

LIMITS OF CULTURAL INTERPRETATION

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The task of bridging the gap between the distant world of the Biblical writers and the contemporary world is not new. It has always been important for any who would understand the meaning of the Bible to study the context in which a passage was written. With the exception of many who seek a mystical meaning other than the natural meaning of the text, all interpreters seek a clear understanding of the Bible by studying the context of the author. Not only the historic or physical setting but study into the cultural and the religious context of the author and that of those whom he addressed has always been of great importance in understanding the author's meaning.

Again, the purpose of all authentic interpreters of Scripture has been to apply the meaning to the present situation. In order to do this effectively it has been necessary to understand the context of the contemporary reader or hearer. For the one who seeks to communicate Biblical truth to people in a culture other than his own, a study of the cultural context of the recipient is of utmost importance.

The study of culture is in this way very important to both interpreting and applying Scripture. But since there is a variety of approaches to the use of culture, the end result varies greatly from interpreter to interpreter. Are there guidelines for the use of cultural "tools"? Before addressing this question, let me begin with some definitions of terms as I will be using them.

"Culture" may be defined as follows:

An integrated system of learned behavior patterns that are characteristic of the members of any given society. Culture refers to the total way of life of particular groups of people. It includes everything that a group of people thinks, says, does, and makes—its customs, language, material artifacts and shared systems of attitudes and feelings. Culture is learned and transmitted from generation to generation. By this definition, we can see that a particular culture would consist of at least the following: Manners, customs, beliefs, ceremonies, rituals, laws (written and unwritten), ideas and thought patterns, language, arts and artifacts, tools, social institutions, religious beliefs, myths and legends, knowledge, values, concept of self, morals, ideals and accepted ways of behaving. In short, culture is the total way of life of any group of people.¹

It is apparent that this broad definition of culture includes the language used to express meaning. Therefore some knowledge of the other elements of a culture is necessary to understand the meaning of the words themselves. It is impossible to interpret the meaning of words, then, apart from the cultural context in which they are spoken. Determining the meaning intended by another person is not always easy, and least of all when the original was given in another language and cultural setting. But it is possible. Meaning can be communicated across lan-

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¹Kohls, *Survival Kit for Overseas Living* (Chicago: Systran, n. d.) 17-18.

guage and cultural barriers, and this is the task of interpretation.

In general, the task of the interpreter is to identify as certainly as possible the meaning intended by the original writer of any Bible passage. Cultural tools are essential in this activity, but other common-sense principles for understanding human language are also needed. For example, the ordinary, plain sense of the text is to be preferred except in cases where the plain meaning contradicts other clearer, stronger or more enduring teachings of Scripture. By "plain meaning" I refer to the natural, clearest, most evident meaning of the text. Once the meaning intended by the original author is identified, the task of application to the contemporary context begins. Again, there are common-sense principles of human language communication that must be observed.

By "authority" I mean the person or principle that has the final say in determining any judgment. In the case of Scripture I hold that since all of it is "God-breathed" it has, in the form in which it was given, the final say for what we must believe and how we must behave. This includes how we are to treat the Bible itself. It must set the parameters of interpretation and application. If some external source—whether an extra-Biblical principle or a person—sets aside the teaching of Scripture, that source has become the authority superior to the Bible itself.

"Contextualize" is a term with broad meaning. In practice, contextualizers range all the way from those who study the historic and cultural context as an aid to clarifying the meaning of the text to those who interpret and/or apply Scripture wholly on the basis of human understanding of "context." The term "contextualize" therefore is ambiguous. In this paper I will use it to refer to the activity of those who tend to combine the traditionally distinct functions of interpretation and application. The currently dominant approach of linguists, dynamic equivalence translation, has been taken as a model for interpretation. Dynamic equivalence interpretation attempts to move directly from the ancient cultural context of the writer/recipient to the contemporary cultural context. The interpreter uses cultural "tools" to "lay back" the words of the text in order to get at the enduring transcultural principle that gave rise to the original words in the first place. This principle is then applied to a current situation directly, bypassing the meaning of the text itself if the text does not seem to the interpreter to adequately express the enduring principle. The element in the ancient culture to which the Biblical author spoke is identified so that a parallel or equivalent element in a contemporary culture may be identified and the two related dynamically or directly without bondage to the literal meaning of the text. This is one form of "contextualization," the words of Scripture serving primarily as part of a bridge to get at the original context in order that God's will for the people in that context might serve as a paradigm or model for discerning his will for contemporary man. The task of the interpreter becomes one of improvising or constructing a model of God's will viable for some contemporary context.

