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# A PRINCIPLIZING MODEL

Walter C. Kaiser Jr.

ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT INTERPRETIVE TASKS, but the one most laypeople, teachers, and pastors often have had little training in, is the move from determining what a text meant in its original setting and context to *applying* that text in one's own day and culture. That move is filled with potential for great power in one's teaching and preaching, but it also possesses an equally great potential for mischief and harm to both the speaker and the audience. These moves are especially sensitive when the original text of Scripture involves cultural elements that are different from cultural elements in our own day. But as we will see, rather than viewing these elements as obstacles to understanding the text fairly, they are meant to actually help us in the task of applying that text to other times and places. The textual illustration of this kind of move used in a former day opens up the potential for our determining what the principle of the same issue being illustrated would be in our own day.

One proposal for bridging this gap between the "then" of the text's ancient context and the "now" application of that

same text in our day was entitled “ethnohermeneutics,”<sup>1</sup> which recognized three horizons in this delicate cross-cultural interpretation: (1) the culture of the Bible, (2) the culture of the interpreter, and (3) the culture of the receptor. It is important to note that all three horizons have to be brought into the discussion of a scriptural text, yet without allowing the second and third horizons to override, or dictate, to the first horizon a new meaning; one that no longer serves as the basis for a common communication on the subject first introduced by the original context.

In the early church fathers, cultural matters in the Scripture were discussed under the topics of “condescension,” “accommodation,” and “acculturation.” From their standpoint, the biblical writers did not make the interpretation of the text more difficult when they introduced cultural aspects; instead, they made it more accessible by showing us how it could be applied. To illustrate this point, notice how easily readers and interpreters of Philippians 4:2 handle “I plead with Euodia and Syntyche to agree with each other in the Lord.” The particularization of the names and the specificity of some altercation that had taken place between these two ladies in the context of the church at Philippi should not cause us to pass over that statement in Paul’s letter and say in effect, “Oh, neither Euodia nor Syntyche is a relative of mine, and I am not part of the church at Philippi, so that word is not for me in my day.” Instead, most will see it for what it is—a good illustration of the principle Paul talked about in his letter to the Ephesians (4:32): “Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.” If that is a legitimate way to handle this *particularismus* in the New Testament, should not that same procedure work for

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1. Charles H. Kraft, “Towards a Christian Ethnotheology,” in *God, Man and Church Growth: Festschrift in Honor of Donald Anderson McGavran* (ed. A. R. Tippett; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973): 109–26, and Larry W. Caldwell, “Third Horizon Ethnohermeneutics: Reevaluating New Testament Hermeneutical Models for an Old Task,” *Asian Journal of Theology* 1 (1987): 314–33. See my chapter entitled “Obeying the Word: The Cultural Use of the Bible,” in Walter C. Kaiser Jr. and Moises Silva, *Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics: The Search for Meaning* (2nd ed.; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 222–39.

the Old Testament, which has many more instances of that same particularity and specificity involving people, places, times, and issues?

Therefore, what happens in this and similar cases where cultural issues intrude on the text can be handled by principlizing the text.<sup>2</sup> For example, in some cases in interpreting the Bible, we will keep the principle affirmed in the theology taught, along with the cultural-historical expression of that principle where the cultural expression remains similar to its meaning in our times as well. Such would be the case when Scripture taught lines of responsibility between husband and wife—both the theology of marriage and the cultural illustrations of it are rather closely proximate to one another.

On other occasions, we will keep the theology of the passage (i.e., one that is now embodied in a principle), but replace the behavioral expression with some more recent or meaningful expression from our contemporary world. To illustrate this instance, we would appeal to 1 Corinthians 5, where a mother and son were guilty of incest (a violation of the moral law of God), but the sanction for that law of stoning (as was true in the law of Moses) was replaced by temporary excommunication from the body of believers until there was genuine repentance and restoration to the church once again. Principles, then, must be given priority over accompanying cultural elements, especially when directed to the times and settings in which that text was written—times now different and separate from the contemporary manner of expressing that same principle.

