

EVANGELICAL REVIEW OF THEOLOGY

VOLUME 2

Volume 2 • Number 2 • October 1978 p. 160a

Acknowledgements

The articles in this issue of the EVANGELICAL REVIEW OF THEOLOGY are reprinted with permission from the following journals:

'The Bible in the WCC', *Calvin Theological Journal*, Vol. 12, No. 2.

'Controversy at Culture Gap', *Eternity*, Vol. 27, No. 5.

'East African Revival', *Churchman*, Vol. 1, 1978.

'Survey of Recent Literature on Islam', *International Review of Mission*, LXVII, No. 265.

'Who are the Poor' and 'Responses', *Theological Forum of the Reformed Ecumenical Synod*, No. 1, Feb. 1978.

'The Great Commission of [Matthew 28](#): 18-20', *Reformed Theological Review*, Vol. 35, No. 3.

'A Glimpse of Christian Community Life in China', *Tenth*, Jan. 1977.

'TEE: Service or Subversion?', *Extension Seminary Quarterly Bulletin*, No. 4.

'TEE in Zaire: Mission or Movement?', *Ministerial Formation*, No. 2.

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Controversy at Culture Gap

by ROBERT C. SPROUL

UNLESS WE maintain that the Bible fell down from heaven on a parachute, inscribed by a peculiar heavenly language uniquely suited as a vehicle for divine revelation, or that the Bible was 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. That is, the Bible reflects the culture of its day, so how can it have authority over us in our day?

In 1967 the United Presbyterian Church in the USA adopted a new confession with the following statement concerning the Bible:

The Scriptures, given under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, are nevertheless the words of men, conditioned by the language, thought forms, and literary fashions of the places and times at which they were written. They reflect views of life, history, and the cosmos which were then current. The church therefore, has an obligation to approach the Scriptures with literary and historical understanding. As God has spoken his word in diverse cultural situations, the church is confident that he will continue to speak through the Scriptures in a changing world and in every form of human culture.

These words of the Confession of 1967 engendered a great deal of dialogue, debate, and controversy during the decade of the 60s. At issue was the sense and degree of *conditioning* ancient culture had on the formation of the Scriptures. Many conservatives manifested great distress to think that the Bible was conditioned in *any* sense by ancient culture. Many liberals argued that Scripture was not only 'conditioned' by culture but was 'bound' by it.

Unfortunately, the confession did not spell out in detail what was meant by the statement. Considering the statement merely in terms of its words, neither the orthodox B. B. Warfield nor the liberal Rudolf Bultmann could assent to it. The real issue remains [p. 182](#) and crosses denominational lines: To what extent is the Bible's relevance limited by changing human structures and perspectives in the Biblical text?

In order to produce an accurate exegesis of a Biblical text and understand what was said and what was meant, the student of Scripture must be involved with questions of languages (Greek, Hebrew, Aramaic), style, syntax, historical and geographical context, author, destination, literary genre. This kind of analysis is necessary for interpreting any body of literature—even contemporary literature.

In a word, the better I understand the 1st century culture of Palestine, the easier it becomes for me to have an accurate understanding of what was being said. But the Bible was written a long time ago and it is not always easy to bridge the sheer chasm of time between the 1st century and the 20th century.

The problem becomes more complicated when I realize that not only is the Bible conditioned by its cultural setting, but I am conditioned by my cultural setting as well. It sometimes becomes very difficult for me to hear and understand what the Bible is saying because I bring to it a host of extra-Biblical assumptions. In fact it is probably the problem of the influence of the 20th century secular mind-set that is the more formidable obstacle of the two.

The classical Reformed method of Biblical interpretation sought to approach exegesis in terms of the *tabula rasa* ('blank tablet') ideal. That is, the interpreter was expected to strive as much as possible for an objective reading of the text through the grammatico-historical approach. Though subjective influences always present a clear and present danger of distortion, the student of the Bible was expected to utilize every possible

safeguard in the pursuit of the ideal, listening to the message of Scripture without mixing in his own prejudices.

The existential method has sharply departed from the classical method by means of a new hermeneutic (hermeneutics is the science of interpretation). Rudolf Bultmann, for example, not only maintains that a *tabula rasa* approach is unattainable but insists that it is undesirable. Because the Bible was written in a prescientific age and is substantially the result of the formative influence of the life-situation of the early Church, Bultmann calls for a necessary 'prior understanding' before we come to the text [p. 183](#) at all. If modern man is to get any valid answers to his questions from the Bible, he must first come to the Bible with the right questions. Those questions can only be provided from a proper philosophical understanding of human existence. Such an understanding, however, is not gleaned from Scripture, but must be formulated prior to coming to Scripture. Here the 20th century blatantly conditions and binds the 1st century texts. (Bultmann finds his prior understanding within the broad framework of Martin Heidegger's existential philosophy.) The net result is a method that moves inexorably towards a subjective Bible removed from its history. The 1st century collapses under the 20th.

