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From Text to Context: Hermeneutical Principles for Applying the Word of God

G. Waldemar Degner

This study deals with principles for working with the word of God.¹ The goal is to elucidate the methods by which we apply Holy Scripture to people today. We shall review several principles for interpreting the word. We call the discipline of interpreting the Bible “hermeneutics.” By emphasizing hermeneutics the desire here is to emphasize its importance in every aspect of pastoral ministry. The word of God does apply to all of life. And the application of the word is a “way of life” in the Christian ministry.

We use hermeneutical principles in every private devotion, in each letter we write that contains a verse of the Bible, in each bedside visit, in all of counseling—whether with a person who has a problem with drugs or alcohol, a family engaged in a dispute, or a delinquent member. We are always using and applying the word of God to the lives of people. Among the many tasks of a minister of the gospel, however, no single pastoral work is more demanding than preaching a good sermon. The principles of hermeneutics must be applied more carefully in preaching than in any other task. The goal and end of hermeneutics, in fact, as of pastoral ministry, is the dynamic preaching of a powerful sermon. We may also call it a careful application of the word of God to people in groups. It is relating the word to real life.

In the title of this essay, “From Text to Context,” the word “text” refers to the word of God and “context” means chiefly application. Until a few years ago hermeneutics was not ordinarily seen as including application. Earlier textbooks on homiletics gave no directions on how to apply the word of God. Missiologists have recently helped us, sometimes even forced us, to apply a text from the Bible according to sound principles. Missiologists have seen the need to make application across cultures. Much more attention, therefore, is being given now (as also in this essay) to the formulation of principles to be used in applying the word of God.

I. The Four Contexts of the Text

We begin, of course, with a text. Whether this text is assigned to us by a pericopal calendar of the church year or by some other series, or

even if we choose a text on our own, we still need a text. The sermon is based on a text of Scripture. The sermon proclaims the text of the Bible.

There is a very important distinction that we must note at the beginning here. The Bible is the word of God. God speaks in the Bible. The voice of Jesus, the Good Shepherd, can still be heard (John 10:3-5). He calls His sheep through the word of God. His sheep hear His voice, and they follow Him. If we listen to Scripture we can hear the *ipsissima verba*, the very words of Jesus.

Hearers will not hear the voice of Jesus in sermons, however, unless we preach that word. If we just read the word of the text and then preach about something else, the voice of God will not be heard in our preaching. Most sermons, unfortunately, are only sharing some opinions "rather than proclaiming the Word." Sermons are powerful when we proclaim the word, not when we merely share some thoughts.

We may take James 3:1-12 as a text by way of example. We have studied it, we have compared the original Greek with the vernacular; we understand each word. The big word in this chapter is "tongue" (γλῶσσα), used once in verse 5, twice in verse 6, once in verse 8. The word-pictures in this chapter, and in James generally, are from farming or rural life—horses, bridles, bits, wild animals, birds, snakes, aquatic creatures. Even the special word used for "sin" in verse 2 ("for we all sin") really means "stumble, trip" (πταίω); it is usually describes a horse that slips in mud or sand.² Other farming words are "trees," "forest fire," "spring of salt," and "fresh water." Marine vocabulary is sprinkled in as well—"ship," "rudder" (for guiding a ship), "pilot," and "making a straight course." The vocabulary is rustic and very descriptive. There are twelve *hapax legomena* (words used only once) in chapter 3, indicating the literary craftsmanship of James. His language is quite elegant. He even "invents" a new Greek word which he uses twice, in 1:8 and in 4:8, δίψυχος meaning "double-minded, doubting." It describes the person who prays without faith; "double-mindedness" is a major negative theme in this letter. While looking at the Greek text we also glance at the critical apparatus at the bottom of the page. The Letter of James is excessively heavy in small variant readings. A third of the

Greek page is given over to variant readings. No variants in our text, however, significantly change the meaning of the text.

We have looked at the grammatical structure and found no difficult constructions. Even the three conditional sentences in chapter 3 (verses 2, 3, and 4) are the simple particular variety that Greek identifies with a one-time event. Verse 6 depicts the tongue under four metaphors: a "fire," "a world of iniquity," "the defiler of the whole body," and "the igniter of all nature."

Perhaps we have read one or two good commentaries—an old one like Huther's in the series called Meyer's Commentary and a new one like Adamson's in the series called the New International Commentary.³ Now we are ready to think about the contexts. The broadest context is the theological context.

