

WEDNESDAY BIBLE FELLOWSHIP

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UNDERSTANDING THE BIBLE I

How to Make the Bible Say Anything

An American President once said he would rather live in Russia than in America. What President would make such a remark? It was said by the Great Emancipator himself, Abraham Lincoln.

But he's being quoted out of context. He actually said, "I shall prefer emigrating to some country where they make no pretence of loving liberty-to Russia, for instance." Lincoln wrote these words while expressing regret about a dangerous trend he saw in America. He feared that many wanted to change "all men are created equal" to "all men are created equal, except non-whites." Lincoln suggested that if that happened, he would be more comfortable in a land where the government didn't pretend to stand for liberty. The context makes all the difference, for it tells exactly what Abe meant to say.

Ripped from context, noble words can be filled with an evil spirit.

How about some people who have accused Paul of being in support of slavery? This is premised on Paul's advice to slaves to obey their masters.

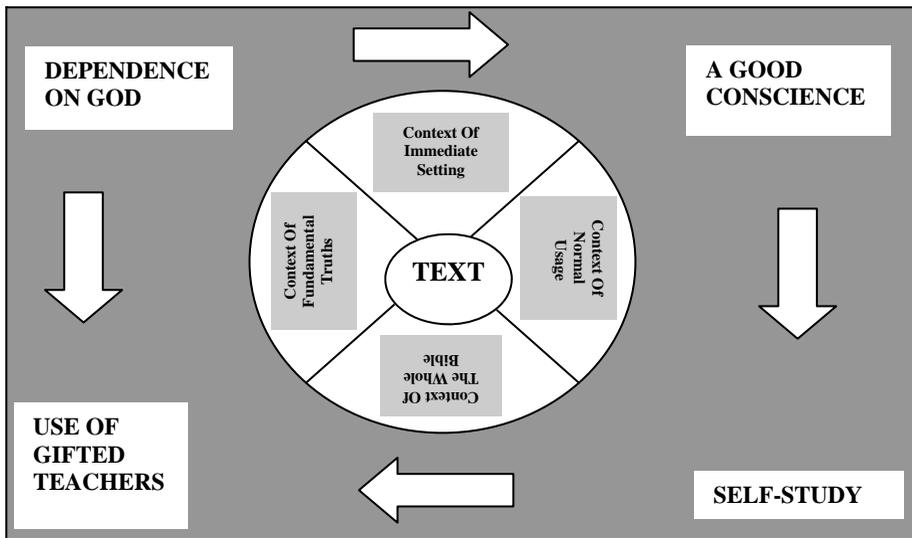
But did Paul encourage slaves to obey their masters? Yes, and his comments must once again be understood in light of the times and spirit in which the apostle wrote. Slavery in Roman days was often the result of war or unpaid debts. Paul taught Christians to be free if they could (1 Cor. 7:21). If that was not possible, he encouraged them to show by their behaviour that their well-being was not in the hands of human masters but in the hands of God, even in bad circumstances (1 Cor. 7:20-24). When two Christians found themselves in a master-slave relationship, Paul appealed to them to treat each other as equals and as brothers who were both accountable to God for the way they treated each other (Eph. 6:5-9; Phile 15-16).

Context: If the immediate and wider contexts are not considered, a person can make the Bible say anything he wants it to say.

ONE RULE TO STUDY THE BIBLE WITH CONFIDENCE

The Law of Context

One basic rule of Bible study underlies all others. It is the law of context. Questions to ask are: In what setting and with what intent were the words written? Equipped with this one basic principle, a student can begin immediately to spend a lifetime looking for and discovering the treasures of the Bible. Let's begin by seeing how this pursuit of context will lead naturally into a careful consideration of (1) immediate setting, (2) normal usage of words, (3) the Bible as a whole, and (4) foundational truths of sound doctrine.



