

CHAPTER 4

The Epistles: The Hermeneutical Questions

We come now to what we referred to previously as hermeneutical questions. What do these texts mean to *us*? This is the crux of everything, and compared with this task, exegesis is relatively easy. At least in exegesis, even if there are disagreements at particular points, most people agree as to the parameters of meaning; there are limitations of possibilities set by the historical and literary contexts. Paul, for example, cannot have meant something that he and his readers had never heard of. His meaning at least has to have been a first-century possibility.

However, no such consensus of parameters seems to exist for hermeneutics (learning to hear the meaning in the contexts of our own day). *All* people “do” hermeneutics, even if they know nothing about exegesis and don’t have a clue as to the meaning of these two words! It is no wonder that there are so many differences among Christians; what might be a cause for wonder is that there are not far more differences than actually exist. The reason for this is that there is, in fact, a common

ground of hermeneutics among us, even if we have not always spelled it out.

What we want to do in this chapter is first of all to delineate the common hermeneutics of most believers, show its strengths and weaknesses, and then offer and discuss guidelines for several areas where this common hermeneutics seems inadequate.

The big issue among Christians committed to Scripture as God's word has to do with the problems of cultural relativity — what is cultural and therefore belongs to the first century alone and what transcends culture and is thus a word for all seasons. This problem will therefore receive a considerable amount of attention.

OUR COMMON HERMENEUTICS

Even if you are among those who have asked, “Herman who?” when confronted with the word “hermeneutics,” you are in fact involved in hermeneutics all the time. What is it that all of us do as we read an epistle? Very simply, we bring our own form of common sense to the text and apply what we can to our own situation. What does not seem to apply is simply left in the first century.

None of us, for example, has ever felt called by the Holy Spirit to take a pilgrimage to Troas in order to carry Paul's cloak from Carpus's house to his Roman prison (2 Tim 4:13), even though the passage is clearly a command to do that. Yet from

that same letter most Christians believe that God tells us in times of stress that we are to “join . . . in suffering, like a good soldier of Christ Jesus” (2:3), another word to Timothy that does seem applicable to ourselves. None of us would ever think to question what has been done with either of these passages — although many of us may have moments of struggle in graciously obeying the latter.

Let it be emphasized here that most of the matters in the Epistles fit nicely into this commonsense hermeneutics. For most texts it is not a matter of whether one *should* or not; it is more a matter of “to stir you up by way of reminder” (2 Pet 1:13 NASB).

Our problems — and differences — are generated by those moments that lie somewhere in between these two, where some of us think we should obey exactly what is stated and others of us are not so sure. Our hermeneutical difficulties here are several, but they are all related to one issue — a general lack of consistency. This is the great flaw in our common hermeneutics. Without necessarily intending to, we bring our theological heritage, our church traditions, our cultural norms, or our existential concerns to the Epistles as we read them. And this results in all kinds of selectivity or “getting around” certain passages.

It is interesting to note, for example, that almost everyone in American evangelicalism or fundamentalism would agree with our common stance on two passages in 2 Timothy (2:3 and 4:13). However, the cultural milieu of most of the same Christians causes them to argue against obedience to an earlier passage in 1 Timothy: “Stop drinking only water, and use a little wine because of your stomach and your frequent illnesses” (5:23). That had only to do with Timothy, not with us,

we are told, because water was unsafe to drink back then. Or else, it is even argued that “wine” really meant “grape juice” — although one wonders how that could have happened when Welch’s processing and refrigeration were not available! But why is this personal word limited to Timothy, while the exhortation to continue in the Word (2 Tim 3:14 – 16), which is also an imperative addressed only to Timothy, becomes an imperative for all people at all times? Mind you, one may well be right in bypassing “use a little wine” as not having personal or universal application, but on what hermeneutical grounds?

Or take the problems that many traditional churchgoers had with the “Jesus people” in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Long hair on boys had already become the symbol of a new era in the hippie culture of the 1960s. For Christians to wear this symbol, especially in light of what Paul argues with the believers in Corinth, “Does not nature itself teach you that for a man to wear long hair is degrading to him?” (1 Cor 11:14, RSV), seemed like an open defiance of God himself. Yet most who quoted this text against the youth culture allowed for Christian women to cut their hair short (despite v. 15), did not insist on women’s heads being covered in worship, and never considered that “nature” came about by a very *unnatural* means — a haircut.

