GORDEN R. DOSS

Culture, Worldview, Biblical Interpretation, and Mission

Case Study 1

Not long ago the Seventh-day Adventist Church completed a study of the theology of ordination. The Theology of Ordination Sub-Committee (TOSC) invested an amount of money and effort into the study of just one issue unprecedented in Adventist history.

As the TOSC process has been described to me, there was a two ton elephant that wondered around the room, receiving only slight attention. That elephant was culture. When the elephant was acknowledged at all, it was through such comments as, "Well, they just think that way because of their culture!" By implication, some participants were shaped by their cultures and others were not.

Consider some differing cultural perspectives that potentially influence the view of women in ministry. Some cultural traditions are very concerned with ritual purity and impurity. Ritually impure people must be excluded from regular community life and especially from religious rituals because their presence would make rituals non-efficacious.

Female menstruation is sometimes seen as causing ritual impurity. I do not know the full extent of this perspective but believe it exists on several continents, including Europe, Africa, and the Americas. Within the last month I was told by a seminary student wife from Latin America that when she was growing up her pastor-father always asked whether she was in her monthly cycle on the Sabbaths when she was to serve on the platform.

In many Adventist churches there is an upper and lower platform. Only men are allowed on the upper platform, though women can sweep it during the week. Some churches may have two platforms for concerns about ritual impurity, others may be practicing gender hierarchy, others may be following tradition, and maybe all of the above applies in some

churches.

Some who have concerns about ritual impurity come from societies with animistic traditions. Religious practitioners must follow precise formulas and protocols for rituals, blessings, or curses to work. In this view, the worship service, communion, or baptism would potentially lose their efficacy if conducted by women who are always subject to their cycles.

One very significant cultural perspective is that gender roles must never be exchanged. Many societies assign the role of cooking to women and car repair to men and insist that men must never cook and women must never repair cars. The tasks themselves are not the issue. The issue is the separation of gender roles.

I represent a different cultural perspective on all of these illustrations. The female cycles are matters of physiology that have nothing to do with the role of women in the church. Ritual purity was part of the Mosaic laws but not part of Christian worship and piety. The efficacy of services of the church, public prayers, and private prayers depend on the will of God and the faith of his followers—not on exact formulas and protocols. Gender roles can be freely exchanged in society, marriage, and the church with appropriate communication and mutual agreement. Finally, there is no hierarchy in the Trinity between humans or between genders in my reading of the Bible.

The differing cultural perspectives described above have one thing in common—they are very deep. In fact, they probe our deepest assumptions about humanity and religiosity. What is a woman, what is a man, how shall they relate to each other, how do humans relate properly to God, how do humans relate to each other as they seek God?

Case Study 2

In the second case study a missionary couple from Brazil serves in Cairo, Egypt with the task of establishing a center of influence. Egypt has about 85 million people, of whom about 90% are Muslim and 9% Coptic Christian. The SDA Egypt-Sudan Field has about 900 members.

Good missiology rules out merely trying to import a Brazilian or any other cultural form of Adventism. Good missionaries will work to bring people to Christ who will continue to live as cultural Egyptians. Their task is to lead the local body of believers to decide which cultural elements are biblically good or neutral, which need modification, and which are to be abandoned.

Included among the issues missionaries contend with are assumptions and behaviors related to gender roles. Men are assumed to be right and women wrong when conflicts arise. At the extreme, fathers and sons

commit "honor" killings of daughters and sisters. Another issue to be dealt with is an abrasive style of conflict management. Minor differences ignite explosive confrontations.

Both case studies address the same basic issue—the relationship of human culture and the Bible. The missionaries in Egypt are engaged in a multilogue that requires them to understand the cultures of the Bible, their own culture, and Egyptian culture. If successful, they will use their own cultural form of Christianity only as a bridge to connect Egyptian converts directly with the Bible. Then the Egyptians will ask critical questions about their own culture and probe the Bible's cultural forms to perceive its universal truth.

TOSC was an opportunity to have a multilogue where the SDA global hermeneutical community gathered around a single issue. For most of our history the North American cultural perspective of the church and theology has predominated. That dominance continues in academic and published theological work but the balance is shifting toward the rest of the world that has 93% of Adventist members. The members of TOSC were reasonably representative of the 93%. What was missing was a forthright discussion of the many cultural perspectives of the group.

