

The young man sees in the first verse a direct command to get married and in the second a timetable—get married now! God has spoken!

What keeps us from taking this ridiculous example seriously? *Context!* Apparently the young man did not bother to read the entire context of 1 Corinthians 7:36c, where the apostle Paul gives advice to engaged men in light of the distressing circumstances in Corinth (notice the italicized portions [italics have been added]):

If anyone thinks he is acting improperly toward the virgin he is engaged to, and if she is getting along in years and he feels he ought to marry, he should do as he wants. He is not sinning. *They should get married.* But the man who has settled the matter in his own mind, who is under no compulsion but has control over his own will, and who has made up his mind not to marry the virgin—this man also does the right thing. *So then, he who marries the virgin does right, but he who does not marry her does even better.* (1 Corinthians 7:36–38)

In light of the situation, Paul actually says that it's better not to marry. In the second verse (John 13:27), the phrase "what you are about to do" refers to Judas's betraying Jesus and has nothing at all to do with marriage. Under the spotlight of context, we see that these two verses give the young man no scriptural basis for proposing marriage.

Not all examples are this ridiculous, of course, but every violation of context is a dangerous matter. By honoring the context of Scripture, we are saying that we would rather hear what God has to say than put words in his mouth. Context determines meaning!

Along with knowing more about the historical-cultural context, we also need to know about the literary context. *Literary context* relates to the particular form a passage takes (the *literary genre*) and to the words, sentences, and paragraphs that surround the passage you are studying (the *surrounding context*).

What Is Literary Genre?

Of every passage of Scripture, we must first notice the form it takes before we look at its content, since form affects content. The word *genre* is a word

Imagine that you are a college student strolling to class one day when a total stranger hits you with a one-liner: "Go for it!" How would you respond? Would you say, "Sure," and walk away thinking that he or she was one fry short of a Happy Meal? Or would you take the message with all religious seriousness and conclude God must be speaking to you through that person, answering your prayers about your decision regarding a major, a new relationship, or whether to take the summer job?

To unveil the meaning of "go for it," most of us would probably come back with a few questions of our own. "What exactly do you mean?" or "Go for what?" We would ask questions as part of our search for a context to give meaning to those three little words. Without a context, "go for it" can mean almost anything. Without a context, words become meaningless.

When it comes to interpreting and applying the Bible, context is crucial. In fact, we would go so far as to say that the most important principle of biblical interpretation is that *context determines meaning*. When we ignore the context, we can twist the Scriptures and "prove" almost anything. Consider the example of a young man seeking advice from God's Word about whether to ask his girlfriend to marry him. As he dances around the Scriptures, he finds a couple of verses that provide the answer he so desperately wants with a timetable to boot.

1 Corinthians 7:36c: "They should get married."
John 13:27: "What you are about to do, do quickly."

of French origin meaning “form” or “kind.” When applied to biblical interpretation, the expression *literary genre* simply refers to the different *types* of literature found in the Bible. In the Old Testament you will encounter narrative, law, poetry, prophecy, and wisdom. The New Testament forms include gospel, history, letter, and prophetic-apocalyptic literature. Both Old and New Testaments feature a number of subgenres (e.g., parables, riddles, speeches).

Many linguists use the analogy of a game to describe literary genre. You can think of each genre as a different kind of game complete with its own set of rules. This insightful analogy shows how we as readers have to play by the rules when it comes to recognizing literary genre.

Think for a moment of a European soccer fan attending his first (American) football and basketball games. In football the offensive and defensive players can use their hands to push their opponents. In basketball and soccer they cannot. In basketball players cannot kick the ball, but they can hold it with their hands. In soccer the reverse is true. In football everyone can hold the ball with his hands but only one person can kick it. In soccer everyone can kick the ball but only one person can hold it. Unless we understand the rules under which the game is played, what is taking place is bound to be confusing.

