DOCTRINE, TEXT AND CULTURE
Biblical Authority and Cultural Conditioning

> The need for interpretation rests in the fact that the Bible was written in a different culture, separated from our time by the distance of many ages, and that it arose under certain specific situations.[1]

The subject of women's ordination currently before the church raises a number of interesting and perplexing issues--social, political and hermeneutical, to mention some general areas. Within hermeneutics one of the most important questions concerns the relation between biblical authority and cultural conditioning, or between culture and biblical interpretation. The question is really two-sided. It involves the relation of the Bible to its culture, on the one hand, and the relation of the Bible to our culture, on the other.

This central hermeneutical question arises from the twofold perspective on the Bible characteristic of Christian faith. Conservative Christians accept the Bible as the Word of God--the primary means by which God communicates to human beings, "the infallible revelation of His will," in the words of the most recent version of "Fundamental Beliefs of Seventh-day Adventists."[2] The Bible is the supreme expression of religious truth available to us today.

While affirming the divine aspect of the Bible is clearly a matter of religious commitment, Christian doctrine also acknowledges the human character of the biblical documents. Unlike Moslems, for example, who regard

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[1]Gerhard F. Hasel, "Principles of Biblical Interpretation," in A Symposium on Biblical Hermeneutics, ed. Gordon M. Hyde (Washington, D. C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1974), p. 163.

[2]"Fundamental Beliefs of Seventh-day Adventists," in Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook 1987 (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1987), p. 5.

the Qu'ran as an earthly copy of a heavenly book,[1] Christians hold that the Bible is "the Word of God," but in general they do not believe that it consists of the literal words of God. Instead, the authors of its various documents were human beings who drew upon their own understanding as they sought to express in their own words the messages imparted to them under divine inspiration. To be precise, then, the Bible is the human expression of the Word of God--the Word of God in the words of men. In the various biblical documents, the Word of God is incorporated, indeed incarnated, in the words and thoughts of the different men who wrote them.

This concept of revelation gives the Bible an authority that other writings lack, but it also subordinates the Bible to the supreme authority, which is God. Ellen G. White makes these points in her familiar comments on the nature of biblical revelation. On the one hand, she elevates the Bible above other sources of truth; on the other, she distinguishes it from the authority of God himself. "The treasure was entrusted to earthen vessels, yet it is, nonetheless, from Heaven. The testimony is conveyed through the imperfect expression of human language, yet it is the testimony of God.... The Holy Scriptures are to be accepted as an authoritative, infallible revelation of His will. They are the standard of character, the revealer of doctrines, and the test of experience."[2] "The Bible is written by inspired men, but it is not God's mode of thought and expression. It is that of humanity. God, as a writer, is not represented.... God has not put Himself in words, in logic, in rhetoric, on trial in the Bible. The writers of the Bible were God's penmen, not His pen."[3]

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[1] John A. Hutchison, Paths of Faith (3rd ed.; New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1981), p. 394.
[2] The Great Controversy, pp. vi-vii.
[3] Selected Messages, Book One, p. 21.

The Bible "does not answer to the great ideas of God; for infinite ideas cannot be perfectly embodied in finite vehicles of thought."[1]

This twofold character of the biblical text, the fact that it exhibits both divine and human sides, frames the central question of biblical hermeneutics: What is the relation between the essential message of the Bible, which applies to men and women of every generation in every culture, and the culture(s) in which this message was originally expressed? The question presupposes that it is both possible and necessary to identify those aspects of the Bible which have permanent significance, because they express its central message, and differentiate them from other elements which applied only to the people of biblical times.

Failure to distinguish between biblical culture and the biblical message can lead to opposite errors--literalism and reductionism. Biblical literalism incorporates biblical culture within the biblical message. It takes every aspect of biblical life as normative for today. No one takes this approach to the Bible all the way to its logical extreme, but there are groups who staunchly adhere to certain features of biblical culture which most people have long regarded as outmoded and extraneous to the biblical message.

Reductionism, in contrast, views the entire Bible as an expression of biblical culture. For the thoroughgoing reductionist, the Bible has no distinctive message for the modern world. In all aspects it belongs to the thought-world of ancient peoples. Consequently, we may read the Bible for historical or literary purposes, just as we read other ancient documents, such as the writings of Aristotle, Julius Caesar, or Josephus. But among such writings it

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[1] Ibid., p. 22.

is not decisively unique. It has the timeless value of all true classics, but no authoritative religious significance.

