

Doctrine of the Bible

The Bible and Culture

1. One of the great challenges in interpreting the Bible is to understand its relationship to the culture in which it was written, and its application for today.
2. There is the problem of being able to understand things written in another culture long ago. There is the problem of applying those things that were written long ago to modern society.
3. This is the problem of transcultural communication. How can the gospel of grace be translated into foreign cultures? How can a Sunday School teacher communicate to inner city ghetto children something about agriculture, and farm animals? Some children have never seen a sheep, or a shepherd.
4. The Bible comes to us in a pastoral setting, and in an agricultural setting, so that some passages are difficult for the modern urban dweller to understand, such as Jesus cursing the fig tree.

The Curse

- *Mark 11:12 And on the morrow, when they were come from Bethany, he was hungry: 13 And seeing a fig tree afar off having leaves, he came, if haply he might find any thing thereon: and when he came to it, he found nothing but leaves; for the time of figs was not yet. 14 And Jesus answered and said unto it, No man eat fruit of thee hereafter for ever. And his disciples heard it.*

The Curse Fulfilled

- *Mark 11:20 And in the morning, as they passed by, they saw the fig tree dried up from the roots. 21 And Peter calling to remembrance saith unto him, Master, behold, the fig tree which thou cursedst is withered away. 22 And Jesus answering saith unto them, Have faith in God. 23 For verily I say unto you, That whosoever shall say unto this mountain, Be thou removed, and be thou cast into the sea; and shall not doubt in his heart, but shall believe that those things which he saith shall come to pass; he shall have whatsoever he saith.*

Special Note.

The problem for some modern commentators is why Jesus would curse, in a tantrum fit, an innocent fig tree, that had bloomed early, when it was not the season for figs. The answer comes in understanding that there are several types of fig trees that grow indigenously in Palestine. Of these types of fig trees, there are late bloomers, and early bloomers. One of the fig trees produces the most delectable fruit, and is preferred above the others. One of the characteristics of this tree is that it provides a lovely blossom. So, there is a fig growing season whereby people might normally expect figs to be produced. But, there is this one particular fig tree that does bring forth its fruit in a different period of the fig season.

The point of the incident, is that when blossoms are produced, that is the normal sure sign that figs will be present. So when Jesus came out of the city, saw the blossoms, He could assume there would be fruit, but there was none. In cursing the fig tree, he used a technique that was common among the prophets of the Bible. He made use of an object lesson. The fig tree became a visual object to teach a lesson about hypocrisy. There can be external signs of righteousness, but upon careful examination, there is no true spiritual fruit, only bareness. God's response to hypocrisy, is to curse it.

5. It is important to study the geography, and background of the Biblical lands.
6. But there is something else that must be done. A proper interpretation of Scripture must be united with application to modern culture.
7. One burning question that divides the church today, is the cultural issue of the role of women in the church, in the home, in the work force.
8. Liberals and Conservatives do agree that the role of a woman in the home is to be subordinate to the husband. They both agree that the apostles set down certain limitations of service within the church. But do those limitations, and restrictions apply today?
9. The question has divided denominations, enraged individuals, and brought shame and sorrow to many.
10. But, what is to be done in light of the Scripture?
 - *1 Timothy 2:12 But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence.*
11. Paul is not doing this out of being a male chauvinist, but out of divine revelation.
12. The challenge for the church, is to discern the difference between Bible principles, and Bible customs.
13. A Biblical principle refers to a teaching, admonition, or precept that applies to all people, in all places, and in all ages.
14. A Biblical custom is not binding on the conscience. Customs are for certain people, in a certain time, and for a certain locality.
 - Principle. We are not to engage in idol worship.
 - Custom. There is freedom to eat meat offered to an idol if the conscience is not violated.
15. It must not be assumed that the Bible, as a whole, is only an ancient relic of a Hebrew culture. Rather, the Bible is the revelation of God.

16. As the revelation of God, the Bible itself recognizes the difference between principle, and custom. The church must understand the Scripture in its literary, and historical setting.
17. We must grant that the Scriptures are the Word of God, and contains eternal principles, and we must grant that there are cultural practices that do not bear on our society today.
18. The principles of God must not be dismissed as being temporary, and merely a custom. It is also wrong to take a custom, and make it needlessly binding on the church.
19. In the area of evangelism, the church can discern, preserve and practice, by the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the principle of evangelizing the world, relying upon the mercies and provisions of God, while not insisting on exactly the same methodology that marked the early disciples of Christ.
 - *Luke 10:4 Carry neither purse, nor scrip, nor shoes: and salute no man by the way. 5 And into whatsoever house ye enter, first say, Peace be to this house. 6 And if the son of peace be there, your peace shall rest upon it: if not, it shall turn to you again. 7 And in the same house remain, eating and drinking such things as they give: for the labourer is worthy of his hire. Go not from house to house. 8 And into whatsoever city ye enter, and they receive you, eat such things as are set before you: 9 And heal the sick that are therein, and say unto them, The kingdom of God is come nigh unto you. 10 But into whatsoever city ye enter, and they receive you not, go your ways out into the streets of the same, and say, 11 Even the very dust of your city, which cleaveth on us, we do wipe off against you: notwithstanding be ye sure of this, that the kingdom of God is come nigh unto you.*
20. Foot washing is meaningful in a culture where people walked about with open sandals, and needed water to wash their feet when entering into a home. That was the custom. But the principle of humility was established for all cultures, in all times.

