

Culture and the Bible

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The modern world detests authority but worships relevance. So to bracket these two words in relation to the Bible is to claim for it one quality (authority) which people fear it has but wish it had not, and another (relevance) which they fear it has not but wish it had.

Our Christian conviction is that the Bible has both authority and relevance to a degree quite extraordinary in so ancient a book-and that the secret of both is in Jesus Christ. Indeed, we should never think of Christ and the Bible apart. "The Scriptures ... bear witness to me," he said (John 5:39), and in so saying also bore his witness to them. This reciprocal testimony between the Living Word and the written Word is the clue to our Christian understanding of the Bible. For his testimony to it assures us of its authority, and its testimony to him of its relevance. The authority and the relevance are his.

As for his authority, we find it to be liberating rather than oppressive, for his yoke is easy; the hand that fits it is gentle, and under it we find rest. As for his relevance, Jesus Christ is timeless. Though born into a first-century Palestinian culture, he belongs to every culture. He is not dated. He speaks to all people in their vernacular. Christ is our contemporary.

It is the relation between Scripture and culture which I want to pursue in this booklet. We shall consider the place of culture in three stages of the Bible's progress: The first is inspiration, or the original giving of the Bible; the second, interpretation, or our contemporary understanding of the Bible; and the third, communication, or the necessary sharing of the Bible with the whole world.

Inspiration

Inspiration is the word traditionally used to describe God's activity in the composition of the Bible. Indeed, the Bible's divine inspiration is the foundation of its divine authority. It is authoritative because-and only because-it is inspired. This statement needs immediately to be qualified, however. To say "the Bible is the Word of God" is true, but it is only a half-truth, even a dangerous half-truth. For the Bible is also a human word and witness.

This, in fact, is the account which the Bible itself gives of its origins. The law, for instance, is termed by Luke both "the law of Moses" and "the law of the Lord," and that in consecutive verses (Luke 2:22-23). Similarly, at the beginning of Hebrews it is stated that "God spoke ... through the prophets," and in 2 Peter 1:21 that "men spoke from God." Thus God spoke and men spoke. Both statements are true, and neither contradicts the other. Let us examine this concept of the double authorship of the Bible. We will first look at each authorship separately, and then at the two in relation to each other.

Divine Authorship. The Bible is the Word of God. He spoke it. It issued from his mouth. The term inspiration means neither that God breathed into the human authors in order to heighten their perception of truth, nor that he breathed into their writings in order somehow to change human prose into divine poetry, but rather that the words they spoke were actually breathed out of his mouth. The emphasis is not on the transformation of truths which were already there (in the minds or words of the prophets), but on the origination of truths which were not there until God thought and spoke them. We cannot escape this. It is the plain teaching of 2 Timothy 3:16 that "all Scripture is God-breathed"-theopneustos-breathed out from his mouth. Hence the familiar prophetic formulas- "the word of the Lord came to me, saying" or "thus says the Lord" - and the comparable claim of the apostles to be bearers or speakers of God's word as in 1 Thessalonians 2:13, for example.

For myself I can see no reason to resist this or to be in the slightest degree embarrassed by it. On the contrary, the concept is eminently reasonable. After all, we do not even know what is going on in each other's minds unless we talk to one another. If someone were to stand before you in silence and maintain a poker face, you would not have the foggiest notion what was going on in his mind. If, however, he were to begin speaking to you, you would know exactly what he was thinking at the moment. He would be conveying to you the thoughts of his mind by the words of his mouth.

And if this is true of human minds, how much more must it be true of the mind of God. God's mind, being infinite, is impenetrable by finite beings. His thoughts are as much higher than our thoughts as the heavens are higher than the earth (Is 55:9). How then can we know them? By ourselves we cannot. They are beyond us. There is no ladder by which we may climb to the heights of heaven, no way by which we may delve into the mind of God. But God has disclosed his thoughts to us by speaking. The Isaiah 55 passage continues: "As the rain and the snow come down from heaven; ... so is my word that goes out from my mouth" (vv. 10-11). God has clothed his thoughts in words. His mouth has declared what is in his mind. Theologically we may say that revelation has come to us through the means of inspiration.