A. The Theological Context

It is no secret that James does not talk much about the person or work of Jesus Christ. He uses the name "Jesus Christ" only twice. In 1:1 he calls himself "a servant of God and of our Lord Jesus Christ" The second place is 2:1, where he tells his readers "to hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory without partiality." These verses contain all which James says about Jesus and the work of salvation done by Him. It is for this reason that the theological context is so important.

Who is the central person of the Bible? It is God. To whom does all of Scripture witness? It bears witness to Jesus Christ. Jesus told the Pharisees: "the Scriptures testify to Me" (John 5:39). According to the theological context, then, we are to relate all of Scripture to Jesus Christ. James does not proclaim the suffering and death of Christ by which Christ won our redemption. This "gap" has been noted long ago. The Lutheran Confessions, for example, twice say that "James speaks of those who are already justified."⁴ The letter of James, in other words, like most of the epistles of the New Testament, is written for believers, while the gospels were written for believers and unbelievers.

The theological context of Scripture further demonstrates that the main teaching of Scripture is justification before God by grace,

through faith. This teaching runs through all of Scripture. It is the main content already of the earliest book of the Bible, namely, Job. Job says that God is righteous but man is a sinner. Man cannot hide his sin from God. God is his Prosecutor, his Umpire, his Acquitter and Redeemer.⁵ Again, the same confessional writings affirm that justification by grace through faith "is the chief topic of Christian doctrine; . . . it is of special service for the clear, correct understanding of the entire Holy Scripture; . . . it alone opens the door to the entire Bible."⁶ The Apology continues to speak about the two principal topics of Scripture, namely, "the law, and the promises, that is, the gospel."

These bold statements hold before us the vital theological context of every text of Scripture. Luke concluded his gospel with Jesus' words to the eleven, urging "that repentance for the remission of sins be preached in His name to all nations" (Luke 24:46-57). A friend once told the author on the basis applying this verse: "If you cannot preach repentance and remission of sins in Christ, then you ought not preach." The apostles bid us do exactly the same. It is the mandate of preachers.

B. The Historical Context

We move with James 3 to the *historical context*. The historical context includes the standard isagogical questions: who, what, when, why, to whom, where, etc. We may reflect especially upon the four main questions: who, when, why, and to whom?

Who? The author is "James, servant of God and of Jesus Christ" (James 1:1) He was the brother of Jude (Jude 1). James is either the son of Mary and Joseph or, much more likely the son of Alphaeus and Mary, thus a cousin of Jesus.⁷ He was head of the church in Jerusalem in A.D. 49, when the Apostolic Council was held (Acts 15). He carries much authority in the early church in Jerusalem.

When? The dates suggested by different scholars vary between A.D. 45 and 90. The early date is preferable. Hence, James was perhaps the first book written by and for Christians.

Why? This short letter is not an evangelistic book, nor is it a book on doctrine. It is a treatise or diatribe in letter form, encouraging

Christians to live their faith in ways that honor God. The thoughts are similar to the Beatitudes of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:3-12). The theme of the letter is expressed in 1:12: Blessed is the man who endures testing, for after he is approved he will receive the crown of life which has been promised to those who love Him."

James is a "general" or a "catholic" letter. It speaks a message for Christians everywhere. Its purpose, in sum, is to exhort Christians to practice what they believe, to be doers of the word and not hearers only. Faith without works is dead.

To Whom? The first verse states that the addressees are "the tribes in the dispersion." Most early Christians were converted Jews. The "scattering" may refer to the dispersion that occurred after James, the brother of John, the son of Zebedee, was beheaded in A.D. 44 (Acts 12:2). Each persecution scattered more Christians. As they were scattered the gospel spread.

B. The Literary Context

James does not teach very much gospel. The epistle is almost all law, which is why Luther called it an "epistle of straw." Yet many pericopal series use James. Nesper lists ten series which take texts from James 3 alone.⁸

Sermons based on texts from James are often neither Christian nor textual. They are less than Christian because the preacher forgets about the theological context. They are less than textual because the preacher ignores the literary context. By literary context is meant the setting of the text in the book.

We are all guilty of jerking a text out of its literary context. We should never read a single paragraph from a good novel. Yet we deal with the Bible in this way all the time. David Black decries the fact that many Christians have memorized countless passages from the Bible, but they cannot fit them into the context from which they came.⁹ Many examples can be given, such as Romans 1:17b, but the just shall live by faith," a quotation from Habakkuk 2:4. If that verse is torn from its context, no one will know what Paul means by "the just person." Is he "just" because he keeps the law? Or is he "just" because he has the "righteousness of God revealed in the gospel?"