In a similar way, there are different “game” rules involved in the interpretation of the different kinds of biblical literature. The author has “played his game”—that is, has sought to convey his meaning—under the rules covering the particular literary form he has used. Unless we know those rules, we will almost certainly misinterpret his meaning.⁵

For communication to occur, the reader must be on the same page as the author in terms of genre. When the stranger said “go for it,” you could have responded with questions to clarify the meaning. But how can we clarify the meaning of the ancient authors when they are not around to field our questions? The answer is literary genre. Even though the author and reader cannot have a face-to-face conversation, they meet in the text where they are able to communicate because they subscribe to a common set of rules—the rules of the particular genre.

In this way, literary genre acts as a kind of *covenant of communication*, a fixed agreement between author and reader about how to communicate.⁶

In order for us to “keep the covenant,” we must let the author’s choice of genre determine the rules we use to understand his words. To disregard literary genre in the Bible is to violate our covenant with the biblical author and with the Holy Spirit who inspired his message.

If you stop and think about it, you are constantly encountering different genres in the course of ordinary life. In a single day you might read a newspaper, look up a number in a telephone directory, order from a menu, reflect on a poem, enjoy a love letter, read a map showing how to get to a friend’s house, or meditate on a devotional book. When you meet these different genres, you know (whether conscious of it or not) that you need to play by certain rules of communication, the rules established by the genre itself. If you fail to play by their rules, you run the risk of misreading.

You run dangerous risks if you were to confuse a telephone directory with a love letter or mistake a menu for directions to a friend’s house. Obviously we don’t read menus the same way that we read love letters or newspapers the same way that we read devotional books. We know this because the genre game determines the rules for interpretation. Just as we know that the kind of game determines the rules we play by, so we know that each literary genre in the Bible comes with its own set of built-in rules for interpretation. When readers pay attention to those rules, they have a much greater chance of reading the passage as it was intended.

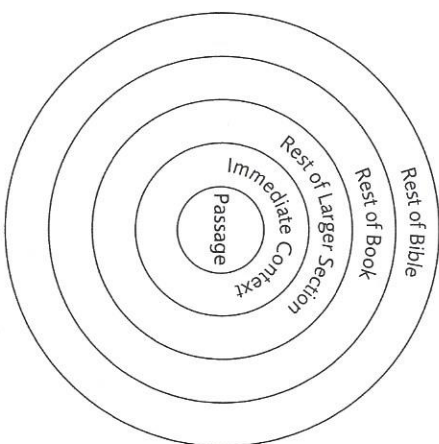
Genres shape our expectations about how to approach a particular text. The form or genre of the text really is connected to the content of the text, and for this reason, we should take literary genre seriously. The very meaning of the Bible is at stake!

What Is Surrounding Context?

Literary context includes not only the genre or type of literature, but also the *surrounding context*—the texts that surround the passage you are studying. You can think of it as the textual world in which your text lives. This includes the words, sentences, paragraphs, and discourses that come before and after your passage. The surrounding context of Romans 12:1–2, for instance, includes the first eleven chapters of Romans as well

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as Romans 12:3 through the end of the book. In a broader sense, the surrounding context of Romans 12:1–2 is the rest of the books in the New Testament and even the entire Old Testament. These various contexts form circles around your passage.



The *immediate context* circle is closest to the center since it describes what comes immediately before and after your passage. First Peter 5:7 is an encouraging verse: “Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.” Do you recall its immediate context? The immediate context includes at least verses 5–9, perhaps more (v. 7 has been put in bold, below).

Young men, in the same way be submissive to those who are older. All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because,

“God opposes the proud
but gives grace to the humble.”

Humble yourselves, therefore, under God’s mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. **Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.**

Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that your brothers throughout the world are undergoing the same kind of sufferings.

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We encourage you to give highest priority to the immediate context when determining the meaning of your passage. As the circles of the context diagram illustrates, the closer the circle is to the center, the greater influence it usually has on the meaning of your passage.

