

Bible Study and Culture

The cultural setting of a passage of Scripture has the potential to both expand and limit how that passage affects our lives. Understanding the unfamiliar background can be a great help in expanding and enriching our knowledge and application of Biblical truth. Recognizing practices that were a part of a particular cultural setting can prevent us from legalistic applications today. The key is distinguishing between timeless, absolute principles and cultural practices.

When we go to the Scriptures, it is as if we are entering a foreign land. Just as we may be puzzled by the way people do things in other countries, so we may be puzzled by what we read in the Bible. Therefore it is important to know what the people in the Bible thought, believed, said, did, and made. To the extent we do this we are then able to comprehend it better and communicate it more accurately. If we fail to give attention to these matters of culture, then we may be guilty of eisegesis, reading into the Bible our Western 20th-century ideas. (Zuck, p. 79)

The historic and traditional view is that the revelation of God comes in and through a cultural form, because any revelation from God must come to man in his concrete, cultural setting and speak to him in terms of his specific culture. Otherwise the revelation would be meaningless. ... When our Lord and his apostles gave exhortations and teachings they spoke in terms of the prevailing culture. Otherwise, they could not have communicated effectively with their audience. (Ramm, p.160, p. 189)

Examples of Cultural Impact on Understanding

- Understanding the idea of a bondservant (*doulos*) helps us understand Paul's view of his ministry.
- Understanding the practice of crucifixion helps us understand Christ's sacrifice for us.
- Understanding the social standing of Samaritans helps us understand Jesus' conversation with the woman at the well, and the parable of the Good Samaritan.
- Understanding Roman armor helps us understand the "armor of God" in Ephesians 6.

Observation, Interpretation, Application: Then and Now

Even in a passage that seems to have lots of culture-specific factors, we still start with the basic inductive method. The cultural aspects of the passage will usually affect the questions we ask, trying to bridge across several thousand years and several thousand miles of differences.

Because the books of the Bible were written in a specific historical setting, and because they were addressed to those who lived in a concrete historical situation, it is imperative that one utilize their historical background if one is to recreate the message of their authors. ... One ought to do one's utmost to discover the historical setting of each Biblical book, and ... use what is found in its interpretation. *It is the recognition and utilization of the historical principle rather than ... exhaustive and certain knowledge of all the historical data which is of prime importance.* (Traina, p. 152-153, emphasis added)

In other words, we don't need to know every detail of the cultural, historical, social, economic, political, and religious environment. But being aware of the impact they might have, and learning what we can from a Bible Dictionary or Bible Encyclopedia, or commentary will be very helpful.

As usual, the dictionaries and encyclopedias and commentaries are resources for after you have used the inductive method to get as much as you can from the passage. Good observation and interpretation questions will include questions about the cultural impact on the passage. Questions should ask what the original meaning and importance was to the original audience, and how that transfers into our time and culture.

	Then	Now
Observation: What does it say?	Word meanings Geography Social/economic circumstances <i>For example, living in a pagan culture, surrounded by idol worship</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The same today? • Similar today? • Completely different today?
Interpretation: What does it mean?	Specific situations Immediate problems <i>For example, most meat had been offered to idols</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the principle behind the circumstances? • Is there a principle that is independent of culture and the particular situation? • What are parallels or analogies in today's culture? • What are clear differences in today's culture?
Application: What does it mean to me?	Practical decisions <i>For example, How will I respond the next time I am offered meat?</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do I translate the culture-independent principle(s) to my current situation? • Is there a "cultural equivalent"?

Practices and principles

What is the principle behind the practice?

What practice is the application for the principle?

How do we distinguish cultural practices from universal principles?

How much is culture, and how much is permanent?

- Attributing too much to culture takes away from the principle and can lead to ignoring application and missing God's truth.
- Attributing too little to culture imposes additional restrictions to the principle and can lead to legalism or even cults.

Absolute Theological Truths, General Practical Principles, Specific Cultural Practices

- Look for absolute, unchanging theological truths about God's character, man's nature, relationships between God and man, and between humans, the nature of sin, moral principles, etc.
- How are these absolutes translated into principles of behavior or attitudes that are directly tied to the theological absolutes?
- What are the specific cultural practices that prompted the teaching in the passage?

Sometimes the sequence is reversed. It may be easier to see the specific cultural practice that the Biblical author was addressing. In that case, what general principle is behind the exhortations about the practice? Is the principle explicit in the passage, or do we have to (carefully) infer it from other passages in Scripture?