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Certainly there are potential forms and styles inconducive to the worship of God. Not every available means is compatible with our understanding of the nature of God and worship. But the human activity of worship is not accomplished through supracultural means. Worship styles which approximate patterns found in the socio-cultural milieu are most effective in ushering worshippers into the presence of God. As in all styles of Spiritual expression, worship will and must use appropriate, available forms relevant to the social setting.

Conclusion

The church is the Body of Christ, a holy nation, and a royal priesthood. It is indeed God's new society in the midst of an old and fallen one. The church of Christ must unabashedly verbalize that claim and give concrete evidence to such in its pilgrimage within the world. But the church can never be acultural or asocial. It always exists within a society and intentionally or otherwise reflects cultural motifs in its theology, polity and styles of expression.

The aim of the church is not to purge itself of all identifying features of its culture. Rather it is to wisely incorporate those cultural themes and patterns which give flesh and blood to God's transcendent message. It is to prudently reject those cultural aspects that are incongruent with the faith and distort the essence of God's message and work.

The church is a social institution. Sociologists can analyze its descriptive features in much the same manner as any other social grouping such as family, state, or community. It is incumbent upon the church to demonstrate that in its earthly manifestation it is more than a social institution—that it is indeed the Body of Jesus Christ.

Normativity, Relevance and Relativism

by Harvie M. Conn

Can one believe in the Bible as the only infallible rule of faith and practice and, at the same time, affirm its culturally-oriented particularity? Must the evangelical tremble in fear every time he hears scholars ask, "How does our understanding of the cultural setting of the Corinthian church affect the way we understand Paul's appeal to women to be silent in the church?" Will our current sensitivity to the New Testament as a word addressed to our century relativize our parallel commitment to it as a word addressed also to the first century?

These are the questions addressed in this article. We do not intend to lay out particular hermeneutical rules to help us in this inquiry. We will touch on them but only as they aid us in our larger research. Nor will we cover the whole sweep of scholarship. Our consideration will be on discussions within the evangelical community.

Many of our case studies will come from those texts central to a study of the place of women in culture. Much current evangelical thinking on the Bible's particularity has revolved around these texts. It is not, however, the issue of the Bible's approach to women that we seek to resolve. Our attention is directed to the larger question of the Bible and its culturally-related character. We examine these texts (and others) only to the degree they relate to this larger agenda.

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¹ James Gustafson, *Treasure in Earthen Vessels: The Church as a Human Community* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), p. 14.

² For an analysis of these concepts see G. Linwood Barney, "The Supracultural and the Cultural," in *The Gospel and Frontier Peoples*, edited by R. Pierce Beaver (South Pasadena: William Carey, 1973), pp. 48-55.

³ For a good survey of the possibilities and limitations of contextualization see John Stott and Robert Coote, eds., *Down to Earth: Studies in Christianity and Culture* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1980).

⁴ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: Scribners, 1958), p. 40.

⁵ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3 Vols. (New York: Scribners, 1899), 1:10.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

⁷ Augustus H. Strong, *Systematic Theology* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1907), p. 2.

⁸ David F. Wells, "An Evangelical Theology: The Painful Transition from *Theoria* to *Praxis*" in George Marsden (ed.), *Evangelicalism and Modern America* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1984), p. 85.

⁹ Note, for example, the difference between James' treatment of the term "justification" and Paul's. The two are not contradictory, but because language is symbol two writers may mean different things by the same word.

¹⁰ See Peter Toon (ed.), *Puritan Eschatology* (London: James Clarke, 1970).

¹¹ Stanley Gundry, "Hermeneutics or *Zeitgeist* as the Determining Factor in the History of Eschatologies," *Journal of Evangelical Theological Society* (May, 1977), p. 50.

¹² John Jefferson Davis, *The Necessity of Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978), p. 172.

¹³ R.H.S. Boyd, *India and the Latin Captivity of the Church* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1974), p. 36.

¹⁴ H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* (New York: Meridian, 1929), pp. 213-214.

¹⁵ Gustafson, p. 31.

¹⁶ A good example is the Puritan "Cambridge Platform" of 1648 which claimed, "The parties of Church-Government are all of them exactly described in the Word of God. . . and therefore to continue one and the same, unto the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ." Williston Walker, *The Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism* (Boston: Pilgrim Press, 1960), p. 203.

¹⁷ Gordon Fee, "Reflections on Church Order in the Pastoral Epistles," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* (June, 1985), p. 142.

¹⁸ Eric C. Jay, *The Church: Its Changing Image Through Twenty Centuries* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1977), p. 214.

¹⁹ Paul M. Harrison, *Authority and Power in the Free Church Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1959), pp. 98 ff.

²⁰ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Mentor, 1958), p. 169. It should be noted that James' typology is drawn from E.O. Starbuck's *The Psychology of Religion*.

²¹ Hans Kasdorf, *Christian Conversion in Context* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1980), p. 29.

²² A different but related analysis is set forth by Andrew Greeley with his notions of Apollonian and Dionysian orientations in religious ritual. The Apollonian orientation stresses logical understanding and reason in worship, while the Dionysian is emotively orientated. See Greeley's *The Denominational Society* (Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman, 1972).

²³ Liston Pope, *Millhands and Preachers* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1942), p. 86.

The Evangelical Agenda of the Past

Evangelicals, in a sense, have wrestled with the problems associated with cultural relativity in earlier decades. Linked more with terms like relevance and applicability, the questions seemed easier then. Is foot washing a continuing ceremony? Must women wear hats or veils in church? Are there times in the official ministry of the church when a woman can teach adult males? What about the use of tobacco and the drinking of alcoholic beverages in moderation?

Then, as now, answers have not always been the same. Evangelicals, in seeking to uphold the infallible authority of Scripture, sought a variety of ways to account for the diversity of opinion. Some noted that mistakes can occur in applying a scriptural injunction to conditions other than those to which it was truly applicable. Cultural distance between dusty roads and concrete sidewalks translates foot washing into humble Christian service for others. The passage of time transforms the hat from a symbol of modesty to one of fashion.

It was also noted that "there are injustices which are simultaneously appropriate to certain undertakings and circumstances and not to others."¹ The same Jesus who told his disciples at the Last Supper to buy a sword (Luke 22:36) a few hours later warned the same group, "All they that take the sword shall perish with the sword" (Matt. 26:32). Biblical texts, it was argued, cannot be applied as a universal plaster for any

conceivable condition. Their use depends upon their specific applicability.

Often resorted to in such debates was the concept of *adiaphora* (literally, "things indifferent"). Here, under the rubric of Christian liberty, were included those agenda items thought to be non-fundamentals of the faith. Generally ethical and not doctrinal issues, they became centers of discussion about which charity toward differences was to be exercised. The popular mind regarded them as peripheral to the centrality of the gospel, disputed areas of the Christian life over which unanimous agreement could not be reached in the community. Dominated by a North American fundamentalist mentality, the disputed areas included such issues as dancing, theatre attendance, the use of tobacco and alcoholic beverages.

In many respects, these responses carried a large measure of truth, and still do. But the development of biblical studies has corrected and complicated the situation.

Contemporary Discussion

Earlier scholarship carried on these discussions in the name of "hermeneutics," the discipline that taught us skills in exegesis, in determining the meaning of the original author. "Application," an afterthought of this, was a homiletical art focusing on the relatively simple extension of exegesis to contemporary faith and life. No guidelines, however, were available to leap the gulf between exegesis and application. No discipline existed to bridge the gap between the two worlds of then and now, there and here.

