

Insider Movements and the Bible: An Exercise in Mere Hermeneutics

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Introduction

The discussion about IM is complex, multi-disciplined and even somewhat clanish. A point of contention may begin as a question of exegesis only to later end as an issue of missiology, church history or even just common sense. An individual's stated position on one point might be taken as agreement with a larger theological agenda, whether this was intended or not. Because of this complexity I want to be very clear about the scope of this paper. My sole concern is to point out some hermeneutical problems that I see in this discussion. To do this I ask the reader to join me for a moment in ignoring the mass of implications and associations that are tangled up in this discussion and just look at a few specific examples from the mere perspective of biblical hermeneutics.

The "biblical" part is important. I am concerned with the principles and premises that control how the Bible is used. This is a discussion about method, not about conclusions. Obviously a method leads to conclusions, but that second step is not my focus here. In order to emphasize this I have purposefully selected examples from both sides of the divide, such that a reader seeking in these pages a position on IM / C5 will very likely come away disoriented. I am coming at this from the perspective of academic biblical studies, where one works hard to ask the very narrow question about the original meaning of the text, regardless of any perceived practical application or theological implication. This method is sometimes maligned as being too impractical or too academic, but I think it has an important place among all the other approaches to scripture that we use to sort out important issues of faith and practice.

Following the lead of D.A. Carson's excellent book, *Exegetical Fallacies*, I will proceed by presenting four *hermeneutical* fallacies which I see at work in the IM / C5 discussion. I will illustrate these from different authors involved in this discussion. No doubt I will commit some of my own along the way as well. I look forward to the input I will receive in Istanbul.

1. Getting too much meaning from historical background

We should never lose sight of the fact that hermeneutics is primarily a literary activity. In Biblical hermeneutics in particular our task is to interpret a text. However, Evangelicals tend to agree that the meaning of the text of Scripture is tied to its original context ("historical grammatical

exegesis”). Because of this we place a great deal of value on historical research and background. The more we understand about the historical and cultural contexts in which Scripture was produced, the better we are equipped to discern the meaning and application of the biblical text.

So far so good. However, there is a point that requires clarification here and which is often neglected: *the value of historical background information is that it helps us interpret the biblical text*. And when I say “interpret” I mean that it helps us to understand what the biblical authors intend to teach. As William Klein *et al.* put it,

The meaning of a text is: *that which the words and grammatical structures of that text disclose about the probable intention of its author / editor and the probable understanding of that text by its intended readers*. It is the meaning those words would have conveyed to the readers at the time they were written by the author or editor.¹

This is a question of biblical authority. The Bible’s teachings and only the Bible’s teachings are normative for faith and practice. The biblical authors were inspired to say something specific when they penned their contributions to Scripture. And it is this specific message that biblical interpretation is concerned with. However, it is not uncommon when exegeting a passage to use background information to add to the explicit teaching of Scripture. When this happens historical background becomes a kind of backdoor authority. Even, perhaps, the proverbial camel that is swallowed to the exclusion of a gnat.

I have seen historical background misused in exegesis in two ways:

1. Reliable historical information is coordinated with Scripture to provide additional insights to the text and to make points which, although not necessarily false or harmful, are not strictly speaking the points that the biblical authors are making.
2. Speculation about what may have happened, or argumentation about what surely must have happened becomes the basis for an interpretation or even the sole point of the exegesis of a passage.

The key again is that historical information ought to help us better interpret what the text intends to teach. Thus, it should help us to recognize what is already there. But it should not add to what the authors are saying, at least not in any kind of normative sense. This distinction can be subtle, perhaps, at times. But the extreme misuses are easy to spot.

Let us begin with a trivial example. I recently participated in a Facebook discussion about a *Christianity Today* article. The article warned preachers preparing for Easter to avoid the exegetical mistake of saying that the crowds in Jerusalem at the time of Jesus’ death were

¹ William W. Klein, Craig L. Blomberg and Robert L. Hubbard, *Introduction to biblical interpretation* (Dallas, TX: Word Pub., 1993), 133. Emphasis original.

fickle, and that this is a lesson about double-mindedness.² It's a common point that most of us have probably heard or even made ourselves: first the crowds celebrate Jesus as the Messiah in the triumphal entry and then within a few days they are calling for his crucifixion. Ah, the fickle human heart! But the problem with getting this meaning from the text is twofold. On the one hand, attention to the progress of the Gospels suggests that the people who welcomed Jesus to Jerusalem were very likely his own followers, perhaps augmented by other Galileans who knew of him. The crowd at the crucifixion, on the other hand, was very likely larger and made up of people from all over the Jewish Diaspora (these are the same people later addressed in Acts 2). So very likely there was not any fickleness happening here, at least not on the crowd level. It was simply a case of two different crowds. However, regardless of this background information, the crucial issue is that the text itself does not make this point about fickleness. It is a conclusion based on observation and historical reconstruction.

One comment on Facebook caught my attention. The user grudgingly agreed with the point, nevertheless adding, "but I don't plan on jettisoning [the lesson about fickleness] altogether since there's no PROOF there weren't some of the same people in both crowds."

