

Ellipsis—”Speaking Where the Bible Is Silent”

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An ellipsis is a figure of speech by which the Bible teaches that which it doesn't say. Understanding how to properly interpret an ellipsis is extremely important for three reasons.

First, it will help us understand hundreds of verses more accurately and more rapidly. Paul used this figure of speech dozens of times; other writers used it many times as well. Somebody in the religious realm misinterprets every one of these verses simply because they don't understand this figure of speech.

Second, it will help us answer a lot of false Bible arguments. When people don't understand this figure of speech, they often grab something that the Bible plainly says, and then teach something that's not right at all. This study will help us answer these spurious arguments.

Third, it will help us put more emphasis in the right places than where we might put it otherwise. This figure of speech is all about placing the emphasis where God really wants it to be.

Ellipsis Defined

“Ellipsis” means “words left out.” It's a way that the Bible teaches, not by words, but by a figure of speech where the writer wants the reader to supply certain words. The Bible contains many different kinds of ellipsis, but the particular type that we're studying is identifiable by the occurrence of *not* and *but* as initial words in dependent clauses that modify a common verb. If we don't recognize this figure of speech the many times it occurs in the New Testament, we will teach false doctrine about each one of them.

Before we study some Bible examples, we need to realize that using an ellipsis isn't restricted to the Bible. We all use sentences where we leave out words, and we expect the person who's listening to understand by supplying the missing words.

For instance, if we tell Junior, “Take the trash out.” Junior understands what we mean. He grabs the can and runs it out to the alley. Yet

that is not a real sentence. “Take the trash out” has no subject. The subject, Junior, is understood.

If someone tells us, “Go for it!” we understand that, but he left out some words. If he’s looking at us, we don’t have a problem knowing who he’s talking to. We all could give hundreds of everyday examples where we know what is being said, although some words are omitted.

Likewise, the Bible contains a lot of different kinds of figurative speech where words are left out. A great reference for more in-depth study than we’ll do here is E. W. Bullinger’s book *Figures of Speech Used in the Bible*. He addresses not only figurative language in general, but also how to recognize an ellipsis in particular. Bullinger has 131 pages just on ellipsis. Now let’s look at some important examples of ellipses in the Bible and see how important it is to interpret them correctly.

In this chapter, we discuss a particular type of ellipsis, where a phrase contains the words *not* and *but* modifying a common verb. If this sounds too grammar intensive, the first example will readily illustrate this type of ellipsis.

I Peter 3.3-4

An easy ellipsis to analyze is I Pet. 3.3-4. In this passage, Peter instructed believing wives how to live with their unbelieving husbands:

...Whose adorning let it *not* be the outward adorning of braiding the hair, and of wearing jewels of gold, or of putting on apparel; *but* let it be the hidden man of the heart, in the incorruptible apparel of a meek and quiet spirit, which is in the sight of God of great price.
[Emphasis mine—SGD]

The kind of ellipsis we’re discussing in this chapter has this construction where Peter said, “Let it *not* be such and such, *but* let it be such and such.” That *not...but* construction must *modify a common verb*.

Basically, verses that have this *not...but* form have words left out which are these: *only* and *also*. The Bible doesn’t say those, but that’s really the way the writer wants us to understand them.

In reality, Peter taught, “Let it *not only* be the external adornment of braiding the hair, and wearing gold jewelry, or putting on dresses, *but let it also* be the hidden person of the heart.” In this type of ellipsis, *the emphasis is placed on the second clause*.

Sure enough, as we said earlier, if we don't recognize this figure of speech, someone will make a false doctrine out of this verse. For some Pentecostal groups, this is one of their favorite passages. Their creed book says, "Our women in the Assemblies of God denomination are not to wear jewels of gold. They're not to wear braided hair, I Peter 3.3-4."

We have to admit, that is exactly what this passage says, isn't it? Peter said, "Whose adorning let it not be the outward adorning of braiding the hair, and of wearing jewels of gold, or of putting on apparel." However, they don't emphasize quite so much the part of the same phrase that says, "or putting on of apparel." They don't teach people, women particularly, *not* to put on apparel. They make an absolute prohibition out of part of the clause, because they miss the significance of this figure of speech.

Peter actually taught, "If you're going to be concerned about your adorning, wear gold jewelry, braid your hair, and put on fancy dresses if you want to, *but more than that, put the emphasis on also adorning your inward being, your spiritual being.*" Peter told women not to emphasize how pretty they looked for their husbands, although that was important, but to emphasize how their hearts looked to their unbelieving spouses.

