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MUST I LEARN HOW TO INTERPRET THE BIBLE?

by D. A. Carson

Hermeneutics is the art and science of interpretation; biblical hermeneutics is the art and science of interpreting the Bible. At the time of the Reformation, debates over interpretation played an enormously important role. These were debates over "interpretation," not just over "interpretations." In other words, the Reformers disagreed with their opponents not only over what this or that passage meant, but over the nature of interpretation, the locus of authority in interpretation, the role of the church and of the Spirit in interpretation, and much more.

During the last half century, so many developments have taken place in the realm of hermeneutics that it would take a very long article even to sketch them in lightly. Sad to say, nowadays many scholars are more interested in the challenges of the discipline of hermeneutics than in the interpretation of the Bible—the very Bible that hermeneutics should help us handle more responsibly. On the other hand, rather ironically there are still some people who think that there is something slightly sleazy about interpretation. Without being crass enough to say so, they secretly harbor the opinion that what others offer are interpretations, but what they themselves offer is just what the Bible says.

Carl F. H. Henry is fond of saying that there are two kinds of presuppositionalists: those who admit it and those who don't. We might adapt his analysis to our topic: There are two kinds of practitioners of hermeneutics: those who admit it and those who don't. For the fact of the matter is that every time we find something in the Bible (whether it is there or not!), we have interpreted the Bible. There are good interpretations and there are bad interpretations; there are faithful interpretations and there are unfaithful interpretations. But there is no escape from interpretation.

This is not the place to lay out foundational principles, or to wrestle with the "new hermeneutic" (now becoming long in the tooth) and with "radical hermeneutics" and "postmodern hermeneutics." [For more information and bibliography on these topics, and especially their relation to postmodernism and how to respond to it, see my book *The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism*, esp. chaps. 2 and 3 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996).] I shall focus instead on one "simple" problem, one with which every serious Bible reader is occasionally confronted. The issue is this: What parts of the Bible are binding mandates for us, and what parts are not?

Consider some examples. "Greet one another with a holy kiss": the French do it, Arab believers do it, but by and large we do not. Are we therefore unbiblical? Jesus tells his disciples that they should wash one another's feet (John 13:14), yet most of us have never done so. Why do we "disobey" that plain injunction, yet obey his injunction regarding the Lord's Table ("This do, in remembrance of me")? If we find reasons to be flexible about **[p. 19]** the "holy kiss," how

flexible may we be in other domains? May we replace the bread and wine at the Lord's Supper with yams and goat's milk if we are in a village church in Papua New Guinea? If not, why not? And what about the broader questions circulating among theonomists regarding the continuing legal force of law set down under the Mosaic covenant? Should we as a nation, on the assumption that God graciously grants widespread revival and reformation, pass laws to execute adulterers by stoning? If not, why not? Is the injunction for women to keep silent in the church absolute (1 Cor. 14:33–36)? If not, why not? Jesus tells Nicodemus that he must be born again if he is to enter the kingdom; he tells the rich young man that he is to sell all that he has and give it to the poor. Why do we make the former demand absolute for all persons, and apparently fudge a little on the second?

Obviously I have raised enough questions for a dissertation or two. What follows in this article is not a comprehensive key to answering all difficult interpretive questions, but some preliminary guidelines to sorting such matters out. The apostolic number of points that follow are not put into any order of importance.

(1) As conscientiously as possible, seek the balance of Scripture, and avoid succumbing to historical and theological disjunctions.

Liberals have often provided us with nasty disjunctions: Jesus or Paul, the charismatic community or the "early catholic" church, and so forth. Protestants sometimes drop a wedge between Paul's faith apart from works (Rom. 3:28) and James's faith and works (Jas. 2:4); others absolutize Gal. 3:28 as if it were the controlling passage on all matters to do with women, and spend countless hours explaining away 1 Tim. 2:12 (or the reverse!).