Worldview and Culture

The case studies above involve worldview, which is our deepest assumptions about what is really real. Worldview has three main intertwining dimensions: Theological, philosophical, and cultural. Unfortunately, the cultural dimension is frequently omitted from discussions of worldview. Some seem to think that a biblically-shaped worldview excludes culture. In reality there is no non-cultural Christian worldview because there are no non-cultural Christians. There are only American-Christian, or Indian-Christian, or Korean-Christian, etc., worldviews. Christianity always wears individual and cultural "clothing."

The culture concept gives access to a dimension of humanity that has to be part of theological reflection. Cultural particularities serve as keys to open the door to the deep assumptions of worldview because they are not easy to discern. For example, some cultures favor event time and others linear time. Event time folk do not care how long a sermon goes, so long as it is good, but linear time folk want it to stop on time. The time concept at this level is simply a matter of cultural preference. However, there are views of time that impinge on a biblically normed worldview. Cyclical time, with multiple reincarnations, contradicts the Bible's linear time and the great controversy metanarrative. By introducing the cultural concept of time, the door is opened to probe deeply in search of biblical worldview

assumptions about time. Then the distinction can be made between mere cultural preference and deep biblical assumptions.

Reasons for Excluding Culture from Biblical Interpretation

In my observation, the cultures of the Bible authors and their recipients are receiving increased recognition in academic biblical studies. However, my sense is that the cultures of those who read and interpret the Word receive less attention. There may be many reasons why contemporary cultural perspectives are not routinely laid before the hermeneutical community.

1. *Not Understanding the Bible as a Cultural Document*. The Bible is assuredly much more than a cultural document but also not less. Just as Jesus was incarnated into the Jewish culture of Nazareth, so his Word was incarnated into the languages, logic systems, and historical settings of the ancient cultures of inspired writers over about 1500 years.

2. *Having an Unarticulated or Erroneous Theology of Culture*. God created humans as individuals with a culture-producing mandate. Both the individual and corporate natures of humanity were damaged by sin. The religion of Jesus is embedded within individuals who remain creatures of culture. Trying to be a non-cultural Christian is like trying to be a non-individual Christian.

3. *Wanting to Be "Objective," Culturally Neutral, or Non-cultural in Bible Study*. Following the playbook of modernity (which is, itself, a culture) and the scientific method seems like a way to side-step the complications of engaging ancient and contemporary cultures in the interpretation process. In so doing we exempt ourselves from cultural bias, which is a fiction.

4. *Wanting to Avoid Postmodern Pluralism*. On the opposite side of the spectrum from modernity, postmodernity makes everything a matter of subjective cultural perspective. People fear losing the eternal, universal Word if any cultural perspective is introduced.

5. *Wanting to Avoid Giving Insult*. Ethnocentrism and racism are a constant danger. In the work of interpreting the Bible, of all places, one does not want to give offense to those of other cultures by being or appearing to be ethnocentric.

6. *Being Afraid of Receiving Insult*. Certain grooves of cultural sensitivity are well worn over centuries of painful history. Theologians are capable of skewering each other in very sanctimonious ways. No one wants to take an ethnocentric hit by sharing a cultural perspective.

7. *Wanting to Use Culture in Defense Mode*. Withholding one's cultural perspective can be a kind theological self-defense. A member of TOSC who opposed female ordination might have withheld the matter of ritual

impurity because they anticipated a derisive response that would undercut their position.

8. *Wanting to Use Culture in Offense Mode*. Refusing to engage cultural perspectives can be a way to win the argument. A member of TOSC who supported female ordination might have introduced ritual impurity of another culture to win his argument.

9. *Having a Lack of Experience*. Almost everyone has experience with the shallow levels of culture at food fairs or on short mission trips. Globalization gives a false sense of cross-cultural understanding as people travel and have routine interactions with other cultures. What many people lack is experience dealing with the deeper levels of inter-cultural exchange. Imagine talking about "honor killings" in Egypt.

10. *Fear of Making Theological Conflict Even Worse*. The sharper the conflict, the greater the resistance to adding anything that would make it even messier. Talking about cultural issues at TOSC would have added complexity.

11. *Lacking Mutual Permission and Conceptual Tools*. Charles Wittschiebe was beloved in his day for giving Adventist pastors permission to talk about sex in honorable ways. Those who attend the Institute of World Mission report a new sense of freedom as they are given the permission, the conceptual tools, and a neutral-voice vocabulary to engage in inter-cultural dialogue. If women's ordination is discussed around their tables, they report a sense of freedom, even if they do not agree. There are positive reports from multi-cultural congregations whose church board meetings become much more congenial when they learn to share their cultural perspectives freely.