It's an odd comment because of the implication. Is this person suggesting that we may teach as biblical anything that might reasonably be true based on historical reconstruction? If this were the case we would surely be tossed about by every wind of historical reconstruction. Used like this, historical background becomes a highway into Scripture through which we may import meaning by the truckload. I am not suggesting that "non-biblical" reconstructions are completely worthless, but I am saying that we need to be sure of how we use them. Historical reconstruction can help us imagine Scripture differently and in so doing we may clue in to legitimate exegetical insights which we have previously missed. However, we must keep our eyes on the prize of exegetical paydirt: What do the authors intend to teach us? This depends most specifically on textual exegesis, not on historical reconstruction.

An example of the kind of historical reconstruction I am describing can be found in one of Kevin Higgin's articles. I have a great deal of respect for Kevin's work, as I do for all the authors I will cite, and I don't intent to imply by this example that I oppose all of his claims. Still, examples must be had if this is to be a credible hermeneutical analysis! In his discussion of the incident in Samaria recounted in John 4, Kevin points to Jesus' statement that true worship is bound to neither Jerusalem or Samaria, but is rather in spirit and truth. Then he notes that

later in John we find Jesus Himself in the Temple. So, what of his statement that true worship would not be in Samaria or in Jerusalem? Clearly his vision of "worship in spirit and truth" (that is neither in Samaria or Jerusalem) did not preclude Him from continuing to worship in Jerusalem, one of the locations He said would not be a place for true worship. And it is logical to assume that the Samaritans did the same after Jesus left their village.

² See Andreas J. Köstenberger and Justin Taylor, "Five Errors to Drop from your Easter Sermon," *Christianity Today*, APRIL 15, 2014. Online at <http://goo.gl/rdmXJ4> (checked June 3, 2014).

Below he adds that after Jesus leaves Samaria the new community “will presumably continue in its prior Samaritan religious life with a major difference: Jesus’ revelation of Himself has changed them.”³

Kevin’s reconstruction seems feasible at first blush. However, I think there are some assumptions here that should be investigated. For one, we know very little about actual Samaritan practice and attendance at the temple in Samaria. Worship at the temple might have been more of a theoretical orientation than an ongoing practice, like it was for Galileans, for example. At least, I would argue for teasing out these details if the reconstruction is going to work, historically speaking.⁴ However, my principal point is that this reconstruction is not strictly speaking “biblical,” so that even if it could be shown to be historically likely, it is still not something Scripture teaches. What is clear, is that it lies outside the scope of John’s inspired agenda to comment on the details of the Samaritan’s continued practice. Therefore, it seems to me that this specific point is not a strong argument in favor of the IM position. It is not so much that we cannot know with certainty what happened, it is simply that what happened lies outside of the scope of what the Bible teaches.

Stuart Caldwell similarly argues that John 4 is about church planting and that,

it seems reasonable to assume that Samaritan believers also understood Jesus’ teaching and continued to worship in Spirit and truth on Gerizim. Just as the Jewish followers of Jesus continued to participate in the cultural and religious life of their Jewish community, we can safely assume Samaritan believers did likewise, with one major difference: they were now disciples of Jesus.⁵

Without delving into whether Caldwell’s assumption is indeed safe, it is important to note, again, that even if this is a solid historical reconstruction, it is not strictly “what the Bible teaches.” Whatever the Samaritans may have done after Jesus left them is not normative for subsequent believers.

I also want to add a caution about historical reconstruction itself. In my experience, this is a much more difficult task than it seems. The more detail we lack, the easier it is to imagine in an uncomplicated way how things might have gone. But as soon as details are added we get bogged down with myriad possibilities and alternatives which often make a credible reconstruction impractical. For example, we might be tempted to assume that just as there was a temple in Jerusalem, there was also one in Samaria. However, the Samaritan temple only existed for 200 years and was destroyed by John Hyrcanus in 128 BC.⁶ This is why the

³ Kevin Higgins, “The Key to Insider Movements: The ‘Devoteds’ in Acts,” *IFJM* 21:4 (2004), 159.

⁴ We might find that the details are simply not there to be found, since little is known about Samaritan practice in the First Century, particularly since all the sources are later or tainted by bias (Josephus). See H. G. M. Williamson, “Samaritans”, in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, 725. The standard reference on Samaritans is A. D. Crown, ed, *The Samaritans* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1989).

⁵ Stuart Caldwell, “Jesus in Samaria”, *IJFM* 17:1, 2 and 25.

⁶ Reinhard Plummer, “Samaritan Remains and Archeology,” in *The Samaritans*, 137.

Samaritan woman refers to “this mountain” as the place that her *ancestors* worshiped (John 4:20). It does not appear to be the place where she worships. Samaritans were also significantly more Hellenized than Jews and it is interesting to note that there are remains of Samaritan synagogues.⁷ Whatever practical form Samaritan worship took, it should not be thought of a temple-centric.

