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Whenever modern people speak of their commitments, when they feel an obligation, when they look for the opportunity to make their contribution to the community, and in many other behavioural patterns, they express the imprint upon them of the biblical morality and its author.

The Bible, unfashionable as it may be today, has shaped the development of many basic patterns of our culture. There remains the question of how to activate this heritage into useful consciousness. The appeal to the Bible itself is felt to be oppressive.[44] Through cultural criticism perhaps we shall find an avenue to re-open the Bible as a public good.[45] At least we should be able to remind our contemporaries of the debt they owe to biblical thinking in the development of the norms they cherish.

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Culture and Revelation

Allan Harman

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Despite the need for updating, this article published ten years ago outlines with clarity the hermeneutical tension between the adaptation and application of the biblical text to the plurality of our cultural contexts today. The author outlines the complexity of assessing the cultural elements in revelation, the dangers of cultural relativism and suggests methodological guidelines. He points to the Reformation principles of the Analogy of Faith and the perspicuity of Scripture as a whole as the way forward in this demanding task. Editor

Keywords: Culture, contextualisation, cultural relatavism, revelation

The problem of relating the Bible to modern readers is an old one, even though the terminology employed to describe it might be new. Thus we find that the term 'contextualisation' has come into vogue to describe the task. This term dates from only around 1972 when it was first used in a World Council of Churches document. Shoki Coe and Aharoan Sapsezian, directors of the Theological Education Fund of the W.C.C., in their report *Ministry and Context*, used the term 'contextualisation' as going beyond what was implied by 'indigenisation'. While both terms were originally used in missiological settings, 'contextualisation' is now being used to describe the broader process of interpreting and applying the biblical teaching in any given cultural environment.

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[44] Paradoxically it was the development of biblical criticism by the English deists that triggered the Enlightenment humanism whose pseudo-objectivity we are at last discounting; Henning Graf Reventlow, *The Authority of the Bible and the Rise of the Modern World* (London: SCM, 1984).

[45] Lesslie Newbigin, *Truth to Tell: The Gospel as Public Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991).

Linguistic and anthropological studies have given greater impetus to the task and also provided models from other disciplines to use in this area of biblical study.

Within the Scriptures there is clear evidence of contextualisation, with the Incarnation itself being the pre-eminent example. The speeches in Acts provide excellent examples of how the same message could be adapted to very varied audiences. Likewise in Acts and in the epistles there are practical illustrations of the gospel being contextualised (cf. Acts 15:1–29; 1 Cor. 8:1–10; 22). Perhaps Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 9:19–23 present the model for contextualisation for in them we have a declaration that he could accept the life-style and stand where his hearers stood in order to fulfil his evangelistic goal.

The task of contextualisation is a complex one. This is because it involves a variety of factors including the original context of the various biblical books, the time gap between the various books and later readers, and the context of the readers today. If we take the first of these, it is soon apparent that for the Bible the task is much more difficult than for other ancient books because it is composed of a wide variety of literature, stems from various cultures, and is written over an extensive period of time. Since the original message was given in a contextualised form the task is that of decontextualisation, i.e., freeing it of those features which were appropriate to the original context but not an intrinsic part of the message, before proceeding to recontextualise it in a contemporary setting.

I. PROBLEMS AND DIFFICULTIES

Pursuit of this task involves problems and difficulties and some of them can be outlined.

1. It is hard to be sure that we know sufficient about every biblical writer's context to determine with precision what were contextual features of his writing. For example, for the Old Testament one can instance the explanations of the patriarchal narratives on the basis of interpretation of the Nuzi texts, or the employment of Ugaritic material to elucidate Old Testament words and concepts. When the interpretation of the extra-biblical material is so dubious, great care has to be exercised or the outcome is that a false (or at best, an imperfect) understanding of extra-biblical material becomes the controlling factor in biblical interpretation. Extra-biblical material is a useful tool, but should not be allowed to dominate the exegetical process. Similarly, New Testament examples can be cited such as commentators' suggestion that the reason for Paul's admonition in regard to women having their heads covered was because the uncovered head was a sign of a prostitute in Corinth. In this case the attempt at a cultural explanation for the practice falls into difficulties. We do not know that the suggested explanation was in fact any part of the background of the Corinthian letters. More importantly, we do know that the explanation is in direct conflict with Paul's own explanation which is unrelated to a cultural framework.

