

# He Gave Us Scripture: Foundations of Interpretation

LESSON  
TEN

BIBLICAL CULTURE &  
MODERN APPLICATION





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# He Gave Us Scripture: Foundations of Interpretation

## Lesson Ten

### Biblical Culture & Modern Application

#### INTRODUCTION

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At one time or another, everyone teaching the Bible has heard someone ask, “Isn’t this part of the Bible just cultural?” What they usually mean is that some portions of Scripture are so embedded in the ancient cultures of biblical times that they can’t possibly apply to us today. So, Christians often spend a lot of time trying to distinguish between “cultural” biblical passages and passages that apply to modern life.

In this lesson, we’re going to propose a different outlook. Rather than treating parts of Scripture as either cultural or applicable, we’ll see that every portion of the Bible is both cultural and applicable. The entire Bible reflects the ancient cultural context, but it still is God’s Word to be applied in one way or another to everyone, no matter who we are, or where or when we live.

This is the tenth lesson in our series *He Gave Us Scripture: Foundations of Interpretation*, and we’ve entitled it “Biblical Culture and Modern Application.” In this lesson, we’ll see how the cultural dimensions of Scripture should affect our application of the Bible to the modern world.

As we’ve said in earlier lessons, whenever we apply biblical passages in our day, we must take into account the epochal, cultural and personal distance between the original audiences of Scripture and modern audiences. Although these three considerations can’t be entirely separated from each other, we’re going to focus especially on the cultural issues that come into play as we move from the original meaning of Scripture to modern application.

There are many ways to define culture. But following outlooks that typically appear in modern sociology and anthropology, we’ll define culture as:

#### **The intersecting patterns of concepts, behaviors and emotions that characterize a community**

As this definition suggests, cultures involve a spectrum of intersecting patterns such as language, the arts, worship, technology, interpersonal relations and social authority. And these intersecting patterns consist of shared concepts, behaviors and emotions — what we believe, do and feel. So, when we speak of cultures, we have in mind how these features characterize a community — whether it be a family, an ethnic group, a social organization, a religious association, a nation, or even the entire human race.

This lesson will focus on three dimensions of biblical culture and modern application: first, we’ll examine the biblical foundations of culture found in the early chapters of the Bible. Second, we’ll trace a number of biblical developments of culture

that took place in the Old and New Testaments. And third, we'll see how these cultural aspects of the Bible should affect our modern application of Scripture. Let's look first at the biblical foundations of culture.

## FOUNDATIONS

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As we consider the biblical foundations of culture, we'll begin by exploring Genesis 1–11. First, we'll see how these chapters establish the importance of culture. Second, we'll focus on how they introduce two opposing cultural ideals. And third, we'll notice how the opening chapters of Scripture set the stage for cultural variety among God's faithful servants. Let's begin with the importance of culture.

### IMPORTANCE

The first eleven chapters of Genesis cover the whole history of the world from creation to the days of Abraham. They're particularly important to our study because they lay out God's ideal patterns for the world and human culture. In this way, they guide our reading not only of the rest of Genesis, but also of the rest of Scripture.

The foundations of culture first appear in Genesis 1:28, a passage often called the “cultural mandate.” Here, God told humanity:

**Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground (Genesis 1:28).**

To understand and apply the significance of the cultural mandate, we need to remember something we've seen in earlier lessons. God's final goal for history has always been to fill the world with his visible glory so that every creature will worship him forever. And after God established the initial order of creation, the cultural mandate indicated that humanity's responsibility was to develop the creation further in preparation for the final display of God's glory.

**God gave humanity the cultural mandate in the most simple terms so that the world, the creation would be filled with his glory. We see a picture of creation as being something like the construction of a house, sort of like an ancient temple. And when a temple is built, the god who commissioned its building inhabits it. And so, the biblical view of creation is that the whole earth was made to be a dwelling place for God, to be a holy sanctuary. But instead of a statue representing God — a statue of a bird or a lion or something like that being placed in that temple — God placed man and woman as his image bearers. And in giving the cultural mandate, God was in effect saying, “Go multiply**

**my image, fill the earth, and then bring it under dominion, exercise authority over it like it a priest.” And so, the cultural mandate was so that God's image bearers would go exercise God's lordship over the created world so that the earth would be a dwelling place for the God who made it, just like his heavenly throne room, glimpses of which we see in places like Isaiah 6, the earth was to be the same. And so it's not a new thing for, for instance, the Old Testament to tell us that the earth will be full of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea, because that was God's original design for it.**

