The Bible in CULTURE

Reading the Bible *With* All the World
Using Ethnohermeneutics

Larry W. Caldwell

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CHAPTER 1

Why Ethnohermeneutics for Reading the Bible with All the World

This is what the LORD says:
"Let not the wise boast of their wisdom or the strong boast
of their strength or the rich boast of their riches, but let
the one who boasts boast about this: that they have the
understanding to know me, that I am the LORD."
—Jeremiah 9:23–24

Think as I Think

When I first began ministry in the Philippines as a missionary, I was assigned to teach (in English) the Bible, theology, and the biblical languages at my denomination's small Bible college located in a rural area on the northern tip of the island of Cebu. The school had been built by American missionaries with American money. It had classrooms, dormitories, a chapel, and a library, all located in the middle of a huge sugarcane field about a mile from the Visayan Sea. The curriculum of this Bible college was modeled after the denomination's seminary that I had just graduated from in the United States. In fact, the buildings, the curriculum, and the content of most of the courses, as well as the five thousand mostly unread books (all written in English) in the library, were based on building design, curriculum, course content, and books all brought over—directly or indirectly—from the United States.

I soon realized, however, that my Filipino students, obviously enough, were not American. Most were from predominantly poor, rural backgrounds and were now studying to become pastors and full-time church workers. Though they knew English, many first-year students were hearing native English speakers (my wife and I) for the first time. Nonetheless, in order to adequately understand the content of my courses, these students had to think like I thought; in other words, they

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had to learn to think in American ways, whether the topic was theology, ethics, or Bible interpretation approaches. The burden was on them, not on me. And everyone at that Bible college, American and Filipino alike, thought nothing of this. It was simply taken for granted.[1]



The above example of the Filipino Bible college where I first taught has been replicated in a myriad of Bible schools and seminaries worldwide over the past two centuries. Unfortunately, Western dominance (whether North American or European) is still found even today in many non-Western (Asian, African, or Latin American) training institutions. Non-Western Christians have been, and oftentimes still are, required to think like Westerners to obtain their theological education. Whether it involves discussions about the Bible, lectures on the latest theological trends, or the hermeneutical approaches that are used to interpret the Bible, all have been profoundly influenced by Western ways that continue to permeate theological education throughout much of the world. This is especially true for those of us who identify with the broader evangelical community today. It is particularly the latter—hermeneutical approaches—that I will address in this book, since hermeneutics is foundational to both good Bible study and good theology. How the Bible is interpreted is an important matter for all of us, whether Westerners or non-Westerners, especially as we seek better ways to read the Bible in all the various cultures of the world.[2]

I believe that the Bible interpretation approaches—or hermeneutical approaches—that one uses when reading the Bible are vitally important for both Western and non-Western Christians and churches; such approaches should not be just "taken for granted," as was illustrated in the example that began this chapter. Furthermore, I believe that we can no longer blithely assume that the dominant Western approach to hermeneutics is

1. Adapted from Caldwell, *Towards the New Discipline of Ethnohermeneutics*, 25.
2. I am well aware that I am speaking in broad generalities here when I use the terms "Western" and "non-Western." I realize that such generalities are simplistic and that the world is more complex than these two binaries suggest. At the same time, the fact remains that historically there has been the dominance (for good or for ill) of the West over the non-West, that such dominance needs to be recognized, and that it has deeply affected many things, including Bible interpretation. I will speak more of this dominance throughout this chapter.

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the only way or the best way to interpret the Bible. I believe that if we are truly going to read the Bible with all the world, we need to examine the very foundations of our hermeneutical approaches. But before we go too far, let's briefly examine what hermeneutics is all about.

The word *hermeneutics* is simply the English rendition of the Greek words "to interpret" and "interpretation." Broadly speaking, hermeneutics deals with the principles used to interpret a particular text, in our case, the Bible. The principles one uses when interpreting the Bible constitute a hermeneutical approach. The discipline of hermeneutics has been more than adequately described by Western scholars for Western audiences, as evidenced by the many books on Bible interpretation coming out of the West today. These scholars, however, have primarily reflected upon how a Christian interprets the Bible in their own cultural context, for their own people, typically from the perspectives of a Western context and people. While this monocultural emphasis is clearly important, it doesn't go far enough in addressing the hermeneutical reality and complexity facing an increasing number of Christians in today's world. Thus, I believe there is a need for a book such as this one that addresses the complexities of Bible interpretation from one culture or people group to another, or from one generation to the next. By doing this, we will be better able to read the Bible in any culture with all the world.

Another assumption that we must reassess is the underlying Bible interpretation approaches we use when interpreting the Bible. All of us who interpret the Bible tend to take these approaches for granted. In other words, whenever we interpret a particular biblical text we are inclined to interpret it in ways consistent with our personal theological heritage and training—our worldview, as it were. If a favorite Sunday school teacher or pastor interpreted the Bible in a certain way, then their pupils will likely interpret the Bible similarly. If a new Christian was discipled by someone from the Navigators, it should not be surprising that this new Christian will follow a Navigator's approach to Bible interpretation later in life. And so on.

