

How to Understand What the Bible Means by What It Says (E. Radmacher)

After the apostle Paul had given some significant teaching to his younger son in the faith, Timothy, he gave him the key to understanding (2 Tim. 2:15):

“Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.”

If the reader is going to understand what he or she is reading, then the rules of communication must be diligently followed. These are the same rules that are followed in everyday conversation when understanding takes place. In other words, there is not a special or secret set of rules for understanding God’s Word.

The Basic Principle

Central to everything else in this process is the recognition that meaning is singular, not plural. For example, the popular response often heard, “there are many different interpretations of that,” is clearly false. There may be ten *suggested* interpretations, but at least nine of them are false. The interpretation is what the writer intended with the vocabulary he used. But this does not limit application, because although the interpretation is single, application may be multiple. It is the work of the Holy Spirit to illumine hearts to see a variety of applications to life. But the applications, to be valid, must be true to the author’s intended interpretation as expressed in the written text.

A Four-Step Process

If there is only one valid interpretation of a biblical passage, how then is it to be understood? Paul’s challenge to “rightly divide the word of truth” may be fulfilled by using the following four-step process:

First step: Word Focus

Second step: Word Relations

Third step: Context

Fourth step: Culture

Now let’s put the process to work on an often-quoted verse of Scripture (Matt. 18:20) where Jesus is speaking to His disciples:

“For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them.”

Word Focus

A key word is “gathered.” A complete concordance lists various forms of *gather* in the New Testament about 75 times. These occurrences translate some ten different Greek words, but over half of them translate just one Greek verb (the one used in our passage) made up of two parts meaning “with, together with,” and “to lead, bring”; thus the expression means “to lead or bring together.” This discovery of the etymology of a word is a good starting point for study. One could go on to look at the word comparatively by studying its synonyms and antonyms. Most important in word study, however, is to note the usage of the word historically in Scripture.

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The use of “gathered” in this verse may be puzzling to the reader because the group is so small. Just “two or three.” Yet it is a very important gathering because Jesus Christ is “in the midst of them” when the condition is fulfilled that the gathering be in His name. Such a significant gathering with Christ drives us to look very carefully at this verse, so we need to move to the second step in the process of finding the meaning, namely word relations.

Before we do that, however, it may be worthwhile to suggest three tools that will be helpful to the student of Scripture in the first step: (1) *The NKJV Greek-English Interlinear New Testament*. This work interweaves the English translation and the Greek text so that the student can see what Greek words translate into the English rendering. (2) *The NKJV Exhaustive Concordance*. This tool is indispensable because it gives a complete listing of every occurrence of every word in the Bible. (3) *An Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*. This handy tool for the English reader by W. E. Vine gives precise meanings of Greek words. It serves as somewhat of a combination dictionary and concordance.

Word Relations

Word studies are enlightening and fun, but words do not stand alone. Rather, they are related to the words around them. We call these relationships grammar or syntax (“to place together”) and studying them is crucial to learning the meaning of Matthew 18:20. For example, the very first word (“for”) expresses a relationship. It is small and usually ignored, but it is an important conjunction. It lets you know that this verse does not stand alone but is directly related to what has just been stated. It establishes the reason or cause for the preceding instructions.

Two other words that show grammatical relations are the adverbs “where” and “there.” The “where” pertains to the dependent clause and the “there” to the independent clause. The independent clause contains the main idea of the sentence (“I am”) which identifies the actions. Thus the personal, powerful presence and ministry of Jesus Christ will be experienced (main clause) where the gathering is functioning according to His directives, in His name. This being the case, we are motivated in our search for meaning to take the third step in the process.

Context

It has sometimes been said (with tongue in cheek, perhaps) that there are three rules for understanding the meaning of the text. The first is context. The second is context. The third is context. This overstatement makes the point - so let's do it!

There are basically three areas of context to study.