The only acceptable position for conservative Christians today lies between these undesirable extremes. It affirms that the Bible contains a message of enormous significance for modern men and women. At the same time it recognizes that a good deal of the biblical material reflects the cultures that surrounded its composition and has no religious authority for Christians today. It is one thing to call for such a distinction, of course, and quite another to spell out just which aspects of the Bible fall into each category. The latter is notoriously difficult.

One of the best known attempts to distinguish the essential message of the Bible from its cultural matrix is Rudolf Bultmann's essay, "New Testament and Mythology."[1] According to Bultmann, the outlook of the New Testament is thoroughly mythical. Its writers viewed the world as a three-storied structure, with the earth suspended between heaven above and the underworld below, and they attributed many ordinary events to the activity of supernatural causes, such as angels and demons. Because this perspective is incredible to modern man, he argues, we must strip the New Testament message of its mythical framework if we expect anyone today to take it seriously. So, turning to existential philosophy, Bultmann identifies the Christian message as an interpretation of human existence: men and women achieve authenticity by responding in faith to the proclamation of God's activity in Jesus Christ.

For many people, the most striking feature of Bultmann's interpretation of the Christian message is what his "demythologizing" leaves out. He

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[1] In Kerygma and Myth: A Theological Debate, ed. Hans Werner Bartsch, rev. Reginald H. Fuller (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1961), pp. 1-44.

dismisses many important elements in traditional Christianity as mythical, and therefore incredible to modern people. These include the incarnation of the Son of God, his resurrection from the dead and exaltation at the right hand of God in heaven, his soon return, and the restoration of the earth to a state of primeval peace and beauty.

For conservative Christians, Bultmann's demythologizing is an example of the reductionism mentioned above. His reinterpretation of the biblical message eliminates so much of historic Christianity that what is left is barely recognizable. But if his constructive proposal is objectionable, Bultmann's work underscores the tremendous challenge involved in determining the contemporary meaning of the Bible. The world of the New Testament is radically different from the world in which we live. And Christians must recognize this difference if they hope to gain a hearing from modern men and women.

Let us review some of the factors that distance us from the biblical documents. One, of course, is the nature of the texts. The biblical writers employed the languages and the literary forms of the ancient Mediterranean world. A knowledge of other ancient languages, such as Ugaritic and Akkadian, increases our understanding of biblical Hebrew. Scholars have also found similarities in structure and content between various biblical passages and other ancient literature, even when the theological perspective of the Bible is unique.

The biblical documents also presuppose the political, social, and economic structures which shaped the lives of the ancient Mediterranean peoples. Biblical writings both refer to and reflect contemporary customs. To cite a familiar example, Jesus' parables contain vivid accounts of the practices of people living in Palestine in the first century: the strategem of hid-

ing the family savings in a field (Mt 13:44); the method of broadcasting seed by hand (Mk 4:1-9); the hatred of Jews for Samaritans (Lk 10:25-37); everyone's animosity toward tax collectors (Lk 18:9-14); a shepherd's devotion to his sheep (Lk 15:1-7); the participants and procedures of an ancient Jewish wedding (Mt 25:1-10). So extensive were Jesus' references to such things that some people believe we know more about the everyday life of Palestinian Jews in the first century than that of any other ancient people.

Another factor distancing us from the biblical documents is the cosmology of their writers, or the concepts which formed their fundamental perspective on reality. Modern science gives us a view of the universe and the operations of nature which is vastly different from what we find in the Bible. Along with other ancient peoples, the writers of the Bible thought the earth was flat, and they believed that its position was fixed, while the sun and other heavenly bodies moved around it. They also held archaic views of natural operations. They saw connections between things that seem quite unrelated to us. Consider, for example, this statement from Psalm 121:6: "The sun shall not smite you by day, nor the moon by night." We know that exposure to the sun can cause illnesses ranging from heatstroke to skin cancer, but we know of no malady caused by moonlight.

