

## Putting the EM-pha-sis in the Right Place

On the way to the office, I was listening to the Blues Channel on the radio and noticed that the artist's name of a particular song was "Shemekiah" Copeland. I wondered if her name was pronounced "SHE-mek-iah" or "she-MEK-iah" or "she-me-KIAH." Having never heard the name spoken, and without looking her up online to know the proper syllable to emphasize/accent, I have no idea. But, these things got me to thinking...

We sometimes have the same problem in biblical interpretation. More specifically, correct interpretation of a verse, passage, or even a book often hinges on properly discerning the main point of emphasis. Until we determine this, correct exegesis of the verse (or passage or even the book) is difficult if not impossible to achieve. Furthermore, if we fail to ascertain the primary point of emphasis, we're also likely to either misinterpret corollary aspects of the verse altogether, or erroneously see them as "the main point" instead of their supportive or subsequent conclusionary roles. Simply put, just like putting the emphasis on the wrong syllable causes us to mispronounce a name or word, putting the emphasis in the wrong place within a verse, passage, or book causes us to misinterpret its primary point. Perhaps a couple of examples will help in these regards.

Hebrews 9:27, "*And inasmuch as it is appointed for men to die once, and after this comes the judgment;*" is often read at funerals and used in sermons to emphasize the inevitability of **our death** and subsequent *judgment*. While those points are surely valid- as other passages confirm, neither of them is actually the point of emphasis in the context (the fact v.27 isn't even the complete sentence should have been a clue). The passage- go back and read Hebrews 9:23-28, is actually emphasizing the efficacy of **Christ's** death: as a *better sacrifice* than those given under the Law of Moses, v.23; as allowing His entrance into heaven and *advocacy* for us before God, v.24; as regarding its ability to *once for all time "put away sin," vv.25-26*; and, to enable the provision of *eternal salvation* to those "*who eagerly await Him*" at the resurrection of *life*, v.28. Thus, v.27 is given, not to make the point that **we** all must *die* and then be *judged*, but to demonstrate that, as *a man*, Christ *died* that we might *live* after death! Focusing on and putting the emphasis on v.27 (as the main point) surely abets our missing the overall message and importance of the passage.

Matthew 18:20, "*For where two or three have gathered together in My name, there I am in their midst.*" We usually hear this verse in connection with, and perhaps in defense of, only a small number of people in attendance for worship. But is this really *where* Jesus was putting the emphasis? Note in the context (Matthew 15:15-19) that a *sinning brother* is to be: *reproved in private* for the purpose of *winning* him back to the Lord, v.15; but if he will not *listen*, then additional *witnesses* are to be taken to *confirm the fact* that he needs to repent and return, v.16; if he *still refuses*, then the matter is to be *taken to the church*, v.17a; and finally, if he *refuses to listen to the church*, then he is to be regarded as "*a Gentile*" (*unclean*) and "*a tax-gatherer*" (*traitor*), v.17b. Next, in vv.18-19, the *disciples* (cf.v1, who would later become the *apostles*) were *assured* that their *inspired decisions* in these matters would be *heaven-sent* and thus *heaven-approved* (cf. Matthew 10:20). So why would Jesus switch gears to address how few it takes to make a quorum of saints assembled to worship for Him to be in their presence in v.20? He didn't, obviously. The *gathering together* in this context is not "saints assembling for worship," but the *disciples* "coming together in agreement," based on divine inspiration, in a matter of church discipline. But by ignoring the context, and emphasizing a single verse out of it, we get the wrong idea completely.

It is practically impossible to correctly pronounce a multi-syllable word or name without knowing which syllable is to be emphasized/accented. And, it is just as difficult to correctly interpret and apply a verse or passage without first understanding the primary point of emphasis being made. To gain this information, we must examine any word, phrase, verse, passage, and chapter within

its *specific* and *general context*. Such may require additional research regarding the *writer*, his *primary audience* (to whom he is specifically writing), and *for what overall purpose* he is writing. All of which DOES NOT MEAN that the Bible is impossible to correctly interpret and apply. But it DOES MEAN that we must give due diligence to these matters in order to put the emphasis in the proper place, and thereby correctly interpret and apply the Word of God. Therefore, *“Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, handling accurately the word of truth,” 2Timothy 2:15.* (Philip C. Strong; Southport Church of Christ; 7202 Madison Ave, Indianapolis, IN 46227; online at [southportcofc.org](http://southportcofc.org); email to [mrpcstrong@hotmail.com](mailto:mrpcstrong@hotmail.com))