

## INTERPRETING IN CULTURAL CONTEXT

Charles H. Kraft\*

At the start of this paper I would like to briefly introduce myself. First of all I am an evangelical Christian, committed to God through Jesus Christ as revealed in the written Word. I have been trained in an evangelical college and seminary and now, as a professor in an evangelical seminary, I endeavor to maintain in all that I do a commitment to the authority of the Scriptures as interpreted from an evangelical perspective. I am, furthermore, a missionary and trainer of missionaries. I am thus committed to the communication of the revealed message of God to the ends of the earth. Additionally I am an anthropologist, linguist and communicologist. From these disciplinary involvements I am committed to studying and analyzing the Word and the communication of God's message from a Christ-centered, cross-cultural perspective.

An evangelical anthropologist should have something to say about culture and the Bible, and I feel that my evangelical commitment to the inspired Word of God and my attempts to integrate that commitment with my academic disciplines enable me to at least take a stab at certain of the cultural issues that affect our attempts to interpret the Bible. Many, however, consider the disciplines that I represent to be basically antagonistic to an evangelical commitment. I do not find them so. Indeed, I feel that my involvement in cultural, linguistic and communicational studies has deepened and strengthened my commitment to God's inspired Word. I find that these perspectives continually illumine for me the Scriptural message for which I have given my life. For the Bible is a cross-cultural book, and to interpret it properly we need the sharpest tools available to enable us to deal reverently—and yet precisely—with the inspired message that comes to us in cultural forms that are not our own.

The matter of interpretation in culture is a weighty concern. For the Word has come to us via the forms of Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek cultures. We are immersed in a culture far different from any of these. We cannot, therefore, always trust our culturally-conditioned reflexes to give us the proper interpretation of Scripture. We trust the Holy Spirit to keep us from going too far astray in our interpretations. Yet we are often puzzled that God's Spirit does not lead us all to the same answer concerning every issue.

In this paper I have selected four areas where insight into the influences of culture can assist us in our understanding of how the Scriptures are to be interpreted. Underlying my discussion is an assumption that I have examined in another place.<sup>1</sup> This assumption is that God communicates via culture and language in essentially the same way that human beings do. If this is true, the insights into culture and language provided by my disciplines are going to be very helpful with respect to our understanding of what it means to interpret the Bible in context.

Evangelical Biblical theologians have for some time focused on the need to in-

\*Charles Kraft is professor of missions at Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, California.

<sup>1</sup>C. H. Kraft, *Theologizing in Culture* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1978).

terpret the Bible in context. The context that has been largely in view has been that of the whole Bible. "The Bible is its own best interpreter" is a statement that is often made to emphasize the importance of this context. Without denying the necessity to focus strongly on the whole Bible as context, evangelical Biblical theologians have also been coming to recognize more and more the importance of the individual cultural context in which each portion of the Bible has been written. Largely through the input of the grammatico-historical method, evangelical scholars have begun to pay more and more attention to the interrelationships between the ways in which things are stated in Scripture and the ways in which things were stated in the wider cultural context in which the people and events recorded in Scripture participated. When it comes to the analysis of such cultural contexts, however, it is likely that contemporary disciplines such as anthropology and linguistics, dedicated as they are to a primary focus on these issues, may be able to provide us with sharper tools for analysis than the disciplines of history and philology have provided.<sup>2</sup> On this assumption, I am attempting to develop an approach that may be labeled *culturo-linguistic* (or, better, *ethnolinguistic*) as a contemporary evangelical modification and amplification of the grammatico-historical method. This method depends greatly on the pioneering insights of Bible translation theorists such as Eugene Nida and John Beekman, who have for some time now been forced to wrestle with the cultural and linguistic dimensions of the Bible at a deeper level than most theologians have felt to be necessary.

