

3. Developments and trajectories

To move further than our cautious first steps beyond the Bible (in Directions not Rules) we may take the idea of 'directions' further. It relates to a cluster of metaphors for reading the Bible faithfully while needing to go beyond the Bible.

Developments

I Howard Marshall ((
Iconic Evangelical scholar of the New Testament who published
a
series of lectures that in some ways looked back on his
career, but
even more looked towards the future: I. Howard Marshall, Kevin
J.
Vanhoozer, and Stanley E. Porter. *Beyond the Bible: Moving
from
Scripture to Theology*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004.
)
proposed that we notice the 'developments' in Scripture. ((
Ibid.
77.))

Marshall noted a
number of features of biblical teaching:

1. There is
development, there is some diversity of teaching on (a

number

of/all?) important issues and within this diversity we can discern greater 'maturity' in some texts than others.

2. Because

biblical teaching is always contextual (Marshall's word is

'occasional') there must be **questions which go beyond** the

available scriptural teaching.

3. Revelation is

not found so much in small fragments of the Bible as in the whole.

Some texts may be **staging posts** to something greater.

4. There is

continuity. Not least we must affirm that the God of the Old

Testament is the God of the New Testament.

5. The

developments are **principled**, changed circumstances e.g. old

covenant to new, the liminal period soon after Jesus to the more

established early church.

6. Further

development after the closing of the canon is inevitable. But they

must show **continuity with Scripture and fit with the 'mind of**

Christ'. E.g. the gospel may relativise some teachings that

were for specific occasions.

7. *"In this*

way we affirm the ongoing supreme authority of

Scripture, but we recognize that Scripture needs interpretation and fresh application, both in our doctrine and in our practice.” ((Ibid. 78-79 number 7 is quoted, the others summarised. Much better than this brief approximate summary would be to read his third lecture, *ibid.* 55-80.))

Marshall gives the example of christology, 1 Cor 12:3 affirms the statement '*Jesus is lord*' as a test of orthodoxy. Such a test neatly distinguishes followers of Jesus from others. Except that as time passes the church's understanding of Christology develops in response to new errors, and in 1 John 4:2-3 the statement is rather '*Jesus Christ has come in the flesh*' because the error of docetism ((The belief that Jesus was God merely appearing to be human.)) is troubling the churches and so a new test statement is needed. In this case we have decided to retain both, because the 'development' is not a refining but rather a response to an additional need. And, of course, as new errors presented the church added and refined its christological touchstones further, until in 451 the Fourth Ecumenical Council at Chalcedon arrived at the more complex and sharp definition still in use today.

Trajectories



Marshall's presentation of 'development' that goes beyond Scripture, but is founded in Scripture and coherent with the 'mind of Christ,' strikes me as being quite similar to the language of 'trajectory' which also points to continuity and change. Marshall recognises that talk of 'development' is in danger of implying that what is newer is necessarily better, and makes a point of denying this. Trajectory language also courts this danger, but to compensate it strengthens the continuity and shared direction and aims of new and old.

The mind of Christ, Gentiles and the law

One of the clear and interesting ways in which the Bible exhibits such development or trajectories concerns the covenant law of four of the first five books of the Bible. The law with its over 600 commands was central to Jewish identity. As Gentiles began to confess their faith in Jesus, and to receive the Holy Spirit and baptism, the question of law became acute. With powerful guidance from God (Acts 10-11), there was heated debate (Gal 2:11-21) in which James' traditionalist Scriptural position was strongly attacked by Paul, not on Scriptural but theological grounds. He bases his argument on the claim that demanding Gentiles conform to the biblical laws is 'not acting consistently with the truth of the gospel'. (Gal 2:14) As a result a meeting of the most vociferous parties in Jerusalem (Acts 15) reached a conclusion that did not demand circumcision of Gentiles. Since circumcision was the sign of God's covenant with Abraham. (Gen 17:11) the minimal requirements that are laid on Gentile believers cohere with the 'covenant with Noah' (Gen 9:1-17) where the only requirement is dietary, not to eat blood. (cf. Gen 9:3-6 with Acts 15:20 which adds requirements to abstain *'from things polluted by idols and from fornication and from whatever has been strangled'*. (Act 15:20) ((Even this curtailed list may not have lasted long, in 1 Cor 8 Paul seems to be saying that food offered to idols was a matter of personal conviction and care for others, who might be offended or led astray, rather than a rule to be obeyed (but cf. perhaps 1 Cor 10:19-23).))

