

Take care when 'interpreting' Scripture

One of the great "temptations" prominent among all of us who practice Christianity today is fundamentalism. Some of us become fundamentalists in terms of church teachings, taking every word uttered or written by church officials literally without attempting to study the passage for an understanding of how its surrounding historical context affects its meaning.

Others of us become fundamentalists regarding Scripture — particularly in regard to the words of Jesus. I have done this myself on many occasions. I like to "mentally eliminate" the fact that Jesus was a Jew of Palestine nearly 2,000 years ago, and that he held a worldview almost entirely different from my own. By eliminating these facts I allow myself to modernize Jesus, making him my peer and turning him into a 20th-century American. By avoiding consideration of the historical context of Jesus' life, which gave his words much of their meaning, I ignore clues that are essential for right interpretation of Scriptural texts today.

I can offer a quick example of this sort of thing from my own life. Not too long ago I heard a talk that referred to the passage in Matthew 5:38 about "turning the other cheek." For as long as I can remember, I have assumed that this passage was



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intended to urge Christians away from violence and toward pacifism. But in the talk I refer to, the speaker suggested that this passage more likely refers to a "social dare" relying on a commonly understood custom of first-century Palestine.

For someone to strike another on the right cheek actually required a "back-handed swipe" that was understood to socially demean the one receiving it. Only social inferiors were struck in this back-handed fashion. By urging his listeners to "turn the other cheek," Jesus was actually challenging his disciples to cause their attackers to strike them with the palm, rather than the back of their hand. Given knowledge of the meaning of this custom in the ancient world, this text probably has more to do with challenging social inequality than it does the practice of war-

fare.

My lack of knowledge about this ancient custom had allowed me to modernize Jesus in a way that led me to read into the words of this passage in an uncritical way. I ended up "solving" my own questions about right behavior in too simplistic a fashion. By doing this I made Jesus say things that neither he nor his words probably ever intended.

The new interpretation I heard, informed by a scholar's knowledge of the world of Jesus and his willingness not to collapse the first century into the 20th, proved disconcerting to me at first. I even resented this, because it upset the way I have been accustomed to reading the passage from Matthew. But as I considered the new reading against the historical evidence and interpretative skill exhibited during the talk, I came to think that the new interpretation might actually be the more "correct" one, given the historical context of Jesus' own time.

Thus I was challenged to review my approach to this passage. If I avoid the hard work of Scripture interpretation, or eliminate the fact that Jesus lived in an age far different from my own, that he belonged to a religion I know far too little about that includes perspectives I can only remotely grasp, I "make" Jesus say what I think he

should mean. I end up not listening to the authentic text but imposing instead my own view onto the text.

What I am trying to suggest here is that we do a grave injustice to Scripture when we apply its ancient passages directly to problems we're trying to solve in our own lives. Far too often we hear one another proclaiming definitively what "the real Jesus" wills for us today. Far too often these statements are made without their speaker having undertaken the hard, painstaking work of learning about Biblical interpretation. Too often those who appear most certain about what "Jesus" wills for us in our own age have simply not taken the time to study sufficiently the skills of genuine New Testament interpretation.

Invoking the figure of Jesus to justify particular positions on contemporary issues, whether these be about pacifism, feminism or contemporary American struggles with "inclusivity" is dangerous business. The work of many fine scholars is readily available to us today and can help all of us move beyond biblical fundamentalism — why not take advantage of some opportunities to study more about the Bible?

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