

He Gave Us Scripture: Foundations of Interpretation

LESSON
TEN

BIBLICAL CULTURE &
MODERN APPLICATION
DISCUSSION FORUM



THIRD MILLENNIUM

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Lesson Ten: Biblical Culture & Modern Application

Discussion Forum

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Dr. Glen G. Scorgie
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Dr. Stephen J. Wellum

Question 1:

Why did God give humanity the cultural mandate?

The foundations of culture can be seen in the Bible as early as Genesis 1:28. In this verse, God blessed Adam and Eve and directed them to rule over all creation. Some theologians have referred to this command as the "cultural mandate." But, why did God give humanity the cultural mandate?

Dr. P. J. Buys

Originally in Paradise, God gave man the mandate to rule over the earth and to represent him in the way they rule and use creation to give glory to his name. Now, men were corrupted by sin, but that mandate was never taken away. So, when people are saved and receive a new value system, to really give glory to God, they actually take up this mandate with new vigor and new strength. And according to their gifts and talents, every human being then wants to give glory to God in their daily task, to make clear that they really belong to him and that he is coming to restore everything again.

Dr. Greg Perry

Many people think that missions really begins with Abraham and the call to be a blessing to all the nations. But actually, the mission of God in relation to humanity and the earth begins in the Garden, and God tells Adam and Eve to be fruitful and multiply and to subdue the entire earth. And so, here we have the sense that God makes a garden, he puts humanity in that garden, and then he says something really incredible. He says that humanity has the mission of expanding the borders of that garden to show forth the image and the reign of God throughout the entire world by how we keep and cultivate the earth, and how we share its resources and how we grow as communities, and how we show forth the goodness of God and what it means that God made things very good. It's really interesting that in the New Testament the apostle Paul kind of combines together the Great Commission and the cultural

mandate. We see this in the passages like Ephesians 4 where he's talking about the growth of the church, and how the church is growing up in Christ, and that that growth of the church is expanding and filling out all things in every way. And he says that as we take off the old self and put on the new self. That we're growing up in the image and likeness of God, being created for holiness, being created as image bearers. And so, in his work in discipleship, or making disciples, Paul goes back to the creational mandate, to that original mission that we're growing up to become a mature humanity in Christ.

Dr. Philip Ryken

When God created the world and the people that he made in his image, the whole future of humanity was open to the possibilities, and God gave a command that we would be fruitful and establish families and communities, and that we would exercise a loving dominion of the creation. And that would lead to culture and music and the arts and cities and civilizations. All of these possibilities were given with creation itself. And I suppose you'd have to ask God why this was his plan for humanity. But God has been working through the human race in all kinds of ways that lead to his glory. And our lives are so greatly enriched by the possibilities of creation that were given in the very beginning and now are brought under the lordship of Jesus Christ. And it brings so much joy to life to have the experiences of family, of community, of enjoying the rich bounty of creation. All of these things return to the glory of God.

Question 2:

How did humanity's fall into sin affect our ability to think rightly?

Genesis 3 records the temptation of Adam and Eve along with humanity's fall into sin. This fall has had a lasting impact on humanity in a number of ways. It's affected the way we act and the way we feel. And it's also affected the way we think. How did humanity's fall into sin affect our ability to think rightly?

Dr. Steve Blakemore

When we have the doctrine of the Fall in Christian theology, the doctrine of the Fall has implications for how we understand how human reason, or human thinking would work ... Our capacity for thought was meant to seek God as its ultimate goal. The human heart was meant to desire God as its ultimate goal. And the human will was meant to choose God and God's way as its ultimate purpose. What does sin do? Sin takes and turns my life toward me, where I become my ultimate desire. I become my ultimate goal. My will becomes the ultimate purpose for my life. Sin, therefore, twists my thinking, because even my reason becomes self-serving. Even my desires become self-serving. Our capacity to think, therefore, is only really freed — our capacity to think truly and rightly is only fully engaged — when, by the grace of God, he turns me outward, which is the doctrine of the new birth and the recreation of our lives in Christ. My heart is turned toward God, therefore my mind can seek and yearn for God, and my will can be willing to yield to God. Sin twists me inward. Grace pulls

me outward. And when grace pulls me outward, the truth of God's revelation becomes more and more and more apparent to me. That it is absolutely true because the vestiges of sin that would keep me trapped in my own self-reference are increasingly broken off my life so that I can more and more think God's thoughts as they are revealed to me in Scripture, and desire God's will as it is revealed to me in Scripture, and surrender my life to the lordship of Jesus and the purposes of God the Father.