— Rev. Mike Glodo

**Right there at the beginning of the Bible in Genesis 1, before the Fall, God gives a very important mandate or set of instructions — really, a worldview we'd almost say — to Adam and Eve, and that is to take the beauty of the Garden and the order and the excellence of it and to spread that throughout the world. And the story of the Bible is very much about the Fall and the failure to do so, and then the restarting of that very mandate through the second Adam and his bride, the church, Jesus Christ. And so that cultural mandate, that creational mandate, that original ordinance from Genesis 1, is really at the core of the Bible's message, and, I would suggest, is really very much what redemption is about. One scholar has called redemption “creation regained.” And I think that's a beautiful image. It's a beautiful comprehensive understanding of what the Bible is about. I've often described the message of the Bible as God restoring his reign, or his kingdom, from heaven to earth, from creation to new creation. And that traffics in these two poles, these two axes, of God bringing the heavenly realities to become fully, full-born earthly realities, and also give the temporal sense of God working from creation to the end-goal of new creation. And at the heart of that is the idea that God is spreading his beauty, his excellence, or to use more biblical language, “his glory” throughout all the earth. And that is the calling of all humans as individuals as well as redeemed humanity in God's church.**

— Dr. Jonathan T. Pennington

We can see this in Genesis 1:26, where God said, “Let us make man in our image.” In the ancient world, kings of nations were called images of god, in part because their royal task was to determine the will of their gods and build their cultures accordingly. In this light, the early chapters of Genesis make it clear that all human beings were created to perform this kind of royal cultural service to further God's will on earth.

In addition, Genesis 2 explains that every cultural development in accordance with God's will is a sacred priestly service to God. In verse 15 we learn that God put

Adam and Eve in his sacred garden “to work it and take care of it.” This expression is an unusual combination of two Hebrew verbs: *avad*, usually translated “to work” or “to labor,” and *shamar*, normally translated “to take care of” or “to protect.” Moses used these terms together only one other time — in Numbers 3:8 when he described the service of Levitical priests before God’s glorious presence in the Tabernacle.

So, in effect, the opening chapters of Genesis establish the foundational biblical perspective that culture is not some minor dimension of our existence. Rather, it is our royal and priestly service to God. God has ordained for us to fill, develop, order, beautify, and sanctify the earth in preparation for the final display of his visible glory.

**I think to understand why God gave man the cultural mandate, it’s important to remember that man was uniquely created in his own image. So there’s a structural component to the divine image — we just are in God’s image. But then there’s also the functional component, that we show and display the glory of God in the particular way that’s just right for us being human by the way that we carry out and reflect his glory through the work that we do. And so when we think about the cultural mandate, we have sort of a work to fill the earth and to subdue it, to make the world like Eden, like the Garden, and so on, but also to fill it, to populate it. And so the idea is that we are to carry out the cultural mandate to spread the glory of God displayed uniquely in his divine image in human form to the ends of the earth for his own glory.**

— Dr. Bruce Baugus

Now that we’ve seen the biblical foundations of the importance of culture, we should take up a second issue: the biblical foundations of two opposing cultural ideals pursued by human beings throughout history.

## OPPOSING IDEALS

When we travel to different parts of the world, we’re right to remind ourselves that there’s a lot of room for people to do things in different ways. We don’t all need to drive on the same side of the street, speak the same language, or wear the same kinds of clothes. Still, the opening chapters of Genesis make it clear that culture is never morally neutral. On the contrary, in one way or another every development of every culture either displeases or pleases God as it reflects one of two opposing cultural ideals.

Biblical authors were well aware that human beings developed culture in many ways. But from their point of view, all cultures fell into one of two basic categories: cultural patterns that served God and cultural patterns that opposed him.

As we’ll see later, these cultural distinctions become very important when we apply the Bible today. But for now, let’s consider how this division was first established in the earliest chapters of the Bible.

In Genesis 3, Adam and Eve failed their test of loyalty to God by eating the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. After this, God revealed that their fall into sin would lead human beings to follow two distinct cultural paths. Listen to the way God described these two cultural pursuits in Genesis 3:15 when he said to the Serpent:

**I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel (Genesis 3:15).**

In brief, “the woman” mentioned here is Eve, the first woman God created, and the Serpent is Satan.

This passage establishes the division that’s characterized human culture throughout history. The woman’s offspring have sought to serve God faithfully. And the Serpent’s offspring have sought to oppose him. And this division will continue to characterize human culture until Christ, the great offspring of Eve, returns to complete his final victory over Satan.

These two paths immediately appear in the story of Cain and Abel in Genesis 4. Near the end of chapter 4, we see how Cain and his descendants lived as the offspring of the Serpent. They formed highly sophisticated cultures, but with the intention of resisting the will of God and exchanging their natural ancestry for the Evil One as their spiritual father.

But in Genesis 5 we find a record of Seth’s descendants who developed culture as the offspring of the woman. They formed families and tribes. They developed religious practices and language. They weren’t perfect, but they did their best to establish cultural patterns that served and glorified God. From this point forward, the Scriptures continue to distinguish these two opposing cultural ideals.

