

CFBC Hermeneutics Handout- Context 1

Notes derived from Brad Klassen and Michael Vlach

“When digging deeper into the meaning of a biblical text, the first order of business is to remember the refrain...Context! Context! Context!

"The word *context* is composed of two Latin elements, *con* ("together") and *textus* ("woven").

Context refers to the surrounding elements into which a given text was woven by its author.

Introductory matters concerning context...

- “When we speak of the context, we are talking about the connection of thought that runs through a passage, those links that weave it into one piece.” (Walter Kaiser, p. 71)
- "Context refers to that which goes before and that which follows after" (Howard Hendricks, *Living By The Book*, p. 225).
- *Importance of context...*Neglect of context is a common cause of erroneous interpretation and irrelevant application" (A. Berkeley Mickelsen, *Interpreting the Bible*, p. 99). People often want to take a verse or passage of Scripture and make it mean what they want it to mean. But disregarding context is one of the greatest problems in Bible interpretation. By taking a verse or passage out of its context we may completely misunderstand its true meaning. Always remember "context determines meaning!"

These surrounding elements are essential for giving the text its meaning and purpose...True is the saying, “A text without a context becomes a pretext.”

It is helpful to recognize that a text’s surrounding elements can be grouped into two categories—one of which is unwritten and the other of which is written.

- The first category refers to ***historical context***, to ***that non-written dimension of elements like the geography, culture, and specific circumstances of the writer and his immediate audience.***

- The second category refers to ***literary context***, to ***that textual dimension that includes the immediate and larger context of the writer's written work and even the antecedent Scripture to which the writer may refer.***

Both categories of context are important, and the student of Scripture must get a handle on these elements before he endeavors to dig deep into the text itself.

How does this look in practice?

1. Discover the text's historical context.

The goal of this step is to become acquainted with the world of the writer and his audience. It considers such things as: the identity of the writer; the place and time at which he wrote his text; the identity of the recipient(s); and the practical circumstance that precipitated the writing.

This step arises out of the reality that any given text of Scripture was recorded in response to an historical need for the word of God. In other words, it's important first to understand that the texts were situational before we begin to consider the implications of their transcendence. We must grasp that they were timely before we can properly delight in their timelessness. It is this reality that gives the texts of Scripture the quality of clarity. They were God's response to real needs, whether it was the need of the people of Israel as they prepared to enter the Promised Land (the book of Deuteronomy), the need of Jews returning from exile to repent of their complacency toward God's law (the prophecy of Malachi), the need of a believing Roman official for accuracy concerning the life of Christ (the Gospel of Luke), or the need of seven local churches facing the challenges of stagnation, false teaching, and persecution (the book of Revelation). ***The goal is to begin with this context in the forefront of one's mind—to read the text from the perspective of the original writer and his immediate audience.***

2. Survey the text's revelatory context.

Consider what parts of Scripture had already been delivered prior to the writing of the book in which your text is found. It is possible that this previous revelation is being assumed by the writer of your text, and so should be assumed by you as a reader as well.

For example, if you desire to dig deep into Daniel's prayer recorded in Daniel 9, you'll need to recognize that Daniel's prayer was built upon his own study of the antecedent prophecies of Jeremiah—particularly Jeremiah's prophecies of the "seventy years" (compare Dan. 9:2 with Jer. 25:11–12; 29:10). Consequently, you'll need to begin there, where Daniel began.

Or, if your goal is to understand Paul's teaching on the Day of the Lord according to 1 Thessalonians 5:1–11, you'll need first to trace the development of this concept chronologically in the Scriptures from its beginning in the Old Testament prophets. Otherwise, you'll construct an understanding of the Day of the Lord in a vacuum—a vacuum which the apostle Paul did not share.

This step accounts for the progressive nature of special revelation. By recognizing where a text is located in the historical flow of divine revelation helps you identify the backdrop which gives a particular text meaning...

3. Recognize the text's book context.

This step identifies the scarlet thread that ties the biblical book together. It locates the foundation which supports and connects all the parts of the book... In a word, it answers the question, ***Why was this book written?***

Look for the author's purpose in writing the book

Find out the historical situation facing the author and his readers By looking at the internal information of the book or by using a good Bible introduction, survey book or commentary you can help answer the following questions: Who was the writer? To whom was he writing (e.g. believers, unbelievers, Jews, Gentiles, apostates or those in danger of apostatizing)? What was the historical situation facing the author and readers?