Dr. Glen G. Scorgie

I think many times our ability to understand and think clearly is impaired by physical maladies that are a consequence of the Fall — dementia. There are characterological deficiencies like laziness and sloth that affect our ability to think clearly. And in a host of ways, we live a world of the false self, of posturing and denial where we are too terrified by the truth to embrace it with candor. And it's only when we experience grace from God, the unconditional embrace of our Creator through Christ that we can be honest about ourselves and even know clearly who we are, as well as the truth on other things. So we are caught enmeshed in a pervasive defacing of the image of God that it touches even the life of our minds. And so, we dare not stray too far from the revealed word, which is constantly providing recalibrating moments and tune-ups on the intellectual disposition that we bring to life.

Dr. Thomas J. Nettles

Human beings are very complex. We are emotion. We're rationality. We are bodies. And we haven't really discerned yet how much our shape and the color of eyes and our hair and how much our height, all of this, how this affects our own emotions, our self-perceptions and how that feeds into our rationality and the affections. We're whole persons and so we cannot, sort of, separate out one part of us from the other. That's what makes every person unique because everything about us feeds into the way we communicate and the way we perceive and the way we think. And when God gives us the Bible, when he gives us revelation, he does it with all of that in mind ... And so, the operation of truth is something that is always funneled through the whole person. This is tremendously important for understanding how the Fall affected the way we interpret Scripture and how we respond to divine revelation, and how it is that we can or cannot understand it. Sometimes the way it affects the mind is called the "noetic" effects of sin. But when we talk about the noetic effects of sin, in my view, I don't think that that means that there is some sort of peculiar genetic fault that has come in that has caused the rationality, by itself, simply to function in a faulty way. I do believe in the noetic effects of sin, but I think that it's related to the way sin has impacted the whole person. When Paul is talking about the relationship between the revelation and rationality in Romans 1, he indicates that, from a purely rational standpoint, everyone has a knowledge of God. They know his eternal power and godhead, even when you get to the decline of that degradation. He talks about those who knowing, that those who do such things deserve punishment, nevertheless, they do them and have delight in those who do them. So, the problem is not purely rational. It's not purely an inability to perceive revelation and to draw the right conclusions of it, if all that was involved was the rationality. But that is simply not the way it is. Much more important is this whole idea that many Christian theologians

have called "affections." It is on the basis of affections that we make our choices, and on the basis of affections that we actually determine what we will believe is true and what is not true, because that is so powerful — the fact that we have become wrapped in upon ourselves, or curved in upon ourselves. So we judge everything in light of the way it affects how people view *us*, what *our* affections are, what *our* pleasure is. And we will easily dismiss the clearest truths. Not because they're unclear. Not because the rationality by itself would not draw that conclusion, but because if there is a way out of not drawing a conclusion that makes moral demands of us, then the unregenerate person will draw that conclusion rather than the conclusion that is clearly demanded by the evidence ... And so Paul, in 1 Corinthians 2, he talks about the things of the Spirit are spiritually discerned. And the person who is unspiritual cannot know them because they are spiritually discerned, and he does not understand them. Now, what Paul is arguing there is that there is a bias that the unspiritual man has against the truths of divine revelation, and that bias is so powerful that he represses that which should be clear to his rationality in favor of himself and his pleasure. So that's what I believe the noetic effects of the Fall have been — this reality of the wholeness of our person and how fallenness makes our affections dominate our rationality so that we refuse to see the things that we should see, and that from God's standpoint have been clearly revealed.

Question 3:

In what ways did God's laws direct the culture of ancient Israel?

