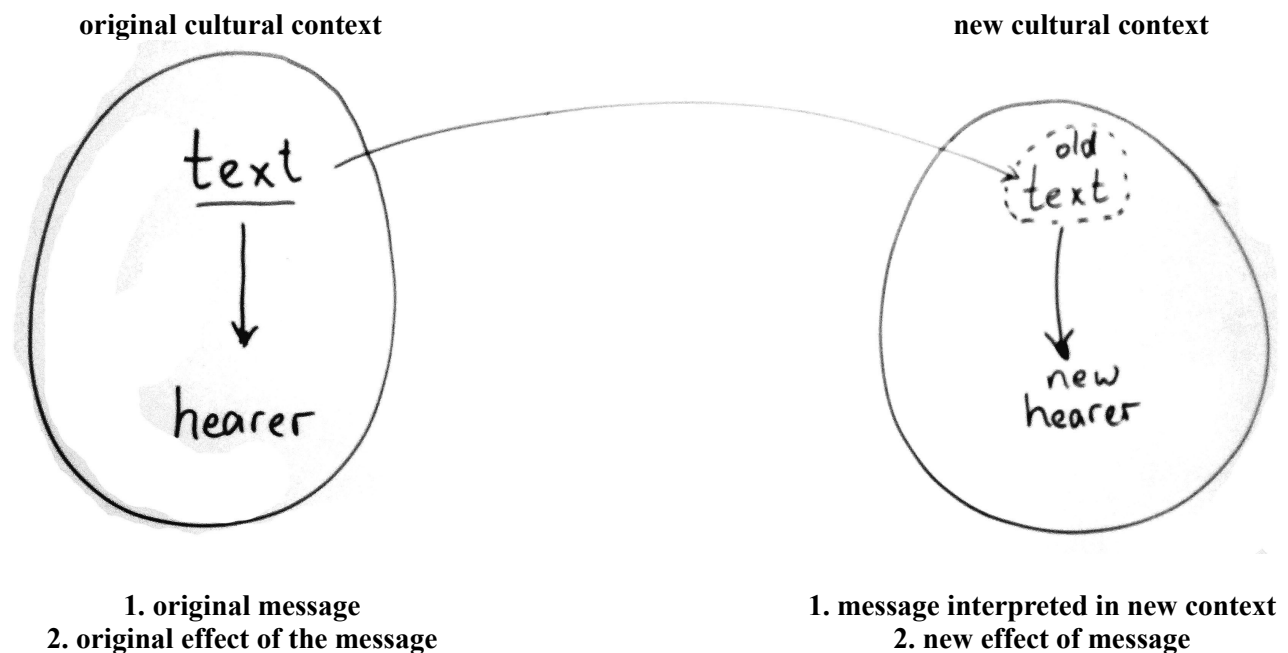


Interpreting the Bible in its Context

Rev. Dr. R. D. Anderson (last edited 13 November 2016)

What follows are merely a few notes related to modern trends in hermeneutics (the study of interpretation). One thing we all need to realise is that in order to understand a text fully, we must understand at least something of the cultural context in which it was originally given. Some texts can, naturally, be quite reasonably understood apart from any knowledge of the context, while others are quite obscure unless we understand the cultural context in which they were given. Whenever we read a contemporary text, be that a book, magazine or billboard, we automatically interpret it within the parameters of our own cultural context without even thinking. The difficulties arise when we read a text which was originally given in a completely different cultural context.¹

We can illustrate matters as follows:



The best way to understand the point being made is by way of several illustrations.