1. The immediate context.
2. The book context.
3. The Bible context.

Taking your cue from the causal conjunction (“for”) of verse 20, begin moving back in the immediately preceding context. Notice the reference to the “two” in verse 19 and the “again” which precedes it. Keep moving back and find the original reference to “two or three” in verse 16. At this point, the words of Jesus take you back to the Old Testament context (Deut. 19:15) for a principle of settling disputes. Now you are gaining awareness of what the “gathered” is referring to in verse 20. But note the contrastive conjunction (“But”) that begins verse 16. This sends you back to verse 15 and the topic sentence which begins the paragraph and starts the immediately preceding context of verse 20. Now you have the subject matter of this whole section, namely a breach of relationship between brothers in Christ: “...if your brother sins against you.” Thus this passage is telling how members of Christ's family settle disputes.

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Now let's look at the context following our text of verse 20. Peter's question in response to Jesus shows that he understood exactly what Jesus was talking about and he applied it to himself:

"Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Up to seven times?"

Thus in the context of verse 20, Jesus is presenting the process for dealing with sin and maintaining unity in the church (verse 17), which was yet to be established. It starts with private confronting in verse 15 (one on one), moves to group adjudication in verse 16 (two or three), and is finalized by the church in verse 17, the highest court of appeal on earth for spiritual accountability. In verses 18 and 19, Jesus strongly reinforces the legitimacy of this process of discipline in the family of believers by stating that, when it is done properly, they will be accomplishing on earth that which has already been determined as the will of God in heaven.

Thus in verse 20, Jesus summarizes this whole process of discipline by affirming that when it is carried out according to His directives, it has the power and authority of His almighty presence.

If you now move from the immediate context to the context of the whole book of Matthew, you will find that Christ spoke of the future church (Matt. 18:17) only one other time in the Gospels, namely in Matthew 16:18. In that passage, He spoke of its nature:

"...I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it."

The church was to be future ("will"), personal ("My"), permanent ("Hades...not prevail") project of Jesus Christ Himself ("I"). By way of comparison, in Matthew 18:15-20, Jesus presents the procedure of governing and maintaining the unity of that church, His body, which was yet to be established at Pentecost.

There is yet a further area of context, namely, the remainder of the Bible. In pursuing that, one might continue this study by comparing the parallel passage in Luke 17:3, 4. One could also move on to the letters to the churches for further instruction and development of a total doctrine of church discipline (see 1 Cor. 5:1-6:20; 1 Tim. 5:19-22, Titus 3:1-11; Heb. 13:17).

Culture

The final step in our four-step process is the cultural study. This seeks to recreate the setting. Actually this may be done at the beginning as well as throughout the study process. There are three major areas of culture, which may be designated as follows:

1. Social - the customs of the times.
2. Temporal - the period in history.
3. Geographical - the place on earth.

Many helpful books are available for this area of study, especially Bible dictionaries and encyclopedias.

Two words in the immediate context that have social and cultural implications are "heathen" and "tax collector." Why are those words chosen as picturing the status of the brother who refuses the discipline of the church?

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With respect to timing in history, this passage of the teaching of Jesus occurred early in His fourth year of public ministry. It follows His prediction of His coming death and resurrection (Matt. 16:21; 17:22,23). Although He lived under the Mosaic law and kept it perfectly (Matt 5:17), He predicted this current dispensation of grace (John 1:17) and the birth of the church (Eph. 3:1-21). Thus Jesus was preparing His disciples who were going to be foundation stones in the church (Eph. 2:19-22) that would be established at Pentecost (Acts 1:4,5; 1 Cor. 12:13).

Concerning geographical setting, Jesus was teaching at Capernaum on the northwestern shore of the Sea of Galilee. He had recently been at Caesarea Philippi (today known as Banias) at the foot of Mount Hermon, one of three sources of the Jordan River. In that beautiful setting, after He was transfigured in their midst, the voice of God from heaven declared, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. Hear Him!"

Perhaps this is the appropriate word for all of us as we now approach God's Word. "Hear Him!"

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