

How Culture Affects Our View of Scripture

For example, Latino attitudes toward women influence our understanding of Scripture.

by Caleb Rosado

THE VOTES AGAINST THE ORDINATION OF WOMEN at the 56th General Conference Session in Utrecht, the Netherlands, July 5, 1995, came largely from not only Africa, but also Latin America, which includes the largest and third-largest divisions in the world. Elsewhere in this issue, it is pointed out that the increasing numbers of Latino members in North America largely share the Latin American opposition to ordination of Adventist women to gospel ministry. The “browning” of North American Adventism means that continued struggles over this issue involve both the Latino and wider North American Adventist church.

For both, a fundamental question underlying differences about ordination of women is how the Bible should be used in determining the direction of the church. In analyzing the presentations by two professors from the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary,

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Dr. Gerard Damsteegt (con) and Dr. Raoul Dederen (pro), Dr. William G. Johnsson, editor of the *Adventist Review*, correctly says that the real issue is two different ways of interpreting Scripture—one literalist, the other based on principle (GC Bulletin No. 7, July 7). In other words, one follows the letter of the law, the other follows its spirit. From the times of the early church, this letter/spirit controversy has been raging within the Christian church (2 Corinthians 3:6). It is splitting a denomination, the Southern Baptist Church, and, as has been mentioned elsewhere in this issue, is currently leaving scars among some ethnic communities within North American Adventism.

I would like to suggest that the issue goes even further—three variables instead of two. It is not merely a “literalist/letter” versus “principle/spirit” approach, but one prior to these two. I am referring to the “why/values” variable. “Why do people in one situation take a particular approach to Scripture, when in another situation the opposite approach is taken?” “What values are being protected by such an approach?” This is the *a priori* variable

to the two ways of interpreting Scripture.

Let me explain by using the decision of the Seventh-day Adventist Church concerning the smoking of tobacco. The church does not base its position against tobacco smoking on an explicit “thus saith the Lord” in the Bible prohibiting its manufacture, sale, and use. And rightly so, since tobacco did not come into popular use by Europeans until Columbus encountered its use among native Indians of Cuba and exported it to Europe at the beginning of the 16th century. So, without a definitive “thus saith the Lord,” how can the church make a public statement warning the world community against its hazards and prohibit its use by church members? The answer is the health principles in Scripture and the teaching that our bodies are a “temple” of God. What is interesting is that the literalists accept this teaching and practice, even though there is no explicit biblical evidence against tobacco.

The literalists, like those that follow the principle approach, accept the Sabbath doctrine in both its literalness (the seventh day and not the first) and in its principle (spiritual rest) with no sense of contradiction. So why is it that when it comes to the issue of women's ordination, literalists run to their corner of interpretation and postulate a position inconsistent with its application to other areas of truth? That's the *why* variable. And it has to do with “values.”

The Why/Values Approach

How is it possible for two individuals (or groups, for that matter), genuinely committed to Christ, to take God's Word, and, after praying for the guidance of the Holy Spirit, study it carefully, *and then come up with diametrically opposed positions?* Is the Holy Spirit to blame, leading both in divergent directions? Hardly. Both speakers at Utrecht were committed, well-trained scholars. And if

both sides have sincerely sought the leading of God, the promise is that “when the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth” (John 16:13, RSV). The problem is definitely not with the Spirit. Furthermore, we should give people the benefit of the doubt that when they come to the Word of God, they are coming as sincere seekers after truth. So, neither is the problem with the sincerity of the seeker.

Why, then, do we have divergent views? The answer to this question lies outside of theology, in the field of social psychology. While we may come to God's Word as sincere seekers, we do not come *alone*. We come with all the sociocultural baggage that imperceptibly is ours. Within this baggage are the various influences or social maps in our lives that give direction to our beliefs and guide our behavior. These include our culture, our gender, our race/ethnicity, our socioeconomic status, and most importantly, the way we have been socialized to see the world, one another, the opposite gender, and even the Word of God. These social maps influence the spiritual and social routes we take, the heavenly and human sights we see along the way in our life course. In fact, we cannot act with integrity outside of the way we see. We cannot maintain wholeness if we talk and walk differently than we see. And our attitude about others and our behavior toward them has to be congruent with how we see, including God and his Word.