The instructions found in the Old Testament laws guided the nation of Israel as God's chosen people and conformed Israel's culture to God's righteous standards. But sometimes these laws looked a lot like other ancient Near Eastern laws. And sometimes, God's laws contained unexpected adaptations. In what ways did God's laws direct the culture of ancient Israel?

Dr. Robert B. Chisholm, Jr.

When we look at the Old Testament, we see that God often accommodated his revelation to the culture around Israel in which they lived. When you look at the Old Testament law you will sometimes see great similarity between it and Mesopotamian laws, Hittite laws, other law codes from throughout the ancient Near Eastern world. So it's apparent that God did contextualize his self-revelation and his demands. He met the people where they were and he formulated laws that were very similar to what they knew from the culture; although, I think in many cases the Law given by God is more enlightened when you look at some of the details. It's more enlightened than what is in the culture. It's almost as if God is taking them where they're at, and he's trying to push them forward toward his ideal. But at other times, God breaks into that culture, and rather than contextualizing or accommodating what they're doing, he confronts what they're doing and outlaws it for Israel. For example, idolatry. The typical people in the ancient Near East is very happy to worship various gods — cover all the bases. But Yahweh comes to his people and says, no. "You will have no

other gods before me." It will be exclusive worship. There is no room for syncretism — the merging of the worship as the one deity with another. And there's no room for polytheism. God will sometimes confront certain practices and outlaw them if they have these pagan, idolatrous associations. A really good example can be found in Deuteronomy 14:1 where the Lord says:

You are children of the Lord your God; do not cut yourselves [nor make] your forehead bald for the sake of the dead (Deuteronomy 14:1, NET).

In the ancient Near East there was a practice — we see it in 1 Kings 18 — where the prophets of Baal are cutting themselves. The reason they're doing that is because there is a drought in the land, and in their theology, the god Baal, the storm god, the fertility god, has died. And they're trying to resurrect him through this practice of cutting themselves. And so, people in this culture, when someone died, they would sometimes cut themselves as an act of mourning and sorrow. And the Lord says to Israel, we're not going to do that because of its pagan associations. That's going too far. So, sometimes the Lord would accommodate the culture; try to move it forward toward his ideal. Other times he would confront the culture and say, no, we're not going to operate that way.

Dr. Daniel L. Kim

In the Old Testament we see that the cultures have various aspects of it that are faithful to God's covenant laws and expectations. But there are also some elements that perhaps are not always faithful or always according to God's standards. So, perhaps I could think of three different examples. The first one that comes to mind is the notion of the firstborn and the blessings that the firstborn gets. Sometimes God intentionally chooses the second child, not necessarily to ask Israel or the people of the ancient Near East to conform to Scripture, but perhaps to shake them up, to do something unexpected that their culture has long held as true. And this is true long before Abraham was even called. There's a second issue, perhaps the issue of having a second or third wife. In the ancient Near East, that was a very common practice, and we see that still very much practiced in the biblical culture, especially in the Old Testament times. And oftentimes we'll see God making specific laws to make sure that all wives are treated according to the way they ought to be. So, perhaps the second wife is the favored wife, and the husband has a son through the first wife. God gives explicit laws saying that it's that first son who gets the double inheritance and not the child of the second, more-favored wife. The third thing that comes to my mind is the notion that we see of the biblical culture in which, oftentimes, the inheritance policy. For example, we know that the ancient Near East and the biblical culture in the Hebrew Bible, in the Old Testament, has always favored and long favored males. So if you had a son, the son would automatically inherit the property in the next generation. But, for example, the case of the daughters of Zelophehad is an intriguing one, because Moses, when he was giving the Law was giving the general case, and the daughters came up to him and approached him and said, "But we are all daughters. We have no brothers to inherit the land. Can the Lord perhaps come up with a different way to do this?" And the Lord indeed agrees with them and says that

if there are no sons, no male heirs, the daughters are permitted to inherit. And so, there are certain adjustments that God makes to the ancient Near Eastern culture and to the Hebrew Bible. Are there elements of the Hebrew Bible or elements of the Old Testament culture that God desires and wants to see changed? Perhaps there might be some. But it's not very obvious to the people that are listening. For example, today we might find it very offensive that the women have to labor long and hard all day just to cook meals. And yet, God does not seem to take that as a negative — in fact, encourages his people to be very, very hospitable whenever visitors come, which requires the wife to be even more engaged in labor in the kitchen area to cook and to do that. So, perhaps, I'm not so sure there are any specific elements of the Old Testament culture that God corrects. Now, I would go back to Genesis 2 and God's statement that a man and a woman shall leave their families — respective families — and join and become one. And we see that reiteration when it comes to the leaders of the church in the New Testament as men who are of one wife.