It goes without saying that our theological heritage and training—both informally in church pews, Sunday school classes, and Bible studies, and formally in Bible colleges and seminaries—greatly affect how we interpret the Bible both for ourselves and for other people. There is nothing inherently wrong with this tendency. In fact, we need the stability that a particular hermeneutical approach may bring to

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our Bible interpretation. However, what *is* wrong, or at the very least is inappropriate, is the assumption we usually make based on this tendency: We *assume* that Bible interpretation approaches that work for us will automatically work for everybody else. As the example of my initial ministry assignment that began this chapter shows, we seldom call into question the possibility that what works for us may *not* work for others. We simply take for granted that our way is the correct way, including how we interpret the Bible. We can no longer do this if we are to truly read the Bible with all the world.

Is it possible, however, that Bible interpretation approaches that work so well for us may *not* work as well for others? Considering the complexities of our increasingly multicultural and multigenerational world, it is imperative that we ask this question. Why? Because we no longer have the luxury to assume that *our* way is the *best* way or the *only* way.[3] In fact, to make such an assumption today may render our message irrelevant to the very people we are trying to influence with the truths of Scripture. Might there not be other valid interpretation approaches available to us that will help the Bible come alive to those who do not share our particular theological heritage, training, or worldview? As a result, both Western and non-Western Christians facing the complexities of making the Bible relevant to an increasingly culturally diverse world need to face this question head-on if we are to read the Bible with all the world.

The first part of this chapter, then, will examine the usually unquestioned connection between colonization, authoritative knowledge, and the hermeneutical approaches that are subsequently used. The second part will explain the need for ethnohermeneutics in light of this unquestioned connection. The third part will briefly show how ethnohermeneutics is really nothing new; in fact, it is rooted in the New Testament itself and found throughout church history.

3. Saying this does not mean that I am advocating for a pluralistic or relativistic approach to interpreting the Bible. There are indeed "better" and "worse" interpretative approaches. Evangelical scholars are under obligation to point out the strengths and weaknesses of the various approaches, as well as to advocate for the use of approaches that are founded upon a high view of Scripture as God's inspired word to humanity. To do no less is to allow Christians to fall into syncretism, at best, or outright heresy, at worst. The topic of "how far is too far" in our Bible interpretations will be discussed in greater detail in chapter 9.

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Colonization, Authoritative Knowledge, and Hermeneutical Approaches

In this book I will mainly critique Western hermeneutical approaches, especially those based primarily on the grammatical-historical process. I do so because they currently dominate Bible interpretation worldwide, especially within the evangelical Protestant spectrum of the church.[4] These Western approaches have heavily influenced Western and non-Western Bible teachers, pastors, and missionaries. Consequently, most Western and non-Western Bible interpreters believe that there are only a few limited ways to interpret the Bible, usually those that *they* have been taught. Not surprisingly, these interpreters, in turn, have helped to perpetuate the dominance of these Western approaches in both the Western and non-Western worlds. Many of these Bible interpreters have consciously or unconsciously presupposed that the transcultural truths of the Bible are made known through a universal hermeneutical approach (Western) that works in all cultures, both Western and non-Western, as shown in figure 1.1.

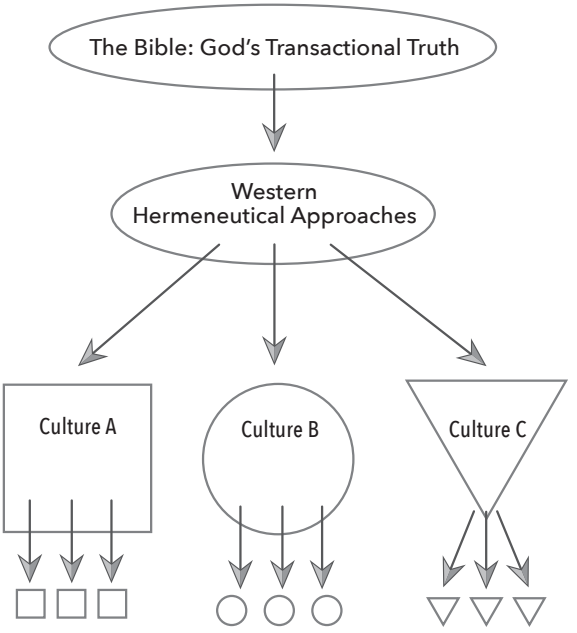


Figure 1.1 Presupposition:
Western hermeneutical approaches work for all cultures

4. Although in this book I am addressing ethnohermeneutics from my own perspective as an evangelical Protestant, the implications of ethnohermeneutics are relevant for the broader church, both Protestant and Catholic.

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