Historically, many Reformed Baptists in England between the middle of the eighteenth century and the middle of the twentieth so emphasized God's sovereign grace in election that they became uncomfortable with general declarations of the gospel. Unbelievers should not be told to repent and believe the gospel: how could that be, since they are dead in trespasses and sin, and may not in any case belong to the elect? They should rather be encouraged to examine themselves to see if they have within themselves any of the first signs of the Spirit's work, any conviction of sin, any stirrings of shame. On the face of it, this is a long way from the Bible, but a large number of churches thought it was the hallmark of faithfulness. What has gone wrong, of course, is that the balance of Scripture has been lost. One element of biblical truth has been elevated to a position where it is allowed to destroy or domesticate some other element of biblical truth.

In fact, the "balance of Scripture" is not an easy thing to maintain, in part because there are different kinds of balance in Scripture. For example, there is the balance of diverse responsibilities laid on us (e.g. praying, being reliable at work, being a biblically faithful spouse and parent, evangelizing a neighbor, taking an orphan or widow under our wing, and so forth): these amount to balancing priorities within the limits of time and energy. There is the balance of

Scripture's emphases as established by observing their relation to the Bible's central plot-line (more on this in the 12th point); there is also the balance of truths which we cannot at this point ultimately reconcile, but which we can easily distort if do not listen carefully to the text (e.g. Jesus is both God and man; God is both the transcendent sovereign and yet personal; the elect alone are saved, and yet in some sense God loves horrible rebels so much that Jesus weeps over Jerusalem and God cries, "Turn, turn, why will you die? For the Lord has no pleasure in the death of the wicked."). In each case, a slightly different kind of biblical balance comes into play, but there is no escaping the fact that biblical balance is what we need.

(2) Recognize that the antithetical nature of certain parts of the Bible, not least some of Jesus' preaching, is a rhetorical device, not an absolute. The context must decide where this is the case.

Of course, there are absolute antitheses in Scripture that must not be watered down in any way. For example, the disjunctions between the curses and the blessings in Deut. 27–28 are not mutually delimiting: the conduct that calls down the curses of God and the conduct that wins his approval stand in opposite camps, and must not be intermingled or diluted. But on the other hand, when eight centuries before Christ, God says, "For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings" (Hos. 6:6), the sacrifical system of the Mosaic covenant is not thereby being destroyed. Rather, the Hebrew antithesis is a pointed way of saying, "If push comes to shove, mercy is more **[p. 20]** important than sacrifice. Whatever you do, you must not rank the marks of formal religion—in this case, burnt offerings and other mandated ritual sacrifices—with fundamental acknowledgment of God, or confuse the extent to which God cherishes compassion and mercy with the firmness with which he demands the observance of the formalities of the sacrificial system."

Similarly, when Jesus insists that if anyone is to become his disciple, he must hate his parents (Lk. 14:26), we must not think Jesus is sanctioning raw hatred of family members. What is at issue is that the claims of Jesus are more urgent and binding than even the most precious and prized human relationships (as the parallel in Mt. 10:37 makes clear).

Sometimes the apparent antithesis is formed by comparing utterances from two distant passages. On the one hand, Jesus insists that the praying of his followers should not be like the babbling of the pagans who think they are heard because of their many words (Mt. 6:7). On the other hand, Jesus can elsewhere tell a parable with the pointed lesson that his disciples should pray perseveringly and not give up (Lk. 18:1–8). Yet if we imagine that the formal clash between these two injunctions is more than superficial, we betray not only our ignorance of Jesus' preaching style, but also our insensitivity to pastoral demands. The first injunction is vital against those who think they can wheedle things out of God by their interminable prayers; the second is vital against those whose spiritual commitments are so shallow that their mumbled one-liners constitute the whole of their prayer life.

(3) Be cautious about absolutizing what is said or commanded only once.

The reason is not that God must say things more than once for them to be true or binding. The reason, rather, is that if something is said only once it is easily misunderstood or misapplied. When something is repeated on several occasions and in slightly different contexts, readers will enjoy a better grasp of what is meant and what is at stake.

