

# The Tabula Rasa Fallacy

**C**arl Henry has long been fond of saying that there are two kinds of presuppositionalists: those who admit it and those who don't. We might adapt his analysis to our topic: There are two kinds of practitioners of hermeneutics: those who admit it and those who don't. For every time we find something in the Bible (whether it is actually there or not!), we have interpreted the Bible.

There is good interpretation and there is bad interpretation, but there is no escape from interpretation. Consequently, we should be self-conscious about our hermeneutical task. Yet it is ironic that in our day some people seem altogether *too* interested, and other people too disinterested, in hermeneutics. Some seem far more interested in challenges of the discipline of hermeneutics than in the Bible itself, while others think they can bypass hermeneutics altogether. Without being crass enough to say so, they secretly harbor the opinion that what others offer are interpretations, but what they offer is just what the Bible says.

In this article, I want to reflect on interpretive decisions by focusing on one relatively "simple" hermeneutical challenge: how to tell what parts of the Bible are binding mandates for us, and what parts are not. This will not be an attempt to deal comprehensively with the subject,<sup>1</sup> but it should nonetheless provide some preliminary principles for sorting such matters out.

## Translating the Word "Bread"

**Principle:** *Determine not only how symbols, customs, metaphors, and models function in Scripture, but also to what else they are tied.*

We may be able to agree with the widely accepted conclusion that biblical language about sackcloth and ashes is a "placeholder" for repentance, and holy kissing for committed fellowship among church members.<sup>2</sup> But is it then acceptable to lead a group of young people in a California church in a celebration of the Lord's Table using Coke and chips? And how about yams and goat's milk in Papua New Guinea? If in the latter case we use bread and wine, are we not subtly insisting that only the food of white foreigners is acceptable to God?

The problem is one not only of churchmanship, but of linguistic theory: Bible translators face it continuously. How do they *translate* "bread" and "wine" in the words of institution? Or consider a text such as Is. 1: 18: "Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool." Suppose the target group for which you are translating the Bible lives in equatorial rain forests and has never seen snow: would it be better to change the simile? Suppose that the only "wool" they have seen is the dirty dun-colored stuff from village goats: could not a "faithful" translation be misleading, while a culturally sensitive translation that is nevertheless more distant from the original might succeed in communicating the point that God speaking through Isaiah was getting across?

Much can be said in favor of this sort of flexibility. Certainly in the case of "snow," not a lot seems at stake. You might want to check out the other seven biblical occurrences of "white as snow" to make sure you are not unwittingly running into some awkward clash or other. But in the case of bread and wine at the Lord's Supper, the situation becomes more complicated. This is because the

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elements are tied in with other strands of the Bible, and it is almost impossible to disentangle them. Having changed "bread" to, say, "yams" in order to avoid any cultural imperialism, what shall we do with the connections between the Lord's Supper and the Passover, where only "unleavened bread" was to be eaten: can we speak of "unleavened yams"? How about the connection between bread and manna, and then the further connection drawn between bread-manna and Jesus (John 6)? Is Jesus (I say this reverently) now to become the yam of God? And we have not yet begun to exhaust the complications.

So what begins as a charitable effort in cross-cultural communication leads toward major interpretive problems

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farther down the road. Moreover, Bible translations have a much longer shelf-life than the original translators usually think. Fifty years later, once the tribe has become a little more familiar with cultures beyond their own forests, and it seems best in a revision to return to a greater degree of literalism, try and change "yams" to "bread" and see what kind of ecclesiastical squabbles break out. The "King James Version" of the rain forests has "yams"....

All of these sorts of problems are bound up with the fact that God has not given us a culturally neutral revelation. What he has revealed in words is necessarily tied to specific places and cultures. *Every other* culture is going to have to do some work to understand what God meant when he said certain things in a particular language at a specific time and place and in a shifting idiom. In some cases, an analogous idiom may be the best way to render something; in other cases, *especially those that are deeply tied to other elements in the Bible's story-line*, it is best to render things more literally, and then perhaps include an explanatory note. In this case, for example, it might be wise to say that "bread" was a staple food of the people at the time, as yams are to us. A slightly different note would have to be included when leaven or yeast is introduced.