Given this range of approach to Scripture, how does one distinguish legitimate and illegitimate cultural interpretation and application? The answer to this question comes directly from one's doctrine of Scripture. Did God inspire the words of Scripture or merely the general ideas? Does inspiration extend to all of Scripture or only to enduring religious principles? If a person does not believe that the effectual work of the Holy Spirit in inspiring Biblical authors extends to the words themselves, it is quite natural to disallow the words in favor of a more acceptable principle found to lie behind the words. If it is assumed, however, that

the Holy Spirit was instrumental in guarding the actual words of the Biblical author from error, then the authority of Scripture extends to the way the truth of God is stated.

My presupposition is the verbal inspiration and full authority of Scripture as written. It is true that the Bible is God's Word in man's words. But those words themselves were inspired. The original author may not have been aware of the implication of his own historic and cultural bonds, but the Holy Spirit certainly was. His object was revelation, not an attempt to hide truth or to confuse the seeker of truth. He obviously felt that to reveal his truth in the living context of a specific language and culture was more effective communication than to dictate a series of theological propositions in a celestial language. But did he intend the communication, therefore, to be so conditioned by the specific historical and cultural setting that truth would be forever relative to each culture? Does a true understanding await the cultural (ethnolinguistic) specialist of the twentieth century? Or do the Biblical words themselves give the meaning God intended? So far as Scripture understands itself, God inspired the author to write infallible truths in words that convey meaning.

What limits does a commitment to verbal inspiration and the full authority of Scripture as written place on the interpreter when considering cultural factors? Cultural understanding may illuminate the text, but it must not be allowed to contradict or set aside the plain statement of Scripture. Otherwise our authority is no longer the Bible but our current understanding of ancient culture. R. C. Sproul puts the problem in contemporary terms:

Historically the United States of America has a special agency which theoretically functions as the supreme board of hermeneutics for our land. That agency is called the Supreme Court. One of its primary tasks is to interpret the Constitution of the United States. The Constitution is a written document and requires such interpretation. Originally the procedure of interpreting the Constitution followed the so-called grammatical-historical method. That is, the Constitution was interpreted by studying the words of the document itself in light of what those words meant when they were used at the time of the formulation of the document.

Since the work of Oliver Wendell Holmes, the method of constitutional interpretation has changed radically. The current crisis in law and public confidence in the nation's highest court is directly related to the underlying problem of method of interpretation. When the Court interprets the Constitution in light of modern attitudes, it in effect changes the Constitution by means of reinterpretation. The net result is that in a subtle way the Court becomes a legislative rather than interpretive agency.

The same kind of crisis has occurred with biblical interpretation. When biblical scholars utilize the method of interpretation that involves "bringing the Bible up-to-date" by reinterpretation, the original meaning of Scripture is obscured and the message is brought into conformity with contemporary trends and opinions.²

Research into the ancient cultural context may legitimately clarify the meaning of obscure words and expressions and serve as a model for application. But since the text itself is God-given, contemporary understanding of the ancient cultural context may not be used to change the meaning of plain words and expressions or to determine application for today independently of the text. For example, the entire sacrificial system is obscure to the contemporary westerner. What

²R. C. Sproul, *Knowing Scripture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1977) 45-46.

does Paul actually want us to do when he tells us to sacrifice our bodies? We are to fear God, an injunction that is particularly abhorrent to the contemporary mood. What does it mean to "fear" God? Both of these questions are greatly illuminated through a study of the ancient cultural context. Again, research into the context of Paul's teaching concerning offering meat to idols may serve as a model for applying the teaching to matters of controversy that do not revolve around bargain-basement, "second-hand" meat. The way Paul handled that problem models how we should handle other problems, and cultural background material helps us understand more clearly how he handled the original problem.