"Unless we have a knowledge of the writer's background, supplied through historical-cultural and contextual analysis, our tendency is to interpret his writings by asking, 'What does this mean to me?' rather than 'What did this mean to the original author'" (Virkler, p. 78).

- **Ex. 2 Thess.** Paul wrote this book because his readers thought they were already in the Day of the Lord (2:2).

- **Ex. Lamentations** Reading Lamentations will make little sense unless one realizes that Jeremiah was writing a funeral dirge bemoaning the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians.
- **Ex. Colossians** Paul wrote Colossians partly to combat early Gnosticism and the dangers of legalism, asceticism, and the denial of Christ's deity.

Repeated reading of the book is fundamental to this step.

"Note if the author has explicitly stated in his preface, conclusion, and/or constant refrains throughout the book what his intention is. The rest of his work can then be systematically skimmed to note how this explicitly stated purpose and plan have been worked out" (Kaiser, p. 71).

In some cases, this repeated reading will uncover direct statements which indicate the writer's overall purpose. These direct statements may occur at the beginning of a work (e.g., Jude 3), in the middle (e.g., 1 Tim. 3:15–16), or at the end (e.g., John 20:30–31).

In other cases, this repeated reading will uncover recurring words or phrases which indirectly reveal the writer's purpose. For example, Moses' repetitive use of the phrase "these are the generations of" indicate that his purpose in writing the book of Genesis was to provide an account of origins (see Gen. 2:4; 6:9; 10:1; 11:10, 27; 25:12; 36:1, 9; 37:2)...

The reader who thinks he knows the purpose of the biblical book, but cannot state it clearly in his own words, is most likely mistaken. A reader who successfully understands a biblical book's central argument will be able to state it in a concise statement: "The purpose of this book is" Ultimately, the better you understand this book context, the better prepared you will be to interpret its contents.

- **Ex. John 20:31** "these things have been written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name."
- **Ex. Ecclesiastes 12:13** "The conclusion, when all has been heard, is: fear God and keep His commandments, because this applies to every person."

- **Ex. 1 John 1:4; 2:1; 2:26; 5:13** Four times John uses the formula "these things" to state his purposes in writing 1 John. He wrote 1 John so his readers may have joy (1:4), may not sin (2:1), may not be deceived (2:26) and may know they have eternal life (5:13).
- **Luke 1:1-4 and Acts 1:1** Luke's purpose in writing was to present an orderly account of the life of Jesus and the beginning of the Christian era.

4. Discern the text's structural context.

The goal of this step is to detect the most prominent features of the book's literary structure. It requires viewing the book as if under an x-ray machine, ***so that any given text can be appropriately placed within the book's literary skeleton—not merely in terms of chapter and verse location, but in terms of the book's flow of argument.***

Once again, repeated readings and surveys of the book are important in order to identify its main sections.

You must look for crucial transitions in the writer's thought, transitions which may be biographical, historical, geographical, logical, or theological in nature.

As you read, begin to construct a working outline. This outline should be general at first, focused on the areas where major transitions occur (e.g., Eph. 4:1–3 serving as the transition from Paul's indicatives in chapters 1–3 to his imperatives in chapters 4–6). But as you read in progressively greater detail, add depth to your outline...

5. Identify the text's immediate context.

The breadth of contextual analysis was broadest in the first step. Since then the focus has progressively narrowed.

Now, in this final step, the focus is most restricted. It is turned upon the paragraph that precedes the text you aim to study, and the paragraph that follows it. Spend time acquainting yourself with the contents of these paragraphs by repeated, careful reading.

Bernard Ramm provides a helpful illustration to explain the importance of these “entry and exit” paragraphs:

“The material before the passage is the radar which guides the approach, and the following material is the radar of the leaving. And if we can track the material approaching and leaving the particular passage, we have the framework in which the passage is to be understood.”

Indeed, the importance of this immediate context cannot be overemphasized...

Determining the context of a word or phrase "The first responsibility of every interpreter is to note carefully what precedes and what follows any verse or passage which he is interpreting" (Mickelsen, p. 102).

Check the immediate context. The sentence in which a word is used clarifies the meaning.

