

Bible Context
February 22, 2015

We have one major thing in common with each other. This one thing brings us together as a group. What we have in common is that we are followers of Jesus.

Other than that, we may not have much else in common.

For example, **We speak different places...**

Different places have different cultures. So where you grew up shaped you. Where you grew up shaped your view of the world. If you grew up in the deep south, you see the world differently from those who grew up in the north, or on the west coast. If you grew up in a rural area you relate to others differently than if you grew up in a large city or in suburbia.

We speak different places, times...

The time in American history in which you grew up has shaped you. Each August, since 2002, professors at Beloit College publish their Mindset List. It provides a look at the cultural realities that shape the lives of students entering college. The List is shared as a reminder of the rapidly changing frame of reference for each new generation. For example look with me at some of the last two lists for the classes that started college in 2013 and 2014. There are 75 items on each of the last two lists. These are just a few of them.

- Tattoos have always been fashionable and highly visible.
- Chocolate chip cookie dough ice cream has always been a flavor choice.
- The KGB has never existed.
- There has always been a Cartoon Network.
- There have always been flat screen televisions.
- Few of them know how to write in cursive.
- Email is just too slow for them, and they seldom if ever use snail mail.
- The world has always been trying to accommodate people with physical disabilities.
- Korean cars have always been a staple on American highways.
- DNA fingerprinting and maps of the human genome have always existed.

These things have always been true within the lifespan of those who have entered college in the last two years. They take these things for granted. They think about the world as it is now as if it has been this way for a long time.

The time in American history in which you grew up has shaped you. The people in our church who are in their 80's became adults in a different American than I did. I just entered my 60's last spring. And I speak a different time than those of us who are in their early 40's. And those in their 40's speak a different time than those who are in their 20's. And even those of you in your 20's speak a different time than those who are just entering middle school. We grew up in different times from each other. And that shapes how we look at the world and think about the world.

We speak different places, times, and subjects...

We are all interested in different subjects. And as we learn about those subjects, we learn the language of those subjects. We learn the vocabulary. We learn the terms, the figures of speech. We learn the history of them.

Some of you speak English literature. Others speak mathematics. Some of you speak computers while the rest of us just scratch our heads. Some of you speak music. And the rest of us say, "Just play the note I'm supposed to sing." Some speak sewing, some speak auto mechanics. There are thousands of subjects to speak.

One night, years ago, after a deacons meeting, Allen, Clint, and I were standing in the parking lot talking. It was a pleasant summer evening. At one point Allen and Clint got to talking about their jobs. And for the next ten minutes I didn't have a clue what they were saying. I didn't speak their subject.

I can't talk much sports with you. I know the basic rules. But don't ask me who pitched for the Orioles last year. Don't ask me to name the last year they played in the world series. Have they ever played in the world series? I don't know. And I really don't care about that subject.

We speak different places, times, and subjects from each other...

Our differences make it harder to understand each other and work together in the church.

All this talk about differences between us is an illustration for today's main point.

We speak different places, times, and subjects from each other, and the Bible.

We are so far removed in place, time, and culture from when the Bible was written it is difficult for us to understand what it means.

The last of the Bible, the book of Revelation, was written about 95 AD. That is more than 1900 years ago. It took place in a different century, on a different continent, and within a different culture. The people of that time had different hopes and dreams, a different understanding about the world, even a different understanding about God from people today. The Bible was written by people in those times to people of those times. We can make the mistake of ignoring that fact.

For example, we read the Sermon on the Mount as if Jesus was speaking to twenty-first century non-Jewish American Christians who are waiting for an eternal heavenly home.

But He wasn't. He was speaking to 1st century Jews living in Israel. Jesus was speaking to those who had an Old Testament mindset. They were expecting the Messiah to usher in a free, independent nation of Israel on earth. They had a 30 AD world view, from a Jewish perspective. We do not. And that is why it is difficult for us to understand what Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount.

Jesus starts off His sermon as follows, in Matthew 5:3.

Matthew 5:3 (NIV) "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Christians have puzzled over these words for centuries. You could easily find a dozen different interpretations of what Jesus means in Christian commentaries on this passage.

And all of them are based on nothing but guesses. From a 21 century American Christian perspective, we don't know what Jesus means by "poor in spirit".

But some of the Jews who were listening to Him in 30 AD knew exactly what He meant. And they were enthusiastic to hear Him say these things. They knew that this idea was preached by Isaiah the prophet. They were expecting someone to show up and preach what Jesus was preaching.

The reason Jesus was so popular in His day was not just the miraculous healings that He did. He was also popular for His message. He proclaimed the arrival of the Kingdom of Heaven. The Jews had been waiting over 400 years for the kingdom of heaven, kingdom of God, kingdom of Israel. They understood this to mean the rebuilding of their nation into the most powerful nation on earth.