We can easily see this illustration of how to interpret an ellipsis, because we realize that the Lord did not say that women ought not to put on apparel at all. With that in mind, let's notice some other examples from Jesus and Paul, so we can get familiar with this figure of speech.

John 6.27

In Jn. 6.27, Jesus spoke to some Jews who were amazed when he turned a few loaves and fishes into an unlimited supply of food for the multitude. They were impressed that Jesus could give them physical food to eat. Jesus answered them in verse 26:

Work *not* for the food which perisheth, *but* for the food which abideth unto eternal life, which the Son of man shall give unto you: for him the Father, even God, hath sealed. [Emphasis mine—SGD]

Notice that Jesus said, "Work *not* for the food which perishes." Is that an absolute prohibition or is there another *but* in there that modifies a common verb that puts the emphasis somewhere else?

Suppose a husband gets up in the morning and says, “You know, I’m not going to work today because Jesus said, ‘Don’t work for perishable food.’” His wife and children will probably say something about that because he is making an absolute prohibition out of something Jesus never intended.

We know that, because it would contradict other teaching in the Bible. In Eph. 4.28, Paul admonished:

Let him who steals steal no longer; but rather let him labor, performing with his own hands what is good, in order that he may have something to share with him who has need. [NAS]

Paul told us we’d better work; Jesus did not contradict Paul. Likewise, in I Tim. 5.8, Paul said:

But if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith, and is worse than an unbeliever. [NAS]

Even though Jesus said, “Do not work,” do we believe that one who won’t work is worse than unbeliever? Certainly! Even unbelievers work and provide for their families. Paul said, in II Thes. 3.10, “If a man won’t work, don’t let him eat.” If he won’t get to work, we admonish him and withdraw fellowship from him if necessary. That isn’t contradicting what Jesus said. Jesus taught that we should work for physical food just as his apostles did, but we should also work for spiritual food, and where do we put the emphasis? We emphasize working for spiritual food. First, that’s the truth of the matter. Second, that’ll help us answer a false argument that somebody makes against this passage. Third, there’s an application there for us.

The application is, “Where do we put the emphasis? Do we emphasize spiritual food over physical?” These Jews didn’t, and it’s easy to see it with them. How is it with us? We fight and scratch for physical food, but what’s our attitude towards spiritual food, toward Bible study? Do we fight and scratch for our spiritual food and insist that we’re going to get it this week like we do our physical food, and even more so? We need to ask ourselves, “Do I put the emphasis where Jesus did?”

I Corinthians 1.17

An ellipsis in Paul's writings, in I Cor. 1.11-17, is misused a lot in denominational circles. Understanding it will help us put the emphasis where it ought to be. After some Christians came to Paul and told him about all the divisions in the church at Corinth, he addressed that:

For it hath been signified unto me concerning you, my brethren, by them that are of the household of Chloe, that there are contentions among you. Now this I mean, that each one of you saith, I am of Paul; and I of Apollos: and I of Cephas; and I of Christ. Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? or were ye baptized into the name of Paul? I thank God that I baptized none of you, save Crispus and Gaius; lest any man should say that ye were baptized into my name. And I baptized also the household of Stephanas: besides, I know not whether I baptized any other. For Christ sent me *not* to baptize, *but* to preach the gospel: not in wisdom of words, lest the cross of Christ should be made void. [Emphasis mine—SGD]

Likely, we've heard these verses quoted by somebody who didn't believe that baptism is important. "That's the problem with you people," some of our friends say, "you put so much emphasis on baptism, and yet Paul evidently didn't think baptism was very important. He said, 'I thank God that I baptized none of you save a couple of you that I remember.' And then he said, 'Christ didn't even send me to baptize.'"

Look at the verses a little closer: "Christ sent me *not* to baptize, *but* to preach the gospel." That's an ellipsis. The *not* and *but* both modify the same verb "sent." Was that an absolute prohibition against baptism? If Christ didn't send him to baptize at all, then why did Paul baptize people? Luke said, in Acts 18, that Paul preached baptism to everybody while he was in Corinth, and he himself baptized several people. He even named them. If Christ didn't send him to baptize at all, then why did Paul do it? That's a legitimate question.

Certainly, that's not an absolute prohibition. The idea is that Christ did send Paul *not only* to baptize *but also* to preach the gospel, and the emphasis was on preaching the gospel. That sounds funny to us because we always emphasize baptism, don't we? Paul's whole point was that it didn't make any difference who did the baptizing.