It will not do, however, to so emphasize the elements of love and loyalty in the Biblical concept of "fear" as to empty it of the strong element of holy awe. It will not do to interpret "sacrifice" in such a way as to weaken the absolute demands of Christian living or to mute the vicarious nature of the atonement. It is quite legitimate to examine the cultural context of Paul's teaching concerning the qualifications for elders in order to extend the application of the teaching beyond the specifics listed in the letters to Timothy and Titus. But it is not legitimate to use such cultural understanding to reverse the meaning of the plain text, so that in certain tribes of Africa where the ability to afford a second wife is the sign of maturity Paul is made to require polygamy for eldership rather than forbidding it.

There are a number of injunctions in Scripture which present problems for many contemporary Christians: Women must keep silent in the church; wash one another's feet; greet one another with a holy kiss; women must wear a head covering; wives are to be in subjection to their husbands; children are to obey their parents; do not be divorced; do not lust; do not take interest on money that is loaned. And there are many others. In each of these, cultural understanding of the context of the original author and recipient may well clarify the meaning. But if it is used to set aside that meaning, the interpreter has assumed greater authority in determining truth than he has permitted the Bible itself.

When we turn to the contemporary context a similar principle emerges. Contemporary cultural forms may legitimately lead to a reexamination of a traditional interpretation or propose agenda of questions for Scripture. Contemporary culture may even demand application of Biblical principles.

Traditional interpretations of the legitimacy of slavery or of the treatment of women have been rightly put to cross-examination. Cultural upheavals often raise questions concerning traditional interpretation, and the interpreter should indeed reexamine his traditions with a fresh look at Scripture to determine if these traditions are actually taught in Scripture. Contemporary society has proposed whole new agenda for Scripture. For example, the ethics of abortion, genetic engineering and organ transplants are not dealt with directly in Scripture, but contemporary culture demands an application of Biblical principles.

Since the text itself is God-given, however, contemporary cultural forms may not be used to change the meaning of plain words and expressions or relativize the plain teaching of Scripture by replacing direct statements with general principles. For example, all would grant that it is legitimate to apply to presidents and prime ministers the command that Christians should pray for "kings." But should the application to a contemporary society be made in such a way as to disallow prayer for a king because he was not democratic, for example, the plain intent of Scripture would be set aside and the interpreter would have usurped the place of independent authority.

I have considered the question of interpretation and application separately, but when it comes to cultural contextualization the two tend to merge. In fact, dynamic equivalence interpretation attempts to move directly from the ancient cultural context of the writer/recipient to the contemporary cultural context. Biblical teaching is wrapped in a cultural form under which lies a principle that God intends Christians in all cultures and all ages to follow. On this basis the task of the interpreter is to separate the cultural form from the principle in order to determine the word of God for today. The principle is put in the contemporary cultural form so that today's audience may respond in the same way the author intended the original audience to respond. The test of successful interpretation is not the accuracy with which the verbal meaning of the author is determined but rather the extent to which a contemporary response is evoked that parallels as closely as possible the response desired by the original author. The issue at stake for understanding the process of interpretation and the role of cultural understanding in it is this: Does the Bible as we have it stand above culture, or is it subject to our understanding of ancient culture?

The work of carefully examining the cultural context in which Scripture was written is important to understand the meaning intended by the original author. Understanding the contemporary cultural context in which one communicates the message of Scripture is essential to make application of the Word of God. But these efforts at contextualization must not become the authority for establishing the meaning of Scripture independently of the meaning of the text itself. The key question is this: "How can the helpful and legitimate tool of assessing the cultural context be used for understanding Scripture without violating its authority?" Certainly there are historical elements that do not apply to the contemporary context. Are there transitory cultural elements as well? If so, on what basis does one distinguish between the authoritative and enduring message of the original author and the temporary historical or cultural context? Several approaches have been suggested.

1. Charles H. Kraft³ argues that a culturally universal abstraction—that is, a principle—may be applied universally with the authority of God's certain will but that a culturally limited particular teaching may not be so applied. The problem, of course, is to determine which Bible teaching is a culturally universal abstraction and which is a culturally limited particular. Kraft would hold that the command against stealing is a culturally universal abstraction because all cultures recognize this ethic in one way or another. On the other hand, commands concerning the role relationship between husband and wife are culturally limited particulars since not all cultures view this in the same way. Therefore Biblical teaching of male dominance may not be applied with authority as God's certain will. On this premise, note the following teachings and consider which is a culturally universal abstraction and which a culturally limited particular:

Greet one another with a holy kiss	Everything must be done in order
Wash one another's feet	Do not forbid to speak in tongues
Women must wear coverings on their heads	Do not speak in tongues unless it is interpreted

³C. H. Kraft, "Interpreting in Cultural Context," *JETS* 21/4 (1978) 357-367.