We can see another example of historical reconstruction at work in Timothy Tennent’s article critiquing the C5 claim that a follower of Jesus may legitimately maintain another religious identity. Tennent takes on the case of Naaman, which according to IM proponents provides a Biblical example of an individual who became a God follower, but remained an “insider” in practice. Although Naaman has become a God follower, he asks Elijah for an exemption to go through the motions of worship when circumstances requires his attendance at the temple of Rimmon (II Kings 5:18, 19). Elijah tells him to go in peace, and some argue that this provides a biblical precursor for insiders in other religions. One of Tennent’s counter points is that this does not work because we don’t know

precisely why Naaman’s master would be leaning on his arm as they enter the temple. Is it because of the frailty of the master and so the master physically could not bow down before Rimmon without the assistance of his trusted commander? If so, then it is out of pure compassion for his master that he is assisting him in the Temple of Rimmon. Thus, we could perhaps make a case for a MBB who does not normally attend the mosque being forgiven if he, as an act of honoring his father, helps his ailing and feeble father into the mosque every Friday.

We also do not know if Naaman raised this issue before Elisha because he feared for his life if he did not accompany his master and bow down beside him in the Temple. Would his master have instantly executed him if he did not bow? If so, then this text could actually provide some encouragement for a C-6 believer... .

Tennent then concludes,

The point is, there are sufficient ambiguities about the text to make it difficult to use in any proper exegetical way to contribute substantially to this discussion.⁸

This is perhaps the polar opposite of using historical reconstruction to add to the message of the Bible. In this case the rationale is that we cannot make a decision about the meaning of the text precisely because there is missing contextual information. If we had more information, implies Tennent, we would be able to determine the meaning. As it is, we are stuck with just what the Bible says.

⁷ See Plummer’s chapter on this, cited above.

⁸ Timothy Tennent, “Followers of Jesus (Isa) in Islamic Mosques: a Closer Examination of C-5 ‘High Spectrum’ Contextualization,” *IJFM*, 23:3, 108.

However, I don't think that the reason for Naaman's participation in worship at the temple of Rimmon is that difficult to discern. T. R. Hobbs, who stands outside the debates about IM, seems correct when he says that "Naaman clearly asks for forgiveness for the resumption of his duties as the king's 'right hand man,' which would involve him in compromise. He would be forced to accompany the king to worship."⁹ The precise issue at stake is that in the course of his duties, Naaman would have to literally bend the knee to Rimmon as he assisted the king in that same act: "when my master goes into the house of Rimmon to worship there, and he leans on my hand *and I bow myself* in the house of Rimmon." (v. 18, emphasis added)

Daniel Baeq has answered Tennent point by point on the paragraph I quoted. To the possibility that Naaman might be under obligation because of the frailty of the king, Baeq responds that in light of Naaman's position, it is more likely that Naaman's obligation is related to larger social pressures. To the possibility that this could be a case of a secret C6 believer, Baeq notes the unlikelihood of Naaman's experience in Israel remaining a secret, and the fact that he brings back earth for sacrificing credibly suggests that Naaman will not be a hidden believer.¹⁰

Another claim made by Tennent is that Naaman asks for forgiveness for something that he knows is wrong. This would seem to suggest his example is not one to be emulated.¹¹ Baeq answers that in context the question is more akin to asking for understanding.¹² Naaman is clarifying that, contrary to occasional appearances, he will not really be worshipping Rimmon. Neither should we neglect the fact that the prophet sends Naaman away in peace. An accommodation has been made.

But aside from these issues, there is a hermeneutical principle at stake. I take it as axiomatic that *the Bible tells us enough to make the point it wants to make*.¹³ If we find ourselves at an interpretative impasse due to lack of information, it may simply be that we are asking the wrong questions. In this case, the foreign question that is being brought to Scripture is whether this is clearly an example of C5. But even if it does not answer that question specifically (due to lack of contextual details), this does not mean that the text has nothing to say on the matter of God worshippers who by the nature of their context must participate in a different religious life than is normally expected from followers of God. Since Scripture does not add any further details to Naaman's situation, the hermeneutically safe assumption would seem to be that the principle expressed in this story is broad enough to encompass various reasons why Naaman, though he is a worshipper of the one true God, might feel that he needs to attend worship in the house Rimmon.

⁹ T. R. Hobbs, *2 Kings*, Word Biblical Commentary 66 (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 66.

¹⁰ Daniel Baeq, "Contextualizing Religious Form and Meaning: A Missiological Interpretation of Naaman's Petitions (2 Kings 5:15-19)," *IJFM*, 27:4, 204.

¹¹ Tennent, 108.

¹² Baeq, 206.

¹³ I take this to be implied in the doctrine of the perspicuity of Scripture. Scripture cannot be considered clear if it depends on unstated or unavailable information.