Human Authorship. Yet this is only one side of the story. There is another. When God spoke, he did not shout in an audible voice out of the clear, blue sky. He spoke through special human messengers. And although at times he addressed them in dreams and through angels and in strange trance conditions, these were rare occurrences. Normally he neither dictated to them as if they were secretaries, nor into them as if they were machines. He seems to have revealed his truth to them and through them in such a way that they were not conscious of divine inspiration, so fully were their own minds

involved in the process. I can perhaps make this point best by characterizing these special messengers as historians, theologians and authors.

Many were historians, for much of the Bible is narrative. Genesis tells the story of the patriarchs, Exodus and Numbers of the Israelites' escape from Egypt and wanderings in the desert, Joshua of their settlement in the Promised Land, the books of Kings and Chronicles of the monarchy, Ezra and Nehemiah of the return from Babylonian exile, the gospels of the ministry of Jesus, and the Acts of the infant church. Yet we must not imagine that all this history was supernaturally disclosed without the use of any documentary sources. No, the biblical writers used diaries and records and archives. For example, the actual decree of Cyrus about the rebuilding of the Temple is incorporated into the text of Ezra 6. Similarly, Luke tells us frankly in the preface to his gospel about his careful historical enquiries into the story of Jesus as told both orally by eyewitnesses and in written documents. It is clear, then, that divine inspiration and human investigation were not incompatible; both proceeded simultaneously.

The biblical historians were not historians, in the modern sense, however, writing with scientific detachment. They were theologians too, writing from a divine perspective. They were not morally and spiritually neutral; they were deeply committed to God's cause. The Old Testament history books were regarded as prophecy, and the four lives of Jesus are not biographies but gospels written by evangelists, who were bearing witness to Jesus. Consequently, they selected and arranged their material according to their theological purpose. Moreover, their purpose arose naturally-though also in God's providence-from their temperament, their background and their God-given responsibilities to the people of God. Man and message were related to each other. It was no accident that Amos was the prophet of God's justice, Isaiah of his sovereignty and Hosea of his love; or that Paul was the apostle of grace, James of works, John of love and Peter of hope; or that Luke, the only Gentile contributor to the New Testament, stressed the worldwide embrace of the gospel. The Holy Spirit communicated through each a distinctive and appropriate emphasis.

These historian-theologians were also authors in their own right. As we read their works, even in a translation, we are aware of the different literary genres they used, of their different styles and vocabularies. These were not eliminated by the process of inspiration.

We see, then, that just as the claim to divine inspiration is there, so are the phenomena of historical research, theological concern and literary composition. If therefore we are to do justice to how the Bible understands itself and presents itself, we must hold both these truths together. Also, we must state them both in such a way that neither overrides the other. On the one hand, God spoke, deciding what he wished to say, yet without obliterating the

personality of the human authors. On the other hand, men spoke, using their human faculties freely, yet without distorting the message of the divine Author.

A number of writers both ancient and modern have detected an analogy between the double authorship of the one book and the two natures of the one Christ. Now all arguments from analogy are perilous, and the parallel between the inspiration of the written Word and the Incarnation of the Living Word is far from being exact. For example, the Bible possesses no inherent deity as we believe Jesus had and has. Nevertheless, in the blend of the divine with the human there is clearly some similarity. Two particular points strike me as worthy of comment. The first is that orthodoxy affirms the two without confusing them, and without allowing either to detract from the other. We must not speak of the deity of Jesus in such a way as to deny his real humanity, nor of his real humanity in such a way as to imply that it was imperfect through sin or error. Similarly, we must not speak of the divine origin of the Bible in such a way as to deny its human authorship, nor of the human authors in such a way as to imply that they were marred by error.

