



Biblical Hermeneutics: Principles for Bible Interpretation

10. Be Aware of Cultural Conditioning

When God inspired the Bible, over a 1,500-year period, using 40 different authors and three languages, the writers expressed ideas in ways that reflected their times, thought forms, and customs. The hermeneutical question, then, is what parts of the Bible express principles to be applied today and which parts are culturally limited customs of the writer's day? In 1 Corinthians 11, for example, Paul states that women who pray or prophesy must wear a head covering as a sign of subordination to men. Should that be applied today?

The challenge increases when we realize that we, too, come to the Bible with our own cultural conditioning. We bring our own assumptions and biases to Bible interpretation. The feminist movement, for example, predisposes many to reject anything even close to expecting women to be deferential to their husbands. Such an attitude, they say, reflects only the custom of that day but is not relevant to our (better) way of thinking now. And so, we need to discern whether the writer's statements are culturally bound, but we also need to discern whether we are interpreting with our own cultural bias. I would agree with R. C. Sproul (*Knowing Scripture*, 105) that the problem of the influence of our present secular culture is greater than the problem of the conditioning of ancient culture. The argument that certain Bible principles are culturally limited in their application can be an excuse to evade the meaning of a text that is uncomfortably strange and unpopular today.

Taking up the head-covering example, R. C. Sproul helpfully defines four interpretive options (107f). We might take this, *first*, as entirely custom. This sign of subordination is a Jewish custom that is outmoded in light of the overall teaching of the New Testament. A *second* option is to take Paul's words as entirely principle. In that case, women today must cover their head with a veil as a sign of submission. The *third* option is to regard the passage as partly principle and partly custom. The principle of female submission transcends all cultures but the way of expressing that is changeable. Finally, the passage might be partly principle. Female submission continues but the article covering the head may vary from culture to culture.

How do we decide which of these options should be applied to passages that may, or may not be, culturally conditioned? Without getting into the complexities of a fuller answer I'd like to suggest three things.

First, come to God's Word with a deep sense of reverence. Remember that the people God favors are those who "tremble" at his word (Isaiah 66:2). Have a firm intention to hear and follow what God says no matter how uncomfortable or unpopular it is.

Second, do not read into a text cultural considerations that ought not to be there. Some commentators, as Sproul says (110), claim that the reason Paul required head coverings was that the local sign of a prostitute in Corinth was an uncovered head. That is why, they claim, he demanded women to cover their heads. The problem is that "our reconstructed knowledge of first-century Corinth has led us to supply Paul with a rationale that is foreign to the one he gives himself" (110). Paul bases his rationale on the creation order, not on the custom of Corinthian prostitutes. Pay attention to the text.

Third, when a cultural context is suggested for interpreting a text, put it to the test of scholarly research in good commentaries. For example, Jesus said that it was easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter heaven. Many of us have heard it explained that the Jerusalem wall had a small gate called the "needle gate". According to this illustration a camel could only crawl through this gate if its baggage was unloaded and it went through on its knees. Jesus was saying that it was very difficult for a rich person to enter heaven. However, there is no historical evidence that such a gate existed. Jesus' lesson was not that it was difficult for a rich person to enter heaven but that it was impossible. Happily, Jesus resolves this by saying, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible." God can save the most impossibly lost people.



"...like newborn babies, long for the pure milk of the word, so that by it you may grow in respect to salvation...." (1 Peter 2:2)

CONDENSED MILK

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