

Jumping the Gap

By Joshua Ng

As evangelical Christians, we are keen to read the Bible for all its worth. We believe it is God's word to us. We still sing, "God is speaking by his Spirit, speaking to the hearts of men, in the age-long word expounding, God's own message now as then".

However, in evangelical circles of late, this enthusiasm for the Bible has been tempered somewhat by an awareness of the 'hermeneutical gap' that is deemed to exist between the Bible and the modern Christian. 'Hermeneutics' is a complex word for what is a simple and everyday process—the process of reading something and working out its meaning and significance for us. We do it with the newspaper, a letter from a friend, the writing on a billboard. In terms of the Bible, 'hermeneutics' usually refers to the way we read and 'apply' the biblical message to our modern situation, how we take an ancient text and hear what it is saying to us, here and now.

What then is the 'hermeneutical gap'? It refers to all the things that separate us from the Bible, and which make reading and applying the Bible a tricky business. Between the original readers or hearers 'there and then' and us 'here and now', a gap has opened up, and unless we have the right set of 'hermeneutical principles', we may find this gap rather difficult to bridge (see diagram below). We may even bridge it wrongly or inadequately and end up misapplying the Bible, and so miss what God wants us to hear and do.

The existence of the 'hermeneutical gap' has been taken as a matter of common sense by many modern scholars, including evangelical ones. This broad acceptance rests on three common assumptions.

Firstly, it assumes that there is a time gap between the original hearers (there and then), and us (here and now). Secondly, it assumes that there are significant differences in culture spanning across this time gap. Thirdly, it assumes that the further we go back in biblical history before Jesus, the greater is the gap not only time-wise and culturally, but theologically, in that God's word was addressed to past epochs or dispensations in God's plan of salvation.

Taken together, these three 'gaps'—in time, in culture and even in theology—constitute the 'hermeneutical gap' that we have to deal with. Each of these factors is seen as a hindrance to a right application of the ancient biblical text to our late twentieth century situation.

In this article, we will look at these three facets or assumptions, and examine how they affect our reading and application of the Bible. In due course, we will come back to the 'hermeneutical gap' and consider whether the concept is a helpful one or not.

1. The time and culture gap

That there is a vast difference in time and culture between ourselves and first readers of the New Testament, let alone the Old, is indisputable (although what we mean exactly by the word 'culture' is something we will return to).

In one sense, although the gap in time is obvious, its significance is less obvious. The passage of time, in and of itself, presents no necessary barrier to the relevance or applicability of a particular text. It is, of course, the changes in circumstance that occur over time that are the matter at issue—changes in language, custom, social

organization, education, patterns of family relationships, music, art, entertainment, and so on. These matters are usually referred to as changes in 'culture'. And most people would accept that extensive cultural change has occurred since the time of Jesus and Paul, let alone Abraham or David.

However, the question is, "Are these cultural differences a significant or even key factor in how we read and apply the Bible?" Many, including Gordon Fee, think so. In his influential book *How to read the Bible for all it's worth*, Fee outlines a 'hermeneutical principle' for the Epistles which states: "Whenever we share comparable particulars (i.e. similar specific life situations) with the first century setting, God's word to us is the same as his word to them" (p. 60). He stresses that they must be "genuinely comparable situations" (p. 63). That is, if we do not share the same cultural situation, then God's word to us is different. We may be able to translate it in some way to our new setting, but sometimes we may not. It simply may no longer apply to us, and should therefore be left in the first century. In fact, to apply a first century command incorrectly across the cultural gap would be to mis-hear and distort God's word, and be guilty of a grave error.

The most famous issue to which Fee's hermeneutical principle has been applied is of course that of the role of women in the church. Fee argues that "there were few educational opportunities for women in the first century, whereas such education is the expected norm in our society" (p. 68). Hence Paul's instruction forbidding women to teach and have authority over men (1 Tim 2) is culturally relative and need not be followed today. Others extend this to the issue of submission of wives to their husbands.

Fee's hermeneutical principle sounds quite reasonable because the cultural gap seems so obvious and indisputable. Three things however need to be said.

a) Different culture, same application

When we turn to the Bible itself, we actually find numerous examples where a comparative cultural setting is not the significant factor in applying God's word—that is, where the cultures are vastly different, but the word of God is the same to each group.

For example, a group of nomadic Jews wandering around the desert in the 13th century B.C. could hardly be more separate in time and culture from a group of city dwelling Gentile Christians in first century A.D. The two groups are separated not only by 1400 years, but by differences in language, custom, dress, education, religious background, and more. Yet God's words and acts of judgement upon the exodus generation are applied directly and without qualification to the Christians at Corinth: "Now these things occurred as examples to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did ... These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us" ([1 Cor 10:6, 11](#)).

In the case of the role of women, it is interesting to note that both 1 Timothy 2 (regarding women in church) and Ephesians 5 (regarding husbands and wives) apply the ancient text of Genesis to the situation of the first century. In Paul's mind, the roles and patterns of relationship that God had ordained in creation were still quite applicable. They were rooted in the created order, such that the passing of millennia, and massive changes in culture, did not alter the basic sense and applicability of the biblical text. The cultural gap posed no hindrance to the direct relevance and application of God's word from the Old Testament to the New. One must ask, why should it pose any necessary problem from the New Testament to us?

b) Same culture, different application

In the Bible, we also see examples of the reverse scenario—that is, where genuine comparative cultural particulars exist, and yet the application of God’s word is vastly different.