There is another issue in the background that confirms that this passage is indeed concerned to show a faithful believer outside of Israel. The Israelites, who are supposedly the true believers in YHWH, are presented unfavorably. The King of Israel panics. It does not even occur to him to rely on God. So much so that Naaman's declaration that "there is a God in Israel" is probably news to Israel's King. Then Gehazi shows himself to be greedy and unfaithful. Naaman, in contrast, along with his Jewish servant now living in exile, know the God of Israel better than the people in Israel.¹⁴

I think the passage may have something to say in favor of an IM position, though I will not venture to say here precisely what that may be. Whatever else we may say, it does show a God worshiper living faithfully in a religious context that is at odds with God's revealed wishes. Exegetically speaking, that's not nothing. Perhaps Harley Talman is on the right track when he suggests that the passage indicates "divine sanction for God's saving deeds being made known to the nations by non-proselyte converts, such as Naaman."¹⁵

2. Treating narrative passages as second class citizens

Proponents of IM often appeal to narrative texts to support their claims. Some examples include the account of Balaam, Naaman, Jonah and the sailors and Jesus' interaction with the Samaritan woman. Basil Grafas, in critiquing the views of John Ridgeway, states, "It is a common place [*sic*] that one does not use history or narrative as a primary source for developing rules or dogma."¹⁶ He contrasts these sources to "clear doctrinal teaching."¹⁷ Bill Nikides has cautioned against the total impact of the use of narrative on the basis that narrative on its own lacks the clarity required for developing doctrine.¹⁸ He states,

Fee and Stuart give advice for handling narratives. They note that Old Testament narratives do not usually teach doctrine. What they typically do is illustrate a doctrine taught somewhere else. When they do look for doctrine in the story itself, they are, to use Indiana Jones words, "digging in the wrong place." If you think the story is pointing to a doctrine, do not build your foundation there; find the better ground.¹⁹

Without evaluating the specific claims that are being made from the narrative passages in question, I would like to challenge this hermeneutical claim that didactic texts have a kind of higher status or greater utility for doctrine than narrative texts. As if any respectable doctrine should have some "clear" teaching passages to support it.

¹⁴ Baeq, 199.

¹⁵ Harley Talman, "The Old Testament and Insider Movements," *IJFM*, 30:2, 53.

¹⁶ Basil Grafas, "Evaluation of Scriptural Support for Insider Movements: Critique of John Ridgeway's 'The Movement of the Gospel in New Testament Times With Special Reference to Insider Movements'," *St. Francis Magazine*, January 2007, 9.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ This is a point that has come up at BtD meetings, on the BtD forum and in private conversation as well.

¹⁹ Bill Nikides "Lost in Translation: Insider Movements and Biblical Interpretation," in *Chrislam: How Missionaries are Promoting an Islamized Gospel*, 174. Kindle Edition.

First, Nikides' statement comes with the significant endorsement of Fee and Stewart's *How to Read the Bible for All it's Worth*. However, it should be noted that only the first two sentences come from Fee and Stuart.²⁰ I don't see in their book evidence for a strong view *against* finding doctrine in a narrative passage. As far as I can tell, they simply note that Old Testament narratives often illustrate.

Although the Old Testament narratives do not necessarily teach directly, they often illustrate what is taught directly and categorically elsewhere. This represents an *implicit* kind of teaching, which in cooperation with the corresponding explicit teaching of Scripture, is highly effective in generating the sort of learning experience that the Holy Spirit can use positively.²¹

They provide the example of David and Bathsheba, where it is implicitly taught that adultery is wrong.²²

Still, I suspect that Fee and Stuart are directing their counsel to beginning Bible readers, for whom this is good advice. Throughout the discussion they couch their statements with terms like "usually" and "often." They are simply offering a common sense general principle, but not one that necessarily applies across the board. And does this principle about narrative (that it only illustrates) really work systematically? Aren't there some things that are taught only in narrative passages? Think for example of the revelation of God's name in Exodus 3, or the story of the Fall in Genesis 3. Both of these are echoed in the rest of Scripture, but the narratives are arguably the source for everything that follows.

Second, I would ask: is the idea, present in Fee and Stuart, that narrative is "indirect" and other passages (presumably didactic ones) are "direct," perhaps unwarranted? Western Bible students, scholars and exegetes are naturally drawn to didactic portions of Scripture because they seem to speak the language of exegetical discourse. But could not the principle be credibly reversed? Didactic passages are more difficult to understand, someone from an oral culture might say, but you can use them if there is a narrative passage that teaches the point more clearly. And that person would have some solid scriptural backing for this hermeneutical principle. The Bible itself acknowledges that Paul's letters have "some things which are hard to understand" (2 Peter 3:16), but it never says this about narratives.

There is a growing appreciation among evangelical scholars of the Bible as an overarching narrative. John Goldingay speaks of "the need for systematic theology to do justice the

²⁰ Analysis here is hampered somewhat by the fact that Nikides does not provide a specific reference to Fee and Stewart's statement. But it does seem to come from the chapter on interpreting narrative passages.

²¹ Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All it's Worth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 77.

²² *Ibid.*

essentially narrative character of the Gospel in both testaments if it is to do justice to the nature of biblical faith.”²³

Narrative shows God at work. His actions in the past are a guide to discerning his actions, desires and person in the present. This is how the past is a clue to the future. In this sense the narrative portions of Scripture are entirely normative and ought to be used (more!) for theology and practice.