As George W. Reid interprets it, this verse reflects the belief of virtually every ancient society "in a natural world manipulated by gods and demons." "The night demon, it was supposed, inflicted mental derangement or other maladies"--a pervasive notion that accounts for the origin of the words "lunacy" and "lunatic." Here we have a instance where a permanently valid spiritual truth, namely, God's abiding care for His people, is expressed in concepts we now find incredible. According to Reid, this shows that "while God was revealing Himself and His truth to the ancients, He did not at the

same time correct every misunderstanding they had accepted as a part of their culture"--especially in their views of natural phenomena. "Even inspired Bible writers," he concludes, "while they received truth from God, were not, in the process of inspiration, purged of all incidental misbeliefs."[1]

The task of biblical interpretation is complicated not only because various factors distance us from the world in which the biblical documents arose, but also because these factors participate in the biblical writings in several different ways. In certain cases, biblical culture functions much as a backdrop for the spiritual or theological message of a passage. The message stands out as clearly from its cultural expression as an actor does from the set behind him on a well-lit stage. In many of Jesus' parables, to return to our earlier example, this seems to be the case. To understand the parable of the treasure hidden in a field, it helps to know something about family finance in the ancient Mediterranean world. But we can easily distinguish the point of the story--that the kingdom of heaven is worth every sacrifice--from the plot of the parable. Nobody maintains that Jesus intended to help people find buried treasure. Similarly, a knowledge of the feelings between Jews and Samaritans at the time of Christ certainly helps us to appreciate the actions of the good Samaritan, but Jesus was not dependent upon this specific story to articulate our obligation to show compassion.

In other cases, however, it is much more difficult to differentiate between the theological content of a passage and cultural elements that lie behind its composition. The results of biblical scholarship in recent years have shown that there is an extensive and intimate relation between the theology

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[1] "Smitten by the moon?" Adventist Review, April 28, 1983, p. 7.

of the New Testament and the social world of the earliest Christians.[1] In many cases, the concepts, cultural forms and practices of early Christians are not merely the setting or background for the expression of a spiritual message, they seem to be essential aspects of the message itself.

Consider the familiar designation of God as "our Father." This description of God seems to be indispensable to Christianity. The most important prayer in the Bible and in Christian liturgy begins with this expression. And some scholars believe that the understanding of our relation to God that the appellation involves is one of the unique contributions of Jesus' teaching. In addition, the identification of God as Father and Jesus as Son is essential to the trinitarian concept of God which orthodox Christians have accepted since the fifth century A.D.

And yet, New Testament descriptions of God as father are intimately, perhaps inextricably, related to the social and cultural status of the father figure in the ancient Mediterranean cultures. The household was the basic social unit in the cities of the Greco-Roman world. It extended beyond the nuclear family to include slaves and even business partners, so participation in the household was defined less by kinship than by the relationship of dependence and subordination.[2] The father, or paterfamilias, functioned as head of the household not only as primogenitor, but as the director of financial social and religious matters as well.

Private households also formed the basic units in the organization of Christianity in the cities of the Roman empire. The establishment of Chris-

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[1]The growing literature in this area includes the following works: Wayne A. Meeks, The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1983), John E. Stambaugh and David L. Balch, The New Testament in Its Social Environment (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986), and Derek Tidball, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1984).

[2]Meeks, The First Urban Christians, p. 30.

tianity in a city typically began with the conversion of a household. Early Christian groups met in private homes, and different congregations are sometimes identified in the New Testament by the respective owners (1 Cor. 16:19; Rom. 16:5; Phlmn 2; Col. 4:15). The New Testament also refers to Christians as brothers and sisters and describes baptism as a rite by which one enters into a family through adoption as God's child (Gal. 3:26-4:6; Rom. 8:15-17).[1] It is apparent, that the prominent New Testament notion of God as Father draws extensively upon the father's role as head of the household, with all that that entailed. So, in this and similar cases, ancient cultural forms seem to provide the content, not merely the background, of an important biblical concept.

All this shows that the relations between biblical message and cultural context are highly complex. In certain cases the message of a biblical passage is relatively independent of its historical setting, but at other times theological content and cultural context seem to be inseparable.

When we think about the relation between biblical text and biblical culture, we typically think of the ways in which the ancient cultures affected the composition of the biblical documents. But cultural influences not only affected those who wrote the documents that comprise the Bible, such influences also affect us as we seek to interpret the documents. We often say that the task of biblical interpretation is to grasp the message of the biblical text in <u>its</u> conceptual terms and then translate it for modern men and women into <u>their</u> language and concepts. This description makes it sound as if the interpreter occupied a point midway between modern thought forms on the one hand and the conceptual world of the Bible on the other. From

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[1] Ibid., pp. 75-76, 84-88.

this position, he can read the biblical documents against their cultural background, determine their essential message, and then express this message in terms that are intelligible to people today.