In the next post I plan to present a similarly over-simplified version of Vanhoozer's ideas of 'Performances and pilgrimages'.

2. Directions not Rules

One helpful way to step 'beyond the Bible' faithfully responds to the first issue we considered in the previous post. It is also hidden in how I presented the problem.

When moving from the message of a biblical passage for its intended recipients (the message back then) and its message for us we noticed the importance of identifying the theological idea or principle that that message expressed or on which it was based. In the examples concerned with charging interest in the previous post, perhaps we can take this idea of identifying the theological idea or principle a step further and mitigate our issue. What is the direction in which the biblical teaching was pointing? What was/were its goal(s)?

The 'bite'



Coin minted in Lydia, under the rule of Cyrus the Great to Darius I. Circa 545-520.

When considering Bible teaching on interest it is probably

helpful to know a little of the socio-economic background to lending and borrowing in the ancient world. In the period before money, ((Roughly from 600BC – conveniently about the time of the Babylonian exile.)) and even for some long time after, ‘interest’ in our modern sense (e.g. 5% per year) was not charged. Rather one ‘borrowed’ the item, and then repaid it after the agreed period with an added amount. This added amount was known as *neshek*. from a word meaning ‘bite’.

In normal lending between family and friends (or neighbours in the village) one does not expect such a ‘bite’ – though sometimes a token one is given, when I lend my chainsaw to a guy from church I am often happy to receive it back with the petrol tank full :)

In loaning larger amounts (or for loans that were not within a community relationship) the ‘bite’ could be large usually 20% per year. An amount that could easily drive a poor borrower into slavery.

The Bible passages seem to be addressing such ‘friendly’ or community lending, not the business of lending. So Ex 22:25 speaks of lending ‘to one of my people among you who is needy’, the situation in Lev 25:36 is setup in Lev 25:35 ‘If any of your kin fall into difficulty...’

The goal here seems to be to avoid profiting from helping someone who is disadvantaged. We can be far from sure that if Moses were delivering God’s laws for the 21stC he would say ‘Do not take interest’ as most translations render Lev 25:36, but for sure he would abject to profiting from others misfortunes.

But that's not 'going beyond the Bible!

At this point some may object that this is not 'going beyond the Bible, but merely identifying what the biblical text 'was really saying'. To them I'd say, notice what we have done, we have moved from 'Do not take interest ' (Lev 25:36) to 'do not profit from those who are needy'.

That may be a small step for someone, but it is a huge leap for humanity! Because it keeps God's word living and active today – and probably all my readers can think of examples in their town where people do profit from the needy. If you can't just examine the effect of your desire for lower prices in the supermarket on the people enslaved to make the Thai fishing industry 'competitive'!

Nor does it solve all the difficulties

The other objection is that this approach only solves a small proportion of our needs. Of course this is true, but in something as necessary yet dangerous as 'going beyond the Bible' small steps are significant.

1. Do we need to go 'beyond the Bible'?

*It seems paradoxical to read scholars, who respect the Scriptures as the authority in matters of both faith and practice, talking about going 'beyond the Bible'. Yet in recent years a vibrant discussion has grown up around this expression. Major contributors include: I. Howard Marshall (longstanding British Evangelical New Testament specialist); Kevin J. Vanhoozer (doyen of US Evangelical writers on hermeneutics); and William J. Webb (Baptist pastor and New Testament scholar). ((See e.g. I. Howard Marshall, Kevin J. Vanhoozer, and Stanley E. Porter. *Beyond the Bible: Moving from Scripture to Theology*. Baker Academic, 2004; Gary T. Meadors, *Four Views on Moving Beyond the Bible to Theology*. Harper Collins, 2009 [contributions from Walter C. Kaiser; Daniel M. Doriani; Kevin J. Vanhoozer; William J. Webb].)) In this post we will explore why going 'beyond the Bible' is a necessary part of reading the Bible faithfully. Then in subsequent posts we will explore how this may be done, and how this evidently dangerous freedom may be properly restrained.*

Changed circumstances

Reading the Bible using the approach outlined in the first section of this material is sufficient for many everyday needs. It is certainly a good way to get faithfully from a Bible passage to a message/application for today. Yet even here there is often a need to go "beyond the Bible".

Often when we look to Scripture for guidance about complex moral, or social issues, even when the Bible addresses the issue we cannot make our application directly.

To consider why moving beyond the direct teachings of Scripture is necessary we will consider loaning money as an

example. The Bible teaches in several places about loaning to those in need. This teaching can be simply summarised in neat principles.