That is why the famous "baptism for the dead" passage (1 Cor.15:29) is not unpacked at length and made a major plank in, say, the Heidelberg Catechism or the Westminster Confession. Over forty interpretations of that passage have been offered in the history of the church. Mormons are quite sure what it means, of course, but the reason why they are sure is because they are reading it in the context of other books that they claim are inspired and authoritative.

This principle also underlies one of the reasons why most Christians do not view Christ's command to wash one another's feet as a third sacrament or ordinance. Baptism and the Lord's Supper are certainly treated more than once, and there is ample evidence that the early church observed both, but neither can be said about footwashing. But there is more to be said.

(4) Carefully examine the biblical rationale for any saying or command.

The purpose of this counsel is not to suggest that if you cannot discern the rationale you should flout the command. It is to insist that God is neither arbitrary nor whimsical, and by and large he provides reasons and structures of thought behind the truths he discloses and the demands he makes. Trying to uncover this rationale can be a help in understanding what is of the essence of what God is saying, and what is the peculiar cultural expression of it.

Before I give a couple of examples, it is important to recognize that all of Scripture is culturally bound. For a start, it is given in human languages (Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek), and languages are a cultural phenomenon. Nor are the words God speaks to be thought of as, say, generic Greek. Rather, they belong to the Greek of the Hellenistic period (it isn't Homeric Greek or Attic Greek or modern Greek). Indeed, this Greek changes somewhat from writer to writer (Paul does not always use words the same way that Matthew does) and from genre to genre (apocalyptic does not sound exactly like an epistle). None of this should frighten us. It is part of the glory of our great God that he has accommodated himself to human speech, which is necessarily time-bound and therefore changing. Despite some postmodern philosophers, this does not jeopardize God's capacity for speaking truth. It does mean that we finite human beings shall never know truth exhaustively (that would require omniscience), but there is no reason why we cannot know some truth truly. Nevertheless, all such truth as God discloses to us in words comes dressed in cultural forms. Careful and godly interpretation does not mean stripping away such forms to find absolute truth beneath, for that is not possible: we can never escape our finiteness. It does mean understanding those cultural forms, and by God's grace discovering the truth that God has disclosed through them.

So when God commands people to rend their clothes and put on sackcloth and ashes, are these precise actions so much of the essence of repentance **[p. 21]** that there is no true repentance without them? When Paul tells us to greet one another with a holy kiss, does he mean that there is no true Christian greeting without such a kiss?

When we examine the rationale for these actions, and ask whether or not ashes and kissing are integratively related to God's revelation, we see the way forward. There is no theology of kissing; there is a theology of mutual love and committed fellowship among the members of the church. There is no theology of sackcloth and ashes; there is a theology of repentance that demands both radical sorrow and profound change.

If this reasoning is right, it has a bearing on both footwashing and on head-coverings. Apart from the fact that footwashing appears only once in the New Testament as something commanded by the Lord, the act itself is theologically tied, in John 13, to the urgent need for humility among God's people, and to the cross. Similarly, there is no theology of head-coverings, but there is a profound and recurrent theology of that of which the head-coverings were a first-century Corinthian expression: the proper relationships between men and women, between husbands and wives.

(5) Carefully observe that the formal universality of proverbs and of proverbial sayings is only rarely an absolute universality. If proverbs are treated as statutes or case law, major interpretive—and pastoral!—errors will inevitably ensue.

Compare these two sayings of Jesus: (a) "He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me scatters" (Mt.12:30). (b) ". . . for whoever is not against us is for us" (Mk. 9:40; cf. Lk. 9:50). As has often been noted, the sayings are not contradictory if the first is uttered to indifferent people against themselves, and the second to the disciples about others whose zeal outstrips their knowledge. But the two statements are certainly difficult to reconcile if each is taken absolutely, without thinking through such matters.