Women must keep silent in the church	Do not be divorced
Be subject to your husband	Do not lust
Children must obey their parents	Homosexual behavior is sinful
Be subject to civil authority	Do not take interest
Obey God	Do not take property
An elder must be of good reputation	Pay taxes
An elder must be apt to teach	
An elder must have children that believe	

The problem of distinguishing between that which is universal—of enduring authority—and that which is not is the question of authority. If culture determines—that is, if only those items that are found universally in all cultures are accepted as God’s universal will—then culture is the authority, not Scripture.

A second problem with this position is the question: “Where did it come from?” Where does the Bible affirm that generalities are authoritative and specifics are not? Where does the Bible give the interpreter the right to set aside some teaching of Scripture which cannot be found in all cultures at all times? The greatest weakness of this approach is that it does not accept the actual text of Scripture, the words of Scripture, as always true and authoritative.

2. Gordon Fee suggests the following guidelines:

(1) To determine what is culturally conditioned, one may begin by asking whether the matter is inherently moral or non-moral, theological or non-theological. Although some may differ with my judgment here, it would appear that eating food offered to idols, women wearing a head covering when praying or prophesying, women teaching in the church, and Paul’s preference for celibacy are examples of issues not inherently moral; they may become so only by their use or abuse in a given context.

(2) One should further ask whether something would truly be an issue for the 20th century if one had never encountered the issue in these first-century documents. Hence, the head covering of women or the length of men’s hair would not seem to be issues were they not raised in I Corinthians. . . .

(3) One must remain alert to possible cultural differences that sometimes are not immediately obvious. For example, to determine the role of women in the 20th century church, one should take into account that there were no educational opportunities for women in the first century, whereas such education is the expected norm in our society.⁴

These guidelines are reasonable. They make distinctions, however, that are no-

⁴G. Fee, “The Genre of New Testament Literature,” *Interpreting the Word of God* (ed. S. Schultz and M. Inch; Chicago: Moody, 1976) 113.

where made in Scripture and that are not authorized by Scripture. Therefore they are criteria imposed on the Bible and *may* be used to set aside the plain intent of the author. Using these guidelines, one can rid himself of the responsibility to obey virtually any undesirable teaching.

For example, is the creation story moral or nonmoral? Is the obedience of children to their parents a theological issue? Would homosexuality be an issue in the twenty-first century if one had never encountered the issue in these first-century documents? In other words, the problem with these guidelines is the basic question of Biblical authority. The person who evaluates a passage as to its enduring moral and theological significance becomes the authority.

The problem is a real one. The solution is not easy. But the abiding principle that puts strict limitations on cultural understanding is the authority of the Bible itself. Scripture itself must determine whether the general principle lying behind a specific command may or may not be divorced from that command.

The two approaches used above by way of example have one thing in common. Both offer criteria to enable an interpreter to distinguish between the teaching in Scripture that is authoritative—the certain will of God among all people at all times—and that which is limited to the context of the culture in which it was originally given and, therefore, not necessarily normative among other people at other times. But what is culture? “Culture” is a sociological abstraction describing the way a particular group of people lives, relates, behaves. Thus it might be said that “culture” is what the Bible is all about. The Bible was given to reveal how God wants people to live, relate, behave. So to mold the teaching of Scripture by contemporary human behavior is exactly the opposite of what is intended by revelation. The Bible was intended to create a culture, not to be molded by it.

Of course, revelation was given in the context of particular cultures. And God was not by this process of “contextualized revelation” validating everything in that culture. For example, when Christ used the behavior of a slaveholder in relating to a slave he was not giving instruction on God’s will for human relationships. Therefore the desire to distinguish between the cultural “package” of Biblical truth and the content is a legitimate one. Nevertheless, when the Bible clearly gives a command and nowhere else nullifies that command, it must be accepted as the revealed will of God and a mandate to mold our personal and group behavior (our “culture”) in the form of this instruction.