The basic difference here centers around the matter of whether the interpreter has two or more than two cultural contexts in view. If he only considers the Biblical cultural context and his own cultural context (the latter usually being that of the academic interpreter), the problems (and the insights) are significantly less than if the interpreter must, in addition to these two contexts, consider a third cultural context into which he must intelligibly render the message. In the latter case the interpreter is forced to develop what may be called a "cross-cultural perspective" as opposed to a "mono-cultural perspective" on the problems of Biblical interpretation. A mono-cultural perspective may assume, as many historically oriented interpreters do, that when one attempts to move the Biblical message from the Biblical cultures into Euro-American language and culture he is moving from less adequate cultures and languages into more adequate cultures and languages. This was one of the mistakes that Bultmann made. A cross-cultural perspective, however, is one that has learned that all cultures and languages, like all varieties of human being, are potentially adequate vehicles for the communication of the Biblical message. It is not, therefore, quite so prone to be ethnocentric in its approach to the relationship between the messages and the cultural context in which they are presented. Though I will not be able to develop the implications of these statements in this presentation,<sup>3</sup> there often seems to be a large gap in understanding between those who have experience with only one receptor culture (their own) and those who have experience with many receptor cultures. The latter are, I believe, usually in a much better position to understand and interpret the relationships between the message and its cultural context. It is this kind of insight that I see as the basic difference between what I am calling the *ethnolin-*

<sup>2</sup>E. A. Nida, "Implications of Contemporary Linguistics for Biblical Scholarship," *JBL* 91 (1971) 73-89.

<sup>3</sup>Cf. further C. H. Kraft, *Theologizing*.

guistic approach to Biblical interpretation and the grammatico-historical approach. To illustrate this approach I would like to focus on four specific areas, each of which has its contribution to make to a deepened evangelical understanding of the relationship of culture to Biblical interpretation. These areas are (1) the definition of meaning, (2) communication within a range, (3) culture and interpretational reflexes, and (4) levels of abstraction in interpretation.

### I. DEFINITION OF MEANING

The first of these areas, and in many senses the most basic, has to do with how meanings are arrived at. By "meaning" I do not mean the same thing as "message." Meaning is, from this point of view, that which the receiver of a message constructs within his head and responds to. We know, of course, that there is often a wide discrepancy between the meanings that the communicator seeks to get across and those meanings that the receptor understands. The process seems to be one in which the communicator has certain meanings in his mind that he encodes in cultural symbols (primarily linguistic symbols) and transmits in the form of a message to one or more receptors. The receptors, for their part, decode the message in their heads and thereby derive the meanings on the basis of which they act.

Culture provides the matrix in terms of which such meanings are both encoded by communicators and decoded by receptors. The symbols used for the transmission of such meanings are all defined and interpreted culturally. We may say, therefore, that words and all other cultural symbols derive their meanings only from their participation in the cultural context of which they are a part. There are, apparently, no symbols that mean exactly the same thing in all cultures and few, if any, that mean exactly the same thing in two or more cultures.

The crucial thing in the transmission of messages via such culturally defined symbols is the extent of agreement between the communicator and the receptor concerning what the cultural symbols signify. If the communicator and the receptor have been taught by means of their participation in the same culture that such-and-such a word has such-and-such a meaning, the degree of difficulty that they experience in understanding each other will be minimal. If, however, communicator and receptor have been taught different meanings for the same word, the degree of difficulty will be large. We may say that common agreements concerning cultural and linguistic symbols minimize the difficulty of communication between participants in a communicational event, while lack of such agreements makes difficult or even blocks communication. The same can be said for interpretation of materials such as the Biblical materials. The fact that we who live in Euro-American culture attempt to interpret the Bible, none of which was spoken or written in Euro-American culture, raises great difficulty for us. For we are unlikely to share with the original authors many, if any, of the agreements concerning the meanings of the concepts that they use, since our cultural conditioning is so different from theirs.

