

Right Idea, Wrong Text

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The right idea, but the wrong text

Introduction: My experience and concerns

As a pastor and a Bible conference speaker I have the privilege of interacting with and learning from a substantial cross-section of sincere, humble, Bible-believing Christians. These earnest saints seek to increasingly know, obey, enjoy and glorify their Lord and savior, Jesus Christ, through a working knowledge of the Word of God. They read their Bibles, pray for understanding and do regular devotionals.

As I've taught and interacted with them, an interesting and fairly regular, specific pattern of thinking and talking has caught my attention. Oddly, this is true only of those who have been churching for some time. It is not true of new believers. This pattern consists of a set of Biblically unwarranted trueisms and maxims, or more correctly, truesisms and maxims that are indeed substantially or at least partly true, but based on the wrong text of Scripture.

I have coined this the, “*Right Idea, Wrong Text*,” phenomenon.

The fact that this occurs primarily among the churching, means that these saints are receiving and believing this same set of pseudo-maxims in their churches, Bible studies, personal conversations, and via other media by group osmosis, by tradition (hearing or reading other Christians repeat the same incorrect things) rather than from a normal reading of the plain meaning of the Biblical text using normal interpretive methods.

Alarm signals arise from this phenomenon:

- *First*, this is concerning because the weight of mass repetition, approval and ubiquity of the pseudo-maxims effectively overturns or obscures the meaning of the underlying texts (“how could all these Christians be wrong?”). Because of group pressure and approval (“group-think”) the reader of those texts doesn't actually “see” them as needing interpretation by him/herself in their Biblical context. The interpretation is already fixed and immutable in his/her mind, so why bother? This is illustrated in the disturbing reaction I sometimes get when I point out the correct interpretation of the underlying texts. It is often met with dismay, puzzlement and disagreement, as if I'd claimed the earth flat or the moon made of cheese.
- *Second*, this is a case of evangelical folksy sound-bite oral tradition being unintentionally but quite effectively set over and against Scripture. As such it is a violation of the foundational Reformation presupposition of *sola scriptura* – Scripture Alone is the final and adequate authority.
- Third, as a troubling lesson to us all, the manipulation of group-think is how heretical groups and cults effectively wrest away the plain meaning of key orthodox texts on such

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core doctrines as the deity of Christ, substitutionary atonement, monotheism and Trinity, salvation by grace alone through faith alone, etc. The group reads, speaks and thinks of the text in contextual isolation and in a consistently unfaithful way such that the actual meaning of that text is subsumed by the aberrant oral and written tradition. They are programmed by pressure and repetition to *not see the text as it actually is*.

Thankfully, the “right idea, wrong text” is not generally a case of teaching false doctrine. There is usually and happily an element of, “the right idea,” in what is stated.

Becoming sensitive to the phenomenon

My hope is to help sensitize the reader to the importance of understanding and identifying the “right idea, wrong text” phenomena as an obstruction blocking their own approach to the Word, and a dead-fall trap in conversation with others. It might be compared to a defective railway switch that directs a train onto a dead-end spur off the main railway. It must be repaired and the train reversed to make forward progress on the main track of God's revelation.

To be obedient to the spirit of being a “good Berean” is to ask the question of any claim *about* a text of Scripture, “is that *indeed what* that text says?”

A factual claim about the meaning of a text should be warranted from *that* text, in its *context*. It should also find similar witness in parallel passages. The claim should arise naturally and necessarily so that reasonable, Spirit-illuminated readers arrive at the same claim independently. The goal of the reader, the interpreter, is to arrive at the one (singular) meaning of the text intended by the original author to his readers.¹ There can be but one accurate meaning. Once that is fairly determined, then and only then can the student of Scripture seek the appropriate application or applications as may be.²

Remember: *A text without its context, is merely a pretext!*

Pastoral Concern

My concern in this area is not theoretical, it is pastoral. The great need in the church is for the children of God to know their Father as He tells them He is to be known. God has revealed to us in His Word, in a knowable and non-mystical way, what He wants us to know. When

1 I highly recommend this article, “Never Read a Bible Verse,” by Greg Koukle – Stand To Reason
<http://www.str.org/articles/never-read-a-bible-verse>

Our church has purchased packets of the article in booklet form to hand out.

