoid this relativism?

First, we need to clean up our language when we talk about Scripture. If we want to discuss the meaning of the text, then we ask, “What does this verse or text mean?” If we want to discuss significance, then ask, “What is the relevance or significance of this verse to you?”

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Second, we must differentiate between our emotional posture (tolerant and sensitive) and our view of the truth (something absolute, which can be determined). We show sensitivity but avoid giving up too much “real estate.”

Establishing correct meanings entails lots of hard, interpretive work. When disagreements arise, it is tempting to retreat from the hard work under the banner of tolerance and sensitivity. Instead, we should underscore in a loving, sensitive manner that only one of several conflicting interpretations can be correct. This correct interpretation can be validated as the most likely one primarily by arguing from the main theme of the passage’s immediate context.

We who teach the Bible feel the pressure Americans generate for immediate application. We are therefore constantly tempted to skip the hard work of determining a biblical text’s meaning and move quickly to the text’s personal relevance. We should ask, “When was the last time we took the time during teaching a passage to establish its context?” Such work will take up part of our teaching time, and it is difficult to make the historical or literary contexts “sizzle.” The challenge is to make the setting of other people’s lives and questions as interesting as our own.

Many of us are unwilling to establish the passage’s literary context by tracing the biblical book’s argument. Or we do not establish the historical context by reading background material in a Bible dictionary, a Bible encyclopedia, or a good commentary. Why? Increasingly we do not see value in establishing a passage’s historical and literary context. In believing that God’s Word directly addresses us, we ignore that he speaks to our needs through the historical and literary contexts of the people of the Bible.

But the reward for such work is that we have the controls and safeguard of the original context that the Holy Spirit used when he inspired the passage. The absence of such work increases our chances of emerging with wrong meaning, wrong emphasis, and wrong application. It may even negate the Holy Spirit’s power in our teaching of that passage.

Focusing on the felt needs of listeners makes it easy to end up with a great felt need desperately in search of a passage. The current emphasis on shorter topical preaching and topical Bible studies may unwittingly help feed this relativism in application. The mistake is a fundamental one: elevating the hearers’ context over the Bible’s. Instead of holding the Bible’s context and our contemporary context in a dynamic tension, we assume that the contemporary context is the most important one.

This perspective may be more dangerous than we think. It presupposes an existential and human-centered world view. Therefore, the onus is upon each individual to wring some sense of life through the exercise of personal choice. If we unwittingly cater to this world view, God and his Word become reduced to helpful items on life’s smorgasbord of options that bring fulfillment. We must differentiate between our emotional posture (tolerant and sensitive) and our view of the truth (something absolute, which can be determined)...When disagreements arise, it is tempting to retreat from the hard work under the banner of

tolerance and sensitivity. Instead, we should underscore in a loving, sensitive manner that only one of several conflicting interpretations can be correct.

It would be far better to appeal to a genuine felt need and then challenge the world view that surrounds that need. Our culture's context—an existential, human-centered world view—needs to be confronted by the Bible's context—a historical and God-centered world view. Verses isolated from their literary contexts seldom achieve such a confrontation. Whole paragraphs discussed within the flow of broader arguments come much closer.

Sprinkling single verses into the topical sermon or tacking them on at the end of a “need-oriented” Bible study do not point the listener to the God of the text, but to the teacher of the text. This is especially likely to happen with baby-boomer listeners, who tend to be more person oriented than authority oriented.

Our Needs are Not Enough

An example of how this works can best be illustrated by an approach to a four-part Bible-study series in light of Americans' strong felt need for happiness.

We might remember that Paul's letter to the Philippians was about “joy” and “rejoicing.” A quick read confirms the presence of those words. We have already determined our general targeted need in this series (people's hunger for happiness), and we have already assumed our general conclusion for the series (God wants to meet our need for happiness). Therefore, what we are really looking for are interesting and specific biblical bridges from our targeted need to our conclusion. So far, so good. But here is where the weeds get taller and the briars sharper.

We first face a choice about how much time and energy we are going to spend on uncovering the historical, cultural, and literary backgrounds of the Epistle to the Philippians. It seems straightforward enough: True happiness and joy come from knowing Christ and thereby being able to rejoice in any circumstances. A four-part Bible-study series might look like this:

- Joy in friendships (Phil 1:3-5)
- Joy in perseverance (Phil 1:25-26)
- Joy in teamwork (Phil 2:1-4)
- Joy in God's peace (with a low-key evangelistic twist) (Phil 4:4-7)

Here we have an expository series with some continuity from one book of the Bible (this satisfies the older folks in the group). We address significant emotional felt needs of both non-Christians and Christians within our culture (this satisfies the baby boomers). And we address some of the key issues people face (this satisfies the baby busters).

But instead of doing the hard work of investigating the epistle's historical and literary context, we made the mistake of assuming our context was the main context that mattered.

We thereby distorted the meaning of these four passages. Focusing on the felt needs of listeners makes it easy to end up with a great felt need desperately in search of a passage.... The mistake is a fundamental one: elevating the hearers' context over the Bible's. Instead of holding the Bible's context and our contemporary context in a dynamic tension, we assume that the contemporary context is the most important one.

The existential perspective, for example, sets up happiness or joy as the goal. We also distort Paul's understanding of the gospel in Philippians if we interpret this epistle from our fulfillment-fixation perspective. If personal joy and peace are our primary concerns, the gospel is reduced to the God-given means for achieving this kind of fulfillment. It becomes an existential fix-all.

But the biblical perspective sees joy as a by-product of involvement in the gospel cause. By interpreting Paul's eight uses of the word gospel in Philippians within their original literary and historical context, we see that the gospel was something in which the Philippians shared in partnership (1:5) and in which Euodia and Syntyche shared Paul's struggle (4:2-3). The gospel was something Paul defended and confirmed (1:7), and which supplied the standard for the Philippians' conduct as they strove for the faith of it (1:27). Ironically, Paul's present sufferings turned out for the greater progress of the gospel (1:12), and Timothy's serving of Paul helped further the gospel (2:22).

The gospel, then, is not something that exists solely for our progress and personal fulfillment (although it does include these things). Rather, the gospel is something to which we are to give ourselves for its progress and fulfillment. The gospel is God's program for worldwide blessing.

Only entering into the cultural, historical, and literary context of Philippians allows us to grasp this insight. It requires bridging significant temporal, cultural, and language gaps. But isn't this why God has given the church Spirit-gifted teachers who can take advantage of the embarrassment of riches in Bible-study tools and helps?

A brief visit to a good Christian bookstore will quickly reinforce the fact that no other people in the history of the church have been blessed with our dizzying array of Bible-study aids. Our nemesis is not a lack of resources but a lack of understanding about their necessity.

We must establish the original historical and literary context of biblical passages. Once this work is done, then we can move to determining the needs a passage addresses. But the text, not our concerns, initially determines the focus. To ignore the necessity of this task is to risk sliding into relativism. We find few contextual safeguards in this land of "what-it-means-to-me" and probably very little of God's voice.

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