

Taking Ourselves More Seriously

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The task of interpreting the Bible for today continues to be perhaps the greatest challenge facing an evangelical constituency, with its historical concern for fidelity to scripture. This article is the beginnings of a look at one aspect of this task, a sort of thinking aloud in a very general way about the significance of the cultural context of the interpreter as she or he interprets scripture. What might it mean if we take more seriously the particular givenness of our place within a particular culture at a particular time? This is a conversation just beginning; I would be glad to hear more.

Books upon interpreting the Bible seem to be one of the characteristics of the '80's.¹ As evangelicals take increasingly seriously the complex issues facing modern Western Christians, there is a growing need for a sensitive and appropriate use of scripture in the discussions.

Although hermeneutics, the study of interpretation, was 'put on the map' at NEAC2 in Nottingham², there were only occasional signs of it at NEAC3, often leaving the field wide open to opinion, passion or traditionalism, and leaving many people dissatisfied. In particular, some of the more radical voices urging a new and wide-ranging Kingdom perspective upon Christian involvement in the world failed to demonstrate their exegetical roots, and so were unable to help people look beyond a 'sound' Biblical pietism. Does not the Lord require more of us than this? With the approach of the 'Salt and Light' Conference in 1990, the range of issues demands a thorough, much more thoughtful – even exploratory – use of the Bible.

One of the great contributions of modern western Biblical studies is the fundamental emphasis upon the 'cultural distance' between those who wrote the scriptures and us who interpret scripture today. In some writing

- 1 For example: G. Fee and D Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for all It is Worth*, SU, 1982 – an outstandingly good book for the beginner; D. Carson and J. Woodbridge, *Scripture and Truth*, IVP, Leicester, 1983; D. Carson and J. Woodbridge, *Hermeneutics, Authority and Canon*, IVP, Leicester, 1986 – two important collections of key articles. J. Dunn, *The Living Word*, SCM, London, 1987 – stimulating. R. Morgan and J. Barton, *Biblical Interpretation*, OUP, Oxford, 1988 – a wide ranging survey of 19th and 20th century European hermeneutics.
- 2 A. Thiselton, 'Understanding God's Word Today', *Obedying Christ in a Changing World 1*, Fontana, 1977; see J. Packer, 'Infallible Scripture', *Scripture and Truth*, p 325; C. Buchanan, 'Anglican Evangelicalism', *Anvil*, 1984, 1:1.

'historical distance' is used, but I prefer 'cultural distance', both because it is a more all-embracing term, and also because it recognises that even in the same historical period, there are many different cultural contexts. The German philosopher Gadamer suggestively pictures the two horizons or cultural viewpoints of the text and of the interpreter. A. Thiselton entitles his major book upon hermeneutics *The Two Horizons*, and writes that 'the goal of hermeneutics is to bring about the active and meaningful engagement between the interpreter and the text . . . a fusion of horizons.'¹ Gadamer insists that before the fusion can take place in the understanding of the interpreter, the historical horizon of the text must first be established.²

The recognition of how different things were in Palestine during Biblical times has led to a renewed emphasis upon understanding those situations. After background study, it is considered possible to use an informed imagination to begin to construct a probable historical context for the text. Time and again, this process allows scripture to speak in a fresh way, for 'the significance of the Bible flows out of what the original authors meant to say to their original readers.'³ The books of the Old Testament Prophets come alive in a new way when we understand the interplay of world powers up and down the Palestinian seaboard, with little Israel caught in between. New Testament parables spring to life when we imaginatively follow the sympathy of the crowd who first listened to them, or the congregation which first heard them read.

There is a risk in this process, which is that the imagined historical context determines how the scripture comes to life, and because of the interpreter's prior understanding of faith, the historical context will be distorted even as it is being constructed. And so the believer is engaged in a sophisticated form of 'eisegesis'. This need not be so,⁴ but it does emphasise the need to do 'good' history, respecting the integrity of the event, allowing it to criticise our prior understanding upon its own terms, before we employ it with the text; hence the phrase 'an informed imagination'.

