

Many of you are called to be America's future leaders. Some of you know this already and are getting ready to guide your peers into the heart of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

But how can you guys lead the way if you can't see the road? God gave us headlights in the form of the apostle's letters and the teachings of Jesus Himself, but our understanding of them is so colored by what we've been taught that we quickly find ourselves passing down church traditions and modern Christian culture instead of God's truth.

When we read the Bible, we bring to it (without even trying) our own ideas about God, the way we do church, a bunch of things from modern teen culture and Christian culture that we're not even aware of, as well as all the things we're trying to get out of our devotions (answers to the questions and problems that we and our friends our facing, encouragement and hope for the day, etc). We bring *all* these things to the Bible when we're trying to read and they cloud our ability to understand what it really says.

When somebody challenges things we believe about the Bible or how we interpret different verses, it's scary how quickly it sounds like a heated argument about politics. We hold to our church's view like a political group's "party line", we get emotional and defensive and we wish we knew more of the verses and arguments to back up our position.

But it doesn't have to be this way. There's a stark contrast between Christian differences and political differences. As Christians, we've all committed to agree with everything the Bible says. So all of our differences boil down to differences in how to *interpret* the Bible.

If you knew how to interpret the Bible – the reasons *why* some paragraphs apply to us today and others don't – and you consistently applied these, it would help you discuss differences intelligently and, more importantly, enable you to shine the "headlights" of the Scriptures into the future as you lead this generation.

Tonight we're going to dig into how to interpret the Bible – specifically, how to interpret the New Testament letters, because they're both the most *applicable* to us, and most *controversial*.

### It Wasn't Written To You

Often when we sit down to have "personal devotions" (a modern invention), we ask God to speak to us through His Word. We want Him to show us what He wants for our lives and to give us direction.

This approach to Bible reading betrays an unconscious assumption that the Bible is written to us. This is, in fact, wrong.

I hate to burst your bubble, but Paul didn't write Romans to you. Or Corinthians or any of the rest of the New Testament letters. We've got to get a grip on this, first of all, if we're going to interpret the Bible right.

The apostles wrote their letters to Christians living in Rome, Corinth and other cities around the 1<sup>st</sup> century A.D. They weren't dealing with cutting or self-esteem or relating to goth or emo friends – they had a totally different set of issues, like friends inviting them over for a take-out dinner from an idol temple.

Yes, God intended, eventually, to get the Bible into your hands, but you're not the primary audience in view. You're radically different from the people it was

written to. This is where we begin. Before we can dive into *what it means for us*, we have to first figure out *what it meant to them*.

### What did it mean to them?

The process of figuring out what a letter meant to the people it was originally written to is called *Exegesis*. It's a fancy word that makes you sound smart, but all it means is putting yourself in the shoes of the people reading the letter for the first time. There are a few different steps here.

**Historical Context:** The first thing you've got to do is step outside of the letter itself and learn what things were like when the letter was written. Not just "history" in the boring, stuffy sense of dates and wars, but (more importantly) questions like: **(1) What were the people like?** Pick up a Bible Dictionary and read about Corinth or Rome. Was it a backwoods hick town? Or was it a city like Vegas? Or Hollywood? Or Silicon Valley? **(2) What happened right before the letter that made Paul write it?** To do this, you've got to read the whole letter in one sitting – just like the people who got it for the first time did – and act like a

detective. Sometimes it's right there, point-blank, but other times you've got to read between the lines to figure out why the letter was written.

For a longer letter, like the first letter Paul wrote to the Christians in Corinth, you've got to ask **(3) what are the detailed issues going on in the church?** There are so many in this letter that it's better to break the letter into logical chunks (like chapters 1-4) and dive in deeper to get a more detailed understanding.

**Literary Context:** You've probably heard before that "context is king" or that a verse was "taken out of context".

Understanding the literary context means a lot more than just reading the verses surrounding the verse in question. The literary context answers the questions:

**How does this sentence contribute to the point the author is making in this paragraph? How does the paragraph contribute to the point of the letter?**

These are the most important questions you can be asking. The apostles didn't write random factoids in a row, they didn't meander aimlessly from thought to thought like you might on your MySpace post or Facebook note. Writing was more

difficult, expensive and time-consuming back then. They used scribes and had to send their letters with messengers. They didn't spill ink for no reason. Their arguments were often complex and sometimes refer to things we don't understand, but they always have a point and they always have a train of thought.