And does "faith" mean some energy that makes us alive, like gasoline in the car? Or is "faith" merely the hand which clings to the merits of Jesus Christ?

Often people memorize just one part of a verse and they forget the other part. In this way Roman 8:28 can easily become the confession of an unbeliever: "We know that all things work together for those who love God." People often stop there and forget how Paul finished the sentence: "to those who are called according to His purpose." Paul wanted to define further "those who love God" by emphasizing how much God loved them, even by calling them according to His eternal purpose. The second part helps us to understand what the basis for "love to God" really is; it is God's prior and eternal love for those who love Him.¹⁰ Romans 8:28 by no means represents the happy-go-lucky optimism of a worldling as some suppose.

We return to the literary context of James 3. In a short letter the immediate context is the whole letter. The remote context includes all literature like James, especially the wisdom-literature. The main topic of James 3:1-12, the control of the tongue, is often discussed in wisdom-writings such as Proverbs. The evils of the tongue that are "hated by God" are, for example, in Proverbs 6 "a lying tongue" (verse 17) and the "flattering tongue" (verse 24). We recall, in fact, that one of the most severe judgments of God came when "the whole earth had one tongue" at Babel (Genesis 11:1). God decided to control the outbursts of pride by confusing the tongues of people (verse 7). Hence, James' exhortation stands in a long Jewish tradition which is concerned about the sins of the tongue.

Within the letter of James is the admonition to every believer "to be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger"; because human wrath does not work the righteousness of God" (James 1:19-20). If your religion does not enable you "to bridle your tongue," then your religion is vain (1:26). Christians are to speak and to act as people who will "soon be judged" (2:12). "Every idle word, [ῥῆμα] that people speak, they shall give account for it in the day of judgment" (Matthew 12:36). The warning of James is directed especially to certain people who were rashly wanting to be teachers: "You know that we [i.e., teachers] shall receive a stricter judgment" (3:1).

We are trying, then, to understand what James 3 meant to people when they first heard these words. We must first understand *what the text meant* before we can go on to *what the text means today*. We are coming closer, however, to seeing the under-structure beneath the text of James 3.

C. The Context of Culture

What did a Jewish Christian of the *diaspora* in the first century feel when he heard that he was to put a “bridle on the tongue,” that “the tongue is a fire,” and “the tongue defiles the whole body, sets on fire the course of nature, and is set on fire by hell” (ὕπο τῆς γέεννης)? The cultural setting suggests many applications of the text. We must be careful to sort out which applications fit with the intended meaning of the text and which are our own ideas. Even within the text itself, some distinction may be necessary between supra-cultural and any which are purely cultural. We must sort, therefore, the cultural from the supra-cultural.

The goal, of course, of exegesis is to join the intended meaning of the text to the situation in life today. There are, in back, guidelines and principles to follow in knowing which elements of a text are cultural, historical, and theological. We may take another example, the “holy kiss.” Four times Paul commands Christians to “greet one another with a holy kiss” (ἐν φιλήματι ἀγίῳ, Romans 16:16; 1 Corinthians 16:20; 2 Corinthians 13:12; 1 Thessalonians 5:26). Peter puts it this way, “Greet one another with a kiss of love” (ἐν φιλήματι ἀγάπης). Some translations incorrectly give “kiss of peace” (e.g., NEB). Any good concordance will help classify the uses of “kiss.” Crudens makes three categories: (1.) The kiss of reverence and subjection to a superior; (2.) the kiss of love and affection (Genesis 27:26-27; 1 Samuel 20:41); and (3.) the kiss of idolatrous reverence and adoration (Hosea 13:2).¹¹

Paul’s command to give “the holy kiss” is an application of a supra-cultural principle. Beneath the surface command the apostle is reminding Christians to show their love to one another. They are all members of the body of Christ, the church. The ethical call to purity of heart and mind joins the command to show love to one another. It is important that Christians exchange expressions of love also in

their greeting with one another.

We return, then, to the exhortation on the use of the tongue in James. We have already noted that James is admonishing teachers of the word of God on the basis of the "stricter judgment" under which they stand. They have no cause, therefore, to be anxious to become teachers (James 3:1-2).