Dr. John Oswalt

God revealed himself in the context of human life. But he did not merely adopt everything that might be typical of a given culture. One of the things that we see when we compare the Old Testament laws to the laws of the neighbors, for instance, is that there are sometimes subtle, sometimes more significant differences. We find, for instance, the biblical laws are constantly put on the basis of, "Do this because I am the Lord. I have entered into a relationship with you." So, you honor your father and your mother, not just because it's a good idea, but because it's an expression of your relationship to your heavenly Father, and it's worked out in that regard. So, this means that the laws typically are more humane than they are in the other cultures where it is simply the king saying, "If you don't do this I'll kill you, and that's that." The law is simply on the basis of a king's personal demand; whereas, in the Bible, the law is on the basis of this covenant relationship with the saving God. So you also will find laws which not only are more humane in the way in which they are applied, you will also find more gradation in the laws so that there are differing punishments for different sins that are on a different level, and that is the relationship to God.

Question 4:

How did the coming of Christ affect the relationship between Israel and the Gentile nations?

The coming of Christ changed a lot of things for both the nation of Israel and the nations around them. For Israel, the long-awaited Messiah had come. And for the nations, they could now take part in God's eternal kingdom. But, how did the coming of Christ affect the relationship between Israel and the Gentile nations?

Dr. Jimmy Agan

We want to say that Israel and the nations are on equal footing before the Lord, and the coming of Christ has revealed that. Jews and Gentiles alike are equally in need of

a Savior. Jews and Gentiles alike must come to God through the work of Jesus and through faith in him. There is no distinction there — equality. Second, we want to say unity. The Scripture makes it clear that, in Christ, Jew and Gentiles are one. Galatians 3:28 states that explicitly. So, there's no preferential treatment within God's people for those who are ethnically Jewish or those who are not. There is no advantage that Gentiles have over Jews in terms of being closer to God or somehow better able to benefit from the work of Christ. We are one in the body. And here we have to say that the church hasn't always lived this out well. There have been times when the church has neglected to evangelize Jews and folks with that kind of ethnic background. And there have been times when Gentile nations have persecuted the Jewish people. The Scripture teaches that that ought not to be the case. Equality, unity should rule the day, and certainly nothing like some of the anti-Semitism that we've sadly seen. But finally, we want to say gratitude. There should be gratitude on the part of Gentiles toward the Jewish nation. We should notice that this is the people through whom God brought us the promises of Scripture, the people through whom God brought us the physical lineage of the Messiah. We should be grateful to God for his people Israel. And when we open the Old Testament we ought to be thinking — as Gentiles, even — we're looking at our family photo album. These are our ancestors. These are our people. We are now a part of that family — and a sense of gratitude for that part of our heritage. At the same time, Jewish people ought to be grateful any time they see somebody worshiping the God of Scripture, the only true God. Jewish believers ought to give thanks that Gentiles are now with them worshiping this one true God as he's revealed himself, not only in Scripture, but now ultimately in the coming of his Son.

Dr. Luis Orteza

Well, I want to read this passage from Ephesians 2, where Paul writes:

For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments [and] ordinances that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility (Ephesians 2:14-16, ESV).

This passage addressed the relationship between Jews and Gentile. And Christ, as it were, became the bridge between Jews and Gentiles so that the hostility that Paul addresses here has been erased. There is now one new man, and that man is Christ Jesus. So that, part of what this means is that there's now no two peoples of God. There's just one people of God. And so that a Jewish man would need to come to Christ to become part of God's people in our context today. So, there's now a sense of unity because of Christ. The race is no longer separated between the Jew and a Gentile. In Christ there is now one people of God, both Jews and Gentiles. And for that matter, all the races of the world are one in Christ.