2 Devotional reading of Scripture should follow, not precede the exercise and good work of interpretation/hermeneutics. Devotional reading properly seeks application of the text by the Spirit in the life of the reader. However, until one actually has a good, solid understanding of the author's one meaning in the text in question, a devotional reading is unwarranted and in fact can be misleading. Interpret first to determine the one meaning as best you can. Then, and only then, go back and read devotionally so the meaning can be applied to your life in various ways by the Holy Spirit. Much individual and church harm has come from so called devotional reading that relies on the Spirit to give personalized meaning and impressions “on the fly,” and against the natural authorial meaning in context. “*But know this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation,*” (2 Peter 1:20 NAS)

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church tradition stands in the way of the self-revealing *I AM*, it must be gently but firmly set aside.

Read on, gentle reader, to see some examples of how the, *right idea, wrong text* shows up in our conversations.

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“Right Idea, Wrong Text” example 1:

“Taking every thought captive”

Two longtime Christian friends meet over coffee. Larry asks Joe,

“How have you been doing at dealing with that one besetting temptation we were talking and praying about? Are you making progress? Are you exercising that spiritual discipline I showed you from II Corinthians 10:5? Are you gaining victory?” Larry replies, *“Well Larry, I've been doing what you suggested. Every time the tempting thought and feeling comes into my mind and heart I stop and remember to, 'take every thought captive to Christ.' I really am trying to be aware of every wrong thought and feeling in my heart and bring it subject to Christ. What I find is that the more I try to take captive that tempting thought, the more defeated I feel and the more I end up thinking about it. It's like I'm obsessing, checking to see if that thought is in my mind, losing sleep. I'm not counting sheep at night, I'm counting thoughts!”*

There is an element of truth here. Christians are indeed instructed, “And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind,” (Rom 12:2 NAS) and, “But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup.” (1Co 11:28 NAS), etc.

However, introspection regarding each of one's own internal wayward thoughts and feelings is not in view in II Corinthians 10:5, and that's the point.

The Context of II Corinthians 10:5

The larger context of 1st and 2nd Corinthians includes the attack by the arrogant Hellenistic Corinthian Christians on Paul's apostleship in particular but also on his fellow apostles and on Paul's apostolic associates. This was much worse a problem in 1 Corinthians, explaining it's harsher tone. But some remains to be dealt with in 2 Corinthians.

They were at the crossroads of the world and their Hellenistic, urban mindset was that a great man of God really should be slick, erudite, eloquent, powerful and persuasive in oratory skills, good looking, influential and well connected to the right associates, and schools of philosophy and oration. (1 Cor 2:1) They *really* approved of the kind of orator they thought Apollos was! (Acts 18:24, 1 Cor 1:12) (It is doubtful Apollos saw himself in just that light.) Paul was none of these and preached the foolishness of Christ crucified (1 Cor 1:23, 2:2-5), a disappointment and embarrassment for them.

The two camps, “We/Us vs y'all”

When you turn to his 2nd Corinthian letter, take note how quickly the apostle sets up two camps: “We/Us” versus “you” (plural in the Greek). The “you” is the Corinthian Christians as a

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body, the recipients of his corrective letter. He uses “we/us/our” speaking of himself as an apostle and of Timothy, and any of his apostolic associates in union with him. *In fact, he uses “we/us/our” over 100 times!* A quick visual scan for the “we” and the “you” helps you to see this contrast. Looking for these words as one reads the letter helps understand the sharp contrast between the two groups.

What he is doing is pointing out the situation, qualification, faith and behavior of the mature “we” - him as apostle/his associates *in contrast* to that of the “you” - the less mature and world-wise Corinthians who still have issues in many areas.

WE

Paul/Associates

in contrast to

YOU

Immature Corinthians

Coming into II Corinthians chapter 10, Paul does not let up on them.