The Corinthians were quarreling over the name of the preacher who baptized them. Paul said, “If that’s the game you’re going to play, I’m glad I didn’t baptize any more of you,” not because baptism wasn’t important, but “lest any of you should say you were baptized in my name. I’m glad there’s not more people calling themselves after Paul in the church at Corinth.”

As a matter of fact, in verse 13, Paul gave the strongest argument on the necessity of baptism in the entire Bible. He said, “Those of you who are calling yourselves after Paul, I want to ask two questions: Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized into the name of Paul?”

The obvious answer is, “If those two things are not true, then don’t call yourselves after Paul.” That’s a legitimate argument.

Martin Luther used the same argument. He begged people, “Don’t call yourself Lutherans.” He said, “Were you baptized into the name of Luther? If not, don’t call yourselves Lutheran.”

Turn that argument around. If you’re going to be called after somebody; for example, after Sam Dawson, first, Sam has to be crucified for you, and, second, you have to be baptized in the name of Sam, right? Nobody wants to claim that.

If we want to be called after Christ, which is what Paul was talking about here, and say, “I want to be a Christian,” two things have to happen. First, Christ has to be crucified for us. Second, we have to be baptized in the name of Christ, is that not true? Unless both of those things are true, we have no more business calling ourselves a Christian if we haven’t been baptized into Christ than we have of calling ourselves a Christian if Christ hasn’t been crucified for us. Both of those conditions have to be satisfied.

Paul taught, “Christ didn’t send me *just* to baptize, *but also* to preach and *mainly* to preach.

We ask, “Why did he put the emphasis on the preaching?” In Paul’s day, before everybody was running around with New Testaments in their pockets, not very many could preach. Who could baptize? Any Christian, at least. At a time like that, where should we put the emphasis? Not on the baptizer, but on the fellow who was preaching at that particular time. (For a discussion of baptism, please see Chapter 6, “Arguments Against Baptism Answered,” in the author’s book *Denominational Doctrines: Explained, Examined, Exposed.*)

I Corinthians 7.3

In I Corinthians 7, Paul discussed various aspects of marriage. He began by talking about a normal, happy marriage. In verse 3, he used an ellipsis to teach how husbands and wives should treat each other:

The wife hath *not* power over her own body, *but* the husband: and likewise also the husband hath *not* power over his own body, *but* the wife... [Emphasis mine—SGD]

Paul did not teach that the wife has absolute power over her husband's body. Nor did he teach that the husband has absolute power over his wife's body. Paul's use of an ellipsis means that both the husband and wife possess a certain power over their own sexual natures, but the spouse has even more power that they should respect. The power of the spouse over the other is not to demand lovemaking, but to recognize that the spouse depends on them for sexual satisfaction. When either person needs sexual relations, the other one has the responsibility of fulfilling the spouse's needs. This verse doesn't authorize demanding satisfaction from the other, but rather it commands the mate to satisfy the other who is so dependent on him or her so that the mate is not deprived. Recognizing where to place the emphasis helps husbands and wives avoid fornication.

I Corinthians 7.10-11

After discussing happy marriages, Paul addressed the unmarried and widows, in verses 8 and 9. Then, in verse 10, he talked to the unhappily married, and said:

But unto the married I give charge, yea *not* I, *but* the Lord, That the wife depart not from her husband (but should she depart, let her remain unmarried, or else be reconciled to her husband); and that the husband leave not his wife. [Emphasis mine—SGD]

Paul said, "I give charge [that's the common verb], yet *not* I, *but* the Lord." If we don't understand this figure of speech known as an ellipsis, we're going to take the *not I* statement as an absolute prohibition, that Paul didn't give charge on this subject. To the contrary, Paul said, "I'm not only going to give instructions, but the Lord also is."

What did Paul mean he wasn't going to do it? He just did. He just said, "I give charge," and then he gave charge. It wasn't just Paul who said it, but the Lord also said it, and the emphasis is on the fact that the Lord said it. Jesus said it in Mt. 5.32 and 19.9.