A related pattern in the Old Testament involves the use and misuse the name of God. Exodus 20 asserts the abiding commandment of God: "You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain, for the Lord will not hold him guiltless who takes His name in vain" (Exodus 20:7). James speaks about the tongue "defiling the whole body" (3:6) and the tongue as a tool for "blessing God and cursing people who are made in the image of God" (3:9), and he compares the mouth to a fountain from which fresh and bitter water flows (3:11). James uses other commands from Exodus 20 in chapter 2:8-11. He specifically speaks about those who "blaspheme the beautiful name of Him who called you" (2:7). James, therefore, is telling his readers to respect the name of God. Deep respect, in fact, for the names of God in general and so for "Jesus" in particular pervades the writing of the New Testament. The writer to the Hebrews, for instance, transfers the Jewish reverence for the divine name to "Jesus." He uses "Jesus" as the name of the Son of God twelve times, and each time he treats that name with special respect by using the figure of speech known as *hyberbaton*. It is may likewise be by reason of special reverence that James himself uses the name "Jesus" only two times in his epistles.

The process of identifying cultural factors, then and now, and of wedding the meaning then with meaning now, we call "contextualization." Such a process, however requires us to move into the specific cultural context of James. He is writing to Hellenistic Jews of the *diaspora* who are living in a Greek and Roman cultural environment. A good commentary will describe the cultural world of the readers. Several vivid pictures appear.

Verses 1-2: The teachers are the teachers in the church. Their office, like the offices of apostle and prophet is a gift of Christ (Ephesians 4:11; 1 Corinthians 12:28; Romans 12:7). They were

entrusted with the task of transmitting Christian teaching to others (2 Timothy 2:2).¹² If their teaching is erroneous, they are teachers who “slip” or “stumble” (πταίνειν). This double-mindedness (δίψυχος in 1:8 and 4:8, a word which James apparently coined) expresses the chief concern of this letter.

Verses 3-4: The pictures involve a small bit in the mouth of a large horse and of the small rudder in the large ship; the small controls the great. This picture was familiar to any one in the first century in the Roman world. Good commentaries, such as the one on James by Douglas Moo, give cross-references to cultural similarities. The Greek tragedian Sophocles spoke of “spirited horses that are broken by the use of a small bit” (*Antigone*, 477). Aristotle commented on the small rudder turning the “huge mass” of a ship (*Quaestiones Mechanici*, 5). Philo used these images to illustrate God’s control of the cosmos.¹³

Verse 5: This verse is a summary of 1-4. It introduces the new extension of the dangerous power of the tongue. The tongue can set the world or, more specifically, a forest on fire (ὄλη meaning “wood” in the first instance and then more generally “material substance”). The Old Testament compares the speech of a fool to a “scorching fire” (Proverbs 16:27). Jeshua ben-Sirach says that the tongue “will not be master over the godly, and they will not be burned in its flame” (Sirach 28:22). Anyone living in dry Palestine would understand how a small brush fire could fan into a disastrous blaze.

Verse 6: This is a key-verse in the discourse and it may be the central core of a chiasmic structure. The tongue is a fire that pollutes (σπιλοῦν) the whole body. Pure religion has the opposite effect, namely, “to keep oneself unstained (ἄσπιλον) from the world” (1:27). The expression “the world of iniquity” (ὁ κόσμος τῆς ἀδικίας) expresses the usual biblical view of the world as an evil world. When sin entered in Genesis 3, the curse of sin affected the ground, the larger environment, relationships between humans, and relationships with God. John uses *cosmos* in this sense in, for example, John 3:16 and 1 John 2:15. Corresponding ideas can be found in Stoic doctrine, in Middle-Platonism, the unending cycle of reincarnations in the Orphic religion.¹⁴

The tongue “is set on fire by Gehenna,” which is to say that all the tongue’s tremendous incendiary powers come ultimately from hell itself. Such was the teaching of Jesus, who described the ultimate condemnation as the “unquenchable fire of Gehenna” (Mark 9:43-48). “Gehenna” is a transliteration of a Hebrew word referring to the Valley of Hinnom, which was used in the intertestamental period as a picture of the place of final condemnation.

Verses 7-8: These verses intensify and extend the picture of the untamable and destructive powers of the tongue. All of the subhuman creation can be tamed. Man’s tongue cannot be tamed by anyone. It is in verse 8 where the first hint of outside help in the control of the beastly tongue is heard. None of us humans can tame the tongue . . . only God can!