3. Appeals to singularity

Critics of IM appeal to what I call “singularities” - classifying events as non-repeatable, and therefore limited in their application.²⁴ This approach often surfaces when discussing passages in Acts. Do they teach theological truths which define the church once and for all, or do they set precedents for the church to follow as it grows and expands?

David Garner, for example, cautions that “application and emulation are critical; but they must grow out of appreciating the cosmically significant and unrepeatable events.”²⁵ He is also concerned when “Unrepeatable and incomparable events in redemptive history become paradigms.” Wiarda similarly argues that the decision in Acts 15 is presented as a universal one, not a merely local one, and that therefore the point of the text is theological (it teaches a concept), not paradigmatic (which would be a pattern to be followed).²⁶ What is at stake here from the IM perspective is that if Acts 15 is a model to be followed it would purportedly point to a lenient approach towards believers in new cultural and religious situations.

The root hermeneutical question I want to address here is the categorization of passages as “theological” or “paradigmatic”. Wiarda expresses this most explicitly, but the paradigm is seen in other authors as well:

Narrative episodes in the Gospels and Acts tend to be shaped in one of two basic directions: some are theologically or Christologically focused (they point the reader toward truth about God or Jesus or salvation), while others are paradigmatically directed (they highlight the experience of disciples or other characters, and offer some kind of example either to follow or avoid). Many narrative units contain both theological and paradigmatic elements, of course, though typically one emphasis predominates. Turning

²³ John Goldingay, *Key questions about Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 152. See 151-162 for an exciting discussion about the relationship between theology and narrative. Fee and Stuart, 74-75 also note that the entire OT is a grand narrative and that all its stories should be seen as fitting into that grand narrative.

²⁴ I’m borrowing this from physics where an event such as the big bang is said to follow its own rules because of the massive forces at work. Thus it is singular and non-repeatable in the rest of the universe.

²⁵ David Gardner, “High Stakes: Insider Movement Hermeneutics and the Gospel,” *Themelios*, 37:2 (2012). All references are to the online version, which lacks page numbers. See thegospelcoalition.org, <http://goo.gl/AtXZ9H> (checked June 3, 2014).

²⁶ Timothy Wiarda, “The Jerusalem Council and the Theological Task,” *JETS* 46:2, 234,245.

to the Acts narrative of the Jerusalem Council, a first question is whether it is theologically or paradigmatically focused.²⁷

I am a bit concerned that the distinction “theological or paradigmatic” is simply plopped down here as guiding principle for the interpretation of Act 15 without some sort of rationale or development. The principle then produces the categories of the discussion. Is this a theological passage, or is it a paradigmatic passage? Everyone wants to know! To my ears the taxonomy feels a bit artificial. To be fair, Wiarda does soften the scheme when he says that both elements can be present, but that typically one predominates. But where a passage has both elements may we not legitimately get both theological and paradigmatic instruction? To what principle could we appeal in order to deny this move? I for one can’t think of one. It seems reasonable to answer that yes, where both theological and paradigmatic elements are found in a passage, we may theologize and / or “paradigmatise” at will. So now I wonder if this is really a useful taxonomy at all, since it does not preclude interpreting a passage one way or the other except in cases where the narrative unit is clearly only theological or paradigmatic.

The most difficult part is the implication here that theological and paradigmatic types of instruction are mutually exclusive, or somewhat exclusive. This is the sort of hermeneutical statement that tends to have a ring of truth for people from one theological perspective, but not for others. Thus it is in the end difficult to demonstrate as biblical or theologically compelling. These types of hermeneutical principles lead our discussions down exegetical dead ends.

A second problem here is that Scripture itself does use unique, theologically instructive redemptive historical events as pattern setters. Followers of Jesus cannot die for the sins of the world, but they ought to nevertheless follow the pattern of his unique redemptive historical act as they live out the Christian life:

have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:

6 Who, being in very nature God,

did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;

7 rather, he made himself nothing

by taking the very nature of a servant,

being made in human likeness.

8 And being found in appearance as a man,

he humbled himself

by becoming obedient to death—

even death on a cross! (Phil 2:5-8).

In fact Jesus’ unique act of self-sacrifice drives much of Paul’s Christian ethic. It is a unique but ever repeatable event which provides a pattern of behavior that can adapt to myriad situations. For example, responding to the question of eating meat that has been sacrificed to idols Paul’s

²⁷ Wiarda, 245.

solution is summarized by the statement “Be imitators of me, just as I also am of Christ” (1 Cor. 11:1). Which is to say that they both sacrifice their own needs for the needs of others.

I think Fleming is correct to say in Acts 15 the Jerusalem council,

In the first place, describes a decisive moment in the encounter between faith in Christ and culture within the life of the early church, which helps to give the task of incarnating the gospel idea historical and *theological* basis. Second, it offers perhaps the fullest and most significant narrative in the New Testament of the process of doing contextual theology by the church.²⁸

4. Categorical Anachronism

The problem of cultural and presuppositional distance between Bible and interpreter is often mentioned in our literature on hermeneutics. However, it is mostly related to trivial examples, such as the issue of wearing head coverings, or the “holy kiss”. But we would all gain a great deal from attending to what I call “categorical anachronism”: the tendency to view Scripture in the categories of our current discussions rather than in the categories that the Bible itself uses. In our IM/C5 discussion this happens particularly when we discuss how particular biblical passages may or may not speak to issues like culture, identity, religion and even theology.