These two examples simply illustrate how one’s own culture tends to dictate what is common sense regarding present application. But other things also dictate common sense — ecclesiastical traditions, for example. How is it that in many evangelical churches women are forbidden to speak in church on the basis of a probably spurious moment in 1 Corinthians 14:34 – 35 (spurious because it is a marginal gloss found in two different locations in the manuscript tradition, and

clearly contradicts 11:2 – 3), yet in many of the same churches everything else in chapter 14 is argued *against*, as not belonging to the twenty-first century? How is it that verses 34 – 35 belong to all times and cultures, while verses 1 – 5, 26 – 33, and 39 – 40, which give regulations for prophesying and speaking in tongues, belong only to the first-century church?

Notice further how easy it is for twenty-first-century Christians to read their own tradition of church order into 1 Timothy and Titus. Yet very few churches have the plural leadership that seems clearly to be in view there (1 Tim 5:17; Titus 1:5 [Timothy was *not* the pastor; he was Paul's temporary delegate to set things in order and to correct abuses]). And still fewer churches actually enroll widows under the guidelines of 1 Timothy 5:3 – 15.

And have you noticed how our prior theological commitments cause many of us to read such commitments into some texts while we read around others? It comes as a total surprise to some believers when they find out that other Christians find support for infant baptism in such texts as 1 Corinthians 1:16; 7:14; or Colossians 2:11 – 12, or that others find evidence for a two-stage second coming in 2 Thessalonians 2:1, or that still others find evidence for sanctification as a second work of grace in Titus 3:5. For many in the Arminian tradition, who emphasize the believer's free will and responsibility, texts like Romans 8:30; 9:18 – 24; Galatians 1:15; and Ephesians 1:4 – 5 are something of an embarrassment. Likewise many Calvinists have their own ways of getting around what is said quite plainly in passages like 1 Corinthians 10:1 – 13; 2 Peter 2:20 – 22; and Hebrews 6:4 – 6. Indeed our experience as teachers is that students from these traditions seldom ask what these texts mean; they want only to know

“how to get around” what these various passages seem clearly to affirm!

After the last few paragraphs, we may well have lost a lot of friends, but we are trying to illustrate how thoroughgoing the problem is and how Christians need to carry on more genteel conversation with one another in this crucial area. What kinds of guidelines, then, are needed in order to establish more consistent hermeneutics for the Epistles?

THE BASIC RULE

You will recall from chapter 1 that we set out as a basic rule the premise that *a text cannot mean what it never could have meant to its author or readers*. This is why exegesis must always come first. It is especially important that we repeat this “basic rule” here, for this at least establishes some absolute parameters with regard to meaning. This rule, of course, does not always help one find out what a given passage means, but it does help to set limits as to what it *cannot* mean.

For example, the most frequent justification for disregarding the imperatives about seeking spiritual gifts in 1 Corinthians 14 is a particular interpretation of a preceding moment, which states that “when the perfect comes, the partial will be done away” (1 Cor 13:10, NASB). We are told that the perfect *has* come, in the form of the New Testament, and therefore the imperfect (prophecy and tongues) have ceased to function in the church. *But this is one thing the text cannot mean* because good exegesis quite disallows it. There is no way Paul could *possibly* have meant this; after all, the Corinthians did not

know there was going to be a New Testament, and the Holy Spirit would not likely have inspired Paul to write something to them that would be totally incomprehensible.

THE SECOND RULE

The second basic rule is actually a slightly different way of expressing our common hermeneutics. It goes like this: *Whenever we share comparable particulars (i.e., similar specific life situations) with the first-century hearers, God's word to us is the same as his word to them.* It is this rule that causes most of the theological texts and the community-directed ethical imperatives in the Epistles to give modern-day Christians a sense of immediacy with the first century. It is still true that “all have sinned” (Rom 3:23) and that “by grace [we] have been saved, through faith” (Eph 2:8). Clothing ourselves with “compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience” (Col 3:12) is still God's word to those who are believers. Our problems here are not with understanding as such, but with understanding quite well and then failing to “wear the clothing.”