The awareness of that gap came to the attention of evangelical theology outside its camp, through the work of the early Karl Barth, Rudolf Bultmann and those who followed them. These scholars, though disagreeing in many areas, had joined in emphasizing the kerygmatic nature of the New Testament, the importance of the interpreting subject and his or her pre-understanding in the act or process of communication. Making use of neo-orthodox dependence on existentialism, they saw the New Testament as more than some "objectively perceived" word from God. It did not convey timeless, eternal information unrelated to situations and hearers. The objectivism of liberal (or fundamentalist) scholarship was repudiated; it could not do justice to the biblical text.

Evangelical scholarship could not listen to these men. Their questioning of the authenticity of the New Testament message, their resorting to existentialism to provide a relevant word from Paul or Jesus, were trails down which the evangelical properly did not go. But as a side effect, their hermeneutical call for attention to how to speak the word of the Lord in the twentieth century was lost.

Only in the last decades of biblical research has the significance of the hermeneutical issue been recognized by the evangelical. Combined with a new sensitivity to what has been called "reader-response" and audience criticism, hermeneutics increasingly has come to be seen "as the operative engagement or interaction between the horizon of the reader. The problem of hermeneutics was the problem of two horizons."²

The two horizons were those of the biblical text and those of the twentieth century reader. And the hermeneutical question became not simply, "What did the Scripture mean to those to whom it was first given?" but rather, "What does the Scripture mean to me?" The earlier question of relevance has now become an essential part of the quest for biblical meaning. We are called to "grasp first of all what Scripture *meant* as communication from its human writers speaking on God's behalf to their own envisaged readers, and from that what it *means* for us."³ The question, "What do these texts mean *to us*?"

has given the old question of relevance a new importance. With it we now search for the nature of biblical "meaning" itself.⁴

In formulating the issue this way, the evangelical has not capitulated to the Barthian formula that Scripture becomes the Word of God to its readers and hearers. The biblical horizon remains the norm of the twentieth century setting. It is translation we undertake, not transformation. Whether we begin our hermeneutical adventure with problems raised by our world or with a struggle to understand the biblical author's intended meaning, we cannot finish the search without resorting to the final judge of our struggle, the Scriptures themselves. Whether we examine the text or our context, we are always aware that the text is examining us.

In this process, the heart of the hermeneutical task takes on a significance it did not have forty years ago. That heart does not lie simply in the effort to find the biblical "principles" that emerge out of the historical meaning of each passage. The Bible does not passively lie there while we search it for theories that we later fit realistically into our setting. The Word is a divine instrument of action. And our hermeneutical task is to see how it applies to each of us in the cultural context and social setting we occupy in God's redemptive history. We are involved in looking for the place where the horizons of the text and the interpreter intersect or engage.

Drawn into this search for fusion, then, has come a new sensitivity to human cultures and their role in the process of understanding. Both horizons are embedded in different cultures, sometimes comparable, sometimes not. How is meaning found when what is common sense in one culture is not common sense in another? The exhortation of Paul to obey one's master in everything (Col. 3:22) is addressed to a world of silent, involuntary slaves. But what does it mean in a culture where employers are to some extent partners in work with their employees? "If we say that the biblical command means today that we should give appropriate respect and loyalty to employers rather than unconditional obedience, are we watering it down, or are we rather expressing the nub of the matter in terms appropriate to modern working conditions?"⁵

A linguist asks a group made up of Africans and missionaries to tell him the main point of the story of Joseph in the Old Testament. The Europeans speak of Joseph as a man who remained faithful to God no matter what happened to him. The Africans, on the other hand, point to Joseph as a man who, no matter how far he travelled, never forgot his family. Differing cultural backgrounds prompted each of the two answers. Which is legitimate understanding? Are both?

In American hippie culture of the 1960s, long hair on boys had become the symbol of a new era, for some a sign of rebellion against the status quo. "For Christians to wear that symbol, especially in light of I Corinthians 11:14, 'Does not nature itself teach you that for a man to wear long hair is degrading to him' (RSV), seemed like an open defiance of God Himself. Yet most of those who quoted that text against youth culture allowed for Christian women to cut their hair short (despite verse 15), did not insist on women's heads being covered in worship, and never considered that 'nature' came about by a very *unnatural* means—a haircut."⁶ Have our cultural, social meanings been read back into the author's intended meanings?

A New Agenda of Problems

From this discussion has emerged a new set of questions or, at least, an old set with new emphases. What are some of them?

1. Given the historical/cultural nature of divine revelation,

how can we better understand the process? And how do we relate this process to the inerrancy of the written revelation?

Up to the recent past, evangelicals have been able to keep separate the questions in inerrancy and hermeneutics. The affirmation of biblical veracity was seen as the foundation for understanding the record, a given presupposition isolated enough from exegetical study to stand on its own as a touchstone for truth. The touchstone still stands. But its isolation is questioned. The issue of inerrancy has become for many "essentially the question of *how* the evangelical is going to do theology while holding to biblical authority."⁷

This closer link between norm and the interpretation of norm has come as scholarship has paid more attention to the occasional character of Scripture. This is more obvious in dealing with the letters of Paul, for example. It is less obvious, but also equally true, of historical narratives like the Books of Chronicles or Luke-Acts. They are not first of all systematic, theological treatises, compendia collections of Paul's theology or Luke's. The theology they present has been called by some "task theology," theology oriented to pastoral issues, born out of the struggles of the church as it seeks to understand its task in God's history and man's world.

malaise.

Post-Bultmannian scholarship has, however, reinforced the warning against a purist self-projection of the interpreter's consciousness on the text. The interpreter brings his or her own built-in limitations to the process of understanding. Meanings are provided by pre-judgments or pre-understanding and become part of the hermeneutical search.⁹ These warnings have also been underlined by a growing sensitivity on the part of the evangelical toward cultural anthropology and its awareness of the place of cultural settings in creating meaning and significance.¹⁰

So, "if the social context we move in tends to be politically conservative, it is surprising how, when we read the Bible, it seems to support separation of church and state, decentralized government, a 'no-work-no-food' concept, strong military, separation of the races, etc. On the other hand, others find it easy to see how concerned the Bible is with social problems, activism, poverty programs, integration of the races, demilitarism, and the general criticism of middle-America, especially when they live within a context of political leftism or liberalism."¹¹

In short, we are all biased already in our thinking and

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To understand their theological intention, then, the reader or hearer must understand the original intent of the text. The cultural particularity of the biblical message must be acknowledged in our search for its message for all people of all cultures. Whether we speak of the "culture bound" character of Scripture or of its "culture relatedness," we are recognizing that "the eternal message of God's salvation was incarnated in a specific, cultural language of an ancient, historical people."⁸

But given this reality, can we never find permanent, culturally universal, normative teaching in Scripture? If cultural factors constantly interact to shape the message of Scripture, does not the authority of the text die the death of a thousand qualifications?

2. Given the cultural, social and world-view dispositions of the interpreter, how can we ever penetrate either to a true understanding of the text or of its significance in the here and now? How do we keep our private meanings from constantly intruding into the text as the final word?

In the past evangelicals have shared with liberal scholarship a deep appreciation for the merits and necessity of historico-grammatical exegesis in the exposition of Scripture. Often characterizing it as "objective" research, the evangelical has properly defined the rules for this research in terms of grammatical interpretation, formal analysis and sensitivity to the redemptive history that surrounds and defines the text.