A careful look at the immediate context of 1 Peter 5:7 reveals that casting our cares on the Lord is strongly tied to humbling ourselves before him. This relationship grows even stronger when we realize that the word “cast” (v. 7) is actually a participle in the Greek text and should be translated “casting” (see, e.g., the NASB translation).

The immediate context reveals that humbling ourselves before God means that we entrust our concerns and troubles to God because we know that God loves us and will not let us down. Pride says to God, “I can bear this burden by myself,” whereas humility involves casting our cares on our caring God. What a positive definition of humility! And that insight comes from a careful reading of the immediate context.

The next step is learning to *identify* the surrounding context of your passage. Before we do that, however, we should first discuss a couple of dangers associated with disregarding context.

Dangers of Disregarding Literary Context

You have probably heard it said that you can make the Bible say anything you want. That is true *only* if you disregard the literary context. When you honor the literary context (including the covenant of communication implicit in the genre), you cannot make the Bible say just anything. Cults are famous for Scripture twisting, and most of their misreadings stem from a breach of literary context.⁷ Just because we approach Scripture as evangelical Christians does not make us immune to misinterpretations should we decide to neglect literary context. There are a number of dangers associated with disregarding literary context. Here we will point out only two of the most common problems.

Ignoring the Surrounding Context

The first danger is simply ignoring the surrounding context. This usually happens when individuals focus on a single verse without paying

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attention to how the surrounding verses might affect its meaning. For example, do you know the context of 2 Timothy 2:22, which reads: "Flee the evil desires of youth, and pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace, along with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart."

Second Timothy 2:22 is a favorite verse for fighting off sexual temptation. But how does the surrounding context define "evil desires of youth"? Paul is writing to Timothy, who is facing the problem of false teachers within the leadership of the church at Ephesus. The previous unit (2:14–19) makes it clear that Timothy must resist the false teachers. This is supported by an analogy from the household (2:20–21). Likewise, 2:23–26 speaks of false teaching. In verse 22 Paul tells Timothy to run away from foolish discussions, arguments, and theological novelties so attractive to young ministers (i.e., "evil desires of youth") and to run instead after righteousness, faith, love, and peace with the true people of God. Much to the surprise of some, this verse has little (if anything) to do with sexual temptation.

The way our Bibles have been divided into chapters and verses doesn't help matters much. The chapter and verse numbers help us find passages quickly, but they can also lead us to believe that each verse stands alone as an independent unit of thought, which is not the case. Just because we attach numbers to the sentences in a paragraph doesn't mean that we can rip one particular sentence out of its context and disconnect it from what precedes or follows.

We also need to remember that the chapter and verse divisions were not part of the original documents but were added much later. When we speak of the Holy Spirit's inspiring the Scriptures, we are talking about the text itself, not about the reference numbers. Don't let these later editorial additions cause you to lift individual sentences out of their surrounding context and give them a meaning never intended by their authors.

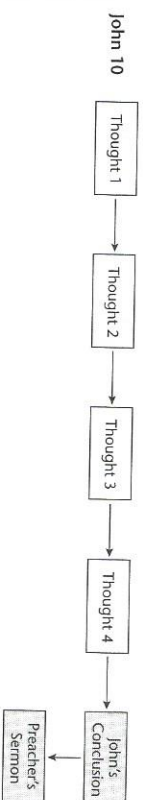
Topical Preaching

A second danger associated with disregarding literary context relates to how Scripture is preached. Topical preaching is a valid approach to preaching when the various passages are understood in context and the overall message doesn't violate those individual contexts. But far too

