

Living Way Church
Biblical Studies Program – March 2013
Knowing Scripture: The Art and Science of Biblical Interpretation
Lesson Four

I. Culture and The Bible

A. Cultural Conditioning and the Bible

1. A major issue in the Christian world is the question of the sense and degree to which the Bible is conditioned by culture
 - a. Was the Bible written for its original recipients only? Or was it written for people of all eras?
 - b. Is there any part of Scripture that is bound by its cultural setting and thus limited in its application to its own cultural setting?
2. In our first lesson we spoke of the “culture gap” (along with the various other “gaps” that separate us from the original audience)
 - a. We recognize the Bible reflects the culture of its day
 - b. The question then is, how can it have authority over us in our day?
3. The nature of Scripture will affect our interpretation of it
4. The ultimate issue: To what extent is the Bible’s relevance and authority limited by changing human structures and perspectives in the biblical text?
5. In order to produce an accurate exegesis of a biblical text, and understand what was said and what was meant, a student must be involved with questions of language, style, syntax, historical and geographical context, author, destination, and literary genre
 - a. The better you understand the culture of the Bible...
 - b. The easier it becomes for you to accurately understand what was being said

B. Cultural Conditioning and the Reader

1. The problem becomes more acute when I realize that not only is the Bible conditioned by its cultural setting, but I am conditioned by my cultural setting, as well
2. We need to become aware that the perspective we bring to God’s Word may well be a distortion of truth
3. Even if biblical interpreters can agree on a method of exegesis, and on the exegesis itself, we are still left with questions of application, relevance, and obligation imposed by the text – even if we agree that the Bible is inspired by God, we are still faced with questions of application
 - a. Does what the Bible commands first century Christians to do apply to us?

- b. In what sense do the Scriptures bind our consciences today?
 - C. Principle and Custom
 - 1. Unless we conclude that all of Scripture is principle and thus binding on all people of all ages, or (on the other extreme) that all Scripture is local custom with no relevance beyond its immediate historical context, we are forced to establish some categories and guidelines for discerning the difference
 - a. Foot washing (John 13:3-17; 1 Tim 5:10)
 - b. Head coverings for women (1 Cor 11:5,10)
 - c. Holy kiss (Rom 16:16; 1 Cor 16:20; 2 Cor 13:12; 1 Th 5:26)
 - 2. Practical Guidelines
 - a. Examine the Bible itself for apparent areas of custom
 - b. Allow for Christian distinctives in the first century
 - (1) Paul's appeal in First Corinthians 11 is in an appeal to creation (8-10)
 - (2) Not solely to the custom of Corinthian harlots
 - c. The creation ordinances are indicators of the transcultural principle (e.g., Matt 19:4-6)
 - d. In areas of uncertainty use the principle of humility
 - 3. Sproul asks...
 - a. *Would it be better to treat a possible custom as a principle and be guilty of being over scrupulous in our desire to obey God?*
 - b. *Or would it be better to treat a possible principle as a custom to be guilty of being unscrupulous in demoting a transcendent requirement of God to the level of a mere human convention?*
 - 4. We do not have the right to legislate the consciences of Christians where God has left them free
 - 5. *"The principle applies where we have biblical mandate whose nature remains uncertain (as to custom and principal) after all the arduous labor of exegesis has been exhausted."*

II. Applying the Biblical Message (additional thoughts)

- A. The general use of the Bible for Christian living
 - 1. The first purpose of the Bible is to make you "...wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus" (2 Tim 3:15)
 - 2. After a person has received salvation, we are told that "All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work" (2 Tim 3:16-17)
 - 3. The Bible is given for a Christian's growth in knowledge, holiness, and spirituality; doctrine and theology serve the same purpose
 - 4. The study of the Bible is one of the prime prerequisites for every Christian in order that they may lead an effective and genuine

Christian life

5. All practical lessons, all applications of Scripture, all devotional material must be governed by general hermeneutical principles
 6. The Bible is more a book of principles than a catalog of specific directions
 - a. If it were entirely specific in its practical teachings, then it would be provincial and relative (e.g., what if Paul had classified sin solely in terms of specifics and the culture of his day)
 - b. If it were a legal code of rules, the Bible would foster an artificial spirituality
 7. The Bible emphasizes the inner spirit rather than the outward religious cloak (outward behavioral conformity)
 8. In some statements, it is the spirit of the statement that is to be our guide
 - a. Matt 5:29,30 – *“If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away...and if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away”*
 - b. Also, turning the other cheek, walking the second mile, giving the second garment
 9. Commands in terms of culture must be translated into our culture
- B. Guidance from Biblical Examples
1. We must make a distinction between what the Bible records and what it approves
 - a. Inspiration extends only to the fidelity of recording
 - b. Some words do not constitute either the will of God or the approval of God
 2. We may take direct application from all those incidents that the Bible directly censures or approves
 3. Express commands to individuals are not necessarily the will of God for us:
 - a. Abraham to sacrifice Isaac
 - b. Joshua to commit “herem” (i.e., people and cities devoted to destruction)
 4. In the lives of the men and women of Scripture we are to determine what the outstanding spiritual principle is (Hebrews 11)
 5. In the application of examples to our lives, we do not need a literal reproduction of the biblical situation (for example, being baptized in the actual Jordan River)
- C. Guidance regarding Promises
1. Note whether the promise is universal in scope (Rev 22:17 – *“And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who desires take the water of life*

without price")