But there are so many things that we do not find compatible with our own way of relating and doing things. How do we handle that? Even our critics recognize that we are engaged in rethinking our hermeneutics:

There is evidence of a wide-ranging rethinking of hermeneutics among evangelicals (see recent writings by Clark Pinnock, Daniel Fuller and Charles Kraft), but in much of the social action literature we may be surprised to find a survival of the unsophisticated fundamentalist approach to the Bible The main strategy was an appeal to the Bible that I call “hermeneutical ventriloquism.”

The young evangelical approaches the problem like this: “Feminism (for example) is true; the Bible teaches the truth; therefore the Bible *must* teach feminism.”

Now it is far from obvious that the Bible explicitly *teaches* feminism, yet the young evangelical will feel that he or she has no right to be a feminist unless “the Bible tells me so.” Thus the primary task of the reform-minded evangelical is to make the Bible teach feminism in the most plausible way.

I think it is rather revealing in this regard to examine the intrafeminist dialogue

in young evangelical publications. There we find at least two competing approaches. Sharon Gallagher, Aida Spencer, Letha Scanzoni and others maintain that *rightly understood*, the plain sense of the text has always been feminist in nature. For instance, I Timothy 2:12, read in the light of Assyrian, rabbinic or Hellenistic texts seems suddenly to mean that women should not teach only if they happen to be heretics, orgiasts, etc. Or the "headship" of Christ over the church, and of husband over wife in Ephesians 5:23 *really* connotes "source," not "authority," despite the context which would seem to suggest that "source" implies "authority" (e.g., Ephesians 1:22).

Other writers—e. g., Virginia Mollenkott and Paul Jewett—admit that various biblical texts *do* inculcate male domination but that such "problem texts" (problematic only to feminists, note) should be ignored in favor of the implicit thrust of other, egalitarian texts such as Galatians 3:28. The agreed-upon goal is that the Bible is to support feminism. The debate is over the best way to arrive at this predetermined goal exegetically! The Bible *must* support the desired social position; otherwise how can the young evangelical believe it, much less persuade fellow evangelicals?

So far I have proposed that many activist evangelicals have really come to hold their social views on the basis of cultural osmosis or legitimate political argumentation. But they need to believe that "biblical mandates" are the reason for their conviction. The real reason has been hidden, even from themselves.⁵

This has been my personal dilemma. I enjoy living in a group of human beings whose affluent economy is based on loaning and borrowing money at interest, in a place where I wash my own feet before bed rather than having someone else wash my feet before meals, where my wife wears short and stylish hair without a head covering, where women talk and pray in church. I have always been told that Biblical teaching of another kind of human behavior was for the people of Biblical days. But suddenly I find myself confronted with a new brand of interpreter who assures me, for the same reasons, that divorce is to be preferred to a "dead" marriage, that homosexual conduct is fine so long as it is faithful, that pornographic literature is excellent therapy for a sexually weak marriage, that premarital and extramarital sex is the best way to love under some circumstances, that husband/wife roles should be interchangeable. Suddenly I am made aware that every teaching of Scripture is "cultural" and that the idea of expecting obedience only to the principle that can be discerned behind any specific command of Scripture has made possible the rejection of any teaching at all that is not deemed appropriate by any group of people. I have found myself increasingly willing to wash my brother's feet before the Lord's supper, insist that my wife let her hair grow long and cover it in church, stop putting money in the bank to earn interest or borrowing it for the purchase of an automobile, or any other alternative to giving up my Bible. I am not sure this is necessary, but I have found myself facing seriously this alternative. I am convinced that God intended the Bible to mold our culture, not to have the meaning of Scripture molded by our culture.

It seems to me that the focal point of the difficulty lies in direct Biblical teaching and explicit commandments that, for one reason or other, we find objectionable. What can be done about these "problem" passages? I suggest that there are five questions to ask. They are designed to safeguard the authority of the text itself and, ultimately, the independent authority of Scripture. I will not attempt

⁵*The Christian Century* (November 28, 1979) 1184.

to treat the subject exhaustively but give brief illustrations of possible ways of handling the portions of Scripture that seem to present cultural problems for some contemporary societies.

1. *What does the passage mean?* This is the hermeneutical question. The first task is to “interpret”—that is, to determine with certainty the meaning of the original author. For example, what does “usury” mean? Does it refer to any kind of lending money for interest? If so, the Christian and the Christian community has no alternative but to conform his/its “culture” or personal behavior to the teaching of Scripture. But first of all it is quite legitimate to make certain that this is the meaning. For this kind of interpretation, cultural understanding is useful to illuminate the text but may not contradict or set aside the plain statements of Scripture.

