



Systematic Theology

A study of the major doctrines of Scripture

TOPIC 7 – HERMENEUTICS: BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

LESSON 131 – THE CULTURE AND CUSTOMS OF THE BIBLE – PART 2

PRINCIPLES OF BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION – LOUIS BERKHOF, PGS. 113-128

KNOWING SCRIPTURE – RC SPROUL, PGS. 114-127

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Cultural Conditioning

- ▶ One major issue in the Christian world has been the question of the sense and degree to which the Bible is conditioned by culture. Was the Bible written for first century Christians only? Or was it written for people of all eras?
- ▶ Is there any part of Scripture that is bound by its cultural setting and thus limited in its application to its own cultural setting?
- ▶ Because the Bible was not dictated directly and immediately by God without reference to any local custom, style, or perspective, we are going to have to face the culture gap as we interpret the text of Scripture.

Cultural Conditioning

- ▶ Too often the conservative side has believed that the Bible was not conditioned by culture and they see this as a requirement to claim that the Scripture is timeless.
- ▶ The liberal side has argued that the Bible was not only conditioned by culture but is bound by it.
- ▶ For example, if people in a period of time held a wrong scientific or historical view, is that reflected in the Scripture? Is an outmoded cultural perspective part of the essence of the message of Scripture?
- ▶ On the other hand, is it that we can “read between the lines” and see a cultural-transcending message being given within the bounds of an ancient culture that was fixed in time?

Cultural Conditioning

- ▶ To what extent is the Bible's relevance and authority limited by changing human structures and perspectives in the Biblical text?
- ▶ To understand and produce an accurate exegesis of a Biblical text we must be involved with questions of language, style, syntax, historical and geographical context, author, destination, and literary genre. This kind of analysis is necessary for interpreting any body of literature – even contemporary literature.
- ▶ The better we understand the first century culture the easier it becomes for us to have an accurate understanding of what was being said in the New Testament. But the Bible was written a long time ago, in a cultural setting quite different from our own, and it is not always easy to bridge the sheer chasm of time between the first and twenty-first centuries.

Cultural Conditioning

- ▶ Cultural Conditioning and the Reader
- ▶ Not only is the Bible conditioned by its cultural setting, but we are conditioned by our cultural setting as well.
- ▶ This means that while I hear the Bible I am hearing it through a potential host of extrabiblical assumptions. No one of us ever totally escapes being a child of our age. We see this even in the conflicts between generations in the same nation and society.
- ▶ If I knew which of my ideas were out of harmony with Scripture, I would try to change them. But sorting out my own views is not always easy. All of us are prone to making the same mistakes over and over again. Our blind spots are so-called because we cannot see them.

Cultural Conditioning

- ▶ We must temper our zeal in criticizing Scripture by allowing Scripture to criticize us: we need to become aware that the perspective we bring to the Word may well be a distortion of the truth.
- ▶ The Reformers understood that the influence of a modern (current) mindset is more of an obstacle to accurate interpretation than is the problem of the conditioning of ancient culture. The interpreter then is expected to work very hard at finding an objective reading of the text through the grammatical-historical approach.
- ▶ We must learn to listen to the Scripture without mixing our own prejudices. This is especially difficult today we so many try so hard to fit everything into a nice little box and give it a label. We tend to hold to a system instead of the Scripture.

Cultural Conditioning

- ▶ Some began teaching that because the Bible was written before the scientific age, it must be modernized before it can be relevant to us. If people today want to get valid answers to their questions then they first must learn to ask the right questions. Those questions can only be provided by a proper philosophical understanding of human existence. That philosophical understanding then is not to be gleaned from Scripture but must be formulated prior to coming to the Scripture with the question.
- ▶ This denies *Sola Scriptura*.
- ▶ It also opened the door for the idea still around today that people from differing communities use the same words or symbols but assign them different meaning, so there is no literal meaning, only a plurality of meanings that are based on the shared community reading the text.