Now, we have to be careful here. To interpret and apply Scripture, we also have to see that there were many similarities between these two paths of human culture. Genesis 4 and 5 indicate that Cain and Abel both sought to subdue nature. They both developed societies and religious practices. And, as the genealogies of Seth and Cain demonstrate, both lines married and had children.

How was it possible for people following such different cultural ideals to develop such similar expressions of culture? From the rest of Scripture we learn that these similarities appeared for two reasons.

On the one side, God’s common grace, his non-saving mercy toward humanity, restrains Satan and the sinful propensities of those who follow him. And as a result, even the most diabolical cultures in the world have exhibited a degree of conformity to God’s will. On the other side, sin continues to corrupt those who pursue the ways of God. So, even the holiest cultures in the world have failed to adhere perfectly to God’s will.

From the time of Cain and Abel until our own day, there have always been both differences and similarities between the cultural efforts of God’s faithful servants and of those who rebel against him. And as we seek to apply any passage of Scripture today, it’s important to keep in mind these cultural distinctions.

Having explored the biblical foundations of the importance of culture, and the establishment of two opposing cultural ideals, we can now turn to a third factor: God’s approval of cultural variety in the opening chapters of Scripture.



## VARIETY

The first chapters of Genesis deal primarily with a few individual human beings. So, there are no examples of communities displaying cultural variety in this part of the Bible. Even so, God set the stage for cultural variety in the first chapters of Genesis in the ways he revealed his will to individual people in early human history.

There are many ways to describe the foundations of cultural variety, but for the sake of time we'll consider how cultural variety developed through "special revelation" and what we commonly call "general revelation."

"Special revelation" is the term traditional theologians use to signify God's disclosures of himself and his will to a select number of people through dreams, visions, prophets, the Scriptures, and other similar means. For example, in the early chapters of Genesis, God verbally revealed himself to Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, and Noah.

On the other hand, "general revelation" refers to God's disclosures of himself and his will in all of creation, both in people — human personalities, physical and spiritual abilities, and other qualities — and in circumstances — in the external, observable world. We see this in passages like Psalm 19 and Romans 1:18-20.

God's use of special and general revelation helps us understand how God set the stage for cultural variety among his people.

We see this in the way God's faithful people obeyed the same special revelation in different ways, even at the same time, because they were different people facing different circumstances. For instance, Adam and Eve received the special revelation of the cultural mandate in Genesis 1:28. But Adam and Eve had different talents, personalities, physical abilities and the like. They also dealt with different personal circumstances. To whatever degree these varieties appeared between them, Adam and Eve had to apply the special revelation of the cultural mandate to their lives in different ways at the same time.

In addition, humanity often applied the same special revelation in a variety of ways over time because of ongoing changes in the people and circumstances involved. As just one example, when God first gave the cultural mandate, sin hadn't entered the world. But after Adam and Eve rebelled against God, they and their circumstances changed, and as a result, the way they obeyed the cultural mandate also changed. In fact, special revelation in Genesis 3 revealed how pain and futility would complicate the fulfillment of the cultural mandate as time and humanity progressed.

We can see that the same kinds of variety appear again and again as God added one special revelation after another over time. To one degree or another, every new special revelation modified the requirements of earlier special revelations. So, every time God gave new special revelations, his faithful people had to respond by changing how they served him both at the same time and over time.

From the very beginning, special and general revelations led to all kinds of variety in the ways early human beings were to serve God. And as we'll see later in this lesson, this initial variety laid the foundations of cultural variety for communities of God's faithful people throughout biblical history and even today.

The cultural mandate in Genesis requires us to be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth, and take dominion over it. That's going to lead to cultural variety. And the question can arise, is that really part of God's design? Does God intend for there to be diversity among different cultures? And I would say that the teaching of Scripture is, yes, absolutely. This is an outworking of what God calls us to begin to do... He created us in an environment that is just shot through with his desire for diversity: There's not just dry land, there's also sea. There's not just sun, there's also other kinds of stars. There are not just birds, there are animals of all types. And there's not just one kind of being human, there is male and female. So as we extend the image of that God who has created in this way throughout all of his creation, surely we ought to mirror that kind of variety, and that's going to show up in different cultural practices and things. See, I think the other thing we'd say there is that God calls us to fill the whole earth with his glory, and as we do that, we're going to run into things like variety of climate, variety of terrain. You can't very well build an igloo at the equator, and grass huts won't work in Alaska. So, as we fill the whole earth and take dominion over the whole earth, there is naturally going to be this kind of variety that we see reflected when Revelation says that in the company of the redeemed will be people from every tribe and language and tongue and nation. That is not a departure from God's intention from the beginning. That's actually the fulfillment of what God commanded in Genesis 1.