We should **loan what others need**, even if they may be unable to repay us (Proverbs 19:17; Luke 6:34-38; cf. Matthew 5:42); charging **interest is wrong** (Exodus 22:25; Leviticus 25:35-37; Deuteronomy 23:19-20 ((Though it is apparently OK to charge interest to those outside the community of God's people!)))

Now suppose for example that someone in your church needs to borrow money. ((Or perhaps 'wants to' borrow money, in a complex society it is difficult, except at the extremes, to distinguish needs from wants, with everyone judging cases differently. But let us assume "needs" for this example.)) They cannot get a bank loan because of previous poor credit history. You are retired, and living on your superannuation payments, supplemented by the earnings from your savings. What should you do?

The Bible teaching is clear and almost unequivocal. ((If you had only a little to supplement your basic superannuation you might be able to resist the claim on the grounds of your own poverty, but even this excuse involves stepping a little beyond the strict letter of the biblical texts, which envisage no excuses for someone who has the resources to lend.))

But, our situation is different from that in Moses' or Jesus' time. Then, there was no money ((They exchanged goods much of the time: "I'll give you 2Kg of my barley for that cup...", and for large-scale trade used silver weighed in scales.)) and even the needs and the loans were usually made in "kind". Someone borrowed a sack of grain to feed their family, and repaid it when the next harvest came in. Now we have money (that is paper or coins that represent units of value, and are subject to inflation or loss of real value in other ways). Then, only greedy merchants charged interest, now (almost) ((

See post on Kingdom Banking for an exception.)) everyone charges interest and savers are paid by banks and building societies for the use of their money. Then, fraternal loans were part of a close-knit communitarian society. Now loans are “big business”.

If the possible helper in our example above is living from the interest, or other investment returns of their savings, then to make a loan at no interest (especially to someone who may not be able to repay) effectively takes future income from them!

Notice what is happening here, as we translate the clear biblical principles from their world to ours they have ceased to be neatly and simply appropriate. This has happened because the social and economic contexts are quite different in ways that directly impact the biblical principle’s application. We cannot live **directly** by those principles in many 21stC contexts. ((Kingdom banking and this scheme to assist farmers in the north of Myanmar offer nice examples of how the biblical principles can inspire action today. In a later post we will consider these for what they can show us about going “beyond the Bible” in ways that are faithful to the Bible.))

We need principles by which we can go beyond the Bible, in ways which are faithful to Scripture!

Issues the Bible could not address

As well as issues like that above where changed circumstances make biblical principles not directly applicable, there are also many issues today that the Bible’s teaching simply do not address. Taking human life is wrong (Gen 9:6; Ex 20:13 cf. Dt 5:17).

But at what stage does life begin? The question is important for **our** decisions about some forms of contraception, for if fertilised eggs are human life even in the first minutes, then

IUDs and some other forms of birth control are killing.

The Bible did not know of such technologies and so does not talk about the exact moment when a human life begins. Though one might argue that passages like Ps 139:16 and Jer 1:5 provide enough guidance to answer this question.

However, what about other forms of birth control? The issue did not really arise in Scripture because the technological means of contraception were not known to the Bible writers (including perhaps the rhythm method which relies on information about conception and fertility that was not available in biblical times).

Conclusion

In this post, I have argued that there are two main, and pretty clear, ways in which change in circumstances between us and the Bible writers mean that we **must** “go beyond the Bible”. There may be others but there are at least these two.

If we are to “go beyond the Bible” then we need principled and faithful ways to do so, and/or ways to ensure that our conclusions are still faithful to Scripture. (For if we do not ensure this, we can no longer claim that Scripture is our authority.)

Kingdom Banking



LIBERTY *Trust*

Once we recognise both the need to try to be faithful to these biblical principles (loaning to those in need and avoiding the extra burden of interest) and the need to in some ways go 'beyond the Bible' in adapting to the contemporary world, some interesting possibilities emerge.

Church-based organisations that operate rather like banks can accept savings and then make loans at lower than bank interest rates. Note that some interest must be charged to cover inflation and costs, and often to cover an interest payment to the savers (who today may indeed be funding their retirement out of such savings).

There are also cooperative mortgage groups some like Liberty Trust explicitly trying to put these biblical principles to work in the contemporary housing market. In this model people contribute 2% each year of the mortgage they want to borrow. Because they are "sowing before they reap" they will have paid in something like 20% before they borrow, the eventual loan is thus able to be 'interest free'.