This account of the hermeneutical task is misleading. As a matter of fact, there is no neutral vantage point available to the biblical interpreter, and there is no way to formulate the biblical message that is independent of culture. We cannot lay aside the concepts of our world and hear the Bible purely "on its own terms." Rudolf Bultmann correctly insists that exegesis without presuppositions is impossible.[1] To the extent that we grasp the biblical message at all, we grasp it within our conceptual framework, and this framework inevitably reflects the world in which we live. So, instead of understanding the biblical text and then undertaking to translate it, we find translation already underway in the very act of understanding. In order to appreciate fully the relation between the Bible and culture, therefore, we need to look at the way people in the modern world characteristically look at things.

It is always tricky to sum up something as complex and elusive as the "spirit of an age," and in the case of one's own age the task is even more difficult. But there are several descriptions of modernity that present us with a fairly clear, if general, pattern. One is John Herman Randall's influential book, The Making of the Modern Mind. According to Randall, the one factor more than any other which accounts for the great revolution from the medieval to the modern world was the development of science.[2] With the rise

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[1] "Is Exegesis Without Presuppositions Possible?" in Existence and Faith: Shorter Writings of Rudolf Bultmann, ed. and trans. Schubert M. Ogden (New York: Meridian Books, 1960), pp. 289-296.

[2] John Herman Randall, Jr., The Making of the Modern Mind: A Survey of the Intellectual Background of the Present Age (New York: Columbia University Press, 1926), p. 164.

of experimental science, people came to see the world largely as a self-explanatory mechanism with predictable operations, rather than a great allegory whose mysterious parts point to realities beyond itself. In other words, science has "naturalized" our concept of the world. A more recent analyst of contemporary thought finds in the modern spirit the characteristic qualities of contingency, relativity, temporality and autonomy.[1] Another identifies its distinguishing features as continuity, autonomy and dynamism.[2]

In general terms, modern men and women are naturalistic in their approach to things. They see the world as an integrated system of phenomena which can be explained in terms of natural law. Consequently, they typically look within the system to explain its individual features. As a corollary, they view individual things as interrelated parts of the whole. Reality is of a piece, and the qualities or rules that apply to any of it apply to all of it. The conviction that the individual parts of reality are interrelated includes history as well as nature. According to the modern spirit, we must view documents and events in relation to the matrix of their historical surroundings.

Such patterns of thought characterize the way Christians today look at reality, too. In fact, the very concern of this paper with the importance of cultural context to an understanding of the biblical documents reflects this mode of thought. Along with modern people in general, we seek naturalistic explanations for things that happen in the world. Conservative Christians are unwilling to apply these explanatory patterns to all reality, for their comprehensive application leaves no room for supernatural intervention in

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[1]Langdon Gilkey, Naming the Whirlwind: The Renewal of God-Language (Indianapolis and New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1969), p. 365.
[2]Kenneth Cauthen, The Impact of American Religious Liberalism (New York: Harper & Row, 9162.

human affairs. But even if we limit their application, we exhibit such predispositions in our approach to things. Ordinarily, even devout Christians do not accept claims of the miraculous at face value, for example. They typically look for natural explanations, and appeal to divine intervention only as a last resort. So, it is impossible to separate ourselves from the patterns of thought that characterize the age we live in. Whether we choose to or not, we read the Bible as modern men and women.

Besides the general conceptual forms that shape our basic perspective on things, other factors also influence us as we read the biblical documents. If we analyze our thinking carefully, we find theological concerns already at work when we come to the study of the Bible. It encourages us to hear stories about people like the inhabitants of Pitcairn Island who read the Bible in relative isolation and arrived at convictions similar to ours about its teachings. But Christians typically do not read the Bible and then form their doctrinal conclusions. Instead, they come to the Bible with a set of doctrinal beliefs and read the biblical texts with these beliefs in mind. In the words of one theologian, "Our questions are already shaped by two thousand years of tradition, even if we are unaware of the details of this tradition. The less one knows about it the more he is vulnerable to be influenced unduly by it."[1]

The observation that various cultural and religious factors always influence us as we read the Bible raises some serious questions. If contemporary thought-forms inevitably affect us, it seems that our understanding of a passage could be completely determined by our cultural background. Consequently, it would be impossible for us to learn anything new from the Bible;

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[1]Dietrich Ritschl, "A Plea for the Maxim: Scripture and Tradition," Interpretation, 25 (January, 1971): 124.

we would hear nothing in the text but the echo of our preconceptions. Similarly, if we came to the biblical documents with our religious convictions already developed, how could we avoid reading into the text what we already believe? This would deny to the Bible any capacity to alter our beliefs, to correct our misconceptions or provide us with additional truth.