Both Paul and Jesus taught, "Don't depart from your husband, and if you do, don't marry anyone else." Jesus said, "If you do, it'll be adultery." Both of them taught it, not just Paul, but also Jesus. (For a discussion of I Corinthians 7 in the context of marriage, divorce, and remarriage, please see Chapter 6, "Divorce Under Christ: I Cor. 7.1-16," in the author's book *Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage: The Uniform Teaching of Moses, Jesus, and Paul.*)

I Corinthians 14.22

I Corinthians 14.22 contains a couple of ellipses where Paul contrasted the spiritual gifts of tongues and prophecy. Notice how he did this:

Wherefore tongues are for a sign, *not* to them that believe, *but* to the unbelieving: but prophesying is for a sign, *not* to the unbelieving, *but* to them that believe.
[Emphasis mine—SGD]

Let's work on understanding what Paul said about prophecy first, as there are many verses regarding it to help us interpret it. Prophecy, inspired speech in a language people understood, was *not* for unbelievers. Is that absolutely true? When Isaiah prophesied, was that *not* for unbelievers at all? When Jeremiah preached to the Jews, was that *not* for unbelievers at all? Was prophecy, inspired speech, *not* really for unbelievers?

The gift of prophecy was for both unbelievers and believers, but mainly for whom? Mainly for believers. Speaking in tongues was *not only* for believers, *but also* for unbelievers, and mainly for unbelievers, wasn't it? Both of them were for both unbelievers and believers. Tongues were *mainly* for unbelievers. Prophecy was *mainly* for believers. In verse 39, Paul concluded that the one who prophesies is greater than the one who speaks in tongues because he was speaking to believers. (For a fuller discussion of miraculous spiritual gifts, see Chapter 3, "Modern-Day Tongue Speaking, Is It from God?" in the author's book *Denominational Doctrines: Explained, Examined, Exposed.*)

Romans 6.14

In Rom. 6.14 is an ellipsis we hear abused many times. Paul said:

For sin shall not be master over you, for you are *not* under law, *but* under grace. [NAS] [Emphasis mine—SGD]

How many times has somebody quoted this verse to us and said, “You know, that’s the problem with you, you still think we’re under law, and we think we’re under grace.” They assume that back under the Law of Moses, those people were under law, but not grace, and we’re not under law, we’re under grace. Both of those extremes are wrong.

Under the Law of Moses, the Jews were under law, and they were certainly under grace, as well. We’re also under law as Paul said, in Gal. 6.2, “fulfill the law of Christ.” We’re also under grace.

When Paul said we’re *not* under law, *but* under grace, we’re *not only* under law, the law of Christ, *but also* under grace, and where’s the emphasis? Under Christ, the emphasis is on grace.

Did the Jews have access to grace under the Law of Moses? We begin reading in the Ten Commandments that God is gracious and pours out his loving-kindness and forgiveness. In Dt. 28.1-14, Moses said if they obeyed God, he would bless them. He talked about all the grace that God was going to pour out on the Jews if they were faithful to him. There was tremendous grace under the law.

The Jews were under grace back there, and they were also under law. We’re also under law, the law of Christ, and we’re also under grace. But where is the emphasis? Under the Law of Moses, it was on law. Under Christ, it’s on grace.

This passage is misused many times. Both the Jews were and we are under law and grace—it was a question of *emphasis* under the two covenants.

I Peter 1.10-12

I Peter 1.10-12 contains an ellipsis that should cause us to do some self-examination. Peter wrote about the salvation that we enjoy in Christ:

Concerning which salvation the prophets sought and searched diligently, who prophesied of the grace that

should come unto you: searching what time or what manner of time the Spirit of Christ which was in them did point unto, when it testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ, and the glories that should follow them. To whom it was revealed, that *not* unto themselves, *but* unto you, did they minister these things, which now have been announced unto you through them that preached the gospel unto you by the Holy Spirit sent forth from heaven; which things angels desire to look into. [Emphasis mine—SGD]

Peter said these Old Testament prophets prophesied *not* unto themselves, *but* unto you—unto us Christians. Let’s think about that. Those prophets did not prophesy unto themselves—is that literally true? Is that an absolute prohibition—they didn’t speak to themselves? What Isaiah preached didn’t apply to him? What Ezekiel preached didn’t apply to him and other Jews of his day? Is that the way Ezekiel understood it? Did he preach to the Jews in Babylonian captivity, “Now don’t you fellows listen to what I’m saying because this is for Christians way down yonder sometime”? Of course, not.

Most of Ezekiel’s preaching was for the Jews directly, as was most of Isaiah’s and Jeremiah’s teaching. Most of all those prophets’ teaching was directly applicable to the people in their day. It was *not only* for the people of their day, *but also* for the people of our day. And get this, it was mainly for whom? Mainly for Christians. The emphasis is on us.

That means that while Ezekiel (and Isaiah, Jeremiah and Hosea) preached for the people of their time, it was more for us than it was for them.