— Dr. Jimmy Agan

I think part of the beauty of God's working in the world is he's not working only in one culture but in and through many cultures. And I think we have a lot of affirmation of that in the Bible. The proclamation of the gospel is for all nations, that is, all the ethnicities, all the people groups of the world. And when you get to the end of Revelation, the Scripture talks about the kings of the earth bringing their glory into the kingdom of God; all of these treasures of different cultures and the unique strengths and gifts that we see worked out in various cultures of the world, these are all things that God uses in a redemptive way that are part of his purposes for humanity. And that's one of the reasons I think it's so important for us to have relationships across cultures in the body of Christ so that we can benefit from the full riches of God's work through the different cultures of the world.

— Dr. Philip Ryken

To explore biblical culture and its relationship to modern application, we need to keep not only the biblical foundations of culture in mind, but also the biblical developments of culture throughout the Old and New Testaments.

## DEVELOPMENTS

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There are many ways to summarize the biblical developments of culture in the Bible, but for our purposes, we'll look at these cultural developments through the same lens that we used to examine the foundations of culture. We'll look first at the importance of culture as biblical history developed. Then, we'll see how the two opposing cultural ideals developed in the Bible. Finally, we'll examine how cultural variety developed in the Scriptures. Let's begin with the importance of culture.

### IMPORTANCE

Culture is important in both the Old and New Testaments, but the importance of culture in the Old Testament appears most clearly in the amount of attention the early Scriptures give to Israel as a nation.

The book of Genesis describes cultural developments before Israel became a nation, but the entire Pentateuch — the first five books of the Bible — was written during the epoch of Moses' covenant of Law, after Israel had left Egypt and been gathered as a nation at Mount Sinai. For this reason, these books focus a lot of attention on God's commands and instructions for Israel's national life.

The rest of the Old Testament, from Joshua to Malachi, was written during the epoch of David's royal covenant, after Israel had already become a fully developed nation. These books address the spectrum of God's revelations that directed Israel's culture during its rise to imperial glory, the ups and downs of the divided kingdom, the exile, and the brief period of restoration at the end of the Old Testament.

Although the Old Testament describes many cultural developments that took place in Israel, the greatest cultural development in Scripture occurred in the transition from the Old Testament to the epoch of the new covenant in Christ. Instead of focusing on the national culture of Israel, the New Testament draws attention to the developments of cultural patterns in the Christian church.

To understand how this dramatic shift occurred, we need to remember that most Jews in first-century Palestine looked forward to the arrival of the new covenant age. As we learned in an earlier lesson, during the intertestamental period Jewish rabbis referred to all of history prior to the Messiah's arrival as "this age." And they taught that when the Messiah appeared, he would bring in "the age to come." They believed that in the age to come, the Messiah would appear, lead his people in battle against the evil nations of the world, and rapidly establish his people in his glorious, worldwide kingdom, dramatically and decisively altering the culture of Israel.

But Jesus and his apostles made it clear that his rule would unfold in three stages: the inauguration of his kingdom in his first coming, the continuation of his kingdom throughout church history, and the consummation of his kingdom at his second coming. This three-stage outlook led to a whole new understanding of the ways God expected the culture of his people to develop during the new covenant period.

It's very easy to lose sight of the importance of culture in the New Testament unless we keep in mind the final goal of Christ's kingdom as described in passages like Revelation 11:15:

**The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever (Revelation 11:15).**

In this passage, we see that Christ will one day destroy the "kingdom of the world" with its many rebellious cultures. But he will not simply destroy these evil cultures. He will also transform the world into a worldwide culture that can be described as the "kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ" where "he will reign for ever and ever."

So, rather than being a marginal element of the New Testament, culture is so important that every portion of this part of Scripture in some way deals with how Christ brings about the fulfillment of God's purposes for human culture.

Some passages focus on the ways Jesus set in motion the final stage of the cultural mandate by his life, death, resurrection, ascension and outpouring of the Spirit. Other portions of the New Testament focus on guiding the church as it helps transform the world through the gospel during the continuation of Christ's kingdom. And still other passages draw attention to the consummation when Christ will return to fulfill God's purposes for humanity and establish a culture in which God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven.

Now that we've explored biblical developments in culture by looking at the importance of culture in the development of biblical history, we can turn to the development of the two opposing cultural ideals found throughout the Bible.

## OPPOSING IDEALS

The establishment of the two cultural ideals in Genesis 3 led Old Testament authors to associate the offspring of the Serpent with Gentile nations and the offspring of Eve with Israel.

Gentile nations developed their cultures in service to false gods and opposed the God of Israel. They set up shrines and temples to these false gods and sometimes even sacrificed their own children. God made it very clear that his people were to have nothing to do with these practices.

Israel, on the other hand, embraced the righteous laws God gave through Moses, and attempted to live in ways that glorified the one true God. They observed the Sabbath, avoided idolatry, and relied on God's guidance and protection instead of on human wisdom and strength.

Of course, this didn't mean that Gentiles couldn't be adopted into the nation of Israel by pledging their loyalty to God, or that Israelites couldn't become so corrupt that they became the enemies of God. But to the extent that each followed their customary ideals, Israel developed its culture in service to God, and Gentile nations developed their cultures in service to false gods.