The task of interpreting a text within a later context is found in all religions which have some notion of scripture. Jewish interpreters in New Testament times considered 'the purpose of all biblical interpretation to be the translating into life of the instruction of God - that is, to make the words of God meaningful and relevant to the people in their present situations.'⁵ The problem of 'cultural distance' has always been with us.

1 A. Thiselton, *The Two Horizons*, Paternoster, Exeter, 1980, p xix.

2 H. Gadamer, 'The Historicity of Understanding', *The Hermeneutical Reader*, ed K. Mueller-Vollmer, Blackwell, Oxford, 1986, pp 267-273.

3 I. H. Marshall, *Biblical Interpretation*, Exeter, 1982, p 97.

4 See a rather preliminary discussion: M. Silva, 'The place of Historical Reconstruction in New Testament Criticism', *Hermeneutics, Authority and Canon*, pp 105-133; compare the rigorous and suggestive P. Stuhlmacher, *Historical Criticism and Theological Interpretation of Scripture*, SPCK, London, 1977.

5 R. Longenecker, *Biblical Exegesis in the Apostolic Period*, Eerdmans, USA, 1975, p 19.

Despite the difficulties which are brought when grappling with 'cultural distance' – the strangeness of those days and their inaccessibility – virtually all contemporary Western Biblical study is committed to the 'historical' approach. And no-one quite knows what to do with 'allegory' anymore! Much time and energy is devoted to 'background' studies, but curiously, less attention is given to the present cultural context of the interpreter.¹

In just the same way that the Biblical cultures were 'particular' cultures, subject to the constraints and limitations of their time, this is true of the cultural context or horizon of the interpreter. 'Hermeneutics begins with the recognition that historical conditioning is two-sided: the modern interpreter, no less than the text, stands in a given historical context and tradition.'² This article begins to ask what might be the significance and implications of this fact – the fact of *our* cultural limitation.

Sometimes it seems that exegesis, the understanding of the text in its own terms and setting, is thought to be the sum total of interpretation; but when exegesis is complete, interpretation is only beginning – now the words must speak to us, in our terms and in our setting. In the words of Karl Barth, 'The conversation between the original record and the reader moves around the subject matter until a distinction between yesterday and today becomes impossible'.³

In order for the scripture to speak to us, and for us to hear it, we need to give attention to our own cultural context. Not only is there the risk of not hearing what the Spirit might be saying through the word, there is the more serious risk that we make the mistake of considering that our personal interpretation is in some way 'authoritative', not just for us – quite properly – but also for others in different cultural contexts. Unconsciously, it is possible to 'absolutise' our hearing of scripture, because we imagine that people everywhere are 'like us'.⁴

Not unsurprisingly, some of the most stimulating writing in this area is produced by a returned missionary, Lesslie Newbigin, in his book *Foolishness to the Greeks* in which he is concerned that the Bible should speak into a Western post-Enlightenment culture.⁵

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- 1 A not untypical example of distribution of attention is: J. Goldingay, 'Interpreting Scripture', *Anvil*, 1984, Vol. 1:2, 3.
 - 2 A. Thiselton, op. cit., p 11.
 - 3 K. Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, OUP, Oxford, 1933, p 7.
 - 4 When a particular interpretation is 'absolutised', it entails that all the conceptual framework is also absolutised; see Achtemeier, quoted in D. A. Carson, 'Recent Developments in the Doctrine of Scripture', *Hermeneutics, Authority and Canon*, p 39.
 - 5 L. Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, Eerdmans/WCC, Geneva, 1986, chapter 3.

The Horizon of the Interpreter

The cultural horizon of the interpreter is important because it is one of the key influences in shaping the assumptions and understandings that she or he holds about every aspect of life. As the interpreter lives immersed in the culture, these understandings are 'absorbed' from that particular culture, often unrecognised, and without permission. When the interpreter comes to the text, these understandings are already present – they form a 'pre-understanding'¹ which will inform and influence how the interpreter encounters, or is encountered by the text. It is impossible to side-step them; they are part of every person within that cultural context.

