

Basic Hermeneutics: "What is the Context?"

Author Bill Foster wrote the book *"How to Read the Bible 'Literally': An Illustrated Guide."* One of the key questions that he deals with is on the subject of "context." Foster says that: "Context is the broader meaning of the text that surrounds and relates to a word, phrase, or passage in question. The meanings of words are not static—they are nuanced by the author's larger point." (Foster, 31)

In the world of hermeneutics, context is a major and required component. Without it, meaning could not be established. Context is key. The interpreter must allow the text to define the words of the author.

Foster gives 5 reasons as to why context "is critical to discerning the correct meaning." (Foster 33)

1). Context determines the meaning of *words*. (Foster 33)

If we could not establish the meaning of words, it goes without saying, that we will not understand the narrative. A correctly defined word helps us understand the verse in which it is found. Understanding the verse helps us understand the chapter. Understanding the chapter helps us understand the book, etc.

2). Context reveals *figures of speech*. (Foster 35)

Context allows us to understand when a writer uses figures of speech. There are many different types of figures of speech. The interpreter should become familiar with the world of literary expression. E.W. Bullinger's book, *"Figures of Speech Used in the Bible: Explained and Illustrated,"* would be a great resource book.

3). Context corrects *false doctrine*. (Foster 37)

Many cults use certain verses of Scripture incorrectly. They have misunderstood it either intentionally or not. When confronted by those that misuse the Bible, always make it a point to read whatever they present within the context of the verses that accompany their so-called proof text.

4). Context corrects *assumptions*. (Foster 39)

Most, if not all, false doctrine is built on false assumptions. Context can fix that, if the interpreter is faithful to the text. If he is faithful to his errant view, context cannot help him. Assumptions are powerful; the text must become more important than our assumed doctrinal positions and beliefs.

5). Context corrects *radical eisegesis*. (Foster 42)

Eisegesis is reading something into the text. As a reader, we often bring lots of baggage with us when we open our Bible. We must allow the Bible to influence *us* (exegesis), and not allow *us* to influence and wrest the text (eisegesis).

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