

THE BIG PICTURE

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One of the biggest plagues in Bible study is failing to see the “big picture.” We tend to read a verse and discuss it. As a result, that statement gets lifted from its setting and put in the context of people’s interests or problems even when it may not belong there. Foreign ideas come into the picture because context is not kept in mind. Bible study needs to cover large portions to keep in sight the general flow of thought. In addition, the total purpose and character of Christian understanding must provide the framework for individual doctrines.

Several advantages come from emphasizing an overview. For one thing, it shows the relative importance of certain items in the Bible. In light of the overall purpose of Christ’s life-death-resurrection for our salvation, how important would it be whether he died on a pole instead of a cross, whether the cross was shaped like a “T” or an “X” rather than the traditional form? How much would it matter whether there were two or three other men crucified with Jesus? Do we have to decide whether it occurred at Gordon’s Calvary outside the Crusader Wall or within the confines of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher? There may be ways to solve questions like these sometimes, but how important are they to solve? Without the whole picture, we cannot compare the “size” of one item with the size of the whole.

For another thing, seeing the big picture helps us decide whether to make a given issue a matter of fellowship. Division among Christians often results from matters that have little impact on Christian living and obedience. What difference does it make whether the rapture occurs after, before, or during the tribulation—or whether there is a special tribulation period? Does Christ come before or after the millennium—or is there a separate millennial age at all? All Christians must remain faithful to the point of death. We can wait to see how God works out such matters, and we can wait in Christian unity. There can be personal differences in factual understanding on such considerations because they do not have a “practical correlate.”

Understanding the character and purpose of Christianity helps us make decisions about moral matters not specifically treated in Scripture. Contraceptives were not generally available to first-century men and women. Does that alter anything about premarital and extra-marital sexual relations? Unless we understand the principles involved, we will be limited to operating from specific statements about do’s and don’t’s, and we will not be able to address important issues the New Testament does not address.

A grasp of the whole helps us see through apparent contradictions. The Scripture has many little “brain teasers” like Galatians 6:2 + 5: “*Bear one another’s burdens*”; “*each person will bear his own burden*.” Remembering the interpersonal character of Christianity suggests

observations that make these complementary rather than contradictory, generalities rather than absolutes. Do Christians sin or not (1 John 1:8; 3:6)? Does God care for animals or not (1 Corinthians 9:9; Matthew 10:29)? Was Jesus deity or not (James 1:13; Hebrews 4:15)? In these and many others, the principle is the same: apparent contradictions disappear in light of “*the rest of the story.*”

“*The whole is more than the sum of the parts.*” A car is more than a tire and a carburetor and radiator and a bumper, *etc.* We could lay out all the parts in a parking lot, but we would not have a car. The relationship between the parts would not exist. Seeing the whole helps us see the meaning of the parts and clarifies the role played by each one. Christian baptism, for example, loses its ritualistic, legal feel when we see its interpersonal context. Baptism is a personal commitment by a person to a person. From this starting point, we derive other matters associated with Christian baptism. This element in Christianity gets its character from the kind of thing Christianity is as a whole. Knowing the whole puts a context around individual pieces that are then qualified by that context.

Since the broad scope clarifies meaning and removes apparent contradictions, it helps give confidence in the truth of what we believe. Consequently, we give ourselves more wholeheartedly to the ministry of that message. There comes a more natural feel for what we need to stress in our work. We may even be able to remember better the parts of Christian doctrine because motivation for permanent learning is higher when we have confidence in the truth of what we study. Remembering itself is easier when we understand what we learn.

There is no substitute for real understanding, but it does not come without a grasp of the “big picture.”