Our challenge is to hop the apostles' thought-train like a hobo, peeking from a flatcar to catch the name of each station and chart on our crumpled paper how each paragraph contributes to the final destination.

**Problems.** Even with a decent understanding of the historical and literary context, we can still run into problems.

Sometimes the author and the readers have hung out before – like the 3 years Paul spent in Ephesus – so they're on the same wavelength and the author can leave a lot unsaid, assuming the readers will catch what he's referring to. Like in 2 Thessalonians 2, when Paul says, "Don't you remember when I was with you and I told you this stuff? You know what's restraining him..."

We need to be careful and remind ourselves which things we can know for

sure and which things are only educated guesswork.

Thankfully, even when there is a verse or paragraph that we just can't figure out, the overall point the author's making in the context is quite plain. Sometimes we have to be content with that and trust that God's informed us of everything we *need* to know, even if it's not all we *want* to know.

On some real tough passages, you will need to resort to a commentary. When you do, don't settle for one that simply states the commentary's view on the subject. Get one that clearly presents each of the different views, with points for and against each, so you can make an informed decision.

### **What's it mean for us?**

The first rule of interpretation is that **the Bible can't mean what it never meant.** Or, to clarify, it can't mean *for us* what it never meant *to them*. It sounds simple, but we violate it all the time, skipping all the work we just talked about and jumping directly into "what's God saying *to me*?" It's absolutely critical to carefully figure out what it meant to them first (what we've just been doing –

*exegetis*) *before* trying to figure out what it means for us.

The process of figuring out what it means for us has a fancy name, too: **Hermaneutics.** If the word scares you and makes you wonder "Herman who?" don't worry – *hermaneutics* just means figuring out whether a paragraph applies to us today and if so, how.

We're trying to figure out how to apply the Bible to us all the time without realizing it. When we read "Go pick up the cloak I left at Troas?" we don't reach for the car keys, but in the same letter when we read "join the club and suffer like an honorable Jesus marine", we think, *yeah, that's for me, I should do that.*

This style of hermaneutics is called **Common Sense.** And it works pretty well most of the time, the only trouble is that we use it inconsistently, especially when we're influenced by our culture, our theology and the kind of church we're used to.

For example, check out 1 Corinthians 11. We'll use verse eleven to say that guys aren't supposed to have long hair, but say that the verses right after it don't apply to today – that it's ok for women to have short hair and that they don't need head-coverings. We're inconsistent in the way

we interpret because of what we're used to in our culture.

For an example of how we're inconsistent because of the kind of church we're used to, we use 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 to prove that women shouldn't preach in church, but everything else in the chapter before and after (prophesying and speaking in tongues) we argue doesn't apply to today.

It's not ok to be lazy and blindly follow whatever our denomination, our pastors and favorite authors and speakers tell us. We've got to wrestle with the Bible ourselves and figure out *why* some things apply and others don't. And above all, if we want to get at the truth, we've got to be *consistent*.

### **If the circumstances are the same, so is the meaning**

The first rule was that **it can't mean for us what it never meant to them.**

The second rule is that if we have the same specific circumstances as they did, it means the same for us.

For instance, we still have local churches, which still have leaders who need to hear the Word and take care how they build the church – with gold, silver

and costly stones (the gospel, Christ crucified) instead of wood, hay and straw (human wisdom and eloquent speech).

One big warning is in order: we've gotta be super-careful with our exegesis to make sure we really understand their situation and problem. If their situation and problem isn't the same, we can't say "God says this to us" when it's really speaking to something different.

### **Extending the Application**

It's easy to think, *The circumstances aren't exactly the same, but... they're close enough, right? Can't we extend the meaning to apply to our issues today?*

But this gets us into trouble. Take 1 Corinthians 3:16 for example. Paul says "don't you know the Holy Spirit's in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God'll destroy him".