The second point I would make about this analogy is that in both cases we more conservative Christians have tended to overemphasize the divine at the expense of the human. In referring to the Incarnation of the Word we sometimes speak only of the deity of Jesus, and forget that he was also a man of flesh and blood. This is the heresy of docetism. Similarly, in referring to the inspiration of Scripture we sometimes speak only of its divine origin and forget that it was also written by human authors. This is the heresy of fundamentalism. It is as misleading to say, "The Bible is the Word of God" without adding that it is also the words of men, as it is to say, "Jesus is the Son of God" without adding that he is also the Son of man. Both errors are understandable because in both Christ and the Bible it is the divine element not the human which is usually under attack. Nevertheless, such lopsided views are seriously misguided. Muslims believe that the Koran was dictated to Muhammad in Arabic. Latter-day Saints believe that Joseph Smith discovered the Book of Mormon, readymade, and that only he could decipher the ancient script on its golden plates. But Christians have a very different understanding of the Bible, namely, that it is men's words as well as God's, or rather God's words through men's.

Christian Realism. An understanding of the double authorship of Scripture naturally affects the way in which we read it. Because it is the Word of God, we read it as we read no other book, humbly praying to the Holy Spirit for illumination. But because it is also the word of men, we read it as we read every other book, thinking about its meaning and paying close attention to its cultural context, grammatical structure and vocabulary.

Thus prayer and study, divine illumination and human investigation go hand in hand. "Think over what I say," wrote Paul to Timothy, "for the Lord will grant you understanding in everything" (2 Tim 2:7).

It is in this sense that, in the original meaning of these terms, every Christian should be both a fundamentalist and a higher critic. The original "fundamentalist," when that series of books entitled *The Fundamentals* was published more than half a century ago, was a Christian who believed such fundamental doctrines as the deity, virgin birth, substitutionary death, bodily resurrection and personal return of Jesus, in addition to the authority of the Bible. The original "higher critic" (in distinction to the "lower" or textual critic) was simply a literary critic who investigated and evaluated the context, sources, forms, date, authorship, aim, syntax and language of the biblical books. It is most unfortunate that over the years the popular understanding of both words has changed. Nowadays the fundamentalist is often obscurantist, and the higher critic destructive, in their respective attitudes toward the Bible. The extreme fundamentalist forgets that the Word of God had human authors; the extreme higher critic forgets that the biblical books are the Word of God. In both cases there is a tragic divorce of what God by inspiration has married.

What, then, if the two seem to be in conflict within one another? What if we come across apparent discrepancies in the text of Scripture-historical, scientific, literary, theological, or moral- which are incompatible with the divine origin of the Bible? Our first duty in such situations is to seek to harmonize what appears to be discrepant. Not of course by twisting the text or manipulating the evidence, but by re-examining the conflict to see if we have misunderstood some part of it. Manipulation is dishonest; true harmonization seeks to honor God whose truth is always self-consistent.

What if a true harmonization eludes us and the seeming discrepancy remains, whether between science and the Bible, or between two parts of the Bible, or between our theological understanding of the Bible and our historical-critical methods of studying it? What then? We should certainly not abandon our confidence in the truth of the Bible, because it is solidly grounded on the authority of Jesus Christ. No, wise Christians keep what might be called suspense accounts or pending trays. That is, they suspend judgment and go on looking for harmony rather than giving up in despair, because they are sure that one day what is obscure will become plain. This procedure is not obscurantism, but humble, sober, Christian realism.

It is also what we do with every other Christian doctrine. No doctrine is free of problems. For example, we all believe that God is love. But this doctrine is fraught with insoluble problems. So what do we do when we are faced with the tragic perplexities of evil, undeserved suffering and natural disasters? Do we turn a blind eye to them? No. Do we settle for glib and

superficial solutions? No. Do we abandon our belief in God's love? No. We go on seeking to harmonize God's love as revealed in Christ with the phenomena of our own experience. And when both our mind and our heart are burdened with the continuing tension between the two, we acknowledge humbly that now we see in a mirror dimly, that in the end we shall see face to face, and that meanwhile we have to endure the tension, waiting patiently until the day when it will be perfectly resolved.