### II. COMMUNICATION WITHIN A RANGE

Considerations of how cultural symbols convey meanings lead to the recognition that all communication (including interpretation) is approximate. I believe

we can state boldly that no receiver of a message ever understands exactly what the communicator intends—even when both communicator and receiver participate in the same culture. The lack of correspondence between intent and interpretation is even greater, of course, when there is a culture gap and/or a time gap between the communicator and his receptor(s).

In ordinary communicational interaction we attempt to compensate for this fact in two ways. (1) The communicator attempts to elicit “feedback” from the receptors to see how well they are getting his message. If he finds out that they are not understanding him well, he adjusts his message by rephrasing, providing additional information, explaining more elaborately, and so forth, in order to bring about greater correspondence between his intent and the receptors’ understanding. Such was the process that Paul and Barnabas went through in Acts 14 when the people of Lystra interpreted their healing as the act of gods and began to worship them. Paul and Barnabas, through feedback, discovered their miscommunication and took steps to straighten it out. (2) The second method of compensation in communication is the fact that human beings settle for approximate understandings of what they seek to communicate, as long as they are reasonably close to what is intended. We make a statement and the receptor restates in his own words roughly what we intend and we settle for that.

In interpreting the Scriptures we are, of course, cut off from the possibility of asking the original authors to clarify their meanings for us. So the first of these techniques for compensating for communicational impreciseness is not available to us. The fact that messages can be interpreted within a range is, however, of great significance to our attempts to understand the Bible from within another culture. For I believe that the Holy Spirit, as he assists us in interpreting his Word, works in terms of such an allowable range.

At one level, of course, the God-allowed range of acceptable interpretation is very narrow. The fact that God exists, that Jesus is the Mediator between God and man, that human beings are sinful, and so on, are either assumed or continually asserted by Scripture. These matters are not debatable, at least at that deep level. At another more surface level, though, there is—even within Scripture—a range of allowable understanding that is culturally conditioned. This fact raises the hope that additional interpretations developed by God-led people within contemporary cultures may also fall within the range allowed by Scripture.

Though the existence of God is not debatable (Heb 11:6), we see in Scripture a range of understandings of him allowed. Likewise with sin, the understanding of the nature of man (one, two or three parts), understandings of the spirit world, and so forth. The problem is, of course, to determine which contemporary understandings of these things fit within the Scripturally-allowed range and which fall outside. Within the allowed range fall both the intent of the author and the intent of God, but these are not always the same. In prophetic utterances, for example, the human author was often unaware of the later use God would make of those utterances.

Accuracy of interpretation is, therefore, a matter of coming to understand what is said or written within an allowable range.

### III. CULTURE AND INTERPRETATIONAL REFLEXES

This recognition, coupled with the recognition of how meanings are arrived at,

leads to our next point: the consideration of our ability to accurately interpret the Scriptures. The major problem here stems from the fact that those who agree on large areas of cultural experience seldom discuss these areas of agreement. What everyone in a given situation assumes is not mentioned.

The Hebrew people, for example, assumed that God exists. They did not, therefore, attempt to prove his existence. Jesus assumed that his hearers understood what a mustard bush and its seeds looked like, that those who sowed seed scattered them around broadcast, that sheep could be led by the shepherd, and so on.

The interpretational reflexes of Jesus' hearers were conditioned by the same culture as his were. They therefore did not need explanation of the assumptions and agreements underlying the things that Jesus said and did. Our interpretational reflexes are, however, conditioned by quite a different culture. We are therefore subject to several pitfalls that accompany the cross-cultural transmission of materials such as that in the Scriptures.

We may, for example, not understand major portions of what is going on at all, since we do not know the cultural agreements. In the story of the woman at the well, for example, we are likely to entirely miss the significance of such things as Jesus' going through Samaria, his talking to a woman, the fact that the woman was at the well at midday, the necessity that she go back to get her supposed husband before she could make a decision, and so forth. For us to understand such things we need large doses of explanation by those who study the cultural background. We cannot simply trust our culturally-conditioned interpretational reflexes. For the Scriptures are specific to the cultural settings of the original events. Sheep, mustard seeds and bushes, broadcast sowing, levirate marriage and many other aspects of the life of Biblical cultures fit into this category.