Rev. Thad James, Jr.

The coming of Christ was a crucial factor to bring the Jewish nation and the Gentile nation together. When we think about how the Jews thought about themselves, and even their rejection of Christ was not seeing him in the light that they thought the Messiah was to come as a warrior and not coming as the peaceable Christ that he was. And if you remember that Jesus said that, you are to wait in Jerusalem and wait upon the Holy Spirit. So, the promise that he gave to them at Pentecost was a culmination of what he had said before, and even what God said in the Old Testament. So, Christ was that linking factor, when he said to wait and the Holy Spirit will come upon you. So, that outpouring of the Holy Spirit, when Jews and Gentiles and people from fifteen different parts of the country, fifteen different ethnic groups, came together and hearing their own language, hearing things — the proclamation of the gospel in their own language — that could only be the work of God, the work of the Holy Spirit. And again, it was the culmination of Christ's promise to wait and tarry on the Holy Spirit. So, here we have Christ who is now bringing together two dramatically different cultures. The Jews looked upon the Gentiles as dogs — as less, as uncircumcised dogs, in fact. So, they didn't have any trust belief in the Gentiles. But now at Pentecost, again under the authority of Christ, we see these two nations coming together. The Jews needed this sign and wonder to see that the same thing was happening to Gentiles that was happening to them for them to be able to accept them, again, into this new nation that God was building.

Question 5:

How can we know the difference between cultural practices merely described in the Bible and practices that we're required to follow today?

As we read through both the Old and New Testaments, we find numerous descriptions of cultural practices. But biblical authors didn't always state which practices we should follow and which practices we should avoid. So, how can we know the difference between cultural practices merely described in the Bible and practices that we're required to follow today?

Dr. Daniel L. Kim

Sometimes I've wondered whether I ought to do what we see in Scripture... For example, if I wash my wife's feet, she would say, thank you. But it does not necessarily imply that I am being humble before her as her servant leader. And yet, in Jesus's time, when he washed the disciples' feet, it spoke volumes. Peter repeatedly denied and did not want Jesus to do that because of how humbling a position that was. And so perhaps one way to look at whether a biblical practice is more culturally based than it is something to be followed, we could always ask ourselves, "In our context today" — in my context today — "what would something like that mean?" So, I would suggest perhaps that we ought to look at some of the things that go on in the Bible not as a literal, "Here's what I need to do." "David played the harp so I have to play the harp. That's God's instrument!" ... Rather than doing something like that,

we should perhaps ask ourselves what exactly is going on in that culture that helps us to understand a principle, a biblical principle? So going back to the example of the foot washing... We have to be willing to do things that will humble us and clearly communicate to our disciples, to those whom we love, that we care for them enough that we would be willing to humble ourselves. And then, to bring it into our context and say, "In my context, how does somebody demonstrate humility?" and to be able to ask that question. I'm from a Korean-American background. My parents are first-generation Koreans. And in the Korean context, one of the ways in which we demonstrate humility is not to be served but to serve. So, for example, a pastor in the Korean church would be the first in line to get a meal. But perhaps the odd thing, or the surprising, or the dis-equilibrating thing that a pastor could do would be, rather than to be the first in line, to actually be the one serving the meal to the people who are going by. That, in my opinion, would truly shake and dis-equilibrate the people who are listening and watching what's going on and would demonstrate that the pastor is willing to serve and willing to be humble and to do things that most people would prefer not to do. And so, that would be one of the ways in which we can begin to ask ourselves whether something that is going in Scripture is prescriptive or descriptive. And when we see things that are very different from our cultural context, that's when it's a clue for us to recognize and acknowledge and say, it's not necessarily that very specific act, but what it represents. What is the biblical, theological principle behind it? And to be able to ask the question in our context, "how do we represent this?" How do we represent humility? How do we represent servanthood? How do we represent lordship? How do we represent being faithful? How do we represent mercy? How do we represent compassion? How do we reconcile?