Interpreting the Bible

Our thoughts about inspiration lead on naturally to the topic of interpretation. An inspired text is of little value if we cannot understand it. We have to admit, however, that many of us are better at defending biblical inspiration than at wrestling with biblical interpretation. We find it easier to affirm the authority of the Bible than to demonstrate its relevance. Yet dogmatic assertions about the inspiration and authority, even about the infallibility and inerrancy, of Scripture can never be a substitute for painstaking reflection about its meaning and its message. Indeed, the higher our view of Scripture, the more conscientious our study of it should be. That this is frequently not the case among conservative evangelicals should give us a red face and a bad conscience.

I need, I think, to elaborate why the struggle to understand Scripture is indispensable. The second paragraph of the Lausanne Covenant (1974) states that the Bible is "without error in all that it affirms." This clause was drafted with deliberate care. It qualifies what is meant by biblical inerrancy. At the same time, it was never intended as an evasion (as some critics have suggested) but only as a clarification. It is essential to realize that not everything contained in the Bible is affirmed by the Bible. For example, the behavior of some biblical characters is positively disgraceful; it is recorded as a warning to us, not as an example. Again, some statements are included in the biblical text not as truth to be believed, but as error to be rejected. Perhaps the best example is the book of Job. That poor man's three so-called comforters did little to comfort him. Instead, holding the rigid orthodoxy of their day that all personal suffering is due to personal sin, they tried to get him to confess those offenses which (in their view) had brought God's judgment upon him. But they were wrong. In the first chapter of the book God describes Job as "blameless and upright," and in the last chapter he expresses his anger with Job's three friends because "you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has" (1:8; 42:7). It is clear, therefore, that in including their speeches the Bible is not affirming their argument but contradicting it.

You may know that at the end of 1978 the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy issued the "Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy," which is an extremely judicious document, consisting of a Preface, a Short Statement and 19 Articles of Affirmation and Denial. The second paragraph of the Short

Statement helpfully develops the Lausanne Covenant clause which I have quoted. It says: "Holy Scripture ... is to be believed, as God's instruction, in all that it affirms; obeyed, as God's command, in all that it requires; embraced, as God's pledge, in all that it promises."

How, then, are we to determine what the Bible affirms, requires and promises? For it is this which is God's inerrant Word, which addresses us as divine instruction, command and pledge, and which we are to believe, obey and embrace. To answer this question we need the science called "hermeneutics," from the Greek verb meaning to "translate" or "interpret." To be sure, we are far from saying that nobody can understand anything in the Bible without the expertise of scholars. On the contrary, we should continue to emphasize what the sixteenth century Reformers called the "perspicuity" of Scripture, by which they meant that the way of salvation is plainly set forth in it, so that the simplest believer may read the Bible for himself, respond to its witness to Jesus by coming to him, and so find salvation and life (see John 20:31 and 2 Tim 3:15). Yet God's Word is a rich and varied revelation. It contains more than the simple way of salvation. It discloses God's creation and control of the universe, his purposes for humanity, his covenant of grace, his dealings with his people Israel, the redeeming work of his Son, the coming of his Spirit, the beginnings and the mission of his church, his call to maturity through Christ likeness, his promises of Christ's glorious return, of resurrection and of heaven, and much more besides.

If, then, we are to enter more deeply into God's revealed Word, we must take the task of hermeneutics seriously, even if we laugh at the term. Anglican evangelicals in England were introduced to it at the 1977 Nottingham Congress, where one of the standard jokes (at the expense of those who had never heard of hermeneutics before) was that a distinguished German theologian was being referred to, Hermann Eutics!

The Old Hermeneutic. The old hermeneutic consisted of a set of universal principles by which any document might be elucidated, legal and literary documents as well as biblical. Here are the three most important principles.¹ The first might be called "the principle of simplicity." Calvin expressed it well in a comment on Galatians 4:22, "Let us know . . . that the true meaning of Scripture is the natural and obvious meaning.... Let us not only neglect as doubtful, but boldly set aside as deadly corruptions, those pretended expositions which lead us away from the natural meaning." You will notice that the adjective is *natural* rather than *literal*, for the natural meaning of a text is sometimes figurative rather than literal.