A much bigger problem of interpretation lies in those areas where the Scriptures use cultural symbols that are familiar to us but for which our cultural agreements are different. We are tempted to simply interpret according to what seems to be the "plain meaning"—as if we could get the proper meaning of Scripture as we would from a document originally written in English. It is to avoid this pitfall that many translation theorists are now contending that a faithful translation of the Scriptures must involve enough interpretation to protect the reader from being seriously misled at points such as these. Our interpretational reflexes tell us, for example, that a fox is sly and cunning. So, when Jesus refers to Herod as a fox (Luke 13:32) we misinterpret the symbol to mean sly when, in fact, on the basis of the Hebrew cultural agreement it was intended to signify treachery. Our cultural reflexes tell us that plural marriage is primarily a sexual matter, though in nonwestern cultures it seldom is. Our cultural reflexes tell us that Jesus was impolite to his mother when he addressed her the way he did in the temple and at the wedding feast. Our culturally-conditioned interpretational reflexes lead us to understand "the faith once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3) to be a system of doctrine rather than a relationship to God. The culturally-conditioned interpretational reflexes of the Nigerians I worked among misled them into thinking that Psalm 23 presented Jesus as insane, since in their culture only young boys and insane men tend sheep. The interpretational reflexes of the Savi of New Guinea misled them into admiring the treacherous Judas even more than Jesus

and those of the Chinese into regarding positively the dragon of the book of Revelation.

The point is that for cultural reasons we who are not a part of the Biblical cultures cannot trust our interpretational reflexes to give us the meanings that the original authors intended. What to us are the "plain meanings" are almost certain to be the wrong meanings unless the statements are very general (see below). We must, therefore, engage in exegesis to discover what the original utterances meant to those whose interpretational reflexes were the same as those of the authors.

With respect to interpretational reflexes there seem to be four principles.

1. If the culture of the original is at any given point very similar to ours, our reflexes are going to serve us fairly well. In these instances the interpretational principle that says that "the plain meaning is the true meaning" is a good principle. Such a situation is rarely the case between Euro-American culture and the Hebrew and Aramaic portions of Scripture. Certain Greek customs do, however, seem to be similar enough to Euro-American customs that our interpretational reflexes will give us the correct meaning. I think in this regard of the language of the race track that Paul uses in Philippians 3. The same may be true of the language of economics that Paul uses earlier in that same chapter. The amount of Biblical material where there is such close cultural similarity to our agreements is, however, distressingly small. And the fact that we cannot trust our interpretational reflexes in most places means that we can never be sure of them unless we have independent evidence that this is a place where their custom is close to ours.

2. If the Scriptural statement is a cultural universal, however, our interpretational reflexes will enable us to get close to the intended meaning. Statements such as those in the Ten Commandments that exist, as far as we know, in every one of the world's cultures are easy to interpret relatively accurately. There is a slight problem in the fact that each culture defines murder, adultery, and so on, in its own way. But the fact that such commands occur in all cultures means that these statements are elevated out of the most difficult interpretational category—that of the culturally specific. Other parts of Scripture such as those dealing with eating together, such injunctions as "love your neighbor," and many of the proverbs of Scripture are also in the cultural universal category.

3. Similarly, if a Scriptural statement relates to experiences that are common to all mankind our culturally-conditioned interpretational reflexes can be of considerable help. When the Scriptures say "go," "come," "trust," "be patient," and the like, they are dealing with experiences that are common to all human beings and therefore readily interpretable. Likewise with respect to illness and death, childbirth and rearing, obtaining and preparing food, and the like.

4. But as indicated above, much of the Biblical material is presented in cultural forms that are very specific to cultural practices quite different from ours. These materials, because of their specificity to the cultural agreements of the original hearers, communicated with maximum impact to them. This is, I believe, a major part of the genius of God and of his Word—that he speaks specifically to people where they are and in terms of the culture in which they are immersed. This fact does, however, enormously complicate the task of the one immersed in another culture who seeks to interpret the Scriptures.