There is almost nothing to be said in favor of Californian young people using chips and Coke as elements. (I'm afraid this is not a fictitious example.) Unlike the people of the rain forests, they do not even have in their favor that they have never heard of bread. Nor can it be said that chips and Coke are their staples (though doubtless some of them move in that direction). What this represents is the whimsy of what is novel, the love of the iconoclastic, the spirituality of the "cutesy"—with no connections with either the Lord's words or with two thousand years of church history.

### Analogies Always Have Limits

**Principle:** *Thoughtfully limit comparisons and analogies by observing near and far contexts.*

"Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever" (Heb. 13:8). Since he never finally refused to heal anyone who approached him during the days of his flesh, and since he is the same yesterday and today and forever, therefore he will heal all who approach him for healing today. I have had that argument put to me more than once. By the same token, of course, Hebrews 13:8 could be used to prove that since he was mortal before the cross, he must still be mortal today; or since he was crucified by the Romans, and he is the same yesterday and today and forever, he must still be being crucified by the Romans today.

The fact of the matter is that comparisons and analogies are always self-limiting in some respect or other. Otherwise, you would not be dealing with comparisons and analogies, but with things that are identical. What makes a comparison or an analogy possible is that different things are similar in certain—not all—respects. It is always crucial to discover the planes on which the parallels operate—something that is usually made clear by the context—and to refuse further generalization.

A disciple is to be like his master; we are to imitate Paul, as Paul imitates Christ. In what respects? Should we walk on water? Should we clean the local temple with a whip? Should we infallibly heal those who are ill and who petition us for help? Should we miraculously provide food for thousands out of some boy's lunch?

Should we be crucified?

Such questions cannot all be answered with a simple "yes" or "no." It is worth observing that most of the injunctions in the Gospels to follow Jesus or to do what he does are bound up with his self-abnegation: e.g., as he is hated, so we must expect to be hated (John 15:18); as he takes the place of a servant and washes his disciples' feet, so we are to wash one another's feet (John 13); as he goes to the cross, so we are to take our cross and follow him (Matt. 10:38, 16:24; Luke 14:27). Thus, the answer to the question, "Should we be crucified?", is surely "yes" and "no": no, not literally, most of us will have to say, and yet that does not warrant complete escape from the demand to take up our cross and follow him. So in this case the answer is "yes," but not literally.

### The Pastoral Context of the Text

**Principle:** *Many mandates are pastorally limited by the occasion or people being addressed.*

For example, Jesus unambiguously insists, "Do not swear at all: either by heaven, for it is God's throne; or by the earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the

city of the Great King... Simply let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one" (Matt. 6:34-36). Yet, we find Paul going well beyond a simple "Yes" or "No" (e.g., Rom. 9:1, 2 Cor. 11:10, Gal. 1:20). In fact, God puts himself under an oath (Heb. 6:17-18). Won't pedants have a wonderful time with this?

Yet the particular language of Jesus' prohibition, not to mention the expanded parallel in Matthew 23:16-22, shows that what Jesus was berating was the sophisticated use of oaths that became an occasion for evasive lying—a bit like the schoolboy who tells whoppers with his fingers crossed behind his back. At some point, it is best to get to the heart of the issue: simply tell the truth, and let your "Yes" be "Yes" and your "No" be "No." In other words, the pastoral context is vital. By contrast, the context of Hebrews 6-7 shows that when God puts himself under an oath, it is not because otherwise he might lie, but for two reasons: first, to maintain the typological pattern of a priesthood established by oath, and second, to offer special reassurance to the weak faith of human beings who otherwise might be too little inclined to take God's wonderful promises seriously.

There are many examples in Scripture of the importance of pastoral context. Paul can say it is good for a man not to touch a woman (1 Cor. 7:1—the NIV's "not to marry" is an unwarranted softening of the Greek). *But* (he goes on to say) there are also good reasons to marry, and finally concludes that both celibacy and marriage are gifts from God, *charismata* (1 Cor. 7:7—which I suppose makes us all "charismatics"). It does not take much reading between the lines to perceive that the church in Corinth included some who were given to asceticism, and others in danger of promiscuity (cf. 1 Cor. 6:12-20). There is a pastoral sensitivity to Paul's "Yes, but" argument, one that he deploys more than once in this letter (e.g., 1 Cor. 14:18-19). In other words, there are pastoral limitations to the course advocated, limitations made clear by the context.