Yet there have also been warnings against the ease with which the goal of "objectivity" can be reached. The work of Cornelius Van Til in the area of apologetics has called attention repeatedly to the myth of "objectivity." The translator engaged in eavesdropping on the Scripture in the world comes with what Van Til has called presuppositions that effect the process of listening. Van Til's warning has not been well heeded in the evangelical community. The popularity of a view of human reason as an hermeneutical instrument relatively untouched by sin or culture has helped to create an evangelical

knowing, bringing assumptions structured by our cultural perceptions, even by the language symbols we use to interpret reality. "We are, that is, 'interested' before we begin to read a text and remain active as we read it. We belong, to a great extent through language, to the theological, social, and psychological traditions that have moulded us as subjects and without whose mediation we could understand nothing."¹² D.A. Carson puts it bluntly: "No human being living in time and speaking any language can ever be entirely culture-free about anything."¹³

In sum, the idea that the interpreter is a neutral observer of biblical data is a myth. How then do we avoid hermeneutical discoveries based largely on what we have assumed? If what we hear from the text, and how we act upon what we have heard, is so heavily influenced by the baggage we carry with us in the process, how do we avoid the relativism of selective listening and selective obedience?

3. Given the hermeneutical gap separating the biblical world from ours, what interpretive clues will help us cross legitimately from what is culturally specific in our world? What are the limitations of "application?" How do we measure the comparable contexts of at least two cultural horizons?

How, for example, do we judge the wisdom of President Ronald Reagan's 1985 usage of Luke 14:31-32 in his support of administrative proposals for a continued military buildup? Reagan listens to Jesus asking, "What king, going to encounter another king in war, will sit down first and take counsel whether he is able with ten thousand to meet him who comes with twenty thousand?" And then the President crosses the hermeneutical gap by commenting, "I don't think the Lord that blessed this country as no other country has ever been blessed intends for us to some day negotiate because of our weakness."¹⁴ Did Reagan stumble in the gap?

In the past evangelicals have dealt with such insecurities by appealing to a "plain meaning" in Scripture, a meaning that is clear and unambiguous. Cultural factors may "clarify"

that plain meaning, but they may not challenge it. A recent statement warns, "If an understanding of some biblical cultural context or some contemporary cultural form is used to contravene the plain meaning of the text, Scripture itself is no longer the authority."¹⁵

Increasingly, however, this appeal to "plain meaning" is being questioned by scholars within the evangelical community. It is said to be oriented basically to only one of the two horizons under discussion, that of the text itself. And it therefore assumes that our interpretation can fairly safely correspond with that of the authors of Scripture. But it makes it very easy for those interpreters or communicators unaware of the pervasive influence of their own culture on their own interpretations to slip unconsciously into the assumption that our interpretational reflexes will give us the meaning that the original author intended.

For example, when Jesus refers to Herod as a fox (Luke 13:32), our contemporary cultural reflex can interpret the plain meaning to be sly. But in the biblical world, the reference may be intended to signify treachery (cf. v. 31). When a well-off, white North American pastor or scholar reads, "Blessed are you who are poor" (Luke 6:20), hermeneutical reflexes tend to interpret the poor as the pious, the humble, those who do not seek their own wealth and life in earthly things. An American black believer, reflecting on years of racism and oppression, will identify more quickly with what are perceived to be the political and economic implications of the term. But, against the background of the culture of the Old Testament, the category may take on significance different from both readings.¹⁶

When Paul speaks of the husband as the "head" of the wife (Eph. 5:23), our hermeneutical reflexes think of a "boss" or "general manager" in a corporation. The dominant image becomes authority as lawful power to act, to control or use. And while something resembling this idea is argued as its exclusive sense in the New Testament¹⁷, the term is also said to be used as that which nourishes the rest of the body, the fountain of life which feeds the body (Eph. 4:15-16, Col. 2:19). Which meaning is appropriate in Ephesians 5:23 cannot be determined by the cultural connotations we give it now, but by its usage in the passage. The plain meaning is not so plain.

A call for the plain meaning of Scripture assumes too easily a larger measure of cultural agreement between our two horizons than is sometimes there. And where the Scriptures use cultural, verbal symbols that are familiar to us (foxes, the poor, head), the danger of hermeneutical error becomes even larger. We may assume a number of cultural agreements on meaning which are not intended in the text. It is exegesis of the text and of our own culturally intended meanings that will provide a way out, not the plain meaning of only one partner in the understanding process.¹⁸ With these assertions, we return to our earlier observation concerning evangelical hermeneutics: mistakes can occur in applying a scriptural injunction to conditions other than those to which it was truly applicable.

Given this obligation for a bicultural approach to hermeneutics (complicated by the presence of a third cultural set of perceptions when we begin communicating to others), does not the biblical message to our world lose its timelessness? Does not the normativity of Scripture disappear in placing undue emphasis on the meaning the text has for the people who read it? Are cultural universals dislocated in our study of the culturally specific?

The three questions we have cited (and there are more) raise legitimate questions about relativism. And they cannot be ignored. "What constitutes a valid interpretation if we loosen up the link between text and meaning? How is the Scripture our authority if its meaning for us is different from what the

text actually says? What is to prevent this kind of two-sided hermeneutics from becoming a cloak for Scripture twisting and subversion? Have we not landed ourselves in the liberal camp by a circuitous route? Is it not fatal to give up total continuity between what the text says and what it means for us? Is not the door wide open to private revelations in interpretative guise?"¹⁹

Living in the Hermeneutical Spiral

Following the lead of Hans-Georg Gadamer, scholars associated with what has been called "the New Hermeneutic" have described this process of understanding as a hermeneutical circle. But the model has its problems. Evangelicals have feared that to bind text and exegete into a circle is to create a relationship of mutuality where "what is true for me" becomes the criterion of "what is true."²⁰ Instead, it has become more popular among evangelicals to speak of a hermeneutical spiral.

Behind the idea of the Spiral is the idea of Progress in understanding; it is closer to the biblical image of sanctification, of growth in grace. Within the spiral, two complementary processes are taking place. As our cultural setting is matched with the text and the text is matched with the cultural setting, the text progressively reshapes the questions we bring to it and, in turn, our questions force us to look at the text in a fresh way. As J.I. Packer puts it, "Within the circle of presuppositionally conditioned interpretation it is always possible for dialogue and critical questioning to develop between what in the text does not easily or naturally fit in with our presupposition and those presuppositions themselves, and for both our interpretation and our presuppositions to be modified as a result."²¹

The interpreter or communicator comes to the text with an awareness of concerns stemming from his or her cultural background or personal situation. "These concerns will influence the questions which are put to the Scriptures. What is received back, however, will not be answers only, but more questions. As we address Scripture, Scripture addresses us. We find that our culturally conditioned presuppositions are being challenged and our questions corrected. In fact, we are compelled to reformulate our previous questions and to ask fresh ones. . . In the process of interaction our knowledge of God and our response to his will are continuously being deepened. The more we come to know him, the greater our responsibility becomes to obey him in our situation, and the more we respond obediently, the more he makes himself known."²² The process is a kind of upward spiral. And in the spiral the Bible always remains central and normative.

How does one avoid overstepping boundary limitations within the spiral? Are there guidelines that will help us?

False Leads

Previously formulated evangelical norms in this search for guidelines and hermeneutical clues can, we believe, lead astray. Much of it was formulated in earlier discussions and still reflects the background of that agenda. The battles fought in these verbal symbols were significant and still are. But, in the contemporary search, they can sometimes mislead.

One problematic reference is the term "principles," usually linked with adjectives like "eternal," "abiding," "timeless" or "normative." Often the term is associated properly with a desire to defend the integrity and canonicity of the biblical record. It continues to find use in responding to those practitioners of the "New Hermeneutic" who move toward subjectivity in their tendency to relegate the quest for the original author's meaning to a secondary place in the spiral. Behind

the term lies a commitment to the ultimate authority of Scripture and to the certainty of hermeneutical answers in seeking understanding. None of these concerns can be laid aside.