Second is "the principle of history." This means that we must rid our minds of twentieth-century ideas and think ourselves back into the original

situation in which the biblical authors wrote. What did they intend to say in that context and by those words? Professor E. D. Hirsch stated this principle in his book *Validity in Interpretation* (1967) by his terse expression "a text means what its author meant."

Third is "the principle of harmony." As we have already seen, we are to look for agreement within Scripture rather than contradiction, harmony rather than discord. So we shall seek to interpret the text in its context, and each Scripture in the light of all. We must never isolate any verse from its setting within the whole Bible, but rather interpret Scripture by Scripture. The Reformers called this "the analogy of faith." As Article XX of the Anglican Church's Thirty-Nine Articles states it, the church must not "so expound one place of Scripture, that it be repugnant to another."

These three principles are not arbitrary. On the contrary, they all arise from the character and activity of the living God we believe in, the God who has spoken. For when God spoke, he wished to be understood; he chose precise situations, and he did not contradict himself. The message he intended to convey was plain, historical and consistent. Any interpretation of the Bible which ignores these elementary principles is of necessity doomed to be a misinterpretation.

The New Hermeneutic. In addition, however, during the last ten to fifteen years scholars have been talking about a new hermaneutic.² This goes beyond general principles to the particularities of both the writers and the readers of the Bible. Its most notable feature is the importance which it attaches to the constantly changing human cultures. God chose to speak to and through people of particular cultures, whether of the ancient Near East or of Palestinian Judaism or of the Greco-Roman world. Those who read the Bible today, however, many centuries later, belong to quite different cultures. Some people read it in the post Christian culture of the West, others in a Marxist culture, others in a Hindu, Buddhist or Muslim culture. The real task of hermeneutics is to achieve what has been called a "fusion of horizons," in which both cultural horizons are recognized and understood, and God's message given in one culture is allowed to impinge on us who live in another.

Take the biblical cultures first. No word of the Bible was spoken in a cultural vacuum. Every part of it was culturally conditioned. This is not to say that its message was controlled by the local culture in such a way as to be distorted by it, but rather that the local culture was the medium through which God expressed himself. This is a fact which we neither can nor should deny. But we must be careful what deductions we draw from it. Extreme positions are being taken up on both sides of the debate. Some, whenever they find biblical teaching couched in cultural terms other than their own, declare the teaching irrelevant because the culture is alien. Others make the opposite

mistake and invest both the kernel of the teaching and the cultural shell with equal normative authority. The more judicious way, however, is to preserve the inner substance of what God is teaching or commanding, while claiming the liberty to re-clothe it in modern cultural dress.

For example, Jesus commanded us to wash one another's feet. We should not discard this instruction on the ground that foot-washing is no part of the contemporary culture of the West. Nor should we ignore the cultural factor and with wooden unimaginative literalism go round asking people to take their shoes and socks off in order to let us wash their feet. No, the right response is to discern the inner reality of our Lord's command, which is that if we love one another we will serve one another, even by doing dirty and menial jobs for one another. Then, if we do not wash each other's feet, we will gladly clean each other's shoes. The purpose of such cultural transposition, it will be seen, is not to dodge the awkward commands of Jesus, but rather to make our obedience contemporary.

Another and more sensitive example concerns the place and ministry of women in modern society. We all know the Pauline passages about feminine submission, together with the requirements of wearing veils and being silent in church, both of which were cultural symbols of that submission. Once again there is a sad polarization in the Christian community on this issue. On the one hand, there are those campaigners for women's liberation who not only reject Paul's teaching in its entirety but seem determined to argue that there are no differences between men and women except the superficial physiological ones. On the other hand, there are those conservative Christians who, in response to the more strident forms of feminism, harden their position even to the point of requiring that veils be worn and silence observed by all women in all churches.