The two longer passages we worked through in the preceding chapter (1 Cor 1 – 4; Phil 1:27 – 2:18) seem to be of this kind. Once we have done our exegesis and have discovered God's word to them, we have immediately brought ourselves under that same word. We still have local churches, which still have leaders who need to hear the Word and take care how they build the church. It appears that the church has too often been built with wood, hay, and straw rather than with

gold, silver, and costly stones, and such work when tried by fire has been found wanting. We would argue that Paul's warnings to the Corinthians about their "destroying God's temple," the church (see 1 Cor 3:16 – 17), is still God's word to us as to our responsibilities to the local church. It must be a place where the Spirit is known to dwell, and which therefore stands as God's alternative to the sin and alienation of worldly society.

The great caution here is that we do our exegesis well so that we have confidence that our situations and particulars are genuinely comparable to theirs. This is why the careful reconstruction of their problem is so important. For example, it is significant for our hermeneutics to note that the lawsuit in 1 Corinthians 6:1 – 11 was between two Christian brothers before a pagan judge out in the open marketplace in Corinth. We would argue that the point of the text does not change if the judge happens to be a Christian or because the trial takes place in a courthouse. The wrong is for two brothers to go to law outside the church, instead of handling things internally, as Paul's own rhetoric (vv. 6 – 11) makes perfectly clear. On the other hand, one could rightly ask whether this would still apply to a Christian suing a corporation in modern-day America, for in this case not all the particulars would remain the same — although one's decision should surely take Paul's appeal to the nonretaliation ethic of Jesus (v. 7) into account.

All of what has been said thus far seems easy enough. But the question as to how a text such as a case-specific matter like the lawsuit among believers (6:1 – 11) may apply *beyond* its specific particulars is but one of the several kinds of questions that need to be discussed. The rest of this chapter addresses four such problems.

THE PROBLEM OF EXTENDED APPLICATION

We first take up the issue just mentioned. When there are comparable particulars and comparable contexts in today's church, is it legitimate to extend the application of the text to other contexts, or to make a first-century case-specific matter apply to a context totally foreign to its first-century setting?

For example, it might be argued that even though Paul's warning about destroying God's temple in Corinth (1 Cor 3:16–17) addresses the local church, it also presents the principle that what God has set aside for himself by the Holy Spirit's indwelling is sacred and whoever destroys that will come under God's awful judgment. May not this principle now be applied to the individual Christian to teach that God will judge the person who abuses his or her body? Similarly, in 1 Corinthians 3:10–15 Paul is addressing those with building responsibilities in the church and warns of the loss they who build poorly will suffer. Since the text speaks of judgment and salvation “as by fire” (KJV), is it legitimate to use this text to illustrate the security of the believer?

If these were deemed legitimate applications, then we would seem to have good reason to be concerned. For inherent in such application is the bypassing of exegesis altogether. After all, to apply 1 Corinthians 3:16–17 to the individual believer is precisely what many in the church have erroneously done for centuries. Why do exegesis at all? Why not simply take any passage at “face value,” as it were, and begin with the

here and now — and thus perpetuate centuries of misunderstanding?

We would argue, therefore, that when there are comparable situations and comparable particulars (that is, the particulars in the text are similar to ours), God's word *to us* in such texts should be limited to its original intent. Furthermore, it should be noted that the extended application is usually seen to be legitimate because it is true, that is, it is clearly spelled out in other passages where that is the *intent* of the passage. If that be the case, then one should ask whether what one learns *only* by extended application can truly be the word of God for all times and settings.

A more difficult case is presented by an imperative in Paul's next letter to the believers in Corinth, "Do not be yoked together with unbelievers" (2 Cor 6:14). Traditionally, picking up a more contemporary metaphor, this has been interpreted as forbidding marriage between a Christian and non-Christian. However, the metaphor of a yoke is rarely used in antiquity to refer to marriage, and there is nothing whatsoever in the context that remotely suggests that marriage is in view here.

Our problem is that we cannot be certain as to what the original text is forbidding. Most likely it has something to do with idolatry, perhaps as a further prohibition of attendance at the idol feasts (cf. 1 Cor 10:14 – 22). Can we not, therefore, legitimately "extend" the principle of this text, since we cannot be sure of its original meaning? Probably so, but again, precisely because it is indeed a biblical principle that can be sustained apart from this single text.

THE PROBLEM OF PARTICULARS THAT ARE

NOT COMPARABLE

The next problem has to do with two kinds of passages in the Epistles: those that speak to first-century issues that for the most part are without any twenty-first-century counterparts, and those that speak to problems that could happen also in the twenty-first century but are highly unlikely to do so. What does one do with such texts, and how do they address us? Or do they?

