

# He Gave Us Scripture: Foundations of Interpretation

Lesson 7

Applying Scripture

Forum



**thirdmill**

Biblical Education. For the World. For Free.

© 2012 by Third Millennium Ministries

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form or by any means for profit, except in brief quotations for the purposes of review, comment, or scholarship, without written permission from the publisher, Third Millennium Ministries, Inc., 316 Live Oaks Blvd., Casselberry, Florida 32707.

#### ABOUT THIRDMILL

Founded in 1997, Thirdmill is a non-profit Evangelical Christian ministry dedicated to providing:

#### **Biblical Education. For the World. For Free.**

Our goal is to offer free Christian education to hundreds of thousands of pastors and Christian leaders around the world who lack sufficient training for ministry. We are meeting this goal by producing and globally distributing an unparalleled multimedia seminary curriculum in English, Arabic, Mandarin, Russian, and Spanish. Our curriculum is also being translated into more than a dozen other languages through our partner ministries. The curriculum consists of graphic-driven videos, printed instruction, and internet resources. It is designed to be used by schools, groups, and individuals, both online and in learning communities.

Over the years, we have developed a highly cost-effective method of producing award-winning multimedia lessons of the finest content and quality. Our writers and editors are theologically-trained educators, our translators are theologically-astute native speakers of their target languages, and our lessons contain the insights of hundreds of respected seminary professors and pastors from around the world. In addition, our graphic designers, illustrators, and producers adhere to the highest production standards using state-of-the-art equipment and techniques.

In order to accomplish our distribution goals, Thirdmill has forged strategic partnerships with churches, seminaries, Bible schools, missionaries, Christian broadcasters and satellite television providers, and other organizations. These relationships have already resulted in the distribution of countless video lessons to indigenous leaders, pastors, and seminary students. Our websites also serve as avenues of distribution and provide additional materials to supplement our lessons, including materials on how to start your own learning community.

Thirdmill is recognized by the IRS as a 501(c)(3) corporation. We depend on the generous, tax-deductible contributions of churches, foundations, businesses, and individuals. For more information about our ministry, and to learn how you can get involved, please visit [www.thirdmill.org](http://www.thirdmill.org).

# Contents

|              |  |    |
|--------------|--|----|
| Question 1:  | What guidelines should we follow when we apply biblical passages to modern life?.....                                      | 1  |
| Question 2:  | How does knowing the original meaning of a passage of Scripture help us apply it to our lives?.....                        | 2  |
| Question 3:  | In what ways is God immutable?.....  | 3  |
| Question 4:  | Do all human beings have a sinful nature? .....  | 5  |
| Question 5:  | How does God’s later revelation influence our understanding of his earlier revelation? .....                               | 6  |
| Question 6:  | What are proper motivations for obeying the Scriptures? .....  | 7  |
| Question 7:  | Is obeying the Bible different from obeying God? .....   | 7  |
| Question 8:  | What are some cultural features of the Old and New Testaments that distance the Bible from contemporary readers? .....     | 8  |
| Question 9:  | How should we account for differences between biblical cultures and our own as we apply Scripture to our lives today?..... | 10 |
| Question 10: | How can believers today apply Scripture to their lives in light of changes in redemptive history? .....                    | 12 |
| Question 11: | How can believers make the Scriptures relevant and applicable to their lives today? .....                                  | 14 |

# He Gave Us Scripture: Foundations of Interpretation

## Lesson Seven: Applying Scripture

### Forum

With

Dr. David R. Bauer

Dr. Bruce Baugus

Dr. Steve Blakemore

Dr. Darrell L. Bock

Dr. David W. Chapman

Dr. Gary Cockerill

Dr. Dan Doriani

Rev. Thad James, Jr.

Dr. Daniel L. Kim

Dr. Robert G. Lister

Dr. Miguel Nunez

Dr. Jonathan T. Pennington

Dr. Robert L. Plummer

Dr. K. Erik Thoennes

Rev. Dr. Stephen Tong

Dr. Miles Van Pelt

Dr. Simon Vibert

Dr. Peter Walker

Dr. Guy Waters

Dr. Stephen J. Wellum

### Question 1:

**What guidelines should we follow when we apply biblical passages to modern life?**

For any newly acquired skill, it's important to know the guidelines in places before we can practice that skill appropriately. The same is true as we learn to apply biblical passages to our lives today. What guidelines should we follow when we apply biblical passages to modern life?

#### **Dr. David W. Chapman**

One of the dangers I've seen in application is that we can drive our own needs and desires into the text. So, I've been in untold number of Bible studies where we'll get done studying a passage that may be about the glory of Christ or about the need to learn more in Scripture, and we'll go around the room and start sharing about what have learned from this that was applicable to our lives. And prayer — everybody will want to apply it to their prayer life because we all feel inadequate in our prayer life. And that's a good thing, to want to work on our prayer life, but in doing so we can often overlook what Scripture is actually calling us to in the moment. So, if we're very careful to interpret the passage of Scripture first and then understand not only what was the author trying to say and have us believe, but also what was the author originally trying to have the audience do with it, then as we connect our application with the intended application of the original audience. Then that ties us to the text and we know that we're applying rightly. We're not just reading applications in that are particular needs in our life. We're actually letting the text challenge us.

#### **Dr. Dan Doriani**

To apply the Bible to modern life, we have to make sure we have the right categories and enough categories. One thing we do sometimes is reduce application to telling people what to do. Telling people what to do is no doubt important. God has laws.