At the same time, the term can also carry meanings into the debate that do not aid in the discussion. If associated with the concept of the plain meaning of Scripture and an appeal to the clarity and sufficiency of Scripture, it can minimize the complexity in the Bible. Too often the word can be used to convey the implication (intended or not) that minimal modification of these "principles" will help us move with relative safety from our world to the biblical world and back again.

most lavish hospitality to a stranger seldom adds us to a day's wages."²⁴

Perhaps, however, the largest problem with the distinction is that it can possibly lead to a rift between the reader and the text as that reader searches for cultural universals to which he or she feels committed to obey and culturally conditioned injunctions that one believes, in the nature of the case, are less normative. The distinction can have the effect of creating a "canon within the canon." And some evangelical discussions already hint at some danger in this precise area. Plans are made for distinguishing between the "central core" of the

The Spirit does not play the role of some "God out of a box," a deus ex machina, undertaking some mechanical, hermeneutic homework assignment. The Holy Spirit is the God who addresses us, not an intermediary between God and us.

Linked to this usage is often a sharp distinction made between what are regarded as normative commands in Scripture and culturally conditioned injunctions. The interpreter's task is then seen as determining in which category a particular imperative or admonition belongs. The assumption is that the normative command yields a cultural universal, whereas the culturally conditioned injunctions are limited in their movement from then to now.

Again, there is much value in this distinction. Behind it is most assuredly the desire to maintain the authority of the Word in the face of some sort of cultural relativizing of the commands of Scripture. And flowing out of it can come related guidelines of much use for hermeneutics. At the same time, this distinction can easily encourage polarization. It appears to assume that historical and cultural particularity are essentially limitations, making all knowledge tentative and conditioned. Finding cultural universals then demands a search for those commands of Scripture with no, or as few as possible, cultural qualifications.

But all reading is necessarily culture-dependent, both in the text and in its translation by the reader. Even our human commonality as image of God (Gen. 1:27-28) does not eliminate that dependency. There is a "pre-understanding" written into the Bible as a partner in the hermeneutical dialogue that must be recognized. The Scriptures were not written only for our culture or for all cultures, but also for the ancient culture. And they assume, even in what to us are perceivable universals, a number of cultural givens which surround and amplify the text itself. Even such cultural universals as the Ten Commandments come in a wrapper of cultural conditioning. The prohibition of idolatry assumes a cultural world of polytheistic orientation. The forbidding of taking the name of the Lord in vain is structured in an animistic world where it was felt that word-magic, the manipulation of the world and the gods through some divine name, could be used for blessing or curse.²³

And there is a further complication to the distinction between cultural universals and culturally conditioned injunctions. It is provided by the second partner in the hermeneutical dialogue, our own cultural understanding. Assuming we accurately assess the Bible's universals, how do we transpose them into our cultural settings with their own cultural ideals? What actions display kindness or self-control (Galatians 5:22-23) in a given setting? Comments a missionary, "An executive in an industrial country is being patient if he waits for someone ten minutes. A Bahinemo of Papua New Guinea would think nothing of waiting two hours. In one village of southern Mindanao, my daughter and I were given gifts equal to a month's wages, as a demonstration of their hospitality. In the U.S. the

biblical message and what is dependent upon or peripheral to it, between what is "inherently moral" and what is not. The motivations behind the distinctions, as we have noted already, are laudable ones. No evangelical wants to deliberately twist the Scripture into any conceivable cultural wax nose. But there may be other distinctions to be made that will safeguard the gospel in a more useful way. If "all the Scriptures" could be utilized by Jesus to explain his ministry (Luke 24:27), surely we, as "witnesses of these things" cannot be restricted in doing any less. Cultural conditioning, maximal or minimal, does not stand in the way of the scribes of Christ seeking to bring forth things new and old from the treasury of their illumined understanding.

Some Clues from the Godward Side of Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics, on the one hand, is a human vocation to rightly handle the message of truth (II Tim. 2:15). In our struggles with Isaiah 53 and Revelation 20, it is still proper to ask, "How can I understand unless someone guides me?" (Acts 8:31).

At the same time, our object of study is the Word of God and the goal of the process is sanctification (II Tim. 3:16-17). And, in this sense, hermeneutics also has a Godward side, a divine participation in the spiral that we cannot forget. The Lord, in the Scriptures, has accommodated Himself to the limits and needs of the human condition. As Father, he baby-talks to his creation in the Bible (Heb. 1:1-2), describing himself in human languages and human images. As Teacher, he fits his infinity to our small measure, bridging the great hermeneutical gap between himself and the creation by descending to meet the limitations of human nature. He is tutor, not tyrant, fitting the instruction where the pupil is. As physician, he stoops to heal the diseased creature. We do not wander through the hermeneutical spiral alone. God has accommodated even his ways of revelation to our condition.²⁵ And in that Godward accommodation in Scripture, there are guidelines to aid in our manward search for meaning and significance.

1. The most obvious is our recourse to Scripture for hermeneutical stability. Wherever we begin in the spiral, the only proper control for our judgments remains the original intent of the biblical text. "In the Protestant tradition since the Reformation, a central concern of biblical hermeneutics has been that the interpreter allows the text of Scripture to control and mold his or her own judgments and does not subordinate the text to the interpretive tradition to which the interpreter belongs."²⁶ The parameters of meaning, the outer limits beyond which our search for contemporary significance cannot go, are always defined by the biblical text.

This is easily said but often not as easily done. "Although everyone employs exegesis at times, and although quite often such exegesis is well done, it nonetheless tends to be *only* when there is an obvious problem between the biblical texts and modern culture."²⁷ Witness the massive volume of biblical studies in the last decade centering on women and women's roles in home, church and society. These can be directly traced to the stimulation provided by the issues revolving around women's liberation in the world's cultures. The rise of the Gay Movement has played a similar role in our intense study of those texts dealing with homosexuality.

these verses a commentary on verse 29, "Let two or three prophets speak and let the others weigh what is said?" Women were then, in this view, taking part in judgment of the prophets, in the culturally shameful act of participation in public debate.

None of these alternatives, some more plausible than others, is meant to deny what has been called "the universality of the prohibition." Nor would our choices render the universal culturally relative. Most assuredly the choice would define the nature of the universal prohibition. Is Paul prohibiting all speaking by women in public worship? Or is he perhaps pro-

Hopefully we have reaffirmed one conviction on the part of the reader: Scripture stands, its veracity untainted by either the cultures in which it comes to us or the cultures to which it goes. God's revelation can make use of our cultures but always stands in judgment over them.

None of this is meant to say that learning to think exegetically is the only task in hermeneutics. But it is a basic task. A powerful safeguard against relativism and a barrier to inappropriate "application" remains the priority of exegesis in looking for meaning and significance.

Suppose, for example, in our congregation in Chicago there existed an absolute prohibition against women speaking or preaching in public worship. How would we judge its hermeneutical propriety? One key textual control would be the words of Paul, "Women should remain silent in the churches" (I Cor. 14:34). And our question would be, What did that text mean to the original readers at Corinth? Is it a prohibition "precise, absolute and all-inclusive?" Are its grounds universal, turning "on the difference in sex, and particularly on the relative places given to the sexes in creation and in the fundamental history of the race (the fall)?"²⁸

The solution to the dilemma must come from a close examination of the text. What does Paul mean by "speaking" (v. 34)? Is its meaning "simple and natural," an obvious contrast to the silence or not speaking mentioned in the same verse? What of the probable parallel to "speaking" in verse 35, Paul's admonition to the wives "to ask their own husbands at home?" Does this indicate that Paul is not dealing with just any speaking of the women at all but rather with the kind of speaking that can be silenced by the women asking their husbands at home? Is the easiest way to understand the talking, in the light of verse 35, as that of "asking questions," not to preaching, teaching or prophesying?