If the interpreter is open to change, then this process becomes a dynamic example of Paul's concern in Rom. 12:2. The pre-existing understanding and outlook upon life is challenged by the word of God and eventually modified through this encounter as the person submits to the word; and in the process a little 'conversion' takes place.² The picture is a dynamic one: with this newly modified understanding the interpreter returns to the text, and is open to be changed again. This is the 'hermeneutical circle', or better the 'hermeneutical spiral', because it is not returning to the same point of understanding.³

So at any point in time, the interpreter hears the word of God 'through' the understanding that is present within them at that moment; when circumstances change, the same text will speak differently. This means that it is impossible to hear the pure Word of God – it always comes to us influenced and shaped by our (changing) pre-understanding.

The word of God as scripture – infallible and authoritative – becomes the word of God in a person's experience at a particular time and in a particular place. Under the action of the Spirit, this experience of the Word of God can be the authoritative word for that person or community – a 'local' authentic infallible word. Infallible at least in this sense: that God ensures that what he wishes to communicate is not merely said by him, but is received by the interpreter.

So we arrive at a paradox: God can speak truly to us in and through his word by the Spirit, and yet this authoritative word is received in the familiar categories which a person already knows (or comes to know, through the encounter with the word) and these categories are not 'final' or perfect – they are continually in process of revision and change. It is both the true word of God, yet only in a particular context. So far there is

1 The term is used in a general sense without the existentialist meaning which is tied up with so much discussion of the 'New Hermeneutic', see D. Carson, 'Recent Developments in the Doctrine of Scripture' *Hermeneutics, Authority and Canon*, pp 38ff.

2 B. Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, DLT, London, 1971.

3 D. Carson, 'Factors determining the Current Hermeneutical Debate', *Biblical Interpretation and the Church*, Paternoster, Exeter, 1984, pp 15ff.

nothing new in this. Now – what are the implications of the limitations of a particular cultural context upon an interpreter's task – what she or he produces in the study of scripture?

If we take seriously the cultural particularity of our existence, we have to say that this received authoritative word is not a transferable word of God. It is the authoritative word to the people in that situation. This is not just because it is given to these people in their unique situation which the Lord wishes to address through the scripture. The primary limitation is that those people's categories of thought and their interpretative understanding derive from their cultural particularities.

When people share a cultural horizon, it is easy to take for granted that their understanding of the word of God seems to have general reference. And it is easy to understand why Western Christians can imagine that because aspects of Western culture can be found in so many places around the world, then their understanding of the word of God has general, in fact, normative, significance. But what happens when the scripture speaks to those who do not fully share this common cultural context? There are large areas of seeming common ground, but there are strange disjunctions too. These are brought into focus when people meet who come from significantly different cultural horizons.

When I was working in East Africa I had the unsettling experience of meeting a Kenyan who had been to the USA for further studies. A church there had loved him, supported him and prayed for him. When he came home he was full of Western concerns, analyses and answers. What had been intended as the provision of sound Biblical teaching had actually become the process of producing an American fundamentalist Christian clone. Many of his Kenyan brethren were suspicious – some suggesting that here was an example of a veiled form of western biblical imperialism!

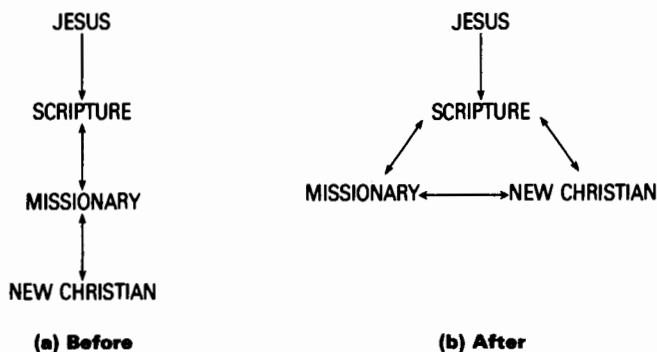
The process of taking more seriously the cultural particularity of the interpreter opens the possibility of a more authentic encounter between the word of God and those who live within that horizon. This process warns against the facile transfers of insights from one Christian group in a particular cultural horizon to another within a different though contemporary cultural horizon: no interpretation of the scripture is normative beyond the context in which it was born.

Insights received in one context can be shared with Christians in another context, and there can be mutual enrichment as they are woven into the pre-understanding of each other; but the primary task is for each Christian community to seek God in his word for that community, authentically catching up its own special particularity and uniqueness as it is encountered by the word of God.