Now I, Paul, myself urge you by the meekness and gentleness of Christ-- I who am meek when face to face with you, but bold toward you when absent! ² I ask that when I am present I may not be bold with the confidence with which I propose to be courageous against some, who regard us as if we walked according to the flesh. (2Co 10:1-2 NAS)

Verses 1 and 2 show Paul defending his approach (and apostleship) against the charge that he's coming across too meek and as just like other mere mortal men (v2), so why should he be listened to? The following verses (vv3 on) indicate they thought Paul and his associates were not going after the right issues and in the right way and with the right *panache* (ie, they were weak in presentation, and beating their fists in the air and didn't look or sound like the lawyers and philosophers they were used to).

<p>Key point: The <i>we/us</i> in II Corinthians is <i>not you</i>, the 21st century reader. Got it?</p>
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Making war like the immortal gods

In v3-4a Paul comes out swinging and says while “we” (Paul and associate) are mortals in the flesh, don't be fooled by mere appearances you ignorant Corinthians!

For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh,⁴ for the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, but divinely powerful for the destruction of fortresses. (2Co 10:3-4 NAS)

“We” few are, in fact, most expertly waging war like the immortal gods, and with the supernatural weapons of the gods, and in their very world! Immediately the Corinthians would have flashed to the mighty man Hercules who, in their mythology, fought super-human battles, and who also descended into Hades and craftily captured and carried away into captivity Cerberus, the vicious three-headed dog which guarded the Gates of Hades. The terms “weapons” and “divinely powerful” may have brought images of the lightning bolts of the great god Zeus.³

Verses 4b-5 are key in that they specifically describe the sphere of the war the “we” are waging, the magnitude of it, what it is like for the apostle and his associates, and where specifically their god/divine-weapons are having their effect. It is vital at this point to remember that Paul just told them in the previous chapter,

“And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, in whose case **the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving**, that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.” (2Co 4:3-4 NAS)

Pointedly, in context, Paul has said,

1. there is a “non-mortal,” a god whose sphere of authority and power is this *age/world* – this temporal world's culture system of unbelievers,
2. this god has deprived military authority and ownership over the thinking (*noemata*) of

3 In Paul's writing and speech he repeatedly reveals intimate familiarity with Greek as well as Roman myth, poetry, playwrights, and philosophers, etc. In Acts 17:28 in his speech before the Areopagus, Paul quotes from the revered Greek poet/playwright/comic Epimenides. Epimenides wrote that the foolish Cretans thought that the great god Zeus had been ripped by a wild boar and killed, was buried and his grave was with them to that day. Minos, the son of Zeus, erected a plaque with these defiant and faithful words,

*“A grave has been fashioned for thee, O holy and high One.
The lying Cretans, who are all the time liars, evil beasts, idle bellies;*
But Thou diest not, for to eternity Thou livest and standest,
For in Thee we live and move and have our being.”*

*Paul quotes line 2 from this same poem from Epimenides in Titus 1:12. Paul also quotes in Acts 17:28 that, “For in him (Thee) we live and move and have our being.” And so “we are his offspring”, is line 5 of the poem *Phaenomena* by poet Aratus. Likewise, our II Cor 10:3-4 shows he's not afraid to use their own imagery to show them up: Paul and company, yes, disguised in humble flesh, but warring gloriously in the abode of the gods. They wielded “weapons,” “divinely powerful” - *dunata tow theo* – *powers of the god*.

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unbelievers,

3. this god has exercised that authority cunningly so that the range of possible thinking regarding the facts and truth of the good news of the glory of Christ is inhibited, *yet they are not aware of the inhibiting*. It is not that they don't think, they do, but that their thinking and presuppositions are walled in, “blinkered” as a draft-horse so to speak, so that their minds can't see or access reality as it is. This present age is like *The Truman Show* – a sham stage where reality is not accessible. By implication, this god is evil.⁴

The sphere of this war

Now with that in the Corinthians' minds, what Paul says in 10:4b-5 makes sense, and it's meaning and sphere are *necessarily constrained* by 4:3-4. Therefore, the sphere of this warfare is the *noemata* – *the thinking, the unredeemed cultural mind-set, the presuppositions, philosophy and worldview of unbelievers*. Paul is warring against what theologians call the, “noetic (*noema*) effects of the Fall,” the Fall of Adam affected every area of Man's mind (total depravity) and made the thinking of that mind and purposes of its will⁵ captive to the manipulating, perverting and obscuring work of the god of this age, who we know to be Satan.