We should obey them. That's clear. But application has much more to it than "doing." I'd like to say there are four questions that people ask. Christians ask them and, candidly, secular people, people from every religion, every ethical system, tries to answer these questions. First question is, "What should I do? What's my duty? What do I owe to other human beings?" The second question is, "Who should I be? What kind of character is godly? What kind of person is able to do what we heard we should do up above in question one? I mean, we often know what we should do but can't do it. So how do we get the character? What kind of person should we be?" The third question, sometimes neglected, is, "What should my goals in life be? Where should I go?" Or better yet, "Where should *we* go?" Because there are lots of things you can do only with others. It's a group project. The question, "Where should I go?" also has to do with my calling, my purpose in life. That is to say, I have things that I'm supposed to do because of my history, my experiences, my training, that might be quite different from what somebody else should do. My gifts, the necessities, the problems I see are different from yours. The last question is, "How can I see? How can I see the world the way God does? How can I have God's perspective, God's vision of the world?" In other words, there are often competing ideas of what's right or what's wrong. What's God's way of seeing it? So let me run through those again. Four questions: What should I do? Who should I be? Where should I go, or where should *we* go? And how can I see? Do, be, go and see. To say it another way, the same thing said another way: What's my duty? What kind of character should I have? What should my goals in life be? And what's a God-given or proper perspective on this world? Those are the four most basic questions. If you're applying the Bible to a group, if you studied a part of the Bible and you want to apply it to a group, you should not be just stuck on one of those. Try to use at least two, sometimes even all four in some lesson that you prepare. The Bible answers all those questions many times over.

## **Question 2:**

### **How does knowing the original meaning of a passage of Scripture help us apply it to our lives?**

**As we seek to interpret a passage of Scripture, one of the first questions we ask deals with the original meaning of the text. This gives us a solid foundation for applying it to our lives. How does knowing the original meaning of a passage of Scripture help us apply it to our lives?**

#### **Dr. Miles Van Pelt**

If we don't first understand what the original meaning of a passage in Scripture meant to the original author, then we're going to have a very difficult time faithfully and with authority applying that text to the modern lives of either ourselves or the people we're preaching and teaching to. So, one way to think of it is this: A particular passage in Scripture, let's say, has one fundamental meaning or one fundamental

thing to teach. Now from that one fundamental meaning or one fundamental thing to teach, there are hundreds, maybe even thousands of applications to that in the different lives of different people. The preschool teacher may have different needs than the contractor who may have different needs than the lawyer or the doctor. And so how a particular passage applies to a person can have a variety of different implications in a particular life. But in order to do that well, in order to get that right application into the life of the person in the pew, you must first understand the right meaning of that particular text. So the right meaning leads to the right application, we hope. Now, let's talk about an example. In John 13 when Jesus washes the disciple's feet. In our culture we can think that's gross, and that's weird, and I'm not going to do that because I don't wash people's feet, and that some people would be offended if I would tried to take off their shoes and wash their feet. But the point of that passage is not that we have to go and physically wash everyone's feet. What Jesus was doing is, he was showing that, as the teacher, as the rabbi, as the leader, that he could perform for his disciples, for his students, the most base and humble act of service. And understanding that culture, the original meaning of what foot washing was in their culture, a base act of service, now we can properly apply it to our culture as what are those acts of service in our lives that are the lowest possible things that we're now able to do because of what Christ has done for us? For example, can we change that diaper? — a terrible and lowly act as a father of four. Can we pick up the trash? ... Foot washing in its original context meant something, and we have to discover what that meant in its original context. We have to properly understand it in its context in order to properly apply it in our context. So we don't go around doing foot washing, but we do go around and do acts of service like that because, as it says in John 13, we know where we're from, and we know where we're going; therefore, we can act like Jesus as this type of servant.

### **Dr. Simon Vibert**

Knowing the original meaning of Scripture does help us apply the Bible to our own lives. When the author of Scripture wrote, he did so with a sense that there was an audience in mind immediately, and therefore, we'd do well to not only consider what the text said, but also how the text was received by an original audience. But then that also helps us to apply it to ourselves today, because we have a lot in common with the ancient audience. Human nature is the same. We believe that God is immutable, that he's unchanged. We believe that his promises are secure and trustworthy, and therefore the things that apply to a community of believers thousands of years ago actually still apply to us. Even though we may need to make some cultural changes to apply them to today, there's more in common than there is less.

### **Question 3:**

#### **In what ways is God immutable?**

**Our world is constantly changing. Growth, progress and decline happen on a daily basis everywhere, in every corner of the globe and in every person who calls it**

**home. And yet, the Bible speaks very differently of God. God never changes. In what ways is God immutable?**

**Dr. Robert G. Lister**

God's immutable in his essence and in his character. So, as God, he's fundamentally unchanging. He's fundamentally self-sufficient. He's fundamentally not dependent on his creation. In his character, he's fundamentally faithful. He's fundamentally committed to keeping his promises. So, we can rely on him in those capacities. Because God is changeless in his essence and changeless in his character, we can also be confident that, in keeping those promises that he has pledged himself to keep, God will change in relationship to his creatures in ways that are appropriate. The most obvious example of that being God's keeping the promise to forgive sinners ... When a sinner lays hold of the promise of salvation, it's not just a change on the part of the sinner, but God changes in relationship to the sinner from a status of wrath and judgment to a status of peace and reconciliation. Now, God's keeping that promise which involves changing in relationship to the sinner is predicated, or based on, the very fact that God is changeless in his character and his essence. It is the fact that God is reliable in his promise-keeping yesterday, today and tomorrow that a sinner can know that on any day he or she repents, that promise stands for him or her and that God will change in his disposition from wrath to reconciliation.

