

What in Scripture is Universally Applicable and What is Historically Conditioned?

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[This essay was originally presented at the Southeastern Michigan Pastoral Conference at Port Huron, Michigan, on September 21, 1992.]

It will be immediately obvious to any serious student of Scripture that the answer to this question is not a minor matter. The very authority of God's Word is at stake.

As heirs of the Lutheran Reformation we cling firmly to two important principles of interpretation. We affirm: 1) that Scripture is clear in its basic meaning; and 2) that Scripture alone is the source and norm of doctrine and practice.

But we also affirm that the historical setting is an important factor for the exegete to consider as he interprets God's Word. We also recognize that when it comes to applying Scripture to the contemporary setting, the data gathered by the sociologist and the cultural anthropologist can be helpful in guiding us to find the proper words in translating, interpreting, and applying Scripture. We want to be sure that the contemporary reader or hearer of Scripture has the same understanding of a given passage as the original reader or hearer had.

Perhaps it would be best to underscore the fact that we said "the data gathered by" and not "the conclusions drawn by" the sociologist and cultural anthropologist. Most conclusions drawn from the data by these specialists are influenced by their worldly, humanistic viewpoint. But the data they gather simply reflect how people in a given culture think and communicate. So if I am sharing God's Word with people in a Hispanic community in the United States or in a foreign country such as Zambia or Japan, it would be foolish to ignore data that will help me understand the people of a particular setting and that will enable me to communicate better in that setting.

But how do we reconcile the two basic principles of our Reformation heritage mentioned earlier with the data we have about the historical biblical setting and the data modern specialists provide us? How do we use the latter without allowing a shift of authority from Scripture itself to the expert on the biblical setting or from God's Word to the specialist on the contemporary setting? What is the proper role of the historical setting in the interpretation of Scripture? How does Scripture itself indicate what is historically conditioned and what is not? We will give attention to all these questions since they are interrelated, but the last two will be our primary focus as we address the major question expressed as the theme of this essay.

I. The role of the historical setting in interpretation

A. The contrast between the answer given in the Reformation and modern historical relativism

At the heart of the Reformation was Luther's approach to biblical interpretation: Scripture is the sole interpreter of Scripture—not any leader of the church, no matter how high and mighty his office; not the accumulated wisdom of the church gathered over centuries from biblical scholars and church councils. For this reason Luther treasured a knowledge of the original languages of Scripture. Several statements of Luther about this are classic:

Let us be sure of this: we will not long preserve the Gospel without the languages. The languages are the sheath in which this sword of the Spirit is contained. They are the casket in which this jewel is enshrined. They are the vessel in which this wine is held. They are the larder in which this food is stored.¹

There is a vast difference between a simple preacher of the faith and a person who expounds Scripture, or, as St. Paul puts it, a prophet. A simple preacher (it is true) has so many clear passages and texts available through translations that he can know and teach Christ, lead a holy life, and preach to others. But when it comes to interpreting Scripture, and working with it on your own, and disputing with those who cite it incorrectly, he is unequal to the task. This cannot be done without [knowing the] languages.²

"Interpreting Scripture, and working with it on your own, and disputing with those who cite it incorrectly"—to Luther these were important reasons for knowing the original languages. It is only in this way that the interpreter can be sure of the simple, literal meaning of Scripture; and to Luther the simple, literal meaning of Scripture was basic and to be maintained in any controversy:

The admonition I have often given elsewhere I repeat here and shall give again: that the Christian reader should make it his first task to seek out the literal sense, as they call it. For it alone is the whole substance of faith and of Christian theology.³

In a controversy we must hold to the literal sense of Scripture only.⁴

It is only the arrogance and frivolous wickedness of the very devil, who . . . pretends he is willing to be shown with Scripture—provided that he first eliminates the Scripture or twists it to his own fancy.⁵

We must everywhere adhere to the simple, pure, and natural meaning of the words. This accords with the rules of grammar and the usage of speech which God has given to men.⁶

Language as ordinarily used is empress; it rates above all subtle, acute, and sophistical constructions. One must not depart from it unless a clear article of faith makes it necessary to do so; otherwise, not a letter in Scripture should be safe against these spiritual jugglers. . . . It is dangerous in this way to play with the words of God, since these are to rule consciences and faith.⁷

In addition to the grammar and syntax of the original language, there was for Luther one other important factor in determining "the simple, pure, and natural meaning of words." That second factor is the context, the immediate context of the verse itself and the wider context of all of Scripture. It is only when one part of Scripture is interpreted by other parts of Scripture that we permit God to tell us what his Word means instead of imposing our own subjective thoughts on the process of interpretation.

¹*Luther's Works [LW]*, St. Louis: Concordia, and Philadelphia: Fortress, 45, 360.

²*LW* 45, 363.

³*LW* 9, 24.

⁴Ewald M. Plass, *What Luther Says* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1959), #1255.

⁵*LW* 37, 32.

⁶*What Luther Says*, #284.

⁷*Ibid.*, #285.

They should weigh the words carefully, comparing that which has preceded with that which follows, and be intent on capturing the real meaning of any passage and not on fabricating their own dreams after mutilating the vocables or tearing away words.⁸

One must consider the meaning of the whole text in its context.⁹

Is one doing the right thing if one takes one word out of a quotation of Christ out of its proper context and gives it an interpretation and a meaning that pleases us without taking into account whether or not it is in harmony with the text or quotation?¹⁰

This applies to the entire Scripture: it wants to interpret itself by a comparison of passages from everywhere and wants it understood that it alone is mistress. And so the safest of all ways to search for the meaning of Scripture is to strive for it by a comparison of passages.¹¹

[Heretics] tear a bit here and a bit there out of the context; and when they have a word or two, they fall to babbling before the people, so that the people do not see what else and what more Scripture says on the matter. Indeed, if one were allowed to tear one or two words out of a text and ignore what has preceded or what follows or what is said at other places of Scripture, then I, too, could certainly give all Scripture and language any explanation and direction I please.¹²

When we let Scripture interpret Scripture, what it says is not obscure. Rather, what the Bible says is as clear as the sun on a bright day. To maintain this clarity, the immediate and wider context of Scripture must be supreme over all extra-biblical sources of knowledge.