Notice how inspired by the biblical principles, but going beyond the Bible – the biblical texts do NOT envisage "sowing before you reap" but rather someone needing to borrow because of a crisis need, this model succeeds in being faithful to the Bible by going beyond it! (We will need to discuss later the criteria that allow us to assess whether a particular example succeeds in being thus faithful despite going beyond.)

11. Reading in the light of Christ



This last article may at first sight seem the simplest. Of course we read the Bible as people who know Jesus, and in the light of what we know of him. As Christians we could hardly do anything else! Yet, how we do it causes big arguments among us.

Those weird laws in Leviticus

Take the question of all those strange laws in Leviticus. It seems simple enough, people often say that the coming of Jesus has abolished the ritual and the civil laws of the Old Testament, while the ethical laws still apply to us. A closer look at the Bible (both OT and NT) shows this “simple” approach fails.

Firstly it involves arguing in a circle. In the Old Testament it is quite difficult to distinguish neatly between the three sorts of law. Take Leviticus 19, this chapter mixes the three sorts up together. It is clear that the “three sorts of law” was not a distinction the OT made. Or take one example, is Lev

19:19 ritual, civil or ethical law? Other laws that prohibit mixing things concern ritual, yet there is no ritual language here. Part of the verse concerns farming issues so perhaps we could classify it as civil law? It must be either civil or ritual law, because we don't refuse to wear poly-cotton clothes, so it can't be ethical law. (Notice the self-defeating circular argument!)

This approach to Jesus' abolishing some OT law seems even more wrong when we turn to the NT. In Matt 5:17-18 (cf. Luke 16:17; James 2:10) Jesus says clearly: "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfil. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished."

We cannot claim that Jesus abolishes any of these laws, because he himself tells us that he did not!

Jesus "fulfils"

The word Jesus uses to describe what he does to the Old Testament (and especially its law) is "fulfil". What does this mean? It seems to imply that what was once a prediction comes true in Jesus. When they are talking about OT prophecies, this can seem to be what NT writers mean. So, in Matt 12:17, the Pharisees conspire against Jesus and he tells those he has healed not to announce his identity – Matthew comments that this fulfils Isaiah 42:1-3 (Matt12:17-21).

There are however clues that Jesus' fulfilling means more than this. In Matt 2:15 the evangelist uses similar wording to point to Hos 11, but this passage is not a prophecy that foretells Jesus. It reads:

¹"When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. ²But the more I called Israel, the further they

went from me. They sacrificed to the Baals and they burned incense to images.

It is clearly speaking about Israel's unfaithfulness to God, not Joseph being called back from Egypt, with Mary and Jesus. Matthew is pointing to a prediction but a parallel, and more to a filling out. Israel (thought of as God's "son") was "called" from Egypt by God, but was unfaithful. Jesus (the son of God) was called by God from Egypt, and was faithful. Jesus fills out fully (fulfils) the failed calling of Israel.

How Jesus fulfils the OT

Jesus fulfils all of the OT (see Luke 24:27), by filling out fully and making perfect what was imperfect there. This is what Jesus does with the OT laws in Matthew 5:17ff. After saying that he did not come to abolish them, Jesus goes on to talk about several OT laws. He talks about the 6th commandment in 5:21ff., he makes "do not kill" more perfect by telling his disciples not to be angry or insult! Likewise in 27ff. he fulfils the seventh commandment, speaking not merely of adultery, but of all sexual desire outside marriage.

If we understand "fulfil" like this we can see not only how Jesus fulfils all the laws, but also the stories. Take a "nasty" story like Jacob stealing his brother's birthright (Gen 27). Jacob the ancestor of God's people, Israel, was a liar and thief who claimed what was not his. Jesus by contrast:

⁶who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, ⁷ but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, ⁸ he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross. ⁹ Therefore God also highly exalted him... (Phil 2:6-9)

The final step

They say even the longest journey begins with a single step. The last step of our year-long journey in reading the Bible faithfully is simply this, to recognise how Jesus fills out fully (fulfils) what we read in Scripture. Whatever is partial, incomplete, adapted to the needs of broken sinful humans (cf. Matt 19:8). Jesus makes perfect, full and complete. If your understanding of what you read in the Bible does not match this fullness it has not been faithful to the Word of God revealed in Scripture.

