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SLAVES, WOMEN & HOMOSEXUALS

Exploring the Hermeneutics
of Cultural Analysis

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Introduction

WELCOME TO THE WORLD OF APPLICATION

I welcome my reader to the fascinating world of applying Scripture. Here we encounter the complexities and challenges of moving from words on a page to actually living out the text within our lives. Our mandate is to figure out which statements from the Bible in their “on the page” wording you and I should continue to follow in our contemporary setting. In order to do this we must determine whether we should apply a particular biblical statement in the exact form articulated on the page or whether we should apply only some expression of its underlying principle(s). In this respect, the objective of this book is not to uncover the meaning of the words of the text in their dictionary sense. Commentaries spend much of their time doing this. Rather, our task is one of applying the ancient text in our modern context. So, assuming that a plausible or reasonable understanding of the text’s original meaning can be attained, we will put our efforts into grappling with its application.

A quick and fun exercise will immediately engage you in the process of applying Scripture. For each of the biblical commands or statements below I ask my reader to answer one question: *Which of these instructions from Scripture are still in force for us today exactly as they are articulated “on the page”?* If you think an instruction is still in force for us *completely* as stated, please place a check mark (✓) before those words. If you think an instruction is still in force only *in part* or *in a modified fashion* through its underlying principle, kindly place an x mark (X) in the blank. Have fun. Consider your answer to be a preliminary guess, not something set in stone. Simply go with your best hunch.

- ___ “God . . . said to them [Adam and Eve], ‘Be fruitful and increase in number’” (Gen 1:28).
- ___ “Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength” (Deut 6:5).
- ___ “When you have finished setting aside a tenth of all your produce . . . you shall give it to the Levite, the alien, the fatherless and the widow” (Deut 26:12).
- ___ “Greet one another with a holy kiss” (1 Cor 16:20).
- ___ “Women should remain silent in the churches” (1 Cor 14:34).
- ___ “Stop drinking only water, and use a little wine because of your stomach and your frequent illnesses” (1 Tim 5:23).
- ___ “Set apart for the LORD . . . every firstborn male of your herds and flocks” (Deut 15:19).
- ___ “If a man happens to meet a virgin who is not pledged to be married and rapes her and they are discovered, he shall pay the girl’s father fifty shekels of silver. He must marry the girl, for he has violated her. He can never divorce her as long as he lives” (Deut 22:28-29).
- ___ “Do not approach a woman to have sexual relations during the uncleanness of her monthly period” (Lev 18:19).
- ___ “Do not lie with a man as one lies with a woman” (Lev 18:22).
- ___ “Do not have sexual relations with an animal and defile yourself with it” (Lev 18:23).
- ___ “Go and make disciples of all nations” (Mt 28:19).
- ___ “Devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture” (1 Tim 4:13).
- ___ “Do not wear clothing woven of two kinds of material” (Lev 19:19).
- ___ “Be all the more eager to make your calling and election sure” (2 Pet 1:10).
- ___ “Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made man” (Gen 9:6).
- ___ “Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s feet” (Jn 13:14).
- ___ “Do not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans. Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel” (Mt 10:5-6).
- ___ “Heal the sick, raise the dead, . . . drive out demons” (Mt 10:8).
- ___ “Sell your possessions and give to the poor” (Lk 12:33).
- ___ “Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work” (Ex 20:9-10).
- ___ “A woman . . . should cover her head. A man ought not to cover his

- head” (1 Cor 11:6-7).
- _____ “If a man has long hair, it is a disgrace to him” (1 Cor 11:14).
- _____ “Are you unmarried? Do not look for a wife” (1 Cor 7:27).
- _____ “Every male among you shall be circumcised” (Gen 17:10).
- _____ “Punish him [your child] with the rod and save his soul from death” (Prov 23:14).
- _____ “Do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you” (Mt 5:42).
- _____ “Bless those who persecute you. . . . If your enemy is hungry, feed him” (Rom 12:14, 20).
- _____ “Give beer to those who are perishing, wine to those who are in anguish; let them drink and forget their poverty and remember their misery no more” (Prov 31:6-7).
- _____ “Do not . . . put tattoo marks on yourselves” (Lev 19:28).
- _____ “Praise God with tambourine and dancing . . . praise him with the clash of cymbals” (Ps 150:4-5).
- _____ “Rise in the presence of the aged, show respect for the elderly” (Lev 19:32).
- _____ “You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality” (Acts 15:29).
- _____ “Slaves, submit yourselves to your masters with all respect, not only to those who are good and considerate, but also to those who are harsh” (1 Pet 2:18).
- _____ “A woman must not wear men’s clothing, nor a man wear women’s clothing” (Deut 22:5).
- _____ “If a man’s wife goes astray and is unfaithful to him . . . the priest shall take some holy water in a clay jar and put some dust from the tabernacle floor into the water. . . . He is to have the woman drink the water” (Num 5:12, 17, 26).
- _____ “I want men everywhere to lift up holy hands in prayer. . . . I also want women to dress modestly . . . not with braided hair or gold or pearls or expensive clothes” (1 Tim 2:8-9).
- _____ “Do not take interest of any kind from your countryman” (Lev 25:36).
- _____ “Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord” (Jas 5:14).