Definitions of Culture

Paul Hiebert defines culture as "the more or less integrated systems of ideas, feelings, and values and their associated patterns of behavior and products shared by a group of people who organize and regulate what they think, feel, and do" (1985:30).

Charles Kraft says that culture consists of

> all the things that we learn after we are born into the world that enable us to function effectively as biological beings in the environment. We are each carefully indoctrinated from before birth in the patterns of behavior that adults around us feel to be appropriate. By the time we become aware of what's going on, we have already been pressed into the cultural mold. (1996:6)

Brian Howell and Jenell Paris define culture as "the total way of life

134

of a group of people that is learned, adaptive, shared, and integrated" (2011:36).

Craig Bartholomew says that "A culture is a community whose praxis and life are shaped by a controlling story" (Bartholomew 2015:78).

Metaphors for Culture

Howell and Paris discuss several metaphors that help to understand culture (2011:38-42), and these in turn help to understand culture's impact on how a person reads and interprets the Bible.

1. *Culture as water or a river*: The water metaphor implies that, like a fish, everyone lives in culture, cannot live without culture, but may be unaware of being a creature of culture. After all, the fish does not know it lives in water. Unless people's perspective is broadened, they think their way of life is the normal, natural, proper way to live. The river metaphor implies that everyone is moving with the cultural current, some drifting along near the center and others near the edges, and still others swimming against the current. The metaphors do not fit culture completely because fish cannot change the water but people can and do change their culture as they interact with it.

2. *Culture as a lens*: The lens or spectacles metaphor makes it clear that everyone has a particular view of reality that is shaped by their culture. The world looks strange when viewed through other people's spectacles. The metaphor suggests the need for one to consider and value how others perceive reality and not to think that one's own view is necessarily the best. The metaphor is inaccurate in the sense it implies that cultural filters are fixed and unchanging, like spectacle lenses.

3. *Culture as the rules of a game or as a map*: The rules and map metaphors show that culture provides directions and guidelines. These metaphors are helpful but also weak because they suggest that culture is fixed and unchanging.

4. *Culture as an onion*: The onion metaphor illustrates that culture has many levels, from the shallow to the deep. The shallow levels include behaviors and material products. Going deeper there are values and beliefs. At the center is worldview, the deepest assumptions about what is really real and how life works.

5. *Culture as a conversation*: Howell and Paris prefer the conversation metaphor. "Understood in this way, culture is not so much a *thing* that people *have* as it is an *activity* they *do*. Culture is a practice" (2011:41). Like a conversation, culture is practiced dynamically by individuals interacting with others, agreeing, disagreeing, and negotiating. Individuals shape conversations and outcomes. Just as a conversation is never repeated in exactly the same way, even with one's spouse, so individuals do not live

within their societies in exactly the same way, all the time.

Biblical Scholarship and Culture

This brief discussion of culture should remind us that biblical scholars are all creatures of culture. Furthermore, our thought processes, study methods, and conclusions are all part of specific cultural matrices. The move to exempt oneself and one's theological work from culture is a naïve and possibly ethnocentric move that severely limits theological dialogue. "Like it or not, our view of the world and our understanding of reason, religion, language, and so forth will shape the way we work with the Bible" (Bartholomew 2015:216).

Craig Bartholomew gives an insight I will treasure. During the twentieth-century both liberal and conservative theologians worked from the same epistemological starting point of modernity—positivism. They posited a one-to-one equivalence between the mind of God and their own theological work. They both wanted to be "scientific, objective, and neutral" in a reason-based study of the text (2015:223). The difference between liberal and conservative scholars was in their conclusions. They did not realize or acknowledge that the questions they asked arose from the shared cultural assumptions of their positivist epistemology. They imagined that ten equally well trained biblical scholars from ten different cultures could remain culturally neutral and reach the same conclusions. However, "reason is inseparable from language, and like language, it is not universal but relevant to a particular culture" (295).

"The Enlightenment manifests prejudice against prejudice," (310) as if anyone can be prejudice-free. Everyone brings cultural prejudice or baggage to the table of interpretation. Some baggage is a hindrance but other baggage—like faith, commitment, experience, and previous study—is a great asset. There is hidden baggage that unknowingly influences "interpretations within one community [and] ought to be in dialogue with interpretations of the same text within other communities" (421).

Interpreters "never read and interpret Scripture with a tabula rasa. . . . We the readers are as embedded in a history as is the text. We bring our own *prejudices*—prejudgments—to the text, and we are heirs to a variety of traditions of biblical interpretation" (114; 284).