2. Note whether the promise is personal (Gen 15:18 – *“On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying, ‘To your offspring I give this land...’”*)
3. Note whether the promise is conditional (Prov 2:1-5)
4. Note whether the promise is for its own time (Acts 27:24 – *“And behold, God has granted you all those who sail with you”*)
5. Whenever we forced the Bible to say something on specific items of our life, we are in danger of divination
 - a. General Principle: A text cannot mean what it never could have meant to its author or his readers
 - b. This rule does not always help one find out what a text means, but it does help to set limits as to what it cannot mean

D. Guidelines for Applying the Biblical Message

1. Translating Biblical commands from one culture to another
 - a. Key questions:
 - (1) To what extent are biblical commands to be understood as culturally-conditioned and thus not normative for believers today?
 - (2) What kind of methodology should be applied to translate biblical commands from that culture to our own?
 - b. The spectrum of interpretation
 - (1) Some interpreters believe that both the Scriptural principle and the behavioral command (which expresses that principal) should be modified in light of historical changes
 - (2) Others believe that Scriptural principles and their accompanying behavioral commands always should be applied literally within the church today
 - (3) Some believe certain Scriptural commands are culturally limited, while others are not
 - c. A criteria must be developed for distinguishing between those commands which apply literally and those that do not
 - d. The criteria must be developed in which:
 - (1) The logic can be demonstrated
 - (2) It can be consistently applied
 - (3) The nature is drawn from Scripture or consistent with Scripture
 - e. Three postulates:
 - (1) The meaning of a behavioral command (and the

- principle behind it) in Scripture cannot be ascertained apart from the context of the command
- (2) The more we know of the context of a behavioral command, the more we will be able to ascertain accurately the meaning of that command and the principle expressed by
- (3) It may be necessary to change the behavioral expression of a Scriptural command in order to translate the principle behind the command from one culture and time to another
- f. In making transcultural applications of biblical commands, three alternatives can be understood:
 - (1) Retain both the principal and the behavioral expression
 - (2) Retain the principle but suggest a change in the way that principal is behaviorally expressed in our culture
 - (3) Change both the principal and its behavioral expression, assuming that those were culture-bound and are, therefore, no longer applicable
- g. Guidelines for discerning whether principles are transcultural or culture-bound (that is, incomplete and tentative)
 - (1) Determine the reason given for the principle
 - (2) If the reason for the principle is culture-bound, then the principle may be also
- h. Guidelines for discerning whether commands are transcultural or culture-bound
 - (1) When a transcultural command is embodied in a form that was part of the common cultural habits of the time, the form may be modified, even though the principle remains unchanged
 - (2) When a practice that was an accepted part of pagan culture was forbidden in Scripture, it is probably forbidden in contemporary culture as well, particularly if the command is grounded in God's moral nature
 - (3) It is important to define the intended recipients of a command and to apply the command discriminately to other groups
- 2. Trans-Cultural Transmission of Biblical Commands:
 - a. Discern as accurately as possible the principle behind the given command

- b. Discern whether the principle is timeless or time bound; most biblical principles are rooted in God's unchanging nature
- c. If a principle is transcultural, study the nature of its application within our culture (Rom 12:2)
- d. If the behavioral expression of a principal should be changed, suggest a cultural equivalent that would adequately express the God-given principle behind the original command
- e. If after careful study the nature of the Biblical principle and its command remain in question, apply the Biblical precept of humility

III. Practical Tools for Bible Study

A. Language Helps:

1. A good translation of the Bible

a. Bible translations

- (1) There are some basic and notable differences between translations that ought to be recognized
- (2) These differences reflect different procedures and methods in preparing the translation
- (3) Elements in translation:
 - (a) Original language
 - (b) Receptor language
 - (c) Historical distance - the difference between the two (the words, grammar, and idioms, as well as culture and history)
- (4) Theory of translation - the degree to which one goes to bridge the gap between the two languages
- (5) Primary methodologies
 - (a) Formal equivalence (literal)
 - i) This method seeks to follow the Greek or Hebrew text as closely as possible in a word by word pattern
 - ii) To keep as close as possible to the exact wording and phrasing in the original language
 - iii) Its strength is its verbal accuracy
 - iv) The weakness can be an awkward literary style (KJV, NASB)
 - (b) Functional equivalence
 - i) Also known as "dynamic equivalence," this is the predominant method of

- the Bible”
- b. Matthew Henry (1662-1714)
 - c. Commentaries should usually be purchased individually (by particular book), rather than sets
 - d. Commentaries are reading someone else’s exegesis
 - (1) Good for background
 - (2) Can give insight into difficult passages
 - e. The Bible itself - the history recorded in Scripture provides background
 - (1) Old Testament historical narratives for the prophets
 - (2) The book of Acts for Paul’s letters
- 4. Bible encyclopedia (more in depth articles) – *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (4 vol)
 - 5. Old and New Testament Surveys
 - 6. Bible atlases – *The Holman Bible Atlas*
 - 7. Historical geographies
 - 8. Biblical archaeology