Hermeneutics Workshop 05/06
Historical Interpretation:
Biblical Context & Cultural Context
For the Bible Institute at GCBC **Fall 2026**
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Introduction:

Hermeneutics is important because the Bible is divine revelation. God has chosen to communicate through human authors to specific audiences. God's Word has meaning, and it is meant to be understood. Proper hermeneutics allows us to better understand God's Word. However, interpretation is not always an easy task. There are many challenges to interpretation because we are separated from the biblical text in multiple ways. These challenges are often ignored or overlooked, and that can lead to poor interpretation of Scripture. We should seek to identify these challenges, and then apply good principles of interpretation to these challenges in order to find the true meaning of the text. Following certain principles of interpretation leads us to developing a system of interpretation. Good biblical interpretation always emphasizes biblical context and cultural context. Context is key to proper interpretation.

Why Is Biblical Context Important?

Biblical context is what gives a specific passage its meaning. Any passage separated from its context loses some level of its meaning. Every passage is a smaller part of a larger whole. Context limits possible meanings. It helps us distinguish what a passage could mean from what it actually means. Context also clarifies meaning. It explains how words and statements function in an author's argument. Context also prevents misapplication. It helps us avoid applying in a verse in a way that contradicts its original meaning. Good interpretation always gives context its proper weight. We must consider a passage's place within the surrounding text, its biblical book, the whole Bible, and the historical world in which it was written.

Immediate context:

Immediate context is an essential aspect of context that must be considered. Immediate context includes the surrounding verses, paragraphs, and sections that help establish the meaning of a particular passage. We should know exactly what we should be looking for in the immediate context. We should seek to identify the primary subject being discussed. We should identify the author's purpose in the passage. We should know and understand the verses before and after the passage. We should identify major divisions within the context. We should identify repeated words, concepts, or phrases. We should identify commands along with any supporting reasons for the command. We should identify comparisons and contrasts throughout the passage. We should identify any cause-and-effect relationships. We should identify key conjunctions. Some key conjunctions are *therefore, wherefore, for, but,* and *because*. We should identify the primary relationship between the particular passage and the larger paragraph or section of Scripture.

The best way for us to get practical experience with examining context is for us to look at a specific passage. Titus 1 is the passage that we will be examining together as a class today. This chapter has relevant things within the biblical context and cultural context that highlight the importance of examining context.

Examining the immediate context of Titus 1 helps us identify two or three main divisions within this chapter. Titus 1:1-4 is Paul's introduction and greeting to Titus. Titus 1:5-9 is about the qualifications for elders. Titus 1:10-16 is about the prevalence of false teachers and false doctrine. These divisions all relate to one another in a significant way. Paul's greeting answers many of our interpretive questions. He identifies himself as the writer. He identifies Titus as the recipient. He identifies his relationship to Titus. Paul transitions his greeting into the qualifications for elders by identifying the reason why he left Titus in Crete. Paul identifies the responsibilities that he left for Titus to do. Titus's responsibilities included the ordaining of elders which makes the discussion of the qualifications for elders particularly relevant to Titus's immediate situation. Paul then transitions into the prevalence of false teachers and false doctrine because he is explaining the need for qualified elders. All of these divisions within this chapter are related to one another. Each division can be better understood by examining the surrounding divisions and how they relate to one another.

The major theme of this chapter is the need for sound doctrine within the churches. The immediate context helps us identify this theme through the repetition of specific ideas and words. *Truth* is repeated throughout this chapter. By way of contrast, the concepts of lies and deception are repeated throughout this chapter. Paul clearly identified problems within the churches in Crete, and Paul's proposed solution is qualified elders who will teach sound doctrine.

Book context:

Book context concerns the purpose, audience, structure, circumstances, and central themes of the book. A passage should always be interpreted in harmony with the purpose and message of its book. We should identify the major themes and structure of the book. Outlining the book can be helpful when trying to determine how a particular passage fits within the flow of the book. Each individual passage contributes to the theme of the whole book.

Paul's purpose for writing is identified in chapter 1, and it is further developed throughout the rest of the letter. Paul left Titus in Crete to set in order the things that are lacking, and Paul is giving Titus clear instructions about how to do that. Therefore, every passage within this letter relates to that overall purpose. This means that Titus's current situation in Crete is particularly relevant to every passage in this letter. Chapters 2-3 give practical instructions for godly living and good works within the church and within the world. The foundation of that godly living is sound doctrine. The flow of this book helps us better understand the foundation that Paul is laying out in chapter 1. Paul identifies the problem of false doctrine, and the need for qualified elders that will teach sound doctrine. However, that is not the end. The end result of sound doctrine is godly living. Doctrine is not just about information, but it is about transformation. The concept of "good works" appears repeatedly throughout this short letter which highlights that sound doctrine should lead to good works within the church. The book context helps explain why Paul discusses elder qualifications, false teaching, and sound doctrine in chapter 1. The primary purpose of the letter is relevant to every particular passage within the letter.

Whole-Bible context:

Whole-Bible context considers how a passage relates to the rest of Scripture, including its major teachings, historical development, and overall progression of revelation. We should examine parallel passages. We should examine other biblical teachings that are related. We should examine quotations of other Scripture passages. We should examine the overall

development of biblical themes. We should examine the dispensation that a particular passage is in. We should examine what this passage and book contributes to our overall understanding of God and the Bible.

This area of context of context can involve a lot of study time. The best tool for this area of study is to be a regular student of God's Word. We should seek to become more and more familiar with all of Scripture. This underlying knowledge of Scripture as a whole will help us as we are reading particular passages of Scripture.