Such was the case of Peter and the first Jewish Christians in their experience with Gentiles in the early church (Acts 10 and 11). Peter's attitude toward the Gentiles reflected his cultural upbringing, which excluded Gentiles from receiving the promise of the Holy Spirit and salvation. In other words, his social maps influenced the routes his theology and Christian practice took. And even though he was sincere and converted, and was used of God to lead thousands to Christ at Pentecost, he still had to experience much growth in his

spiritual/social pilgrimage. His exclusive and narrow view of Gentiles influenced his view of God, and vice versa. God had to perform spiritual surgery on his eyes, heart, and mind. Peter's altered theology and practice transformed the early church.¹

The same problem is found in the modern church. We still live in a sexist society, where women are often relegated to varying degrees of second-class status. This is especially true in Latin American, European, and African countries where Catholicism or Islam dominate. They dominate not only the religion, but also cultural traditions and social customs. While conversion to Adventism in such a milieu may provide a change of doctrine, it often does not bring about a change of attitudes, either in home or public life, toward gender relations.²

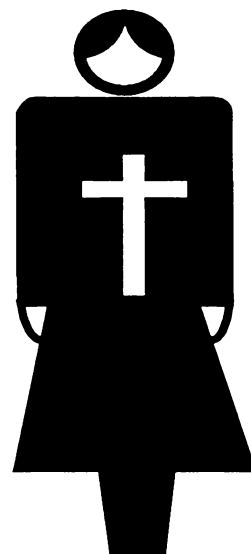
Thus, while Adventist Latinos, for example, may have come out of so-called "Babylon," it seems that "Babylon," with its intoxicating "wine" of gender/power relations, has not come out of Latinos. Like Peter, the church of today needs a special revelation worldwide from God, a divine eye salve, if you please, to help the church see that there is no longer divisions of male or female in God's household, but a unity that reflects a oneness in Jesus Christ (Galatians 3:28).

The fact that two people looking at the same object—or biblical text for that matter—do not see the same thing is a result of two different types of *vision*: the "visual field" in the eye, and the "visual world" in the brain. The visual *field* is made up of the light, colors, and figures recorded by the retina. The visual *world* is made up of all the sociocultural experiences stored in the mind that define the image in the retina, giving it an interpretive meaning called "perception." Though the image is in the eye, perception is in the mind. What people actually "see" is not the reality of the image, but the reality of the perception. Thus *perception is reality*.

What this means is that none of us sees the

world exactly as it is, not even the Word of God, for the reality that we see is significantly shaped by what is already in our brain. It is actively constructed from a constantly changing flood of information we take into our minds, which is then interpreted through our experiences.³ Thus the eyes record, while the mind sees. And our social and cultural experience, including our ideology, helps shape what the mind sees. Culture, then "as the shared understandings that people use to coordinate their activities,"⁴ has a definite impact on our way of "reading the word and the world."⁵ This is why Jesus said that some people "have eyes, but fail to see, and ears, but fail to hear" (Mark 8:18, NIV). Anaïs Nin is thus correct when she declared, "We don't see things as they are, we see them as we are." } Thus, where we stand does indeed determine what we see.

The same is true of Bible translations. The current controversy over which is the more accurate translation is part of the ongoing concern of each generation to make the Word of God relevant to their times.⁶ This is why the Bible is the most translated book in history. But it does raise an interesting observation, that the attitudes toward women especially in Paul's letters, as reflected in the King James Version of 1611, may be more a reflection of "the sexist norms of the seventeenth century, [and] not the realities of early Christian communities."⁷ We thus need to be mt careful in using one translation, such as the King James Version or Reina Valera, as the norm for the church's beliefs and



behaviors toward women.

The significance of all this is to Dr. Johnsson's question of "How shall we interpret Scripture?" is that we all come to the Bible *biased*. All the possible explanations and meanings of the biblical text and writings of Ellen G. White on the topic of women's ordination have been explored at length in a growing body of literature on both sides of the question.⁸ Yet few have changed their positions. Why? Because of the prejudiced mind. As the renowned attorney Gerry Spence tells us, "*No matter how skillfully we may argue, we cannot win when the Other is asked to decide against his self interest.*"⁹ This has to do with *values*—those socially shared ideals about what is good, desirable, and right. In all the discussion of the topic, the one thing we have not done is to examine the cultural values—the self-interests—people bring to their study of Scripture. All the arguments on both sides of the ordination issue will do little to change people's basic views on the subject, if we do not examine the cultural values or self-interests we seek to protect when we come to the Scriptures in the first place. These values are often so unconscious and so much a part of our religious fabric that they become, what Shirley Teper calls a "habit system":

Culture is called a habit system in which "truths" that have been perpetuated by a group over centuries have permeated the unconscious. This basic belief system, from which "rational" conclusions spring, may be so deeply ingrained that it becomes indistinguishable from human perception—the way one sees, feels, believes, knows. It is the continuity of cultural assumptions and patterns that gives order to one's world, reduces an infinite variety of options to a manageable stream of beliefs, gives a person a firm footing in time and space, and binds the lone individual to the community of a group.¹⁰

In our discussion of how to interpret Scripture we cannot leave out the "why/values" or self-interest variable of habitual culture.

So What Do We Do?

First, we need to acknowledge that our way of seeing is greatly influenced by our socio-cultural experiences. It is the height of arrogance, or just plain ignorance, to think that we come to the Bible with our mind a *tabula rasa*—a clean slate or blank paper, before impressions are recorded upon it by experience. Failure to accept this basic premise means we have no open, common ground as a basis for discussion, only "hidden" agendas.