I cannot bear it that they thus revile and blaspheme Scripture and . . . accuse the Bible of being obscure. . . . Scripture should be placed alongside Scripture in a right and proper way. He who can do this best is the best of the fathers. And all the books of the fathers must be read with discretion: they should not be taken on faith. But see whether they quote clear texts and explain Scripture by other and clearer Scripture.¹³

I have observed that all heresies and all errors in dealing with the Scriptures have not come from the simple words . . . but from the failure to follow the simple words.¹⁴

Holy Scriptures are a spiritual light clearer by far than the sun itself But if the Scripture which they explain is obscure, who will make us sure that their explanation is reliable? Another new explanation? And who will explain that? And so it would go on ad infinitum. In a word, if Scripture is obscure or ambiguous, what need was there for its having been divinely delivered to us?¹⁵

⁸*Ibid.*, #244.

⁹*LW* 40, 86.

¹⁰*LW* 40, 326.

¹¹*What Luther Says*, #297.

¹²*Ibid.*, #296.

¹³*Ibid.*, #268.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, #1947.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, #225.

When one refuses to grant that God's plain Word, given to enlighten us and teach us, is clear....[it] is as if a self-willed fellow were to shut his eyes against the brilliant sun in bright daylight or bar door and window and then complain that he is unable to see!¹⁶

Observe, however, what mischief the devil has wrought through the papists....To make sure that no one would bring the book to light again, they have branded it with infamy, blaspheming God and saying that it is unclear. Therefore we must follow the comments of men and not bare Scripture. What is this but giving the lie to Paul, who says here that it is our book of doctrine?¹⁷

The devil has so deceived us that we forsake the "day" and seek truth from philosophers and heathen, who never knew a solitary thing about all this; we permit ourselves to be blinded by human doctrines and to be led back into the night....Our search for auxiliary light besides such lucid and clear passages of Scripture, when the Lord calls Himself the Light and Sun of the world, must be a great punishment brought upon us by the wrath of God.¹⁸

To understand the meaning God intended is the interpreter's task. This meaning, however, cannot and dare not be discovered apart from the words of Scripture and cannot be in conflict with them. It is only by letting Scripture interpret Scripture that we safeguard the authority of Scripture. When we make anything from outside the Bible an authority which allows us to deny or change the substance of the simple, pure, and natural meaning of the words of Scripture, then we no longer have an authoritative Scripture.

If we admit that any epistle, or any part of an epistle, of Paul does not apply to the church universal, then the whole authority of Paul falls to the ground. Then the Corinthians will say that what he teaches about faith in the Epistle of the Romans does not apply to them. What greater blasphemy and madness can be imagined than this? God forbid that there should be one jot or titlle in all of Paul which the whole church universal is not to follow and keep!¹⁹

We are to search [Jn 5:39], says he, not to sit in judgment; not to inject our notions into Scripture, but get Christ's testimony out of it....Scripture is to be understood alone through that Spirit who wrote it. This Spirit you cannot find more surely present and active anywhere than in these Sacred Scriptures, which He Himself wrote.²⁰

For Luther the translator's and the interpreter's task did not end with getting an understanding of the meaning of a passage that was based solely on Scripture's own interpretation of that passage. The second and equally important task was to put that meaning into the setting of contemporary language and culture without changing the substance of that meaning in any way.

What purpose does it serve unnecessarily to abide by the words so rigidly and strictly people can get no sense out of them? Whoever would speak German must not use Hebrew idioms; but if he understands the Hebrew writer, he must see to it that he grasps his meaning and must think: How does a German speak in this case? When he has the German words that serve the purpose, then

¹⁶*What Luther Says*, #228.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, #232.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, #262.

¹⁹*LW* 36, 25.

²⁰*What Luther Says*, #241.

let him dismiss the Hebrew words and freely express the sense in the best German he is capable of using.²¹

We must ask the mother in the home, the children on the street, the common man in the market place, how this is done. Their lips we must watch to see how they speak, and then we must translate accordingly. Then they will understand us and notice that we are talking German with them.²²

We have quoted Luther at length for two purposes: 1) to establish clearly that the only thing that was authoritative for Luther was Scripture itself and, therefore, the only historical setting that is authoritative for Luther is the historical setting that Scripture itself gives; any historical setting discovered, or in many cases manufactured in part from some slender pieces of evidence found in ancient or modern extra-biblical writers, cannot be used to alter or change the pure, simple, natural meaning of the words of Scripture as they are understood within the context of Scripture itself; and 2) to show how the role of the historical setting in interpretation as viewed in the Reformation differs drastically from the views we will take up next, the views held in various shadings of modern historical relativism.

What is historical relativism? At the risk of oversimplification, it can be described simply as the view that since the Bible is historical, it cannot convey universal truth but only relative truth. This assertion is based on one or both of the following assumptions: 1) words have one meaning in one time and cultural setting but have another meaning in another time and cultural setting. This is true, it is argued, because the meaning of words (and the truth derived from those words) is derived by each individual from how people communicate in their own time and culture; 2) interpretation is always conditioned by one's presuppositions as derived from one's worldview. Since the worldview of the writers of Scripture and the modern interpreter are seen as being entirely different, the statements of Scripture are said to be historically conditioned and so neither universally authoritative nor applicable today in the same way as in biblical times.