Question: Is that the way we think about those Old Testament prophets? Do we think they’re in the Bible more for Christians than for Jews? That’s not normally the way we think about that. “Oh no,” we say, “the Old Testament was nailed to the cross.” No, it’s more for us than it was for Jews. Is this an area where we’re not putting the emphasis in the right place, where the Lord would have us to?

II Corinthians 3.6

We want to look at II Cor. 3.6, which is often misused. It is also one that we might need to re-emphasize in our own thinking, as well. Paul spoke about a distinction between the Old Covenant and the New:

...who also made us sufficient as ministers of a new covenant; *not* of the letter, *but* of the spirit: for the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life. [Emphasis mine—SGD]

Notice, “*not* of the letter, *but* of the spirit.” How many times has somebody quoted this verse to us? We answer, “You know, we sing because we can read that in the Bible. We contribute on the first day of the week because we can read that in the Bible. Where is your authority for such and such?”

They say, “You people are going by the letter, and you ought to be going by the spirit. That’s just the problem with you people, always has been. You insist on having Bible for everything you do.”

Did Paul make that contrast? Did he say that under the Law of Moses, they went by the letter; now we go by the spirit? If that were an absolute prohibition, sure. But if we understand this figure of speech, what did he say? We *not only* go by the letter, *but also* by the spirit or attitude. We should ask, “Where’s the emphasis?” It’s on the attitude.

That doesn’t mean the letter is unimportant, it means the spirit is more important. Consider this. Under the Law of Moses, did they go by the letter? Yes, they did. God said, “Don’t add to it, don’t subtract from it, don’t mess with it.” You bet they did. Just like God told us in the New Covenant.

Did they go by the spirit under the Law of Moses? Did God give instructions about the attitude they needed to manifest when they obeyed him? In the New Testament, the Jews asked Jesus what was the greatest commandment of the Law, and he said, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.” It had everything to do with attitude. Where did Jesus’ answer come from? That was the teaching of the Law of Moses in Dt. 6.5—the passage Jesus quoted.

The Law of Moses said plenty about the Jews’ attitude. It had letter; it had spirit. Under Moses, the emphasis was evidently on the letter. Under Christ, we’ve got letter and spirit, and where’s the emphasis for us? It’s on our attitude as we obey God.

We ask, “Why the distinction?” Perhaps God did that with his kids just like we do with ours. When our kids are a year old we say, “Don’t touch that stove!”

He says, “Why?”

“It doesn’t matter why, just don’t do it!” As he gets older, we explain to him, “Because the heat of the stove energizes molecules, and they’re going to harm your body.” But a toddler doesn’t need to know

that. “Just obey me! Later on you can understand the why behind that.” The Lord did the same thing with his children. He emphasized the letter with the Jews, and he emphasized the attitude with us.

Is that where we put the emphasis? Does our preaching reflect both obedience of the letter and the spirit of loving God and wanting to do his will? Does our teaching emphasize our attitude more than the letter? If we preach the ABCs or like what little kids need all the time, we’re not putting the emphasis where the Lord said to put it. Putting the emphasis where God intended places some obligation on us as students and teachers of the word of God.

Hebrews 10:24-25 Is Not an Ellipsis

A familiar passage that has a *not* and a *but* in it, but isn’t an ellipsis is Heb. 10.24-25. Calling passages an ellipsis that aren’t can get us into as much trouble as failing to recognize an ellipsis. Notice the *not* and *but* construction:

...and let us consider one another to provoke unto love and good works; *not* forsaking our own assembling together, as the custom of some is, *but* exhorting one another; and so much the more, as ye see the day drawing nigh. [Emphasis mine—SGD]

What was the writer teaching? Is this a pattern of everything we’ve seen so far, that we *not only* ought to forsake our assembling together, *but also* exhort each other and place the emphasis on exhortation? Did he say that we ought to forsake assembling? No, because there’s not a common verb. *Not forsaking* is the first verb, and *but exhorting* is the other verb. Remember, the rule is that they must share a common verb; thus, this passage is not an ellipsis. We need to make sure the passage contains a common verb that is modified by the *not* and *but* clauses.

Conclusion

In the future, when we’re studying our Bible, we’ll notice, “That doesn’t add up,” and then we may look a little closer and say, “There’s one of those *not* and *but* constructions. Maybe it is an ellipsis.” We’ll look at it a little closer to see if the phrases share a common verb. If they do, we’ll know where to put the emphasis and can learn an important teaching that God has for us. If the *not* and *but* modify two different verbs, then we’ll know it is not an ellipsis.

Learning to recognize an ellipsis opens up many passages that may have given us problems in the past. Understanding this figure of speech also helps us spot many false teachings about these verses.

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