This is the end of a journey, If you are interested in sharing this approach to Reading the Bible Faithfully with a group, and you would like Tim to help, you can contact him here or by email: tim@bigBible.org

10: Application: Where the rubber hits the road

Reading Scripture is only faithful to the goal of Scripture (to change lives and draw us nearer to God) when it is applied to life. This section will give some simple tips for powerful application that is faithful to Scripture yet relevant today. If I cook a nice meal I would be most disappointed if none of the family ate it, however delicious they said it looked. Scripture is made up of writings that aim to change people, to help them draw nearer to God, if reading the Bible does not change how we live it is worthless by the one criterion that matters.

So, having spotted the main thing a passage was saying, its

“point” (see this earlier article), and from that identified the timeless truth that undergirded the passage (see the previous article), how do we apply that truth today to change lives?

Psychology 101



Photo by Anthony Topper

Many preachers and Bible study leaders seem to believe that making the application as general as possible makes it more powerful. In fact the reverse may be true. Show a human being a rule, and we will tell you ways in which it does not apply to us. At Carey there was a rule that one ought not to park on the grass. On a rainy day when the carpark was full there were always cars on the grass. Some were teachers or students late for an important class – and therefore “exceptions” to the rule. Others were parents bringing children to the creche on a Tuesday (the day the carpark was most often full) – who, of course were worthy “exceptions”. Almost anyone could find a “good” reason...

General rules often fail to motivate us to good behaviour. On the other hand humans are natural storytellers and hearers. Tell a story and people identify with the characters. Avid

readers of fiction will recognise this as a truth universally acknowledged.

So, make your application a “story”.

Real people and real magic



The Boyhood of Raleigh by Sir John Everett Millais, oil on canvas, 1870.

Duval and Hays (in *Journey into God's Word*) suggest forming a “scenario” (a concrete illustration of the principle), which should be as realistic as possible. Ideally a true story – perhaps with names and other identifying details changed to protect people. If it is not true, then it should “ring true” (be a story we can believe would happen). If Jane, the central character, is not someone you know (under another name) then she should still be thoroughly believable. Give details as well as a name, so that people can imagine the person. Then tell how the principle (from the Bible passage) worked out in Jane's life.

This is where the magic of stories happens. Even if Jane is an Asian teenager, and your listener is a middle-aged Pakeha (NZer of European origin or descent), somehow he will identify with her joys and pains. Her story will work on him. He will apply the principle to his own circumstances, having “seen” it

apply to hers.

Now it is true that it is easier to identify with “people like us”, and our audiences are usually varied. So, don’t just think up one “scenario”, work out two or even three. Fill them with details, but above all make sure the theological truth (from Scripture) is clearly at work in the details of their lives. Your audience is more likely to generalise it to themselves.

Application in practice

This week I’ve been marking students exegeting (studying and explaining) Gen 15. There, after Abraham’s victory over the kings has been celebrated by Melchisedek, king of Salem, God again comes to speak with Abraham. At 85, Abraham is beginning to wonder if God’s promise of offspring is going to be realised. God not only reaffirms his promise, but seals a solemn covenant to confirm it.

The students spotted that the passage was “about” God showing Abraham that his promises are true and reliable (even when their fulfillment does not seem likely). One suggested that this passage: *“stirs its audience to develop a trust in God, one that can stand firm despite severe doubts.”*

However the majority of “applications” ran something like this: *when we doubt God’s promises we should trust them because he has shown himself trustworthy.*

It is **more powerful** to tell the story of Adoniram Judson. A few years ago I was invited to teach at a Bible School in the largest refugee camp on the border of Burma. About 40% of people in the camp are Christian. When we got there we heard that they trace this astonishing church back to an American Baptist missionary Adoniram Judson. Yet three years after Judson went to Burma, he still had not baptised his first convert. Someone asked what evidence he had that his work would ever bear fruit. He replied: "As much as there is a God who will fulfill all His promises."



It was another three years before the first convert was baptised. Yet because of his trust in God's promises Judson lived to see a hundred churches and thousands of converts, and today there are still new churches being planted in Thailand as a result of Judson's trust in God's promises.

We too can trust God's promises to us.

Homework:

Take this principle that God keeps promises and either remember or construct scenarios that illustrates this truth. Make them concrete and real(istic)!

Part 9: God remains faithful: the principle of the thing



Are Rock Badgers
acceptable food?
Photo by Bjørn
Christian Tørrissen

At the start of this series we took notice of the way God chose to give Scripture to us. To make the Bible, God inspired many people (all very different) in many times and places.