Believers are not and cannot be in view, since they belong to a different God and do not belong to this age (our citizenship is in heaven). Believers are strangers and aliens to this age. *The fortress under siege is the worldview of fallen man, composed of twin evil towers that the apostles have been battering away at:*

The first tower is unbelief outside the church, with apologetics and gospel preaching the engine of war to smash and pull down that pagan holdout. The second tower is false doctrine and false teachers under the auspices of false apostles within the visible church. These smooth, well spoken characters, so yearned for by the Corinthians, Paul goes after with vigor. Polemics, warnings, teaching, writing letters, calling out names, even cajoling, being the engines of war to breach that second bastion.

This view of the sphere of demonic activity being in the area of thinking, ideas and mental scope of unbelief is in line with,

4 By using a manner of speaking the Greek Corinthians could identify with, “the god of this world,” Paul is quite possibly making another illustration from the Greek gods. According to Hesiod (*Theog.* 230), Ate (ah-teh) a daughter of the great god Zeus, had betrayed his deep trust and Zeus had cast her down out of the heavens of the gods, banishing her to the world of the mortals. There she became the evil spirit (*daimona*) of delusion, blind folly, rash action, infatuation, and reckless impulse who led men down the path to ruin. Of course we know from other scripture that this blinding, ruinous, “god of this world,” the evil *daimona*, is masculine, and is the Devil.

Paul's use of particular Greek myths does not, of course, indicate that he believes they are true in every detail, but that even in their pagan stumbling and fallen, dimmed spiritual sight, they still retained some kernel of the faded memory of real events, truths, and realities passed down from long ages past from the fathers. There was enough light there to convict them, not save them (Romans 1:21, 2:14-15), but they had encrusted and buried these truths with accretions of myth and unbelief. Where the poets and myths spoke a useful truth, Paul used it to help them identify, as well as leverage against the conscience of the readers or listeners.

5 *Cognition* as well as *purpose of will* are both included in the concept of *noemata*.

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“But the Spirit explicitly says that in later times some will **fall away from the faith, paying attention to **deceitful spirits** and **doctrines of demons**,”**
(1 Timothy 4:1 NAS)

The mature “we” apostles and associates are making war against this evil god in the very fortress he knows best: that of the thinking and ideas and presuppositions of the unbeliever – *the marketplace of ideas*. There he has worked, over time and ages and cultures and desires and ancient prides and biases and traditions to construct mental fortresses of worldly and Godless speculation, lines of reasoning, ways of thinking, vain philosophies. He has carefully engineered high towers and parapets of prideful God-denying ways of man. With careful cultivating of “critical thinking skills” and skeptical doubt, elevating man and his abilities while denigrating and even disallowing in the mind of the creature the very existence of the true Creator. He has evolved the primitive doubts of, “Did God really say?” to a far more mature, “We can't see Him or evidence of Him. He doesn't exist.”

Paul and his associates are claiming to be breaching and casting down the walls of unbelieving *logismos* - “speculations” (lines of reasoning), tearing down the dearest thoughts of self-serving man, putting the torch to the falsity of man's “critical thinking”, and knocking the foundations out from man's highest independent thoughts.⁶

Our key text, “*taking every thought captive to obedience to Christ*”

Once having pulled down the defensive walls, in our key text Paul claims that he and company are indeed, “taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ.” Employing the metaphor of Greco-Roman warfare, they have entered the city and taken captive each and every defender to the last man, stripped them of weapons and all insignia of honor and rank, even taking their clothing, and clapped them in irons. Having led them off home they are parading the captives before them as the spoils of war on their return from battle. In chains of shame and degradation, every single thought of the world's most powerful pagan agnostic philosophers, and that of it's most ignorant superstitious peasant, is now a nameless depersonalized captive slave, herded off to make it serve emperor Christ. (See Eph 4:8 for Paul's use of the Greco-Roman practice of triumphal enemy shaming and degradation). This is not merely a general rout, it is an individual humiliation.