**Dr. Miguel Nunez, translation**

The concept of God implies perfection. And perfection cannot change because then it would become imperfect. God is immutable in every way. God is immutable in his essence. God is immutable in his characteristics as God. When God speaks, that word is immutable. When God is powerful, that power is immutable. When we talk about God's wisdom, that wisdom is immutable precisely because it belongs to God, and God is perfect. God is eternal, the same from eternity to eternity. The attributes of God are all immutable. When we think of a mutable or changeable being, we are no longer thinking about the Creator. We are no longer thinking about God. We are thinking of a creature. The creature is the one who changes, changes when she gets old, changes because he is not perfect, changes because we can improve. When we exist or believe or think something, since we are creatures, we can improve in the future, and therefore, change to improve. But God is perfect. He does not need to improve. He cannot improve. It is not only that he is immutable. He cannot change because, by virtue of being God, he is a perfect being in himself, independent of everything, not dependent on anybody. Nothing affects him. Nothing transforms him. Nothing changes him. He does not age. He exists outside of time and space. He is a being without comparison, set apart, and therefore, we can only talk about the immutability of God. So, regarding the question: How is God immutable? In every way that we can think of God, God is immutable. His decrees are immutable. His word is immutable. His essence, as we said, is immutable. His Spirit is immutable because he is God, and God by definition is immutable. God has not *become* immutable. He is: "I AM WHO I AM" and always will be. In God's case, what he once was, he is today. What he once thought, he thinks today, and he will think the same tomorrow, because everything God conceives is perfect. Therefore, he doesn't

have the need to change opinions tomorrow, or change his being, or change his methodology, because from day one he thought of everything immutably; he thought of everything perfectly.

#### **Question 4:** **Do all human beings have a sinful nature?**

**Christians believe that human beings are born with sinful nature. For believers, this idea seems all too self-evident. But most nonbelievers argue that all people are basically good and only do bad things because of outside influences. So, do all human beings have a sinful nature?**

##### **Dr. K. Erik Thoennes**

Every human being who has ever lived has had a sinful nature, except for two — Adam before the Fall, and Jesus — who were both truly human. But before the Fall Adam didn't have a fallen human nature and Jesus never did, even though he had a true human nature. But the situation for every other human, besides those two situations, is a depraved nature where sin has affected us throughout and holistically and is defined fundamentally as being in opposition to God, being in rebellion against him and a twistedness that's produced in our natures.

##### **Dr. Simon Vibert**

Well, we believe that all human beings have a sinful nature, which means that none of us come *tabula rasa*, as a "blank slate," to reading the Bible. We come with our own preconceptions. We come with our own prejudices. We come with our own inherent desire to run from the holy and the living God. But actually, the Bible also gives us a diagnosis of our sinful human condition and a remedy. And there is just that sense in which we are the same human beings, the same *kind* of human beings as received the original Bible. They speak of a holy God; they speak of a fallen, sinful human nature. They speak of a coming Savior and Redeemer and a returning judge and King. And we read the Bible realizing that we cannot read it perfectly, but actually, the whole of the Bible is addressed to human beings like you and like me with a sinful nature, addressing our human condition and providing a cure in Christ.

##### **Dr. Bruce Baugus**

All human beings have a sinful nature, except one, and that is Jesus Christ. So when we think about all human beings having a sinful nature, being totally depraved and so on, we want to think about all who are in Adam fell in Adam, and thus all who are the natural descent from Adam are fallen. And in that sense of "all," yes, all human beings have a fallen nature. But there is one, of course — a second Adam, a last Adam — who is free from the taint of sin, though fully human, and was, therefore, a fit redeemer of those of us who have fallen.

### Question 5:

#### How does God's later revelation influence our understanding of his earlier revelation?

**Biblical interpreters have long understood the value of interpreting Scripture with Scripture. For instance, Paul's writing in one part of the New Testament shed light on his writings in other parts of the New Testament. And Old Testament history provides background for New Testament teachings. But, how does God's later revelation influence our understanding of his earlier revelation?**

#### **Dr. David R. Bauer**

The Bible itself testifies to a growth, a progress, in the way in which God reveals himself to his people over time. And so that, even within the Old Testament, you have a progress of revelation. Later Old Testament writers make use of and readapt earlier canonical material, earlier revelation, and don't simply take it up but carry it further and sometimes even clarify or modify how it was originally understood and used. Of course, the major development that you have in terms of "progressive revelation" is between the Old Testament and the New Testament, what Hebrews refers to as a first covenant and the new covenant. Progressive revelation means, then... that we are to judge or evaluate earlier revelation in terms of its applicatory value, the way we apply it, on the basis of later revelation.