This approach recognizes that God will speak through his word appropriately within any cultural horizon. Instead of the differences in perceptions of God through the variety in interpretations of his word being a problem for our concept of orthodoxy, there is now a growing range of new insights which Christians can share with each other.

This approach mirrors an analogous change in the understanding of how missionaries share the gospel in a new culture. When we at the mission-founded churches in East Africa they all seem very similar to the church polity of the missionaries who brought the gospel. Even when a society specifically sets out to be a 'church society' rather than a denominational society, as did the Church Missionary Society (whose first missionaries were Lutherans!) the churches established looked suspiciously like the Church of England!

This recognition has led to a reconceptualising within many missionary societies of the way the scripture is shared and received with Christians of another culture. This newer approach respects the uniqueness and importance of that person's hearing of the word of God through the scripture:



The tendency of Biblical interpreters expounding an authoritative text is to treat their interpretation as authoritative, whereas it is culturally conditioned, partial and – hopefully – itself still growing and changing.

In essence, taking our cultural contexts more seriously leads to the recognition that:

1. Every interpretation can only 'make sense' most completely within the cultural horizon which gave it birth. For other people to appreciate what this means requires a conscious cross-cultural adjustment – language can only be really understood within its cultural context.

This suggests that the notion of a 'true' interpretation has to be refined. No longer can we pose the simple question 'Is this interpretation true?' – because the truthfulness will be a function of the authenticity of expression of the word of scripture in the culture in which it is heard. As language is in part communally generated, the statement of truthfulness needs to be qualified by the context in which the language is used.

When I was teaching theology in a Ugandan theological college, there was a discussion with a group of students as to whether the New Testament picture of 'Jesus, the brother' can serve as a sufficient Christological starting point. As a European, I found this to be an interesting but not very significant category (which may be a comment on Western individualism –

or more simply, my brothers and me(!) Yet within that culture, the concept overflowed with meanings and resonances.

In the realm of Christian doctrine this need to contextualise language in order to understand is quickly appreciated: despite regular recital at Holy Communion services, the so called Nicene Creed still remains stubbornly mute to many – for they have never breathed the air of Greece, nor lived in the villages outside Nicaea, nor visited Chalcedon. Language speaks most eloquently within the culture which gave it birth, and within which the language is still living.

2. Although there seems to be much common ground within western biblical Christianity, there can only be generally formulated insights – at the personal or community level there is no normative interpretation, arrived at in Langham Place or The Dales. Instead, there is a normative scripture, and a host of different cultural contexts into which the scripture speaks.

This is born out in experience when people enter new cultures distinctively different from their own. H. Turner conducted research upon an African independent church, 'the Church of the Lord' in Western Nigeria. An Independent Church is one founded by a national Christian, with no missionary involvement and often with a distaste for these 'Western Churches' with their 'Black Europeans.' So it is likely that within an independent church there can be a more authentic engagement with African culture as the cultural horizon of the interpreters, as there is less obvious western influence.

Part of that research was a study of the use of scripture by analysing 8,000 sermon texts.¹ The selection of the texts – the most popular sources being James and Matthew – was reflected in a moralistic type of interpretation. Other themes emphasised included life and spirit in the gospel of John, and resurrection in various books; Jesus was seen primarily as a teacher; justification by grace through faith hardly figured at all.

Now it is tempting to compare this immediately with our emphases and interpretations of scripture, and find Africa wanting. But that is an illegitimate procedure if we are to take seriously the particular givenness of the culture in which those Christians live. Western Christians and African Independent Christians have generated true and seemingly different insights from the scripture – the question is whether we can understand one another well enough across the cultural differences to hear what it really is that God has showed to the other through their encounter with scripture.

3. The recognition that our particular cultural context shapes our hearing of the word of God leads to the conclusion that whatever we hear can only be partial – hopefully true for us, but not exhaustive, which then means that:

(a) we ought to be open to receive further insight. Yet such an attitude is not that common, an attitude which is grateful about what God has already

1 H. Turner, *Profile Through Preaching*, Edinburgh House Press, London, 1965.

communicated through his word, and expectant to learn more from others who are not like us!