Or consider two adjacent proverbs in Prov. 26. (a) "Do not answer a fool according to his folly . . ." (26:4). (b) "Answer a fool according to his folly . . ." (26:5). If these are statutes or examples of case law, there is unavoidable contradiction. On the other hand, the second line of each proverb provides enough of a rationale that we glimpse what we should have seen anyway: proverbs are not statutes. They are distilled wisdom, frequently put into pungent, aphoristic forms that demand reflection, or that describe effects in society at large (but not necessarily in every individual), or that demand consideration of just how and when they apply.

Let us spell out these two proverbs again, this time with the second line included in each case: (a) "Do not answer a fool according to his folly, or you will be like him yourself." (b) "Answer a fool according to his folly, or he will be wise in his own eyes." Side by side as they are, these two proverbs demand reflection on when it is the part of prudence to refrain from answering fools, lest we be dragged down to their level, and when it is the part of wisdom to

offer a sharp, "foolish" rejoinder that has the effect of pricking the pretensions of the fool. The text does not spell this out explicitly, but if the rationales of the two cases are kept in mind, we will have a solid principle of discrimination.

So when a well-known para-church organization keeps quoting "Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it" as if it were case law, what are we to think? This proverbial utterance must not be stripped of its force: it is a powerful incentive to responsible, God-fearing, child-rearing. Nevertheless, it is a proverb; it is not a covenantal promise. Nor does it specify at what point the children will be brought into line. Of course, many children from Christian homes go astray because the parents really have been very foolish or unbiblical or downright sinful; but many of us have witnessed the burdens of unnecessary guilt and shame borne by really godly parents when their grown **[p. 22]** children are, say, 40 years of age and demonstrably unconverted. To apply the proverb in such a way as to engender or reinforce such guilt is not only pastorally incompetent, it is hermeneutically incompetent: it is making the Scriptures say something a little different from what can safely be inferred. Aphorisms and proverbs give insight as to how culture under God works, how relationships work, what are priorities should be; they do not put in all the footnotes as to whether there are any individual exceptions, and under what circumstances, and so forth.

(6) The application of some themes and subjects must be handled with special care, not only because of their intrinsic complexity, but also because of essential shifts in social structures between biblical times and our own day.

"Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves" (Rom.13:1–2). Some Christians have reasoned from this passage that we must always submit to the governing authorities, except in matters of conscience before God (Acts 4:19). Even then, we "submit" to the authorities by patiently bearing the sanctions they impose on us in this fallen world. Other Christians have reasoned from this passage that since Paul goes on to say that the purpose of rulers is to uphold justice (Rom.13:3–4), then if rulers are no longer upholding justice the time may come when righteous people should oppose them, and even, if necessary, overthrow them. The issues are exceedingly complex, and were thought through in some detail by the Reformers.

But there is of course a new wrinkle added to the fabric of debate when one moves from a totalitarian régime, or from an oligarchy, or from a view of government bound up with an inherited monarchy, to some form of democracy. This is not to elevate democracy to heights it must not occupy. It is to say, rather, that in theory at least a democracy allows you to "overthrow" a government without violence or bloodshed. And if the causes of justice cannot do so, it is because the country as a whole has slid into a miasma that lacks the will, courage, and

vision to do what it has the power to do, but chooses not to do (for whatever reason). What, precisely, are the Christian's responsibilities in that case (whatever your view of the meaning of Rom.13 in its own context)?

In other words, new social structures beyond anything Paul could have imagined, though they cannot overturn what he said, may force us to see that valid, thoughtful, application demands that we bring into the discussion some considerations he could not have foreseen. It is a great comfort, and epistemologically important, to remember that God did foresee them—but that does not itself reduce the hermeneutical responsibilities we have. **[The 1996 article ends here. What follows is the 2003 update.]**

(7) Determine not only how symbols, customs, metaphors, and models function in Scripture, but also to what else they are tied.

We may agree with conclusions already drawn about sackcloth and ashes, and about holy kissing. But is it then acceptable to lead a group of young people in a California church in a celebration of the Lord's Table using coke and chips? And how about yams and goat's milk in Papua New Guinea? If in the latter case we use bread and wine, are we not subtly insisting that only the food of white foreigners is acceptable to God?