How are we to understand words like, "they are not allowed to speak but they must be in submission as the Law says?" Is this an appeal to a general law apart from Paul's personal command? Perhaps to the Old Testament, as the term, "law," frequently does? Or to Gen. 3:16? Is not Paul, with this kind of language, stressing the universality of the prohibition?

Exegesis must wrestle with these difficult issues. Is the submission of the women, for example, submission to the husbands or to the law? If the latter, could "the law" be a reference to the order of worship, the women being thus exhorted to avoid whatever unseemingly behavior had been disturbing the order of worship at Corinth? Or could it be that verses 34 and 35 are not in fact expressing Paul's own opinion but are quoting perhaps directly from a previous letter to the apostle, the views of one group within the church? The reference to "the law" then could be a reference to "some type of legalistic bondage newly raised by the Jewish community." And verse 36 is Paul's strong repudiation of these views. Or, again, are

hibiting the boisterous flaunting of a woman's new-found freedom in Christ and in his worship? Is he prohibiting women from passing judgment on the prophets and leaving themselves and the church open to misunderstanding from "those who are outside?" Or is it simply a judgment against culturally perceived immodest behavior?

Whatever we answer, only one of these alternatives could be used in support of a Chicago church's decision to bar women from teaching in public worship. But whatever our choice, the universalism of the prohibition is not lost in the text's cultural setting. A better understanding of the situation addressed makes more likely the possibility of a better understanding of the "universal" imbedded in the text.

2. Another Godward side to hermeneutics aids in our search for what has been called universals. We speak of the dynamic process of the self-revelation of God recorded in Scripture. There is a history of redemption that sweeps us in unity from the first promise of the gospel in the garden to its fulfillment in the new Jerusalem. God leads history to its redemptive consummation in cultural epochs determined by God's saving acts. And revelation follows that epochal structure, amplifying the unitary message of salvation as redemptive history progresses.

In this history of special revelation, cultural particulars are recognized through their links with God's redemptive epochs. But their significance is kept in place when the interpreter, a participant in the history of redemption, grasps the organic relation of these successive eras. They become part of the God-centered design.

Time and place, then and there, are points in the whole line or continuum of God's progressing work throughout the ages. They do not cloud God's self-disclosure. They are the setting which God gives it and out of which He shapes it. The promise of covenant faithfulness comes to childless Abraham in terms of numberless star children; to an enslaved race in Egypt it takes the form of divine deliverance from oppression (Ex. 3:12). To a David anxious to build a house for God it comes with the return assurance that God will build a house for David (II Sam. 7:11-14). At a meal, cultural eating habits become kingdom designations of the new covenant in the broken body and shed blood of Christ (Luke 22:19-20). God not only gives his transcultural word in culture; he uses the cultural moment and historical time to deliver that word to culture-bound people.

Culture does not simply provide the Lord with sermon illustrations and examples for spiritualizing fodder. It becomes

the providentially controlled matrix out of which his revelation comes to us. Part of the task of the discipline called biblical theology becomes the searching of that cultural particularity for those "universals" that link Rahab's act of faith to ours.

This redemptive history also fuses the horizon of the biblical text to ours. To quote Geerhardus Vos, "we ourselves live just as much in the New Testament as did Peter and Paul and John."²⁹ We share a common hermeneutical task, those of us "on whom the fulfillment of the ages has come" (I. Cor. 10:11). We are part of the eschatological history of redemption.

Viewed in this light, the traditional sermonic distinctions between explication and application become highly suspect. Scripture presents no truth divorced from reality, no theory, information or doctrine which must be bent towards and applied to genuine life by the effort of preacher or teacher. Every hermeneutical struggle with the word in our cultural setting is, by the nature of redemptive history, "a link in the chain of God's acts" in history; the sermon "extends 'the lines of God's redemptive history to contemporary man.'"³⁰

How does one determine what is culturally restricted to the biblical time period and not also to ours? In view of the progressive nature of Scripture, one looks at subsequent revelation and the light it throws on earlier texts. The goal of the development is never the correction of previous errors, for God does not lie. The goal in the consummation of all things, the restoration of creation to what it was intended to be.

Again, the biblical materials on women supply a useful sample. In keeping with the divine accommodation to the word, the Lord allows polygamy, even laying down rules for its regulation (Deut. 21:15-17). He permits divorce because of the hardness of our cultural hearts (Matt. 19:8), in spite of his divine creation intent for lasting monogamy (Gen. 2:24-25, Mark 10:4-9). Even in the New Testament, the pattern continues. Culturally perceived improprieties prompt Paul to warn against married women appearing in worship service with hair uncovered (I Cor. 11:4-7) or "speaking in church" (I Cor. 14:34-35). Our liberty in Christ must not be curtailed, but always it must be exercised with a view to possible cultural misunderstandings by "outsiders" (I Cor. 11:5, 13:14).

And yet, this accommodation is always accompanied by a divine eschatological polemic against the culture, pointing to Christ as the transformer, the re-possessor, of our social settings. Even within the old order, there is an "intrusion ethic," an intrusion into the present of the final order to be brought by Christ. Divorce, though permitted in the old order, is thus re-examined by Christ in the new day of the kingdom of God (Matt. 5:32, 19:9). In the new age of the Spirit, daughters as well as sons, servants both male and female, will be filled by the Spirit and be participants in the prophethood of all believers (Acts 2:16-18). Over against those forms of Judaistic chauvinism of the first century that prohibited women from being legal witnesses in law courts or studying the law of God, women will testify before men of the resurrection of Christ (Luke 24:1-10). They will be exhorted by Paul to study the covenant word, to "learn in silence" (I Tim. 2:11). Mary will be commended for staying out of the kitchen (a culturally defined role responsibility) and "listening to what he said" (Luke 10:38-42). It is not simply the context that "limits the recipient or application." It is the place of that context in the history of unfolding special revelation.

3. The Holy Spirit is an active participant in the hermeneutical spiral. He brings into being the first horizon of the text (II Peter 1:20-21). He opens our understanding (John 14:16-17, 26) and, through what has been called illumination in the past, "causes the letter of the Bible to become charged with life and to become the living voice of God to us."³¹ The closed

canon is opened to our world through the ministry of that Spirit.

All this means an activity of the Spirit in connection with both horizons. How can we bring the text over the hermeneutical gap of the centuries and watch it address our situation? Here too the Spirit leads us into all the truth and takes things of Christ and declares them to us (John 16:13-15).

The Word of the Spirit sets up parameters within which the people of God are to move. We ought to love our neighbor. We ought to do justice. We ought to help the poor. The Spirit of the Word gives guidance in our search for when and how. How can we love our neighbor in Russia or Honduras? How is justice done on our block when homeowners join in denying access to a black family to purchase a house? What does our commitment to the poor mean in a society where black salaries are sometimes 20% of whites in comparable jobs? The same Spirit who communicates the meaning of the text communicates also its significance for our setting.

This is not intended to make the Spirit into some kind of magical answering service floating somewhere between God and humanity in the spiral. The Spirit does not play the role of some "God out of a box," a *deus ex machina*, undertaking some mechanical, hermeneutic homework assignment. The Holy Spirit is the God who addresses us, not an intermediary between God and us.

And when He does address us, it is through the human perception of those whom he speaks. "When the biblical writers or Christian theologians speak of the testimony of the Spirit, this is not to invoke some additional *means* of communicating the word of God, but is to claim that a message which is communicated in human language to human understanding addresses man *as* the word of God."³²

Here is another reason why we can trust the reliability of our perceptions of God's culture-related truth. The Holy Spirit's blessing makes the Bible a mirror in which the common people look and can cry, "We are pilgrims like Abraham; We are in bondage in Egypt and Jesus liberates us also." Without benefit of theologian or erudite language, Spirit-filled people can say, "God speaks my language."