In Ephesians 5:18 Paul says: *Do not get drunk with wine*. If we did not know the original context of this command we might think that it could be alright to get drunk on beer or whisky, as long as one does not get drunk with wine. We might perhaps theorise that wine is isolated like this because it is used in the sacrifices in the temple. To become drunk *with wine* might therefore be considered as some kind of specially bad sacrilege. We appropriately understand why Paul mentions wine only when we realise that in the first century Roman empire wine was by far the most common alcoholic drink. In addition, we realise from the rest of Scripture, that drunkenness itself is the matter being forbidden. When we understand the original message in its original cultural context, we can determine that the original *effect* of this message was to warn people against the tendency to abuse alcohol. In this example, the message, once appropriately understood has the same effect in our own cultural context, given that there is still a tendency among people in our own time and culture to abuse alcohol. In other words, when the original message is rightly understood within its *own* cultural context (not getting drunk by means of commonly available alcoholic beverage), we are able to think about transferring that message to our own *new* cultural context. In this example, the new cultural context is very similar with respect to the point that the message is making.

A second example will illustrate the difficulties which arise when the cultural context has radically changed with respect to the message. God says in the second commandment: *You shall not make for yourself a carved*

¹ One aspect of interpretation not addressed in these notes, nor in the illustrations, is the question of the person(s) addressed by the text. I have deliberately avoided this question to keep the matter which I wish to emphasise clearer.

image. If we also have the rest of the commandment we will immediately understand that the commandment concerns images to be used in the worship of God. In the original cultural context, such images were used to assure the worshippers of the presence of the god (or God) which was thought to come and inhabit the image. In this way prayer (which in the ancient world could only be brought when accompanied by sacrifice) would be directed towards an image that one could see with the eyes and in which the deity was thought to have come to inhabit in order to make contact with humans. Given this cultural context, the commandment was quite *counter-cultural*, asking the Israelites to *trust* that God would hear their prayers even though they were not permitted to see him. They were to understand that God is greater than any image could possibly portray. Now while we may understand the message, having studied the text in its original cultural context, the effect of the message in our own cultural context is quite different. Modern western man does not see any need for an image in order to worship or pray to God. In fact, we usually don't even specifically appreciate the need for a sacrifice in order to pray (forgetting the fact that it is Christ's sacrifice on the cross that gives us the ability to pray any time, anywhere to God). In other words, while the commandment in its original context combated a very real temptation, it falls rather flat in a modern context. Only when we ponder what motivated God to give this commandment do we begin to appreciate something of its meaning for us today. However, many modern interpreters would encourage us to read Scripture in such a way that the original *effect* of the commandment upon the first hearers be recreated in us. They would argue that the *meaning* is the sum of the original *message* + *cultural context*. But a step is then added, for meaning often then gets turned into the *effect* of the original message. When this is the goal, often the only way to cater for a changed cultural context, while keeping the original effect, is to change the *message* itself. In this case, the original effect of the command was, as stated, quite counter-cultural requiring a counter-intuitive form of trust. One might suggest that we could achieve the original effect by interpreting the command: *You shall not make for yourself a carved image* in our context as *You shall not pray with your eyes closed and your hands folded*. This would have the effect of challenging hearers to pray in a way that is quite counter-cultural and requires a counter-intuitive trust that God in heaven will hear them without this special inner-spiritual form of concentration. Is this not also the effect of the original commandment? My point is, of course, not to suggest that this is the most appropriate way of recreating something of the original effect, let alone to suggest that this is the way we ought to interpret the second commandment. But it illustrates how many modern interpreters wish to interpret the Bible's message for today.

Somewhat surprisingly, we can also find this method of interpretation among authors who are usually known for being 'fundamentalist' Bible believers. Years ago (I believe it was 1991) I was given a book by Chuck Swindoll to read on grace. In this book, Swindoll was dealing with Paul's Gospel of salvation by grace alone, apart from works of the law. At one point he argued that unless we were preaching the Gospel of grace in such a way that our hearers were inclined to have the same wrong reaction as those of Paul (namely, *let us then sin that grace may abound*, cf. Rom. 6:1) we were not preaching the Gospel of grace! Rather unthinkingly, Swindoll was applying a very modern (and liberal) method of interpretation (= 'hermeneutic'). He was encouraging us to go for the same *effect* as the original message had, rather than understanding the message itself from its original cultural context.