2. The task of recontextualization has to be understood as involving several dimensions.[1] The first dimension attempts to cover the time gap between say the writings of the New Testament in the first century and our own setting at the end of the 20th century. The second dimension is the breadth of cultural patterns present at any particular time. This involves not only an assessment of the cultural differences for example between East and West, but the innumerable differences which exist within both East and West. The third dimension is concerned with the varieties of understanding which exist within any one cultural pattern at any one time. Contextualisation has to be related to the capabilities of various groups within a society and expressed in terms which

[1] I am here following the helpful discussion in Millard Erikson, *Christian Theology* (Baker, 1987), pp. 75ff.

they can comprehend. The difficulty here is in maintaining a correct balance between these dimensions, as they all have a bearing whenever a person attempts to communicate to someone else what they have learned of the original text.

3. There is often confusion of thinking between understanding contextualisation as adaptation on the one hand, or application on the other. Sometimes the terms 'transformers' and 'translators' are used of those who practise these two methods respectively. Adaptation has as its focal point man and his context (both ancient and modern) and displays a willingness to effect radical change in order to fit biblical teaching into a particular cultural context. This means that the Scripture is not only conditioned by culture but bound by it. The process may wellcommence in a legitimate attempt to contextualise biblical concepts and language, but degenerate 'into the arbitrary imposition of conceptual structures, whose genius and control spring from authoritative voices alien to the Bible itself, onto theBible itself'.[2] Application is rather the taking of biblical norms of doctrine and conduct and applying them to particular situations, and in so doing, keep those norms fully operative. While recognizing that the content of the gospel does not change, application has more to do with the methodology of using the Scripture. In fact any theology which does not end in application has no real claim to be genuine theology.[3]

4. The debates concerning contextualisation are inter-connected with various philosophical and theological ideas. Thus many discussions start from a stand-point which assumes that there is no objective truth at all. The application of a hermeneutic to the Bible has as its goal not 'what is true', but rather 'what is true for me'. This is linked with the idea that when I come to an ancient text it must first translate me, before I can translate it.In essence an anthropological approach has been substituted for a theological one.[4]

5. As a corollary to the preceding point, there is a very real danger that unless the boundaries are clearly defined for the text of contextualizing, we arrive at a position of cultural relativism. The task then becomes not one of trying to define what an ancient text meant but *only* what it means for me. The result of this is to make a particular culture so time-bound that we cannot say that our predecessors were either right or wrong in their thinking, nor can we say anything about our successors. Taken to its logical conclusion this would render the idea of objective divine revelation impossible, as well as making theology itself a culture-bound phenomenon. There could be no core of truth or basic abiding principles of belief and practice which are universally applicable and able to be passed on to those of another culture.

There can be no denying that there are cultural differences between biblical writers and ourselves. But these differences are not total, and investigation has to be made to ascertain just where the lines of divergence and agreement lie. Without such investigation we cannot decide *a priori* what we share with ancient writers. When we come to the

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[2] D.A. Carson, 'A Sketch of the Factors Determining Current Hermeneutical Debate in Cross-cultural Contexts', *Biblical Interpretation and the Church: Text and Content*, ed. D.A. Carson (Paternoster, 1984), p. 18.

[3] Cf. the words of Harvie Conn: 'I argue that if theology is to be biblical theology, it ends, not in the self-assurance of an exegetical job well done, but in the re-appraisal again of those demands and solutions we originally brought to it at the initiation of our participation in the "hermeneutical circle" ', *Evangelical Review of Theology*, 2, 2 (Oct. 1978), p. 234.

[4] For good discussions on the philosophical background, see A.C. Thiselton, 'The New Hermeneutic', *New Testament interpretation: Essays on Principles and Methods*, ed. I.H. Marshall (Paternoster, 1977), pp. 308–333, and the shorter summary of D.A. Carson, op. cit. pp. 11–29.

biblical documents we have to ask how dependent is the written material on underlying cultural presuppositions. This means that there are two basic aspects of our investigation which require attention. We have to decide how far cultural presuppositions have intruded into biblical revelation so that they have become part of it, and then secondly to assess whether our understanding of the general cultural background of the Bible is to influence our interpretation of the biblical writings.[5]