For example, the culture of first century Judaism concerning animal sacrifices is quite comparable to that of Leviticus. And yet the writer of Hebrews tells his Jewish readers that they are to have nothing to do with animal sacrifices. Similarly, the culture of first century Judaism concerning food laws is genuinely comparable to that of Leviticus. And yet Jesus gives a different word, in effect declaring all foods clean (Mark 7). If a similar cultural situation is the key factor, why doesn’t Jesus understand this?

c) That elusive word ‘culture’

It must also be pointed out that there is something disturbingly illogical about the ‘cultural gap’ argument advanced by Fee and others. To take the women’s issue as an example, the question seems to be, “Should we directly obey what the Bible says about men and women, or are there factors that make the Bible’s teaching not so relevant to us?” The answer seems to go like this:

- a. the roles of men and women are shaped by culture;
- b. cultures inevitably change over time, and our culture is now significantly different from the first century culture;
- c. therefore the first century instructions about men and women do not directly apply to us.

Even if this audacious line of argument were valid, it would surely prove too much—or certainly more than its proponents would like. Would it not mean that all statements in the Bible regarding men and women were unable to be applied with any reliability, including those that venerate and dignify the place of women (such as the oft-quoted [Gal 3:28](#))? In fact, would it not mean that all biblical statements that touched upon, or were shaped by, any matter of ‘culture’ would be of dubious applicability? It is hard to see how any biblical teaching would be exempt from this stricture, for the whole Bible was written by people living in particular cultures different from our own. If the difference in culture between the biblical authors and ourselves was to be a key element in working out how the Bible applies to us, it is hard to see how any part of the Bible could be appropriated with any confidence. This is in fact the argument of liberalism—that the Bible as a whole is an outmoded document, hopelessly caught up in the thought-forms, mores, and lifestyle-patterns of a bygone culture that is now alien to us. And thus we are free to pick and choose our way through the Scriptures, according to what seems reasonable to us today. It is hard to see how the ‘cultural gap’ argument can be prevented from logically ending up at this point, where God is evacuated from the Bible as its ultimate author.

However, there is also a problem inherent in the word ‘culture’. It is such a broad word, with such a wide range of meanings. It can refer more narrowly to language, or dress conventions, or the world of art and music. It can also be used to describe something as broad as “the sum total of ways of living built up by a group of human beings” (as the *Macquarie Dictionary* puts it).

To say, then, that the issue of male-female roles (for example) is a matter of ‘culture’ is really to say very little. Of course it is a matter of ‘culture’; that’s what ‘culture’ is in its broadest sense. The question remains: “In the cultural matter of the relationship of men and women, is the Bible’s teaching to be followed or not?” Has our culture changed for better or worse? Are our patterns of relating to each other correct? Or does the mere existence of our cultural patterns—and their difference from the biblical pattern—make them immune from criticism?

To put the question differently: When our culture condones and approves of homosexuality as a pattern of relationship, is the biblical culture allowed to critique ours or not? If a culture thought of stealing as an honourable, or at least acceptable, means of wealth redistribution, would the Bible be allowed to speak against this or not?

In other words, the Bible must be allowed to critique our culture, to challenge it, to question it, even to reaffirm it. The Bible may say very little about some aspects of culture—it has no clear word to say, for example, as to what sort of language we should speak, or what music we should listen to, or what style of dress we should adopt (except that it be modest). However, God may have a great deal to say through the Scriptures about other aspects of our ‘culture’—how we relate to each other, whether children should honour their parents, and so on.

Again we see that the rather malleable word ‘culture’ is not the key. It doesn’t help us to see where we, in the twentieth century, sit in relation to the Bible. The Bible itself provides that framework. It is called ‘biblical theology’.

2. The theological gap

The Bible is not a theological dictionary, but a progressive unfolding story. It reveals God and the way he deals with the world, from Genesis to Revelation, from Creation to New Creation. There is a unity in its message—for there is but one Ultimate Author. There is an overarching plan and purpose to world history—for there is one Ultimate Sovereign. However, God did not choose to reveal everything in Genesis 1, but has wisely revealed the whole unified message bit by bit:

Now to him who is able to establish you by my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery hidden for long ages past, but now revealed and made known through the prophetic writings by the command of the eternal God, so that all nations might believe and obey him—to the only wise God be glory for ever through Jesus Christ! Amen. ([Rom 16:25-27](#)).

God’s revelation in the Old Testament invariably points to the fullness of the revelation in Jesus, as God’s final revelation ([Heb 1:1-4](#)). Indeed there is a dynamic movement from one epoch to another in the Old Testament, each successive stage building on what went on before, and all pointing forward to the fulfilment in Christ.