The problem is one not only of churchmanship, but of linguistic theory: Bible translators face it continuously. How should we translate "bread" and "wine" in the words of institution? Or consider a text such as Isa.1:18: "Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool." Suppose the target group for which you are translating the Bible lives in equatorial rain forests and has never seen snow: would it be better to change the simile? Suppose that the only "wool" they have seen is the dirty dun-colored stuff from village goats: could not "faithful" translation be misleading, while culturally sensitive translation that is nevertheless more distant from the original succeed in communicating the point that God speaking through Isaiah was getting across?

A lot can be said in favor of this sort of flexibility. Certainly in the case of "snow," not a lot seems to be at stake. You might want to check out the other seven biblical occurrences of "white as snow" to make sure you are not unwittingly running into some awkward clash or other. But in the case of bread and wine at the Lord's Supper, the situation is more complicated. This is because the elements are tied in with other strands of the Bible, and it is almost impossible to disentangle them. Having changed "bread" to, say, "yams" in order to avoid any cultural imperialism, what shall we do with the connections between the Lord's Supper and the Passover, where only "unleavened bread" was to be eaten: can we speak of "unleavened yams"?! How about the connection between bread and manna, and then the further connection drawn between bread/manna and Jesus (John.6)? Is Jesus (I say this reverently) now to become the yam of God? And I have not yet begun to exhaust the complications connected with this one.

So what begins as a charitable effort in cross-cultural communication is leading toward major interpretive problems a little farther down the road. Moreover, Bible translations have a much longer shelf-life than the original translators usually think. Fifty years later, once the tribe has become a little more familiar with cultures beyond their own forests, and it seems best in a revision to return to a greater degree of literalism, try and change "yams" to "bread" and see what kind of ecclesiastical squabbles will break out. The "KJV" of the rain forests has "yams". . . .

All of these sorts of problems are bound up with the fact that God has not given us a culturally neutral revelation. What he has revealed in words is necessarily tied to specific places and cultures. Every other culture is going to have to do some work to understand what God meant when he said certain things in a particular language at a specific time and place and in a shifting idiom. In the case of some expressions, an analogous idiom may be the best way to render something; in other expressions, especially those that are deeply tied to other elements in the Bible's story-line, it is best to render things more literally, and then perhaps include an explanatory note. In this case, for example, it might be wise to say that "bread" was a staple food of the people at the time, as yams are to us. A slightly different note would have to be included when leaven or yeast is introduced.

There is almost nothing to be said in favor of California young people using chips and coke as the elements. (I'm afraid this is not a fictitious example.) Unlike the people of the rain forests, they do not even have in their favor that they have never heard of bread. Nor can it be said that chips and coke are their staples (though doubtless some of them move in that direction). What this represents is the whimsy of what is novel, the love of the iconoclastic, the spirituality of the cutesy—with no connections with either the Lord's words or with two thousand years of church history.

(8) Thoughtfully limit comparisons and analogies by observing near and far contexts.

"Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever" (Heb.13:8). Since he never finally refused to heal anyone who approached him during the days of his flesh, and since he is the same yesterday and today and forever, therefore he will heal all who approach him for healing today. I have had that argument put to me more than once. By the same token, of course, Heb.13:8 could be used to prove that since he was mortal before the cross, he must still be mortal today; or since he was crucified by the Romans, and he is the same yesterday and today and forever, he must still be being crucified by the Romans today.

The fact of the matter is that comparisons and analogies are always self-limiting in some respect or other. Otherwise, you would not be dealing with comparisons and analogies, but with two or more things that are identical. What makes a comparison or an analogy possible is that two different things are similar in certain respects. It is always crucial to discover the planes on which the parallels operate—something that is usually made clear by the context—and to refuse further generalization.

