

CFBC Hermeneutics Handout- Context 2

Notes derived from Michael Vlach

Cultural Context

I. Introductory matters concerning culture

Definition of culture "Webster defines 'culture' as the total pattern of human behavior [that includes] thought, speech, action, and artifacts, and as the customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits...'

Thus, culture includes what people *think* and believe, *say*, *do*, and *make*. This includes their beliefs, forms of communication, customs and practices and material objects such as tools, dwellings, weapons, and so forth. An individual's culture includes several spheres of relationships and influences—his interpersonal relations with other individuals and groups, his role in his family, his social class, and the nation or government of which he is a part.

Religion, politics, warfare, law, agriculture, architecture, business, economics, and the geography of where one lives and travels, what he and others have written and read, what he wears and the language(s) he speaks—all these leave their mark on how he lives, and if he is an author of a Bible book, on what he wrote" (Zuck, p. 79).

- *Importance of cultural studies* "Cultural matters are not niceties we may search out if we have the time but which we may ignore under the pressure of time and circumstances. They are indispensable for the accurate understanding of Holy Scripture" (Roy Zuck).
- *Scriptures—a foreign land* "When we go to the Scriptures, it is as if we are entering a foreign land. Just as we may be puzzled by the way people do things in other countries, so we may be puzzled by what we read in the Bible. Therefore, it is important to know what the people in the Bible thought, believed, said, did, and made. To the extent we do this we are then able to comprehend it better and communicate it more accurately.

If we fail to give attention to these matters of culture, then we may be guilty of eisegesis, reading into the Bible our Western 20th-century ideas" (Zuck, p. 79).

- *Transporting ourselves to Biblical times* "Understanding the Bible properly requires that we clear our minds of all ideas, opinions, and systems of our own day and attempt to put ourselves into the times and surroundings of the Apostles and Prophets who wrote. To the extent that we seek to transport ourselves into the historical situation of the Bible writers and disengage ourselves from our own cultures, to that extent the likelihood of our being more accurate in interpreting the Bible increases"(Zuck, p. 77).

II. Examples where knowledge of culture contributes to proper interpretation

A. *Political (national, international and civil matters)*

1. ***Jonah's reluctance to go to Ninevah*** "The Ninevites were atrocious in the way they treated their enemies. . . . No wonder Jonah did not want to preach a message of repentance to the Ninevites! He felt they deserved judgment for their atrocities" (Zuck, p. 81).
2. ***Instruction for slaves and masters*** (1 Peter 2:18; Eph. 6:5) "In order to better appreciate the writings of men such as Paul, we need to understand how greatly slavery permeated his society. Our concept of the word "servant," which usually refers to a slave, is inadequate to convey the emotional and social impact. Too often we think of a household servant, and office worker or a member of a construction crew. When Paul used the word "servant," he often meant "slave" (The primary meaning of *doulos* is slave, with an emphasis on bondage) (William L. Coleman, *Today's Handbook of Bible Times and Customs*, p. 134).
3. ***Third position in Babylon*** (Daniel 5:7, 16) Why did King Belshazzar offer Daniel the third position in his kingdom and not the second? The reason is that Belshazzar was only second in command himself.

His father, Nabonidus, was actually first in command though he was temporarily out of the country.

4. ***The Samaritans*** Understanding who the Samaritans were will help one's understanding of the gospels. The Samaritans were descendants of the Jews who remained in Palestine after the Assyrians defeated Israel. They came from mixed marriages between Jews and Assyrian settlers who entered the Promised Land. They also set up their own worship system where they built their own temple and sacrificed animals. Because of their mixed heritage and worship system, they were despised by the Jews.

Understanding Jewish hatred for Samaritans helps us understand the significance of Jesus' willingness to speak to a Samaritan woman (John 4), the story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) and the account of the Samaritan leper who returned to give Jesus thanks (Luke 17:11-19) (J. I. Packer, Merrill Tenney and William White, *The Bible Almanac*, pp. 509-10).

B. Religious

1. ***Corban in Mark 7*** "In Mark 7. . . Jesus upbraids the Pharisees soundly for their concept of "corban". In the practice of corban a man could declare that all his money would go to the temple treasury when he died, and that, since his money belonged to God, he was therefore no longer responsible for maintaining his aging parents. Jesus argues that men were using the Pharisaic tradition to render God's command (the fifth commandment) of no account. Without a knowledge of the cultural practice of corban, we would be unable to understand this passage" (Virkler, p. 79).
2. ***Meat sacrificed to idols in 1 Cor. 8*** "What was the point of meat being sacrificed to idols which Paul discussed in 1 Corinthians 8? No one today sits down to a meal in the home of a guest and asks if the meat had been sacrificed to idols. Obviously this custom pertained to a cultural setting different from today. The point is that people in Corinth would buy meat in the marketplace, offer some of it to pagan idols in one of several temples,

and then take the rest of it home for dinner. Therefore some Christians felt that eating such meat involved them in idol worship" (Zuck, p. 84).