INTERPRETATION AND APPLICATION

Even if Biblical interpreters can agree on a method of exegesis and can agree on the exegesis of Scripture itself, we are still left with the questions of application, relevance, and obligation imposed by the text. If we agree that the Bible was inspired by God and was not merely the product of prescientific authors, we are still faced with questions of application. Does what the Bible commands 1st century Christians to do apply to us? In what sense do the Scriptures bind our consciences today?

The issue in many circles today is the issue of principle and custom. Unless we conclude that all of Scripture is principle or that all of Scripture is local custom, we are forced to establish categories and guidelines for discerning the difference.

If we take the position that everything is principle then some radical changes must be made in evangelism if we are going to be obedient. Jesus says, 'Carry no purse, no bag, no shoes; and greet no one on the way' ([Luke 10:4](#)). If we make this text a trans-cultural principle then it's time for Billy Graham to start preaching in his bare feet! Obviously the point of this text is not to set down a perennial requirement of barefooted evangelism.

However, other matters concerning Biblical commands are not so obvious for distinguishing custom and principle. Christians remain divided, for example, on the foot-washing rite. Is this a perpetual mandate for the Church of all ages or is it a local custom illustrating a principle of humble servanthood?

To illustrate the dilemma let us examine the head-covering [p. 184](#) passage of [1 Corinthians 11](#). The RSV translates this to require a woman's covering her head with a veil when she prophesies. In applying this text to our modern culture we have basically four options:

- (1) *It is entirely customary*—The whole passage is a cultural custom requiring a woman to cover her head with a veil to symbolize her submission to the man. Since we live in a different culture, it is no longer necessary for a woman to cover her head with anything and it is no longer necessary for women to be submissive to men.
- (2) *It is entirely principle*—If we take this approach to the passage then we must apply it by insisting that the woman is still to be submissive, that the woman is still to cover her head, and that the woman must cover her head with a veil.

- (3) *It is partly principle*—Option (A)—The principle of female submission is trans-cultural but the means of expressing it (covering the head with a veil) are customary and may be changed.
- (4) *It is partly principle*—Option (B)—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 by a babushka or a hat, etc.

How do we determine what alternative application is pleasing to God? I certainly do not know the final answer to these difficult questions. However, I would like to offer some practical guidelines to the problem.

PRACTICAL GUIDELINES

1. Examine the Bible itself for apparent areas of custom.

By doing this we can see that the Scriptures themselves have a certain latitude of custom. For example, divine principles from the Old Testament culture have been restated in a New Testament culture, suggesting a common core that transcends custom, culture and social convention.

Obviously, too, the Old Testament laws can be communicated by the Greek language. This obvious matter gives us at least a clue to the variable nature of verbal communication. That is, [p. 185](#) *language* is a cultural aspect that is open to change, not that the Biblical content may be distorted linguistically, but that the Gospel can be preached in English as well as Greek.

Secondly, we 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. Other normal cultural differences such as monetary systems are clearly open to change.

Such an analysis of cultural modes of expression may be simple with respect to clothes and money, but matters of cultural institutions are more difficult. For example, slavery has often been introduced into modern controversies over civil obedience and marital structures of authority. In the same context that Paul calls women to be submissive to husbands, he calls slaves to be submissive to their masters. Some have argued that since the seeds of the abolition of slavery are sown in the New Testament, so also are the seeds of the abolition of female subordination likewise sown. Both represent institutional structures that are culturally conditioned.

Here we must be very careful to distinguish between institutions the Bible merely *recognizes* and those which the Bible positively institutes, endorses, and ordains. The principle of submission to existing authority structures (such as the Roman government) does not carry with it a necessary implication of God's endorsement of those structures but merely a call to humility and civil obedience. God, in his ultimate providence, may ordain that there be a Caesar Augustus without endorsing Caesar as a model of Christian virtue. Yet in the institution of marriage—in Genesis there is a positive commandment and endorsement with respect to the structure of the home. Thus the Scriptures provide a basis for Christian behavior in the midst of oppressive or evil situations as well as ordaining structures that are to mirror the good designs of creation. To put the Biblical structures of the home on a par with the slavery question is to obscure the difference between the two.

2. Allowing Christian distinctives in the 1st century.

It is one thing to seek a more lucid understanding of the Biblical content by investigating the cultural situation of the 1st century; it is quite another to interpret the

New Testament as if it were merely an echo of the 1st century culture. To do so would be to fail to account for the serious conflict the Church experienced as [p. 186](#) it confronted the 1st century culture and the 1st century world.