Here is also why we sometimes see in a clouded and misguided way. The Spirit does not bypass our cultural and experiential conditioning, our finiteness and sinfulness. The Spirit works through all these conditioning factors, enabling us to see adequately. But all these things may hinder us from the message of the Spirit more adequately.

Some Clues from the Manward Side of Hermeneutics

Looking at the hermeneutical spiral from the human side is not as awesome and frightening when we remember the process begins with, is participated in and consummated by the Lord. Cultural particularities, in spite of their complexities, are not barriers to a sovereign God but merely part of His providential design. His word, set loose in his creation, does not return empty (Isa. 55:11).

At the same time, our participation in hermeneutics is real also. And, as we have noted, that is not a neutral participation without presuppositions theological, cultural or psychological. We cannot escape the influence of our preunderstandings in looking for meaning and significance. How then does my specific socio-cultural and psychological background aid or distort my reading of Scripture? That is a basic question.³³ Limitations of space allow us only a few suggestions.

1. Before a proper "fusing" of the two or three horizons can take place, there must also take place a "distancing." That is, "we must become aware of the differences between the culture and thought-background out of which the words of

the text come and that of our own thought and speech. Only so can we be saved from the particular naivete that H.J. Cadbury pinpointed when he wrote *The Peril of Modernizing Jesus*.³⁴ We can and must bring our preunderstandings to a level of self-consciousness. In the light of day we then evaluate their appropriateness in relation to the cultural setting and to the text. Borrowing language from some liberation theologians, we must cultivate a "hermeneutics of suspicion."

Or again it may be a set of circumstances in which the providence of God places you. The situation may be new enough to make you look again at the Scriptures and new light breaks forth. My own Bible studies held with beggar boys in Seoul, Korea began to open my eyes to seeing the biblical category of the poor in a new light. And out of that experience my understanding of the Bible and my ministry were changed.

Or again: cultural value changes on a larger, social scale

The popularity of a view of human reason as an hermeneutical instrument relatively untouched by sin or culture has helped to create an evangelical malaise.

Strange though it may seem, over-familiarity with the Bible can sometimes inhibit that process. "By a very young age most people with a Christian upbringing know the parable of the prodigal son so well that it loses all force for them. They know right from the beginning that the father will welcome the wayward son back home and that the father typifies God. The father's forgiving love is taken for granted, and so the original force of the parable gets lost. But the first hearers, who had never heard the story before, probably expected that the son would suffer some kind of chastisement from his father—just as the son himself expected. They would listen with bated breath to see just what would happen when he came near his home again. They were in for a surprise when Jesus reached the climax of his story, a surprise that we may fail to experience, with the result that the story loses its intended emotional impact."³⁵

The same process of familiarity breeding misunderstanding takes place as we study the parable of the Pharisee and the publican (Luke 18:9-14). Our familiarity with the text gives its surprise ending the wrong meaning and reduces its shock value for us. We know that Pharisees are hypocrites, understood by us in terms of insincerity. We have already identified them as stereotyped villains. In the same way, the Publican is not the greedy robber familiar to its first listeners; he has become the humble hero. The parable then, shaped by our cultural understanding, becomes "a reassuring moral tale which condemns the kind of Pharasaism that everyone already wishes to avoid."³⁶

But to the first hearers, the Pharisee was an example of godliness and piety, themes underlined by Jesus with no irony or tongue in cheek intended. The shock then was over Jesus' affirmation of the justification of the wrong person, the ungodly. The double-take ending has been lost in the changed attitudes between now and then over Pharasaism.

These parable studies are more than samples of misunderstanding; they are also demonstrations of the technique of "distancing" we are commending at this point. The cultural, social expectations of the hearer are suddenly jolted by the surprising meaning of the speaker. And a reassessment of meaning is demanded. Using technical language, the horizon of the communicator (speaker) and the horizon of the receptor (hearer) suddenly intersect in a way that demands the receptor look again. The receptor must reevaluate what before seemed clear, familiar and firm. Like humor, the punch line works with our assumptions by questioning them.

There are many ways in which that may take place. Sometimes it will be a Bible verse, long nestled securely amid our preunderstanding, suddenly erupting into our consciousness to shake past assumptions. For Martin Luther it was a word from the past first addressed to the Romans, "The just shall live by faith." The encounter with Romans totally rearranged Luther's hermeneutics.

may create an atmosphere, planned by God's design, that shakes our equilibrium long enough and hard enough to "distance" us from our long held assumptions. The counter-cultural movement in the United States in the 1960s touched the ministry of a traditional church in California. And out of the influx of hippies and their conversion into "Jesus people" came a new understanding of body life in the church, an understanding that has since affected the hermeneutics of the wider church. In the same way, missionaries have testified to the new meaning they have found in Scripture, and its significance for life, that has come from immersion into a culture foreign to them. Old cultural ways of perception have been jolted by the block-buster of culture shock. And out of the shock has come a rearranged hermeneutics.

Extra-biblical disciplines have also initiated the irritation process that leads to "distancing." The behavioral sciences—psychology, cultural anthropology, linguistics, sociology, communications—are more and more shaking the cloistered world of the theologian and the church member. And out of this engagement, this intersection, new re-examinations are taking place in the hermeneutical spiral.³⁷

For some evangelicals today, this interaction is viewed with special concern. Negative pictures of these disciplines fear the relativism they may bring. And sometimes this is related to what is called the "independent authority" of Scripture.

One of the dangers in this kind of response is that it can split apart the word of God in the Bible (special revelation) from the word of God in creation (general revelation). Is not creation also a continual source of God's truth (Ps. 19:1, Rom. 1:20)? Cannot wise men, touched by the Spirit, also unlock divine truth through disciplined study of the creation? The hermeneutical task, after all, does not allow us to isolate the world we live in from the world of the Bible.

2. Most of our discussion has concentrated on the distortions that our presuppositions bring to understanding. We also need to recognize that there are times when those same assumptions may aid us in the task.

In our turning to God, we are increasingly drawn by the Holy Spirit into a new cultural world. Our way of perceiving the cosmos, our worldview, begins to undergo reshaping. We are given a spiritual predisposition to understand the things of the Spirit (I Cor. 2:14). He makes over our values and perspectives. We become, in this process called conversion, increasingly familiar with the structure of biblical narrative. What seemed like nonsense before now becomes the only sense we can make of things. We see more and more the world as God wants us to see it, from creation to fall to redemption to consummation.³⁸

In short, we find ourselves more and more operating in a context increasingly comparable to the design of God. Our predispositions to understand what God says and does be-

come more closely proximate to His vision of reality. God has not changed but we have. Two horizons are fusing in our "heart" level, the control box that touches also our pursuit for meaning and significance.

Now, a sentence like "All have sinned and come short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23) matches our new predispositions. We no longer tie it solely to our next door neighbor's children but to ourselves. Axeheads that float, fish that swallow men, city walls that collapse with the blowing of trumpets are no longer answered with a scientific smirk and wink. One man's death and resurrection for others was foolishness; now it becomes the wisdom of God (I Cor. 1:23-24). The biblical context remains the same. But ours has been changed by faith.

On still another level our presuppositions can aid us. This occurs when there are comparable contexts in the two horizons. "Whenever we share comparable particulars (i.e., similar specific life situations) with the first-century setting, God's Word to us is the same as His Word to them."³⁹

If the culture of the first horizon is at any given point very similar to ours, our interpretational reflexes are going to serve us fairly well. At this point the element of truth in the idea of "plain meaning" becomes visible. No matter then how we understand the image of the husband as the head of the wife, the call for a husband to love his wife as his own body, to love her to the point of self-sacrifice on her behalf (Eph. 5:28-29), conveys meaning fairly easy to transpose to twentieth century Philadelphia or Buenos Aires. We may struggle with Peter's judgments against "braiding of hair, decoration of gold and wearing of robes" (I Peter 3:3). Is he condemning ostentation and extravagance? Or does it cover eye makeup and hair coloring also? But his description of the "unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit" (3:4) is much easier to grasp.