The fact that our interpretational reflexes are so limited when dealing with

Biblical materials argues strongly for the application of the sharpest tools available to the study of the cultural matrices through which God revealed his Word. The harnessing of the perspectives of anthropology and linguistics to this end of the interpretational task (as well as to the communication end) could be a real boon to the evangelical exegete. One important result of such harnessing is the development of faithful dynamic-equivalence translations and highly interpretive "transculturations" of God's Word. These aim to communicate God's message as specifically as possible in today's languages and cultures so that the members of these cultures will be able to trust their interpretational reflexes when they study the Scriptures.

#### IV. LEVELS OF ABSTRACTION IN INTERPRETATION

The fact that so much of the Biblical material is presented in a form that is specific to the Biblical cultures but distant in its forms from our cultural matrix presents us with the major problem in our search to discover a principled way of interpretation. And yet, as I have endeavored to point out, not all the Scriptural material is at this culturally specific, distant-from-us level. What we find is, rather, a mixture of materials, some of which require a great deal of expert exegesis and some of which are readily interpretable even by twentieth-century American laymen. We need, therefore, an approach to interpretation that will sort out which is which.

I came to feel this need deeply as a result of the question directed to me by one of the Nigerian Church leaders whom I was assisting. He pointed out to me that the Bible commands both that we not steal and that we not allow women to pray with their heads uncovered. He then asked, "Why is it that you missionaries teach us that we are to obey the one command and to ignore the other?" I do not feel that I was able to give him a very good answer at that time. But I have been able, I believe, to get closer to a satisfying approach since then.

My suggestion is that we recognize that when people speak they continually mix levels of abstraction. In this presentation I have mixed general statements with very specific illustrations. The Bible does the same. The statement, "God is love," and the statement, "The Lord is my shepherd," say much the same thing. But one is at a general level of abstraction, while the other is rather specific to Hebrew culture.

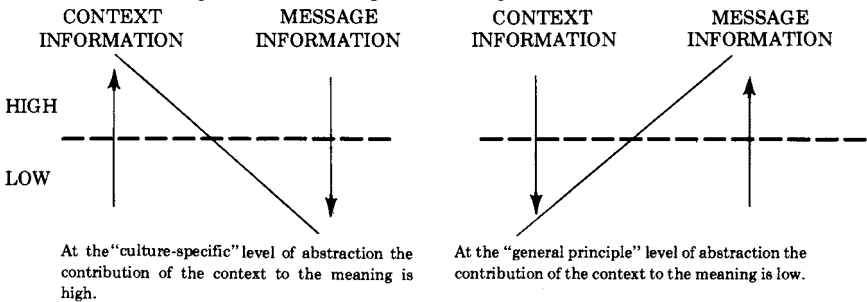
With respect to the head-covering versus the "do not steal" commands, likewise, we have statements at two different levels of abstraction. "Do not steal" is a general command that occurs in every culture. Analysis of the meaning of this command from culture to culture yields slight culturally-conditioned alternative understandings within a fairly narrow range.

With respect to the head-covering command, however, analysis of the meaning of the custom in its cultural context does not simply lead to an alternative understanding of the same command. It leads, rather, to a meaning that demands expression via a different cultural form if it is to be understood in English. In the Greek culture of that day, apparently, the cultural form "female praying in public without head covering" would have been interpreted to mean that "this female is immoral"—or, at least, that "she is not showing proper respect to men" (see commentaries on 1 Cor 11:10-12). Since that meaning was not consonant with the witness that Christians ought to make, Paul commands against the use

of the head-uncovered symbol in favor of its opposite, the head-covered symbol. For only this latter symbol conveyed the proper Christian meaning in that culture—that Christian women were not immoral and/or were properly subject to their men. The theological truth, then—a truth just as relevant today as in the first century—is that Christian women should not behave in such a way that people judge them to be “out of line” (whether morally or with respect to authority).<sup>4</sup>

