

A Fresh Encounter with God

The need for a Cultural-Historical Commentary

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Many readers will recognize the value of a cultural commentary. But others may, even after reading “How to Use This Commentary,” still remain unclear. The following essay elaborates the importance of cultural background in biblical interpretation for those who have not been exposed to this issue previously. Because those already trained in biblical studies will agree with the need for cultural context, this essay is directed solely toward nontechnical readers.

HOW THE BIBLE ITSELF INVITES US TO INTERPRET IT

Readers of the Bible have long realized the value of cultural and historical background for understanding the Bible. The biblical writers themselves assume its importance. For instance, when Mark writes about an issue debated by Jesus and his opponents, he explains the custom involved in it to his Gentile readers, who would not have otherwise known the custom ([Mark 7:3-4](#)). Similarly, when Jesus’ opponents take an apparent concession in the Law at face value, Jesus says that the *intent* of the Law is what is crucial, and to grasp it one must understand the situation and the state of its original audience ([Mark 10:4-5](#)).

Biblical writers can often simply assume the importance of the readers’ knowing the situation. (It was understood in the ancient world that the better one knew the situation with which a speech dealt, the better one could understand the speech: see the first-century A.D. Roman rhetorician [Quintilian](#) 10.1.22; one should also keep rereading the speech to catch all the subtle nuances and foreshadowings in it; see [Quintilian](#) 10.1.20-21.) For instance, when Paul writes a letter to the Corinthians, he can assume that the Corinthians know what situations he is addressing. Reading 1 Corinthians may be like listening to one side of a telephone conversation, and we can fortunately reconstruct most of the conversation by reading 1 Corinthians. But part of the meaning of the conversation is determined by the situation itself, not just by the words in front of us. What Paul *assumes* his readers will grasp in his writing is as much a part of his meaning as what he *says*. If we cannot relate to the situation he and his readers are assuming, we will have more difficulty understanding his point. A few examples will illustrate this point.

Paul addresses the issue of celibacy in [1 Cor. 7](#). There he definitely sounds as if he favors celibacy, and even though he allows marriage as a valid lifestyle, some commentators think he suggests that it is a second-class lifestyle for those who do not have the gift of being able to

“control themselves.” He certainly makes some valid points about the benefits of singleness, but is he really against marriage in general? [1 Cor. 7:1](#) tells us plainly that Paul is responding to a letter from some of the Christians in Corinth. Because some of these Christians followed a certain view in their culture that opposed marriage, one could just as easily read the chapter as follows: Paul is saying, “You have a good point, and I agree with you that singleness is a good gift from God. But you are taking matters too far if you impose it on married people or on people who should get married.”

A clearer example would be how we read Paul’s warnings about meat offered to idols. It would be all too easy for readers today to say, “Well, there aren’t any idols to sacrifice meat to today, so let’s just skip this chapter of 1 Corinthians.” But this sidesteps the transcultural issue *behind* the cultural issue. Once we see how concrete the issue was in Corinth—that well-to-do Christians who did not eat this food could offend friends and business associates, and all to keep the less-educated Christians from being hurt in their faith—we can compare it with similar issues today. Some Christians today want a prestigious lifestyle because it attracts other yuppies to a religion that demands little in the way of sacrifice—even if such a religion alienates the homeless and hungry in developing nations and in our North American cities. Considering how to balance the interests of different factions in a church is relevant in many congregations today.

Understanding that the Bible does address issues and motives like those we face today is important. Far from making the Bible less relevant, understanding the situation helps us make it more relevant (sometimes even uncomfortably relevant). It forces us to see that the people with whom Paul dealt were not simply morally unstable troublemakers; they were real people with real agendas like ourselves.

RELEVANCE TO ALL CULTURES

Most of the book God gave us was not directly dictated in the first person (i.e., the Bible does not read as if God were saying: “I’m God, and I am speaking directly to everybody in all times”). Some Bible readers have always wanted the Bible to read that way and like to pretend that this is the proper way to interpret it. But God chose to inspire the Bible in a different form: he inspired his prophets and witnesses to address real situations in their own day as an example for generations that would follow ([1 Cor. 10:11](#)). If Paul was inspired to write a letter to the Corinthians, whether people today like it or not, that letter is a letter to the *Corinthians*, just as it claims to be.