Perhaps it will help to summarize briefly three different types of historical relativism that have been advanced as ways of letting the historical setting of Scripture have its due: a radical approach (liberation theology), a middle-of-the-road approach (dynamic equivalency interpretation), and a seemingly conservative approach.

Liberation theology insists that the historical setting of Scripture makes it necessary to look for truth and thus for meaning, not in the words of Scripture, but in the contemporary context. Revolutionary events give meaning to life and so are the truth for people who are oppressed by the rich and powerful in many cultural settings today. Only those portions of Scripture which provide guidelines and examples for revolution against the oppressor are significant. In this way the historical setting of Scripture is used to undermine the authority of Scripture and to put the stamp of approval on an approach which sees only some of the Bible as useful, and none of it as authoritative, for the contemporary setting.

Dynamic equivalency interpretation tries to handle the historical setting of Scripture by saying that the meaning of the words of Scripture must be sought on two levels: 1) the grammatical/syntactical meaning of the words of Scripture as understood within the context of Scripture itself; and 2) the meaning of the words of Scripture that one derives from the worldview of one's own culture. To accomplish this twofold task, the interpreter must get behind the meaning of the words of Scripture and discover the response the biblical writer desired to elicit from his audience. Then he asks, "How can I get the same response from the contemporary

²¹*What Luther Says*, #319.

²²*Ibid.*, #324.

audience?" By this approach the interpreter is supposed to be able to overcome the fact that the words and concepts of Scripture are culture-bound. In this way he is also able to discover the "cultural universal" (the dynamic equivalent) in the words of the Bible that will bring the same response to day as the original writer sought from the original readers.

Those who hold this view insist that in order to do this the interpreter needs to be thoroughly informed both about the cultural setting of Scripture and his own cultural setting. It will be much easier for him to discover the "cultural universal" if he is "anthropologically informed." What follows may be an extreme example of the result of this approach (with which not all of the practitioners of dynamic equivalency interpretation will necessarily agree), but it is an example nonetheless of the end to which this approach can come: If, in a given culture, the sacrament of baptism may not be culturally acceptable, the church in that culture may have to drop baptism from its teachings. You see what has happened in this case—the teaching of baptism is recognized as being scriptural, but it is not a "cultural universal." The Bible thus is not the sole authority any longer, but the anthropologically informed interpreter decides what is authoritative with one eye on the contemporary culture in which he is living and teaching the Bible. Baptism is historically conditioned from the contemporary viewpoint and so needs to be dropped.

A third, and seemingly more conservative, example of historical relativism is the approach which says that only those commands in Scripture formulated in such a way that they are explicitly universal are applicable today; all the other commands of Scripture are culture-bound. At first glance this might seem like a workable kind of basic approach for determining what in Scripture is universal and what is historically conditioned. But on further examination, those who set this up as their guiding principle reveal that it is not exactly what it appears to be.

On the one hand, they insist that the Ten Commandments, as they were formulated by God in the Old Testament and repeated in principle (if not always in the same wording) in the New Testament are universal commands. On the other hand, they say that Paul's teachings on divorce, homosexuality, slavery, the role of man and woman, etc., are not formulated in "explicitly" universal terms. For example, they say that the setting for Paul's words in 1 Timothy 2 must be considered in the light of the fact that women in Paul's day did not have the educational opportunities they have now. Thus these words are historically conditioned, not explicitly universal, and so not applicable today. Note that they have substituted their own extra-biblical reason for Paul's words and brushed aside the reason Paul himself gives.

That is rather typical of this approach. The criteria for what is "explicitly" universal are often extra-biblical cultural norms imposed on the text rather than being determined from the words of the given passage and the context of Scripture itself. Even if it were true that many women in biblical times did not have the educational opportunities they have now, and even if we were to grant for the moment that this might be one reason among many why Paul spoke these words, this does not set aside the reasons Paul gives (the sequence in which God created man and woman, the consequence of the woman's stepping out of the role God gave her in creation) which establish what Paul says about womankind in this passage as universally applicable.

How does the interpreter properly determine what in Scripture is universally applicable as opposed to what is historically conditioned? We shall address this question eventually, but first it will be helpful in the discussion of this whole matter to say a little more about a belief that is common to all three of the approaches of historical relativism. This belief is illustrated by the words of Alan Johnson: "Exegesis in the fullest sense including insights from both ancient and modern cultural concerns must be able to do more than *clarify* the text; it must be able also to modify and even *change* our understanding of certain biblical teachings. Otherwise we

are bound to human ecclesiastical traditions and our own provincial view of Scripture."²³ Note how relativism is introduced into biblical study through the door of cultural hermeneutics and is used to undermine the authority of the Bible by asserting that the worldview of the writers of Scripture is entirely different from the worldview of the contemporary interpreter and reader of Scripture.

B. Worldviews: Scripture's and man's culturally conditioned

When we talk about the Scripture's worldview, we need to distinguish between the basic message of Scripture, which is law and gospel, and the historical settings of the Old and New Testaments in which that divine message was recorded by the inspired writers. The worldview of Scripture is its divine message, not the historical setting. The latter is only the external vehicle in which and by which God communicates with mankind. Of course, anyone who does not believe God when he says that all the words of the Bible are his by inspiration will have trouble accepting the historical setting as only an external vehicle. Anyone who believes that the Bible as a whole or in part is not God's inspired Word will see the historical setting as part of its substance instead of only the external vehicle.