Dr. Darrell L. Bock

Well, actually, the question of sorting out when cultural practices are simply described and when they are commanded or directed to us is a difficult question. And that's why some of these examples often get discussed between people, with people putting a particular practice on one side or the other of that divide ... But basically I think the difference is, is that in those texts where we're being commanded certain things, and the rationale for that command is somewhat timeless, or something that said, "all the churches do," or something like that. Then we're pushing in the direction of, at least, a practice that, if we don't exactly replicate, is something we should follow in kind. Perhaps a good example of this is the exhortation to greet one another with a holy kiss, which was a very cultural way of greeting someone. The cultural equivalent we have of doing that is a handshake, or maybe a hug, or something like that. So, I wouldn't be strictly legalistic in this kind of an idea, but I would say that the kind of affection that these acts represent are something that we're supposed to show to one another to help affirm our community with one another. That's really what's going on with that kind of an example. In other cases, it might be that there are certain cultural features that are unique to the particular situation that tell us, "Well, maybe this passage doesn't have a universal application." Sometimes a clue to that is to go to another passage where the situation is very similar but the practice differs, which tells you that there is some flexibility in terms of what's going on ... So, when

we pay attention to cultural practices, we have to pay attention to the genre, the type of material that it is, to determine whether or not this is a kind of command. An illustration that appears in a parable, for example, is likely not commanded to be something that's followed. It's a part of the story that's being told so the parable has life and can make its point. So, we have to distinguish between the kind of literature that we're in sometimes to determine whether or not something is merely an example to tell a story as opposed to being an example to follow. But as I said, sometimes these will be debated, and people will discuss... the different classes, because sometimes it isn't really clear which category something belongs in.

Question 6:

How should Christians respond to Paul's statements about head coverings in 1 Corinthians chapter 11?

Many cultural practices mentioned in the Bible seem foreign to Christians who come from today's Western cultures. One of those practices was the use of head coverings for women in public. With so much cultural distance between Western Christians today and the cultures of the New Testament, how should Christians respond to Paul's statements about head coverings in 1 Corinthians chapter 11?

Dr. Craig S. Keener

In the Eastern Mediterranean world, married women — although exceptions were sometimes made for the elite — but married women were expected to wear head coverings that would cover at least all of their hair to protect against being seductive, or considered seductive, to men. It was alright if they weren't married, but if they were married they were supposed to cover their hair. This introduced a conflict into the Corinthian church because you had different values. You have some elite women who belong to the families where the churches are meeting, and then you have other women who were coming in. And if some women didn't have their heads covered, other women could interpret that as seductive. So, you have ostentation from the upper class women. You have seduction, or at least the thought that it might be seductive, among others. And then you have class conflict. Now today, women going out with naked hair is not necessarily considered seductive in most societies in the world. But we can still learn from the principles that Paul applies in this situation. We should be modest. Whether male or female, we shouldn't be trying to seduce people. We shouldn't be ostentatious. And we also should reduce class conflict. So, I think the biggest principle in the passage, though, is modesty, avoiding dressing in a way that people would consider seductive.

Question 7:

What does it mean for Christians to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world?

Jesus' teaching often contains metaphors that are associated with the culture of his time. Sometimes this makes his instruction more difficult for us to understand today. For example, in his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus directed his disciples to be "the salt of the earth" and "the light of the world." But what does it mean for Christians to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world?