6. Another difficulty relates to language and the distinction between translation and application. All biblical truths come to us in a cultural way, and the language used by the biblical writers and by ourselves is part of a total cultural milieu. While from one aspect religious language is different because of God's transcendence, yet on the other hand it is also ordinary language.[6] Because it is ordinary language it is affected by changes in meaning. Two aspects of change can be mentioned. When attempting to translate, interpret and apply the biblical teaching, we face the pressing contemporary problem that many words have changed their meanings. This applies not just to archaic words but especially to value words which have often assumed a derogatory meaning. There is also grammatical transformation taking place, which shows an evolution of self-consciousness which has affected our speech patterns. As an example, think of the many participles which are now used as adjectives (charming, understanding, thrilling, amazing, etc). When used as adjectives the unexpressed object of the verb is really the speaker. Thus a thrilling address means thrilling *to me*. In particular, speech about God is affected, and there is the constant danger that instead of translation we have intrusive interpretation. In translating 'we are not at liberty to act as though the world of the ancient Near East was not radically different from our own, or to pretend that the original text is not saying something different from what we might choose to say on the subject, if we translate responsibly. Application of a text—study of it—is open to cultural accommodation and discussion; translation is not'.[7]

7. It is also important to remember that in approaching the biblical text we are not just coming to ancient documents like other Near Eastern or classical writings. We are approaching what claims to be God's revelation, and which needs spiritual illumination if we are to understand it. Even our fact-finding endeavours have to be performed on the basis of what is contained in the Scriptures. To understand the world we have to see it through the glasses which God himself provides. Calvin uses this analogy in the *Institutes* to underscore the idea that the source of all true knowledge has to come from God's witness to himself.[8]

II. ASSESSMENT OF CULTURAL ELEMENTS IN REVELATION

Acceptance of the authority of the Bible does not mean the end of all our difficulties. Rather it marks the beginning of problems of interpretation which will always be with us. In seeking to be obedient to its claims, our problem is twofold. On the one hand, we

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[5] In these two paragraphs I have utilized arguments found in Paul Helm, *Divine Revelation* (Marshall, Morgan and Scott), pp. 47–55.

[6] Cf. John Frame, 'God and Biblical Language: Transcendence and Immanence', *God's Inerrant Word: An International Symposium on the Trustworthiness of Scripture*, ed. J.W. Montgomery (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1974), pp. 159–177, 159–177.

[7] D.L. Jeffery, 'Inclusitivity and Our Language of Worship', the *Reformed Journal*, 37, 8 (1987), p. 17. See his whole discussion (pp. 13–22) for a most stimulating approach.

[8] Calvin, *Institutes*, I.VI.2.

understand all too well many injunctions (e.g. 'Do all things without murmuring or disputing'), but have difficulty in obeying. On the other hand, there is the problem, which is at present our concern, of distinguishing between principles and customs. All Christians who accept the authority of the Bible make a distinction between the two, or otherwise they would find themselves bound by numerous injunctions which they could not possibly obey. It is in the area of what constitutes the basis on which we make the distinction that opposing viewpoints are brought to the fore. In assessing the impact of the culture of biblical writers upon their writings and of our culture upon the way in which we apply the gospel today we are faced with decisions in regard to what is of continuing validity for Christian practice.

If we take a practice like women covering their heads (1 Cor. 11), there are four basic positions we can adopt.[9]

1. It is entirely customary. This position assumes that the practice was one required in the cultural setting at Corinth, but not necessary in another culture in which there is no submission of the female to the male and therefore there is no need to have a veil or hat covering the head.

2. It is entirely principle. This viewpoint holds that the submission of the woman is universally applicable, and that it must be in the form described in the Corinthian passage.

3. It is partly principle. Option A. This position maintains that the principle of female submission remains valid. However, the manner by which women in Corinth expressed that principle was a cultural one, and it can be changed from culture to culture.

4. It is partly principle. Option B. The final position maintains that both the submission and the means of expressing it are perpetual, though the covering may be altered to suit the demands of a particular culture. Thus, a hat is acceptable in countries where veils are not in common use.

These distinctions can be seen in many of the discussions which take place on New Testament practices. It is a very complex area and some guidelines have to be held in order to help make decisions in particular cases.

III. GUIDELINES

1. In establishing our methodology we have to recognize that there are three important steps in the process.

a. We have to understand the original setting of a biblical passage and seek to ascertain the meaning the author intended his readers to understand and which is conveyed by his words.
b. Proceeding from that first point, we have to reflect on what was the revelation addressed to the particular situation and the response which it was intended to elicit.
c. Only after the first two steps can we go on to ask how that same revelation is addressed to our situation today.