An example of the first kind of passage is found in 1 Corinthians 8–10, where Paul speaks to three kinds of issues: (1) Christians who are arguing for the privilege of continuing to join their pagan neighbors at their feasts in the idol temples (see 8:10; 10:14 – 22); (2) the Corinthians' calling into question Paul's apostolic authority (see 9:1 – 23); and (3) food sacrificed to idols and sold in the open market (10:23 – 11:1).

Sound exegesis of these passages indicates that Paul answers these problems as follows: (1) They are absolutely forbidden to attend the temple feasts on three grounds: the stumbling-block principle (8:7 – 13), such eating is incompatible with life in Christ as it is experienced at his table (10:16 – 17), and it means to participate in the demonic (10:19 – 22). (2) Paul defends his right to financial support as an apostle, even though he has given up that right; he also defends his actions in matters of indifference (9:19 – 23). (3) Idol food previously presented to an idol and now sold in the marketplace may be purchased and eaten; such food may also be freely eaten in someone else's home. In the latter context it may also be refused if it could potentially create a problem for someone else. Believers may eat anything to the glory of God; but one should not do something that deliberately offends.

To be sure, these passages are still very existential for Christians in many Asian cultures; but in Western cultures this kind of idolatry is largely unknown, so that problems 1 and 3 are not common — unless one regularly eats at a restaurant run by a cult that dedicates its food to a “god” as it is prepared. Moreover, regarding problem 2, we no longer have apostles in Paul’s sense of those who have actually encountered the risen Lord (9:1; cf. 15:8) and who have founded and have authority over new churches (9:1 – 2; cf. 2 Cor 10:16).

The second kind of passage may be illustrated by the incestuous believer in 1 Corinthians 5:1 – 11, or by the “haves” abusing the “have-nots” by their meals eaten in conjunction with the Lord’s Table (1 Cor 11:17 – 22), or by people wanting to force circumcision on Gentile Christians (Gal 6:12). These things could happen but are highly improbable in our culture.

The question is, how do the apostle’s answers to these non-contemporary problems speak to twenty-first-century Christians? We suggest that proper hermeneutics here should legitimately take two steps.

First, we must do our exegesis with particular care so that we hear what God’s word to them really was. In very many cases a clear *principle* has been articulated, which usually will transcend the historical particularity to which it was being applied.

Second, and here is the important point, the “principle” does not now become timeless to be applied at random or whim to any and every kind of situation. We would argue that it *must be applied to genuinely comparable situations*.

To illustrate both of these points: First, Paul forbids participation in the temple meals on the basis of the stumbling-

block principle. But note that this does not refer to something that merely offends another believer. The stumbling-block principle refers to something that one believer feels can be done in good conscience and then, by their action or persuasion, they try to induce another believer to do, who cannot do so in good conscience. After all, Paul's language is intensive: the other believer is "destroyed" by *emulating* another's action; they are not merely offended by it. The principle would seem to apply, therefore, only to truly comparable situations. In any case, this principle is especially abused when long-standing believers use it to condemn younger believers for their actions!

Second, Paul finally absolutely forbids participation in the temple meals because it means to participate in the demonic. To be sure, some followers of Jesus have at times been confused as to what constitutes demonic activity. Nonetheless, this seems to be a normative prohibition for Christians against all forms of spiritism, witchcraft, astrology, *etc.*

Again, we may not have apostles, and most Protestants do not think of their ministers as standing in the apostolic succession. But the principle that "those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel" (1 Cor 9:14) certainly seems applicable to contemporary ministries, since it is corroborated elsewhere in Scripture (e.g., 1 Tim 5:17 – 18).

The problem of eating marketplace idol food (1 Cor 10:23 – 11:1) presents an especially difficult dimension of this hermeneutical problem. The food itself was a matter of indifference — both to God and to Paul. But because of prior beliefs and associations, it was not so to others. The same was true of food and drink and the observance of days (Rom 14), as well as various similar matters in his letter to the believers in

Colosse (Col 2:16 – 23).