The basic message of Scripture is universal because it centers in what the just and holy God has done in his love and grace for all mankind: 1) All mankind is conceived and born in sin; sins daily in thought, word, and deed; falls short of the perfection which God's law requires; and is eternally condemned. 2) All mankind is redeemed and justified by Jesus' atoning life and death, and so has the perfection which God's law requires unless this gospel is rejected in unbelief. 3) It is the continuing, joyful task of all whom the Holy Spirit has brought to faith in Jesus to share this message with all mankind so that all may believe and live with God forever in heaven.

The Holy Spirit inspired men at various times and places over the span of more than a thousand years to record this message for mankind. Yes, these men wrote in their own languages. Yes, these men, as they wrote, often reflected the customs, idioms, and figures of speech prevalent at the time and place in which they wrote. But the Bible is still totally God's Word, not simply the words of men. "In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways" (He 1:1). For this reason the substance of the writings of these men is not their own thoughts or thoughts derived from their social contexts. Rather, the Spirit guided each in the use of his language and the inclusion of customs and figures of speech from his culture so that nothing he wrote would deny, conflict with, undermine, or cloud the divine message.

The inspired writers also deny that the basic message they communicated from God reflects the human worldview of their time. "We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us. This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom, but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words" (1 Co 2:12,13). The language, the customs, and the figures of speech used by the biblical writers do reflect the social context in which they wrote, but these are only the outward, human vehicles by which the divine message is communicated to all mankind, including us in the contemporary world.

The conflict which exists, therefore, is not a conflict of a supposed biblical worldview (i.e., a worldview purportedly drawn from the social and scientific context of the men who wrote the Bible) and the contemporary worldview. Rather, the conflict is a conflict between the divine message of Scripture and the worldview of natural man. Because of mankind's lost condition, any worldview which reflects the thoughts of the unregenerate heart and mind of man will be in total conflict with the worldview of Scripture. Man by nature will

²³Alan F. Johnson, "A Response to Problems of Normativeness in Scripture: Culture Versus Permanent" in *Hermeneutics, Inerrancy and the Bible*, Earl Rademacher and Robert Preus, eds. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), p 267.

not submit to God's law. "I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature....Those who live according to their sinful nature have their minds set on what that nature desires....The mind of sinful man is death . . . because the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so" (Ro 7:18; 8:5-7). The message of the gospel does not fare better in any human culture. Paul reminds us in 1 Corinthians 1:23 that the message of the cross is "a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles."

Yes, there are things in human cultures that can be morally neutral (clothing, housing, utensils for eating, etc.) When it comes to making moral decisions as such, however, natural mankind's thinking will inevitably end up as Paul describes it in Ephesians 4:18,19: "They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts. Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, with a continual lust for more." It is just because of the hostile, perverted, and perverting worldview of natural mankind that God put up a "barrier" which was a "dividing wall" (Eph 2:14) between Israel and the rest of the nations. God wanted them to be a holy people, set apart for God, and thus a beacon shining forth the glory of the merciful and gracious God who was working out the salvation of all nations through this chosen nation. That is also why the apostle Paul wrote to the people living in the capital city of the Roman Empire and writes to us, "Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind" (Ro 12:2).

The claim of historical relativists that the worldview of Scripture is culture-bound and as a result obscure to one degree or another for people living in contemporary cultures is nothing but a smokescreen of the devil to undermine the authority of God's Word. Yes, we know that portions of Scripture are historically conditioned and not universally applicable. But this does not make anything in Scripture so culture-bound that the contemporary interpreter needs to replace the authority of Scripture with his own judgments and conclusions drawn either from extra-biblical data or from restrictions such as "cultural universals" or subjectively determined "explicitly universal formulations." Instead, the authority of Scripture needs to be upheld by applying the Reformation principle of letting Scripture interpret Scripture also in determining the role of the historical setting in interpretation.

C. Letting the principle, "Scripture interprets Scripture," determine the role of the historical setting in the interpretation of Scripture

Inspiration gives Scripture an essential unity and clarity so that the Bible can be understood and interpreted on its own terms. God communicates with us in his Word by using the historical setting of the inspired human writer. Since, however, these men "spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Pe 1:21), the historical setting did not distort or relativize the divine message God was speaking through them. Therefore, the historical setting does not undermine the clarity or authority of Scripture either. The meaning of God's Word is single and does not change in substance from one time or place to another because its basic message of law and gospel addresses the relationship of God to all mankind of every time and culture. "Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation" (Mk 16:15). "You have been born . . . through the living and enduring word of God. For `all men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord stands forever" (1 Pe 1:23-25).

The meaning of a passage of God's Word is clear also because all of the immediate and wider context of Scripture is also God's Word, and by these contexts God himself makes clear to us what the words mean in any given passage. "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path" (Ps 119:105). God's Word is clear not just for the "expert" armed with all his knowledge or for the mentally mature, but it is also clear for the uneducated and the infant. "The statutes of the Lord are trustworthy, making wise the simple" (Ps 19:7). "From

infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus" (2 Tm 3:15).

Yes, there are some things in Scripture that are hard to understand in and of themselves or that speak of future events we cannot yet comprehend. The biblical writers themselves acknowledge this. "The prophets . . . searched intently and with the greatest care, trying to find out the time and the circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow" (1 Pe 1:10,11). "His [Paul's] letters contain some things that are hard to understand" (2 Pe 3:16). Usually, however, our difficulty in understanding is not the obscurity of the words because of the historical setting from which they come. Our difficulty in understanding comes because of our sinful nature and the consequent lack of spiritual knowledge and understanding, or because the things spoken of are miracles or glorious things that are beyond our human reason or experience.