#### **Dr. Robert L. Plummer**

The Bible is the timeless Word of God. At the same time it would be a distortion to think of the Bible as some abstract set of moral principles that's fallen from heaven. In fact there is a progressive development in terms of a revelation of God's plan, greater and greater clarity in terms of prediction of how he'll deal with the sin problem and the coming of the Messiah. And there's some aspects of earlier revelation in the old covenant that clearly find their fulfillment outside of those specific regulations. So, for example, the food laws related to the Old Testament. I wouldn't want to use the word that those are irrelevant because all the Scripture is relevant and timeless, but do we try to avoid eating catfish — fish without scales? Or are we worried about wearing garments that are woven with two different kinds of cloth? Obviously we are not, and so we have to read the Scripture knowing that the end of the Scripture, the New Testament, the revelation, provides the hermeneutical grid through which to understand how these regulations in the Old Testament... do they find their fulfillment in Christ? Are they expressing timeless moral principles? Jesus did not see himself as rejecting prior revelation, but as fulfilling it. A key verse for us in this is Matthew 5:17:

**[Jesus said], "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets;" — the prior revelation of God — "I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them" (Matthew 5:17, ESV).**

### **Question 6:** **What are proper motivations for obeying the Scriptures?**

The Bible is full of instructions regarding what we should believe and how we should live. But the Bible isn't just a list of do's and don'ts. Scripture also tells us *why* it's important to obey God's Word. What are proper motivations for obeying the Scriptures?

#### **Dr. Jonathan T. Pennington**

When Jesus was asked, "What's the greatest commandment?" he offered that plus a bonus track. He offered the second greatest commandment as well. And they are both centered around the greatest Christian virtue, and that is love, wholehearted love and devotion. First, the greatest commandment is to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. And the second commandment Jesus teaches is like that one, to love others, to love our neighbor as ourselves. At the end of the day, our goal in reading and applying Scripture to ourselves is nothing short than worship of God and service toward others. It has both a vertical component — love for God — and a horizontal one — love for neighbor. And in fact, that's not only our goal in reading Scripture. That will actually help us ask the right questions when we read Scripture. It's actually the closest thing to a method we could have in reading Scripture. It's reading texts and saying, "How does this teach me about loving God?" and "How does this help me to love others as well?"

#### **Dr. K. Erik Thoennes**

There are certainly practical implications in our lives for obeying the Scriptures. Our lives will be more abundant and full, and our relationship with God will be deepened. But, sometimes obeying the Bible actually can make your life harder. It can bring persecution, and even martyrdom and loss. So, the practical implications for our lives can't be the primary motive. The primary motive for obeying Scripture needs to be that God wrote it. And we obey God because he's God, and we obey his Word because it's his Word. And that will have a profound effect on our relationship with God. But obeying him, and bringing delight to his heart in that obedience, needs to be the primary reason we obey the Scriptures.

### **Question 7:** **Is obeying the Bible different from obeying God?**

We strongly affirm what the Bible says about itself, namely, that it's the inspired and authoritative Word of God. There is no other book that carries the same power

**and influence for humanity. And yet, the Bible is not equal to God himself. So, is obeying the Bible different from obeying God?**

**Dr. Steve Blakemore**

When people think about obeying what the Scripture teaches, we need to keep something, I think, pretty clearly in mind. On the one hand, obeying the Scripture, if it is the Word of God, is an act of obeying the Lord, because the Lord has given us the Scripture. It fills out for us what his will for our moral lives is. It tells us how we should conduct ourselves in relationship to him. How we should think about our need for him. It teaches us to pray. It teaches us what pleases God. So when we understand that the Bible is the Word of God, and the Bible points us to God, and we obey the Scripture because the Scripture is, to us, the Word of God, then obeying the Scripture is obeying God. However, there are many people, I fear, for whom the Bible, keeping what the Bible says, is what they think the faith is all about. "If I just believe these things, if I just live my life according to this, I'll figure out where the loopholes are. I'll do just enough to make sure that I'm keeping the spirit of the Law or the spirit of the teachings of Jesus. I'll do what I need to do." That way of thinking can actually become a replacement for obeying God. The Bible is not an instruction manual. The Bible is a gift from God to us to tell us what his will for our lives is. And as we respond to God through the witness of the Scripture, we can be obeying God. But if we're just looking at the text, looking at the teaching and trying to figure out how to conform our lives to that without reference to, "I just want to please God," then obeying the Bible is not obeying God.

**Question 8:**

**What are some cultural features of the Old and New Testaments that distance the Bible from contemporary readers?**

**When we apply the teachings of Scripture to our lives today, we have to consider the distance between biblical cultures and our own. Believers sometimes struggle to apply a passage of Scripture because most modern cultures are unlike the cultures described in the Bible. So, what are some cultural features of the Old and New Testaments that distance the Bible from contemporary readers?**

**Dr. Dan Doriani**

The Old Testament and New Testament are distanced from us in different ways depending on who we are. In the West and prosperous countries, also in Asia, we simply have to remember how very poor people were by our standards. People might eat meat once a week, might have one or two meals a day. The average person probably had six or seven or eight articles of clothing *total*, counting shoes. This is almost inconceivable to us. Food was scarce. Water was scarce. People traveled by foot. And when it says, they went from here to there, just think of them walking. So that's very different from our culture. It's also true that it was a land where people

lived close together, densely populated. Towns were close to each other. People knew each other by name. A lot of cultures are like that today, but not all by any means. Even something as simple as envisioning the question, how could Jesus send out his disciples saying, go to a worthy village, go to the next town and they'll receive them. How could you possibly imagine that when you go to pronounce the kingdom, people will receive you? Well, let's see. For one thing, towns were very close to each other. So, nobody received you in one town? It wasn't a death sentence. You'd be in another town very shortly. And word of Jesus' proclamations spread very quickly because, again, towns were close, densely populated. And so, when a messenger arrived saying, "I want to tell you a little bit more about what Jesus was saying," a good chance there'd be people who were very hungry to hear what they had to say. So, we just have to get out of our own mindset of abundance, the way we travel and, depending on where you live, maybe populations are concentrated in cities that are far apart from each other. Those are just a few of the ways in which biblical culture was quite different from our own.