Contemporary Western interpreters must confront two contrasting cultural "prejudgments." One prejudgment is "historical objectivism" that overempowers the text by seeing it as a cold, lifeless, historical artifact to be either woodenly guarded by conservatives or sliced and diced by liberals in search of its original form and meaning. The second prejudgment, coming from postmodernity, has "a tendency to disempower the text and

overempower the reader" (118), allowing the text to mean whatever the reader wishes.

A better approach is to empower the Spirit-inspired text, the Spirit-guided reader, and the Spirit-guided hermeneutical community who share their individual and cultural perspectives without fear. This approache replaces wooden conservatism, slice-and-dice liberalism, and loosey-goosey perspectives with the authentic and creative tension of living by the Word within culture.

To illustrate, the Brazilian missionary in Cairo lives in a creative tension that is unavoidable. Comparing his own culture with the Bible he sees imperfection. Looking at Egyptian believers he sees another set of imperfection. Looking at the Bible he prays for wisdom to be more faithful to God and to lead people of a different culture to live faithfully. His constant walk is in between multiple cultures and the Word.

The two case studies really describe the same process of walking between the Word and multiple cultures. That is why "the insights of missiology are . . . particularly relevant to renewing biblical interpretation" (83). The word that missiology uses for walking between culture and the Bible is contextualization.

The Critical Contextualization Model

Contextualization is a well-discussed topic in missiological circles. The latest major contribution is by Scott Moreau, *Contextualization in World Missions: Mapping and Assessing Evangelical Models* (2012). Other authorities include Charles Kraft (1996; 2005) and Paul Hiebert (1985; 1994; 2008; 2009).

Hiebert's use of the term "critical contextualization" sometimes raises concerns among biblical scholars. As Bartholomew notes concerning the historical-critical method of biblical interpretation, "*Critical* signifies the subjection of the biblical tradition to examination on the basis of the modern worldview. . . . *Historical* indicates that it is particularly the Enlightenment historical method that is applied to the Bible by the historical-critical method …" (Bartholomew 2015:208). When Hiebert uses the term "critical contextualization" (1985:186) he does not imply acceptance of the modern historical-critical method as his theological assumptions demonstrate (1985:191-192). Hiebert refers to a thoughtful, selective, intentional, analytical contextualization of the Bible to a particular culture. The goal is that the eternal, universal gospel would be faithfully expressed in a particular cultural style. The term "faithful contextualization" may be preferable.

Faithful contextualization usually has a Christian-to-non-Christian focus, as it does in the second case study about Egypt. In that setting, the

contextualization model seeks to lead Egyptian Muslims or Coptic Christians to become Adventists who continue life as cultural Egyptians.

The faithful contextualization model can also be applied to internal Christian discussions as we seek to incorporate culture into the hermeneutical process. In the TOSC case study the goal would be to discuss cultural perspectives that shape the role of women in different societies, apply biblical principles to those perspectives, and make a response.

Wrong Approach: Uncritical Rejection

One option for the Brazilian couple in Cairo when they observe elements of the culture that are against biblical principles is to adopt the *tabula rasa* (blank slate) approach. Instead of struggling with the local culture they could try to take a short cut by replacing it with their own Brazilian "Christian culture."

In the setting of biblical interpretation this approach either excludes culture as a valid part of the process or rejects particular cultural perspectives uncritically, without due consideration. The unwise interpreter would summarily reject opinions that differ from his own, believing that his reading of the Bible was unshaped by his own culture.

Cultures, as "integrated systems of ideas, feelings, and values" (Hiebert 1985:30), include the "prejudices" and "prejudgments" that cannot be ignored. In reality, a *tabula rasa* is a fiction, both in missions and in biblical interpretation, because culture always remains a two ton elephant in the room. The most dedicated *tabula rasa* advocate never succeeds at his task. Egyptians remain culturally Egyptian and participants in theological discussion retain the cultural perspectives that shape their theology, even if they never acknowledge them.

Wrong Approach: Uncritical Acceptance

In the cross-cultural mission setting, uncritical acceptance embraces everything because it is cultural. In biblical interpretation, every variation is accepted in a misguided "I'm-OK, You're-OK" move. Uncritical acceptance is a fiction, like uncritical rejection, because even the most determined pluralist will not accept everything.