(b) the importance of the churches around the world *oikumene* leaps into view. It is Christians in other places who can authentically communicate what Jesus means to them – which, with careful cross-cultural attention, can be appreciated by Christians here in the West.

The tragedy is that with such a rich resource, the disease of Western self-sufficiency has killed off our expectancy, and even our interest. For we imagine that 'we know best'. It was for this reason that missionaries found it hard to 'let go' of young churches. It is for this reason that the Church of England was one of the last two churches in the Anglican Communion to invite partners from overseas to join us in a Partners in Mission consultation; it is for this reason that General Synod does not want to repeat it – for the insights of visitors didn't fit; they seemed unreasonable – for they were different from what was expected.

Statistically, the church is growing south of the Equator and shrinking in the North; what can God show us about himself and his word through those who have been redeemed, and grown to love and serve him in another culture?

The Critical Function of Scripture

If there is no longer any neat simple normative interpretation of particular texts, and the word is going to be interpreted by people all over the place – the results might well pose even more sharply than usual the question which faces all interpreters: How may the word we are interpreting criticise our interpretation of it?

One possible fear produced by such an approach is to imagine that it is in danger of lapsing into a kind of relativism, in which every interpretation is possible, as long as it is authentically rooted in the cultural horizon. And people can list Christian groups who have become prisoners of their culture – from those who preach the prosperity gospel in materialistic USA, to the amazing gymnastics of Dutch Reformed Church Bible expositors in South Africa and any number of 'sectarian' theologies, from Black Theology and Feminist Theology, to Pacifist Theology and Latin American Liberation Theologies – even British Folk Religion Theology! Sometimes, we can even begin to discern this invisible captivity within ourselves, as we live in this culture – though more often we notice other people who have been 'conformed to their part of the world'. And all claiming that the Lord spoke to them through his scripture!

The only authority which can check our interpretation of scripture is scripture itself. We would expect the one Lord encountered in his word to produce common ground in the understanding of the different faith communities. And in general terms this is so; but it is not enough; the only proper context for a critique of an interpretation is within the cultural horizon which gave birth to the interpretation. This insight would explain

why critiques of Latin American Liberation theologies seem more convincing when expounded by Latin American theologians.¹

So, how might interpretations of scripture be checked by scripture?

1. Once Christians have recognised the limited nature of a particular interpretation, as being true for them, and yet provisional and partial, there is a proper place for 'openness' to the insights of others. These have to be carefully transposed, and only then may they be taken into the process of building a new pre-understanding.

This openness to hear more of God is hard to sustain. Just as Peter was changed by the encounter with Cornelius, through which God showed him something new, so as Biblical interpreters, we ought to pray for a discerning openness.

It is significant that there is a quest after certainty, which 'seems' to be met by some authoritative and definitive interpretations of the scripture. This quest brings with it a reluctance to countenance change, the new or the uncertain. The result is that there is a closing up to what God may be offering – and so, quite logically, as these interpreters go back to scripture, the scripture often seems to say the same kind of thing all over again, which, of course, is reassuring!

This openness is a rare and valuable attribute; encouraged by Jesus 'He who has ears to hear, let him hear.'

2. The extent and scope of the Christian canon provides much material with which to compare the understanding already arrived at. So a good critical base can be approached with a determined effort to study the whole of scripture rather than the favourite 'canon within a canon'.

It is commonly supposed that one of the ways to ensure that we are truly encountered by the word of God is to use a 'correct' methodology as we do our interpretation. Is there an approach to scripture which will minimise the misunderstandings within our interpretation?

J. I. Packer, answers 'yes' to this question: 'the hermeneutic that derives from the evangelical doctrine of scripture . . . binds us, first to the grammatico-historical method . . . for God has put his words into mouths, and caused them to be written.'² This 'grammatico-historical' approach considers that the first and key task of interpretation is to understand the words of the scripture in their historical context. Similarly I. H. Marshall: 'it is the grammatico-historical method . . . which is being commended, for it is fully compatible with Christian belief and with the character of the Bible as the Word of God.'³

1 Compare J. Bonino, *Revolutionary Theology Comes of Age*, SPCK, 1975 with comments by European critics, particularly those who have never lived in Latin America.