Now, at the same time, the Old Testament and archeology also indicate that Israelite and Gentile cultures were similar in many ways. Some of these similarities resulted from Israelites following the sinful paths of their neighbors. But other similarities resulted from God's common grace restraining the sinful propensities of Gentiles, so that aspects of their cultures were at least superficially true to God's will. These cultural divisions continued throughout the Old Testament.

When we turn to the New Testament, the two opposing cultural ideals appear again, but with different associations.

Israel's long unfaithfulness, which began in the Old Testament, had left only a remnant of faithful Jews by the time of Christ's incarnation. And in the New Testament, Gentiles could now receive full adoption as God's people alongside this remnant. So, rather than dividing between the Jews and Gentile nations, New Testament authors associated followers of Christ with the seed of the woman and unbelievers with the seed of the Serpent, whether they were Jews or Gentiles.

This is why Jesus spoke of Satan as the father of the Pharisees in John 8:44. This also explains why, in Romans 16:20, Paul alluded to Genesis 3:15 when he assured the Christians in Rome that God would crush Satan under their feet.

**The relationship between Israel and the Gentile nations is an interesting question... And if you look in Genesis 18 and elsewhere, God makes a promise to Abraham that he would bless Abraham and bless his descendants. And if we think of Scripture as a multi-act drama, you have the first act where God makes the promise to Abraham, and he preserves the nation of Israel, keeping it from the corrupt influences of the surrounding nations; they fail, but he disciplines them. He protects the nation until the Messiah comes. The Messiah comes and announces salvation for Israel. If you look in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus says in Matthew 15, "I came for the lost sheep of Israel." This Canaanite woman is beseeching him for her daughter. And it's troubling sometimes. People say, "well, why isn't he immediately healing her daughter?" And Jesus is in some ways saying, "This is act two." Right? "I've come to announce salvation for the lost sheep of Israel." But then you get to the end of the gospel, Matthew 28, and we have what begins act three, the act that we're in, where the gospel goes forth to all nations, to Jews and to Gentiles alike. Now, in Romans 1 it's interesting, even in act three, Paul maintains this distinction. He speaks about "to the Jew first, then to the Gentile." He feels an obligation to his countrymen, to those who have the promises of Abraham: I have an obligation to announce to them first. So he goes to the synagogue and declares the promises given to our forefather are true. But when he's kicked out of the**

**synagogue or when they'll no longer listen to him, he immediately goes to the Gentiles. Because, as he describes in Ephesians 2, through Christ's death on the cross, the dividing wall between Jew and Gentile is broken down... there's a beautiful unity we have now as Jew and Gentile together as adopted sons and daughters of God.**

— Dr. Robert L. Plummer

The New Testament often warns believers not to be conformed to this world because the church and world follow opposing ideals. But at the same time, New Testament authors acknowledged that the line between the church and the world was not absolute. As culture developed in the Bible, early Christians often endorsed customs and philosophical outlooks that unbelievers followed. And as we learned earlier, some of these similarities resulted from the influence of sin on Christ's followers, and other similarities stemmed from the positive effects of common grace on the world.

In our focus on biblical cultural developments we've seen the importance of culture in the Old and New Testaments, and how opposing cultural ideals developed throughout biblical history. Let's now turn to our third topic: the development of cultural variety in the Scriptures.

## VARIETY

When we explore the Old Testament, it's obvious that it contains many laws and instructions that were designed to solidify Israel's national culture. But this didn't mean that God expected all Israelite cultures to be exactly the same. In fact, as different communities within Israel faithfully applied God's special and general revelations, a variety of cultural patterns emerged.

Many of these variations occurred simultaneously. Levitical priests applied God's laws in certain ways in their communities, while at the same time kings and other political leaders applied God's laws differently. One family applied God's laws in ways appropriate for its members, while other families applied God's laws in ways that were appropriate for their members.

Beyond this, even more variations occurred as God gave more and more special revelations to Israel over time. God ordered certain cultural patterns for his people as they marched through the wilderness and different patterns during the conquest of Canaan. God ordained changes when he established kingship in Israel and also when he commanded Solomon to build the Temple in Jerusalem. Other variations in the culture of Israel took place during the exile and after the exile.

**Some aspects of Israel's cultural life did not change very much throughout their history. They were a patriarchal culture from beginning to end. The husband was the major figure in the family. Not the only figure by any means. I'm reminded of Proverbs, which says that you much honor your father and not curse your mother. But**

**nevertheless, the culture was largely patriarchal from beginning to end. On the other hand, their state life changed rather dramatically from loose clans and then more tightly organized tribal structure, finally to nation status, and then the nation being destroyed and them being simply a culture within a larger world empire and trying to understand, who are we then as the people of God? So, that political situation changed for them pretty dramatically over that period of time.**

— Dr. John Oswalt

When we turn to the New Testament we find variety again. Old Testament cultural patterns were still applicable, but they had to be seen in the light of the fact that God's people were no longer a single nation. The people of God were now the church, a community called to live within many different national cultures. So, as you might expect, in the new covenant epoch God led his faithful people to develop even greater cultural variety.