John 13:1 Now before the feast of the passover, when Jesus knew that his hour was come that he should depart out of this world unto the Father, having loved his own which were in the world, he loved them unto the end. 2 And supper being ended, the devil having now put into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, to betray him; 3 Jesus knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he was come from God, and went to God; 4 He riseth from supper, and laid aside his garments; and took a towel, and girded himself. 5 After that he poureth water into a bason, and began to wash the disciples' feet, and to wipe them with the towel wherewith he was girded. 6 Then cometh he to Simon Peter: and Peter saith unto him, Lord, dost thou wash my feet? 7 Jesus answered and said unto him, What I do thou knowest not now; but thou shalt know hereafter. 8 Peter saith unto him, Thou shalt never wash my feet. Jesus answered him, If I wash thee not, thou hast no part with me. 9 Simon Peter saith unto him, Lord, not my feet only, but also my hands and my head. 10 Jesus saith to him, He that is washed needeth not save to wash his feet, but is clean every whit: and ye are clean, but not all. 11 For he knew who should betray him; therefore said he, Ye are not all clean.

12 So after he had washed their feet, and had taken his garments, and was set down again, he said unto them, Know ye what I have done to you? 13 Ye call me Master and Lord: and ye say well; for so I am. 14 If I then, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet; ye also ought to wash one another's feet.

21. The challenge for the church is to discern what is principle and what is culture. One illustration deals with the covering of the head by women.

- *1 Corinthians 11:4 Every man praying or prophesying, having his head covered, dishonoureth his head. 5 But every woman that prayeth or prophesieth with her head uncovered dishonoureth her head: for that is even all one as if she were shaven. 6 For if the woman be not covered, let her also be shorn: but if it be a shame for a woman to be shorn or shaven, let her be covered. 7 For a man indeed ought not to cover his head, forasmuch as he is the image and glory of God: but the woman is the glory of the man. 8 For the man is not of the woman; but the woman of the man. 9 Neither was the man created for the woman; but the woman for the man. 10 For this cause ought the woman to have power on her head because of the angels. 11 Nevertheless neither is the man without the woman, neither the woman without the man, in the Lord. 12 For as the woman is of the man, even so is the man also by the woman; but all things of God. 13 Judge in yourselves: is it comely that a woman pray unto God uncovered? 14 Doth not even nature itself teach you, that, if a man have long hair, it is a shame unto him? 15 But if a woman have long hair, it is a glory to her: for her hair is given her for a covering.*

22. There are four ways to apply the teaching of this passage.

- It could be assumed that the whole passage is a matter of custom and so is not binding on the church today. A veil is not needed in any form, and, since the veil was a sign of a woman's subordination to her husband, that too is no longer culturally valid.
- It could be assumed that the whole passage is transient. Here is a pure principle that all women, in all cultures, should subordinate themselves to men, and all women should wear a veil.
- It could be assumed that the whole passage teaches a principle of subordination of the woman to the man in some way, and that submission is conveyed by covering the head in some form, long hair, a veil, a hat, a handkerchief, or a burka.
- It could be assumed that the whole passage contains a principle that is transient, and a cultural facet that is non-transient. The principle of female subordination to the man is a Bible principle from Genesis to Revelation. However, the wearing of a veil is not a principle, but a cultural practice that can be discarded.

23. While it is not always easy to discern what is principle, and what is culture, it can be done.
24. Four guidelines are suggested.

- Search the Scriptures to see if there are particular areas that are apparent to custom.

Special Note.

The Bible was written over a period of 1,500 years, on three continents, in three languages, which means there were different customs. Styles of dress changed. There were patterns of similarities, but there were changes in clothing. The principle that runs through the dress habits is the principle of modesty. But, even modesty changes, illustrated by the mode of dress in Africa, and Wall Street. At one time in history, the use of makeup and the wearing of jewelry symbolized ostentatiousness, and eroticism. That is not always the case, however. So, care must be taken. Today, a good Southern Baptist preacher would tell the women, “If the barn needs painting, paint it. Wear some makeup.”

Paying tithes has also changed from an agricultural setting to an urban setting, and from paying in shekels, to the local currency.

- Allow for Christian distinction in the first century. For example, in the first century, the mark of a prostitute was the uncovered head. It is possible that Paul enjoined women to cover their head so that the church was not scandalized by Christian women appearing to look like prostitutes. But that may not have been the case because Paul does not mention the moral dimension argument. However, Paul does give the reason of the wearing of the veil, based on the principle of authority, and subordination, based on creation teaching.

Special Note.

Bible interpreters must not give an argument, or rationale for something that is plainly taught.

- Be aware of creation principles. These principles are transient. They transcend all cultures.
- In case of any remaining doubt regarding a custom, or principle, then it becomes a matter of faith, and conscience. Do not violate what may be a grand and glorious principle. It is better to have high scruples, rather than loose scruples. This is the principle of humility. Bow before the Word of God. Such an attitude, God will honor.