On the other hand, what of the task of applying Scripture? In making application to a contemporary setting, it is not only helpful but also necessary to examine the general principle that lies behind any specific instruction in order to secure obedience to the will of God as revealed in the authoritative Word of God. For example, should a word study on the Biblical term “usury” reveal that the Bible actually is merely forbidding an exorbitant rate of interest, the principle of just dealing in business, which lies behind the teaching, must be applied to all areas of business and not simply to the taking or receiving of oppressive rates of interest. For example, the principle would forbid an inordinate profit margin in a sales operation, whether or not “interest” were involved.

“Wives, be subject to your husbands” is clear enough. It will not do to say that this is a culturally conditioned statement and therefore no longer applicable. To do so would mean that the next command—“Children, obey your parents”—should also be relativized and that the prior command—“Obey God”—could suffer the same fate. Paul’s meaning to any objective observer seems evident. It cannot be changed through interpretation so long as the interpreter recognizes the independent authority of God’s Word. When it comes to application, however, the way in which the Biblical teaching concerning the husband’s role as head of the home should be applied will certainly differ from culture to culture. For example, a much more democratic atmosphere will prevail in the American home than in the Japanese home, while both may be obedient to the clear teaching of Scripture concerning the roles of the husband and wife.

Notice that the first question has to do with interpretation: What does the text mean, what concept was the author communicating? To preserve the independent authority of the Bible I feel it is necessary to clearly distinguish the two activities of interpretation and application. And interpretation must be the ground for application, not the other way around. To leap dynamically from a perceived cultural pattern underlying the text to some contemporary equivalent undercuts the authority of the inspired words of Scripture. Understanding context helps both in interpretation and in application, but the two activities are distinct.

2. *To whom is this teaching addressed?* Not all teaching in the Bible is addressed to all people of all time, not even to all believers of all time. The most highly visible example is the Old Testament. Not all of its requirements are for the New Testament believer. But the criteria for deciding this must be Scripture itself, or the source of extra-Biblical criteria becomes the authority superior to the Bible. Only that which the New Testament sets aside as normative for Chris-

tian behavior may be set aside by the believer today.

There are other ways in which the recipient of a particular teaching is restricted. "Put away your sword" was addressed to Peter. Was it for others as well? Perhaps so, but Scripture itself must decide. If magistrates are commended for sword-carrying (Romans 13), and in fact Christ and his armies are to become the supreme "sword-carriers," the command is obviously not for all people of all time or even for all followers of Christ of all time.

The key point is that the Bible itself must designate the recipient of its teaching, not externally imposed criteria. To whom is the great commission addressed? The Biblical data must decide.

3. *What reason does Scripture give for the teaching?* Usually the commands of Scripture do not come with a reasoned argument in support of their validity. They are simply presented as God's will. For the Christian, the only legitimate response is obedience and faith. Occasionally, however, a reason is given. If Scripture itself does not treat the reason as normative, the command itself may not be normative. Once again, the Scriptures themselves must define the limits of their intent. For example, in the well-known passage concerning women and head covering (1 Corinthians 11) both theological and cultural arguments are used. If the primary argumentation is cultural—how people behave naturally, not because of any Biblical mandate—then the Scripture *itself* is identifying the teaching as culturally based, and it may be evaluated in that light.

4. *Are there conflicts in teaching?* When two teachings of Scripture seem to be in conflict, commitment to the inspiration of *all* Scripture means that the interpreter must seek to resolve the conflict. An understanding of the cultural context may help at this point. Furthermore, apparent conflicts may be resolved through comparing Scripture with Scripture, the use of the "analogy of faith." The basic idea of solving problems of related Scriptural passages is to identify all passages of Scripture that deal with a particular subject and give greater weight to that which appears (1) more often, (2) with greater clarity, and (3) with the authority of Christ and the apostles. For example, the fact that women are forbidden to speak in church in several passages must somehow be brought into harmony with an equal if not greater number of passages that speak approvingly of women speaking in the church.