In summary, then, we need to remember that sound interpretation is absolutely essential for relevant application. If Scripture is interpreted wrongly, then the application will also be faulty. But we do not need a new process of interpretation in our day in order to discover the meaning of the Bible for our contemporary setting. The process of interpretation restored by Luther in the Reformation is still the only safe and true process: Let Scripture interpret Scripture. The process is simple:

- Use the grammatical/literary context to determine the literal, normal sense. The immediate context is vital because it defines the meaning of the individual words more narrowly and establishes the relationship of words and clauses for us. The wider context of all of Scripture is also essential because the other passages of Scripture that are truly parallel passages (i.e., speaking about the same thing and using the same or similar words) give us the meaning God would have us take from each passage instead of compelling us to guess at the meaning or even end up distorting the meaning to our own destruction (2 Pe 3:16).
- Use the historical setting to add clarity or depth to the literal, normal sense of the words (not to alter or change their meaning). The historical setting adds clarity or depth to the meaning because it puts the abstract words of Scripture into a concrete setting as we see the meaning of the words for real people in real life situations. Extra-biblical data, too, may add clarity or depth to the literal, normal sense of the words. But extra-biblical data cannot, without replacing the authority of God's Word itself, be used to set aside a rationale which Scripture itself gives for a biblical statement or be used to dispute and change or even deny the pure, natural, and simple sense of the inspired words.
- The first step in dealing with the historical setting in interpretation should not be to try to convert the historical setting of Scripture to a contemporary setting (e.g., convert the setting of the parable of the Good Samaritan from the road to Jericho to a modern urban setting). Rather, the first step should be to explain the historical setting so the contemporary reader or hearer reads or hears these words in the same setting as the original reader or hearer. If the biblical idiom is not intelligible in its original form to the contemporary reader or hearer, give the substance of its meaning in the contemporary setting without adding or subtracting from the meaning of the original.
- As the final step in interpretation, show how the meaning applies today in the same or similar situations as that of the biblical setting. If the meaning is culturally conditioned in any way, show how Scripture itself indicates that this is the case.

II. How Scripture indicates what is historically conditioned

Now that we have probed the role of the historical setting in interpretation we are ready to examine how the Spirit in Scripture itself, not the conclusions of man based on the insights deduced from data gathered outside of Scripture, indicates what in Scripture is historically conditioned.

There are three basic approaches which have been suggested for determining what in Scripture is historically conditioned. Briefly put, they are: 1) Everything in Scripture is universally applicable unless Scripture itself clearly indicates it is not. 2) Everything in Scripture is historically conditioned unless Scripture itself clearly indicates it is not. 3) Each passage needs to be considered individually to determine whether it is universally applicable (God is giving directions to all the people in the world or to all believers) or historically conditioned (God is giving directions to a limited group of people in the world or to a group of believers because they are living in a specific time and/or place). As we look at these three approaches, we will see that each has certain things to recommend it, but that the third one is preferable because it best enables us to let Scripture interpret Scripture.

The first approach (Everything in Scripture is universally applicable unless Scripture itself clearly indicates it is not) wants to emphasize above all else that everything in the Bible is God's Word. It is felt that the divine nature of Scripture is best safeguarded by insisting that everything in the Bible is addressed to all mankind in general unless God clearly spells out that a given passage applies to an audience limited by time and/or space.

While one sympathizes with its goal of safeguarding the fact that the Bible is God's Word, there are several problems with this approach that we cannot ignore. It lays down a guiding principle which Scripture itself does not support, namely, that everything in Scripture is to be taken as being spoken to all people of every time and place. Certain portions of the Old Testament, however, are clearly labeled by Scripture as being spoken only to Israel and applying only until the promised Messiah would come. Also, this approach ignores the basic way in which God chose to reveal his Word to us. God does not give us his Word in the form of general theological treatises in which he is always speaking to all people or to all Christians. Instead, he chose to reveal his Word by writers who spoke to people in particular times and places. The books of Moses along with the Old Testament poetic and prophetic books speak to real people in real life settings. Although the four Gospels are addressed to more general audiences, yet it seems each has a particular audience in mind also. The Pauline and General Epistles even more clearly address a special group of people (e.g., James, Hebrews) or people in a given place and often for a reason that is peculiar to that place (Romans, Galatians, etc.).

Since the basic message of Scripture is one of law and gospel addressed to all mankind, this first approach might work if one developed enough restrictions to identify exactly when the Bible is not speaking to all mankind. This approach, however, emphasizes one basic truth about the Bible, that all of it is God's Word, and tends to downplay the importance of another basic truth, that all of God's Word has a historical setting. In order to overcome this fault, one has to develop many rules to ascertain when Scripture "clearly" indicates something is not universally applicable. This need to multiply rules also tends to make room for some obvious subjectivity in applying many of the rules.

The problem with the second approach (Everything in Scripture is historically conditioned unless Scripture itself clearly indicates it is not) is the reverse of the first approach. This approach emphasizes above all else that God's Word has a historical setting but downplays other basic truths: that all of it is God's Word and that its message of sin and grace is addressed to all people. In order to overcome this fault, this approach like the first has to develop many rules to ascertain when Scripture "clearly" indicates something is not historically conditioned. This need to multiply rules again tends to make room for some obvious subjectivity in applying many of the rules.