The problem for us at a much later moment in history is how to distinguish matters of indifference from matters that count. This problem is especially intensified for us because these things change from culture to culture and from one Christian group to another, just as they appear to have done in the first century. In twentieth-century America alone the list of such matters included clothing (length of dresses, ties, women's slacks), dyed hair, body piercing, tattoos, cosmetics, jewelry, entertainment and recreation (movies, TV, cards, dancing, mixed swimming), athletics, food, and drink. The ongoing problem for many contemporary believers is that just as with those who judged Paul's freedom on the matter of idol food, so it always is that those who think abstinence from any one of these constitutes holiness before God do *not* think of them as matters of indifference.

What, then, makes something a matter of indifference? We suggest the following as guidelines:

1. What the Epistles specifically indicate as matters of indifference may still be regarded as such: food, drink, observance of days, *etc.*

2. Matters of indifference are not inherently moral but are cultural — even if they stem from *religious* culture. Matters that tend to differ from culture to culture, therefore, even among genuine believers, may usually be considered to be matters of indifference (e.g., wine and nonwine cultures).

3. It is especially important to note that the sin-lists in the Epistles (e.g., Rom 1:29 – 30; 1 Cor 5:11; 6:9 – 10; 2 Tim 3:2 – 4) never include the first-century equivalents of the items we have listed above. Moreover, such matters of indifference are

never included among the various lists of Christian imperatives (e.g., Rom 12; Eph 5; Col 3; etc.).

We know that not all will agree with our assessment. However, according to Romans 14, people on both sides of any of these matters are neither to judge nor disparage one another. The free person is not to flaunt their freedom; the person for whom such matters are a deep personal conviction is not to condemn someone else.

THE PROBLEM OF CULTURAL RELATIVITY

This is the area where most present-day difficulties — and differences — lie. It is the place where the problem of God's *eternal word* having been given in *historical particularity* comes most sharply into focus. The problem has the following steps: (1) Epistles are occasional documents of the first century, conditioned by the language and culture of the first century, which spoke to specific situations in the first-century church. (2) Many of the specific situations in the Epistles are so completely conditioned by their first-century setting that all recognize that they have little or no personal application as a word for today, except perhaps in the most distant sense of one's deriving some principle from them (e.g., bringing Paul's cloak from Carpus's house in Troas). (3) Other passages are also thoroughly conditioned by their first-century settings, but the word contained in them may be "translated" into new but comparable settings. (4) Is it not possible, therefore, that still

other texts, although they appear to have comparable particulars, are also conditioned by their first-century setting and need to be translated into new settings, or simply left in the first century?

Nearly all Christians, at least to a limited degree, do translate biblical texts into new settings. Without articulating it in precisely this way, twenty-first-century evangelicals use this principle to leave “a little wine for thy stomach’s sake” in the first century, to not insist on head coverings or long hair for women today, and to not practice the “holy kiss.” Many of the same evangelicals, however, wince when a woman’s teaching in the church (when men are present) is also defended on these grounds, and they become downright indignant when someone tries to defend same-sex partnerships on the same grounds.

Frequently there have been some who have tried to reject the idea of cultural relativity altogether, which has led them more or less to argue for a wholesale adoption of first-century culture as the divine norm. But such a rejection is usually only moderately successful. They may keep their daughters home, deny them an education, and have the father arrange for their marriage, but they usually allow them to learn to read and go out in public. The point is that it is extremely difficult to be consistent here, precisely because there is no such thing as a divinely ordained culture; cultures are in fact different, not only from the first to the twenty-first century, but in every conceivable way in the twenty-first century itself.

Rather than rejection, we suggest that the recognition of a degree of cultural relativity is a valid hermeneutical procedure and is an inevitable corollary of the occasional nature of the Epistles. But we also believe that to be valid, one’s hermeneutics must operate within recognizable guidelines.

We suggest the following guidelines, therefore, for distinguishing between items that are culturally relative on the one hand and those that transcend their original setting on the other hand and are thus normative for all Christians of all times. We do not contend for these guidelines as “once for all given to the saints,” but they do reflect our current thinking, and we would encourage further discussion and interaction (many of these have been worked out in conjunction with our former colleague, David M. Scholer).

1. One should first distinguish between the central core of the message of the Bible and what is dependent on or peripheral to it. This is not to argue for a canon within the canon (i.e., to elevate certain parts of the New Testament as the norm for reading other parts); it is to safeguard the gospel from being turned into law through culture or religious custom on the one hand and to keep the gospel itself from changing to reflect every conceivable cultural expression on the other hand.

