

## **Overcoming Cultural Presuppositions**

Kenneth J. Coughlan

February 13, 2019

E. Randolph Richards and Brandon J. O'Brien conclude their book *Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes: Removing Cultural Blinders to Better Understand the Bible* by outlining five principles we can use to try and see past our cultural presuppositions. First, they ask that we "embrace complexity." There may be more than one cultural factor that is influencing our interpretation of a text. It may take effort to sort through them all and arrive at the author's original intent.<sup>1</sup> Second, we must "beware of overcorrection." When we do identify a cultural factor that may be influencing our interpretation, that does not necessarily mean our hermeneutic conclusion should swing all the way in the opposite direction. The truth may lie somewhere in between.<sup>2</sup>

Third, "be teachable." We need to open ourselves up to alternative interpretations and genuinely be willing to acknowledge that another view may be more accurate than our own.<sup>3</sup> Richards and O'Brien's fourth principle is closely related to their third, "embrace error." Mistakes help us learn.<sup>4</sup> Finally, we can reduce the risk of arriving at an improper understanding of Scripture if we "read together." As the authors point out, "We are likely misreading when our reading of the text requires us to ignore the context, to shorten the text to just this or that verse or part of a verse" or "to lengthen the text, by pulling in verses from other parts of the Bible until we get all the pieces we need."<sup>5</sup> The authors encourage the worldwide church to read the Bible

---

<sup>1</sup> E. Randolph Richards and Brandon J. O'Brien, *Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes: Removing Cultural Blinders to Better Understand the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 212-13.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 213-14.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 214-15.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 215-16.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 216.

together, paying attention to what our brothers and sisters in Christ from other cultures are saying. This can serve as a check against us shaping our interpretation to fit our worldview.<sup>6</sup>

Some scholars have argued that an example of Richards and O'Brien's point about misreading scripture when we ignore the context can be found in the Word of Faith movement. Russell A Morris and Daniel T Liroy define the basic premise of this movement as a theology which "posits an anthropocentric worldview, in which Christians are entitled to health, wealth, and prosperity, all of which is obtainable by utilising one's faith."<sup>7</sup> Eric Z.M. Gbote and Selaelo Thias Kgatla argue that people who preach this message do not adhere to sound exegesis and hermeneutical principles, disregarding the context, grammar, and history of the text.<sup>8</sup> Gbote and Kgatla claim that "Faith preachers' rejection of these core values leads to misinterpretation and manipulation of the gospel and gives it a different and wrong meaning."<sup>9</sup> As a result, these preachers "use indigenous systems and situations in providing interpretations of the word of God."<sup>10</sup>

Failing to give proper consideration to the context of biblical passages, Word of Faith theology allows various outside factors (including cultural ones) to influence its message. For example, one of several factors Morris and Liroy cite as contributing to the appeal of Word of

---

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 216-17.

<sup>7</sup> Russell A Morris and Daniel T Liroy, "A Historical and Theological Framework for Understanding Word of Faith Theology," *Conspectus (South African Theological Seminary)*, vol. 13 (2012): 74.

<sup>8</sup> Eric Z.M. Gbote and Selaelo Thias Kgatla, "Prosperity gospel: a missiological assessment," *HTS Theologiese Studies/Theological Studies*, vol. 70 no. 1 (2014): 8.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

Faith theology in the West is the “American Dream.” Specifically, “America’s fascination with all things material, facilitates certain tenets of the word of faith movement.”<sup>11</sup> Ebenezer Obadare notes that this movement in Nigeria “became ascendant at precisely the same moment that the country was witnessing perhaps its most exacting period of economic upheaval since independence in 1960.”<sup>12</sup>

Genis Pieterse and Kevin Smith describe the role cognitive dissonance allegedly plays in willingness to accept Word of Faith interpretations.<sup>13</sup> Cognitive dissonance “occurs when two beliefs do not fit together.”<sup>14</sup> Often when this happens, people are faced with the choice of either changing their beliefs or changing their behaviors. According to Pieterse and Smith, people will opt for whichever choice they perceive as bringing about the greatest personal reward.<sup>15</sup> In the context of the Word of Faith movement, people possess a felt need to for a “better life” which Word of Faith theology claims to deliver. “The need and its associated emotional impact is so strong that people are prepared to alter their beliefs in the hope that the innovation will ultimately meet their individual needs,” leading them to accept Word of Faith interpretations.<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> Morris and Liroy, “A Historical and Theological Framework for Understanding Word of Faith Theology,” 79.

<sup>12</sup> Ebenezer Obadare, “‘Raising Righteous Billionaires’: The prosperity gospel reconsidered,” *HTS Theologiese Studies/Theological Studies*, vol. 72 no. 4 (2016): 8.

<sup>13</sup> Genis Pieterse and Kevin Smith, “The Appeal of the Word of Faith Movement,” *Conspectus (South African Theological Seminary)*, vol. 26 (2018): 130-31.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, 130.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, 131.

Word of Faith theology is but one example in which disregarding the context of Scripture can open a door for improper interpretations to creep in, especially influenced by felt cultural needs. Overall, the suggestions in Richards and O'Brien's conclusion are good reminders. While at times during their book they overstated their case, in fairness they openly admitted at the outset that they were (of necessity given the length of the book) overgeneralizing and being "forced to oversimplify complex issues."<sup>17</sup> While at times I believe they allowed themselves too much leeway in this regard, the overall point of the book and the cautionary principles they built up to in their conclusion stand as solid reminders for anyone seeking to properly interpret the Scriptures.

---

<sup>17</sup> Richards and O'Brien, *Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes*, 19, 22.