Perhaps several examples can help illustrate the room for subjectivity in each of the first two approaches. One proposed guideline says that what is normative in Scripture are the universal principles which lie behind the words of the Bible. While this guideline underscores the authority of Scripture in general, it makes room for subjectivity when it says that it is not the words of Scripture themselves that are normative but only the principles that lie behind them. Some use this guideline to deny the authority of specific statements such as those of Paul in regard to homosexuality (Ro 1). Others employ this guideline to brush aside some of the applications of principles made in Scripture that are just as appropriate today as they were in biblical times. For example, in 1 Timothy 2 Paul states the general principle that women are not to have authority over men and applies this principle by stating that woman is not to teach a man in a way in which she is wielding authority over a man. Some use this guideline to set aside the application, and then, because the application no longer is valid, they in turn begin to cast doubt on the principle.

Another proposed guideline that illustrates the room for subjectivity in the first two approaches: Some say the only authoritative parts of Scripture are those based on the nature of God or the order of creation. This guideline avoids the weakness of the preceding one by allowing specific teachings as well as general principles to be normative. Such a guideline can be helpful at times to distinguish a principle from its application in a particular setting for example, in interpreting Paul's words about food offered to idols or about celibacy (1 Cor 7,8). But what about something like the Lord's Supper? Since Scripture does not indicate that this sacrament is based on the nature of God or on the order of creation, is it therefore historically conditioned and not applicable to believers in our day?

The third approach (Each passage needs to be considered individually to determine whether it is universally applicable or historically conditioned) is preferable because its guiding principle and the accompanying guidelines give full attention to all the basic truths about the nature of Scripture: 1) It is all God's Word; 2) Its basic message is addressed to all people; 3) It has many historical settings. This approach is also preferable because, instead of setting down one overarching principle and then making rules for the exceptions to this principle (as the first two approaches do), it deals with each passage individually on the basis of several guidelines that let Scripture interpret Scripture.

One of two basic questions needs to be answered in regard to each passage. If it is a moral command, is it addressed to all the people in the world or just to a limited number of people? If it is a gospel command addressed to believers (a command spoken to the new man in the Christian that reveals God's saving will while at the same time giving the Christian the ability to do what God encourages [cf. WLQ, Vol 82, pp 24ff]), is it addressed to them because they are believers or only because they live in a certain place at a certain time? To answer these questions we need to use guidelines which objectively distinguish between a principle and an application.

A principle is either a generalization in which God tells mankind what to think or say or do (e.g., "Do not steal!") or the rationale which underlies a command (e.g., in 1 Cor 9:9,10 the command not to muzzle an ox when it is treading out grain is used to illustrate the principle that Paul is developing, namely, that ministers of the Word have the right to expect support from those they serve with the Word). An application is an example of a principle as it is put into practice in daily life (e.g., Ac 4:34,35, the Christians in the congregation at Jerusalem loving their neighbors as themselves by selling personal possessions or property and sharing the proceeds with the needy) or a general statement of how God wanted a principle to be put into practice (e.g., 1 Cor 8:13, not eating meat offered to idols if doing so might cause a fellow Christian to fall into sin).

A principle and its application need to be clearly distinguished one from the other. Otherwise, an application may be turned into a principle and bind people in the slavery of man-made rules (e.g., the command in Pr 23:31 not to gaze on the wine when it is red is turned into a command not to drink an alcoholic beverage at

all) or an application is substituted for the principle and what God really commands is limited to one application of the principle (e.g., the explanation of the Missouri Synod's position on the role of man and woman which uses the applications of the principle in 1 Co 14 [women are to not to rise and speak a personal message to the Corinthian congregation when they assemble for worship] and 1 Tm 2 [women are not to teach men in an authoritative way] to teach that the principle is only that women are not to serve in the office of the pastorate in a congregation [cf. *Concordia Journal*, April 1992]).

How do we let Scripture interpret Scripture so that principles are clearly distinguished from their applications? The answer is important because the same guidelines that help us make this distinction will also help us distinguish when God is addressing all mankind from when he is speaking only to a limited number of people. These guidelines will also help us distinguish when he is addressing all Christians from when he is speaking to Christians of a particular time and place.

It will be no surprise to hear that all the guidelines by which we let Scripture make these two distinctions for us have to do with either the immediate or wider context of a passage in Scripture. We will state the three guidelines and briefly explain and illustrate them.

Does the immediate context limit who is addressed by the statement?

There are many times when the immediate context indicates that the words of a passage are addressed to a single person or a limited group of people. In such cases it is obvious that the statement is not one that applies to all mankind or to all Christians. On the other hand, the speaker or writer may address all people or all Christians, or his statement may be couched in general terms so that it speaks not only to his immediate audience but also to all people or all Christians. In 1 Timothy 5:17, Paul tells Timothy, "The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching." Although these words are written to Timothy in regard to the elders with whom he was ministering, nothing in the context indicates that Paul means this statement to apply only to the elders whom Timothy knew. Rather, the words of the verse are couched in general terms (the generic article with "elders" and the use of the present, attributive participle to generalize the description of the elders as "those whose work is"). So the statement is one that applies to all faithful elders as well as to Timothy's faithful elders. Contrast this with 1 Timothy 1:3. Paul tells Timothy, "Stay there in Ephesus so that you may command certain men not to teach false doctrines any longer." Here the command to stay in Ephesus clearly is limited to Timothy and so does not apply to anyone else.

Or, take the words of 1 Corinthians 2:1-5 in which Paul describes how he proclaimed God's Word to the Corinthians: he resolved to know nothing except Jesus Christ and him crucified; he spoke not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power. The preceding verses, however, and those which follow clearly indicate that Paul is speaking in general about the content, the preaching, and the effect of God's Word. So, although these verses use the pronouns I and you, they speak to a wider group than just Paul and the Corinthians. Contrast this with 1 Corinthians 11:33f where Paul tells the Corinthians to wait for each other when they come together to eat. The context (vv 20-22) shows that Paul is speaking about the disorderly conduct of the Corinthian congregation and so is addressing only the Corinthians, not Christians in general.