Verses 9-12: The double-minded nature of the tongue is likened to the restless and unstable situation of man in general. It is inconsistent that blessing and cursing come from the same mouth. A well cannot produce sweet and bitter water at the same time. An olive tree cannot produce figs, nor a fig tree olives.

A Summary of the Text

The cultural setting points to the chief theological truth of this text: If we first are right with God, then our relations with the world and with our tongues will begin to fall into place. We are summoned first, in other words, to mend our relations with God by observing the First Table of the Law. Only then can we practice our relationships with our neighbors as taught in the Second Table of the Law. If Christ gives us new and clean hearts, then our tongues will praise God and speak well of others.

A sermon on this text, with complementary reference to James 1:17 (which speaks of “every good and perfect gift” coming down “from heaven”), might follow the ensuing outline:

The Tongue As the Gift of God

- I. The Proper Use of the Tongue
 - A. To call upon the Name of God (Exodus 20:7)
 1. In prayer and praise (James 1:5-6)
 2. In teaching the word of God (James 3:1-2)

- B. To spread the word of grace in the *diaspora*
 - 1. In visiting the needy (James 1:27)
 - 2. In being a fountain of pure water and a tree of good fruit (James 3:10-12)
- II. The Dangers of the Tongue
 - A. Misused power (James 3:4-5)
 - 1. The analogy of a horse
 - 2. The analogy of a ship
 - 3. An analogy on example taken from one's own life
 - B. Destructive power (James 3:6-8)
 - 1. The destructiveness of a fire out of control
 - 2. The destructiveness of an untamed animal
 - 3. The destruction wrought by our tongues too
- III. The Lesson of James
 - A. The specific lesson: gift of the tongue
 - 1. When the heart is redeemed by Christ
 - 2. When the heart is converted by the Holy Spirit
 - 3. When the tongue is used in prayer, praise, and evangelism
 - B. The larger lesson
 - 1. Overcoming "double-mindedness"
 - 2. Putting faith into practice (James 2:20-26)

Guidelines for Applications of the Word of God

One problem in applying the word of God centers in knowing which parts of the word are always applicable and which portion of the word presents an application to a specific culture and is therefore applicable with equal directness only when a current culture is equivalent to the ancient in some regard. Several "models" have been proposed principles to be used in making the needed distinctions.

A. *Fee and Stuart Model*

Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart are co-authors of a "best-selling" book on hermeneutics, *How to Read the Bible for All It's Worth*.¹⁵ While each author follows his own distinctive rules for contextualizing, their principles may be combined for the purposes of this paper.

1. *The Problem*

Modern Christians “automatically” interpret Paul’s directive to Timothy “bring my cloak which I left with Carpus” (2 Timothy 4:13) as a command that applied only to Timothy. They understand the command, on the other hand, to “endure hardship . . . like a good soldier of Jesus Christ” (2 Timothy 2:3) as an admonition from God to every Christian. Some Christians flinch when they read Paul’s advice to Timothy: “Stop drinking water only, and use a little wine because of your stomach and your frequent illnesses” (1 Timothy 5:23); they want at least to substitute grape juice for the wine. When, on the other hand, Paul exhorts Timothy “to continue in the word” (2 Timothy 3:14-16), the same readers see this exhortation as an imperative addressed to all Christians for all times. References to long hair versus short hair, enrolling widows, teaching by women, dealing with homosexuals, going to pagan courts, eating meat that had been offered to idols, and entering a pagan temple with a friend, have all resulted in questions as to cultural consideration.

2. *The Rules.*

Fee and Stuart list many rules designed to guide Christians today in knowing what in the Bible applies today and what applied only when the words were written. An attempt to summarize them follows.

(1.) The basic rule is this: A text can never mean what it never meant to its author and his readers. Hence we must always get back to the original situation of the text. If, for example, eating and drinking the flesh of Jesus in John 6:53 meant the Lord’s Supper to readers of John, then it means the same today. If, on the other hand, such was not the meaning that Jesus intended then, it is not now.

(2.) Whenever we share similar cultural backgrounds, the word of God means for us today the same thing which it meant then. Statements like “all have sinned” (Romans 5:12) and “by grace are we saved through faith” (Ephesians 2:8) and injunctions to clothe ourselves with “compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience” (Colossians 3:12) still address us and all believers, of course. The opposite principle applies: If the word then applied only to a cultural situation of that day, then the word applies only indirectly to us today. The dress of women, cosmetics, jewelry,

television, playing cards, dancing, mixed swimming, and the like must be evaluated on the basis of general principles drawn from word of God.