In the same way, what Paul says to encourage Christian assurance to the Romans at the end of chapter 8 is not what he says to the Corinthians in 2 Cor. 13:5. What particular elements of a full-blooded, nuanced, and even complex doctrine need to be stressed at any particular time will be determined, in part, by a pastoral diagnosis of the predominant current ailments.

### Multiple Narrative Contexts

**Principle:** *Always be careful how you apply narratives.*

Nowadays most of us are familiar with "postmodern" voices that advocate open-ended meaning—meaning, finally, that you or your interpretive community "find" meaning that is not necessarily in the text, and certainly not what the author intended. It is no accident that when these postmodern voices turn to the Bible, they are often attracted to narrative portions. Admittedly, these narrative portions are usually pulled out of their contexts in the

books in which they are embedded, and made to stand on their own. Without the contextual constraints, the interpretive possibilities seem to multiply—which is, of course, what the postmodernists want. But narratives are, I think, generically more open than discourse. They have other virtues, of course: they are evocative, affective, image-enhancing, memorable. But unless care is taken, they are more easily misinterpreted than discourse.

In fact, little narratives should not only be interpreted within the framework of the book in which they are embedded, but within the corpus, and ultimately within the canon. Take, for instance, Genesis 39, the account of Joseph's early years in Egypt. One can read that narrative and draw from it excellent lessons on how to resist temptation (e.g., Joseph refers to sexual sin to which he is enticed by Potiphar's wife as "sin against God," not some mere weakness or foible; he avoids the woman's company; in the crunch, his purity is more important to him than his prospects). But a careful reading of the opening and closing verses of the chapter also shows that one of the important points of the narrative is that God is with Joseph and blesses him even in the midst of the most appalling circumstances: neither the presence of God nor the blessing of God are restricted to happy lifestyles. Then read the chapter in the context of the preceding narrative: now Judah becomes a foil for Joseph. The one is tempted in circumstances of comfort and plenty, and succumbs to incest; the other is tempted in circumstances of slavery and injustice, and retains his integrity. Now read the same chapter in the context of the book of Genesis. Joseph's integrity is bound up with the way God providentially provides famine relief not only for countless thousands, but for the covenant people of God in particular. Now read it within the context of the Pentateuch. The narrative is part of the explanation for how the people of God find themselves in Egypt, which leads to the Exodus. Joseph's bones are brought out when the people leave. Enlarge the horizon now to embrace the whole canon: suddenly Joseph's fidelity in small matters is part of the providential wisdom that preserves the people of God, leads to the exodus that serves as a type of a still greater release, and ultimately leads to Judah's distant son David, and his still more distant son, Jesus.

So if you are applying Genesis 39, although it may have some use as a moral account that tells us how to deal with temptation, the perspective gained by admitting the widening contexts discloses scores of further connections and meanings that thoughtful readers (and preachers) should not ignore.

### Can I Be Objective?

**Principle:** *Remember that you, too, are culturally and theologically located.*

In other words, it is not simply a case of each part of the Bible being culturally located, while you and I are neutral and dispassionate observers. Rather, thoughtful

readers will acknowledge that they, too, are located in specific culture—specific language, unacknowledged assumptions, perspectives on time and race and education and humor, notions of truth and honor and wealth. In postmodern hands, of course, these realities become part of the reason for arguing that all interpretations are relative. I have argued elsewhere that although no finite and sinful human being can ever know exhaustive truth about anything (for that would require omniscience), they can know some truth truly. But often this requires some self-distancing of ourselves from inherited assumptions and perspectives.

Sometimes this is achieved unknowingly. The person who has read her Bible right through once or twice a

taking us in quite a different direction. As our culture becomes progressively more secular, the need for this sort of reading is becoming more urgent. *How* it is done—both theoretically and practically—cannot be elucidated here. But that it must be done if we are not to domesticate Scripture to our own worlds cannot be doubted.

### The Web of Belief

**Principle:** *Frankly admit that many interpretive decisions are nestled within a large theological system, which we must be willing to modify if the Bible is to have the final word.*

This is, of course, a subset of the preceding point, yet it deserves separate treatment. Some Christians give the impression that if you learn Greek and Hebrew and get your basic hermeneutics sorted out, then you can forget about historical theology and systematic theology. Simply do your exegesis and you will come out with the truth straight from the Word of God. But of course, it is not quite that simple. Inevitably, *everyone* is doing his or her exegesis

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as an Arminian, or as a Reformed Presbyterian, or as a dispensationalist, or as a theonomist, or as a Lutheran—and these are only some of the predominant systems among believers. Even if you are so ignorant of any one tradition that you are a bit of an eclectic, that simply means your exegesis is likely to be a little more inconsistent than that of others.