Does the rationale for a statement in the immediate context limit it in any way?

The reason given for a command or a statement is another clue by which the Holy Spirit indicates whether the words are universally applicable as a principle or whether they are historically conditioned or only the application of a principle. The rationale can indicate whether or not the statement is God's holy will for all people of all time, or whether or not the statement is a gospel command given to all Christians.

In 1 Corinthians 9:14 Paul states that the people who benefit from the gospel should provide for the material needs of those who preach the gospel to them. The rationale he gives for this statement is simple and direct: "The Lord has commanded." In the preceding verses (w 1-13) as Paul speaks about this subject, he gives additional rationale by citing examples from everyday life: a soldier does not have to take care of his own expenses; a vineyard caretaker, a shepherd, and a farmer who plows and threshes all receive a return for their efforts; both the Old Testament temple worker and those who offered the sacrifices received their food from their work in the temple. Paul also quotes the law of Moses which prohibited the muzzling of the ox when it was treading out grain and argues that if God said this about oxen, it applies to human beings all the more. Obviously, the rationale in this context makes it abundantly clear that providing for those who preach the gospel to them is an obligation of all Christians, not just the Corinthians.

On the other hand, in 1 Corinthians 16:2 Paul urges each of the Corinthians to set aside a sum of money on the first day of every week in keeping with his or her income. The rationale he gives is not that this is the way the Lord commands that Christians plan and carry out their offerings, but the rationale is this: "so that when I come no collection will have to be made." Paul explains this rationale further in verse 3 when he indicates that immediately upon his arrival he wanted to send the gift of money to Jerusalem. In 2 Corinthians 9 he also indicates that he wanted their gift to be as large as possible in order to help the Christians in Jerusalem in their great need. These two facts from the immediate and wider context confirm what the rationale in verse 2 suggests, namely, that Paul's urging of the Corinthians to set aside a gift on the first day of the week was a special directive for this special offering. It ought not be used as a command of God given to all Christians. The only way this directive might be used is that, like the tithe in the Old Testament, it can serve as an example which individual Christians might adopt on their own as a way of planning and carrying out regular, generous, and cheerful offerings for the Lord's work or for charity.

Note how in 1 Corinthians 11 Paul makes it clear in verses 13, 14, and 16 that the words he has been speaking about women having long hair (or wearing a head covering), and men the opposite, apply only to the Christians in Corinth because none of the other churches are living in a setting where this custom has the significance it does in Corinth (WLQ, Vol 78, No 2, pp 99-102). The rationale Paul gives the Corinthians is the meaning the local custom had for all women and men living in Corinth. So, the rationale indicates that this directive about long hair is limited to Corinth. We should add the caution, however, that it must be explicitly stated in Scripture that a local situation limits a statement of Scripture; otherwise an interpreter could limit virtually any biblical text by suggesting a local circumstance that may lie behind a passage.

In contrast to the limited directive in 1 Corinthians 11 about long hair, note the rationale Paul gives in this very same chapter for women to give glory to men as their head (which was the significance of the Corinthian custom of women wearing long hair). "For man did not come from woman, but woman from man; neither was man created for woman, but woman for man. For this reason, and because of the angels, the woman ought to have a sign of authority on her head" (vv 8-10). This rationale points out that man's headship is not limited to Corinth. Rather, it is a relationship of all men and all women as God established it in creation by how and why he created woman, and it is also a matter of concern for God's ministering angels who themselves always carry out God's will and are deeply concerned with how Christians on earth do God's will.

Does the immediate or wider context of Scripture limit a statement in scope or time?

Sometimes the immediate context may not limit a statement of Scripture and so it may seem to be a directive for all people or for all Christians, but then the wider context of Scripture indicates that the statement is limited in scope or time. The classic example of this, of course, is the Old Testament Mosaic Law. Some people argue that it is a law clearly given by God and so has universal application, at least in part (e.g., the

moral law, some of the civil laws, and the Sabbath of the ceremonial law). However Scripture makes it clear that the entire Mosaic law was limited in scope to the people of Israel and in time until Christ came and completed the work of redemption. Naaman, for example, was not required to observe the same regulations as the Jews. With regard to time, Ephesians 2:14b,15 states, "[He] has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations." Hebrews 7:12 tells us, "When there is a change of the priesthood, there must also be a change of the law," and Hebrews 10:18 says "Where these [sins and lawless acts] have been forgiven, there is no longer any sacrifice for sin." Note also Galatians 3:24,25 in the *New Evangelical Translation*: "The Law has been our guardian until Christ came.... But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian."

Sometimes the statement is made that only those statements of the Old Testament which are repeated in the New Testament apply to us. This assertion confuses things. The proper way to say it would be this: Anything in the Old Testament or New Testament which is part of the Mosaic law is not universally applicable. Only when Scripture clearly states that something in the Mosaic law also applies to all people of all time does it become a universal principle.

None of the ceremonial laws apply to us. God's instructions about the Old Testament tabernacle and the later temple are not binding on us. Since they reflect how God wanted his Old Testament people to worship him, we might choose to imitate some things such as making our "house of God" a beautiful building like the Old Testament temple or using musical instruments in our worship. We are not, however, bound to do so. None of the civil laws apply to us. Some of the civil laws in the Mosaic law are helpful to us only in that they indicate God's view of things which lies behind a law (e.g., Ex 21:22,23 shows us that an unborn child is a human life because God ordered that the person who caused the death of a child in a woman's womb should be put to death according to the principle of the Mosaic code, "a life for a life"). The moral law in the Sinaitic Covenant was a special form of the moral law which was applicable only to Israel until Christ would come. Some applications of the moral law in the Sinaitic Covenant applied only to Israel (e.g., the Sabbath day). The aspects that apply to us are only those that the rest of Scripture makes clear are God's holy will for all people of all time.