God gave us eternal principles, but he gave them to us in specific concrete forms, addressing real situations. He gave us those principles in the form of illustrations, to show us how those principles work out in real-life situations, because he wanted to make sure that we would apply them to our own real-life situations. Thus, for example, [Deut. 22:8](#) (“build a parapet around your roof, lest you incur bloodguilt if someone falls off”) still teaches us concern for our neighbor’s safety, even though most of us no longer have flat roofs on which we entertain our neighbors. The moral today might be, “Make your colleague fasten her seatbelt when she rides with you to work.” The example might be different today, but the point is the same; yet until we understand the original example, we cannot recognize the real point we must reapply in our own culture.

We may not like the fact that God gave us his Word in concrete form, because in our culture we are used to thinking abstractly. But in many cultures people think concretely and can read a story or a conversation and learn much more about God than we can learn from reading a series of abstractions. Those cultures are more attuned to the Bible that God chose to give the world than we are. Much of the Bible is historical narrative (i.e., true stories), and much of it is letter or prophecy directed to specific situations. Thus its format is more like a conversation than an

abstract philosophical treatise. Even abstract principles like those in Proverbs are expressed in specific cultural forms; for instance, some Egyptian wisdom sayings use almost the same wording as their Hebrew counterparts, because that was how people in that part of the ancient Near East expressed their wisdom at that time.

If God had not chosen to give us the Bible in concrete, cultural forms, what forms would He have used? Is there a neutral language, a universal one not bound by any culture? (Some North Americans seem to think that English is neutral; but had the Normans not ruled English territory for some time, *we* would not speak English now ourselves.) As one scholar put it, if God had just spoken to us in a cosmic wind, how many of us would have understood him? Or as one cartoon put it, if God had revealed the details of quantum physics and the theory of relativity to Moses, instead of “In the beginning God created,” would Moses or the Hebrew language have been able to communicate that data to his contemporaries? God is too practical and too concerned about us understanding Him to try to communicate with us like that. He worked through all the different cultures—from early in the Old Testament to totally different cultural situations in the New Testament—to communicate His Word.

BEYOND OUR OWN CULTURAL STARTING POINTS

Indeed, God is so involved in the multicultural matrix of history that He did not disdain to step into it Himself. The ultimate enculturation of His Word occurred when the Word became flesh, as the prologue of John ([John 1:1-18](#)) declares. Jesus did not come as a cultureless, amorphous, genderless human. He came as a first-century Jewish man, with unique chromosomes and physical features, just as each of the rest of us is unique. His cultural specificity does not mean that He was not *for* all of us; it means instead that He could better identify with all of us as a *particular* person—by being like we are—than by being a general, faceless person who compromised any real humanity for an indistinctive “neutrality.” Many Gnostics, who reinterpreted Christianity in later centuries, tried to deny that Jesus really came “in the flesh,” but the apostle John is clear that this point is the dividing line between genuine and phony Christians: genuine Christians believe that our Lord Jesus came in the flesh, as a particular historical person ([1 John 4:1-6](#)). Those who insist on understanding Jesus—or the other people in the Bible—apart from that historical particularity are treading on the outer fringes of Christian faith.

One of the main emphases in the book of Acts is that the gospel is for all peoples and all cultures. The first Christians were surprised to learn that the gospel was for Gentiles as well as Jews, but throughout the book of Acts the Spirit of God was revealing this multicultural mission to the church. That was God’s program from the beginning: missions from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth. Those like Stephen and Paul, who already knew more than one culture, were the most ready to participate in God’s plan. People who assume that God reveals Himself only in one culture (their own) are a couple of millennia behind on their Bible reading! In Acts we find God purposely revealing Himself to people of all cultures in terms they understood; thus Paul preaches one way in a synagogue in [Acts 13](#), another way to rural farmers in [Acts 14](#) and still another way to Greek philosophers in [Acts 17](#). The same Paul related to specific issues of ancient culture in his letters, and we cannot ignore those issues if we wish to know what Paul’s point was.

When Paul fought for Gentiles to have the right to come to Christ as Gentiles, he was fighting cultural bigots who (in that case) said that one had to be Jewish to be a first-rate Christian. They read the Bible in the light of their own culture and tradition and thought that everybody else should read it the same way they did. They had quite a lot of good company,

unfortunately, because their problem was not their Jewishness—Paul was just as Jewish as they were. The problem was that they read the Bible in light of their own cultural assumptions, which is the same problem we all have unless we train ourselves to see beyond those assumptions. Our own backgrounds and the information we start with affect the categories and associations we bring to a text—consciously or unconsciously. By contrast, getting more of the ancient readers’ backgrounds helps us to read texts more as they would have read them.