Is there a wiser and more biblical way than these two extremes? I think there is. It begins by striving to discern the inner reality of the apostolic instruction. Paul grounds it in creation. He affirms that, although men and women are equal because God created man male and female in his own image, and because in Christ they are one, yet equality is not to be confused with identity. God made male and female equal, but he also made them complementary rather than identical. Our sexuality, whether masculine or feminine, is deeply embedded in our created personality. And God has given to man a certain headship or responsibility, whose purpose is not to suppress any woman, still less to crush her, but the reverse, namely, so to love and serve her as to provide the context within which she may express the full grace and beauty of her femininity. For what God by creation has established, human beings by their culture cannot (and must not try to) destroy. Veils and silence seem to me to be cultural symbols which belong to the past; others today can take their place. There will be different symbols in different cultures, but

whatever they are, they must express the inner meaning of the biblical teaching, namely, that men and women complement each other, that each is to serve the other, and that men are to exercise a strong, loving, caring headship which enables women to fulfill themselves.

Contemporary Cultures. I have been talking about the biblical cultures, but let us move on to consider contemporary cultures. We do not always realize how difficult it is to study Scripture objectively. Our understanding of Scripture is inevitably influenced by our own cultural background. The spectacles through which we view Scripture have cultural lenses. For example, people who belong to the First or Free World, to the Second or Communist World and to the Third or Developing World read the Bible from different perspectives and are likely in consequence to discover different priorities. All of us come to Scripture with our own questions. They are the questions which our situation suggests to us are of paramount importance. But they may not be the questions which Scripture has been given to answer. Therefore, instead of answering our ready-made questions, Scripture often challenges us to revise and refine them. We then come back to Scripture with better questions, the answers to which stimulate further questions. And so the dialog goes on. The creative interaction between God's Word and us forms what has been called a "hermeneutical spiral," for gradually we progress upward in our knowledge of God.³

Another way of putting this truth is to say that obedience is a precondition of understanding. We need to repent of the haughty way in which we sometimes stand in judgment upon Scripture and must learn to sit humbly under its judgment instead. If we come to Scripture with our minds made up, expecting to hear from it only an echo of our own thoughts and never the thunderclap of God's, then indeed he will not speak to us and we shall only be confirmed in our own prejudices. We must allow the Word of God to confront us, to disturb our security, to undermine our complacency and to overthrow our patterns of thought and behavior.

Throughout its long and variegated career, however, the church has seldom cultivated a humble, sensitive attitude of listening to God's Word. Instead, it has frequently done what it has been forbidden to do, namely, become conformist. It has accommodated itself to the prevailing culture, leaped on board all the trendiest bandwagons and hummed all the popular tunes. Whenever the church does this, it reads Scripture through the world's eyes and rationalizes its own unfaithfulness. Church history is replete with tragic examples. How was it that the Christian conscience not only approved but actually glamorized those terrible Crusades to recover the holy places from Islam-an unholy blunder which Muslims have never forgotten and which continues to obstruct the evangelization of the Muslim world? How is

it that torture could ever have been employed in the name of Jesus Christ to combat heresy and promote orthodoxy? How is it that for centuries Protestant churches were so inward-looking and so disobedient to Christ's Great Commission that William Carey's proposal of a mission to India was greeted with that patronizing retort, "Sit down, young man". When God wants to convert the heathen, he'll do it without your help"? How is it that the cruel degradations of slavery and of the slave trade were not abolished in the so-called Christian West until eighteen hundred years after Christ? How is it that racial discrimination and environmental pollution have become widely recognized as the evils they are only since World War 2? Such is a catalog of some of the worst, blind spots which have marred the church's testimony down the ages. None of them can be defended from Scripture. All are due to a misreading of Scripture, or to an unwillingness to sit under its authority.