Dr. Michael J. Kruger

When Jesus describes Christians, he often uses parabolic language, meaning he describes them in light of things around us. One of the most famous times Jesus does this is when he describes Christians as "salt" — salt of the world — and also the light of world. Now, often Christians misinterpret those passages in light of the way we think about salt and light today. Most of us use salt to season our food to make it taste better. But in the ancient world, that's not really what salt was designed to do. Salt was a preservative in the ancient world. It protected food, kept it from going rotten, kept it from going bad, and allowed it to have value over an extended period of time. And Jesus is making the same point with the light of the world. In our day and age where light is abundant and you can flip on a switch anytime to have light, it's not that significant. But in that day and time, light would have been something that would have been very critical in the ancient world, to keep the path clear, to keep the house lit, to point the way. And so, when he calls Christians "light of the world" and "salt of the earth," there's a sense in which Christians preserve the world by their presence and also, in one sense, enlighten the world by truth. Jesus is calling Christians, in one sense, to be a preservative in society, to make sure that it stays consistent with God's principles. And we see that all around us. When Christians are around, it does restrain sin. It does keep the world from going as bad as it possibly could. Likewise, to say that Christians are the light of the world is to say that we speak truth into it. We give them enlightenment, show them the right path, the right way, so they don't stumble and fall. And so Christians, in one sense, are a preservative in culture and a speaker into culture. And that's what it means to be salt of the earth and light of the world.

Dr. Stephen J. Wellum

In the Sermon on the Mount, our Lord Jesus Christ — and throughout the entire New Testament — calls us to be salt and light. Those two pictures, those images, are important. I mean, salt in the first century was so crucial in the preservation of food. They didn't have all the refrigeration system that we have today. So that picture of salt is, you know, something that would be well known. And of course, as it comes over to us, what's Jesus saying to us as his people? Well, we are to be those who are preservatives. We are to be those who, as we live for his glory, as we take the gospel to the nations, we are to be those who show God's way to the world. All people are made as image bearers. But in the Fall, they do not live out the very purpose of their existence. And part of being salt is to be those who demonstrate, by God's grace and

by the redemptive work of Christ, what it means to be an image bearer — what it means to be a child of God, but what it means to be, in terms of our very creation, showing those outside of him what we were created to be in the first place as restored in Christ. The imagery of light, as well, picks this up, because sin is often pictured as darkness — walking in the dark, walking contrary to God's ways. Well, when the lights get turned on, we then can see clearly how we are to live and what God's demands are. And we shine that on darkness, where we expose what they are doing in light of God's Word, as well as show a way of light. Think of light imagery from the Old Testament. It's "a light to our path." It opens up a way which shows, you know, the way to go. And we are to be those kind of role models. We are to be those kind of examples as we follow Christ. We are to show non-Christians, as image bearers, what it means to truly be created in God's image, what it means to be redeemed, and by God's grace for them to come to know the Lord Jesus Christ themselves and to follow him as God intended for them to be.

Rev. Michael J. Glodo

Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, tells Christians that we are to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world. This idea of the followers of Jesus as light has an Old Testament root. I think one good place to look is Deuteronomy 4. There were two things that were going to make Israel's reputation among the nations. And their reputation among the nations would make God famous. One is God's works. The nations would say, "What God is so near to this people as this God is?" because he'd freed them from slavery and brought them through the wilderness and given them the Promised Land and then, the Law of God. "What nation is like this nation that has a Law like this?" So, God's Law was to exhibit the ethical, the righteousness of God as Israel lived it out. And so, to be a light on a hill, to be the City of God, to exhibit God's glory would mean to live together in community in a way that showed the difference within God's people in contrast to the way the nations lived. And so, while we can think individually about being salt of the earth and light of the world — and certainly that's appropriate — we have to think first of all, or principally, in a communal way or in a societal way. How do we live together as the new society? Because the Sermon on the Mount is about ethical behaviors, how we're to live together. And it's not just an individualistic thing — as someone like Dietrich Bonhoeffer has reminded us — but rather, as we live together we exhibit what this city is supposed to look like when God rules and reigns in righteousness. There's mercy, there's justice, there's generosity, there's loving-kindness toward one another because Christ is our king.

Question 8:

How do Christians approve of the differences between cultures today but still maintain faith in the absolute authority of Scripture?

Evangelical Christians wholeheartedly believe in the absolute authority of Scripture as God's Word. At the same time, it's clear that God has allowed a diversity of

human cultures to flourish on earth. But it's not always easy to know how to accept cultural diversity while also acknowledging biblical authority. So, how do Christians approve of the differences between cultures today but still maintain faith in the absolute authority of Scripture?