2 J. I. Packer, 'Infallible Scripture and the Role of Hermeneutics', *Scripture and Truth*, p 349.

3 I. H. Marshall, *ibid.*, p 86.

A preliminary question springs to mind: Is this another example of western interpreters 'absolutising' their methods, and legislating for all Christians, everywhere? Would it not be more modest, and more accurate to say something like 'For those who live within a western, largely rationalistic culture, the grammatico-historical type of hermeneutic is the normative approach, given our western way of conceptualising the nature of scripture?' Certainly, for those who live within a culture which has produced and is heir to critical studies, this would seem to make sense.

A further question is raised by Packer and Marshall: upon what grounds could one transfer this approach to Christians in an agrarian, pre-scientific culture? Many of the Independent Churches in Africa are nearer to a Pentecostal type of spirituality, and wouldn't know what a grammatico-historical hermeneutic was if they fell over it as they danced in worship!

And more questions arise because Packer and Marshall are interpreters who wish to be judged 'under the scripture'; what does the New Testament teach? – are there New Testament examples of exegesis? – could these be normative?

There are many examples of New Testament authors bridging the cultural distance between Old Testament texts and their situation. The surprise is the freedom with which they do it, choosing either from the Greek version or the Hebrew, as fits the need; rewriting scripture; developing midrash – and even leaning upon 1 Enoch, which wasn't in the still undecided canon. There is an energy and variety about these examples – what are we to make of it all? Longenecker writes: 'the early Christians used many of the same exegetical procedures as were common in Judaism . . . and they seemed to have looked to Jesus' own use of scripture as the . . . paradigm.'¹

Scholars debate whether these New Testament examples of exegesis should be normative for Christians today, and most would say 'no' – though sometimes the justification can seem strained.² The reasons are usually variations upon the 'cultural limitations of the day' approach; which are close to the concern in this article: that we do take seriously their cultural horizon, with all its strengths and limitations.

But then there seems an inability to recognise that the reasoning works both ways; are not *we* limited by our cultural particularity? Instead, Packer and Marshall invite us to relativise the scriptural examples, and absolutise a post-scriptural approach to scripture born more than 1500 years after scripture was written, in just one part of the universal church. Can this be a satisfactory proposal?

1 Longenecker, 'Who is the Prophet Talking about?' *Themelios*, 1987, 13:1, p 7.

2 *Ibid.*, p 8.

To be more precise: this article is based, in a general way, upon insights and perspectives of a culturally sensitive grammatico-historical approach.¹ It considers that this should be the normative approach for western Christians today. And much of the slackness in the use of scripture in recent evangelical writing is because this has not been done thoroughly or with a sufficiently careful attention to the critical function of scripture over and against its interpreters. The whole counsel of God in scripture needs more attention. And as western influences spread around the world, so such an approach will have an increasing sphere of usefulness.

The thrust of this part of the discussion is to identify the, perhaps unwitting, but illegitimate insistence that what is productive and useful for western Christians should be normative for all; it betrays an insensitivity to the cultural variety of different cultural horizons inhabited by Christians.

There is a further consideration. The ultimate criterion for interpreting scripture is that through the scripture people are encountered by Christ and put their faith in him (John 20:30, 31). This is precisely what is happening around the world; all manner of hermeneutics seem to be used by God to address his people. Allegorising and moralising – anathema to western Protestant Christians – are instrumental in new Churches being started, and many people becoming Christians.

When we wish to 'absolutise' one way of interpreting scripture, it seems we are close to Peter in Acts 10 and 11: we are in danger of missing God's new things.

Taking our cultural particularity more seriously helps in better relating scripture to our life situation. And paradoxically, it also reminds us of the limitations of being Western twentieth-century Christians, and opens us up to Christians around the world. With careful cross-cultural communication, perhaps they can share with us more ways of hearing God's word speak than we imagine possible.

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1 The continuing debate about whether 'inerrancy' is a necessary model to describe the nature of scripture; the variety in meanings attached to 'truth' and 'error'; the need to look more carefully at how pastoral concerns may be legitimately weighed and incorporated in the debate; the place for 'propositional' and 'personal' aspects of the scripture to be employed; all these point to a provisionality about the detailed formulation of the grammatico-historical approach.