“...Moses in the desert, David in Jerusalem, Ezekiel in Babylon... different people, different periods, different places, different life-issues... This varied collection was God’s deliberate choice, so we should take the variety seriously.”

Thus Scripture is time-bound, tied to the language, customs and interests of particular times and places. The writers God inspired wrote about things that interested their hearers, or at least things God wanted those hearers to hear!

Not an issue today!

Some of those interests are still with us, but some are not. Few today worry about whether Rock Badgers are acceptable food, but Leviticus 11:5 reasons it out: “The rock badger, even though it chews the cud, does not have divided hoofs; so it is unclean for you.”

Paul’s audience were also troubled about acceptable foods. What, they seem to have asked, about food that’s been offered to an idol, is eating that OK? 1 Cor 8 begins to focus on that tricky question. Not so vital, though, for most of us. When was the last time you were asked to eat food that had been offered as a sacrifice?

Does the fact that the Bible is time-bound mean that large parts of Scripture are no longer relevant? By no means! Jesus declared that none of the Old Testament could be written off (see Matt 5:17ff.), so we “modern” people can hardly write off the New Testament! Yet Scripture come to us, shaped by people and times long past. The words, and even what is said, are time-bound, but the God who inspired them is not. God remains faithful, the same yesterday, today and forever.

This means that as we read Paul’s advice about responding to the difficult issue of food offered to idols we can’t just say: “Not a problem, I’m never offered any!” and move on to the next passage. For Paul’s understanding of God (“theology”) is still true for us. How he responded to that question can show us how to respond to equally tricky issues of Christian practice that face us today.

1 Corinthians 8-10

The passage is a complicated one, with the issue running through the whole centre of the letter. There seem to be (at least) two positions on the issue. The “strong” claimed “there

is only one God” and that “idols have no reality” (1 Cor 8:4) and went on to argue that eating such food was OK. Thus “knowledge” (of the true God) makes us strong, and frees us from clumsy and inconvenient rules.

However, this free behaviour can seem to compromise the unique claims of Christ. Paul calls those who were troubled by this “weak”. Despite the “strong” using arguments that sound solid (only one God, idols are nothing, Christ sets us free) Paul defends the weak, for the behaviour of the “strong” may cause others to stumble. For Paul, the significant issue is not what we know, but how we love one another (1 Cor 10:23-24). Paul put the principle of love into practice (1 Cor 9) by foregoing his “rights”.

God does not change

There are many parallels to this situation in today’s world where the theological principles Paul uses can be put to work! The Bible is not only clothed in ancient and foreign language, it addresses issues that are not ours. Yet God can be trusted today, as then. What the Bible writers said about God, their grasp of theology that underlies the issues their hearers faced, remains true and applicable today.

Paul’s advice about shopping and hospitality (1 Cor 10:25-33) may not be arguments against becoming Vegan, or much direct help in deciding whether to accept an invitation to an Eid party. His theological principles, though: asking whether our behaviour makes faith difficult for others, and how it impacts the proclamation and reception of the gospel, remain powerful and important today!

Spotting timeless truth in time-

bound texts

At this point we return to the previous topic. Spotting the timeless truth, means first spotting the point the author was trying to make to their hearers. In this case, Paul's point was something like: Although your knowledge (only one God, idols not real) means you can see that there is nothing wrong with eating food offered to idols, you should restrain your freedom for the sake of others.

This summary is already on its way (compared to the practical advice in 1 Cor 10:25ff.) to theological principle. We can take it the last step by generalising the mention of idols: Although your knowledge makes you free, it is important to restrain your actions, so that someone else's chance of salvation is not compromised. Or more sharply: *The gospel is more important than your freedom.* Now there's a challenge today!

Homework

Go back to the previous article and review your conclusions about the "points" being made in Ephesians 4:1-6 and John 5:1-19. Check that you expressed these in time-bound ways (past), so they clearly address the issues the early church faced. Then look for the timeless truth about God, the theology, that underlies those points or that they express. Again, try for just one simple sentence.

[If you are worried that the theology we get seems often a bit vague, wait for the next thrilling installment! There I'll suggest how our application of Bible truths can be sharp and precise. In the meantime explore the website and if you want more help ASK!]

1 Cor 10:23ff. Meat offered to idols?

Part 8: Don't miss the point

Teaching or just saying

Sometimes the Bible says things that are not what the Bible is teaching.