In order to arrive at the third point, there can be no escape from pursuing the first two. Moreover, the order of our task is important. To come toan understanding of the biblical revelation we must approach it by historical-grammatical exegesis. That is to say, a

[9] The illustration is borrowed from R.C. Sproul, 'Controversy at the Culture Gap', *Evangelical Review of Theology*, 2, 2 (October, 1978), p. 84).

passage is interpreted according to the natural sense of the words and in accordance with our understanding of the historical context in which it was given and received.

I have deliberately referred to the meaning which the author intended to convey. We are unable to discover what processes went on in an author's mind, because we cannot *be* that person. What we have are the words that were written, and the task is to study them and come to an understanding of what they mean. Speaker (or writer) analysis in the case of biblical documents can only be discourse analysis projected back onto the speaker, for the only source of the speakers' intentions is the extant text.[10]

There has been much discussion of the *sensus plenior* or 'fuller meaning' which God may have intended a particular passage to convey. Even when the fuller meaning is homogenous with the literal sense[11], the determination of any 'fuller meaning' appears to become very subjective. The fact that the New Testament writers declare more from an Old Testament passage than the original writers or recipients understood, is no justification for our attempt to act similarly.

2. There has to be careful analysis of any particular biblical passage to see if it has reference to customs which are purely cultural or to institutions which are of divine appointment. There are many cultural features in the Bible which can be changed without affecting the message. Language itself is one of those features. Hebrew and Greek are not sacred languages which cannot be translated into other languages, for clearly from within the Bible there is evidence that the message can be conveyed in various linguistic forms. Other features provide greater degrees of difficulty, especially in the areas of institutions. It is helpful to distinguish between institutions which are *recognized* and those which are positively *ordained*. Thus the principle of submission to the civic authority structure of the Roman Empire does not imply that we must use that as a model for all civic authorities. On the other hand, the authority of the home is based on a positive command in Genesis 2 and reiterated many times in the Scripture.

3. There has to be the recognition that while revelation came through particular cultural settings, yet revelation constantly challenged those cultures. At times, even when in the biblical text there is reference to specific features associated with a culture, the biblical revelation has often already decontextualized those features and either uses them in a polemical way or in order to infuse well-known expressions with new meaning. Thus, for example, the opening chapter of Genesis appears to employ Near Eastern concepts and expressions in a polemical way, while Paul in his epistles gives words familiar from the Greek mystery religions a new Christian context. Ultimately the meaning of words and phrases must be ascertained from the biblical context, not from the culture with which they may have been shared.

4. We have to place the emphasis on the didactic passages of Scripture for discovering the elements of its teaching which are transcultural. To put this another way, we have to insist that the essential material which is transcultural in the Bible will not be found by scrutinizing incidental features of the text; but by considering the passages containing basic theological and moral teaching. This is not to argue for a canon within a canon, but simply to recognize that the central core of biblical teaching has to be separated from the peripheral aspects, just as we separate the essential message of a parable from the incidental features which are part of the overall picture. In many cases, too, the same

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[10] See the two articles by V.S. Poythress, 'Analysing a Biblical Text: Some Important Linguistic Distinctions', *SJT* 32, 2 (1979), 113–137; 'Analysing a Biblical Text: What are We After?' *SJT* 32, 4 (1979), 319–331.

[11] The term 'Homogenous' is used by R.E. Brown in his valuable discussion on 'Hermeneutics' in the *Jerome Biblical Commentary*, pp. 617ff. to describe the fact that the fuller meaning must be an extension of the literal meaning which the author wished to convey.

teaching is repeated in more than one biblical context such as the New Testament epistles which enables us to be sure that we are dealing with a didactic passage. Continuing Christian practice is drawn from the imperatives of Scripture, not its descriptive content.

5. Often when teaching is given in the Scriptures, appeal is made to a recognized permanent factor as the basis for a particular practice. Thus there is the appeal to creation ordinances, for example, drawing attention to features of human life which were ordained by God at the very beginning of human history, and which come to man as man. Of all biblical features, they are the transcultural principles *par excellence*. The dispute between Jesus and the Pharisees about divorce provides a very clear example of the application of the principle. When the question is raised with Jesus he does not become involved with the contemporary discussions on the matter but focuses on the creation mandate in Genesis 2:24. 'Haven't you read that at the beginning the Creator made them male and female, and said "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother" . . . Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate' (Matt. 19:4–6). A different type of example would be the principle of the priesthood of all believers, which is based on the fact that our great High Priest has 'passed through the heaven'. Not only can all believers have confidence in coming to the throne of grace (Heb. 4:14–16), but as Jesus is a priest forever (Heb. 7:21, 24) it also holds true that all who are saved draw near to God through him (v. 25).