There are also other passages where either the immediate or wider context of Scripture limits the scope of a statement. Take, for example, Paul's words about celibacy. In 1 Corinthians 7:7,8 he urges that the unmarried and widows remain unmarried so they can serve God full-time without the distractions of taking care of a family. But he immediately concedes that God did not give all people the gift that he had, namely, to remain unmarried and not burn with passion. To all those whom God created with a strong sexual desire he says it is better to marry than to burn with passion. Thus Paul's directive to remain unmarried does apply to some Christians, but the context indicates it is limited only to those to whom God has given the gift of being able to do so.

Another example of verses which apply to a limited number of Christians is those which set down qualifications for those serving in the public ministry of the church (1 Timothy 3:1-13, overseers and deacons). Many of the virtues listed in this passage apply to all Christians. But some of the virtues listed, and thus this specific list of virtues, apply only to those serving in the public ministry.

By using these guidelines we can determine whether a statement applies to all people of all time or a limited number of people for a limited time, whether a gospel command is given to all Christians (i.e., a command given to Christians simply as Christians) or to a limited number of Christians (i.e., because they live in a certain place and time or because of some special qualifications); or whether a statement is a general principle or only an application of a principle.

In addition to these three guidelines, it might be helpful to state briefly two cautions and then also explain and illustrate each.

General truths are often illustrated by historical events but are not established by them.

Sometimes interpreters try to establish general truths from historical events. For example, the way Abraham went about finding a wife for Isaac is used to establish the truths that a Christian ought to seek only a believing wife and that God will lead those Christians who do so to find the right one. The life of Samson is used to establish the general truth that those who marry an unbelieving wife will bring ruin on themselves and perhaps also on others. But if we take the context of these two biblical texts into account, we realize that these accounts are not recorded in Scripture to establish general truths. They do, however, illustrate the truth of the general statement made in Proverbs 3:5,6 that God wants us to trust in him and not lean on our own understanding. He promises that those who do so will find that he "will make your paths straight." So while these two biblical texts can provide encouragement and admonition for Christian young people by illustrating the truth of the Proverbs passage in the area of marriage, they do not establish universal truths about marriage.

Another example is the speaking in tongues which took place in the early New Testament church. That this happened does not establish speaking in tongues as a universal sign of the Holy Spirit's presence in a Christian, a congregation, or a church body. The wider context of the New Testament indicates that this gift is not vital to the spiritual life of the individual Christian or to the continuing edification of a group of Christians (1 Cor 12-14).

General principles are often illustrated by specific commands which are not principles.

Not all the commands in Scripture are general principles. The three guidelines given earlier remind us that the people addressed, the rationale, or the wider context of Scripture may indicate whether the scope of a statement is limited or general. General principles are often illustrated by specific commands. Since this question seems to cause the most confusion in this whole matter, it might be good to stress this point as a special caution.

When Jesus says: "If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles" (Mt 5:41), it is obvious in context that though this is a specific command, it is only an illustration of Jesus' earlier command not to resist an evil person (v 39). Jesus is not saying that if a person forces you to go five miles with him, then the principle no longer applies simply because that person forces you to go more than a mile. Since the command to go two miles is only an illustration of the general principle, the principle also applies to any distance someone might force you to go.

The command of Paul and Peter to the Christians of various congregations to greet one another with a holy kiss or a kiss of love (Ro 16:16; 1 Th 5:26; 1 Co 16:20; 2 Co 13:12; 1 Pe 5:14) also fits under this caution. This exhortation is part of the final greetings of all these letters in which Paul or Peter express their love for the Christians to whom they are writing and urge them to do the same for one another. The wider context of the New Testament indicates that this is not the only way the apostles encouraged Christians to show the love they had for one another, but it was one way among many. So like the other passages which encourage Christians to show love in specific ways, it is a command which illustrates how the general principle of showing love for one another could be carried out.

Conclusion

We have said a great deal in this essay about how historical relativism undermines the authority of God's Word by asserting that some or even a great deal of what the biblical writers say is historically or culturally conditioned. We have responded by granting that some things in Scripture are historically conditioned, but maintaining that this in no way changes the clarity or authority of the Bible.

What are the key points on which this assertion is based? Two points in particular stand out. One is that verbal inspiration means the historical settings are not part of the timeless message of God's Word but only an external vehicle in which and through which God communicated the basic scriptural message of sin and grace to all mankind. Inspiration means that the Spirit guided each writer so that nothing from a human culture would mar the clarity of his Word or undermine its authority. The other key point is that when we follow the Lutheran principle of letting Scripture interpret itself, we can identify and properly interpret anything in Scripture that is historically conditioned. The immediate and wider contexts of Scripture determine the meaning of the words of Scripture. Extra-biblical information is used only to clarify or add depth to the meaning determined for us by the context of Scripture.

It is only when one lets Scripture interpret Scripture that the interpreter can avoid injecting anything subjective into the interpretation. It is only when one lets the immediate and wider context of Scripture determine the meaning of a passage that the interpreter can say with confidence, "This is what the Lord says in this passage." This, therefore, is also the only way for the interpreter to determine objectively what in Scripture is universally applicable and what in Scripture is historically conditioned.