Dr. K. Erik Thoennes

The Bible was communicated within different cultures, and it's intended to communicate into every culture. And so God creates culture, and every culture has truth in it and has error in it. And so, our job is to take the Scriptures and interpret the Scriptures in light of our cultural influences, weeding out those influences that are counter-biblical and celebrating the ones that do align with Scripture. And so, culture can be celebrated and appreciated, but it can't be the determinative, interpretative rule that we go by. Culture needs to be critiqued by Scripture.

Dr. Daniel L. Kim

Missionaries oftentimes go overseas and immediately get confronted with a culture in which they do things differently than themselves. And sometimes it's very tempting for the missionary to conclude that that culture is being sinful by doing things a certain way ... Is it truly being sinful? Or are they simply representing it in a different way that is perhaps equally right before the eyes of God? And so, of course, there are sinful things that are going on in all cultures, including our own. So, we have to first acknowledge that. Not every culture is going to be faithful in every aspect of how we do things. But for the most part, I would say that just because a culture does things differently than ours, it does not necessarily mean that they are being unfaithful to God and to his laws. So, perhaps, I would encourage us to ask ourselves this question: Why are they doing that? What does it represent in their culture to do it that way? And if the question comes back to a biblical principle that they are in some way violating, then yes, it might be more accurate to say that they are being sinful and that that's a practice in that culture that should not be continued. I'm thinking of some of the witchcraft that goes on in the African culture. It is no different than the witchcraft that we see in the ancient Near East. And that is clearly a violation of God's word because they're not being faithful and honoring God and keeping him as their most important and kingly person that he is. But I want to not necessarily encourage people to go look with a vigilante attitude saying, "That's bad in this culture; that's sinful, and that's sinful," simply because they do things differently. And so, I want to just encourage people not to jump to conclusions but first get to know that culture. Get to know why they do things that way. One of the most often-experienced actions here in America from international students is that they say that the view of time is so different here. People call before they tell people... Let's say there's a meeting going on and they're late. They'll call and say, "I'm sorry I'm running late;" whereas, in most other cultures, that's not even an issue. Being late to something is accepted. It's an accepted part of life, and time is treated differently. And so, I want to just encourage us, don't think that some... just because they do things differently that it is in some way a violation. But it requires us just to get to know the culture, get to know how they do things.

Dr. Dan Doriani

Well, it's important for us to recognize, as a culture, cultures differ and that people come to the Bible with different expectations and habits while yet saying the Bible has authority over all those. There are a couple ways to do that. One is simply to acknowledge that each culture is different from that of the Bible. So, for example, there are many ways in which cultures diverge from biblical sexual ethics. Some cultures practice polygamy. And if you want to address biblical ethics, you have to simply acknowledge that there are polygamist cultures and try to understand how it works, how it functions, before you simply try to address it, eradicate it, change it. Other cultures, maybe, are tolerant of homosexuality. The Bible certainly does not seem to approve of homosexual behavior in any way. But you're not going to make any progress if you deny that your culture is tolerant of something. You have to have a dialog with people in order to proceed. So, in that sense, you have to accept cultural differences. There's another sense, and that is that there are different ways of getting things done so that, let's suppose we're reading Ephesians 5 and it says, "the husband is the head of the wife." That's a command, but each culture may have its own ways of expressing that ... In some cultures a wife shows that she submits to her husband by walking a couple of paces behind. That would make no sense whatsoever in other cultures. In other cultures, maybe she would hold his arm, and that would be a sign. In other cultures, it's more subtle. So, for example, a husband could lead his wife financially, in the West by saying, "This is the amount of money we have; use it wisely," and then they talk it over, but there aren't really commands given. The way in which a husband leads is, in this case, subtle and quite different from another culture. Nonetheless, the principle would hold. And we should find ways to express the leadership of the home by a husband in a way that's culturally sensitive and genuine.

The Bible is a book that spoke to biblical cultures thousands of years ago. And it continues to speak to us today. Its message is both timeless and timely. Rather than being an outdated historical book, the Bible is the authoritative Word of God that remains relevant for all cultures in all ages. So, as we seek to understand the Bible's message for particular cultures throughout history, we'll grow to understand how Scripture resonates in our own culture as well.

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