(3.) When the Bible narrated history—as in the case of about forty percent of the Old Testament—we are to relate the narratives to three levels of importance.

(a.) The upper level deals with creation or redemption of the world, including the incarnation and sacrifice of Christ.

(b.) The middle level deals with the nation of Israel or of Christ.

(c.) The bottom level deals with the many individual occurrences, such as Jacob meeting his brother Esau, Joseph's life in Egypt, Paul's imprisonments in Caesarea and Rome, and his fortnight at sea between Crete and Malta (Acts 27).

Relating happenings on the lower levels to those on the higher levels helps the interpreter to keep a balance and to set aside unimportant information. Stuart says specifically that the Old Testament points to Christ (John 5:39), while not every narrative is messianic. Those narratives which are messianic, either by direct prophecy or by typology, are on the upper level (1 Corinthians 10:4). Thus, the atonement of Jesus is the central act of all Holy Scripture.

(4.) In culturally related matters one should distinguish the central core teaching—at the top or middle level—from what is outward or external. Thus, the fall of mankind and the redemption of all by Christ is central, while the holy kiss, head-coverings, and charismatic gifts are peripheral.

(5.) One needs to ask whether the New Testament suggests options when it prescribes a certain practice. When Paul tells women to cover their heads in 1 Corinthians 11, he indicates that this practice is a “custom” (συνήθεια) which nature (φύσις) teaches. The woman's head-covering is to show submission. In whatever the woman can show submission, she should. The underlying theological truth should be preserved, even when a particular custom has no prescriptive force on us in a culture with differing symbols.

In regard to homosexuality the New Testament gives no options. Even though homosexuality was widely practiced in the ancient world and was regarded as an acceptable form of sexual expression, the New Testament is consistently opposed. It does not distinguish between "abusive" and "non-abusive" homosexuality. The Bible as a whole, indeed, witnesses against homosexual relations (Romans 1:24-28; 1 Corinthians 6:9; Leviticus 18-22; 20:13).¹⁶

B. Bishop Ting

1. The Basic Model

Bishop K. H. Ting, Director of the Chinese Christian Council of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement, asks three sets of questions in order to know how and when to apply a teaching of Holy Scripture.¹⁷ The questions are these:

- (1.) In the biblical context what was the purpose of the passage in question? What results did it produce?
- (2.) In our context what is God's purpose and what are the results which He anticipates in relating the passage in question to us?
- (3.) In our context, in quoting the passage in question, to what are we pointing? What is our purpose? What results do we anticipate?

The first question deals with background, with what the passage meant then. This consideration helps us to "avoid far-fetched conjectures." The second question puts the reader's name on the message from God. It tells the reader what it means now. The third question helps the reader avoid impure motives in speaking about this word of God or the hopes he has.

2. An Application of the Model

By way of example, we may apply Ting's three sets of questions to the biblical and confessional teaching of justification through faith. (1.) What was the purpose of Paul and of Martin Luther in stressing justification by faith? What results did it produce?

Paul was opposing the observance of laws and rituals, circumcision,

and the like as a standard of righteousness. Only the one-time sacrifice of Christ can and has reconciled God to humankind. It is not behavior in accordance with the law, but only faith in the grace of God on the basis of the work of Jesus Christ that justifies us. The *result* of this teaching was that the ethnic narrowness of Judaism was replaced by a world-wide religion. The preaching of justification by faith exerted great influence in the history of religion and in the course of all history. Luther's stress on justification by grace through faith likewise emphasized again the redemptive work of Christ on the cross, by which the separation of humanity from God has been overcome by God Himself.

(2.) The second set of questions relates to our own situation. In our context what is God's purpose and what results come from preaching justification by faith? This unchanging truth enables Christians to come boldly before God in prayer for guidance and help. This doctrine, Bishop Ting asserts, is the basis for the "self-government, self-support, and self-propagation" movement in the Chinese Church. Justification by faith is the doctrinal point of departure for the independent initiative of the Chinese Christians.

(3.) The third set of questions builds on the second. In our context what is the correct purpose and the good result of speaking about justification by faith? What would be an incorrect purpose and harmful result?