**Rev. Thad James, Jr.**

When we look at the distance as far as the Old Testament and the New Testament and then trying to bring that into the twenty-first century, we must understand, one, that we are far removed from the time of the Old Testament and New Testament periods. So we have a time gap. We equally have a space gap. And so we still struggle today with understanding the Middle Eastern mindset. We have a severe language gap. They spoke in Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek... so we try to find the best English word to be that Hebrew, Aramaic or Greek word, but inevitably you're going to lose something in the translation. We have the intended hearer and reader gap. So, I'm trying to put myself prayerfully into the place of that first century or that early Near Eastern person as far as their mindset is concerned. And then we have a writing gap. The writing of Hebrew, the writing of Greek is dramatically different than how we write in English today. Then we have all the other cultural aspects as far as, the Old Testament Jews were living by the 600-plus Levitical laws which governed every aspect — moral, civil, spiritual — of their lives, which governed the relationships of men and women, animals, farming, feast. All those aspects are governed by those laws. And then you have in the New Testament, again, you have the Greco-Roman culture and worldview, which, again, is similar to our thought process today but still far removed. So, we don't live in an agricultural society anymore ... We're not governed by seasons and by times and by weather. We don't understand the significance of the animal life. What really do we know about sheep and camels? And what do we know about fig trees and grapevines? So, all those were very important to the culture of the Old Testament world and also to the New Testament world — the relationships of people as far as the different cultures of the Hebrews to the Moabites to the Edomites. And then we get into, again, into the Greco-Roman cultures and the relationships of Jews and Gentiles, males and females. So, all those issues are crucial to our interpretation and understanding and not, again, trying to place a twenty-first century world into the first century or into the B.C. world.

**Dr. Darrell L. Bock**

I think the major feature that distances the Bible from most contemporary readers today, at least in industrialized countries, is the urban environment in which we live. Whereas much of the Bible was written in contexts that were much more rural, agricultural, certainly not industrialized in the way that we think about it, with all the dynamics that come with that difference in lifestyle. And so, many of the illustrations that we have coming out of both testaments reflect people who live on the land, live from the land, live in relationship to the land, that kind of thing. Whereas, much of the way we earn money today and gain a living has very little to do with our connection to the land. So, that's one, certainly, major difference. Culture is also more patriarchal in its structure generally speaking than ours is. Ours is a more egalitarian culture. That produces some differences in the reading. You have a more literate culture today versus a less literate culture then, which means that a lot of the Bible is presented in narrative and in pictures so that literacy is not an issue. At least in the New Testament period, the literacy rate is estimated to be somewhere — at least full literacy — somewhere between 5 and 10 percent, very low in comparison to our cultures today. So there are a lot of cultural differences in terms of the way the Bible functions ... Another difference that's important is the fact that the Bible was heard and not read, and experienced orally as opposed to experienced on a page. People didn't own a Bible. They didn't walk around with a Bible. The way they heard the biblical message was either in the church, or in the synagogue, or at the temple. And when you write for an oral audience, so that you hear rather than read what's on the page, that produces a certain kind of style and certain kind of way of presenting the material. That works well with narrative, but it can sometimes make reasoned discourse a little more difficult. It works well with the psalter because you balance the lines and you work with rhyme and that kind of thing, and that helps to make things memorable. So, all of these feature go into the way in which the Bible is presented when it's presented orally. And that's a very different way from the experiencing the Bible than, generally, the way we do it.

### **Question 9:**

#### **How should we account for differences between biblical cultures and our own as we apply Scripture to our lives today?**

**Today, we're separated from the cultures of the Bible by thousands of years. And with this separation comes marked differences in how we speak, think and act. How should we account for differences between biblical cultures and our own as we apply Scriptures to our lives today?**

#### **Dr. Daniel L. Kim**

I've always wondered, if I could get ten people seated in a room and have a dialogue with them, all from different cultures and different parts of the world, I wonder what kind of dialogue we would have when we start investigating specific passages of Scripture. For example, when I think of the example of Abraham talking with the