It is easy to criticize our Christian forebears for their blindness. It is much harder to discover our own. What will posterity see as the chief Christian blind spot of the last quarter of the twentieth century? I do not know. But I suspect it will have something to do with the economic oppression of the Third World and the readiness with which Western Christians tolerate it, and even acquiesce in it. Only slowly is our Christian conscience being aroused to the gross economic inequalities between the countries of the North Atlantic and the southern world of Latin America, Africa and most parts of Asia. Total egalitarianism may not be a biblical ideal. But must we not roundly declare that luxury and extravagance are indefensible evils, while much of the world is undernourished and underprivileged? Many more Christians should gain the economic and political qualifications to join in the quest for justice in the world community. And meanwhile, the development of a less affluent lifestyle, in whatever terms we may define it, is surely an obligation that Scripture lays on us in compassionate solidarity with the poor. Of course we can resist these things and even use (misuse) the Bible to defend our resistance. The horror of the situation is that our affluent culture has drugged us; we no longer feel the pain of other people's deprivations. Yet the first step toward the recovery of our Christian integrity is to be aware that our culture blinds, deafens and dopes us. Then we shall begin to cry to God to open our eyes, unstop our ears and stab our dull consciences awake, until we see, hear and feel what through his Word he has been saying to us all the time. Then we shall take action.

Communicating the Bible's Message

So far we have thought about the inspiration of the Bible (how God spoke his Word in the first place) and about the interpretation of the Bible (how we are to listen to it today in order to understand and obey). But we cannot stop there. For God's Word is not intended for us only, but for the

world. Our desire to understand it, therefore, is not just that we may obey it ourselves, but that we may communicate it to others for their obedience too.

In one sense the whole Bible is gospel, for its fundamental purpose is to bear witness to Jesus Christ and to proclaim the good news of a new life to those who come to him. Now if the Bible (which is God's Word through men's words) is gospel, then all theologies (which are human formulations of biblical truth) must be framed as gospel also. Too much contemporary theology fails at this point. It is incommunicable. But any theology which cannot be communicated as gospel is of minimal value. For one thing, the task of formulating truth is fruitless if, once formulated, it cannot then be more readily communicated. If it cannot, why bother to formulate it? For another, Jesus taught that only those who pass on to others the truth they have received will receive any more. "Take heed what you hear," he warned, "the measure you give will be the measure you get, and still more will be given you" (Mk 4:24).

As in the interpretation of the Bible, so in its communication, culture is a factor of immense importance. Dr. Rene Padilla of Argentina startled participants in the Lausanne Congress in July 1974 by accusing many Western missionaries of exporting a "culture-Christianity." That is, the version of the gospel they were proclaiming had been much more strongly influenced than they realized by their own cultural upbringing. Many people resented what he said, but his condemnation was just.

The Willowbank Consultation in January 1978 gave further consideration to the cultural barriers which hinder the communication of the gospel. Why do people reject the gospel which missionaries bring? Often it is not because they think it to be false, but either because they perceive it as a threat to their own culture or because it is presented to them in terms of a foreign culture. "Sometimes," says the Willowbank Report, "these two cultural blunders are committed together, and messengers of the gospel are guilty of a cultural imperialism which both undermines the local culture unnecessarily and seeks to impose an alien culture instead."

Cross-cultural Communication. Let us imagine an American who is sent as a missionary to an African country. He will have to ask himself this question: How can I, who am the product of an Anglo-Saxon culture, take the gospel from the Bible, which was written in the cultures of Judaism and the Greco-Roman world, and communicate it to Africans who belong to a third culture, whether of Islam or of an African traditional religion, without either falsifying the message or rendering it unintelligible? It is this interplay between three cultures—the cultures of the Bible, of the missionary and of his or her hearers—which constitutes the exciting, yet exacting, discipline of cross-cultural communication.

We must not think even of the biblical versions of the gospel as if they were culture-free statements which are immediately and universally intelligible. They are not. They are presented in cultural terms like the rest of the Bible. They presuppose a background without which they cannot be well understood. Of course the biblical formulations remain permanently normative. They are the criteria by which we must judge the faithfulness of fresh formulations today. But this does not mean that we are under obligation to continue using biblical categories and biblical vocabulary in precisely the same way as they are used in Scripture without any modification.