Differences in people and circumstances led Christian communities to apply biblical teachings in different ways from one another. For instance, Jewish and Gentile believers observed distinctive cultural practices based on their own circumstances. And Christian churches located in different regions had to consider their own people and circumstances as they applied the Bible. And various family groups faithfully followed God's words in diverse ways.

But it's important to remember that new covenant special revelation didn't take place all at once. For nearly a century, God disclosed his will for the church through Christ and through Christ's apostles and prophets. So, the culture of the church in the New Testament also varied over time. For instance, the practice of circumcision changed dramatically when the apostles and elders met in Jerusalem in Acts 15. And every time a New Testament book was written and received, various Christian churches went through changes. For these and many other reasons, there was a great deal of cultural variety among Christian communities in New Testament times.

Now that we've looked at biblical culture and modern application by investigating the biblical foundations of culture and the way biblical developments affected culture in the Bible, let's turn to our third main topic. What do all of these considerations have to say about our modern application of Scripture?

## APPLICATION

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In our day, many evangelicals think of faith primarily as a private, individual matter. Now to be sure, the Scriptures have much to say about our personal walk with God. But many of us stress this aspect of the Bible to the point that we have very little interest in the implications of Scripture for modern culture. But as we'll see, the

Scriptures emphasize the cultural dimensions of our faith so much that we must devote ourselves to applying the Scriptures to culture today.

We'll consider the modern application of what the Bible teaches about culture in the same way that we looked at the foundations and developments of culture in Scripture. First, we'll explore the importance of culture when we apply Scripture. Next, we'll see how the two opposing cultural ideals should affect the application of Scripture today. And finally, we'll see how modern application must take into account the cultural variety that God has ordained for our times. Let's begin with the importance of culture in modern application.

### IMPORTANCE

Many portions of Scripture help us understand why it's important to apply the Bible to modern culture. But one of the easier ways to see this is to consider how Christ called his followers to influence every culture in the world by teaching the full range of what he'd commanded.

Listen to the way Jesus put it in Matthew 28:19-20, the familiar passage that Christians often call the Great Commission or the "gospel mandate." In this passage, Jesus told his disciples:

**Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you (Matthew 28:19-20).**

This passage summarizes the mission of Christ's followers until he returns in glory. But to appreciate how it relates to our modern cultural endeavors, it helps to see how this gospel mandate echoes the cultural mandate given to the human race in the beginning of Genesis. In the cultural mandate of Genesis 1:28, God told humanity to "be fruitful and increase in number."

Similarly, in Matthew 28:19, Christ called his followers to increase in number when he said, "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." Much like Adam and Eve were to fill the world with images of God, Christians are also to multiply God's redeemed images. And we do this in part by leading people to saving faith in Christ.

But Jesus' gospel mandate didn't stop with just increasing the number of God's faithful servants. According to Matthew 28:20, our mission also entails "teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you." Just as Adam and Eve were called to obey God by filling the earth and subduing it, Christians are to teach all nations to obey God by following his commands, and that includes instruction on nearly every facet of culture.

We can look at it this way: Adam and Eve were to obey God and build culture by subduing the earth, and we are to obey God and build culture by discipling the nations.

It should be evident from Matthew 28 that Jesus expected his followers to have an impact on every culture by baptizing believers and teaching his commandments to all nations. His teachings addressed very public cultural issues like poverty, finances, health,



marriage, justice, ethnicity, politics and even paying taxes. This is why we find New Testament books touching a broad range of cultural issues.

Along these same lines, in Matthew 5:13-14, Christ boldly described his disciples as:

**The salt of the earth ... [and] ... the light of the world (Matthew 5:13-14).**

As history has shown time and again, when followers of Jesus faithfully devote themselves to teaching all that Christ commanded to every nation, we have the potential of positively influencing every facet of every culture in the entire world. And for this reason, our modern application of the Bible must address the full range of human culture.

**In Matthew 5, Jesus tells his disciples that they are to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world. And to a modern reader, this is kind of a mysterious statement... You think about, to the ancient hearers, what does that language convey, especially rooted in the culture in the Scripture? And salt was something that preserved things from going rotten, so salt was added to meat or fish to keep it from rotting, to preserve it, and it was something that added flavor. And you think about Christians. Their influence in the world is to be a presence for righteousness in many ways under the instrument of God, preserving the culture or flavoring the culture with the presence of God's truth. And light pictures that as well. Light throughout Scripture is seen as an image of revelation, as revealing. And Christians are to be in the world revealing who God is, broadcasting, illumining a dark world with the truth and the righteousness of who God is.**

— Dr. Robert L. Plummer

In our study of modern application and biblical culture, we've seen the importance of culture for Christ's followers today. Now let's look at our second topic. How should the existence of the two opposing cultural ideals impact our modern application of the Bible?

