

# Interpreting The Bible In Agreement With Modern Cultures

Another common error many people make when interpreting the Books of the Bible is to interpret them according to the philosophies, ethics and practices of any one of the cultures in today's world instead of interpreting the Books of the Bible in terms of their original specific historical and cultural contexts.

For example, many people today wrongly try to interpret parts of the Bible to agree with modern Western attitudes to abortion, divorce, homosexuality, euthanasia, the family, disciplining children, smacking children, sex before marriage, sexual petting before marriage, nudity, modesty and so on. This is even though the Bible itself does not agree with these present-day attitudes.

It is right to apply the teachings and commands of the Bible to various modern cultures. But it is sinful to interpret the Bible to conform to the various standards of the present-day world. In Romans 12:2, God commands: *“And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.”*

## The contextualization of theology

One example of interpreting the Bible in agreement with modern cultures began in the early 1970's when some liberal theologians invented a system of interpreting the Bible called the contextualization of theology. These theologians were Nikes A. Nissiotis, the director of the Ecumenical Institute of the liberal World Council of Churches, and the members of a consultative theological group who met in Switzerland in 1971 on the topic “Dogmatic or Contextual Theology”.<sup>1</sup> In 1972, the Theological Education Fund of the World Council of Churches began to popularize contextualization as the new approach to missionary work among liberal churches.<sup>2</sup>

Nissiotis and the members of this consultation group argued that our approach to God must be a “contextual or experimental” theology which is based on the current philosophies and contemporary cultures of the present world. By this, they did not mean we should interpret Bible verses in the original historical context. Instead they meant we should interpret the Bible to agree with the current popular philosophies and practices of various modern cultures.

The supporters of the contextualizing of theology movement also do not emphasise Jesus' method of interpreting the Bible by cross-referencing Biblical verses on the same topic (see Matthew 4:5-7).

The followers of the contextualization of theology movement focus on rationally or mystically trying to determine what God is doing among humans in the contemporary world and then interpreting the Bible in agreement with this. This results in them mistakenly attributing to

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Elwell (Editor), “Evangelical Dictionary of Theology”, Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, 1984, page 271.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

God many political and social movements which have a few Biblical emphases with many unbiblical wicked philosophies and practices added on. In order to justify their tolerance or even acceptance of some of these added evils, they:

- a) find proof texts in the Bible which they quote out of context and/or contrary to other verses in the Bible on the same topics.
- b) quote quack academic studies which supposedly justify these evil practices.
- c) give practical examples supposedly to prove the “rightness” of the evils they support. This typifies their wicked ends-justifies-the means philosophies which God condemns in Romans 3:8: *“And why not say, ‘Let us do evil that good may come’? – as we are slanderously reported and as some affirm that we say. Their condemnation is just.”*

The liberals and also the semi-liberals among the Evangelical movement who follow the contextualization of theology philosophy, reinterpret the Bible in terms of any of the following:

- a) the popular non-Christian theories in the fields of sociology, psychology, anthropology, cross-cultural studies, history, historiography, English literature, law, medical ethics, the study of politics, genetics, biology and other academic fields.
- b) non-Christian philosophies like rationalism, pragmatism, relativism, modernism, secular humanism, Marxism, existentialism and post-modernism.
- c) non-Christian ethical philosophies like situational ethics, utilitarianism, pragmatism and natural law or natural justice.
- d) indigenous pagan religions like animism and spiritism.
- e) New Age religious philosophies which incorporate various aspects of witchcraft, sorcery and occult practices.

By following the wrong Biblical interpretation techniques of the contextualization of theology movement, many church leaders and churchgoers have been deceived into interpreting the Bible in terms of modern wicked philosophies. For example, they claim God approves of homosexuality, homosexual marriage, homosexual adoption of children, easy abortion, sex before marriage, sado-masochistic sex and converts from paganism to Jesus Christ in Africa continuing to have many wives.

