

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](https://en.wikipedia.org)

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/>