Such cultural universals as the Ten Commandments also intersect with our interpretational horizons fairly easily. "Creation mandates," so called because they were given by God before the fall, by their very nature may be extrapolated into our world with a minimum of struggle. The call to marry, to cultivate the earth and rule over it, to work, defines the duties of Adam and Eve and of Harvie and Dorothy Conn. And it defines them without a heavy measure of complications.

Similarly, if a Scriptural statement relates to experiences that are common to all mankind our culturally-conditioned interpretational reflexes can be of considerable help. When the Scriptures say "go," "come," "trust," "be patient," and the like, they are dealing with experiences that are common to all human beings and therefore readily interpretable. Likewise with respect to illness and death, childbirth and rearing, obtaining and preparing food, and the like.⁴⁰

Again, though, we must be wary. Identifying comparable contexts requires careful judgment of both the biblical setting and our own. And we may go astray in either or both of these areas.

3. It will help and not simply hinder us to acknowledge that there are levels of cultural particularity in both horizons and therefore levels of particularity in interpretation. Much of the biblical material, for example, is presented in cultural forms that are very specific to cultural practices quite different from ours. In fact, because of their specificity to the cultural agreements of the first readers, these materials communicated with maximum impact. But they have minimum impact on us.

Generally evangelical writers today see cultural bound perceptions as a handicap. They spin off guidelines for hermeneutics that discard the peripheral for the core, or divide the theological from the moral, in their search for the usable. More

general rules can also be brought into play. The priority of didactic passages over the record of historical events, of more systematic passages with those less so, are used.

With modifications, many of these standard arguments can be very useful. We do not speak against them *per se*. But they are often negative in their attitude toward culture's specificity. What we are concerned to underline here is the value, not simply the danger, of cultural particularity. Cultural perceptions are not to be obliterated in our search for the significance of the Bible for us. They aided the first-century reader in better grasping the significance of revelation for them. And they do for us also.

Paul's sensitivity to cultural perceptions in his day was acute. In I Cor. 11:14 he writes, "Does not even nature (*phusis*) itself teach you that if a man has long hair, it is dishonor to him?" And, in speaking of women without some sort of hair covering in worship, he calls it "shameful" (11:6), not "proper" (11:13). The same word, "shameful," appears in his evaluation of "women speaking in the church" (I Cor. 14:35) or his sensitivity to "even mentioning what the disobedient do in secret" (Eph. 5:12).

What does Paul have in mind in these passages? Is he concerned over violation of some kind of Stoic "natural order?" We think not. He seems most naturally to be referring to the general order of human cultural values that designate a practice as seemly and becoming, unseemly and unbecoming. And he is arguing for the inappropriateness of a Christian's practice in the light of cultural mores.

His goal in this is not the obliteration of cultural perceptions as a hindrance to hermeneutics. Nor is he promoting the rule of cultural perceptions over hermeneutics. It is an understanding of cultural particularities as an aid to the application of the law in our day. There is what Herman Ridderbos calls a relativizing element in such appeals to custom,⁴¹ a positive concern for the judgment of people that we must seek, not to expunge or ignore, but to listen to and find.

This cultural relativism is not the kind that allows a person to do anything that conforms to his or her own culture, anything that party pleases, as it were. Paul's ultimate motivation here and elsewhere is his concern that the church not give unnecessary offense to the world. He remains apprehensive in so many of the texts we have cited that the church will be perceived by the world's cultures as licentious in its consciousness of our new freedom in Christ. We are to have a good reputation with outsiders.

As an exhibition of our calling to love "those who are without" (I Cor. 5:12-13, Col. 4:5, I Thess. 4:12), we are obliged "to respect that which is right in the sight of all men" (Rom. 12:17). Paul's focus here is on the need for maintaining a deportment that approves itself to all people⁴² (cf. II Cor. 8:21). The cultural norms of behavior governing Christian conduct are norms that even unbelievers recognize as worthy of approval. When Christians violate these cultural proprieties, they bring reproach upon the name of Christ and upon their own profession. This does not mean that the unbelieving world prescribes cultural norms of conduct for the Christian in, for example, his or her attitude to women. But it certainly means that the Christian in determining the will of God for here and now must have regard to what can be vindicated as honorable in the forum of men's and women's judgment. Again, Paul is nodding to the insights of human culture as a proper partner in the hermeneutical process. Stamped on those things honorable and just is the effect of the work of the law written on the hearts of all people (Rom. 2:15).

Cultural perceptions are not only problems of hermeneutics; they are also aids. And again, as always, it is the task of

exegesis of the Scripture to make the final determination.

Conclusions

Obviously this article leaves many questions unanswered. We have left out a study of the nature of language as it touches the question of culture and relativism. We have done very little to define specifically the levels of cultural particularity. And still waiting is the massive question of what might be called extrapolation. That is, what legitimate procedures allow us such an extended application of the text as to cover nineteenth century slavery practices or twentieth century biomedical ethics? What are the ground rules for "a developmental hermeneutics?"

But hopefully we have reaffirmed one conviction on the part of the reader: Scripture stands, its veracity untainted by either the cultures in which it comes to us or the cultures to which it goes. God's revelation can make use of our cultures but always stands in judgment over them. The hermeneutical spiral should not leave us dizzy in confusion but always moving ahead. The Bible still shines "forth as a great, many-faceted jewel, sparkling with an internal divine fire and giving clear and adequate light to every pilgrim upon his pathway to the Celestial City."⁴³

- ¹ Paul Woolley, "The Relevance of Scripture," *The Infallible Word*, N.B. Stonehouse and Paul Woolley, eds. (Philadelphia: The Presbyterian Guardian Publ. Corp., 1946), p. 204.
- ² Roger Lundin, Anthony C. Thiselton and Clarence Walhout, *The Responsibility of Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publ. Comp., 1985), p. 95.
- ³ James I. Packer, "Infallible Scripture and the Role of Hermeneutics," *Scripture and Truth*, D.A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge, eds. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publ. House, 1983), p. 337.
- ⁴ For an overview of evangelical participation in these discussions, consult: J. Julius Scott, Jr., "Some Problems in Hermeneutics for Contemporary Evangelicals," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 22, no. 1 (1979): 66-67. Cf. also: Grant R. Osborne, "Preaching the Gospels: Methodology and Contextualization," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 27, no. 1 (1984): 27-42; Gordon D. Fee, "Hermeneutics and Common Sense: An Exploratory Essay on the Hermeneutics of the Epistles," *Inerrancy and Common Sense*, Roger R. Nicole and J. Ramsey Michaels, eds. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1980), pp. 161-186.
- ⁵ I. Howard Marshall, *Biblical Inspiration* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publ. Comp., 1983), p. 105.
- ⁶ Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible For All It's Worth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publ. House, 1981), p. 59.
- ⁷ Robert K. Johnson, *Evangelicals at an Impasse* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1979), p. 2.
- ⁸ Alan Johnson, "History and Culture in New Testament Interpretation," *Interpreting the Word of God*, Samuel Schultz and Morris Inch, eds. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1976), p. 131.
- ⁹ A careful survey of the development of the idea of "pre-understanding" will be found in Anthony C. Thiselton, *The Two Horizons* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publ. Comp., 1980), pp. 103-114, 133-139, 303-310.
- ¹⁰ The volume that has created this awareness, more than any other, is Charles Kraft, *Christianity in Culture* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1979).
- ¹¹ Johnson, "History and Culture in New Testament Interpretation," p. 133.