Such cross-cultural analysis shows that in comparing the two commands we are not comparing sames. The commands are given at different levels of abstraction—that is, the relative importance of the specific cultural context to the meaning of the utterances differs. Those utterances that relate most specifically to their particular cultural contexts are here termed “at a lower level of abstraction.” Those utterances in which the specific context is less important to the meaning and which, therefore, relate to pancultural human commonality are termed “at a higher level of abstraction.” That the stealing command is at a higher level of abstraction is evident from the fact that it does not refer to a specific cultural act but to a category of cultural behavior. The command is general rather than specific. Note, by way of contrast, the specificity of the tenth command. That command is at a lower level of abstraction (like the head-covering command) in that it specifies the proscribed cultural acts rather than (until the final phrase) generalizing them into an overall principle as we do when we refer to that command as the command against “covetousness” in general. Note the wording: “Do not desire another man’s house; do not desire his wife, his slaves, his cattle, his donkeys, or anything else that he owns” (Exod 20:17 TEV).

The head-covering command is at this more specific level, where the particular cultural context is very important to the meaning. A corresponding specific stealing command would be something like this: “Do not take your neighbor’s donkey without his permission.” A head-covering command at the same level of generality as the stealing command would be something like this: “Do not appear out of line with respect to immorality or authority.” Thus we see a specific cultural form/symbol level with context contributing relatively more to the meaning, and a deeper “general principle” level in which the context contributes relatively less. “Seesaw” diagrams illustrating these two possibilities are as follows:



There seems in Scripture to be yet a deeper level of abstraction, however. This is made explicit by Jesus when he summarizes the teaching of the law and the prophets in two statements:

<sup>4</sup>See R. C. Sproul, “Controversy at Culture Gap,” *Eternity* 27 (1976) 13-15, 40, for a useful discussion of this issue.



“Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.” This is the greatest and the most important commandment. The second most important commandment is like it: “Love your neighbor as you love yourself.” The whole law of Moses and the teachings of the prophets depend on these two commandments” (Matt 22:37-40; cf. Deut 6:5; Mark 12:29-31; Luke 10:27 TEV).

In such a three-level scheme there are occasional problems with respect to which of the levels to assign certain of the general statements of Scripture. We may, however, advance the following chart as a step in the direction of developing this model more precisely. Note that a complete chart would show (even more than this one does) the fact that there are fewer categories at the basic ideal level, more at the general principle level and an enormous number at the specific cultural form level.

1. BASIC IDEAL LEVEL	2. GENERAL PRINCIPLE LEVEL	3. SPECIFIC CULTURAL FORM/SYMBOL LEVEL
←.....More General.....→.....More Specific.....→		
A. Love your neighbor as you love yourself (Matt 22:39)	1. Do not steal (Exod 20:17)  2. Do not covet  3. Be free from partiality (1 Tim 5:21; Jas 3:17)	a. Do not take your neighbor's donkey (Hebrew) b. Do not take your employer's money (U.S.A.)  a. Do not desire another man's house . . . (Exod 20:17) b. Same for U.S.A.  a. Treat Gentiles/blacks/women as human beings b. Rebuke whoever needs it (1 Tim 5:20)
B. Love the Lord your God with all your heart . . . (Matt 22:37)	1. Worship no God but me (Exod 20:3)  2. Seek by all means to save people (1 Cor 9:22)	a. Do not bow down to any idol or worship it (Exod 20:5) b. Do not pledge primary allegiance to material wealth (U.S.A.)  a. Live as a Jew to win Jews (1 Cor 9:20) b. Live as a Gentile to win Gentiles (1 Cor 9:21) c. Live as an African to win Africans
C. Everything must be done in a proper and orderly way (1 Cor 14:40)	1. Leaders should be beyond reproach (1 Tim 3:2; Tit 1:6)  2. Christian women should not appear out of line  3. Christians should live according to the rules of the culture (as long as they do not conflict with Christian principles)	a. They must be self-controlled, etc. (1 Tim 3:2)  a. They should cover their heads when praying in Greek culture (1 Cor 11:10) b. They should not wear their clothes too tight (U.S.A.)  a. Women should learn in silence in Greek culture (1 Tim 2:11) b. Women may speak up in mixed groups in U.S.A.