Rebecca Lewis’ article *The Integrity of the Gospel* is a frequently discussed and critiqued pro-IM article. In it we find an exposition of the New Testament’s insistence that salvation is by faith alone as applied to the question of varying cultural and religious norms. I agree with Lewis’ concern that the gospel “not be altered by adding additional requirements such as adherence to Christian religious traditions, thereby clouding or encumbering the gospel.”²⁹ I think that in the first part of her article she makes a solid biblical theological case for a lenient approach to how the gospel is expressed in different cultural contexts.

But as the article progresses, the positions that she attributes to Paul in particular begins to sound anachronistic. It is couched in terms and categories which come from our discussion today and which seem like unlikely ways of expressing Paul’s thought.

In his subsequent letters, Paul had to argue repeatedly that the gospel must move into the Gentile people groups unhindered by external religious expectations.

Therefore, Paul emphasized the importance of the gospel not being linked to changing cultures, even religious cultures.

²⁸ Dean Flemming, *Contextualization in the New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 43.

²⁹ Rebecca Lewis, *The Integrity of the Gospel and Insider Movements*, *IJFM*, 27:1, 42. I take her to mean by “Christian religious traditions” not the gospel itself but things which have accrued to the Christian tradition which, while they may not necessarily be good or bad, are not inherent to the gospel. But I’m not naive: what these things are precisely is the battleground.

Having recognized that they were received by God equally, without merit, they had no right to boast over one another, or to consider their own religious expression of faith in Christ to be more salvific than the other.

He saw that the marvel of the gospel is that it has the power to save and transform people within any socio-religious context. That power brings far more glory to God than would be the case if God could only transform believers within a single religious construct.

The mystery He revealed to Paul was that the Greeks did not have to adopt the religious form of the Jewish believers to become joint heirs.³⁰

These summarizations of Paul's message, while perhaps going in the same direction as Paul's thought, make him sound too much like a modern day champion of Christian relativism, as if Paul's great passion was to guard the legitimacy of each receptor context's "religious expression." Terms like "religious," "social-religious contexts" and "cultural" are useful and appropriate in our current missiological discussions, but when we use them as literal expressions of Paul's message we risk flattening Paul's teaching and equating it with our own.

The discovery of this sort of anachronism is not necessarily fatal to an argument. In many cases it only takes the extra step of extracting the Biblical message and then applying a general principle derived from that message to address the current situation. For example, one might say that Paul's insistence that Gentiles can be Jesus-followers as Gentiles shows that we should never allow the gospel to be hindered by cultural and social differences. By doing this, we avoid the implication that Paul's thought falls directly into line with a contemporary set of ideas and categories.

But one of the more serious problems with importing biblical teaching into contemporary categories is that this move will very likely generate dissonance somewhere along the line. In the case of Lewis' article I think this happens when she affirms that there were two radically different religions based on Jesus Christ in the first century, the Jewish and Gentiles ones.³¹ This idea flows naturally from emphasis on Paul as the champion of difference. However, for Paul the problem of different practices is ultimately the problem of unity in Christ. The Gospel has come to both Jews and Gentiles in order to create, as he puts it in Ephesians 2:14-15, out of the two (Jews and Gentiles) one new *anthropos* (human being). In the next chapter, the mystery of the Gospel for Paul is "that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus" (Eph. 3:6). That unity is then the lead-in to the second part of the epistle, where the theme is worked out in full:

³⁰ Find these quotes on the following pages, in order 44, 46, 45, 47, 45

³¹ Lewis, 45.

As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. (Eph. 4:1-3)

This is not a merely theoretical or merely soteriological unity (“we are saved by one Lord, Jesus”). It is also very much a practical “life together” kind of unity. Of course, the calling Paul mentions in 4:1 is all that he has expounded in the previous chapters, culminating in the mystery of the unity of Jews and Gentiles. Living this “new *anthropos* oneness” means being humble and gentle, patient, and bearing with one another in love. Then he goes on to talk about there being one body, one lord, etc. We should probably not think of Paul as preaching a pure non-contextualized Gospel which can be applied to any given culture, using its own cultural norms. This is not totally inconsistent with his thinking, but when viewed on his own terms, Paul is interested in one single new thing: the church; and the church transcends both Jewish and Gentile sensibilities.