The report of the Dutch deputies on *Male/female in the Church* to Synod Ede 2014 rather infamously took the same route.² The deputies argued that Paul in 1 Timothy 2:11-15 was warning against the dominant behaviour of women against men. But they noted that within the original cultural context, Paul's command had the same message as the moral philosophers of his time and also reflected the cultural mores of his time. This meant that Paul's command had the effect of making a link to his non-Christian environment. Non-Christians could readily agree that disorderliness (by dominant women) brings disgrace. This gave Paul's command cultural credibility. However, when we import that same message into our own cultural context, it no longer resonates with non-Christian culture. In fact, instead of forming a link to non-Christian culture, it serves to isolate the church even more from its surrounding culture. For modern non-Christian culture *inequality* (which is what Paul is commanding) *brings disgrace*. This leads to the conclusion that the same message in its new cultural context no longer has cultural credibility. The deputies then argued that this *effect* of cultural credibility needed to be reproduced if we were to interpret Paul adequately in our own cultural context. To achieve this, the message itself needed to be reinterpreted and equality of men and women in church offices allowed for. The reversal of the ancient cultural context in respect of our own new cultural context requires (in the view of the deputies) the reversal of the message itself! The process of interpretation and thinking leading up to this result was deemed to be led by the Holy Spirit, and the resultant interpretation

² See particularly pages 17-20 of this report.

was therefore viewed as the ‘work of the Holy Spirit’.³

Given such radical applications, it is understandable that those wishing to simply follow God’s Word not infrequently desire to retreat into a position where the study of the cultural context is simply denied. It is then argued that Scripture must interpret Scripture and nothing outside of Scripture may encroach upon the interpretation of God’s Word. After all, do we not confess in the Belgic Confession (art. 7) that: “We believe that this Holy Scripture fully contains the will of God and that all that man must believe in order to be saved is sufficiently taught therein”? While such an approach may sound quite pious it is at the same time closing one’s eyes to reality and in effect shutting oneself off from the due diligence that our Lord expects in the handling of his Holy Word. It is true, of course, that Scripture interprets Scripture. And it is also true that for someone having no access to any other documentation or context, Scripture itself would be sufficient to teach a person all that is necessary for salvation. But one of the reasons that Scripture itself would be sufficient is that by comparing Scripture with Scripture we are enabled to form a fair idea of the cultural background in the time at which the revelation of Scripture was given. In other words, Scripture itself provides much of the basics of the original cultural context which we need to interpret it. The background which Scripture supplies can be further complemented by our knowledge of the relevant culture (or more accurately expressed, cultures)⁴ from other documentation and archaeology.

The radical applications illustrated here easily lend themselves to a natural abhorrence of the method described (which is appropriate). However, without realising it, we ourselves can all too readily fall into the same trap. Recently in Australia, one of the congregations asked for advice from ministers and professors both in Australia and Canada on whether the teenagers of a family who had come to faith ought to be baptised together with the parents. A number of those who responded argued that only children under the age of around about 12 years should be baptised together with the parents. These respondents reasoned that the message of the Bible was that circumcision and baptism was to be given to the whole family, including slaves and children of all ages who were present in the home. The original cultural context, however, was one in which fathers had more direct authority over older children and older children could be expected to submit to their parents – even in such drastic choices such as religion. The *effect* of household baptism in the first century seems therefore to have been one in which families were kept together in peaceful harmony in the bond of the covenant. The current cultural context, where individualism has become much more dominant, is such that submission and obedience cannot always be expected of teenage children. In this context it is possible that the sacrament may be profaned. Therefore, given that the biblical message is now speaking to a quite different cultural context, the *effect* will potentially be radically different. By compelling household baptism families could be torn asunder or teenagers could be baptised who show no signs of faith and obedience and are unwilling even to attend church regularly. A desire to retain the same *effect* provokes these respondents into changing the *message* – given the change in the cultural context. Regardless of what might be the correct course of action, I submit that this *method* of reasoning is no different to that of the deputies in Holland arguing for women in office.

³ I’d be more inclined to think in terms of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit at this point.

⁴ It is often forgotten that ancient civilisation also had sub-cultures formed by different ethnic, social or religious groups just as modern society today.