Some examples are obvious. In Bible stories, the writers sometimes recount events they do not approve. Judges is not recommending we copy Jephthah's stupidity in making dangerous promises to God when it recounts his vow in Judges 11:30. This difference between what the Bible says and what it teaches is not only found in narratives. It's in Psalms too, we read "There is no God" in Ps 14:1 & 53:1, though in this case since we are told that this is what "fools say" it would be especially foolish to base our teaching on this phrase from Scripture!

Those examples are trite, but there are more complicated cases. For example in 1 Cor 15:29 Paul mentions people "who are baptised for the dead." Some Christians (and some strange sects) have understood this as justifying a practice of baptising people on behalf of dead relatives or friends. But, is that what Paul wanted the Corinthians to understand?

The whole of 1 Cor 15 is about resurrection. From the beginning of the chapter Paul has hammered home the message that Jesus rose from death, therefore we will be raised from death with him. He first reminds the Corinthian Christians that this is what they have been taught from the start, indeed it is what being an apostle is all about. He then, in v.13ff., points out that their faith is empty and worthless unless Christ has been raised and unless we will be raised with him. If not (v.17) we “are still in our sins”. If our faith is only good for this life (v.19) then it is useless. In v.24ff. he turns to that glorious time when God’s rule will finally be fulfilled, and all enemies (even death) will submit.

Then in v.29 he mentions, in passing, people who are baptised on behalf of the dead, saying this is a daft idea if the dead will not be raised, then returns to how useless his own career and sufferings have been, if there is no future hope.

We don’t know why Paul mentions baptism for the dead, or who was practising it. We don’t know if Paul thinks it is useful or stupid. He only tells us some people do it, and that this also demonstrates belief in resurrection. The point Paul is making, what the Bible is teaching here, is the “sure and certain hope” of resurrection. If we get hung up on “Baptism for the dead” we have missed the point.

A few verses earlier Paul pointed out that to miss this point makes Christianity worthless. People who chase after things Paul may have mentioned, but miss what he is teaching, are wrong and their error is dangerous. It is vital to spot what the Bible writers were teaching, and not to get hung up merely on what they say!

Knowing what a Bible passage is teaching?



“Spear point knife blade”
by Selbstmord at
en.wikipedia

There are many clues, the skill of spotting them and putting them together is one we can practice. The key is to keep asking ourselves: What is the point of this passage? What is the “main thing” Paul (or whoever) wanted their audience to “get”? To keep things focused I suggest trying to express this “main thing” in one short simple sentence.

Openings and conclusions are strong clues. Paul opens his discussion of end times in 1 Thess 4:13-5:11 saying: “we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest, who have no hope.” This opening suggests Paul’s main point is that we have hope (and as in 1 Cor 15 hope of resurrection with Christ).

On the other hand Genesis 2:24 sums up the teaching of that chapter saying: “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh” suggesting that the unity of the marriage covenant is being taught in that chapter. In this case we have another clue, both Jesus and Paul turn to Genesis 2 when they teach about marriage (Mat 19:5; Mark 10:8; Eph 5:31).

Another clue is repetition, Bible writers are like preachers, they repeat themselves. What is repeated is often the point. In 1 Cor 15 Paul repeats the words “raised”, “resurrection” and the like so often we would have to be deaf, or daft, to

miss his main point.

So, to sum up (and make sure my conclusion makes my “main thing” clear) we should base our teaching on what the Bible teaches. That’s what it means to say Scripture is our authority. The Bible says things that it does not teach. Sometimes they are true but incidental, sometimes they are wrong and the writer argues against them, either way they are not the “main thing”. It is useful to sum up the main point a writer was making in one simple sentence – this keeps us focused on the point. Missing the point is foolish and dangerous, weird ideas and sects flourish where people concentrate on details in Scripture, but miss the main point.

Remember there are videos, links and the chance to discuss and practice these ideas at <http://bigbible.org/faithfully/>

Homework

Read carefully Ephesians 4:1-6 or John 5:1-19. Look for openings and conclusions, or repeated words or ideas, notice the flow of the argument. Try to work out the main thing Paul or John wanted their readers to “get”. Try to express this idea in one simple sentence. It is very helpful to practice this with other people, one way is to use the “Homework” section at <http://bigbible.org/faithfully/>

Part 7: Logic and rhetoric:

How does the passage flow?

Rhetoric and purpose



Golfers, like writers, have a goal in mind (photo Wikimedia)

People write for three main reasons: to entertain, to inform or to persuade. Most texts have two, or even all three, of these goals, but usually one predominates. Jokes are told mainly to entertain, manuals are written to inform, political speeches persuade. Much of the Bible is “entertaining” (especially stories, but also poetry), much provides information (e.g. descriptions of building the tabernacle), yet the primary goal is almost always persuasion. The art of persuasion is called “rhetoric”.