Context of the Immediate Setting

Even experienced Bible students are often surprised to see what a familiar bible quotation means when understood in light of its immediate setting. Difficult problems of understanding often evaporate simply by determining how a text is framed by the main idea running through that section of Scripture. Behind every statement of Scripture is an immediate setting. This provides clues as to what was on the author's mind. In every immediate setting there are similar or recurring ideas and words that help to signal the main idea. Once that main idea is identified, it becomes the key to opening up the meaning of the text in question.

ASK QUESTIONS

To discover the flow of ideas streaming through a passage, good Bible students become childlike and at the same time scientific in asking questions: Who is the author? To whom is he writing? Why? When? Where? How? Wherefore?

Imagination and curiosity are powerful tools of the Bible student as long as they are tied to the text.

Careful students interrogate the page to expose its logic and flow of ideas. They don't assume that the author is saying what they think he is saying, until they have done their spade work. They don't try to plant an idea in "unworked ground." They dig and turn over the soil of the biblical environment until they discover the growing, living, life-changing ideas that God has planted.

Let's look at some examples of specific texts whose immediate contexts have been ignored.

Misquote #1: "The Bible says that if you confess your sins you'll be saved." (Discuss)

Comment:

It really says, "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins" (1 John 1: 9). These familiar words are often quoted as a formula for salvation. But the presence of the word *we* in the immediate context makes it clear that John was not addressing the unsaved. Rather, he was talking to people who were already believers in Christ (vv. 6,7,8,10), and was showing them how to be restored to a right family relationship with the God who had saved them.

If we don't consider the immediate context, we might conclude that we are saved by admitting our sins rather than by believing the gospel of Christ.

Misquote #2: "The Bible says that it's wrong to wear jewellery." (Discuss)

Comment:

The actual quote is: "Do not let your adornment be merely outward-arranging of the hair, wearing gold, or putting on fine apparel" (1 Peter 3:3). Some have used these words to say that godly women should not style their hair, use cosmetics, or wear jewellery. But if we read on, we find the words, "rather let it be the hidden person of the heart" (v.4). By these additional words we see that the apostle's main purpose was not to tell women that they either should or should not style their hair or wear jewellery. He was saying that they should focus on the beauty of

a gentle and quiet spirit rather than relying on outward appearance. To focus on whether or not to wear jewellery or whether cosmetics are permissible can cause us to miss issues of the heart that Peter was concerned about.

Misquote #3. "The Bible says that studying for knowledge isn't necessary." (Discuss)

Comment:

It actually says, "If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him" (Jas. 1:5). These words of James have been seen by some as a promise that we can receive unlearned skills and knowledge if we just pray. More than a few college students have claimed this promise before taking an exam they had not prepared for. The immediate context, however, is describing a reason for the joy we can have when difficult circumstances test our faith. James' promise is not that we can be successful without effort, but rather that God does not leave us alone when He allows trouble or temptation to come into our lives. James assured us that if we don't know how to let God do His work in us, we can have wisdom for the asking.

Later in the same letter, James told his readers how to recognise this wisdom when it comes. He said it is not marked by envy or selfish ambition, but is "pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy (Jas. 3:17). This is the kind of wisdom James had in mind.

Misquote #4: "The Bible says that I can do anything with God's strength" (Discuss)

Comment:

More specifically is says "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (Phil 4:13). This optimistic comment is often taken to mean that if our faith is strong enough we can do anything we set our mind to do. But the immediate setting in which Paul said this is important. The apostle was talking specifically about his ability to live by God's strength in times of great poverty as well as in times of plenty. Paul wanted us to know that the person whose confidence is in the strength God supplies can live and thrive in all kinds of situations. The present economic downturn is one which should remind Christians that our eye must be fixed first upon God's purposes, and not on the progress of stimulus packages.

Conclusion

These are just a few examples to show that misinterpretations of Bible texts can often be avoided if the immediate setting is taken into account. Looking at the verses that precede and follow a passage is a natural and logical first step in understanding the Bible, It is a way of giving God the same consideration we want for ourselves., No one wants to be quoted out of context.