In the context, when Paul says "you are God's temple" and "the Holy Spirit's in you", he is referring to *the whole church body* and he's speaking to those who would destroy a local church, not those who abuse their own bodies.

You say, *Sure, ok, but can't it apply to people who cut themselves by extending the same basic principle?*

No, it can't. You can't say "God says He will destroy those who cut themselves" because He's obviously not saying that. His promise to "destroy" is clearly leveled at people bent on destroying his church, not people who cut themselves.

### **Under Different Circumstances**

Can you pull out a general principle from this passage, *even though the circumstances are different*, and apply it to self-mutilation? Maybe... but it's a stretch. Paul *does* use the Spirit's indwelling in his logic, but it's not his whole argument and "destroying" a local church doesn't equate to "cutting" your body. Even if you could use this passage, you'd have to state the general principle of the passage and your *opinion* that the principle should be applied a certain way to the specific issue of cutting.

There are, however, other circumstances that are genuinely comparable with our own.

For instance, the Christians in Corinth had to deal with the question of eating chicken from the local Buddha temple. This was a serious issue for them, but what're the chances of one of your buddies saying, "Hey, let's grab some take-out Buddha-chicken?"

However, the problem of ordering a cold Bud Light can be genuinely comparable – but only in certain circumstances.

See you've got to look carefully and do the exegesis right. The *actual* issue Paul's concerned about was Christian leaders and long-time Christians influencing newer Christians to eat idol-food, even though they still felt it was wrong, so they were violating their consciences.

Paul's not at all concerned about offending his grandma – or legalistic Christians, for that matter – he's concerned about those who might follow his example and hurt themselves.

### **Cultural Relativity**

The whole question of food sacrificed to idols is certainly a 1<sup>st</sup> century cultural problem and *cannot* (directly) apply to modern life in the US.

But what about other things that *could* apply to us today... but look like they shouldn't?

Should we greet each-other with a holy kiss? Should we drink a little wine for our stomach's sake? Should women wear head-coverings and have long hair? Should we discourage homosexuality?

How do we *know* what is a cultural issue of the 1<sup>st</sup> century and doesn't apply directly today and what is a bigger issue that applies to *all* cultures?

This is admittedly a tricky question and the cause of a lot of differences in the church. As you're investigating a certain issue, here are some guidelines that may help in being consistent about what's cultural and what isn't:

1. The *gospel* isn't culturally relative
2. Paul's *sin lists* aren't culturally relative (Rom. 1:29-30, 1 Cor. 5:11, 1 Cor. 6:9-10, 2 Tim. 3:2-4)
3. Issues that the NT letters *differ* on are likely to be relative
4. *Principles* are likely to be absolute, while *specific actions* may be relative
5. Think about what *options* the author had, culturally, at the time of writing
6. Investigate *subtle cultural differences* between the 1<sup>st</sup> & 21<sup>st</sup> centuries
7. Be *gracious* (open lines of communication, ask questions, don't get heated) when discussing differences

### **Piecing together theology from somebody else's mail**

None of the letters in the New Testament are written as full, general

theology with no respect to their particular audience at the time. Even the more-general letters of 2 Peter, James, Hebrews and Romans contain specific emphases and perspectives keyed to their audience.

Sometimes subjects are just touched on and not full explained. We've got to be content with this and trust that God's let us in on everything we *need* to know, even if it's not all we *want* to know.

A lot of times we need to remember that, although we may not "get" a particular sentence or paragraph, the main point of the context is clear enough and that, after all, *is* the main point.

Often our trouble in interpreting comes from asking *our* questions of the text instead of *their* questions. When there just isn't a passage that answers our questions, we've got to speak to them from a whole biblical worldview, including creation, the fall, redemption and consummation. We can't use verse as proof that *sound* like they have to do with the subject at hand when the context betrays they don't.

I know it may sound like there's a lot involved and it's hard work – and it is, but it moves us away from hot-headed fearful conversation and into intelligent, clear-

headed, gracious conversations – and, more importantly, it moves us closer to the truth. We'll get some practice, walking through these steps next time, as we dig into 2 Peter and put into practice what we've learned.