

TheWordWorks

General Bible Handling Training

Module 1

Getting the Situation of the Original Audience

Aims of this module:

1. To see that understanding the situation of the original audience leads to a clearer understanding of why the author's main point and purpose are what they are. This in turn allows the purpose of the author to be applied in the sharpest possible way i.e. into a current day situation similar to the original situation
2. To practice working out the situation of the original audience

Recap

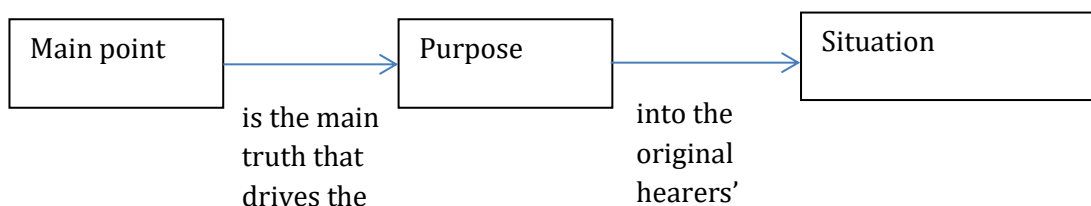
The **Big Idea** of a passage consists of 3 things (see GBHT_M1_1- Bible Handling Training Part 1)

Main Point: The main point is the main thing/truth the author is saying in that passage, captured in one summary sentence.

Purpose: When a bible author states a truth (i.e. the main point), he has a specific purpose for doing so. He wants that truth to do something to the original readers. The effect the main point was meant to have on the original readers is called the author's purpose.

Situation: The situation is particular circumstance of the original hearers which the original author is writing to address

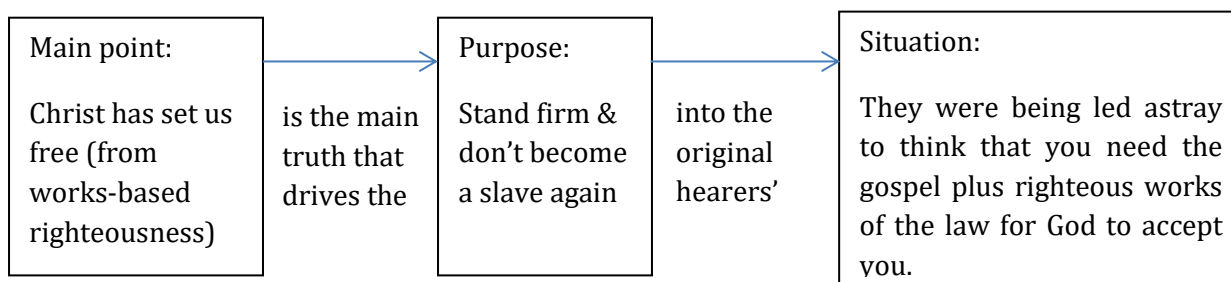
The relationship between these 3 elements of the main point is summarised in the diagram below:



Example: Galatians 5:1

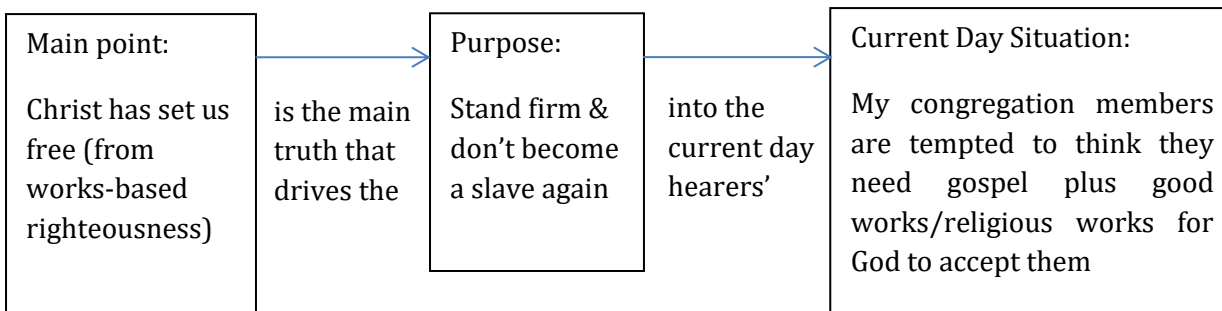
For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.

The BIG Idea of Galatians 5:1



The task of the preacher is to teach the author's **main point** in order to achieve the author's **purpose** in a **current day situation** similar to the situation of the original hearers.

Preaching Galatians 5:1



The advantages for preaching when the preacher knows the original situation

1. Sharper applications (See also GBHT_M1_5- Applying the purpose)

Applying the purpose into a current day situation similar to the original situation gives specificity to your applications. You are not only preaching how to respond to the text (i.e. the purpose) but also who-in-what-kind-of-situations should respond in this way. These kind of applications, in our experience, feel “real” i.e. they are addressed to real people in specific situations. These applications are sharp in terms of purpose and sharp in terms of situation.

2. It allows us to make an educated guess of the author’s purpose when there is no explicit imperative/command to tell us what the author’s purpose is

Take Colossians 1:1-14 for instance. If I read it without knowing the original situation, I’d just read it as Paul thanking God for the fruit of the gospel seen in the Colossian Christians’ lives (1:1-8) and Paul’s prayer that they might grow even more (1:9-14). I might take this in a few directions when it comes to Paul’s purpose for writing these things. Maybe he wants the Colossians to **imitate him** in this kind of prayer? Maybe he wants them to **be thankful to God** for what He’s done in them?