IV. APPLICATIONS AND CONTROLS

When we come to follow out any system of guidelines we still have to exercise great care in our selection of the areas of biblical teaching which we regard as amenable to contextualisation, and in the manner in which we apply the guidelines. When biblical teaching is considered then, there appear to be four main categories of material to which contextualisation could apply.[12] These are:

1. The core: the essential message of sin and grace, with emphasis on the redemptive work of Jesus Christ.

2. The substance: the Old Testament explanations of the demands of God and the associated principles of worship and practice, together with the gospel tradition as it has been passed on by the apostolic band.

3. The application: exhortations which were addressed to particular local settings of the people of God.

4. The expression: the manner of life of the believing community as it relates to a particular cultural setting. This may involve the application of general Christian principles to specific situations which have no direct counterpart in the biblical text.

The degree of contextualisation will vary in relation to each of these categories. There will be the least amount of contextualisation in the first two, and the greatest in the fourth. From culture to culture, the core and substance of the faith have to remain constant, allowing only for some linguistic change in order to communicate effectively the message. In regard to application there will be no contextualisation when the New Testament suggests that a command has as its foundation a universally applicable basis. On the other hand, certain matters of social custom will be contextualised, so that the message is related meaningfully to a particular cultural environment.

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[12] These categories have been drawn from the helpful discussion by N.R. Ericson, 'Implications from the New Testament for Contextualisation', *Theology and Mission: Papers Given at Trinity Consultation* No. 1 ed. D.J. Hesslegrave (Baker, 1978), pp. 83.

The New Testament points to certain controls which hem us in, and which should prevent us from lapsing into extreme individualism in our interpretation of the biblical message. Paul made his appeal to the commandments of the Lord (I Cor. 7:10). The teaching of the canonical Gospels provides for us those commandments, along with the epistolary expansion of them by men on whose minds the spirit of God had worked (Jn. 16:12–15). There is also recourse to the collective body of believers, drawing upon the formulation of biblical teaching by past generations of Christians and those by contemporary believers. Past teaching provides a framework from which to make further developments, while the pursuit of the task along with the total church community provides a safeguard against excessive individualism. Finally, of course, there is the corrective activity of the Word of God itself (Heb. 2:12, 13). The Word of God is active and discerning, and we stand daily before as it comes to judge and to correct. That Word must not only be our source of knowledge but also be our teacher and corrector.

Whatever guidelines are adopted we are going to be left with cases in which there is uncertainty. On some issues we are going to have to admit that we do not know at this stage of the history of interpretation if the reference is to a principle or a custom. Clearly we do not want to elevate a human custom into a divine command. It would be better to lean the other way and consider a possible custom to be a matter of principle and so be overscrupulous in our obedience to our Lord, while reserving final judgement on the exact nature of the case before us.

The hermeneutical task is daunting and demanding, but two great principles stemming from the Reformation tradition of biblical interpretation give encouragement. The first of these is that of the Analogy of Faith. The Scripture is a unified whole, and in interpretation we need to compare Scripture with Scripture. The second principle really underlies the concept of the Analogy of Faith. It is that of the perspicuity or clarity of Scripture. The biblical message is clear enough for ordinary people to understand, with obscure finding their explanation in another part. 'Perspicuity' is an epithet to the totality of Scripture, not its individual parts. It also relates to the basic message of the Bible, and it is not a description concerning the difficulty of the exegetical task. Exegetical difficulties and problems in applying the results to contemporary church life should not distract us from receiving and responding to the central message of Scripture.[13]

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Christ and Culture

Paul G. Schrotenboer

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[13] On these two aspects of Scripture see R.C. Sproul 'Biblical Interpretation and the Analogy of Faith', *Inerrancy and Common Sense*, ed. Roger R. Nicole and J. Ramsey Michaels (Baker, 1980), pp. 119–135; S.B. Ferguson, 'The Book for All the People', *Christian Graduate*, (June 1982), pp. 17–20.