- **Ex. World** What does the term "world" (*kosmos*) mean? It depends on the immediate context. World can mean: 1) The world of people (John 3:16); 2) The organized system of evil in rebellion against God (1 John 2:15-16) or 3) This physical planet (John 17:5).
- **Ex. Saved or Salvation** These terms do not always mean deliverance from sin. They can mean: 1) Israel's deliverance from her enemies (Luke 1:71); 2) deliverance from physical danger (Acts 27:20; Matt. 24:13); 3) deliverance from physical sickness (James 5:15) and 4) deliverance from sin (John 3:17).
- **Ex. Spirit** The word "spirit" (*pneuma*) is used a variety of ways in the New Testament. It is used of the wind (John 3:8), the life breath (Rev. 11:11), the temper of the mind (Luke 9:55), the life principle or immortal nature of man (John 6:63), the perfected spirit of a saint in the heavenly life (Heb. 12:23), demons (Matt. 10:1; Luke 4:36) and the Holy Spirit of God (John 4:24; Matt. 28:19). John 3:8 is an example where *pneuma* (spirit or wind) is used twice in the same context. It is used of the natural wind and the Holy Spirit (Milton S. Terry, "The Use of Words in Various Contexts," *Rightly Divided*, ed. Roy B. Zuck, p. 134).

Check the paragraph or chapter context "The context of the paragraph or chapter is sometimes helpful in clarifying a word, phrase, or sentence that is not made clear in the sentence in which it is used." (Zuck, p. 109)

- **Ex. Temple** Jesus, in John 2:19, spoke of destroying "this temple." What is the temple Jesus was speaking of? Verse 21 explains that the temple of which Jesus spoke was His own body.
- **Ex. Fire** Does "fire" in Matthew 3:11 ("He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire") refer to a literal fire of hell or does "fire" refer to the spiritual fervor Christ will give? The fact that "fire" in verses 10 and 12 refer to a fire of judgment indicates that the fire in 3:11 also refers to judgment. The fire, then, refers to eternal torment.
- **Ex. Seeing the Kingdom** What did Jesus mean when He said to His disciples, "There are some of those who are standing here who shall not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom (Matthew 16:28)"? The fulfillment of this promise came in the following chapter with the Transfiguration (ch. 17). Jesus gave Peter, James and John a preview of the kingdom that would be established at Christ's second coming.

Check parallel passages "Parallel passages also serve as helpful contexts for ascertaining the meaning of certain words or sentences. Parallel passages may be verbal parallels, in which the same or similar words, phrases, or sentences occur, or idea parallels, in which the same or similar ideas are expressed but in different words" (Zuck, p. 110).

- **Ex. Sin** . 1 John 3:6-10 cannot mean that a Christian never sins, in view of what John wrote in that same epistle in 1:8, 10 and 2:1 (Zuck, p. 109).
- **Ex. Prophets**. "In Ephesians 2:20 does the word *prophets* refer to Old Testament prophets or New Testament prophets? As one examines the other ways Paul used *prophets* in Ephesians— in 3:5 and 4:11—it becomes clear that in those verses he was referring to

New Testament prophets. Therefore it is likely that he means the same thing in 2:20" (Zuck, p. 104).

- **Ex. Divorce** "The brief statement of Jesus on divorce in Matthew 5:31-32 has a parallel in Matthew 19:3-12 where the interpreter has more context" (Mickelsen, p. 106).
- Matthew—Mark—Luke
- 1 and 2 Kings—1 and 2 Chronicles
- Romans—Galatians
- Ephesians—Colossians
- Daniel—Revelation
- 2 Peter—Jude

Check the entire Bible context

- **Ex. Security of salvation** Does Hebrews 6:4-6 and its mention of falling away from the truth teach that a true believer can lose his salvation?

It cannot for other passages clearly teach that a believers salvation is eternally secure (Rom. 8:31-39; Rom. 5:9-10; John 10:28-29; Philippians 1:6; Hebrews 7:25). When interpreted correctly, Hebrews 6:4-6 is speaking of unbelievers who know the truth but stop short of committing to it and being saved.

- **Ex. The Kingdom "at hand"** Many have taken Jesus' statement that the "kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matt. 4:17) to mean that the Kingdom began with Christ's earthly ministry. But other passages clearly show that Jesus did not see the Kingdom as having begun during His earthly ministry (see Acts 1:6-7; Luke 21:20; 22:16).

When Jesus declared the Kingdom as "at hand," He meant that it was "near" not that it had arrived. It was near while the King was present and in the offer of the Kingdom to Israel (Matt. 10:5-7). After the clear rejection of the Messiah by the leaders of Israel (Matt. 12), the Kingdom was no longer presented as "at hand" but as something that would take place in the future (Luke 21:20).

Every interpreter must recognize that the more he interprets apart from context, the more he interprets according to convenience.

The need here is not a better understanding of one's own context, or even of the context of another contemporary reader! ...The need of the hour is to learn to interpret the biblical text in its biblical context. Anything else will lead to a pretext for error.

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