

Concentric Circles and Cross-References in Communicating Scripture  
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As you work with the Biblical text for your message, consider the concentric circles of truth around it. Our starting point is our chosen text, then we can work our way out to the wider Bible. Let's say you are choosing to preach from Ephesians 2.1-10. Your first place to understand any part of that passage is right in those verses. Notice that both vs. 2 and vs. 10 talk about walking, what is the difference? Both vs. 5 and vs. 8 say saved by grace, how are they different/the same? Dig into that text to find the primary meaning.

A common mistake of many Bible messengers is to jump away from your appointed text too quickly. Perhaps having poured over that text for long hours you are quite familiar with it. But realize that for many of your hearers it is brand new. Park there and explain the basic who, how, what, where, when, why truths of that text. In taking the context seriously you teach people good methods of Bible study. Jumping off that text immediately like a spring diving board into the rest of the Bible teaches people how to carelessly 'proof-text.' This method can make the Bible say whatever you want it to say! We are not trying to be like Jehovah's Witnesses, we want to be careful and faithful students of Scripture.

After having explained as much as you think fitting from your assigned text, you can expand your circle out a bit wider within the book of Ephesians. You can easily see that chapters 1-3 focus on What God has Done for Us, and chapters 4-6 on What God Demands from Us. So as you're in 2.1-10, the first wider concentric circle would be chapters 1-3. How can you better understand/explain your text from understanding/searching the teaching of Paul right within the doctrinal portion of that letter you are already in? Next, going into the next wider circle, you can look for help/parallel ideas in the chapters on application, Ephesians 4-6.

The next wider circle would be Paul's other letters. 1Timothy might be closest because Paul was writing to Timothy who was IN Ephesus. Paul's other letters to churches are also very helpful because their cultural/historical situations are quite similar. And they all stand on this side of the finished work of Christ for our salvation.

You can push out to the next wider circle by looking at Acts 19-20 where Luke records Paul's ministry to Ephesus. The next circle out would be the other mission journeys of Paul into similar cities/situations. Next the whole book of Acts would

give you important teaching about how the Lord established and developed the early church, of which Ephesus was one.

Next circle out might be 1,2,3 John because many scholars think that John was also in Ephesus. (Though this is not clearly stated in the Bible.)

The next circle outward might be the message of the Exalted Jesus to the church in Ephesus in Revelation 2.

Then you can look at the Gospels. But keep in mind you are jumping over a big chasm because these messages of/about our Lord mostly took place before He accomplished his finished work for our salvation and established His Church for Jew and Gentiles to be one. So there are lots of theological/cultural/historical differences from the Gospel days to the days of the NT Epistles. Of course, we know that there is one primary author of all Scripture, the Holy Spirit. But He chose to use men to speak in their words into their immediate situation. So we must first understand/explain the human writers situation/message AND the message of the Divine author.

The next wider concentric circle you search for meaning for Ephesians 2.1-10 will be the Old Testament. Remember as you go into the Old Testament you're jumping many hundred years. Within the thirty-nine books of Hebrew Scripture is a wide span of time, covenant status, cultural/political/geographical distinctives, and literary styles. The cultural/historical situation has some similarities to the Jews described in the Gospels, apart from the hated Roman occupation.

I am sharing this idea of concentric circles to give you a visual picture to help you be more accurate in your handling of Scripture. It is hills and valleys not all flatlands. A collection of many different types of literature, historical situations, cultural issues, theological challenges, evangelistic purposes, and pastoral concerns written by about forty different authors over a 1000 year span of time in two major languages are bound within the sixty-six different books!

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