This exercise should convince almost every modern Christian about the complexity of applying the biblical text. Moving from the ancient text into our modern world is not a simple matter. If you score the above list with a friend or a group, it may be interesting to poll the results from a select number of these ex-

amples and to begin talking about the question, *Why?*

Each of us must ask the probing question, *Why?* Why do some biblical instructions have ongoing significance and force in their entirety, while the continued application of others is limited in some manner? How do I determine which components of the biblical text should apply today and which should not? To cite an old rabbinical response, “That would be like trying to explain the entire Torah while standing on one foot!” The journey is not an easy one. Neither is it a short one. There are many twists and turns along the way, and one will have to encounter portions of Scripture that are not entirely pleasant to gaze upon. But the journey is worth it. Those who take that journey will often come to grips with a wondrous and resilient dimension of Scripture of which they had been completely unaware.

So permit me to give a brief overview of the journey. You will find that the book is laid out in three parts. As I outline these major parts below, I will also introduce the individual chapters within each part.

Part I: Toward a Hermeneutic of Cultural Analysis

In part one, I lay out a proper framework for asking the question, *Why?* Why do we continue to apply certain biblical texts in their entirety but not others? Or, why do we apply some things from some texts and not all things? The first chapter, “The Christian & Culture,” discusses the role that culture plays in coming to grips with that all-important question. Culture and the phenomenon of “cultural relativity”¹ contribute in a significant way to shaping what it is that we continue to apply in any given text. This first chapter will also orient the reader to the three major case studies in this book: slaves, women and homosexuals. The second chapter, “A Redemptive-Movement Hermeneutic,” investigates the big picture or meta-framework through which we look at Scripture. In this chapter I argue that a redemptive-movement framework is much better than a static one, if we are going to develop a credible and enduring answer to our question about contemporary application. Before moving into the details of cultural assessment, the third chapter, “Cultural/Transcultural Analysis: A Road Map,” provides a brief overview of where we are headed. To make the process a little easier and to keep from getting lost among the trees, I provide a few instructions and some navigational tools. With these tools in hand, you can read the next two parts with greater understanding and with the potential of tailoring your reading to meet your individual goals.

Part II: Intrascriptural Criteria

Having laid the foundation within the first part, we now focus directly and in-

¹For definitions of *culturally relative* and *transcultural* see chapter one.

tently upon our question of applying Scripture. At this point, we set out to do some serious work on cultural assessment. Chapters four through seven (this includes the first chapter of part three) contain eighteen criteria for helping us determine what components within the biblical text have ongoing applicational significance and what components are limited in their application to the original audience only. The first sixteen of the eighteen criteria are grouped together under this part's heading, "Intrascriptural Criteria." For the most part, these criteria rely upon elements within Scripture itself for assessing what is cultural and what is transcultural within the text. The titles of the chapters—"Persuasive Criteria" (chapter four), "Moderately Persuasive Criteria" (chapter five) and "Inconclusive Criteria" (chapter six)—should rightly yield the impression that the criteria are moving from a grouping of extremely strong ones, to moderately strong ones, to weak ones. This organizational placement of each criterion relates to argument outcomes alone, not to the credibility of the criterion itself. In other words, the criteria are laid out according to the how much they contribute to my final conclusions, and in particular, the conclusions on the women's issue. I will leave further introductory details to chapter three, which immediately precedes the criteria material. For now, however, one might note that these intrascriptural criteria at times fall into clusters. For example, criteria 1, 2 and 3 (Preliminary Movement, Seed Ideas and Breakouts) are closely related to each other on the matter of assessing redemptive movement. In a similar manner, criteria 6, 7 and 8 (Basis in Original Creation, Section 1, Basis in Original Creation, Section 2, and Basis in New Creation) form a related cluster around the biblical theme of creation.

Part III: Extrascriptural Criteria

The third part of the book, "Extrascriptural Criteria," contains the last two criteria: criterion 17 (Pragmatic Basis Between Two Cultures) and criterion 18 (Scientific and Social-Scientific Evidence). These two criteria are similar to the preceding sixteen criteria inasmuch as they assist the Christian community in sorting out which components of the text are cultural and which are transcultural. For the most part, however, their basis of assessment is derived from data beyond Scripture instead of material that is directly found within the biblical text. While I grant a certain measure of methodological deference to the first group of criteria over this latter group, the criteria within part three are no less weighty. They rely upon input from truth as it can be determined from God's general revelation. We need to discover truth in his Word and in his created world. Within this latter part, then, the strength of the last two criteria appropriately merits the classification of "Persuasive Criteria." They contribute significantly to the ultimate conclusions of this book.

Chapter eight, “What If I Am Wrong?” is a curious chapter indeed. Such a chapter is an anomaly within egalitarian and patriarchal publications alike. Here I pause and do some reflective pondering about the degree of certainty in my findings. I ask myself, “What would I do if I were wrong at my point of least strength (greatest weakness)?” In a rather vulnerable move I tip my hand concerning the weakest link in my argument, namely, my assessment of 1 Timothy 2:13. After that, I talk about what I would do if I were to change my mind and accept a completely transcultural understanding of this verse. A number of considerations would, nevertheless, still lead me to apply the Timothy text today in quite a different way than would most patriarchal proponents. Based on these reflective musings, I close the chapter by unveiling what I consider to be two redemptive-movement models, “complementary egalitarianism” and “ultra-soft patriarchy.”

The “Conclusion” naturally draws together all of the contributing tributaries within the book into one final, summary articulation. Here is where the journey ends. But, in some respects, it should serve as only a beginning! The redemptive-movement hermeneutic and the cultural/transcultural criteria developed within this work are general enough to be applied to many other crucial questions of application far beyond the three subject areas that I focus upon. Though this book is hardly perfect in form or substance, I hope that it will provide a catalyst and pliable model for future opportunities in which you explore the fascinating world of applying Scripture.