A disciple is to be like his master; we are to imitate Paul, as Paul imitates Christ. In what respects? Should we walk on water? Should we clean the local temple with a whip? Should we infallibly heal those who are ill and who petition us for help? Should we miraculously provide food for thousands out of some little boy's lunch? Should we be crucified? Such questions cannot all be answered with a simple "yes" or "no." It is worth observing that most of the injunctions in the Gospels to follow Jesus or to do what he does are bound up with his self-abnegation: e.g. as he is hated, so we must expect to be hated (Jn.15:18); as he takes the place of a servant and washes his disciples' feet, so we are to wash one another's feet (Jn.13); as he goes to the cross, so we are to take our cross and follow him (Mt.10:38; 16:24; Lk.14:27). Thus the answer to the question, "Should we be crucified?", is surely "yes" and "no": no, not literally, most of us will have to say, and yet that does not warrant complete escape from the demand to take up our cross and follow him. So in this case the answer is "yes," but not literally.

(9) Many mandates are pastorally limited by the occasion or people being addressed.

For example, Jesus unambiguously insists, "Do not swear at all: either by heaven, for it is God's throne; or by the earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King. . . . Simply let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one" (Mt. 6:34–36). Yet we find Paul going well beyond a simple "Yes" or "No" (e.g. Rom. 9:1; 2 Cor. 11:10; Gal. 1:20). In fact, God puts himself under an oath (Heb. 6:17–18). Won't pedants have a wonderful time with this?

Yet the particular language of Jesus' prohibition, not to mention the expanded parallel in Mt. 23:16–22, shows that what Jesus was going after was the sophisticated use of oaths that became an occasion for evasive lying—a bit like the schoolboy who tells whoppers with his fingers crossed behind his back, as if this device exonerated him from the obligation to tell the truth. At some point, it is best to get to the heart of the issue: simply tell the truth, and let your "Yes" be "Yes" and your "No" be "No." In other words, the pastoral context is vital. By contrast, the context of Heb. 6–7 shows that when God puts himself under an oath, it is not because otherwise he might lie, but for two reasons: first, to maintain the typological pattern of a priesthood established by oath, and second, to offer special reassurance to the weak faith of human beings who otherwise might be too little inclined to take God's wonderful promises seriously.

There are many examples in Scripture of the importance of pastoral context. Paul can say it is good for a man not to touch a woman (1 Cor. 7:1—NIV's "not to marry" is an unwarranted softening of the Greek). But (he goes on to say) there are also good reasons to marry, and finally concludes that both celibacy and marriage are gifts from God, *charismata* (1 Cor. 7:7—which I suppose makes us all charismatics). It does not take much reading between the lines to perceive that the church in Corinth included some who were given to asceticism, and others in danger of promiscuity (cf. 1 Cor. 6:12–20). There is a pastoral sensitivity to Paul's "Yes, but" argument,

one that he deploys more than once in this letter (e.g. 1 Cor. 14:18–19). In other words, there are pastoral limitations to the course advocated, limitations made clear by the context.

In the same way, what Paul says to encourage Christian assurance to the Romans at the end of chap. 8 is not what he says to the Corinthians in 2 Cor. 13:5. Which particular elements of a full-blooded, nuanced, and even complex doctrine need to be stressed at any particular time will be determined, in part, by a pastoral diagnosis of the predominant current ailments.

(10) Always be careful how you apply narratives.

Nowadays most of us are familiar with "postmodern" voices that advocate open-ended meaning—meaning, finally, that you or your interpretive community "finds," not meaning that is necessarily in the text, and only accidentally what the author intended. Not surprisingly, when these postmodern voices turn to the Bible, they are often attracted to narrative portions, since narratives are generically more open to diverse interpretation than discourse. Admittedly, these narrative portions are usually pulled out of their contexts in the books in which they are embedded, and made to stand on their own. Without the contextual constraints, the interpretive possibilities seem to multiply—which is, of course, what the postmodernists want. Narratives have other virtues, of course: they are evocative, affective, image-enhancing, memorable. But unless care is taken, they are more easily misinterpreted than discourse.