elders of the Hittites as he is about to purchase a cave to bury his beloved wife, the interaction between the two groups is very interesting. There's a great deal of nonverbal communication going on. Whenever Abraham steps up to speak, he is bowing repeatedly as a sign of respect, something that we typically would not do here in the West. And then when the dialogue actually begins between him and Ephron, from whom he eventually buys the cave, it's interesting how they never actually address each other directly, but it's always in the third person. And whenever I look at a story like that, I am reminded once again how various cultures deal with a business transaction in a way that is different than something that I have experienced. And the question that comes to my mind is, "How can I best understand it?" One of the theories that we learn in cultural communication is from a fellow named Edward T. Hall. He wrote a book called *Beyond Culture* in which he decided to look at culture based on how that culture communicates. Now, of course, there are variations in any culture. Between every culture there are variations. There are gender variations. There are personality variations as well. But in the broadest strokes, Edward T. Hall suggested there are two primary ways to look at culture. One is the culture that is driven by low-context communication, and in that culture, most of the information is in the actual speech itself. So, for example, he uses the illustration of in the courtroom in the United States. A lawyer, when he stands up, and he gives a sentence, every single word in that sentence has only one possible meaning, and that's why it is so complicated and confusing to anybody else who is not a lawyer because they have to come up with specific words to represent a particular case or situation. So, that's considered low-context in which it's irrelevant what the lawyer is wearing, or how he's gesturing, or how she is walking. Those are all irrelevant. It's only what he or she says. But then there's the other end of the spectrum which is a high-context culture in which, in fact, the vast majority of what is being communicated is actually not at all in what is being said, but it is through nonverbal communication. And when I look at something like that, we begin to sense and recognize that that could perhaps help us understand not only what's going on in the biblical context, but also, perhaps, what's going on in our context — how we can best appropriate or apply Scripture. I would suggest that most of the Old Testament and the ancient Near East was more a high-context culture than it was a low-context culture. And so, when we begin to start seeing Abraham and Ephron dialoguing with each other, and yet never actually physically addressing each other in front of the elders, we can begin to recognize that because most of what they're saying is going to be indirect. So Abraham says, "How much is the land?" And Ephron says, "Oh, what is a thousand shekels between us?" He was essentially saying, "It's going to be a thousand shekels, buddy." But Abraham, knowing that that's the way that they communicate, he immediately sets out and gives him the thousand shekels to buy the land. And yet for those of us who are from a low-context culture, we would say, "But that's not what Ephron said. Didn't he actually say, 'You can get the land without paying for it'?" But that's not at all what is being communicated. And yet, likewise, for a person who is from a high-context culture, they might pick that up very quickly, and they might recognize and go, "Okay, that's how we do things in our context as well." And so I would encourage all of our listeners here to be able to acknowledge and recognize if they are from a low context culture, to pay close attention. To not necessarily pay attention only to what is being

said, but the context, the broader picture, Abraham bowing. Why are they before the elders? Well, that's a business transaction. Why is Ephron and Abraham not speaking directly to each other? Why are they speaking in such indirect ways? Because that's the way the culture communicates these things. And for those of us who are in the high-context culture, that would make perfect sense and would probably require very little to apply to their context. But for us, we would have to ask ourselves in the low-context culture, "How do I communicate something like that?" and have to make necessary adjustments in such a way that it is done properly.

**Rev. Dr. Stephen Tong, translation**

When you see that the ancient Greek culture has things that don't relate to current times, then you have to realize that those things are what were needed for that age. For example, "Greet one another with a holy kiss." It would be ridiculous for Chinese people to kiss while greeting each other. So, the focus of this verse is the *essence* and not the literal meaning. We are to clearly discern which concepts are cultural, which are literal, which are spiritual, which are temporary, and which are eternal. That way, we won't be in error.

**Dr. Gary Cockerill**

How do we account for cultural differences between the biblical times and our own time when we want to apply the Scripture in our own lives today? There's some simple illustrations. Of course, you can talk about the "kiss of peace" that was a sign of fellowship in the early church and the instructions to give the kiss of peace ... Of course, that wouldn't really work very well in our culture today because of what the meaning of a kiss is. So instead of giving a kiss of peace in Western culture, we shake hands. In other cultures, people may shake hands in a different way. They may embrace or do different kind of things that become that symbol of fellowship. But the truth is still there, the truth of Christian brotherhood and sisterhood. The way... the culturally appropriate way to express that is still in effect. In some cultures, and where I lived in Africa, a kiss is only used for sexual purposes. So if you started doing a kiss of peace in church... it would not only be ineffective, it would actually be wrong and misunderstood and so, an appropriate equivalent that expresses the same thing. So the husk, the kiss of peace, if you will, helps us to understand how the principles of Christian fellowship were expressed in the culture. We'd find something that's appropriate for this culture. But the basic understanding of Christian fellowship is there.

**Question 10:**

**How can believers today apply Scripture to their lives in light of changes in redemptive history?**

As we read through the pages of Scripture, we see significant developments in redemptive history that affect how God relates to humanity. These developments

**provide ways for us to understand our own place in redemptive history. So, how can believers today apply Scripture to their lives in light of changes in redemptive history?**

**Dr. Stephen J. Wellum**

Reading Scripture, it's important to realize that Scripture doesn't come to us all at once. It's a progressive revelation. God has chosen to reveal his plan to us over time through the biblical covenants, culminating in our Lord Jesus Christ. With that in mind, we have to realize that as we apply the Scripture to our lives, not all aspects of Scripture come over to us in application, especially now as Christians, in exactly the same way as it did, say, under the old covenant or in the Old Testament era. As we then think of what applies to us, we have to see how the Old Testament specifically comes to fulfillment in Jesus Christ. He is the lens and grid by which we then say, "This applies and this doesn't apply." You think of some examples of, say, circumcision. Circumcision under the old covenant had direct application for those who were under that covenant. Now, in light of the new covenant, it doesn't apply in exactly the same way. The same with various food laws. And the same with some of the priestly system. It all reaches its fulfillment in Christ; it applies to us in and through him. And that's the basic principle that we have to follow as we read any portion of Scripture, placing that portion in its place in redemptive history, seeing how it is brought over to fulfillment in Jesus Christ, and then how it comes over to us as the people of God living in light of what Jesus has done.