Thus the fallenness of all humanity, redemption from that fallenness as God’s gracious activity through Christ’s death and resurrection, the consummation of that redemptive work by the return of Christ, etc., are clearly part of this central core. But the holy kiss, women’s head coverings, and charismatic ministries and gifts would seem to be less so.

2. Similarly, one should be prepared to distinguish between what the New Testament itself sees as inherently moral and what is not. Those items that are inherently moral are therefore absolute and abide for every culture; those that are not inherently moral are therefore cultural expressions and may change from culture to culture.

Paul’s sin-lists, for example, never contain cultural items.

Some of the sins may indeed be more prevalent in one culture than another, but there are never situations in which they may be considered *Christian* attitudes or actions. Thus sexual immorality, adultery, idolatry, drunkenness, homosexual practice, thievery, greed, and the like (1 Cor 6:9 – 10) are *always* wrong. This does not mean that Christians have not from time to time been guilty of any of these. But they are not viable moral choices. After all, Paul goes on to say, “That is what some of you *were*. But you were washed . . .” (v. 11, emphasis added).

On the other hand, foot washing, exchanging the holy kiss, eating marketplace idol food, women having a head covering when praying or prophesying, Paul’s personal preference for celibacy, or a woman’s teaching in the church are not *inherently* moral matters. They become so only by their use or abuse in given contexts, when such use or abuse involves disobedience or lack of love.

3. One must make special note of items where the New Testament itself has a uniform and consistent witness and where it reflects differences. The following are examples of matters on which the New Testament bears uniform witness: love as the Christian’s basic ethical response, a nonretaliation personal ethic, the wrongness of strife, hatred, murder, stealing, practicing homosexuality, drunkenness, and sexual immorality of all kinds.

On the other hand, the New Testament does not appear to be uniform on such matters as women’s ministries in the church (see Rom 16:1 – 2, where Phoebe is a “deacon” in Cenchrea; Rom 16:7, where Junia — *not* Junias, which is an unknown masculine name — is named among the apostles; Rom 16:3, where Priscilla is Paul’s coworker [cf. Phil 4:2 – 3] — the same

word used of Apollos in 1 Cor 3:9; and 1 Cor 11:5 over against 1 Tim 2:12 [and 1 Cor 14:34 – 35, which is suspect textually]; the political evaluation of Rome (see Rom 13:1 – 5 and 1 Pet 2:13 – 14 over against Rev 13 – 18); the retention of one's wealth (Luke 12:33; 18:22 over against 1 Tim 6:17 – 19); or eating food offered to idols (1 Cor 10:23 – 29 over against Acts 15:29; Rev 2:14, 20). By the way, if any of these suggestions cause an emotional reaction on your part, you may ask yourself why, since in each case the New Testament evidence is *not* uniform, whether we like that or not.

Sound exegesis may cause us to see greater uniformity than appears to be the case now. For example, in the matter of food offered to idols, one can make a good exegetical case for the Greek word in Acts and Revelation to refer to going to the temple to eat such food. In this case the attitude would be consistent with Paul's in 1 Corinthians 10:14 – 22. However, precisely because these other matters appear to be more cultural than moral, one should not be disturbed by a lack of uniformity. Likewise, one should not pursue exegesis only as a means of finding uniformity, even at the cost of common sense or the plain meaning of the text.

4. It is important to be able to distinguish within the New Testament itself between principle and specific application. It is possible for a New Testament writer to support a relative application by an absolute principle and in so doing not make the application absolute. Thus in 1 Corinthians 11:2 – 16, for example, Paul appeals (apparently) to the divine order of creation and redemption (v. 3) and establishes the principle that one should do nothing to distract from the glory of God (especially by breaking convention) when the community is at worship (vv. 7, 10). The specific application, however, seems to

be relative, since Paul repeatedly appeals to “practice” or “nature” (vv. 6, 13 – 14, 16).

This leads us to suggest that one may legitimately ask at such specific applications: would this have been an issue for us had we never encountered it in the New Testament documents? In Western cultures, the failure to cover a woman’s head (especially her hair) with a full-length veil would probably create no difficulties at all. In fact, if she were literally to obey the text in most American churches, she would thereby almost certainly abuse the spirit of the text by drawing attention to herself. But with a little thinking, one can imagine some kinds of dress — both male and female — that would be so out of place as to create the same kind of disruption of worship (a man in his swimsuit, for example, would be so noticeable as to distract others).