In fact, little narratives should not only be interpreted within the framework of the book in which they are embedded, but within the corpus, and ultimately within the canon. Take, for instance, Gen. 39, the account of Joseph's early years in Egypt. One can read that narrative and draw from it excellent lessons on how to resist temptation (e.g. Joseph refers to sexual sin to which he is enticed by Potiphar's wife as "sin against God," not some mere weakness or foible; he avoids the woman's company, at the crunch, because his purity is more important to him than his prospects). But a careful reading of the opening and closing verses of the chapter also shows that one of the important points of the narrative is that God is with Joseph and blesses him even in the midst of the most appalling circumstances: neither the presence of God nor the blessing of God are restricted to happy lifestyles. Then read the chapter in the context of the preceding narrative: now Judah becomes a foil for Joseph. The one is tempted in circumstances of comfort and plenty, and succumbs to incest; the other is tempted in circumstances of slavery and injustice, and retains his integrity. Now read the same chapter in the context of the book of Genesis. Joseph's integrity is bound up with the way God providentially provides famine relief not only for countless thousands, but for the covenant people of God in particular. Now read it within the context of the Pentateuch. The narrative is part of the explanation for how the people of God find themselves in Egypt, which leads to the Exodus. Joseph's bones are brought out when the people leave. Enlarge the horizon now to embrace the whole canon: suddenly Joseph's fidelity in small matters is part of the providential wisdom that preserves the people of God, leads to the exodus that serves as a type of a still greater release, and ultimately leads to Judah's (!) distant son David, and his still more distant son, Jesus.

So if you are applying Gen. 39, although it may be appropriate to apply it simply as a moralizing account that tells us how to deal with temptation, the perspective gained by admitting the widening contexts discloses scores of further connections and significances that thoughtful readers (and preachers) should not ignore.

(11) Remember that you, too, are culturally and theologically located.

In other words, it is not simply a case of each part of the Bible being culturally located, while you and I are neutral and dispassionate observers. Rather, thoughtful readers will acknowledge that they, too, are located in specific culture—they are awash in specific language, unacknowledged assumptions, perspectives on time and race and education and humor, notions of truth and honor and wealth. In postmodern hands, of course, these realities become part of the reason for arguing that all interpretations are relative. I have argued elsewhere that although no finite and sinful human being can ever know exhaustive truth about anything (that would require omniscience), they can know some truth truly. But often this requires some self-distancing of ourselves from inherited assumptions and perspectives.

Sometimes this is achieved unknowingly. The person who has read her Bible right through once or twice a year, loves it dearly, and now in her eightieth year reads it no less, may never have self-consciously engaged in some process of self-distancing from cultural prejudice. But she may now be so steeped in biblical outlooks and perspectives that she lives in a different "world" from her pagan neighbors, and perhaps even from many of her more shallow and less well-informed Christian neighbors. But the process can be accelerated by reading meditatively, self-critically, humbly, honestly, thereby discovering where the Word challenges the outlooks and values of our time and place. It is accelerated by the right kinds of small-group Bible studies (e.g. those that include devout Christians from other cultures), and from the best of sermons.

Does our Western culture place so much stress on individualism that we find it hard to perceive, not only the biblical emphasis on the family and on the body of the church, but also the ways in which God judges entire cultures and nations for the accumulating corruptions of her people? Are the biblical interpretations advanced by "evangelical feminists" compromised by their indebtedness to the current focus on women's liberation, or are the interpretations of more traditional exegetes compromised by unwitting enslavement to patriarchal assumptions? Do we overlook some of the "hard" sayings about poverty simply because most of us live in relative wealth?

The examples are legion. But the place to begin is by acknowledging that no interpreter, including you and me, approaches the text *tabula rasa,* like a razed slate just waiting to have the truth inscribed on them. There is always a need for honest recognition of our biases and assumptions, and progressive willingness to reform them and challenge them as we perceive that the Word of God takes us in quite a different direction. As our culture becomes progressively more secular, the need for this sort of reading is becoming more urgent. How it is done—both

theoretically and practically—cannot be elucidated here. But that it must be done if we are not to domesticate Scripture to our own worlds cannot be doubted.

(12) Frankly admit that many interpretive decisions are nestled within a large theological system, which in principle we must be willing to modify if the Bible is to have the final word.