The phrases Jesus was using in His sermon were familiar to those Jews who were anxiously awaiting the arrival of their perfect king and Israel's restored kingdom. Look at the following passage that was very familiar to God's faithful people.

Isaiah 57:15 (NIV) For this is what the high and lofty One says-- he who lives forever, whose name is holy: "I live in a high and holy place, but also with him who is contrite and lowly in spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite.

The faithful Jews of Jesus' day, the faithful remnant knew what God was looking for. God was looking for humble, believing, repentant Jews. If we twenty-firsts century followers of Jesus were students of the culture of first century Jews, we would better understand what Jesus was teaching them.

In order for us to understand the Bible we must try to read it like the original hearers did. In seminary we were taught how to approach the Bible in order to preach it to God's people. We must ask questions of the Bible text.

- Who was the writer?
- To whom was he/she writing?
- What kind of literature is it?
- What is the cultural, historical context?
- What was the author intending to communicate?
- What did it mean to the original hearers?
- What meaning does it have for us today?

The temptation for us, when we read the Bible, is to skip to the last question and ignore the rest. The problem with that is we can read into the text what WE want to see there. We may miss what God wants to say to us.

We must try to understand the Bible in its original context by becoming students of that context. The more you understand about the cultural setting of the Bible events the better you will understand what the writers were trying to communicate to those they were writing to. And the more accurately you will interpret those meanings for you in your life situation. You will also teach it more accurately to others.

The place to start is by reading the Old Testament part of the Bible. The more you read it, and read about it, the more familiar it will be to you, the more comfortable you will be

there, and the more confident you will be there. Aside from learning about the history and culture of the Jewish people Jesus preached to, there is a lot in the Old Testament to inspire your faith, your hope, and your love in the Old Testament. It is, after all, the Bible that Jesus used. God used it to shape Jesus as He was growing. It says this about Jesus as He grew up.

Luke 2:52 (NIV) And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men.

He grew that way using the Old Testament scriptures. You must follow His example.

Learning this context can guard against misreading the Bible to suit our sinful desires. Jesus criticized some of His listeners because they read the scriptures a lot, and yet missed the real message there. They read it to support the sinful way they wanted to live. We do not want to be guilty of the same thing.

Let me mention a few cautions here.

Don't depend only on your pastor or teacher. I am not an expert in the Old or New Testaments. I am not a scholar. And I am always learning. Some subjects I thought I had down, I later found out I was misinformed. I am continuing to learn just like you. Don't rely too heavily on me. Just because I say it doesn't mean it is "gospel".

Don't depend only on commentaries. There are lots of commentaries around, some are even available for free online. There are good ones and bad ones, easy ones and hard ones, written by those who believe as we do and some written by those who try to explain away the parts of the Bible they don't like. When using other sources, you need to know something about those sources. Not all commentaries are trustworthy.

Some years ago we had a member of the church who had an interest in theology. He read commentaries and other theology books. When a writer quoted from another writer and it was a significant point, this man would go by the book of that was quoted from. He found that sometimes the one who used the quote misquoted the original author in order to make his point. So not everything you will read is trustworthy.

I encourage you to become a student of this book, these writings. It may seem like a lot to learn, but God is involved in the process. Ask the Holy Spirit to guide you, to speak to you, to instruct you. He will.

Focus on what interests you. If you have an interest in angels, study about angels. If you have an interest in baptism, study baptism. You might do personal background study on the Bible passages your Bible Study Group is studying.

My Sunday morning Bible Study group is studying the book of Revelation. In the first chapter Jesus says that He holds the keys to death and Hades. So today we had to take a side trip to discover what first century Christians believed about Hades, the place of the dead.

Over time you will build up a bank of Biblical knowledge and cultural knowledge. The Holy Spirit will use that to instruct you in the meaning of other Bible passages. You will begin to see how one theme runs through different writers in the Bible. You will start to see

connections that we miss when we hit a different, unconnected Bible passage each Sunday.

Having the Bible brings a stewardship (responsibility) for reading it correctly.

Having the Bible brings with it a responsibility. So many Christians have not the freedom to own and read the Bible. If they have one they must keep it secret. You can carry one with you everywhere. You are in no danger if you do so. And you are rich enough to own multiple translations if you wish.

With such great blessing comes great responsibility for learning it and using it correctly. Let us take this responsibility seriously.

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The main message of the Bible is not dependant on understanding the people of the first century. The main message equally applies to every person in every time and place. We are all guilty of sin. There is a day coming when we must answer to God for our sin. What we need is someone to save us from our sin. God has provided the savior we need. Put your faith in Him and live for God.