However, I don’t think either of these is Paul’s main purpose for writing Col 1:1-14. I think Paul’s purpose is for the Colossians to **KNOW** that the gospel of Jesus is **all they need** to keep on growing as Christians. I get this from working out the original situation: The Colossians who started with the gospel were now tempted to turn to other things for spiritual growth/maturity (2:4-8). Therefore, what Paul does in 1:1-14 to address this situation is he tells them how God grew them in the gospel in the past (1:1-8) and prays that the gospel will continue to grow them in the future (1:9-14). They need nothing else but the gospel.

Examples where knowing the situation of the original audience leads to sharper applications

Example 1: Hebrews 1:1-2:4

Main Point:

Jesus is better than the angels (and therefore the Mosaic law they mediated. See Acts 7:53) (1:1-14)

Author's purpose (what he wants his hearers to do):

Pay close attention to Jesus, God's final Word. Don't drift away (2:1-4)

Original situation:

The Hebrew Christians were recently converted from Judaism (10:26-31). They were being persecuted for their new faith in Jesus (10:33-34). They were tempted to give up Jesus and return to Judaism not only because the persecution would stop but also because Judaism was such a tangible, concrete religion with a temple, priests, rituals and sacrifices. It seemed to offer **more spiritual security**. (Explains why in Hebrews 5:1-10:18, the author is at pains to stress that Jesus is better than Old Testament religion aka Judaism).

Application not derived from author's purpose:

Worship Jesus and trust him to solve your problems because he's so much more powerful than the angels!

Blunt application (derived from purpose but doesn't take into account situation):

Pay close attention to Jesus and don't drift from him in the Christian life. Make him your priority. Don't listen to the voices of the world etc. Why? He's a really important, powerful guy (> angels!)

Sharper application (derived from purpose and takes into account situation):

Pay close attention to Jesus and don't drift from him as you **seek (false) spiritual security** in other things (e.g. a Jewish Christian today seeking to return to Judaism, a Christian seeking spiritual security in spiritual experiences, Christian heritage, religious leaders, religious ritual).

Example 2: Isaiah 13:1-14:2

Main Point:

God will bring down proud Babylon in order to save his people

Author's purpose:

Don't fear Babylon. Trust in God.

[Note: In this passage, there is no explicit command to God's people i.e. no explication indication of purpose. However, this is one of those passages where knowing the original situation helps us make an educated guess as to what the implicit purpose is]

Original situation:

Israel had been through 2 recent national emergencies. In both emergencies, there was an external threat to fear. In both case, Israel had to trust something to allay their fear.

Emergency #1 (Isaiah 7-12)

Israel's northern neighbours threaten to invade. Who does Israel trust to allay her fear? God and his promises of protection OR the superpower of the day, Assyria?

Emergency #2 (Isaiah 28-39)

This time Assyria is the threat to fear. Who does Israel trust for its security/future? God or the other great power of the day, Egypt?

Therefore, in the light of this original situation, Isaiah 13-27 pronounces 10 judgment oracles against the nations as a way to show that a) God will deal with any scary external threat b) By getting rid of these threats, God is working to save his people and give them a great future.

Blunt application (if we make a bad guess of the implicit purpose because we didn't take into account the original situation):

Don't be like Babylon. Come out of her. Because she will be judged.

Sharper application:

Don't fear Babylon today (Babylon being the symbolic of human society in rebellion against God): people/organisations around you hostile to your faith, a hostile/oppressive government that cracks down on Christians. Trust in God to judge and save his people.

3. Exercises

Read the following passages and write down what you think the situation of the original hearers was (show the verses):

| Passages | Situation |
|-------------------|-----------|
| Colossians | |
| 1 Corinthians 1-4 | |
| Titus | |

4. TheWordWork's working

| Passages | Situation |
|-------------------|---|
| Colossians | <p>False teachers were deceiving the Colossians (2:4, 8) that in order to grow and have fullness as Christians (, the Colossians needed to abide by OT practices (2:16-17) and live ascetic lives that promote mystic access to God (2:18-23).</p> <p>That's why the gospel of Jesus is presented as the all-sufficient way to growth and fullness (1:6, 10, 19, 28; 2:7, 19; 3:16; 4:12)</p> |
| 1 Corinthians 1-4 | <p>The Corinthians were following certain human leaders (Apollos, Cephas, Paul etc See 1:11-12) in order to be more spiritually impressive than others (see the boasting/pride language of 1:26-31; 4:6-7). They evaluated these leaders by worldly standards of impressiveness (e.g. eloquence, miracle/sign working. See 1:17, 20-23; 2:1). This led to disunity/factionalism in the church. (1:10)</p> |
| Titus | <p>The Christians in Crete faced the twin threats of temptation from an immoral culture (1:12-13) and the presence of false teachers who promoted works of the law like circumcision as the way to godliness (1:10; 3:9)</p> |

5. FAQs

- a. What if I can't work out who the original audience is or what their situation was from the text itself?

We will deal with these issues when we come to modules that deal with genres where this is more prevalent.

- b. What if I don't have anyone in my congregation who is in a situation close to the situation of the original audience? E.g. persecution (2 Thessalonians) or needy widows (1 Tim 5:3-10)

In these cases, there are 2 things you can do: First, preach it to prepare people for the future day when these situations arise. Second, generalise the situations by taking it one level down in specificity. E.g. instead of needy widows, apply to needy people in general. Instead of physical persecution, apply it to persecution of all kinds (social, verbal etc).