## **None Of Paul’s Biblical Teachings Were Just His Culture-Based Opinion**

Also when interpreting verses in context, be careful not to fall into the common trap of believing that some verses in the Apostle Paul’s writings only relate to the specific ancient churches to whom he wrote at the time or only to the specific culture at the time Paul wrote.

For example, I have heard Christians argue that Paul’s mentions of slavery in 1 Corinthians 7:21-23, 12:13, Galatians 3:28, Ephesians 6:5-9, Colossians 3:11, 3:22-4:1, 1 Timothy 6:1-2 and Titus 2:9 reveal he personally totally approved of Greek and Roman types of slavery for the churchgoers at Corinth, Galatia, Ephesus, Colossae, Crete and other parts of the Roman Empire in the culture of the first century A.D. and Paul’s comments in these verses are

not part of God's Word but are only his own personal opinion which no longer applies in the modern world.

But note Paul's teachings about these matters are God's Word and are not just his personal culture-based opinions. While Paul did not insist on the immediate end to slavery, his God-inspired teachings undermined the foundations of pagan Greek and Roman systems of slavery, attacked the worst features of Greek and Roman slavery and established a momentum which led to its ultimate abolition.

In 1 Corinthians 7:21-23, Paul commanded: ***“Were you called while a slave? Do not be concerned about it; but if you can be made free, rather use it. For he who is called in the Lord while a slave is the Lord's freedman. Likewise he who is called while free is Christ's slave. You were bought at a price; do not become slaves of men.”***

Here Paul taught that:

- a) Slaves should try to become free if they could (verse 21).
- b) Because Jesus Christ had purchased all believers by His death as His love-slaves, they should not willingly become physically, emotionally or mentally the slaves of other humans (verse 23).

In Philemon 10-16, Paul instructed a Christian master named Philemon that it would be good if he began to treat his Christian slave Onesimus as a brother in Christ instead of as a slave.

Paul knew that the pagan Romans made slaves of millions of unwilling captives from the nations the Romans conquered. Paul knew the early Christians had no authority in the first century A.D. over the pagan rulers of Rome. So his comments were addressed to Christian churches and Christian individuals, many of whom had previously been masters or slaves under the pagan Greek or Roman systems of slavery or who had at least been brought up to approve of it. God inspired Paul's comments about these matters in order first to change the attitudes of Christians to slavery and then for Christians in later centuries when they became politically powerful enough to lobby political leaders to achieve the abolition of slavery altogether.

In the Bible, we see that God's approach to slavery was:

- a) He *tolerated it under certain strict conditions*, just as under the Mosaic Covenant, He tolerated men having two wives (see Deuteronomy 21:15) and divorcing their wives more easily than under the New Covenant (see Deuteronomy 24:1-4 and Matthew 19:3-10). Under the New Covenant, however, God insisted that men have only one wife (see Matthew 19:3-9, Ephesians 5:33, 1 Timothy 3:2 and 3:12) and He raised the standards about divorce (see Matthew 19:3-9).
- b) He preferred humans to be free than to be slaves.

In the New Testament, God condemned various aspects of Greek and Roman slavery, showing that He would only tolerate a version of slavery which was based on higher ethical standards. For example:

- a) in Ephesians 6:9, God commanded masters to not threaten their slaves with punishments: ***“And you, masters, do the same things to them, giving up threatening, knowing that your own Master also is in heaven, and there is no partiality with Him.”*** This verse expresses God’s total opposition to the Roman practice in the first century A.D. of many masters beating or punishing their slaves in any way they wished without any interference from the Roman government. The Romans punished their slaves by whipping them with as many strokes as the masters decided, crucifying them, selling them to gladiator schools and inflicting other barbaric forms of suffering on them. But even under the Mosaic Covenant, God had insisted that slaves be not punished harshly (see Leviticus 25:43, 25:46 and 25:53). This was totally different from the harsh pagan Roman and Greek systems of slavery. In 1 Peter 2:18-21, God led the Apostle Peter to instruct Christian slaves what to do if they had harsh unjust pagan masters who beat them for no valid reason. This does not mean God approved of such unfair cruel treatment but was similar to His attitude to unbelievers unjustly harshly persecuting Christians (see 1 Peter 4:12-19). In Proverbs 29:21, God emphasised that if masters treated slaves well, that in the end, the relationship of the master and the slave would become like that of a good father and his son whom he loves: ***“He who pampers his slave from childhood will in the end find him to be a son.”*** (N.A.S.B.)
- b) in Colossians 4:1, Paul instructed: ***“Masters, give your servants what is just and fair, knowing that you also have a Master in heaven.”*** God here commanded that Christian masters should treat their slaves with justice and fairness in terms of how God, our heavenly Master defines such things. This is totally different from pagan Roman and Greek forms of slavery. In the first century A.D., Roman law provided no protection for male and female slaves against being sadistically treated or sexually abused by their masters. One aspect of God’s justice is He totally opposes homosexuality and all sex outside of marriage. Therefore, He opposed male masters having sex with female slaves to whom they were not married and with male slaves.
- c) in Galatians 3:28 and Philemon 10-16, Paul teaches that in God’s eyes, in Christ slaves are not a lower class than free people. Galatians 3:28 states: ***“Therefore is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”*** This teaching undermined the pagan Greek and Roman idea that slaves were an inferior social class. By elevating the social standing of slaves, this led to the gradual undermining of slavery in nations in which Christians become influential, leading to its ultimate abolition.

So even though Paul’s letters were written to various specific ancient churches, all their words are relevant to New Covenant believers today.

### **My own personal belief**

I believe that God led Paul in his letters to write in such a way about slavery that it would only be tolerated by the Church in the short run but in the longer term when the Church

had successfully removed many of old pagan values from many of the nations, slavery would be abolished.

The Romans had butchered thousands of slaves during the violent slave rebellions in Sicily in about 135 B.C. and later in 104-101 B.C.<sup>3</sup> and in Italy in 73-71 B.C.<sup>4</sup> Spartacus led the latter slave rebellion. His slave army defeated numerous Roman armies until finally being beaten. The Romans were continually ready mercilessly to suppress any hints of slave revolts after these three slave wars. So it is highly likely God decided that to avoid having all Christian slaves murdered by the pagan Romans for starting a new revolt against slavery and to prevent having the pagan Romans from blaming the Church for starting another war, it was better to remove slavery in the long run.

This concern that the Church may be identified as the cause of a new violent slave revolt may be implied as one aspect of the meaning of Paul's comments in 1 Timothy 6:1: ***“Let as many servants as are under the yoke count their own masters worthy of all honor, so that the name of God and His doctrine may not be blasphemed.”***

### **The early Christian's attitude to slaves**

Prior to the time that many Christians began to greatly compromise with the world and evil in the 300's and 400's A.D., one of the means Christians showed their love for others was by buying slaves from their pagan masters. The Christians did this so that they could:

- a) save the slaves from the wicked practices of pagan masters. Pagan masters could force their male and female to have sexual intercourse with them or do various perverted sexual acts to them. Pagan masters could force their slaves to have sex with visitors or with other slaves to whom they were not married. These masters could kill the slaves if they wished and not be charged with murder. Pagan masters also forced their slaves to follow their masters' pagan idolatrous practices.
- b) preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ to them.
- c) often free the slaves.

In Chapter “That Christians Must Abstain from All the Impious Practices of the Heathens” in the Constitutions of the Holy Apostles, it refers to Christians going to public places *“to purchase a slave, and save a soul...”*<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Diodorus Siculus, “Library of History”, Books 34, 1:1-2:48 and 36, 1:1-10:2.

<sup>4</sup> Appian, “The Civil Wars”, Book 1, 116-121, Plutarch, “Crassus”, 8-11 and L. Annaeus Florus, “Epitome of Roman History”, Book 2, VIII, 20, 1-14.

<sup>5</sup> “Constitutions of the Holy Apostles”, Book 2, Section 8.