It is good to hold up Jesus Christ to show that a human being cannot make up his short-comings before God. Only by faith in Christ will we be accepted as righteous before God. Justification by faith also shows us our responsibility within the church and in the world. Two bad consequences result when the doctrine of justification is over-emphasized so that the wholeness and balance of all doctrines are destroyed. The first harmful result from an over-emphasis is that Christians show contempt and even enmity for ordinary people and they set themselves up as better than others. Bishop Ting cites James 1:16-17 to show that Christians should not view those who are not Christian as enemies. A second harmful result from an exaggerated emphasis on justification is that Christians think that they can sin freely and boldly on the ground that God's grace freely covers their sins. Ting cites Roman 6 (1-2a, 15) and Hebrews 10:26 to thwart this

misconception. He concludes this example of contextualizing a doctrine by stressing the need for Christians today to make "Christ manifest in their actions."

C. Grant Osborne

Grant Osborne's book of five hundred pages in fine print, entitled *The Hermeneutical Spiral* is the most comprehensive textbook today on biblical hermeneutics.¹⁸ It combines depth of theory with extensive description of practice. The discipline of hermeneutics finds its proper goal in dynamic preaching and teaching of the word of God. As professor of Trinity Evangelical Seminary in Deerfield, Illinois, Grant Osborne is required to accept the full authority of the word of God. For the purpose, however, of understanding his hermeneutical principles, we should note that he distinguishes three levels of authority:

Level 1 . . . The Text . . . Implicit Authority

Level 2 . . . Interpretation . . . Derived Authority

Level 3 . . . Contextualization . . . Applied Authority¹⁹

It is important to understand these levels of working with the text of Holy Scripture in order to appreciate why and how Osborne guards the intended meaning of the text through the levels of interpretation and contextualization (application). The authority of the word is lost if the application does not bring the intended meaning to the modern hearer and learner.

Osborne devotes two chapters to homiletical contextualization.²⁰ He cautions us that the most important part of our task is to base application on the intended meaning of the text. Sermon preparation must be a devotional exercise—"a first-person encounter"—before it becomes proclamation—"a second-person encounter." "The goal is to wed the text with the current context of the congregation." He speaks of the problem of "distanciation" (the cultural distance between biblical times and today). This gap is not correctly bridged by allegorizing, spiritualizing, or moralizing—examples with which the history of thought is replete.

Osborne sets forth three steps as his model of interpretation and

application:

(1.) One must, first of all, determine the situation behind the text, separating any cultural application from the supra-cultural elements of the divine word. Paul's "urban evangelism" approach in Acts 18-19 teaches us the need for evangelism and the power of the gospel over all evil, including its authority over the unclean spirits of magic. His burning, however, of all the books on magic and witchcraft is not a command to us to burn down every "porn-shop" and brothel.

(2.) One must delineate the underlying theological principle beneath the surface message of the text. The theological principle is the bridge that spans the gulf between past and present. Didactic passages, such as the injunction to "pray without ceasing" (1 Thessalonians 5:17), are usually relevant for all time. Passages like 1 Corinthians 11:1-2 on head-coverings are also easily explained if the deeper theological meaning is seen. Sometimes the underlying meaning requires more study. Osborne cites the narrative flow in John 9 in which "the progressive coming to sight of the man born blind" is contrasted with the "growing blindness of the Pharisees."

(3.) The third stage entails a search for parallel situations in the current life of the congregation. The pastor must be close to flock. He must live with them and become, in a sense, a "sociologist" who analyzes the deeper needs of his people. The applications in sermon and class should (a.) follow the same pattern that the biblical writer used, and (b.) it should be as personal as possible, but (c.) it should remain evangelical and constructive in the life of the Christian.

Summary and Conclusion

We have spoken, then, of why and how readers are to examine the contexts as well as the texts of Holy Scripture. If we separate the text completely from its context, we are not preaching the word of God according to its intended meaning. It can be correctly said that if we ignore the context, we are not really proclaiming the word of God. We are only sharing our own ideas.

Most of the above discussion has been devoted to the how? Of contextualizing or applying the word of God. This study has pointed to the four contexts of any text—theological, historical, literary, and

cultural—and has shown how each is an essential part of the process of preparing to preach and teach.

Three models, finally, were briefly presented which contain significant insights on how to bring together what the word of God meant to its original readers with what it means today. Each has some valuable lessons for us today. There are, at the same time, disagreements of considerable significance among the authors of the three models presented. Thus, teaching in the church by women, which is forbidden by Paul in 2 Timothy 2, is permitted by both Fee-Stuart and Osborne. Both recognize, at least, that in 2 Timothy 2 the top level of teaching, related to creation and redemption, is involved. Paul specifies a standard of the “top level” when he speaks of “the law” (ὁ νόμος as in 1 Corinthians 14:34). Only Bishop Ting, however, recognizes the need for the supra-cultural gospel to influence and change the cultural structures of society. The church is called to change society, not society to dictate the ethics of the church.