5. It might also be important, as much as one is able to do this with care, to determine the cultural options open to any New Testament writer. The degree to which a New Testament writer agrees with a cultural situation in which there is *only one option* increases the possibility of the cultural relativity of such a position. Thus, for example, homosexual activity was both affirmed and condemned by writers in antiquity, yet the New Testament takes a singular position against it. On the other hand, attitudes toward slavery as a system or toward the status and role of women were basically singular; no one denounced slavery as an evil, and women were consistently held to be basically inferior to men by the philosophers. The New Testament writers also do not denounce slavery as an evil — although they undercut it by urging that the householder and his slaves were brother and sister in Christ (see Phlm 16; cf. Eph 6:9). On the other hand, they generally move well

beyond the attitudes toward women held by their contemporaries. But in either case, to the degree to which they reflect the prevalent cultural attitudes in these matters, they are thereby reflecting the only cultural option in the world around them.

6. One must keep alert to possible cultural differences between the first and twenty-first centuries that are sometimes not immediately obvious. For example, to determine the role of women in the twenty-first-century church, one should take into account that there were few educational opportunities for women in the first century, whereas such education is the expected norm in our society. This may affect our understanding of such moments as the one on women's dress and demeanor in Paul's first letter to Timothy (2:9 – 15). Likewise, a participatory democracy is radically different from the government of which Paul speaks in his admonition to the believers in Rome (13:1 – 7). It is expected in a participatory democracy that bad laws are to be changed and bad officials are to be ousted. These differences should surely affect how one brings such a moment into twenty-first-century English-speaking North America.

7. One must finally exercise Christian charity at this point. Christians need to recognize the difficulties, open the lines of communication with one another, start by trying to define some principles, and above all else have love for and a willingness to ask forgiveness from those with whom they differ.

Before we conclude this discussion, it may be helpful to see how these guidelines apply to two current issues: the ministry of women and homosexual activity — especially since some who are arguing for women's ministries are using some of the same arguments to support same-sex partnerships as a

valid Christian alternative.

We begin with the question of women's role in the church as teachers or proclaimers of the Word. This issue has basically focused on two unrelated passages (1 Cor 14:34 – 35 and 1 Tim 2:11 – 12). But the first passage is highly suspect as being anything Paul wrote, since it is the only place in the entire transmission of Scripture that a passage like this occurs in two different places in the Greek manuscripts and was most likely brought in as a marginal gloss from someone who was not quite satisfied with Paul's affirmation of women both praying and prophesying in worship (as in 11:2 – 5). In the second case silence and submission or a quiet demeanor are enjoined — although in neither case is the submission necessarily to her husband — and in 1 Timothy 2 she is not permitted to teach or to “assume authority over” a man. Full compliance with this text in the twenty-first century would seem to rule out not only a woman's preaching and teaching in the local church, but it also would seem to forbid her writing books on biblical subjects that men might read, teaching Bible or related subjects (including religious education) in Christian colleges or Bible institutes where men are in her classes, and teaching men in missionary situations. But those who argue against women teaching in the contemporary church seldom carry the interpretation this far. And almost always they make the matters about clothing in the preceding verse (1 Tim 2:9) to be culturally relative.

On the other hand, that the passage in 1 Timothy might be culturally relative can be supported first of all by exegesis of all three of the Pastoral Epistles. Certain women were troublesome in the church at Ephesus (1 Tim 5:11 – 15; 2 Tim 3:6 – 9), and they appear to have been a major part of the cause of the false

teachers making headway there. Since women are found teaching (Acts 18:26) and prophesying (Acts 21:9; 1 Cor 11:5) elsewhere in the New Testament, it is altogether likely that the 1 Timothy passage spoke to a local problem. In any case, the guidelines above support the possibility that this singular (uncertain) prohibition is culturally relative.

The question of homosexuality, however, is considerably different. In this case the guidelines stand against its being culturally relative. The whole Bible has a consistent witness against homosexual activity as being morally wrong.

In recent years some people have argued that the homosexuality against which the New Testament speaks is that in which people abuse others, and that private monogamous homosexuality between consenting adults is a different matter. They argue that it cannot be proved on exegetical grounds that such homosexual activity is forbidden. It is also argued that these are twenty-first-century cultural options not available in the first century. Therefore, they would propose that some of our guidelines (e.g., 5 and 6) open the possibility that the New Testament prohibitions against homosexuality are also culturally relative, and they would further argue that some of the guidelines are not true or not relevant.