Missionaries today face problems similar to Paul’s. (For instance, compare the graphic examples in Don Richardson, *Peace Child* [Ventura, Calif.: Regal Books, 1974], and case studies in more technical works from various perspectives, like Marvin K. Mayers, *Christianity Confronts Culture: A Strategy for Cross-Cultural Evangelism* [Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1974]; Charles H. Kraft, *Christianity in Culture: A Study in Dynamic Biblical Theologizing in Cross-Cultural Perspective* [Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1979]; Louis J. Luzbetak, *The Church and Cultures: An Applied Anthropology for the Religious Worker* [Techny, Ill.: Divine Word, 1970; Pasadena, Calif.: William Carey, 1976].) If we read the gospel in the light of our own culture, we are in danger of mixing our culture in with the Bible and then imposing our new concoction on someone else as a condition of being right with God. For instance, missionaries were the first people to introduce divorce into some African societies, thinking that they were creating a remedy for polygamy. They refused to accept these African converts as full Christians until they got rid of their extra wives. In so doing, they not only introduced a new sin and social upheaval into these societies, but they imposed a condition on these new believers that the Bible itself does not demand. Polygamous marriages do not appear in a healthy light in the Bible, and I am not suggesting that polygamy is good. But neither should we simply break up polygamous marriages already in existence, without thought for the husbands, wives, children and others involved. Nowhere does the Bible advocate breaking up such marriages already in existence.

Most missionaries today recognize that Christians in different cultures can learn from one another. Different parts of the Bible appeal to different groups. One part of the Bible unclear to us may be clear to some Shona Christians in Zimbabwe. Or a reading that one group thinks is clear may be a misinterpretation of the text. Hindus who read Jesus’ teaching about being “born again” as a reference to reincarnation have missed Jesus’ meaning because they have read it from the standpoint of Hindu assumptions. But if we start merely from our own culture’s assumptions, we stand as much chance of misreading the Bible as reincarnationist Hindus do. (Hopefully none of us would err so far as the man who suspected that when the Bible called Herod a “fox,” it meant that his subjects thought him attractive.)

Some devoutly evangelical Christians in certain Asian and African cultures still venerate their ancestors, and North American Christians generally consider such veneration as pagan. But we North Americans often explain away texts like “You can’t serve both God and mammon,” and “covetousness is idolatry,” so we can live the way we want. Christians in other cultures generally consider our culture’s materialism as pagan too. Our cultural blinders let us see other people’s sins more easily than our own, and only reading the Scriptures the way the writers were inspired to intend them—rather than the way the Scriptures fit what we already believe—will challenge our own cultural misconceptions.

What common ground can we, as Christian interpreters from a variety of cultures, have? If we want an objective way to interpret the Bible, and if we believe that the writers were inspired to address specific issues of their day, then we need to try to find out what issues they were addressing. To some extent we can figure that out from the texts themselves. We do not have to know what women’s head coverings looked like in Corinth to figure out from [1 Cor. 11](#) that the question of whether women should wear head coverings was an issue there. Further, some texts can give us background for other texts; for instance, 2 Kings tells us what was going on when Isaiah was prophesying to the people of Israel, and so helps us understand the book of Isaiah.

But such background is not always enough. This is true not only of so-called problem passages but also of passages that we assume we interpret correctly. For instance, when we read that the good seed bears fruit a hundred times over ([Matthew 13:23](#)), only if we know the average size of an ancient Palestinian harvest do we understand how abundant such a harvest would be. The charge against Jesus posted above the cross, “The King of the Jews,” makes a lot more sense if we recognize that the Romans were very nervous about so-called prophets in Judea whom some people thought were messianic kings, because some of these “prophets” had already stirred up a great deal of trouble for Rome.