- ¹² Lundin, Thiselton and Walhout, *The Responsibility of Hermeneutics*, p. 27.
- ¹³ D.A. Carson, ed., *Biblical Interpretation and the Church: The Problem of Contextualization* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1984), p. 19.
- ¹⁴ Quoted in: "Reading the Bible Ecumenically," *One World* 8 no. 4 (March-April, 1985): 11.
- ¹⁵ J. Robertson McQuilkin, "Problems of Normativeness in Scripture: Cultural Versus Permanent," *Hermeneutics, Inerrancy and the Bible*, Earl D. Radmacher and Robert D. Preuss, eds. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publ. House, 1984), p. 222.
- ¹⁶ A helpful approach to this text will be found in: Herman Ridderbos, *The Coming of the Kingdom* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publ. Comp., 1962), p. 188. For another, and more debatable, perspective on these same perceptions, using the discipline of cultural anthropology, consult: Bruce J. Malina, "Interpreting the Bible with Anthropology: The Case of the Poor and the Rich," *Listening* 21, no. 2 (1986): 148-159.
- ¹⁷ A lengthy essay by Wayne Grudem examines this question of the meaning of "head" in Greek literature and argues that the connotation of "source, origin" is nowhere clearly attested. See: "Does *kephale* ('head') Mean 'Source' or 'Authority over' in Greek Literature? A survey of 2,336 Examples," *The Role Relationship of Men and Women* by George W. Knight III (Chicago: Moody Press, 1985), pp. 49-80.
- ¹⁸ A rich discussion of "plain meaning and interpretational reflexes" will be found in Kraft, *Christianity in Culture*, pp. 131-134.
- ¹⁹ Clark Pinnock, *The Scripture Principle* (San Francisco: Harper and Row Publishers, 1984), p. 215.
- ²⁰ For evangelical criticisms of the circle model, consult: Anthony C. Thiselton, "The New Hermeneutic," *New Testament Interpretation: Essays on Principles and Methods*, I. Howard Marshall, ed. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publ. Comp., 1977), pp. 323-329.
- ²¹ Packer, "Infallible Scripture and the Role of Hermeneutics," p. 348.
- ²² John R.W. Stott and Robert Coote, eds., *Down to Earth: Studies in Christianity and Culture* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publ. Comp., 1980), p. 317.
- ²³ Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publ. Comp., 1948), pp. 154-155.
- ²⁴ Quoted in Kraft, *Christianity in Culture*, pp. 248-249.
- ²⁵ Ford Lewis Battles, "God Was Accommodating Himself to Human Capacity," *Interpretation* 31 (1977): 34-36; Clinton M. Ashley, "John Calvin's Utilization of the Principle of Accommodation and Its Continuing Significance for an Understanding of Biblical Language" (Unpublished Th.D. dissertation, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1972), pp. 91-121.
- ²⁶ Lundin, Thiselton and Walhout, *The Responsibility of Hermeneutics*, p. 80.
- ²⁷ Fee and Stuart, *How to Read the Bible For All It's Worth*, p. 21.
- ²⁸ B.B. Warfield, "Paul on Women Speaking in Church," *The Outlook* (March, 1981): 23-24.
- ²⁹ Vos, *Biblical Theology*, p. 326.
- ³⁰ Sidney Greidanus, *Sola Scriptura: Problems and Principles in Preaching Historical Texts* (Toronto: Wedge Publ. Foundation, 1970), pp. 91-93, 232.
- ³¹ Pinnock, *The Scripture Principle*, p. 163.
- ³² Thiselton, *The Two Horizons*, p. 90.
- ³³ This is only one question out of several asked by Alan Johnson in his extremely helpful essay, "A Response to Problems of Normativeness in Scripture: Cultural Versus Permanent," *Hermeneutics, Inerrancy and the Bible*, Earl D. Radmacher and Robert D. Preuss, eds. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publ. House, 1984), pp. 257-282.
- ³⁴ Packer, "Infallible Scripture and the Role of Hermeneutics," pp. 339-340.
- ³⁵ Marshall, *Biblical Inspiration*, p. 99.
- ³⁶ Thiselton, *The Two Horizons*, p. 15.
- ³⁷ For samples of this interaction, consult: Charles Kraft, "Can Anthropological Insight Assist Evangelical Theology?," *Christian Scholar's Review* 7 (1977): 165-202; Harvie M. Conn, *Eternal Word and Changing Worlds: Theology, Anthropology, and Missions in Dialogue* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publ. House, 1984), pp. 330-338.
- ³⁸ For a full treatment of this four-fold structure of biblical narrative, consult: Henry Vander Goot, *Interpreting the Bible in Theology and the Church* (New York and Toronto: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2984), pp. 67-78.
- ³⁹ Fee and Stuart, *How to Read the Bible For All It's Worth*, p. 60.
- ⁴⁰ Charles Kraft, "Interpreting in Cultural Context," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 21 (1978): 362.
- ⁴¹ Herman Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publ. Comp., 1975), p. 463.
- ⁴² John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans: The New International Commentary on the New Testament*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publ. Comp., 1959, 1965), 2: 138.
- ⁴³ Woolley, "The Relevancy of Scripture," p. 207.

BOOK REVIEWS

Power Evangelism
by John Wimber with Kevin Springer
(Harper and Row, 1986, 201 pp., \$13.95).
Reviewed by David Werther, graduate student in philosophy, the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

For years the lack of sophistication in the presentation of Pentecostal/Charismatic theology has been lamented. Many expected former Fuller Seminary professor John Wimber to provide the church with a carefully developed theological statement on the question of signs and wonders. Unfortunately *Power Evangelism* touches on many topics, but fails to give any of those topics adequate treatment.

Wimber devotes a chapter to each of the following topics: the kingdom of God, power encounters-clashes of God's kingdom and Satan's kingdom, power evangelism-evangelism enhanced by demonstrations of God's power, worldviews, and miracles in the early church. Chapters also include illustrations from Wimber's experiences in the ministry.

Herein lies one of the central flaws of this book. One could not do justice to G.E. Ladd's view of the kingdom in fourteen pages or treat the topic of worldview in twenty-five pages, even if personal illustrations were left out. Wimber's efforts to treat his topic comprehensively have resulted in a series of significant theses presented in outline form.

Wimber does present some theses worthy of further development. As the title suggests the author's concern is with the church growth and the way in which church growth is related to demonstrations of God's power. Third world countries are experiencing church growth at a dramatic rate whereas Western countries are lagging behind. The crucial element in third world evangelism is the free operation of God's Spirit. Western Christians are berated for quenching the Spirit.

Wimber may very well be correct in charging Western Christians with quenching the Spirit and maintaining that the growth of the church in the West will be retarded until there is an openness to dynamic works of the Spirit. But again one wishes that Wimber

clearly developed his theses. For example, in addressing the question of "the baptism of the Holy Spirit," a crucial question with regard to openness to the Spirit's activity, Wimber limits his comments to less than three pages and notes:

I have discovered that the argument concerning the baptism of the Spirit usually comes down to a question of labels (p. 145).

Even when addressing topics that seem to be paramount importance for his theory of church growth, Wimber is content to leave the discussion at a superficial level.

If one wants to find clear careful presentations of the kingdom of God and the baptism of the Holy Spirit, the authors to turn to are still G.E. Ladd and James D.G. Dunn. *Power Evangelism* may be useful to theological neophytes, but it will be inadequate for the work of seminarians and pastors. Those who wish to fill in the outline presented in *Power Evangelism* have a lot of homework to do.