

Some Thoughts on Cultivating Biblical Comprehension

What elements are essential for cultivating the capacity to properly understand and apply the word of God? Four words come to mind: contact, content, context, and Christ.

The first element is the element of contact. You have to be in contact with the word of God. The seed of God's word has to reach the soil of your heart before it can produce a harvest in your life! So contact is crucial.

Like many of you, I read a smattering of Shakespeare in high school and college but have read very little of him since that time. And like most of you, I'd be a poor interpreter of Shakespeare as a consequence of my neglect. The best interpreters are those who read Shakespeare on a regular basis. If we want to understand Shakespeare then we have to read him frequently, regularly, and consistently in order to enter into his world. The more we read him, the better we understand him.

In the same way, we need to read the word of God frequently, regularly, and consistently in order to cultivate the capacity for comprehension. Occasional reading might make us more dangerous than adept at understanding the word of God. But regular, frequent, and consistent reading of the bible will cultivate our capacity for comprehension. Do you want to understand the bible? Then you have to have contact with it on a regular basis.

But contact is not enough. We can read the word frequently, regularly, consistently, and badly, importing our own ideas into the word rather than extracting the truths that are already in it and allowing those truths to shape our lives. So, in addition to contact, we need to focus on content and context to properly understand the word of God. Content refers to the actual words that are in the word of God. What do those words actually say? And what is the genre in which they are written? We don't interpret poetry or parables in the same way we interpret prose, do we? Of course not. So, I suggest reading the passage in a variety of English translations and studying scholarly commentaries to better understand the content of the passage we are exploring. By doing this, we'll better grasp what the bible *actually* says and not just what we think it does.

But in order to understand content, we must also understand context. As you probably know, you can make the bible say almost anything by pulling things out of context. Perhaps you've heard the story of the man who was trying to determine God's will for his life so he decided to open the bible at random and then follow whatever he found there. So, he opened the bible and read about Judas Iscariot in Matthew 27:5 where the bible says, "Judas...went away and hanged himself." "That can't be God's will for my life!" the man said. So, he opened the bible again and read John 13:27 where "Jesus told (Judas), 'What you are about to do, do quickly.'" As you can imagine, that really rattled the man but he had sense enough to realize that he had taken God's word out of context. Yes, we can make the bible say almost anything by doing that. So, we should always read the bible in its context.

Now there are at least three levels of context that we should consider whenever we read the bible. The first is the immediate context of the passage. In other words, what do the words before and after the section in question really have to say? The immediate context often clarifies the meaning of the passage at hand.

The second level of context is the biblical context as a whole. In addition to the immediate context – what lies immediately before and after a particular passage – we need to put the passage in the larger context of the bible. What does the grand sweep of the bible say about the topic or the issue under consideration? We may find a particular passage of scripture that seems to teach one thing but the grand sweep of the bible seems to trend in a very different direction. It's probably best to follow the grand sweep of the bible in such a case, unless, of course, that witness is at odds with the witness of Jesus Christ – but more on that in a moment.

In addition to the immediate context and the biblical context, we also need to refer to the cultural context. What was the culture like in the time the passage was written and how does the bible's teaching fit into our current understanding of reality? After all, the bible was written more than two thousand years ago in a prescientific and premodern era. Our understanding of the world has advanced a great deal since then. Are we to discount those advances and simply hold to an ancient world view, or are we to use those advances to help us better understand the bible, and use the bible's wisdom to help us better understand those modern advances? I believe advances in science and learning will necessarily influence how we understand the bible, and I believe the bible will help us better understand those same advances. So, we should always read the bible in conversation with our current culture.

So, you see, through contact, content, and context, we come to conclusions about what the bible teaches. And once we've done that then we need to lay those conclusions at the feet of Jesus Christ. In other words, we need to compare our conclusions with the life of Christ, the example of Christ, the teachings of Christ, and the spirit of Christ to see if our conclusions comport with the living Christ we've come to know and love. If we can't imagine Jesus doing what we've concluded then maybe we should take a pause and start the process over again. For in the end, our study and application of the bible should always make us more like Jesus. "For those whom God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family." (Rm. 8:29) May our reading and application of the bible always make us more like Jesus and strengthen the bonds of love within the family of God! Amen!