The Critical Contextualization Process

The critical contextualization process assumes that every aspect of Egyptian Muslim cultural life must be included in a comprehensive approach for a convert to become an authentic Christian who remaining

culturally Egyptian. The same applies to groups of Christians in theological dialogue. Every cultural element that substantively impinges upon a particular issue needs to be addressed. Hiebert outlines three steps in the process (1994:88-90).

Step 1: Exegesis of the Culture. "The first step . . . is to study the local culture phenomenologically" (88). This means gathering and analyzing cultural data uncritically. Certain practices may be clearly unbiblical but the missionary does not try to change them at this stage. The process starts with a discussion group in which participants share their cultural perspectives in an atmosphere of mutual trust and fellowship. Participants forthrightly acknowledge the weaknesses of their own cultures and affirm the strengths of other cultures. The goal is to come to a deep, comprehensive understanding of all cultural phenomena related to the issue being discussed.

In Egypt the issue might be the combative relational style that church members continue to use. At TOSC the cultural perspective of ritual impurity would be shared, along with others.

Step 2: Exegesis of Scripture. Bible passages relevant for a particular cultural phenomenon receive thoughtful, prayerful study by the body of believers. In Egypt the texts to be studied might include the Acts 15 account of conflict management. At TOSC passages to be exegeted could include Leviticus 15 and those involving the ceremonial law.

Step 3: Critical Response. When culture and Scripture have been exegeted, a critical response and application is made by the community of believers. In a setting like Egypt, the local community would be fully engaged because they understand the cultural issues best and must live with the outcomes of the process. Three responses are available: biblically innocent aspects can be retained, forbidden aspects of the cultural element are rejected, and acceptable aspects of the item being studies should be invested with new Christian meanings. An example of the last option is the use of secular tunes for Christian hymns. "The missionary may not always agree with the choices the people make, but it is important, as far as conscience allows, to accept the decisions of the local Christians, and to recognize that they, too, are led by the Spirit" (Hiebert 1985:190).

In Egypt the body of believers would need to reflect on their cultural style of conflict and identify modifications they would like to make based on biblical conflict narratives like Abram and Lot (Gen 13) and the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15). At TOSC the group would decide how Lev 15:19 and other texts related to ritual impurity apply to the role of women in the church and whether the global church had the freedom to apply the texts in different ways.

Avoiding Syncretism

"The Bible is not infinitely pliable" (Bartholomew 2015:199) allowing it to suit every cultural preference. Since Christians live in the creative tension that necessarily exists between culture and the Bible, syncretism is a constant danger. In fact, Christianity in every culture, whether long established or newly arrived, experiences syncretism in different ways. The Western culture of modernity has produced syncretism, as has post-modernity. There is no "model Christian culture" because every cultures fails and succeeds in applying biblical principles in different ways. Where one is strong, another is weak. The best strategy for individual cultures to avoid syncretism is the continual process of critical contextualization that places emerging cultural trends under the constant scrutiny of Scripture. The best strategy for the world church is to encourage interaction in the global hermeneutical community where cultural perspectives are shared without being defensive and responses are given without being judgmental. The Word, the Spirit, and the collegial body of Christ work together.

Conclusion

Hermeneutics is not merely an esoteric exercise performed in ivory towers. Real life issues are involved and God's mission to lost humanity is involved when Christians interpret the Bible. When a person studies the Bible individually every component of one's being is engaged. When Christians discuss the Bible collectively they need to place themselves in submission before the group by sharing the factors that contribute to their conclusions. In the process every person reaches a deeper level of understanding.

Works Cited

Bartholomew, Craig G. 2015. *Introducing Biblical Hermeneutics: a Comprehensive Framework for Hearing God in Scripture*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic.

Hiebert, Paul G. 2009. *The Gospel in Human Contexts*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic.

_____. 2008. *Transforming Worldviews*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic.

_____. 1994. *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.

_____. 1985. *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House.

Howell, Brian M., and Jenell Williams Paris. 2011. *Introducing Cultural Anthropology: A Christian Perspective*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic.

Kraft, Charles H. 2005. *Appropriate Christianity*. Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library.

_____. 1996. *Anthropology for Christian Witness*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.

Moreau, Scott A. 2012. *Contextualization in World Missions: Mapping and Assessing Evangelical Models*. Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel.

Gorden Doss was born in the USA and grew up in Malawi. His adult service has been divided between Malawi and USA. Since 1998 he has taught world mission at Andrews University. He earned a PhD from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. His wife, Cheryl (Brown), is director of the Institute of World Mission at the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists. They have two married children and four grandchildren who serve in Egypt and Canada.