## **OPPOSING IDEALS**

When Christ came to earth, he inaugurated the final stage of his great victory over Satan. But this victory will be completed only when Christ returns in glory at the consummation of all things. In the meantime, during the continuation of his kingdom, the human race continues to be divided between the offspring of the Serpent, the unbelieving world that pursues the cultural ideal of rebellion against God, and the offspring of Eve, followers of Christ that pursue the cultural ideal of service to God.

But, as it was in biblical times, the line between God's people and the world is not absolute. Until Christ returns, his people on earth will continue to struggle with the remaining influence of sin. We are free from sin's tyranny, but not free from its influence. At the same time, God's common grace still restrains the world so that even unbelievers often live in ways that, to some degree, conform to the will of God. And this is especially true of nations where the gospel has had great influence.

As followers of Christ, it's our responsibility to follow cultural paths that are true to God's will and to avoid those that are not. Sometimes the paths we pursue should be very different from the world. Biblical authors repeatedly warned their original audiences against falling into idolatry, sexual immorality, selfishness, pride, injustice and a host of other cultural evils. Wherever we see these kinds of evils in our own day, we are to turn away from them.

But other times, biblical authors encouraged their original audiences to recognize the influence of common grace on different aspects of social relationships, technology, art, music, architecture, law, and politics. Every time we find that the Scriptures approve of the ways unbelievers lived, we should search for similar effects of God's common grace on the cultures of the world today. As long as we remain true to the teachings of Scripture, we should freely endorse the blessings of common grace in science, art, politics and other facets of life.

We may find it difficult at times to discern how cultural patterns in Scripture apply to our day. But in general terms, we must take account of the ways God directed various dimensions of culture throughout the Bible. When we compare all that the Scriptures reveal about different dimensions of culture, we find at least four ways in which God directed cultural patterns. He permanently approved some patterns, such as marriage and work. Other patterns he only temporarily endorsed, such as the arrangement of the tribes of Israel during their march from Egypt to Canaan. At times, in his patience with sinners, God temporarily tolerated some cultural activities of his people, such as polygamy and slavery, even though he disapproved of them. And of course, throughout Scripture, we see many cultural patterns that received God's permanent disapproval, such as injustice and idolatry.

In other words, to apply a cultural pattern we find in the Bible to our lives today, we should look for God's evaluation in the passage itself. Then, we should search out relevant moral standards from other biblical passages and determine the motivations and goals behind the biblical cultural elements we see. In these ways, we can discern how cultural patterns in biblical passages represent the two opposing cultural ideals of service to God or rebellion against him. And as we do this, we'll be enabled to apply appropriate patterns of culture in the Bible to our modern world.

Having looked at modern application in the light of the importance of culture and at the opposing cultural ideals in the world today, we can now turn to a third consideration. How should we deal with cultural variety as we apply Scripture in our day?

## VARIETY

When we visit different believers in various parts of the world, it's obvious that our languages, styles of dress, our diets, music, and many other cultural patterns can be very different. Why is this true? If we all seek to follow the standards of Scripture, then why have the patterns of our cultures gone in so many different directions? Well, needless to say, some of our differences exist because all of us fail to live in ways that are true to Scripture. But apart from our failures, there are many legitimate reasons for expecting cultural diversity among God's people throughout the world.

As we've seen, with the inauguration of the new covenant age, God's people were no longer a single nation. And over the last two thousand years, as the gospel has spread further and further around the world, God's faithful people have faced the challenge of living for Christ in increasingly diverse cultures. This challenge raises a crucial question. How much cultural variety should we allow? What limits should we set?

There are many places in Scripture that address this question, but one of the best places to explore this issue is 1 Corinthians 9:19-23. In this passage, Paul told the Corinthian church:

**Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings (1 Corinthians 9:19-23).**

In this passage, Paul described how his commitment to fulfilling the gospel mandate led him to embrace a wide range of cultural concepts, behaviors and emotions. As he summarized it in verse 22, "I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some."

As one who travelled here and there, Paul had to exercise an extraordinary amount of cultural flexibility. In verse 20 he said that he "became like one under the law" when he was in Jewish communities. And in verse 21, he said that he "became like one not having the law" when he was in Gentile communities.

But notice how Paul drew limits on the cultural variety he was willing to embrace. In verse 20 he said, "I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law)." In other words, Paul followed the cultural patterns of Jewish communities, but he wasn't bound by the law as the religious leaders of his day understood it. Most of the Pharisees and religious leaders in Paul's time only used the law to flaunt their own self-righteousness. But, as Jesus indicated in Matthew 23, this behavior led to condemnation and death. Here, Paul explained that he embraced the culture without embracing cultural standards that ultimately would only bring him under God's judgment.