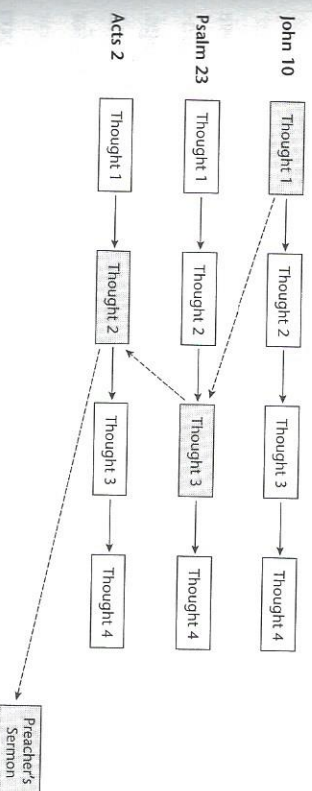
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often topical preaching distorts the meaning of Scripture by disregarding the literary context. Here is how that happens.

The diagram below shows how a biblical author's thought flows through a particular text. Expository preaching (in contrast to topical preaching) will follow an author's flow of thought through a particular text (e.g., John 10) in order to grasp the intended meaning and communicate that meaning to the congregation.



Topical preaching, by contrast, often jumps from one passage to another by stringing together a series of originally unrelated thoughts (see the resulting diagram below). That is the same as jumping from the newspaper to the menu to the poem to the love letter, picking thoughts at random, in order to construct a message of your own choosing. You can see how this approach could easily violate the literary context and lead to all sorts of unbiblical conclusions.



Quoting Bible passages out of context may make for an entertaining sermon, but it will mask God's true message. Misreading the Bible ultimately hurts people by enslaving them rather than setting them free with truth. What if the young man we mentioned at the beginning of the chapter really believed God had told him to marry his girlfriend when in fact God had done no such thing? The young man's failure to consider the context would cause a misreading with serious relational consequences. Of course, his girlfriend might say "no" to his proposal and encourage him to take a class on Interpreting the Bible. Then all would be well.

How to Identify the Surrounding Context

The Bible is more than a collection of unrelated parts. The Holy Spirit moved the biblical writers to connect their words, sentences, and paragraphs into a literary whole in the normal way that people use language to communicate. Just imagine how a document would appear if the sentences were not linked together to form a unified message. Better yet, read the following paragraph:

I heard an interesting story on the news the other night. The quarterback faded back to pass. Carbon buildup was keeping the carburetor from functioning properly. The two-inch steaks were burned on the outside but raw on the inside. Ten-feet-high snow drifts blocked the road. The grass needed mowing. The elevator raced to the top of the one-hundred-story building in less than a minute. The audience booed the poor performance.⁸

We typically don't string together randomly selected ideas when we are trying to communicate. Normally, sentences build on previous sentences and lead into later sentences in order to produce a coherent message. As God's communication to us, the parts of the Bible connect to form a whole, while the whole in turn provides guidelines or boundaries for understanding the parts.

When we ask you to identify the surrounding context, we are asking you to see how these sentences (the parts) fit together in a book to communicate the larger message (the whole). We cannot read the author's mind, but we

can trace his thought as it flows through each sentence and paragraph to form the whole book. We want to see how the smaller units connect to form the larger units. Moreover, the most accurate interpretation of a passage is the one that best fits that passage's surrounding context.

We are going to use the short New Testament book of Philemon to illustrate how you identify the surrounding context of a passage. Suppose that you are trying to determine the surrounding context of Philemon 4–7 (there is only one chapter in the entire book of Philemon). Take a moment and read Philemon in your Bible. To grasp what Paul really means in verses 4–7, you need to examine what Paul says before and after this passage. This is what we mean by "surrounding context"—how a section fits with what comes before and after it. Finding the surrounding context of any passage consists of three steps: identify how the book is divided into paragraphs or sections, summarize the main idea of each section, and explain how your particular passage relates to the surrounding sections. Let's continue with our Philemon example.