Cultural Conditioning

- ▶ This makes our perspective and experiences the ultimate arbiter of the truth of Scripture.
- ▶ So even if biblical interpreters can agree on a method of exegesis and even on the exegesis itself, we are still left with the questions of application, relevance, and obligation imposed by the text.
- ▶ If we agree that the Bible is inspired by God and not merely the product of prescientific authors, we are still faced with questions of application. Does what the Bible commands first-century Christians to do apply to us?
- ▶ In what sense do the Scriptures bind our consciences today?

Principle and Custom

- ▶ Unless we conclude that all Scripture is principle and thus binding on all people of all ages, or that 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. Which is principle and which is custom? And what is the principle demonstrated by the custom and what custom today conveys the same ideas?
- ▶ To demonstrate, let's look at the famous head covering passage of 1 Corinthians 11.

Principle and Custom

- ▶ 1 Cor. 11:2 Now I praise you, brethren, that you remember me in all things and keep the traditions just as I delivered them to you. 3 But I want you to know that the head of every man is Christ, the head of woman is man, and the head of Christ is God. 4 Every man praying or prophesying, having his head covered, dishonors his head. 5 But every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head, for that is one and the same as if her head were shaved. 6 For if a woman is not covered, let her also be shorn. But if it is shameful for a woman to be shorn or shaved, let her be covered. 7 For a man indeed ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God; but woman is the glory of man. 8 For man is not from woman, but woman from man. 9 Nor was man created for the woman, but woman for the man. 10 For this reason the woman ought to have a symbol of authority on her head, because of the angels. 11 Nevertheless, neither is man independent of woman, nor woman independent of man, in the Lord. 12 For as woman came from man, even so man also comes through woman; but all things are from God. 13 Judge among yourselves. Is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered? 14 Does not even nature itself teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a dishonor to him? 15 But if a woman has long hair, it is a glory to her; for her hair is given to her for a covering. 16 But if anyone seems to be contentious, we have no such custom, nor do the churches of God.

Principle and Custom

- ▶ This text seems to require a woman to cover her head with a veil when she prophesies. In applying the command to our culture we have several options to consider in order to make correct application:
- ▶ 1. It is entirely custom. The whole passage reflects a cultural custom that has no relevance today. The veil is local customary headgear; the uncovering of the head reflects a local sign of rebellion and prostitution. The sign of the woman subordinating herself to a man is a Jewish custom that is outmoded in light of the overall teaching of Scripture. Since we live in a different culture, it is no longer necessary for a woman to cover her head with anything; it is no longer necessary for a woman to be subordinate to a man.

Principle and Custom

- ▶ 2. It is entirely principle. In this case everything in the passage is regarded as culturally transcending principle. That would mean by way of application that women must be submissive to men during prayer, women must always give a sign of that submission by covering their heads, and women must cover their heads with a veil as the only appropriate sign.
- ▶ 3. It is partly principle and partly custom – option A. In this approach part of the passage is regarded as principle and thus binding for all generations and part is seen as custom that is no longer binding. The principle of female submission is transcultural, but the means of expressing it is customary and may be changed.

Principle and Custom

- ▶ 4. It is partly principle, partly custom – option B. In this final option the principle of female submission and the symbolic act of covering the head are to be perpetual. The article of covering may vary from culture to culture. A veil may be replaced with a hat, for example.
- ▶ Which of these alternatives would be most pleasing to God?
- ▶ To properly interpret the passage we must identify the principle and the custom, always applying the principle and looking to see how the custom is expressed in our cultural context.
- ▶ Illustration – in some cultures, for a women to cover her head is not a sign of submission, but of rebellion, and a shaved head, which customarily could mean shame, is seen instead as submission.

Practical Guidelines

- ▶ 1. Examine the Bible itself for apparent areas of custom. By close examination we can see that the Scriptures allow some latitude for customs. For example, divine principles from the Old Testament culture have been restated in a New Testament culture. By seeing Old Testament laws and principles restated in the New, we see that some common core principles transcend customs and social convention. At other times we see some Old Testament principles (such as dietary laws) abrogated in the New Testament completely. We must carefully discern which principles and customs carry over and which do not.
- ▶ We also see that Old Testament styles of dress are not fixed perpetually for God's people. Principles of modesty prevail, but local styles of dress may change.