The theological situation is a bit more complicated than simply dividing people up into “Jews” and “gentiles.” The unity of the Jew and Gentile in one new-covenant community, the church, is so significant that Paul calls it “the mystery of Christ”. (Eph 3:4-6)³²

There is a practical side to the “new *anthropos* community”. That is to say: there is a distinctive culture that naturally forms when people with a common set of presuppositions spend time together. And so, along with the theological conviction of the unity of Jews and Gentiles in Christ, there was also a practical common life which was distinct both from Jewish practice (foods, special days, temple reverence, etc.) and from Gentile practice (sexual ethics, attitudes to slaves, household codes).³³

This is why Paul’s treatment of the freedom of believers is significantly qualified by an emphasis on love and sacrifice (see Romans 14:15, 1 Cor. 8:13). Paul is not so much the champion of difference as the champion of unity in love. Accommodating difference through personal self-sacrifice is crucial to living together in love, and this comes to the fore particularly when believers spend time together in fellowship. But this message can be missed when we bring Paul into our discussion without accounting for his own categories and interests. And so the idea that Paul would champion difference to the extent that “two radically different religions” might develop under his tutelage and with his encouragement seems very unlikely.

I don’t necessarily think that my observations here are fatal to Lewis’ overall direction. Dudley Woodberry argues for a similar approach, but also emphasizes the importance of unity:

The Jews and Gentiles could keep much of their own identity and follow Christ. But to express the universal Church, they needed to have fellowship, which was expressed by

³² Terence Paige, “Early Gentile Christianity, Conversion and Culture-Shift in the New Testament,” Unpublished Paper, 8. Available at btdnetwork.org, <http://goo.gl/SHiHrx> (checked June 3, 2014). See also Gardner’s section “Relativized Holiness in a Relativized Church” for a critique of Lewis’ ecclesiology (np).

³³ Paige, 10-11.

eating together. This required some additional adjustments. So with the insider movements, there is much freedom for them to retain their identity but over time some adjustments will need to be made for the sake of fellowship in the broader Church. The same Paul who argued for the freedom of the Jewish and Gentile churches to retain their own identity also argued that Christ had broken down the wall between Jew and Gentile so they might be one body, the Body of Christ (I Cor. 12:12–27). In like manner traditional Christian and Muslim Christ centered communities should have the same freedom to retain their own identity, but must express the unity of the Body of Christ by their love one for another.³⁴

The problem of categorical anachronism is not limited to this particular set of issues. It may not be too much to say that it is present in almost all our discussions about IM/C5. It's worth noting, in closing, that it can cut both ways, chronologically speaking.

We may think, for example, of the term “religion.” Contemporary usage of this word is confusing in its own right. A recent discussion on the BtD forum, sparked by the report of an insider who said, “Isn't it wonderful that we can be of different religions but of the same faith” highlighted the fact that there are at least two competing meanings of “religion” in the discussion about IM. In the first, “religion” is conceived as beliefs and practices related to the transcendent. In the second, influenced by the monolithic reality of religion in the Muslim world, it is more akin to “culture.” L. D. Waterman identifies these as the “simple concept of religion,” which he sees reflected in New Testament usage, common evangelical parlance and an (English) dictionary definition, versus the “anthropological definition,” which he rightly notes is not commonly understood by most people.³⁵

But I am not so sure that the biblical uses of the word “religion” really do match up with common parlance and dictionary definitions. More importantly, I want to question the urge that we evangelicals feel to connect biblical words to contemporary issues that use the same words. Just because the Bible uses the term “religion” this does not necessarily mean it is talking about the same thing we mean today when we say “religion”. Let's look briefly at James' well known statement:

If anyone thinks himself to be religious, and yet does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this man's religion is worthless. Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world. (James 1:27)

³⁴ Dudley Woodberry, “To the Muslim I became a Muslim,” *IJFM*, 24:1, 28. Kevin Higgins takes up the question of the unity of IM communities with the larger body as well, stating that unity is biblical and important and should be pursued notwithstanding various practical concerns such as security. See Kevin Higgins, “Inside What? Church, Culture, Religion and Insider Movements in Biblical Perspective.” *St Francis Magazine* 5:4, 79-80.

³⁵ Gene Daniels and L. D. Waterman, “Bridging the ‘Socio-Religious’ Divide: A Conversation between Two Missiologists,” *IJFM* 30:2, 60.

James seems to be concerned about consistency between Jewish ceremonial observance and the ethical life which that observance would seem to imply. But there is nothing here that would point towards a biblical definition of “religion,” as if Christians should add James 1:27 to their dictionaries. The term here simply refers to religious rites and is used by James to name the activity of performing a religious rite.³⁶ It is not the author’s intention to give his readers a definitive meaning for the term “religion” or to speak to how people ought to understand the term. There is another problem here. If we take this to be the Biblical definition of “religion,” it would arguably describe and commend other religions in which care of widows and orphan, truthfulness and abstention from worldly pleasures are emphasized. A case could be made for this as an emphasis in all the major religions of the world. But surely this is not in line with James’ intention. He is directing himself to followers of Jesus only. The teaching is therefore not related to the global concept of “religion.”