Do not misunderstand: systems are not evil things. They function to make interpretation a little easier and a little more realistic: they mean that you do not have to go back to basics at each point (i.e., inevitably you assume a whole lot of other exegesis at any particular instance of exegesis). If your tradition is broadly orthodox, then the system helps to direct you away from interpretations that are heterodox. But a system *can* be so tightly controlling that it does not allow itself to be corrected by Scripture, modified by Scripture, or—in the ultimate case—overturned by Scripture. This is also why a devout Presbyterian and a devout Baptist are not going to sort out what Scripture says about, say, baptism and church government, simply by taking out a couple of lexica and working over a few texts together during free moments some Friday afternoon. What is at stake, for both of them, is how these matters are nestled into a large number of other points, which are themselves related to an entire structure of theology.

year, loves it dearly, and now in her eightieth year reads it no less, may never have self-consciously engaged in some process of self-distancing from cultural prejudice. But she may now be so steeped in biblical outlooks and perspectives that she lives in a different “world” from her pagan neighbors, and perhaps even from many of her more shallow and less well-informed Christian neighbors. But the process can be accelerated by reading meditatively, self-critically, humbly, honestly, thereby discovering where the Word challenges the outlooks and values of our time and place. It is accelerated by the right kinds of small-group Bible studies (e.g., those that include devout Christians from other cultures), and from the best of sermons and books.

Does our Western culture place so much stress on individualism that we find it hard to perceive, not only the biblical emphasis on the family and on the *body* of the church, but also the ways in which God judges entire cultures and nations for the accumulating corruption of her people? Are the biblical interpretations advanced by “evangelical feminists” compromised by their indebtedness to the current focus on women’s liberation, or are the interpretations of more traditional exegetes compromised by unwitting enslavement to patriarchal assumptions? Do we overlook some of the “hard” sayings about poverty simply because most of us live in relative wealth?

The examples are legion. But the place to begin is by acknowledging that no interpreter, including you, approaches the text *tabula rasa*, like a razed slate just waiting to have the truth inscribed on you. There is always a need for honest recognition of our biases and assumptions, and progressive willingness to reform them and challenge them as we perceive that the Word of God is

And yet, if this is all that could be said, then the postmodernists would be right: the interpretive community *determines* everything. But if believers are in principle willing to change their minds (i.e., their systems), and are humbly willing to bring everything, including their systems, to the test of Scripture, and are willing to enter courteous discussion and debate with brothers and sisters

who are similarly unthreatened and are eager to let Scripture have final authority, then systems can be abandoned, modified, reformed.

The number of topics affected by such considerations is very large—not only the old chestnuts (baptism, the significance of holy communion, the understanding of covenant, Sabbath/Sunday issues), but more recent questions as well (e.g., theonomy, the place of “charismatic” gifts). For our purposes, we note that some of these manifold topics have to do with what is mandated of believers today.

Let us take a simple example. In recent years, a number of Christians have appealed to Acts 15:28 (“It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us...”) to serve as a model for how the Church comes to difficult decisions involving change in disputed areas—in the case of Acts, circumcision and its significance, and in the modern case, the ordination of women. Is this a fair usage of Acts 15:28? Does it provide a definitive model for how to change things formerly accepted in the Church?

But believers with any firm views on the exclusive authority of the canon, or with any sophisticated views on how the new covenant believers were led in the progress of redemptive history to re-think the place of circumcision in the light of the cross and resurrection, will not be easily persuaded by this logic. Has every change introduced by various churches across the centuries been justified, simply because it was blessed with the words “it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us”? Does the Church now have the right to change things established in and by the canon in the way that the early Church changed things established in and by the *Old Testament* canon, as if we were similarly located at a strategic turning point in redemptive history? The mind boggles at the suggestion. But what is clear in any case is that such issues cannot properly be resolved without thinking through, in considerable detail, how the parameters of the interpretive decisions are tied to much more substantial theological matters. ■

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