Titus 1:5-9 has an obvious parallel passage. I Timothy 3:1-7 also talks the qualifications of elders. Many of the qualifications within these two chapters are similar, but they also do have different areas of emphasis. We should ask, "why do these qualifications appear more than once within Scripture?" They appear in different contexts, and therefore they have different areas of emphasis. They both contribute to our overall understanding of what church leaders should be. The passage in Titus puts a unique emphasis on sound doctrine that the passage in Timothy does not. Titus 1:9 says, "Holding fast the faithful word as he hath been taught, that he may be able by sound doctrine both to exhort and to convince the gainsayers." This description of a qualified elder makes sense within the context of Titus. False teachers and false doctrine were very prevalent in Crete, and Paul identifies one of purposes of elders is to confront and correct false doctrine and teaching. Therefore, the Titus passage reinforces our understanding from the Timothy passage, but it also gives us further information that relates its particular context. I Peter 5:1-4 also includes specific commands to elders. However, that passage also does not specifically address this aspect of dealing with false doctrine. Therefore, this passage in Titus about the qualifications of elders gives us a bigger picture of what church leadership should be. Comparing these passages shows that passages can support one another, but they also are all unique to their specific context. Cross-references should clarify a passage, not replace its immediate context.

Cultural Context:

Cultural Context refers to the historical, social, religious, political, economic, and geographical circumstances that help explain a biblical passage. a Some references that were immediately understandable to the original audience may be unfamiliar to modern readers.

Titus involves some interesting cultural context. The biblical context actually gives us some key information regarding the cultural context of Crete. Titus 1:12-13 says, "One of themselves, even a prophet of their own, said, The Cretians are alway liars, evil beasts, slow bellies. This witness is true. Wherefore rebuke them sharply, that they may be sound in the faith." Paul quotes Epimenides of Phaestus who was regarded as a diviner or prophet. Paul is not quoting him to endorse everything that he said, but he is pointing out that he was right about the character of the Cretians. It is always important to identify the source of the cultural context that we use to aid in our interpretation. The only infallible source of cultural context is Scripture. That does not mean that other sources are useless. We can find lots of relevant cultural information in bible dictionaries, commentaries, and historical resources. However, we should not give those things the same authority that we give to Scripture. The culture of the Cretians is especially relevant because Scripture itself gives attention to it.

The other cultural context of Crete can be found in other resources. The location of Titus's ministry in at the time of this letter is important because it provides important context to the letter. Crete was a large Mediterranean island that was under Roman rule. Crete had economic importance for the Roman empire because of its location in the Mediterranean. It was

in the middle of many shipping and trade routes. Therefore, this is not an isolated island, but it was strongly connected to the larger Roman empire. Crete also had Greek culture and spoke Greek. Therefore, the religious background of Crete was historically pagan. Cretians did not have the best reputation. Titus was not ministering in an easy area. Titus had to deal with pagan culture that lacked morals. Titus not only would have to know how to navigate opposition from the pagan culture, but there was also a Jewish presence in Crete. Titus had to deal with Judiasm and false teachers that were infiltrating the church. These false teachers were particularly troublesome in Crete because Christianity was still relatively young in Crete. We are not told in Scripture when the churches started in Crete, but tradition says that Paul started these churches when he travelled along the southern coast of Crete on his voyage to Rome. These churches were full of babes in Christ, and there several problems arising within these churches. Paul describes some of them as rebellious, vain talkers, deceivers, upsetting entire households, teaching wrong things, motivated by money. So Paul left his trusted representative and problem-solver, Titus, in Crete to handle these problems. Paul wants Titus to take these developing churches and establish them properly. Paul tells Titus to set in order the thing things that are wanting. Church should be done decently and in order and Titus is tasked with bringing order to these lacking areas in the churches in Crete.

This aspect of cultural context does not negate the relevance of Scripture to our current culture. However, we must always seek to understand what the text meant to the original audience before applying it to ourselves. The meaning of Scripture never changes, but how it is applied may be different in different cultures. One question that an interpreter must ask is "was this teaching or practice just for a specific culture or does it transcend culture?" This is a question that often comes into play with topics such as head coverings, feet washing, women pastors, alcohol, and many other topics. These are topics that are often disagreed upon because people disagree about how to use cultural context in interpretation. We should not use cultural context to explain away biblical teachings. We also should not ignore cultural context and apply every passage the same way that the original audience would have applied it. This is the discernment and wisdom that is needed when interpreting Scripture and applying it to us today.

Homework – Research Biblical and Cultural Context:

You should have picked a passage, identified challenges, established interpretive principles, considered systematic/theological assumption, and now you need to dive deeper into the specific context of the passage. Identify the key aspects of the immediate context. What is the primary subject? What is the author's purpose? What are the main divisions within the passage? How do the divisions relate to one another? What are some repeated words, concepts, or phrases? What are some commands along with their reasons? Identify the key aspects of the book context. Who is the writer? Who is the audience? What is the primary theme of the whole book? How does your specific passage contribute to that theme? How does your specific passage fit within the outline and flow of the book? Identify the key aspects of the whole-Bible context. Are there any parallel passages? Are they any other relevant biblical teachings? Does your passage quote any other passages of Scripture? How does your passage develop any major biblical themes or teachings? How does your passage contribute to our overall understanding of God and the Bible? Identify the key aspects of the historical and cultural context. Are there any historical or cultural details within the biblical context? What is the historical setting? What is the geography? What is the political situation? What is the primary culture? What is the

language? What is the religion? Where and when does the church fit in historically? Bible dictionaries, commentaries, and other historical resources can all aid in this type of research.

Conclusion:

Understanding how to study biblical context and cultural context is foundational to proper interpretation of Scripture. We must carefully establish what a passage communicates in its original context before determining how to apply it to us. We accomplish this by examining the surrounding text, the purpose of the biblical book, the teaching of the whole Bible, and the historical world of the original audience.