In recent years scholars have devoted considerable attention to the topic of hermeneutics--not just biblical hermeneutics, but the topic of textual interpretation in general. Their studies show that the interaction between reader and text is highly complicated, but there is an interaction. While we always bring some interpretive framework with us to the text, we can always learn from the text as well. Accordingly, the preconceptions we bring with us as we read the Bible will certainly influence our interpretation, but they need not wholly determine it. The fact that we never read the Bible in a cultural vaccum means that we never come to the biblical text empty, but it does not deprive the biblical documents of their capacity to speak to us. We can always learn new things from the Bible It can increase our understanding and correct our misunderstandings.

In fact, one of the best ways to limit the influence of cultural background and bias on our interpretation of the Bible is to become explicitly aware of our perspective. Knowing what it means to think as modern men and women and analyzing our own religious ideas can help us to determine whether a given biblical interpretation is merely a projection of our own desires or preconceptions, or a faithful reading of the biblical text.

It is also important to note that the typical priority of doctrinal belief to the study of the biblical documents is by no means necessarily negative. To the contrary, a doctrinal framework can be immensely helpful in the study of Bible. It can introduce us to those themes in the Bible which are

most likely to have spiritual benefit. According to John Calvin, the purpose of his greatest work, Institutes of the Christian Religion, was "to prepare and instruct candidates in sacred theology for the reading of the divine Word."[1] "Although Holy Scripture contains a perfect doctrine," he wrote, "a person who has not much practice in it has good reason for some guidance and direction, to know what he ought to look for in it, in order not to wander hither and thither, but to hold to a sure path, that he may always be pressing toward the end to which the Holy Spirit calls him."[2]

As Calvin suggests, it can enhance our study of the Bible to have some idea of what to look for when we start, and the church's doctrines provide a helpful agenda of issues that deserve attention, as long as they do not predetermine the results of our investigation. On this model of Bible study, it is not essential that personal study of the Bible serve as the origin of all our religious beliefs, since we acquire our beliefs in a variety of ways. The important thing is that we test our beliefs against the standard or criterion of the biblical text.

To read the Bible in light of a doctrinal framework, as we have just described, is to read it in the company of other Christians. Effective Bible study is a collaborative effort. We can benefit from the insights of others. We can learn from their errors, and we can build on their achievements. So, it would be a mistake to ignore what others have learned from their study of the Bible as we undertake our own interpretive efforts. Trying to do so only obscures the fact noted earlier that every reading of the Bible is affected by

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[1] "John Calvin to the Reader, 1559," Institutes of the Christian Religion, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), p. 4.
[2] "Subject Matter of the Present Work," from the French Edition of 1560, op. cit., p. 6.

cultural and religious factors. And it actually makes us more, rather than less, susceptible to their influence.

When we consider the relation between the Bible and culture, we typically think of the impact of ancient cultures on those who wrote the biblical documents. We have also observed that modern culture has an impact on us as we read them. But there is a third way in which the biblical documents are related to culture, and this, too, deserves our attention. For not only has culture affected the composition of the biblical documents and the various ways they have been interpreted, but the biblical documents themselves have exerted an enormous influence on culture.

Christianity has been the dominant religion in the western hemisphere since the fourth century, and the Bible has been one of the most important factors in the development of Western civilization. As a result, some of the sentiments prevalent in today's culture may reflect biblical principles more fully than those that prevailed in the cultures of biblical times. And it may be possible to implement certain biblical principles within the Christian community today even more fully than they were in biblical times.