Some very subtle means of relativizing the text occur by reading into the text cultural considerations that ought not to be there. For example, with respect to the hair-covering issue in Corinth, numerous commentators on the Epistle point out that the local sign of the prostitute in Corinth was the uncovered head. Therefore, the argument runs, the reason why Paul wanted women to cover their heads was to avoid a scandalous appearance of Christian women in the external guise of prostitutes.

What's wrong with this kind of speculation? The basic problem here is that our reconstructed knowledge of 1st century Corinth has led us to supply Paul with a rationale that is foreign to the one he gives himself. In a word, we are not only putting words into the Apostle's mouth that are not there, but we are ignoring words that are there. If Paul merely told women in Corinth to cover their heads and gave no rationale we would be strongly inclined to supply it via our cultural knowledge.

In this case, however, the Apostle does provide a rationale which is based on an appeal to creation, not the custom of Corinthian harlots. We must be careful not to let our zeal for knowledge of the culture obscure what is actually said. To subordinate Paul's stated reason to our speculatively conceived reason is to slander the Apostle and turn exegesis into eisegesis.

3. Appeals to creation ordinances are indicators of trans-cultural principle.

If any Biblical principles transcend local customary limits, they are the principles drawn from creation. Appeals to creation ordinances reflect stipulations a covenant God makes with man *qua* man. The laws of creation are not given to man as Hebrew or man as Christian or man as Corinthian, etc., 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. Yet it is precisely at this point that many evangelical scholars have relativized New Testament principles. Here we see the existential method operating most blatantly.

To illustrate the importance of creation ordinances we can examine Jesus' treatment of the divorce question. When the Pharisees tested Jesus by asking if divorce was lawful for any [p. 187](#) cause, Jesus responded by citing the creation ordinance of marriage: 'Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, for this cause a man shall leave ... what therefore God has joined together, let no man separate' ([Matthew 19:4-6](#)).

By reconstructing the life-situation of this narrative, it is easy to see that the 'test' of the Pharisees involved getting Jesus' opinion on an issue which divided sharply the Rabbinic Schools of Shammai and Hillel. Rather than siding with either, Jesus took the matter back to creation to get the norms of marriage in perspective. To be sure, he acknowledged the Mosaic modification of the law of creation, but refused to weaken the norm further by yielding to public pressure or the cultural opinions of his contemporaries. The inference to be drawn is that the creation ordinances are normative unless explicitly modified by later Biblical revelation.

4. Uncertainty and humility.

What if, after careful consideration of a Biblical mandate, we remain uncertain as to the question of 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? Here the Biblical principle of humility can be helpful. The issue is simple—would it be better to

treat a possible custom as a principle and be guilty of being overscrupulous in our design 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? I hope the answer is obvious.

If this humility principle is isolated from the other guidelines mentioned, it could easily be misconstrued as grounds for legalism. The humility principle does not mean that we have the right to legislate the consciences of Christians where God has left them free. It cannot be applied in a normative way where Scripture is silent. The principle applies where we have Biblical mandates whose nature remains uncertain (as to custom and principle) 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.

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The East African Revival—African Initiative Within a European Tradition

by BRIAN STANLEY

IN 1877 the first missionaries of the Church Missionary Society arrived at the court of Kabaka Mutesa, the ruler of the kingdom of Buganda; a kingdom lying at the heart of what is now Uganda, which had risen during the 19th century to pre-eminence among its neighbours.¹ European missions in Africa at this time were winning most of their converts from amongst marginal groups at the fringes of traditional society. In Buganda, however, the story was very different. Christianity offered the Kabaka and his supporters the ideological weapon they needed in their attempts to assert his authority against the representatives of the traditional gods, and with remarkable rapidity the political *elite* aligned themselves either with the Anglican missionaries or with their Roman Catholic rivals. In the tumultuous conditions associated with the advent of British influence and then rule, Bugandan politics assumed a strongly religious flavour, and it was the Protestant party which emerged from the Uganda Agreement of 1900 as the chief beneficiary of the colonial *concordat* with the British. Protestantism was thus entrenched as the virtual established religion in Buganda, and Anglican baptism followed by Anglican education became the accepted route to social and political advancement. In a context of intense Protestant-Roman Catholic rivalry, the Catholic policy of mass baptisms

¹ The first draft of this article was presented to a meeting of the Historians' Study Group of the UCCF Associates on 26 March 1977. I owe an especial debt to Dr. Joe Church, who kindly gave me free access to his autobiographical account of the Revival and answered many of my questions. The responsibility for the interpretation of the Revival advanced in this article is, of course, entirely my own.