3. *Elijah, Baal and Mount Carmel (1 Kings 18)* Why did Elijah choose Mount Carmel as the place for his showdown with the 450 prophets of Baal? The followers of Baal believed that Mount Carmel was the home of Baal. Showing the supremacy of Yahweh on Baal's home turf would be devastating to the followers of Baal.

C. *Economic*

1. ***Giving of sandal*** "Why did Elimelech's closest relative give his sandal to Boaz? (Ruth 4:8, 17) According to the Nuzi tablets, discovered in present-day Iraq, in excavations from 1925-1931, such an action symbolized releasing one's right to land he walked on. This was done when a sale of land was completed" (Zuck, p. 84).
2. ***How much is a "denarius"?*** (Rev. 6:6) A denarius is one day's wage. In Revelation 6:6 famine conditions will be so bad that a full day of work will barely be enough for a man to feed his family.

D. *Legal*

1. ***The Stolen Blessing*** In Genesis 27, Jacob deceives his father, Isaac, and receives the blessing that was supposed to be for Esau. When the plot was discovered, Isaac could not change the result. Why? It might seem strange to members of Western society that such importance was placed on an oral blessing or testament. However, recent discoveries have verified that an oral benediction (in those days) was legally as valid as a written last will and testament.
2. ***Daniel, Darius and the lion's den (Daniel 6)*** When King Darius of Medo-Persia was tricked into making a decree that would send Daniel to the lion's den, why didn't he simply revoke his former decree since he wanted Daniel to live (Dan. 6:14)? Once a decree was made in this empire, no one, not even the king, could revoke it (see Esther 8:8).

E. Agricultural

"The Jewish involvement with the land was reflected in the teachings of Jesus Christ. His imagery and illustrations gave His listeners vivid pictures, such as a sower, pouch at his side, flinging seed across a newly plowed field. He frequently used metaphors about rich ripe grapes and fruitful vines" (Coleman, p. 145).

1. *The Fig tree (Mark 11:12-14)* "Why did Jesus denounce a fig tree for having no fruit when it was not even the season for figs? In March fig trees in Israel normally produce small buds followed by large green leaves in April. The small buds were edible 'fruit.' The time when Jesus 'cursed' the fig tree was the Passover, that is, April. Since the tree had no buds it would bear no fruit that year. But 'the season for figs' was late May and June, when the normal crops of figs ripened. Jesus' denouncing of the tree symbolized Israel's absence of spiritual vitality (like the absence of the buds) in spite of her outward religiosity (like green leaves) (Zuck, p. 86).

2. *Vines and the Vineyard* "The vine was of great importance in the religion of Israel. It was used as a symbol of the religious life of Israel itself, and a carving of a bunch of grapes often adorned the front exterior of the synagogue. The symbolism was based upon passages such as Psalm 80 and Isaiah 5:1-5 where Israel is God's vine. The importance of the vine is why the Pharisees took the point so angrily when Jesus told the story of the wicked tenants in the vineyard (Matthew 21:33-41, 45-46)" (Ralph Gower, *The New Manners and Customs of Bible Times*, p. 111)

F. Architectural

Roof "How could four men let a paralytic man down through a roof? (Mark 2:1-12) Most houses in the Western world are built with slanted roofs, but in Bible times roofs were flat and often were made of tiles. Therefore it would be no problem for these men to stand on the roof, remove some of the tiles, and let the man down" (Zuck, p. 86).

G. Clothing

Girding up one's loins "What is meant by the command 'Gird up your loins' in Job 38:3; 40:7; and 1 Peter 1:13? When a man ran, worked, or was in battle, he would tuck his robe under a wide sash at his waist so that he could move about more easily. The command thus means to be alert and capable of responding quickly" (Zuck, p. 87).

H. Domestic

1. **Burying the Father** In Luke 9:59 a man who wanted to be Jesus' disciple wanted to first bury his father. Was Jesus' denial of this request insensitive? Actually to bury one's father meant to wait until one's father died (which could take years) so one could receive their inheritance. Thus Jesus' denial stressed the urgency of following Him immediately.
2. **John's leaning on Jesus at the Last Supper (John 13:23)** Back then people did not sit in chairs at meals as we do today. They were either on the floor or on couches. To lean on someone, then, was not considered rude.

I. Geographical

1. **Passing through Samaria** What was significant about Jesus passing through Samaria (John 4)? The Jews would not defile themselves by walking through the land of the Samaritans, who the Jews considered half-breeds. Jesus would not partake in this prejudice.
2. **Lukewarm water** In Revelation 3:16 the church at Laodicea was referred to as "lukewarm." This undoubtedly is a play on the lukewarm water the people had in that city. The water in Laodicea was channeled six miles from Hieropolis. When the water left Hieropolis, it was hot, but by the time it reached Laodicea, it was lukewarm.
3. **Going down from Jerusalem** "Why did Jesus speak of a man going 'down' from Jerusalem to Jericho when Jericho is located northeast of Jerusalem? (Luke 10:30)

The elevation drop in the 14 miles from Jerusalem to Jericho is more than 2,000 feet. Obviously going from Jerusalem to Jericho then was to go down in elevation" (Zuck, p. 88).