This must have shocked, shamed and humbled the sophisticated, prideful Corinthians, since they thought so highly of their orators, philosophers and lawyers.

6 This view is in line with David Lowery in his 2 Corinthians commentary in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary – New Testament* (Walvoord/Zuck general editors), regarding 10:7-8 “A major factor contributing to the Corinthians' dilemma concerning apostolic authority was their superficiality and shallowness. They looked only on the surface of things. They were oriented to externalities and worldly wisdom (cf. 1 Cor 3:1). As a result the false apostles found them fair game. In order to retrieve this indiscriminate church Paul would have to engage in what he found personally repugnant – self-commendation. His goal was not real self-enhancement but restoration of the Corinthians. To that end he wielded his authority as an apostle of Christ. And he did so freely and without being ashamed of it. He tore down the “strongholds,” “arguments,” and every “pretension” of his opponents (1 Cor 10:4-5) but he built up believers.” p577

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But it gets worse!

In v6 Paul tells them they're useless in battle and wet behind the ears. "We" are ready to punish all disobedience (any rebellious thought of unbelieving man no matter where it has hidden its miserable carcass) as soon as "you," the Corinthians do two things: First, repent of your silly ideas about what you think being an apostle really is and isn't. Repent of viewing us as mere men. "We" *are* the real deal. Second, get busy and complete apologetics 101 and gospel preaching Basic Boot Camp - "whenever your obedience is complete." In short, we'll be happy to mop this up with you as soon as you're somewhat competent in apologetics and worldview and ready to join us. We're waiting.

V7 Wraps up their ridiculous position. They're looking down their Corinthian noses at the appearance and lack of oratory prowess of Paul, and Paul tells them they're looking with entirely the wrong eyes. "We're" the real immortals, we're winning in the realm of the gods, and all "you" can do is complain about what you can't even see.

Summary of, "Taking every thought captive"

It is helpful when reading the text to ask the question, "Who is the 'we' of 2nd Corinthians 10:5?" Since it is the apostles and associates (and not the immature Corinthian and certainly not the 21st century American reader), interpretation of the passage becomes simpler and quite powerful.

If we are going to reach and grow towards the competence level of the the "we" (the mature ones doing apologetic battle to free the thinking of those blinded by the god of this age) then we ought to be about the business that Peter urges on us,

"always being ready to make a defense [an apologetic] to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence; and keep a good conscience so that in the thing in which you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame." (1 Peter 3:15-16 NAS)

If the dear reader is going to make the argument that the "we" who are to take every thought captive is each and every believer without distinction, then the reader is in a very awkward position. The reader is claiming:

1. That not only we, but also the apostle Paul and his associates were struggling to take their own thoughts and desires captive. God forbid!
2. That not only we, but also Paul and associates were experiencing lofty thoughts that exalted themselves against the knowledge of God! God forbid!
3. We have no idea who the contrasting "you" is in v6b for whom the "we" is waiting!

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The better approach

To misuse this passage to command examining one's own thoughts and feeling, trying to take them captive to Christ, focuses the thoughts and mind of the Christian inwardly and on self. It risks becoming a frustrating exercise, soulical rather than spiritual, narcissistic, and surprisingly un-Christian. The Lord loved the Corinthians and He loves us. He does not leave the Corinthians or us without help and instruction in this matter:

*But to this day whenever Moses is read, a veil lies over their heart; but whenever a man turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. Now the Lord is the Spirit; and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty. **But we all, with unveiled face beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit.***

(2 Cor 3:17-18 NAS)

Look to Christ my friend, and away from self. We are to, “be transformed by a renewing of the mind.” You can't transform your thinking. Forget it! The Greek here is passive, indicating the transforming is done *to* you, not *by* you. A focus on Him via His Word will set His eternal Spirit about the business of transforming the mind as no inward mortal glance can.

As the hymnist urges, “Turn your eyes upon Jesus, look full in His wonderful face, and the things of earth will grow strangely dim, in the light of His glory and grace.”