- c. Pay the government what belongs to it (Matt 22:21)
- d. Obey governmental authorities (Rom 13:1)
- e. Wives, submit to your husbands in Greek and many segments of U.S.A. culture (Eph 5:22; Col 3:18; etc.)

D. Other ideals?

In such expositions as the Ten Commandments (especially as Jesus summarizes them in Matt 22:37-40), the Sermon on the Mount, the listing of the fruits of the Spirit (Gal 5:22-23) and the many similar statements, the Scriptures seem to come closest to a clear statement of a portion of the supracultural will of God for man's conduct. The reason for the apparent clarity of these portions is that they are phrased at a level of abstraction that largely extricates them from specific application to the original cultures in which they were uttered. As one moves from specific cultural applications of supracultural truth (as with the head-covering command) back toward the most general statements of the truth, however, the statements require less understanding of the original cultural context to be accurately understood. They therefore have more immediate (though general) meaning to us in another culture. The "plain meaning" principle is therefore often adequate for interpreting information presented at this deeper level of abstraction.

Note, however, that the effectiveness of the communicational impact is a matter of cultural perception. For the original hearers, it was presentations of supracultural truth in terms of specific applications (abstraction level three) that communicated most effectively. For us, likewise, it would be specific applications of Scriptural generalizations that most effectively communicate. But since the Scriptures were written in terms of cultures other than ours, we are denied in-scripturated applications of supracultural truth in our culture. The general statements, therefore, make more sense to us than the specific cultural forms through which these principles were applied in Biblical cultures. And the more specific applications in the Scriptures are often the most confusing to us.

Throughout the Scriptures we are provided with glimpses of supracultural truth, clothed in specific events taking place within specific cultures at specific times. Frequently, as with statements at the general principle or basic ideal level, we get the impression that we are looking at such truth with a minimum of cultural conditioning. More frequently, however, we are exposed to supracultural truth applied in a specific situation in a specific Biblical culture. The record of this, then, comes to us only in translation, so that we see such truth as "puzzling reflections in a mirror" (1 Cor 13:12, *Phillips*). Among these "reflections" William Smalley feels that

those parts of Scripture which give us evaluations of human motives and emotions, human attitudes and personalities, give us the deepest insight into God's ultimate will, and that to understand the revelation in terms of God's will for our behavior we will have to learn to look behind the cultural facade to see as much as we can of what the Word indicates about those questions. The cultural examples given us are thereby not lost. They provide most valuable examples of the way in which God's will was performed in another cultural setting to help us see how we may perform it in ours.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup>W. A. Smalley, "Culture and Superculture," *Practical Anthropology* 2 (1955) 58-71.

In this way it is possible for Christians to learn something of supracultural truth even though this, like all human knowledge, is perceived by us in terms of the cultural grid in which we operate. Though often puzzling and never total or absolute, such knowledge is adequate for God's purposes—the salvation and spiritual growth of all who give themselves to him in faith.<sup>6</sup> We may, then, under the leading of the Spirit come to know something of how he desires us to live out these truths in terms of our cultural forms.

#### CONCLUSION

I have attempted to raise four closely interdependent issues that relate to the matter of Scriptural interpretation on which my fields (anthropology, linguistics and communicology) cast some light. I am hopeful that these considerations will make some contribution and/or stimulate my readers to greater insight into faithful Scriptural interpretation in culture.

<sup>6</sup>A. B. Mickelsen, *Interpreting the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963) 353.