Four Foolish Filter Fails in Bible Study

I was having coffee with a friend the other day. He's one of my favorite people in the universe and I love his take on the Bible and church. Our church models are very different. Still, we marveled that even though our churches are about as different as Switchfoot and Lecrae, we've both experienced the same awkward moment when our fellow leaders and group members take the Bible completely out of context. Context is key if we want to disciple and lead believers into an authentic faith. All this started me thinking about all the cringe-moments I've experienced through the years. I'd categorize these as "filter fails." They are fails because the Bible requires at least a moderate amount of contextualization. (I'll call them *filters*, because contextualization reminds me of my AP English class my parent made me take in the 9th grade. The scars are there, trust me.) At best, a lack of appropriate filters has twisted a minor phrase into a cross-stitch verse that was never intended to be hung above a fireplace or sewed on a doily. At worst, they have lead cults, crusades and Bentley owning, name-it-claim-it, TV preachers.

So let's take a look at 5 of the most frequent filter fails on teaching the Bible.

1.Failing to understand what's really going on the story.

I have a confession to make. I am guilty of this. I use Bible Gateway™ key word search to look for that perfect verse to summarize a Biblical truth. One verse that I absolutely loved was Habakkuk.

> *The Lord replied,*

> *“Look around at the nations;*
>
> *look and be amazed!*
>
> *For I am doing something in your own day,*
>
> *something you wouldn’t believe*
>
> *even if someone told you about it.*

Now if that’s not a verse destined for the wall art section of a LifeWay Store, I don’t know what is. Right?

Well… Let’s look at the context. It’s not hard. Just read a couple of verses after that, where we learn about God’s ultimate threat of destruction of the people with whom this promise is speaking. God is sending the dreaded Chaldeans to wreak havoc on the people of God. So although Habakkuk 1:5 sounds like a great life-verse, certainly in its context, it’s not *exactly* the kind of amazement you’d ever really want.

2. Ignoring the Voice

If you’re knee-deep into church culture you have heard it in songs, cheers, sermons and in pregame interviews of famous Christian athletes.

> *“I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength.”*
>
> *Philippians 4:19*

It’s often referred to in contemporary circles like this: I can solve this promise, score this touchdown, win that award, and (I’m sorry but it’s true…) marry that girl. But often, the

person referring to the verse forgets the voice of the writer.

Paul was in prison. In earthly terms, like girls, football, acclaim, financial success, Paul would seem like a loser. Paul is writing a letter ***from prison*** about being able to endure not achieve. He's enduring a loss of freedom, loneliness, uncertainty and pain. Speaking in modern terms, this is not a Joel Osteen kind of verse. It's a Martin Luther King Jr. kind of verse.

Now, you don't have to agree with me 100%, but I want to submit that Paul's voice, his circumstance, and the entirety of the book of Philippians is not well served by a trite, fist-bumping take on it. Watch your toes. I'm dropping the mic.

3. Evangelical Cherry-Picking to Drive a Point Home.

This is the main reason expository Bible study is so effective. In expository Bible study you aren't simply going on a fishing expedition to string together related verses on a subject. You are going through the narrative to understand what God is up to in the passage, while also realizing that you have to understand and ask some really important questions:

- What is the culture?
- When was it written?
- What's going on around the writer?
- What has God revealed so far to the people in the book?

Expository Bible study is much like practicing legitimate journalism. – *Who, What, When, Why Where and How.* This is elemental to understanding and teaching scripture with

integrity. History is important. What was going on the culture when the passage was written? Progressive revelation is important. It goes without saying that Peter, even though he was a knucklehead every now and then, had more revelation than amazing Isaiah. He got to see more revelation by the simple fact that he was born later and happened to be a disciple of the Son of God Himself! Therefore, we can't look at the annihilation of the enemies of Israel in the Old Testament as a proof text to carpet bomb towns. Otherwise you're going to have to throw out a lot of Jesus teachings.

4. Jumping the Gun

I saved the worst for last: You head off alone. Bible study and Bible teaching will be cold, ineffective, and futile if you don't have Someone working with you. (You see what I did there with the capitalization, don't you?) The Holy Spirit must guide you as you study scripture or prepare to teach. Scripture comes alive when we have a dialogue with the Source of all knowledge. This is what makes reading the Bible so incredibly transforming. There's something going on between the reader and the text. So prayer is a vital link to understanding the text. Prayer makes the Bible a dialogue.

There are other fails out there, but these are four that you surely want to avoid.