Practical Guidelines

- ▶ The Old Testament does not prescribe a godly uniform that must be worn at all times by all believers in all ages.
- ▶ Another example is that New Testament believers paid with denarius, and now we pay in dollars. That doesn't change the principle.
- ▶ 2. Allow for Christian distinctives in the first century. It is one thing to seek a clear understanding of the Biblical content by investigating the culture situation of the first century; it is quite another to interpret the New Testament as if it were merely an echo of the first century culture. To do so would fail to account for the serious conflict the church experienced as it confronted the first century world. Christians were not thrown to the lions for their penchant for nonconformity.

Practical Guidelines

- ▶ Some very subtle means of relativizing the text occur when we read into the text cultural considerations that ought not to be there. For example, the local sign of prostitution in the City of Corinth was an uncovered head. Therefore, the argument runs, the reason why Paul wanted women to cover their heads was to avoid a scandalous appearance. He didn't want Christian women to be mistaken for prostitutes.
- ▶ However, this kind of speculation is based on our reconstructed knowledge of first century Corinth and leads to an argument that Paul himself does not make. It puts words in his mouth and ignores what he actually says. Paul does not appeal to the culture of Corinth, but to Creation itself, demonstrating a principle that has always been since the beginning.

Practical Guidelines

- ▶ 3. The creation ordinances are indicators of the transcultural principle. If any Biblical principles transcend local customary limits, they are the appeals drawn from creation. Appeals to creation ordinances reflect stipulations a covenant God makes with humanity.
- ▶ The laws of creation were not given to the Hebrew people or to Christian people first, but are rooted in basic human responsibility to God. To set principles of creation aside as mere local custom is the worst kind of relativizing and de-historicizing of the Biblical content.
- ▶ To illustrate the importance of creation ordinances we can examine Jesus' treatment of divorce. When the Pharisees tested Jesus by asking if divorce were lawful for any cause, Jesus responded by citing the creation ordinance of marriage.

Practical Guidelines

- ▶ Matthew 19:4 And He answered and said to them, “Have you not read that He who made them at the beginning ‘made them male and female,’ 5 and said, ‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’? 6 So then, they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate.”
- ▶ By reconstructing the life situation of this narrative, it is easy to see that the Pharisees’ test involved getting Jesus opinion on an issue that sharply divided the rabbinical schools of Shammai and Hillel. Rather than siding with either side completely, Jesus took the matter back to creation to get the norms of marriage in perspective.

Practical Guidelines

- ▶ 4. In areas of uncertainty use the principle of humility. What if, after careful consideration of a Biblical mandate, we remain uncertain as to its character as principle or custom? If we must decide to treat it one way or the other but have no conclusive means to make the decision, what can we do?
- ▶ Would it be better to treat a possible custom as a principle and be guilty of being overscrupulous in our desire to obey God? Or would it be better to treat a possible principle as a custom and be guilty of being unscrupulous in demoting a transcendent requirement of God to the level of a mere human convention?
- ▶ We do not have the right to legislate the consciences of Christians were God has left them free. It cannot be applied in an absolute way where Scripture is silent.

Practical Guidelines

- ▶ The principle applies where we have Biblical mandates whose nature remains uncertain after all the arduous labor of exegesis has been exhausted.
- ▶ To short-circuit such labor by a blanket scrupulosity would obscure the distinction between custom and principle. This is a guideline of last resort and would be destructive if used as a first resort. We must be humble and careful about binding our conscience or the consciences of others where a matter is unclear.
- ▶ Barriers of time, place, and language frequently make communication difficult, but the barriers of culture are not so severe as to drive us to skepticism or despair of understanding God's Word. It is comforting that this Book has indeed manifested a peculiar ability to speak to the deepest needs and communicate the gospel effectively to people of all different times, places, and customs. The obstacle of culture cannot make void the power of the Word of God.

Next Week

- ▶ Lesson 132 – Hermeneutics: Theological Interpretation