

## READING THE TRAILMARKERS

How did it go the last time you tried to give directions to someone? Is this when you're most likely to be misunderstood? You know what you're trying to say, but they just can't seem to connect. They don't have your context. Sometimes you have to draw a map. Because you tend to subconsciously follow markers, signposts, and objects that signal you're on the right track. It's a lot like reading the Bible.

**1- Start with CONTENT** - We're exploring four major aspects to understanding the Bible: observation, interpretation, application, and transformation. In two past columns we've said observation is like looking at a map, scoping the terrain. It starts with asking the question, "what does the text actually say?" This begins with content, reading what the passage says. But you need context to understand and apply it.

As we've seen, Romans 15:4 explains some practical reasons God wrote the Bible for you (not directly to you, but for your benefit): "*for whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures, we might have hope.*" Read to understand the Bible. It's like a journey that begins with what the Bible actually says. Read it. Then read it again!

**2- Check the CONTEXT** - You observe the content in context so you can understand and apply the Bible to change your life. Context involves reading the trailmarkers along the way. 2Timothy 2:15, "*Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth.*" This is the apostle Paul's instruction to the young pastor Timothy. It applies to anyone seeking to understand the Bible, to make a difference in their lives. Work hard at it. Do your best.

But notice the immediate context of this passage, the verses before and after: "*Remind them of these things, and charge them before God not to quarrel about words, which does no good, but only ruins the hearers. Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth. But avoid irreverent babble, for it will lead people into more and more ungodliness.*" God's Word is not a text you can twist however you want. It is breathed out by God, His words written down for all mankind. Do your best in handling what God has written.

This involves comparing the text of Scripture in context to the rest of the Bible. How does this passage fit into this paragraph, chapter, book, the whole Bible? Your goal is to learn what the original Author meant for His original audience. First you submit to the authority of the Author, God Himself, who is Truth.

**3- Who do you CONSULT?** - You are not the authority on what the Bible says and means. The Author is. Submit to His authority, because He did not write the Bible for quarreling or endless babble, but for truth to transform your life. Take a moment to read your church's statement of faith about the Bible. Mine says, "We believe that God has spoken in the Scriptures, both Old and New Testaments, through the words of human authors. As the verbally inspired Word of God, the Bible is without error in the original writings, the complete revelation of His will for salvation, and the ultimate authority by which every realm of human knowledge and endeavor should be judged. Therefore, it is to be believed in all that it teaches, obeyed in all that it requires, and trusted in all that it promises." Your church's statement is likely very similar.

This recently updated statement doesn't use all the terms of older versions, but it retains the concepts. God is the Author and the Authority of Scripture, so His Word is inerrant, that is, without error. God is infallible, that is, incapable of error. Verbally inspired or plenary means every word is from God. As Brian H. Edwards stresses, "*The Bible does not merely contain the Word of God, it IS the Word of God.*" God and His written Word are your ultimate authority, objective measure, over every realm of humanity.

**4- Do some CORRELATION** - In order to believe the Word of God, trust it and obey it, you need to read it and understand it. So you ask questions of the text, who, what, when, where, why, how, etc. What did the original Author mean for His original audience? How does this literary passage fit in with the context of the whole of the Bible? What are the eternal principles that instruct you for your life today?

One of the first principles of understanding the Bible is that "*the Bible is its own interpreter.*" And its own authority. The Bible itself tells you what any passage means. Few things are more aggravating to people than to have someone else tell you what you meant to say, when clearly they have misunderstood what you actually said and what you intended. In the same way, any passage of the Bible is rightly interpreted, not by you yourself, but by the Bible itself, the rest of the same Author's larger book.

It's well said, "*a text without a context is a pretext for a proof text.*" That is, it's easy to make the Bible mean what you want it to mean when you wrench a text from its context. Just like reading a map, the trailmarkers give you context but are themselves part of the greater context of the map itself. They get you back on track and keep you from getting lost in your own interpretation. Read your Bible! ☐