The Endnotes

1. This paper was first read to the APATS (Asian Program for Advanced Training and Service) in Hsinchu, Taiwan (Republic of China), in November of 1994. The author has spent three years at China Lutheran Seminary teaching courses on exegetical theology in the Master of Divinity program. He is emeritus professor of exegetical theology at Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne. In addition to the Master of Divinity, he possesses the degrees of Master of Arts in Classics from Washington University in St. Louis and Doctor of Philosophy in Classics, New Testament, and Early Christian Literature from the University of Chicago.
2. BAGD and M-M, *sub voce*, cite references which show not only the physical act of stumbling, for example, against the rocks (Xenophon, *Anabasis*, 4.2,3), but also the result of the slipping (“be ruined, be lost”), as in 2 Peter 1:10.
3. John Huther, *The General Epistles of James, Peter, John, and Jude*, translated by Gloag-Croom-Clarke, Meyer's Commentary of the New Testament, X (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1883). James Adamson, *The Epistle of James*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing

House, 1976).

4. Apology to the Augsburg Confession, 2.248; and Formula of Concord, Thorough Declaration, III. *Triglotta*, 931.
5. One may see especially Job 31-32.
6. Apology IV (II).
7. Offered here are the Epiphonian and the Jeromian (Hieronimoan) views; the Helvetian view that James is a child of Joseph through a previous marriage is less commonly held.
8. Paul W. Nesper, *Biblical Texts* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1952), 440. He shows a total of 49 pericopal texts from James, while there are only 42 from 1 Peter.
9. David Alan Black, *Using New Testament Greek in Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1994), 70 and following.
10. C.E.B. Cranfield, *Romans*, 1, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1975), 431.
11. Alexander Cruden, *Complete Concordance* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1967), 367-368. The concordances of Thayer and Strong provide similar information.
12. We should avoid the appealing metaphorical significance of tongue and body which Bo Reicke sees here, namely, of the tongue as the teacher-preacher and of the body as the church. Bo Reicke, *The Epistles of James, Peter and Jude*, The Anchor Bible (New York, London, Toronto, Sydney, Auckland: Doubleday, 1964), 37-40.
13. Philo, *On the Creation*, 88. One may see also his comparison of the mind of man to the charioteer who controls all, *On the Migration of Abraham*, 67. One may compare Strobacrus, Ecclesiastes 3.17, and Plutarch. Moo takes his references from M. Dibelius, *A Commentary on the Epistle of James*, revised and translated by H. Greeven (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976).
14. This cycle is described in Pythagorean writing, in Plato's *Timaeus* (where Plato said he learned it from Pythagoras), in the Stoic literature at least as late as Marcus Aurelius (*The Meditations*). Marcus was the philosopher-emperor of Rome A.D. 161-180. One may see *παλιγγενεσία* in Gerhard Kittel or Colin Brown, *sub*

voce, for a complete picture of the cycle beginning with the “technic fire” and ending with the “regeneration” of all organic and inorganic matter.

15. Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All It's Worth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic Books, 1982). Fee covers the chapters on the New Testament and Stuart those on the Old Testament.
16. Fee and Stuart understand the admonition by Paul regarding the role of women in the church as a cultural application. The injunction in 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 of silence and submission on women is so broad that it excludes them from almost any service in the church; it must therefore, Fee and Stuart maintain, constitute a specific application to the culture of Corinth. First Timothy 2:11-12, which forbids women to teach in the church, is likewise said to be culturally relative by virtue of other female troubles discussed in 1 Timothy 5:11-16 and 2 Timothy 3:6-9. Women are, indeed, engaged in teaching in Acts 18:26 and 21:8, in 1 Corinthians 11:5, and elsewhere. Fee and Stuart express such opinions frequently, especially on pages 65-70.
17. *How to Study the Bible*, translated and published in Shatin, N.T., (Hong Kong: Tao Fong Shan Ecumenical Centre, 1981), 29-35. The example of justification by grace through faith is also essentially Ting's argument.
18. Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1991).
19. *Ibid.*, 8.
20. *Ibid.*, 318-365: Chapter 15, “Homiletics I: Contextualization,” and Chapter 16, “Homiletics II: The Sermon.”