J. Social

1. **Mourners** Why when Jesus went to the house where a little girl had died, were there flute-players and a noisy crowd (Matt. 9:23)? It was the custom then that when a person died, the family would hire professional mourners to show how much they cared for their lost loved one.
2. **Sackcloth and ashes** "The Israelites used sackcloth as a ritual sign of repentance or a token of mourning. . . .The New Testament also associated sackcloth with repentance (see Matt. 11:21). The sorrowful Israelite would clothe himself in sackcloth, place ashes upon his head, and then sit in the ashes. Our modern Western custom of wearing dark colors to funerals corresponds to the Israelites' gesture of wearing sackcloth" (Packer, *The Bible Almanac*, p. 477).

Cultural relevance and present day application

- **The issue of culture** "One of the most important issues Bible interpreters face is the question of culturally conditioned Bible passages. That is, are some passages of the Bible limited to that day by the culture setting and therefore not transferable to our culture, or is everything we read in the Scriptures normative for today. . . . If some passages are limited. . . then how do we determine which ones are transferable to our culture and which ones are not?" (Zuck, p. 90).
- **The options...There are three ways to approach this issue of culture and present day application:**
 1. **Modify the scriptural principle and the behavioral command which expresses that principle in light of historical changes.** For example, according to this view, the commands that women should not teach or exercise authority over men (1 Timothy 2:12) or that women should be subject to their

husbands (Ephesians 5:2) should be rejected because we now live in an egalitarian society which does not recognize the role distinctions between men and women. Thus, the principle and the working out of the principle must both be rejected. HOWEVER, if one accepts the Bible as the unchanging Word of God, ***this approach is unacceptable.***

2. ***Observe the scriptural principle...and always abide by the accompanying behavioral commands.*** Thus, the command to "greet one another with a holy kiss" mentioned five times in the New Testament should be observed in principle and in practice. HOWEVER, the behavioral commands of biblical times do not always carry the same meaning in other cultures in other eras.
3. ***Observe the scriptural principle and...either 1) keep the biblical expression described or 2) if the biblical expression does not carry the same meaning today, look for a way that principle can properly be expressed in one's own culture.*** Using our previous example of greeting one another with a holy kiss, the following may be drawn. The principle is to greet one another. However, in our day a proper greeting is usually done by a handshake or a hug. Thus, a handshake or hug properly expresses the biblical principle. As Henry Virkler says, "since a behavior in one culture may have a different meaning in another culture, it may be necessary to change the behavioral expression of a scriptural command in order to translate the principle behind that command from one culture and time to another" (Henry A. Virkler, "A Proposal for the Transcultural Problem," in *Rightly Divided*, ed. by Roy B. Zuck, p. 240). *This principle seems best and has the least problems.* (For more on this issue see C. 4 on page 46.)

Principles to determine relevance for today

The following principles may be useful in determining which cultural practices, commands and precepts in the Bible are transferable to our culture and which ones are nontransferable.

- **If a command or principle that pertains to a theological or moral subject is not revoked, it is permanent and transferrable to us.**

"When the Bible clearly gives a command and nowhere else nullifies that command, it must be accepted as the revealed will of God" (Zuck, p. 93). "All Scripture should be received as normative for every person in all societies of all time unless the Bible itself limits the audience" (J. Robertson McQuilkin, *Understanding and Applying the Bible*, p. 245).

a. Not Revoked:

(1) *Capital punishment* (Gen. 9:6) Capital punishment is considered a permanent command because, after being given in Genesis 9:6, it is nowhere revoked. Plus this command is rooted in a universal principle that man is made in the image of God.

(2) *Being baptized* (Acts 2:38)

(3) *Observing Lord's Supper* (1 Cor. 11:24)

(4) *Loving God and neighbor* (Matt. 22:37-39)

b. Revoked:

Unclean food The dietary restrictions of Leviticus 11 have been revoked by the clear testimony of Mark 7:19 ("He declared all foods clean") and Acts 10:9-16.

- **"Some situations or commands pertain to cultural settings that are only partially similar to ours and in which only the principles are transferrable"** (Zuck, p. 93). If the behavior prescribed in the Bible means something different in our culture, use the behavioral expression that best expresses that principle.

- **Showing partiality to the rich (James 2:1-9)** This passage condemns showing partiality to the rich. In James' day that was expressed by giving the rich special seats while the poor often sat on the floor. Today partiality for the rich may be shown in other ways. Thus, the principle of not showing partiality to the rich may take different forms today than it did in James' day.
- **Abstaining from meat sacrificed to idols (1 Cor. 8; Acts 15:29)** "Though meat we purchase has not been sacrificed to idols, the principle of 1 Corinthians 8 holds true, namely, that we ought not be involved in any practice that would be a stumbling block to weak believers" (Zuck, p. 94).
- **Praying for kings (1 Timothy 2:1-2)** This passage tells us to pray for kings. But what about believers who do not live under a king? The principle is that we pray for our leaders. For us that would involve our president.