**Dr. Miles Van Pelt**

When you think about applying the Bible, one of the things you need to be really sensitive about is where you are in redemptive history. There are certain things that apply to the people of God in the Mosaic era, for example, that do not apply to us. For example, we're not stoning disobedient children. We're not circumcising every male. Those were things particular and peculiar to the Mosaic covenant ... And so, knowing where you are in redemptive history, between the first coming of Jesus and the second coming of Jesus, helps you to understand where you fit into, the rules and regulations part of the game. In the old covenant, even in the patriarchal era, certain things are different and expected than now, and... we have a fuller revelation. We have the full word of God. We have his Son coming externally to testify to the veracity and the truthfulness of these things. And therefore, we're sensitive to our fuller revelation, and so, "to whom much is given," in some sense, "much [is] required." And therefore, we're sensitive to where we are in redemptive history, not only in terms of how we act because of Christ's work on our behalf, but also in terms of the body of literature we have to live in light of.

**Dr. Guy Waters**

When we read the Bible, I think we understand instinctively that we can't simply open up a passage at random, take a command, and say, "I must do it." To take an obvious example, circumcision. We know that God commanded circumcision under the old covenant — Genesis 17 and many following passages. But even a casual glance at the New Testament shows — Acts, Galatians — that circumcision was not required of

God's people under the new covenant. Now, there may be health, medical reasons why a person may choose circumcision, or why a parent may choose to circumcise their son, but we're clear from the New Testament that it's not a requirement of God, and we're not sinning against God by not being circumcised. Well, we could look at many examples along those lines. And that shows us something of the importance of being sensitive to the epochal character of Scripture, that circumcision was commanded of Israel, of God's people, at a certain point in redemptive history. But at this point in redemptive history, we can say very confidently from the authority of the Scripture that this is no longer required. So we don't practice circumcision not because we're uncomfortable with it, but because we're respecting the authority of God himself.

### **Dr. Peter Walker**

Readers of the Bible today need to be aware of their location in redemptive history. We live in the days of the new covenant, the New Testament, after Christ. And therefore when we look at the Old Testament, we've got to be aware we are in a different time zone, if you like. That's important. And there are some changes between the Old and New Testament which we need to take into consideration. I think, for example, of the ritual associated with the temple. We no longer have a physical temple. So some of that ritual stuff in Leviticus, we have to read that differently. Secondly, there's stuff to do with the ethnic nature of the nation of Israel, for example the requirements of circumcision or some of the Aaronic rules which related to the nation of Israel, the ethnic nation of Israel. Well, again, we have to universalize those. Thirdly, I'm aware also there are some particular things which are what we may refer to as geographical. The Old Testament is focused on three great things: the temple, the city and the land. Now those are really important in the Old Testament. But in the New Testament each one of those is transformed by the coming of Christ, and the New Testament is operating on a universal, not a particular plane, and therefore those things which relate to the land, to the city of Jerusalem, etc., and to the temple in particular, we need to learn how to universalize them and apply them to ourselves. And fourthly, there's the area of politics. A lot of the time in the Old Testament the nation of Israel is actually running its own affairs; God's people are in charge of their own political life. And now Christians throughout the world rarely are actually in control. We live as part of larger societies. And so there are going to be some transitions we need to make as we read the stuff which is governing Israel's life, but actually, how do we apply that in our own context that is slightly different.

### **Question 11:**

#### **How can believers make the Scriptures relevant and applicable to their lives today?**

**For many, the Bible seems to be an outdated and irrelevant book. After all, it was written a really long time ago to people who were very different from us. How can believers make the Scriptures relevant and applicable to their lives today?**

**Dr. Steve Blakemore**

One of the big questions for a minister, or a preacher, or a believer, is how can I take what I read in Scripture or what I hear preached in a sermon, and how can that be relevant to my life? How can I make it applicable? That is, on one level, that's the question of discipleship. I'd like to flip it around and ask this question: Maybe the way we ought to think about it is this: how does my life become relevant to what God has revealed in the Scripture? And how do I apply my life to what God has shown us through his Word? That way of just casting it just slightly in a different way helps us get a better perspective, I think, in that the Word of God, the revelation of God, the teaching of Scripture, it's automatically relevant to my life whether I know it or not. Whether I believe it or not, it's relevant. For me to say, to think to myself and to say to myself, my calling as a Christian is to learn the Scripture, let the narrative of Scripture shape my understanding of my life so much, let the story of God's salvation so soak into my being that I cannot think one thought about any aspect of my life outside of the narrative of God's mighty work to save and redeem and fill and cleanse and make pure his people. When I can think about my life in those terms, then the Scripture begins to come alive to me in a different way. I can begin to live in that message in a new way... A part of the way we would make the Scripture relevant to our lives is by a consistent, ongoing study of the Word, both in my own private life, but also in the fellowship of other believers who help me read it rightly, who help me understand it correctly, who help me obey it with all of my heart. So, first of all thinking about my life as needing to become relevant to what God has revealed, surrendering my life over to what God has revealed about himself, and then learning to study, not just by myself, which is always a danger, but learning to study the Scripture in the fellowship of the church in harmony with God's people. That helps me, then, not only learn the Scripture, but it helps me begin to see how it applies to my life in ways that I might not have imagined on my own when someone can help point me to this aspect or that aspect of scriptural teaching that may not have occurred to me in the privacy of my own prayer closet. Or it might not have occurred to me if I haven't become a person who understands I must make myself relevant, by grace, to what God has revealed of himself in the Scripture.