Consider the prevailing attitude toward marriage in the West. Although the Bible never specifically prohibits polygamy, most Christians view monogamy as the only acceptable expression of the biblical theology of marriage, and the social consensus within the so-called "Christian" countries of the world overwhelmingly supports monogamy. The attitude of western cultures toward slavery is also revealing. The Bible nowhere explicitly prohibits the practice of slavery. In fact, the Mosaic law provides for the institution of slavery, and Paul advises slaves to be obedient to their masters (Eph 6:5). Nevertheless, many Christians strongly believe that the overall biblical emphasis on the worth of all human beings, and specific passages

such as Paul's insistence that there is neither slave nor free in Christ (Gal 3:28), indicate that slavery and Christianity are fundamentally incompatible. Thus convinced, many Christians worked and risked to abolish slavery in the nineteen century, and today no civilized nation in the world tolerates the practice. Although it would exceed the scope of this article to do so, one could argue that the prevalence of monogamy and the eradication of slavery in much of the world manifest the cultural influence that the Bible has exerted over the centuries in parts of the world where its teachings have been taken seriously.

Besides pointing to the influence the biblical documents have exerted on culture, these phenomena also indicate that it is by no means a simple task to specify the precise conditions under which certain beliefs and practices are biblical. To have biblical authority it is not enough for an idea to have some connection with the biblical text. Different religious groups derive a number beliefs and practices from the Bible which Seventh-day Adventists do not regard as "biblical," in the sense of "authorized by the Bible." To mention a few, members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints support baptism for the dead on the basis of 1 Corinthians 15:29. Jehovah's Witnesses base their refusal of blood transfusions on Leviticus 17:11-12. And Pentecostal groups find a precedent for speaking in tongues in numerous New Testament passages, including Acts 2:1-4 and 1 Corinthians 14:5, 18.

At the same time, Adventists claim biblical authority for a number of beliefs and practices which do not have a straightforward biblical mandate, in the form of so many words from a specific biblical passage. Besides two items already mentioned, abolition and monogamy, these include the doctrine of the Trinity and abstinence from alcoholic beverages and tobacco, to

mention a couple of diverse examples. It appears, then, that certain religious beliefs and practices are not "biblical," in the sense of being authorized by the Bible, even though they are derived from the biblical text, and conversely, that others are biblically authorized, even though the Bible does not explicitly articulate them. Consequently, the fact that a certain practice is mentioned in the biblical documents is not enough to establish it as normative for Christians today. Nor does the fact that a practice is not explicitly mentioned in the Bible mean that it has no current religious importance. Even though the biblical writers do not advocate the abolition of slavery in so many words, many Christians are convinced that the trajectory of their statements requires that conclusion. By the same token, even though the Bible admonishes slaves to be obedient to their earthly masters, this does not constitute support for the institution of slavery.

So far we have noticed several things regarding biblical interpretation. Contemporary culture affected the production of the biblical documents in several different ways. It provided the language and literary forms in which the documents were written. It provided illustrative material. It also provided the conceptual framework, or cosmology, of the biblical writers. And occasionally, it provided the content, not merely the background of theological ideas.

We have also seen that cultural influences affect us as we read the biblical documents. In general, our perspective on things is shaped by modern science, so the size and structure of the universe are much different from what ancient peoples conceived them to be. Moreover, we instinctly seek natural explanations in order to account for the phenomena of nature.

These observations suggest two things we need to avoid when it comes to the relation between the biblical documents and cultural influences.

One error is to regard certain aspects of ancient culture as theologically normative because the biblical documents reflect or refer to them. The other is to accept the culture of our own day as normative for doctrine and eliminate from our expression of Christian faith any concepts that run counter to it.

In the case of women's ordination each side of the issue portrays the other as guilty of one of these mistakes. In the thinking of those who favor women's ordination, its opponents fail to see that the biblical passages they cite to support their view reflect the cultural outlook of ancient times and do not express a permanent rule for Christian ministry. Conversely, opponents of women's ordination often believe that its supporters have been influenced by some of the progressive, if not radical, forces in contemporary society, and fail to give the Bible the normative status it deserves.

The crucial question, obviously, is how to determine whether a practice followed, perhaps even encouraged in biblical times, such as women deferring to men in worship and religious instruction, was a concession to ancient cultural mores, with only temporary significance, or the expression of a permanently binding rule for Christian faith and life. Without undertaking to resolve this particular issue, let us mention some of the factors which responsible hermeneutics should take into account in dealing with such questions. There is no single "acid test" for determining whether a practice mentioned in the Bible is obligatory for Christians today. Only a careful consideration of several different things can lead to the proper conclusion.