This way of reading the Bible is often called ‘biblical theology’. Rather than viewing the Bible’s teaching under particular topics (like God, Man, Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, Revelation, and so on), biblical theology traces the themes and teachings of the Bible as they develop in its unfolding story. In this way of thinking, the whole Bible is viewed as an unfolding, but unified, whole. It all makes sense and hangs together when you see the movement of the whole Bible—which is basically from promise to fulfilment.

As the story unfolds, there is obviously a great deal of continuity between the different stages or epochs, but we must also not underestimate the discontinuity

between them, especially the quantum leap brought about by Jesus and the coming of the Spirit. 'The new age', or 'the last days', have begun with the first coming of Jesus. We now await his return, having received a foretaste of the benefits of his eternal kingdom, but still longing for its consummation. In other words, Christians still live in 'this present evil age', yet we are at the same time citizens of the 'age to come'. We live in the period of the Overlap.

Is there a theological gap then? Well, yes and no, and understanding this is the key to reading and applying the Bible.

Yes, there is a theological gap of sorts between all those who lived BC (before Christ) and all those who have lived AD (in the year of our Lord). The coming of Jesus brought in the fulfilment of all that the Old Covenant looked forward to, and has wrought some changes in the way God relates to his people.

Unlike the so-called 'cultural gap', this 'theological gap' (that is, between New Testament and Old Testament believers) is very significant in working out how to apply the Bible. For while many aspects of the Old Testament are still valid and to be followed, other aspects are no longer to be followed. And the key 'hermeneutical principle' to bridge this gap is 'biblical theology'. This simply means reading the Bible in the light of God's unfolding plan, as outlined above. In trying to apply any particular text, we first locate it within the flow of salvation history, see how it is fulfilled in Christ and his people, and therefore how it applies to us. It is the way the Bible itself unfolds and tells its story ('biblical theology') that determines why it is that some aspects of the Old Testament are still valid, and why other aspects are no longer to be followed. In other words, both the continuity and discontinuity in applying the word of God across the Testaments depends on biblical theology.

But no, there is no theological gap between those in the New Testament who put their faith in Christ and received the Holy Spirit, and those who do so today. We occupy the same situation, the same theological world. We all live in the period of the Overlap, which the New Testament refers to as 'the last days'. Our situation today is identical with the Corinthians, for we too are those "on whom the fulfilment of the ages has come" ([1 Cor 10:11](#)).

In other words, we may read the New Testament and, like the original readers, hear God speaking directly and applicably to us. We do not need to make it relevant, for it is relevant. God himself is speaking through it to his people. And we may read the Old Testament as the New Testament believers did—as the still powerful and active word of God, full of warning, examples and encouragements, teaching us about Christ, and driving us to put our faith in him and to live in love. In other words, we don't have to construct an artificial bridge to try to work our way back to the Old Testament, for the relationship of the Old to the New is fully comprehended and explained in the New Testament itself.

There is much more to be said about these matters, especially about the subject of typology, which is very important in relating the Old Covenant to the New. We will return to it in a follow-up article (['Bridging the Gap'](#)). For now, a few closing remarks about the 'hermeneutical gap' are called for.

3. Back to the gap

It has become common these days to introduce Christians to ‘hermeneutics’ by explaining the ‘gap’. This is often done with the best of intentions, but it has the unfortunate effect of dampening people’s enthusiasm for God’s word. It renders the Bible a distant and difficult book which can only be applied to us by the application of complex and often vague ‘hermeneutical principles’.

In truth, there is no hermeneutical gap, at least not in the way it is normally spoken of. The differences between us and the original New Testament readers are minor. We are really no more different than the Colossians were from the Laodiceans up the road, whose letter they were also to read. We share with both the same theological and moral world, created by God, with the same temptations, struggles, joys and resources, the same salvation, the same Spirit, the same human nature, the same challenge to live worthily of our calling in every facet of our lives. There is no need to be pessimistic about the applicability of the Bible, for in every sense that matters, we are in precisely the same situation as they were.

If ‘culture’ is to be a factor at all in our Bible reading, it should be at the level of exegesis—that is, of working out what the author was communicating to his original audience. In undertaking that task, we will of course have to take account of the different language that was spoken, of the different idioms and expressions that were used, of the geographical, historical and cultural context in which the words were written and received—for example, the cultural context of Jews and Gentiles and their relationships with each other. A consideration of these matters will help in understanding what is actually being said in the part of the Bible we are reading (e.g. what Paul is actually saying to the Colossians).

However, in terms of working out how we relate to what is being said—that is, how we apply to ourselves Paul’s word to the Colossians—culture is not the key, as we have seen. Nor is the gap in time. Nor is there any theological gap between us and the Colossian Christians.

To embark upon our Bible reading with the assumption that a mighty chasm exists between us and the Bible is both unnecessary and unhelpful. It sidelines the fundamental truth that the Bible is alive, that God is speaking by his Spirit through what he has spoken, God’s own message now as then. For evangelicals, the very way we interpret and apply the Bible should stem from this doctrine of Scripture. Because it is God who speaks, we trust and obey it. This attitude is crucial, for without it we will always distort Scripture to make it more comfortable for ourselves. We will find clever (or not so clever) hermeneutical excuses for avoiding what God is saying.

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