Similarly, in verse 21 he said, “I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God’s law but am under Christ’s law).” Paul shared in the cultural concepts, behaviors and emotions of Gentile communities, but only to the extent that he did not violate the law of God as Christ had interpreted it for his new covenant people.

In much the same way, to fulfill the gospel mandate today, faithful followers of Christ must be prepared to apply the Scriptures differently whenever they encounter people and circumstances from other cultural backgrounds. Local congregations, Christian businesses, schools, hospitals, and even friendships will be different from each other. And of course, as time passes, these communities will change as the people and circumstances involved change as well.

But this doesn’t mean that we’re free to shape the cultures of our communities any way we wish. On the contrary, like the apostle Paul, followers of Christ today must be firmly committed to staying within the parameters of Scripture. This commitment to remaining true to the Scriptures as we apply them in different ways to our communities is one of the most complex aspects of modern application.

**As God reveals himself to us, he does so in space and time. That’s part of the glory of his revelation and his plan of redemption. As we work from Old Testament era to New Testament era, obviously we interact with various cultures, people in different periods of time. There’s all kinds of cultural variety that we see that’s tied to certain places in history, certain places in terms of cultures and backgrounds. How do we know which variety applies to us, how it should be lived out? Well, I think first of all we have to evaluate variety in terms of the standard of certain moral demands. Certain cultural variety needs to be rejected because it is inconsistent with how God has made us — what his moral standards are, and those practices — even though they may reflect ... cultural variety may reflect idolatry, may reflect a rejection of God and his standards.**

— Dr. Stephen J. Wellum

Throughout biblical history, every community of God’s faithful people maintained certain cultural patterns. But other cultural patterns changed over time. One way to determine how closely we should imitate any pattern of culture we find in the Bible is to pay attention to whether or not a particular cultural feature remained the same throughout Scripture or changed to accommodate different eras, people or circumstances. If cultural patterns changed in Scripture, we should expect them to be changeable in our time as well. But if facets of culture remained the same throughout biblical history, we must consider them standards for us today.

For example, family structures and living situations have changed over the last 2,000 years, but Scripture consistently instructs children to obey their parents. This is still true for us today. And although legal systems varied from culture to culture and era to era, Scripture never altered the fact that God’s people are expected to be honest witnesses when called to testify. Political systems, clothing, music, food preferences, and many

other facets of culture changed throughout biblical history, but the directive to honor and serve God in our families, work places, and communities has remained consistent.

As followers of Christ, we should be careful to distinguish these continuities and discontinuities every time we apply a cultural pattern in Scripture to our own day.

## **CONCLUSION**

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In this lesson, we've explored several important dimensions of biblical culture and modern application. We've seen the biblical foundations of culture in the early chapters of the Bible. We've looked at biblical developments that took place in culture in both the Old and New Testaments. And we've explored how the aspects of culture in the Bible should affect our modern application of Scripture.

The Bible itself makes it clear that faithful followers of Christ must apply the teachings of Scripture not simply to themselves as individuals, but to the cultural dimensions of their lives as well. Even during the epoch of the new covenant, we are still images of God and we've been called to build human culture in ways that please God. This mandate will continue in effect until Christ returns. So, we must learn how the Scriptures apply to every dimension of modern culture.

**Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr. (Host)** is Co-Founder and President of Third Millennium Ministries. He served as Professor of Old Testament at Reformed Theological Seminary for more than 20 years and was chair of the Old Testament department. An ordained minister, Dr. Pratt travels extensively to evangelize and teach. He studied at Westminster Theological Seminary, received his M.Div. from Union Theological Seminary, and earned his Th.D. in Old Testament Studies from Harvard University. Dr. Pratt is the general editor of the NIV Spirit of the Reformation Study Bible and a translator for the New Living Translation. He has also authored numerous articles and books, including *Pray with Your Eyes Open*, *Every Thought Captive*, *Designed for Dignity*, *He Gave Us Stories*, *Commentary on 1 & 2 Chronicles* and *Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*.

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**Dr. Jimmy Agan** is Associate Professor of New Testament and Director of Homiletics at Covenant Theological Seminary.

**Dr. Bruce Baugus** is Associate Professor of Philosophy and Theology at Reformed Theological Seminary.

**Rev. Mike Glodo** is Associate Professor of Biblical Studies at Reformed Theological Seminary in Orlando, Florida.

**Dr. John Oswalt** is the Visiting Distinguished Professor of Old Testament at Asbury Theological Seminary.

**Dr. Jonathan T. Pennington** is Associate Professor of New Testament Interpretation and the Director of Research Doctoral Studies at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

**Dr. Robert L. Plummer** is Associate Professor of New Testament Interpretation at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

**Dr. Philip Ryken** is President of Wheaton College.

**Dr. Stephen J. Wellum** is Professor of Christian Theology at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.