

# Text, Context and Secondhand Coats

by Scott Smelser

John the Baptist would not fit in well with the custom made suit industry. In addition to his general appearance, he seemed to have little concern for the need of a tailor-made single person fit: "He that hath two coats, let him give to him that has none." Horrors.

Yet as anyone knows who has benefited from hand-me-downs or second hand shops, a good coat that once warmed person A can generally keep person B just as warm. There are some obvious exceptions; attention should be paid to whether you're shopping in the boys section or the girls section, and a coat from Goliath is clearly not going to fit Zacchaeus.

So it is with texts and contexts. Some texts are obviously one-size-fits-all, like the two greatest commandments (Mt.22.37-39). Some texts fit one context, but not another; "Israel... remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt ... therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath" (Dt 5; but cf. Col. 2.17). Some texts appear in a specific context, but certainly fit elsewhere just as well. When Paul warned the Corinthians that "bad companions corrupt good morals," the context was an anti-resurrection influence; yet the applications fit far beyond that. Indeed, this simple statement of truth was already borrowed when Paul employed it here (it was a well known maxim among the Greeks).

Consider then please, some common mistakes regarding text & context.

## **Ignorance of Context**

A man walks into the middle of a conversation. Everyone else understands what's being said, while the man coming in partway is confused. People get confused by the Bible in the same way. Reading random verses from the middle of Romans or Hebrews will not give good Bible knowledge just as sampling random sentences from a stack of history books would not give good history. Context helps the text make sense.

## **Misapplication of Context**

Another man steps up to a conversation, hears a name, and jumps to a premature conclusion. He thinks he understands, but may discover he does not after offering congratulations or condolences to the wrong person. Likewise with the biblical texts, when attention is not paid to context people jump to flawed conclusions and end up misinterpreting the text. Consider some examples: 1Cor.3.15 "If any man's work shall be burned, he shall suffer loss: but he himself shall be saved"

Is Paul referring to a man walking in sinful works, but being saved regardless (in contradiction to ch. 6.10,11)? Read and see the context to be the construction of the Corinthian church, with Paul, Apollos and others being workers (v.9ff.), and the Corinthian converts being the work (3.9, 9.1); with some converts enduring like gold, and others being burned up like stubble (3.12), to the reward, or loss, of the worker in the gospel (cf. Php. 2.16).

### **Isa. 55.8-9 “My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are my way your ways”**

Clearly, we have biblical texts that focus on the omniscience of God (Job 38ff, etc.). But is that the point of this particular text?

In this text, is the point: you are not expected to be all knowing as God is (cf. Dt. 29.29)? Or is the point: you are expected to stop being carnally minded and become godly minded (cf. Col.3.2)? Let the context tell you: “Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts... For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways” (Isa. 55.7-8; cf. Php.2.5).

### **Textual dismissal by contextual strait-jacketing**

Respecting context is good Bible study. Abusing context to the point of hindering the text is not. Perhaps you’ve heard some of these: Acts 2:38 is not applicable to us since it was addressed to Jews in Jerusalem. 2 Thess. 3:6ff is not applicable beyond busybodies that won’t work. None of the instructions in 1 Cor.14 apply today, since the context is spiritual gifts. 1 Cor.16.1-2 ought not to be read before collection since the context was a special collection for needy saints.

Yes, Acts 2 was addressed to Jews, but doesn’t it apply to those afar off (v.39)? Yes, 2 Thess. addressed a particular problem, but is discipline limited to lazy gossips (cf. 1Cor.5)? Yes, the context of 1 Cor. 14 is spiritual gifts (ch.12 and 13 as well). Does that negate the teachings on love, edification, maturity, gender roles, or decency and order? Yes, the instructions of giving in 1 & 2 Cor. related to benevolence. But for other works of the church, ought we to abandon them in favor of giving grudgingly, in assigned amounts, regardless of income, every time the doors are open? Or ought we to let the biblical principles, precepts and precedents be applied to more than just the details of their first application?

Let’s respect the original contexts, but let’s also not leave the word in the first century. The word is living and active, and needs to be brought into our contexts too. As the old saying goes: if the shoe fits, wear it.