5. *Does Scripture treat the context as normative?* The Bible nowhere treats human behavior as normative. What a person did may or may not be normative. If the Bible itself commends or condemns a particular behavior, we know God's will on the subject. If it does not, we cannot be sure. Neither what someone has done (history) nor how a group of people customarily behaved (culture) is validated by inclusion in the inspired record. Therefore if the historic event or cultural pattern is not made normative by Scripture it does not have authority as the will of God for all people of all time. The key question is this: Does Scripture command obedience to the form itself, or is the command merely given in the context of an historical or cultural form? Note that the answer to this question may not legitimately come from outside the teaching of Scripture. Scripture itself must determine whether the context as well as the command is normative.

For example, the command to treat slaves well does not mean that a person must own slaves. If the historical form does not exist, there is no Bible mandate for us to recreate that in order to obey the Scriptural injunction. When a second wife is taken, both must be treated fairly. But there is no mandate to have a sec-

ond wife. You do not have to get married, but if you do, be subject to your husband and do not leave him. The specific condition or context of the command is not made normative either in the text or in other passages of Scripture.

On the other hand, the historical event of the passover was mandated as a ritual ceremony to be repeated. The same is true of the Lord's supper. But the command to pray for the king does not mean that we must have one to obey the command. The command was to pray, not to set up a particular form of government. The principles may apply to the cultural as well as to the historical context: The commanded form and the command in the context of a form are both authoritative, but the context itself is authoritative only if Scripture so affirms.

Although the same principle may apply to the cultural context as well as to the historical context, notice that I have favored examples of historical context over cultural context. I do this because the principle is much more subject to abuse in the case of cultural contexts. The reason is this: Culture has to do with the way a people behave; history has to do with how people behaved. Since the Bible does not indicate that all past behavior must be repeated, it is quite legitimate to distinguish between the commanded behavior and the historical context in which the command was given—and the distinction is easily made. Where the historical context does not exist the command may not be the norm, although the principle behind the command is enduring and applicable. On the other hand, "cultural context" is simply a contemporary sociological expression designating how a people lived, related, behaved. Therefore if a particular way of living, relating or behaving is commanded in Scripture, it is normative for all people in all times—that is, for all cultures. It is normative, that is, if Scripture itself does not restrict it in one of the ways indicated earlier.

In the nature of the case, then, it is much more difficult to identify any non-authoritative cultural context. Scripture was given to change and mold culture. In this sense most of the New Testament is cultural. It is also normative and authoritative. If the Bible itself does not make a distinction between temporary cultural context and permanent cultural teaching in any given passage—and I know of very few passages in which it does—the interpreter must not usurp the authority of Scripture by setting aside any teaching as culturally limited to the context of the author and his original audience. The principle is the same: The Bible itself must be its own authority. And that includes setting limits on cultural interpretation.

The distinction between history and culture is not absolute and clean-cut. Culture becomes history and history contains culture. They overlap, but they are not coextensive. The distinction is helpful if not crucial in setting limits for cultural interpretation because historical events, whether or not repetitive, are easily identified—and nowhere as a class are they treated as normative. On the other hand patterns of human behavior are by definition the substance of divine revelation, and hence the normative and nonnormative cannot be distinguished apart from revelation whenever that behavior is commanded or taught as normative.

I have given these brief illustrations to indicate possible ways of handling the culturally problematic portions of Scripture. My endeavor has not been to exhaustively treat the subject but rather to suggest possible approaches that would safeguard the authority of the text itself and, ultimately, the independent authority of Scripture.

To discern the principle behind a culturally conditioned teaching of Scripture

is quite legitimate and necessary in applying the Scriptures for present-day faith and obedience. This does not violate the Scriptural authority but implements it. On the other hand, to use this approach in interpretation so that the plain meaning of Scripture is set aside replaces the authoritative text with contemporary cultural understanding. This not only violates Scripture; it also becomes a tool that can manipulate Bible teaching into virtually any form desired by the interpreter. The grammatico-historical method of interpretation, which takes the words and text of Scripture seriously, is thus displaced by some cultural, ethno-linguistic or dynamic equivalence principle that is, in the final analysis, relativistic.

In a day when sociological concepts (which by definition are relative, not normative) are increasingly used to allow applications foreign to the plain intent of the Biblical text, strict limits must be put on the activities of cultural interpretation lest the interpreter become the authority and not the independent text of Scripture itself. My prayer is that the seed thoughts presented here may bring a harvest of greater fidelity to the will of God.