For example, we believe that we have been "ransomed ... with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot" (1 Pet 1:18-19). For those who can interpret the language, it is an exceedingly solemn and wonderful truth. Indeed, we shall spend eternity ascribing praise, honor, glory and power "to him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb" (Rev 5:13). This phraseology was extremely popular in the Victorian era. Hymns inquired if their singers had been "washed in the blood of the Lamb" and exhorted them "louder still and louder" to "praise the precious blood." Indeed, there was a time when evangelists were not regarded as having preached "the pure gospel" if they failed to make explicit mention of "the precious blood of Christ."

What these watchdogs of orthodoxy did not remember, however, is that even in the New Testament itself the death of Christ is not always explained in terms of the shedding of the blood of God's Lamb. Such expressions were particularly meaningful to Jewish readers who were familiar with the Old Testament Levitical sacrifices, though to be sure Gentile audiences familiar with the mystery religions also knew something of blood sacrifices. But today these categories make ready sense only among Hindus and animists who sacrifice animals, and among the Falasha Jews of Ethiopia who still perform sacrifices. Secular audiences in the West, however, not only lack the background to understand such phraseology, but in addition often feel squeamish at the mention of blood. What I am urging is this: The truth that through Christ's death for us and instead of us we may be forgiven and receive new life is indispensable to the gospel. But we can proclaim this good news with entire faithfulness without ever mentioning either the shedding or the sprinkling of Christ's blood. Only later shall we need to teach converts the meaning of these expressions, so that they may enter more deeply into an understanding of his death and may also appreciate the significance of the Lord's Supper.

In our generation it is not the blood of Christ but the kingdom of God which is in danger of becoming a shibboleth. We must proclaim the gospel of the kingdom and the ethics of the kingdom, some people are telling us, or else we are emasculating the biblical gospel. This kind of talk, however, confuses

the truth with the formulation of the truth just as much as did insistence on the blood of Christ. Of course the announcement of God's kingdom was the very heart of the message of Jesus, and to Jewish audiences steeped in the messianic expectation the apostles continued to proclaim it. But already in the New Testament the good news was expressed in other terms. In John's Gospel the emphasis is on eternal life rather than on the kingdom, and to Gentiles Paul preferred to proclaim Jesus as Lord and Savior. Yet all these are different ways of saying the same thing. If we are to preach the gospel faithfully, we must declare that through the death and resurrection of Jesus a new era dawned and a new life became possible. But we may speak of this new life in terms of God's kingdom or Christ's lordship or salvation or eternal life or in other ways. It is certainly not essential to refer explicitly to the kingdom; indeed in countries which are not monarchies but republics kingdom language sounds distinctly odd.

There is an urgent need today for creative Christian thinkers who will be utterly loyal to the essentials of the biblical gospel, but who will express it in fresh ways appropriate to every culture. To this task the Incarnation commits us. In order to communicate with us, the Eternal Word became flesh. He entered our world and lived our life. We, too, if we are to reach others who are alienated from God and from the gospel, will have to enter their cultural worlds, in particular their thought worlds. Only so can we hope to share the good news with them in terms which they can grasp.

Imitators of God. We have looked at the three principal stages in the divine communication to humanity. First God spoke (inspiration), next we have to listen and understand (interpretation), and third we must pass on what we have learned (communication).

The progress of the Word is from God to special messengers, from them to us and from us to the world. At each stage there is a cultural factor. God's own Word was spoken in specific cultural contexts. We who read it are the children of our cultures. And as we seek to share it with others in their cultures, we must struggle to do so in categories which neither impose ours nor despise theirs. In this way we shall be imitators of God, seeking to do what he has done. We shall be speaking to people in terms of their own situation, in order that they may understand, believe and obey. This is what is meant by the "contextualization" of the gospel.

Notes:

¹I have elaborated these three principles in a chapter on interpretation in my *Understanding the Bible* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1971).

²Tony Thiselton gives an excellent summary of the new hermeneutic in his chapter in *Obedying Christ in a Changing World, Vol. I, The Lord Christ* (New York: Collins, 1977).

³See section 4, "Understanding God's Word Today," of the *Willowbank Report*, 1978, which is Lausanne Occasional Paper No. 2.