1. *Identify how the book is divided into paragraphs or sections.* Look at several different Bible translations to see how the translators have divided the book and the chapters into smaller units. Although there will not be universal agreement about how to divide the text into sections, often there will be a consensus among the translations (as there is with vv. 4–7). If you want to do the work yourself, you need to look for changes in the text as clues to a shift in the author's flow of thought (e.g., conjunctions, changes of literary type, topic or theme, time, location, setting). You will notice some of these transition points in Philemon. Paul switches from a greeting to a prayer between verses 3 and 4. Don't miss the conjunction "therefore" in verse 8 and the "so" in verse 17, both beginning new sections.

2. *Summarize the main idea of each section in about a dozen words or less.* For each statement that you write, make sure that you summarize the point of the whole section and not just a portion of the section. After writing a summary, you may want to read the section again and see if your summary truly captures the entire section. When writing your summary, think about two things: (a) the topic or main idea of the section, and (b) what the author says about the topic or main idea. Take a look at our summaries for each section of Philemon:

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- vv. 1–3: Paul identifies the letter senders/recipients and offers a greeting.
- vv. 4–7: Paul thanks God for Philemon's faith and love and intercedes for him.
- vv. 8–16: Paul appeals to Philemon for his "son" Onesimus and offers Philemon perspective on God's providence in the matter.
- vv. 17–20: Paul urges Philemon to receive Onesimus as he would receive Paul himself.
- v. 21: Paul expresses confidence that Philemon will do even more than he asks.
- v. 22: Paul shares his hope to come in person and visit Philemon.
- vv. 23–24: Paul shares greetings from his fellow workers.
- v. 25: Paul closes the letter with a benediction of grace.

3. *Explain how the section you are studying relates to the surrounding sections.* Now that you can see the author's flow of thought through the entire book by reading your section summaries, it is time to look at how your passage fits into its surroundings. We tell our students, "If you do nothing else besides read what comes before and what comes after your passage, you will eliminate about 75 percent of all interpretive mistakes." The heart of identifying the surrounding context is observing how your section relates to what comes before it and what comes after it. In Philemon, our section (vv. 4–7) is sandwiched between the opening of the letter (vv. 1–3) and the body of the letter (vv. 8–22). Almost everything that Paul says in our thanksgiving and prayer passage prepares the reader for what he is about to say in the body of the letter.

In this case, the thanksgiving becomes the basis for the request that follows. Paul attributes a number of qualities to Philemon in verses 4–7, the very qualities that will enable him to respond positively to Paul's upcoming request. Paul thanks God that Philemon trusts the Lord and loves people. This love, Paul goes on to say, has "given me great joy and encouragement." He also commends Philemon for refreshing the hearts of the saints. Now Paul has a favor to ask about one saint in particular, Onesimus. Thus, the thanksgiving and prayer section (vv. 4–7) prepares the way for the body of the letter. Philemon's good qualities that are highlighted in verses 4–7 provide the character anchor that will motivate him

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to do what Paul is about to request in the rest of the letter. When we study Philemon 4–7 with its surrounding context in view, we can truly grasp the meaning of the passage.

Conclusion

We study literary context of Scripture because the interpretation that best fits the context is the most valid interpretation. When we disregard literary context, we run the risk of forcing the Bible to say what we want it to say. This may appear to satisfy people's immediate needs, but ultimately, this approach hurts people by robbing them of God's liberating truth. People are seeking time-tested answers to problems that are staring them in the face, answers that contemporary culture simply cannot supply. When we take the literary context seriously, we are saying, "We want to hear what God is trying to say to us."

We honor the literary context by playing by the game rules established by the author through his use of literary genre and when we pay close attention to the surrounding context. We ourselves communicate by connecting our words, sentences, and paragraphs into a coherent message, and the Bible does the same. As you honor the literary context of a passage of Scripture, you will be saying through your actions that above all, you want to hear what God has to say to you through his Word.

Discussion Questions

1. What happens if you carefully consider the surrounding context of a passage, but ignore its literary genre?
2. Besides those examples cited in this chapter, what are some instances of interpreting a biblical passage apart from its immediate context?
3. When is topical preaching contextually valid? When does it disregard and violate context?