Second, having acknowledged the influence of our social exposure, we need to ask what aspects of this social influence need to come under the judgments of the gospel. What elements of our cultural upbringing, our values, our views of others, and our behaviors toward them need to line up with the gospel principle of inclusiveness and oneness in Christ Jesus (Galatians 3:28)? What doesn't line up, such as our machismo and craving for power, need to be discarded, or else we place our values and our self-interests above the gospel. We need to realize that both sexism and racism are not about gender or color; they are about power! They can thus afflict anyone of any gender, color, community, culture, or country, who craves power above the need to respect the Other.

The church in Utrecht acknowledged this in its statements affirming the "equality of all people" and calling for an "equal role of women" in church and society. "Seventh-day Adventists deplore and seek to combat all forms of discrimination based on race, tribe, nationality, color, or gender."¹¹ But then it contradicted these statements with its action that women cannot serve on an equal basis with men as ordained pastors. Interestingly, this is the identical position the Roman Catholic Church took just five days after our church's vote in Utrecht. In a letter Pope John Paul II wrote on July 10, 1995, he urged the equality of women, while simultaneously reaffirming the

church's ban on female priests.¹² Who's following whom? How one can hold both positions and not see the contradiction is a neat trick of mental gymnastics. How can Latino Adventists fight for equal treatment of all races, while simultaneously opposing the equal treatment of the sexes? Yet it is a law of the human mind that we frequently are able to do this.

Third, we need to implement principle even if it goes against social and cultural conventions. We have done this with the Sabbath. That doctrine was not put up to a majority vote. We simply implement it because it is truth. This is important, because some people's views will never change if given an option. As long as an action satisfies our needs, we will not change. Again, this is the self-interest factor.

Fourth, we need to stay continually tuned to the leading of the Spirit. Truth is progressive. What may not have been an issue or concern for generations past, such as environmental destruction, does concern us now. Note the call for "environmental stewardship" at the 56th General Conference Session in Utrecht. The same is true of concerns for women in ministry. The times have changed. There is no possible way the Bible can address explicitly

every issue the church is encountering and will encounter in the years ahead. Therefore, the church must move forward as the Holy Spirit leads and in harmony with God's leading in the past, based on principle. Thus, where there is no clear "thus saith the Lord," principle rules.

We need to remember, as Paul reminds us, "The letter kills, but the Spirit gives life" (2 Corinthians 3:6, NIV). Interpreting Scripture is more than taking a literalist vs. principlist, or letter vs. spirit approach. It first requires an examination of the epistemological question: *What deeply ingrained biases, indistinguishable from human perception, do we bring to our reading of the Word and the world, which influence what we see in the biblical text and our corresponding action?* Failure to do this, tends to result in self-interest values overriding the values of the kingdom of God.

If we are willing to submit our personal values and group self-interests to the fundamental inclusive principles of the gospel, we will then be led by the Spirit into "all the truth," and will practice as a people what God desires us to model before the watching world.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. See Caleb Rosado, "The Sin of Saint Peter," *Ministry* (June 1994).
2. For a broader discussion on this see the article by Lourdes E. Morales-Gudmundsson and Caleb Rosado, "Machism, Marianismo, and the Seventh-day Adventist Church: Toward a New Gender Paradigm," in Lourdes E. Morales-Gudmundsson, ed., *Women and the Church: The Feminine Perspective* (Berrien Springs, Mich.: Andrews University Press, 1995), pp. 113-134.
3. See the special issue of *Scientific American* (September 1992), on "Mind and Brain."
4. Howard S. Becker, "Culture: A Sociological View," in Howard S. Becker, *Doing Things Together* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1986), p. 15.
5. This phrase is from Paulo Freire, the world-renowned Brazilian educator.
6. James R. White, *The King James Only Controversy: Can You Trust the Modern Translations?* (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1995).
7. Rodney Stark, "Reconstructing the Rise of Christianity: The Role of Women," *Sociology of Religion* 56:3 (Fall 1995), p. 239.
8. See, for example, Caleb Rosado, *Women/Church/God—A Socio-Biblical Study* (Loma Linda, Calif.: Loma Linda University Press, 1990).
9. Gerry Spence, *How to Argue and Win Every Time* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995), p. 86. Emphasis in original.
10. Shirley Teper, cited by Betty Lee Sung, "Bicultural Conflict," in Elvio Angeloni, ed., *Annual Editions Anthropology* 94/95, (Guilford, Conn.: The Dushkin Publishing Group, 1994), p. 228.
11. Statement for Immediate Release, July 3, 1995, "Adventist Statement Affirms the Equality of All People," issued by the 56th General Conference Session of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, Utrecht, the Netherlands.
12. Jack Kelley, "Pope Praises, Bars Women," *U.S.A. Today* (July 11, 1995), p. A1.