**Dr. Dan Doriani**

The Bible is an historical book. It has a variety of epochs within it, and those epochs are, on many occasions quite old, and there are elements of the Bible that are four thousand years old. And so it's not always easy to see the relevance, the importance, the truth, even, when we're reading about things that are so old. What we have to do, of course, is be patient and realize that the Bible is a book that speaks to people in their cultures. You might say the principle of the incarnation — Jesus came to live with humans — is also true with all the Bible, namely that God enters into our sphere of life. And so when the Bible gives commands or describes the way of faithfulness in the Old Testament, it's spoken to that culture. And that culture in the Old Testament was agrarian, shepherding, even nomadic at times. And so we have commandments or teachings that are sometimes very broad and clear in their significance. "You shall not murder." That still applies today. But then, since we want to know exactly what

that means, the Bible then gives particularizations that seem far away from us. So for example, it says if you have a bull and it gores someone, it's in the habit of goring, you must destroy the bull lest it gore somebody else. And if you do have a bull that gores somebody and you don't destroy the bull and it gores somebody else, your life is forfeit, or at least in principle it's forfeit. So we think, "Wow, that just doesn't even speak to me at all as I live in a city. I don't spend time with bulls. I don't have a bull." Let's assume that the Bible is true, that the principles are valid. There's something behind the word about bulls, and the word is, "Watch out for your neighbor. Protect people from danger. Don't do anything careless with any powerful thing" — a bull — "under your control." Now when you say it that way you think, "Okay, I have to preserve life, avoid letting powerful things harm other people." Then we realize quickly enough that that would apply to heavy machinery, to cars, to trucks and so forth. And we would then realize that in an industrial age there are very specific things we can do to obey God and preserve life, much as they did in times past. So, for example, under the idea of "You shall not kill," we understand that that can be turned around, and we have an obligation to preserve life. That's why we have in the Bible commands — a command in Deuteronomy 22 — which says when you're building a new house, put a parapet around the roof. Well, we don't put parapets around our roof today. Are we violating the law? No. People had flat roofs in those days, and they still do in some parts of the world ... So, when someone puts up a house, they put a parapet around their roof to protect people from falling off. Why? Somebody might say, "I'm not going to fall off my roof. I don't need to go to the expense." But no, the Bible is teaching us that we should preserve the lives of other people, even people who would heedlessly, foolishly hurt themselves by sleeping too close to the edge, by playing too vigorously. You might think to yourself, "Not my problem." The Bible says, yes, it is. We love our neighbors. We love our neighbors as ourselves. And in fact, it's of the very character of God. It is the God who gives commands like, "put a parapet around the roof," that leads to our salvation. Who are we but people who are prone to foolishly damage ourselves, foolishly fall off a roof — maybe a literal roof, maybe some other foolish behavior. God cares about people who don't watch out for themselves. He cares for us. That's really ultimately what led to the plan of redemption and to the work of Christ.

**In order to apply the Bible to our lives today we need to account for the differences between ourselves and the original audiences of Scripture. Thankfully, we have the same God, and human beings have the same nature today as they did in biblical times. Similarities like these can help us take into account changes throughout redemptive history and responsibly apply the Bible to our own lives and cultures.**

## Contributors

---

**Dr. David R. Bauer** is Dean of the School of Biblical Interpretation and the Ralph Waldo Beeson Professor of Inductive Biblical Studies at Asbury Theological Seminary.

**Dr. Bruce Baugus** is Assistant Professor of Philosophy and Theology at Reformed Theological Seminary in Jackson, Mississippi.

**Dr. Steve Blakemore** is the Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Wesley Biblical Seminary.

**Dr. Darrell L. Bock** is Executive Director of Cultural Engagement and Senior Research Professor of New Testament Studies at Dallas Theological Seminary.

**Dr. David W. Chapman** is Associate Professor of New Testament and Archeology at Covenant Theological Seminary in St. Louis, Missouri.

**Dr. Gary Cockerill** is Academic Dean and Professor of Biblical Interpretation and Theology at Wesley Biblical Seminary in Jackson, Mississippi.

**Dr. Dan Doriani** is the senior pastor of Central Presbyterian Church in Clayton, Missouri.

**Rev. Thad James, Jr.** is Vice President of Academic Affairs at Birmingham Theological Seminary in Alabama.

**Dr. Daniel L. Kim** is Assistant Professor of Old Testament at Covenant Theological Seminary in St. Louis, Missouri.

**Dr. Robert G. Lister** is Associate Professor of Biblical and Theological Studies at Biola University in La Mirada, California.

**Dr. Miguel Nunez** is Senior Pastor of the International Baptist Church in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic.

**Dr. Jonathan T. Pennington** is Associate Professor of New Testament Interpretation at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

**Dr. Robert L. Plummer** is Associate Professor of New Testament Interpretation at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky.

**Dr. K. Erik Thoennes** is Professor of Biblical and Theological Studies at Biola University's Talbot School of Theology.

**Rev. Dr. Stephen Tong** is the founder of the Stephen Tong Evangelistic Ministries, International (STEMI).

**Dr. Miles Van Pelt** is the Alan Belcher Professor of Old Testament and Biblical Languages, and the Academic Dean at Reformed Theological Seminary, Jackson Campus.

**Dr. Simon Vibert** is the former Vicar of St. Luke's Church, Wimbledon Park, UK, and is presently the Vice Principal of Wycliffe Hall, Oxford, and Director of the School of Preaching.

**Dr. Peter Walker** is Tutor in Biblical Theology at Wycliffe Hall and lectures in New Testament studies and Biblical Theology.

**Dr. Guy Waters** is Professor of New Testament at Reformed Theological Seminary, Jackson, Mississippi Campus.

**Dr. Stephen J. Wellum** is Professor of Christian Theology at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.