There is a danger here with an essentialist (Platonic) view of language, where words are seen as intrinsically connected to an ultimate reality. In this way of thinking, there is a word (“religion”) which is inherently linked to an enduring concept (religion). Any historical instance of the word is assumed to be a contribution to our understanding of the essential concept. And if the Bible mentions the word, then the assumption is that this is the most important thing said about it. However, language does not work this way. Words are socially agreed upon names for ideas and things, and their referents can and do change throughout history, sometimes in very surprising and unintuitive ways.³⁷

The discussion about whether the Greek term *ethne* (people groups, the nations) should be seen as a religious designation may also be relevant here. Jeff Morton has stated that “being a Gentile did not mean being a member of a particular religion ... Neither *ethne* or its synonyms carry any explicit designation or specific religions activity.”³⁸ While it is true that non-Jewish religion was varied in the first century, there was a common shape to the religion practiced by peoples under Roman dominion, as is well documented by Paige.³⁹ When we take into account the intensity of Roman piety (that is, their interest in maintaining favor with the gods or *pax deorum*), and the lack of a boundary between secular and sacred in the ancient world, I think it is valid to say that in the New Testament *ethne* does indeed have specific religious content,

³⁶ The word *threskos* in in v. 26 is used only here in the NT, but it is derived from *threiskeia*, which is found in Acts 26:5 and refers to Jewish worship. In Colossians 2:18 it describes worship of angels in the “Colossian philosophy,” and then in verse 27. Ralph Martin, *James*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 48 (Dallas: Word, Incorporated: 2002), 52. BDAG’s *Lexicon*, 459 defines the noun as “expression of devotion to transcendent beings, esp. as it expresses itself in cultic rites, *worship*.” Another dimension here is that in the ancient world “religion” was tied much more closely to ceremonial observance than it is today, a development which probably owes a lot to the influence of Christianity.

³⁷ I have two chapters dedicated semantics as it relates to biblical words in my as of yet unpublished book “God’s Word to Us”. I’m happy to share the PDF with anyone who wants to read more. The must read resource on this, however, is Moises Silvas’ *Biblical Words and their Meaning* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994).

³⁸ Jeff Morton, *Insider Movements: Biblically Incredible or Incredibly Brilliant?* (Wipf and Stock Publishers, May 18, 2012), 49

³⁹ Paige, 2 -6.

particularly when it is used in contrast to the Gospel, even if that content is awkward to coordinate precisely with the modern term “religion.”⁴⁰

We must exercise great care both when we bring Scripture into dialogue with contemporary terminology and vice-versa. This is not to say that the Bible has nothing to say about what we today call “religion”. It has plenty to say about it. I agree with Jeff that a scripturally based theology of religions is no minor doctrine and is related to all other major areas of theology.⁴¹ But these teachings are not necessarily associated with the Hebrew and Greek words that have been translated as “religion” in our modern Bibles. Neither does the Bible necessarily speak to the full gamut of meaning that we associate with that term today.

Conclusion

A theme throughout this paper has been the need to focus on what Scripture intends to say in the categories that the Biblical authors themselves use. I believe that our greatest hermeneutical temptation is the double urge to extrapolate too quickly from Scripture to current controversies, and to package too easily the biblical text in our own categories. Karl Barth once personified the Bible, as though it was talking back to a reader who was bringing his own questions to it:

My dear sir [says the Bible], these are your problems: you must not ask *me!* ... If you do not care to enter upon my questions, you may, to be sure, find in me all sorts of arguments and quasi-arguments for one or another standpoint, but you will not then find what is there.

Then he adds, “We shall find ourselves only in the midst of a vast human controversy and far, far away from reality.”⁴²

I think this explains a lot about church history.

However, heeding Barth’s advice on this matter does not mean that we should become biblical minimalists, as if in any given situation we should only speak in the categories of Scripture. Christians can and should discuss anything and everything that falls under the lordship of Jesus (that is, everything). But when we look to the Bible for authoritative guidance on any given topic it is important to disassociate ourselves as much as possible from current controversies, connotations and ideologies and try to hear Scripture on its own terms. We should also recognize that while Scripture will not always necessarily speak directly to a situation or topic, it may nevertheless teach a larger principle that does come into play. For example, it would be

⁴⁰ Note that one of the definitions of the term in BDAG’s *Lexicon* is “those who do not belong to groups professing faith in the God of Israel, the nations, gentiles, unbelievers (in effect = ‘polytheists’).” Included in the examples of this usage is Acts 15:7.

⁴¹ Morton, 100. Jeff develops a theology of religion in the chapter “Theology of Religions: Would Jesus Be Caught Dead Working in Islam?” *Chriislam*, Kindle Edition.

⁴² Karl Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man* (New York: Harper & Row, 1957), 47.

odd to find in the Bible direct support for a contemporary political ideology (socialism, capitalism, communism, etc.). Yet the teaching of the Bible does intersect at many points with the aims and values of different contemporary political ideologies; for example, biblical notions of justice, care for the less fortunate, the use and abuse of power, etc. A faithful Christian witness should bring that biblical teaching to bear on the current debate without implying that the Bible actually argues for one or the other.

Similarly, in discussion about IM / C5 issues we should be careful, on the one hand, when our exposition of Scripture sounds suspiciously similar to our own contemporary categorizations. On the other hand we should not be too hasty to dismiss a claim as compatible with biblical teaching simply because it is not directly supported by biblical terminology or similar biblical categories. It may be that a broader biblical principle does provide the required support.

May God continue to guide our discussion for his greater glory.