The problem with this argument, however, is that it does not hold up either exegetically or historically. The homosexuality Paul had in view early on in his letter to the believers in Rome (1:24 – 28) is clearly *not* of the “abusive” type; it is homosexuality of choice between men or women. Furthermore, Paul’s word “homosexual” in 1 Corinthians 6:9 literally means genital homosexuality between males. Since the Bible as a whole witnesses against homosexuality and invariably includes it in moral contexts, and since it simply has

not been proved that the options for homosexual practice differ today from those of the first century, there seem to be no valid grounds for seeing it as a culturally relative matter for Paul. One may not like what Paul says, but to re-create him to fit present culture is an infraction of the highest order.

THE PROBLEM OF TASK THEOLOGY

We noted in the last chapter that much of the theology in the Epistles is task oriented and therefore is not systematically presented. However, this must not be taken to mean that one cannot in fact systematically present the theology that is either expressed in or derived from statements in the Epistles. To the contrary, this is one of the mandatory tasks of the Bible student. One must always be forming — and “reforming” — a biblical theology on the basis of sound exegesis. And very often, we readily acknowledge, a given biblical writer’s theology is found in his presuppositions and implications as well as in his explicit statements.

All we want to do here is to raise some cautions as one goes about the task of theology, cautions that are the direct result of the occasional nature of the Epistles.

1. Because the Epistles are “occasioned” either by the author or the recipients, we must be content at times with some limitations to our theological understanding. For example, to get the Corinthians to see how absurd it was for them to have two brothers going to the pagan court for a judgment, Paul

states that Christians will someday judge both the world and angels (1 Cor 6:2 – 3). But beyond this the texts say nothing. Thus we may affirm as a part of Christian eschatology (our understanding of final events) that Christians will in fact exercise judgments at the eschaton (the end time). But we know very little as to what this means or how it is going to be worked out. *Everything beyond the affirmation itself is mere speculation.*

Similarly, Paul argues from the nature of the Corinthians' own participation in the Lord's Supper that they may not likewise participate in the meals at the idol temple (1 Cor 10:16 – 21). What Paul says about that participation seems indeed to go beyond the theology of the Supper found in most of evangelical Protestantism. Here is not mere remembrance but actual participation in the Lord himself. From other New Testament texts we may further argue that the participation was by means of the Spirit and that the benefits came by faith. But even here we are going outside the immediate texts to express Paul's understanding in a theological way, and many will probably not agree with our choice of outside texts. But our point is that we simply are not told what the precise nature of this participation is or how the benefits come to the believer. We may all *want* to know, but our knowledge is defective precisely because of the occasional nature of the statements. What is said beyond what the texts themselves reveal cannot have the same biblical or hermeneutical import as what can be said on the basis of solid exegesis. We are merely affirming, therefore, that in Scripture, God has given us all we *need* but not necessarily all we *want*.

2. Sometimes our theological problems with the Epistles derive from the fact that we are asking *our* questions of texts

that by their occasional nature are answering *their* questions only. When we ask the texts to speak directly to the question of abortion, or of remarriage, or of infant baptism, we want them to answer the questions of a later time. Sometimes they may do so, even if at times indirectly, but often they will not because the question simply had not been raised back then.

There is a clear example of this in the New Testament itself. On the question of divorce Paul says, “not I, but the Lord” (1 Cor 7:10), meaning Jesus himself spoke to this question. But to the question raised in a Greek environment as to whether a believer should divorce a pagan partner, Jesus apparently had no occasion to speak. The problem simply lay outside his own Jewish culture. But Paul did feel the need to speak to it, so he said “I, not the Lord” (v. 12). One of the problems, of course, is that we ourselves possess neither Paul’s apostolic authority nor his inspiration. The only way we can speak to such questions is on the basis of a whole biblical theology that includes our understanding of creation, the fall, redemption, and the final consummation. That is, we must attempt to bring a biblical worldview to the problem. But no proof texting when there are no immediately relevant texts!

These, then, are some of our hermeneutical suggestions for reading and interpreting the Epistles. Our immediate aim is for greater precision and consistency; our larger aim is to call us all to greater obedience to what we do hear and understand — and to an openness and charity toward others when they differ with us. Perhaps if we were truly to do so, the world might pay more attention to our Savior.