The genealogies of Jesus in Matthew (1:1-17) and Luke (3:23-38) provide information, but they are included in the gospels so readers realise that Jesus, a “son of David”, rightly fulfils the messianic prophecies. In Old Testament histories it is striking that information is given almost only with inspirational goals. King Omri and his son Ahab gave the Northern Kingdom (Israel) its time of greatest economic and

military power. Yet the Bible dismisses Omri's reign in a few lines, and Ahab's is told through the conflict between him (and Jezebel his wife) with Elijah. The theological, not the economic, impact of their reigns matters. The Bible is about God, and aims to encourage us to love and serve him alone.

As we read we should ask: What change (in ideas or actions) did the author want from their audience? Or what did they want to reveal about God?

Articulation (how parts join and work together)

We used this "big word" talking about conjunctions earlier, and the idea was prominent last time too (in "the thigh bone is connected to the hip bone"). Articulation is significant at the level of sentences:

*House and wealth are inherited from parents,
but a prudent wife is from the LORD. (Prov 19:14)*

Spotting the articulation of parts of whole Bible books is also helpful. Thus Paul's letters often start with theological arguments, before moving to their practical implications in the closing chapters.

In between these extremes, noticing how paragraphs or sections interact to work together is really helpful. For example, Jonah's psalm (Jonah 2:2-9) read on its own sounds like a song of praise for deliverance from drowning. But when read with the story in the first chapter in mind, we spot how almost every line is ironic. (For more on this watch the video in last month's material)

Conclusions and introductions

Often the introduction to a book, section or chapter will help us recognise the author's purpose. Even more often, in fact almost always, if there is a conclusion it shows the intention clearly. So the book of Jonah concludes with God asking the

prophet *“should I not have compassion on Nineveh?”* (Jonah 4:11). The answer to this question is the key to the book’s purpose, and Jonah’s answer is not recorded!

1 Cor 13 concludes: *“And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love”* this is what Paul wants us to recognise and accept, in connection with his talk of spiritual gifts in chapter 12. The opening words in 13:1 show us Paul intended us to make this link between the chapters.

What does God say?

Since the Bible is about God, and inspired by God, what God says must be determinative of a passage’s meaning. The exception is when a character, and not the narrator, reports God’s words, they might be mistaken or lying (like Hananiah was in Jer 28). This was the clue we used to notice that what Job’s friends say in the body of the book is problematic, and not a solid foundation – though we had to read to the last chapter to find out!

Who is speaking to whom?

Relational language (talk within a family, between lovers or among friends) works differently from literal language (like textbooks or manuals). In relational language: *“I’ll never speak to you again!”*, means precisely the opposite of what it says. *“I hate you!”* can mean *“I love you, but you have hurt me so much I wish I hated you.”* Relational language often exaggerates: *“You are the most beautiful woman”* is probably not true. Like all relational language, it reveals what the speaker feels.

Relational language is particularly common in speeches in narratives (OT histories, Gospels, Acts...) and visions of prophets or Revelation. It is really important to notice who is speaking to whom, and what is *“going on”* in their relationship at the time. The Bible is God’s love-letter to

humanity, so God speaks “relational language”. See Isaiah 1:11-14 for example (and compare it with e.g. Lev 1:9,13,17).

With relational language context matters. What God desires or plans for Jeremiah’s Judean hearers is very different between Jer 29:11 and 19:7. The circumstances are different also, giving two very different examples of relational language. In Jer 29, Judah faces defeat by Babylon and seventy years exile (see the earlier verses), but in chapter 19, all this is future, Judah’s leaders then were still confident in their own power and politics.

Paragraphs

Someone who “keeps changing the subject” is confusing. So writing needs to be organised into sections dealing with different topics. These sections are called “paragraphs”, and in modern writing are marked by gaps and/or new lines. For maximum understandability each paragraph deals with one aspect, moving to another related aspect in the next.

In Bible times people did not mark paragraph breaks. They were added later, somewhat differently in different traditions. Spotting sensible paragraphs (or using the ones printed in your Bible) and summarising in one simple sentence what each is about, really helps us see how a book, or section of a book, works.

Homework

Read the book of Philemon (it’s just 25 verses :) and see how many of the things discussed above you can see at work in this little book.