Over twenty-five years ago I had occasion to put down in print what I meant when I had repeatedly urged Bible readers, teachers, and preachers to “principlize” the text of Scripture. My emphasis then, as now, was that the task of interpreting a text was not concluded until the reader or interpreter had carried what the text meant over to the present day and said what it now means. I had written in the past:

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2. See Kaiser and Silva, *Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics*, 233–37.

To “principlize” is to [re]state the author’s propositions, arguments, narrations, and illustrations in timeless abiding truths with special focus on the application of those truths to the current needs of the Church.<sup>3</sup>

Later, in that same textbook, I explained:

Principlization seeks to bridge the “then” of the text’s narrative [or any other biblical genre] with the “now” needs of our day; yet it refuses to settle for cheap and quick solutions which confuse our own personal point of view (good or bad) with that of the inspired writer.<sup>4</sup>

This method of “principlizing” I had attempted to distinguish from several older and newer ways of making the biblical text contemporary and relevant to our own times:

Unlike allegorizing or spiritualizing, the method of principlizing seeks to derive its teachings from a careful understanding of the text [of Scripture]. Rather than importing an external meaning into the Bible (this includes pre-maturely using the analogy of subsequent doctrines [usually called “The Analogy of Faith”] and assigning these new meanings to the details of the earlier narrative, meanings which were not in the mind of the original author), we must receive only those meanings authoritatively stated by the authors themselves.<sup>5</sup>

The first step in principlizing a passage from the Bible is to determine what the subject of the focal point of that passage is. My colleague Haddon Robinson has called this focal point “the big idea of the passage.” Usually this focus can be found expressly stated in the heart of the text selected (in a summarizing verse or clause thereof) for teaching or preaching. It is necessary to get a fix on this first lest we are tempted to

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3. Walter C. Kaiser Jr., *Toward an Exegetical Theology: Biblical Exegesis for Preaching and Teaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 152.

4. *Ibid.*, 198.

5. *Ibid.*, 205. I distinguish between the “Analogy of Faith” and the “Analogy of [Antecedent] Scripture” in Walter C. Kaiser Jr., “Hermeneutics and the Theological Task,” *Trinity Journal*, n.s. 12 (1990): 3–14, and Henri Blocher’s careful study, “The ‘Analogy of Faith’ in the Study of Scripture,” *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 5 (1987): 17–38.

impose a mold over the Bible by forcing it to answer one of our favorite questions, but one the text never encompasses in its purpose. A greater temptation is to introduce a truth taught in the New Testament and to read the Bible backwards (as in “eisegesis”) and claim here was a “deeper truth” or something that is a *sensus plenior*, presumably encrypted between the lines and not in the grammar or syntax per se. Surely that imposition has given “eye-popping” New Testament types of truth to the Old Testament with plenty of contemporary relevancy, but the question is this: Did the Holy Spirit come to the same use of that text?

Once the topic/subject has been identified, then the emphasis must be sought from any terms that are repeated or are a key or part of the important words used in developing that same subject. Notice simultaneously has to be given to the connecting words in that pericope that link the phrases, clauses, and sentences, such as “because,” “since,” “therefore,” or the like.

Once we have identified the subject, the emphasis, and the ways in which the passage is connected, we can move to see how each paragraph (in prose genres), scene (in narratives), or strophe (in poetical passages) can be expressed in propositional principles. It is always best to avoid using all proper names/nouns in stating the principle for each of these units of thought (e.g., the paragraph in the prose sections, the scene in narrative sections, or the strophe in poetical sections of the Bible) except divine names, for all such references to all other persons, places, or historic events will only lock the text into the past and handicap its application to the contemporary scene.

Likewise, all use of third person pronouns has the same inhibiting function on formulating useful principles for our day; instead of using third person pronouns, one is better advised to express the newly devised principles in terms of first person plural pronouns that have a hortatory function in the preaching and teaching situation—“Let us . . .,” “it’s our job . . .,” or “we must. . . .” Of course second person pronouns can likewise be used, but for teaching and proclamation purposes, it is always better if the speaker identifies with the audience rather than pontificating from on high against all of “you”!