This is, of course, a subset of the preceding point, yet it deserves separate treatment.

Some Christians give the impression that if you learn Greek and Hebrew and get your basic hermeneutics sorted out, then you can forget about historical theology and systematic theology: simply do your exegesis and you will come out with the truth straight from the Word of God. But of course, it is not quite that simple. Inevitably, you are doing your exegesis as an Arminian, or as a Reformed Presbyterian, or as a dispensationalist, or as a theonomist, or as a Lutheran—and these are only some of the predominant systems among believers. Even if you are so ignorant of any one tradition that you are a bit of an eclectic, that simply means your exegesis is likely to be a little more inconsistent than that of others.

Systems are not inherently evil things. They function to make interpretation a little easier and a little more realistic: they mean that you do not have to go back to basics at each point (i.e. inevitably you assume a whole lot of other exegesis at any particular instance of exegesis). If the tradition is broadly orthodox, then the system helps to direct you away from interpretations that are heterodox. But a system can be so tightly controlling that it does not allow itself to be corrected by Scripture, modified by Scripture, or even overturned by Scripture. Moreover, not a few interpretative points of dispute are tied to such massive interlocking structures that to change one's mind about the detail would require a change of mind on massive structures, and that is inevitably far more challenging a prospect. This is also why a devout Reformed Presbyterian and a devout Reformed Baptist are not going to sort out what Scripture says about, say, baptism or church government, simply by taking out a couple of lexica and working over a few texts together during free moments some Friday afternoon. What is at stake, for both of them, is how these matters are nestled into a large number of other points, which are themselves related to an entire structure of theology.

And yet, and yet. . . . If this is all that could be said, then the postmodernists would be right: the interpretive community determines everything. But if believers are in principle willing to change their minds (i.e. their systems!), and are humbly willing to bring everything, including their systems, to the test of Scripture, and are willing to enter courteous discussion and debate with brothers and sisters who are similarly unthreatened and are similarly eager to let Scripture have final authority, then systems can be modified, abandoned, reformed.

The number of topics affected by such considerations is very large—not only the old chestnuts (e.g. baptism, the significance of Holy Communion, the understanding of covenant, Sabbath/Sunday issues) but more recent questions as well (e.g. theonomy, the place of

"charismatic" gifts). For our purposes, we note that some of these manifold topics have to do with what is mandated of believers today.

Let us take a simple example. In recent years, a number of Christians have appealed to Acts 15:28 ("It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us . . .") to serve as a model for how the church comes to difficult decisions involving change in disputed areas—in the case of Acts, circumcision and its significance, and in the modern case, the ordination of women. Is this a fair usage of Acts 15:28? Does it provide a definitive model for how to change things formerly accepted in the church?

But believers with any firm views on the exclusive authority of the canon, or with any sophisticated views on how the new covenant believers were led in the progress of redemption history to re-think the place of circumcision in the light of the cross and resurrection, will not be easily persuaded by this logic. Has every change introduced by various churches across the centuries been justified, simply because it was blessed with the words "it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us"? Does the church now have the right to change things established in and by the canon in the way that the early church changed things established in and by the Old Testament canon, as if we were similarly located at a strategic turning point in redemptive history? The mind boggles at the suggestions. But what is clear in any case is that such issues cannot properly be resolved without thinking through, in considerable detail, how the parameters of the interpretive decisions are tied to much more substantial theological matters.

One final word: By advancing these dozen points, am I in danger of elevating certain hermeneutical controls above Scripture, controls which themselves serve to domesticate Scripture? Had I time and space, I think I could demonstrate that each of these twelve points is itself mandated by Scripture, whether explicitly or as a function of what Scripture is. It might be a useful exercise to work through the twelve points and think through why this is so. But that would be another essay.

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Notes

1. Allan Bloom, *The Closing of The American Mind* (Simon & Schuster, 1987), p. 56–57
2. J. Gresham Machen, *What Is Faith?* (Banner of Truth, 1925), p. 21.