1. Is the practice in question explicitly commanded in the Bible? Or is it merely presupposed? Some people have argued that the Bible supports slavery because there are passages in the Old Testament dealing with the relations between slaves and masters, as well as passage in the New Testament, such as Ephesians 6:5, which show that both slaves and masters were

members of the early Christian community. Others have observed that such passages are concerned with the relations between individual human beings within the institution, and do not speak directly of the institution of slavery itself. The Bible does not condone the practice of slavery in so many words, they believe, but seems to accept its existence as a given. As a general rule, an explicit command provides a stronger biblical warrant for subsequent generations of believers to follow a certain practice than does the tacit assumption of that practice.

2. Is the practice common to the cultures of biblical times, or is it unique to Israel and/or the church? The fact that the people of God followed a practice that was pervasive among the cultures of their time does not by itself indicate that it does not have permanent validity. We must beware of exaggerating the number of parallels between the biblical documents and other ancient literature and avoid overemphasizing their significance. Nevertheless, practices unique to the biblical communities of faith would be stronger candidates for permanent validity than those common to different cultures, if other things are equal.

3. Are there biblical passages which speak directly against the practice? This is particularly important in the case of practices whose observance is required at one time and criticized at another. The most familiar example is circumcision. The Mosaic law requires circumcision, while Paul's writings come close to prohibiting it. The apostle contends that circumcision is inconsequential at best and at worst an indication of legalism, with its rejection of the Gospel. Christians interpret Paul's polemic against circumcision as evidence that the command has been rescinded. In such cases, the latest biblical word on a practice determines what is normative for Christians today. As a general rule, Christians interpret the Old Testament in light of

the New. For Christian faith and life, the record of God's revelation in Jesus Christ is definitive, and takes precedence over what preceded it.

4. Does the Bible express fundamental principles that relate to the practice? The biblical documents, in both Old and New Testaments, assume the practice of slavery and nowhere explicitly condemn it. But a number of passages strike at the root of slavery by conferring a dignity upon slaves which negates the basic presuppositions of the institution. The sabbath rest extends to slaves (Ex 20:8-11), for example, and Paul asserts that there is neither slave nor free in Christ (Gal 3:28). In addition, the Bible emphasizes the value of each human being as a potential recipient of salvation (Jn 3:16). So, even though there is no explicit prohibition of slavery in the Bible, the consensus of later Christians has been that the practice is utterly incompatible with biblical religion.

5. Is modern social thought generally favorable or unfavorable toward the practice? It would be a mistake to reject a practice as normative for Christians because it is out of fashion today, just as it would be a mistake to insist that a practice is normative simply because it enjoys current popular support. But a consideration of modern values does have a role to play in determining whether Christians today should observe a certain practice. As we have seen, there are instances in which certain biblical principles can be concretely realized more effectively in the modern world than they could in ancient times.

To show how important it is to be sensitive to a variety of concerns like these, let us briefly note the attitude of Seventh-day Adventists toward several different biblical practices. Adventists accept the biblical prohibition of murder--a practice enunciated in the Old Testament, affirmed in the New, and supported by modern social conventions as well. Adventists observe the

seventh day sabbath, because it was commanded in the Old Testament and the command was never rescinded. The sabbath is an element of biblical culture and teaching that retains its validity for modern Christians, even though most Christians today deny its current validity. In contrast, Adventists reject circumcision even though it was commanded in the Old Testament, because the New Testament removes it as a Christian obligation. Adventists reject slavery and polygamy as opposed to Christian principles, although the Bible never explicitly objects to either institution. Adventists practise baptism because Jesus specifically commands it, even though other religious groups also practised the rite in ancient times. So there seems to be no one criterion, or "bright line test," to use an expression that has recently come into vogue, that neatly determines whether or not a practice has biblical authority.

How, then, should Adventists resolve the issue of women's ordination to the Gospel ministry? This depends on their answers to questions like these: Does the fact that the biblical prototypes for Christian ministers were male rather than female represent a concession to the patriarchy characteristic of traditional cultures, or does it express a principle of permanent validity for the Christian community? Do the biblical passages that counsel against women as leaders of worship and religious instructors express a binding obligation on subsequent generations of Christians, or were they intended to prevent the early Christian community from creating a negative impression within the ancient Mediterranean world?

To answer such questions, Adventists today must carefully consider all the biblical material that bears on the status of women, the relations between men and women in ancient cultures as they illuminate these passages, the developing attitudes towards women within the Christian community

during its history, and the attitudes toward women prevalent in contemporary society as the possible fulfillment of biblical principles.

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