Further, culture affects even which books strike us as easier to understand; different parts of the Bible appeal to different cultures. Any reader of Leviticus and 1 Timothy could tell that the forms of writing used in these documents are quite different. Leviticus’s hygiene codes have parallels in Hittite and other ancient Near Eastern texts; Leviticus was addressing issues of its day. But the subject matter of Leviticus would not have even interested most Greco-Roman readers by the time 1 Timothy was written, whereas all of 1 Timothy’s themes and literary forms have parallels in Greco-Roman literature. To modern Western readers, most of the New Testament is much more inviting than Leviticus; but in many cultures, laws concerning what is clean and unclean are important, and Christians in these cultures have taken more interest in some parts of the Bible that we tend to ignore. Of course, we have theological reasons for saying that we do not need to obey Leviticus literally today; but if all Scripture is inspired and profitable for teaching ([2 Tim. 3:16](#)), it must have some purpose. The question is just, What is that purpose? What point was God communicating to his people? Cultural background helps us figure out what the purpose was.

OBJECTIONS TO USING CULTURAL BACKGROUND

Although everyone knows that the Bible was written in a different time and culture, and most people take that fact into account when they read particular passages, not everyone is consistent in using cultural background. Of course, not all passages in the Bible require much background; our culture still has some features in common with the culture of the Bible. But if we do not know anything about the original culture, we may sometimes assume that we do not need any background for a passage when in fact it would dramatically affect the way we read the text. Even though most people recognize the need to pay attention to cultural background, some people become nervous at the suggestion that they need it.

Some Christians occasionally object that using cultural and historical background is dangerous. “After all,” they complain, “you can use culture to twist the Bible around to mean anything.” People who raise this objection could cite one of the arguments raised by some apologists for a gay church with whom I have talked. Some gay theological writers claim that Paul argues against homosexual behavior only because at that time it was normally associated with idolatry; thus they suggest that Paul would not oppose homosexual behavior today. With no disrespect intended for these writers, the problem in this case is that the cultural background these writers give is wrong: homosexual behavior was widespread among the Greeks and was practiced by some Romans, and it was by no means specifically linked with idolatry. Although this example is a good argument against *making up* cultural background, it is no reason not to use genuine cultural background.

One might keep in mind that people have been twisting the Bible quite ably for a long time without using any cultural background; it is doubtful that a little historical study would make matters any worse. *Ignoring* the original culture and so reading it in light of our own is a far graver threat to most of us. (For example, the “Aryan Christians” under the Nazis

“demythologized” biblical history to make it non-Jewish and hence more palatable to Nazi tastes. This is an extreme example of ignoring original historical context and reinterpreting the Bible to fit one’s own culture. It differs from most reinterpretations today only in that the Nazis did it intentionally.)

A more common objection, which I raised myself a decade and a half ago, is that assuming the importance of cultural background might take the Bible out of the hands of nonscholars. At that time I rejected the use of cultural information so thoroughly that I insisted that women should wear head coverings in church, and I even tried to get up enough nerve to engage in some of Paul’s “holy kissing.” Fortunately, I deferred the kissing idea till I could resolve the issue (I say “fortunately” because someone would have probably hit me). I finally did resolve it, and the more I have studied the world of the Bible, the more I have come to realize that God was being relevant in communicating His Word the way He did. He gave us concrete examples of how His ways address real human situations, not just abstract principles that we could memorize without pondering how to apply them to our lives. If we wish to follow God’s example of being relevant, we need to understand what these teachings meant in their original culture before we try applying them to our own.

Cultural background does not take the Bible out of people’s hands; it is when we *ignore* cultural context that we take the Bible out of people’s hands. To hand people the symbols in Revelation with no explanation of how such symbols were commonly used in the ancient world is like handing the Gospel of Luke in Greek to somebody who cannot read Greek and saying, “Since this is the Word of God, you must understand and explain it.” Only a trained scholar or a complete fool would have any idea what to do with it (and the fool’s idea would be wrong).

TRANSLATING BOTH LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

Some scholars before the time of Luther decided that the church hierarchy of their day was wrong to keep the Bible in Latin. Most people could not understand the Bible unless scholars translated it for them into their own language. Some of these scholars were martyred for their conviction that the Bible must be available in common people’s language; Luther, who translated the Bible into the German of his day, barely escaped this same fate. The best way scholars could help people was not by saying, “Translations are not available for the common people; therefore we take the Bible out of their hands if we say they actually needed such translations all along.” The better approach was for such scholars to say, “Translations are not available for the people; therefore we will put the Bible into their hands by doing some hard work and making translations.”

Translating can be difficult, as anybody who has studied a foreign language can testify. Some words do not translate directly in a single term; sometimes a word or phrase can have several different meanings, and the translator has to decide which meaning is best for a particular context. There is also more than one way to express an idea in English once one decides what it means. Those of us who have read the whole New Testament in Greek can testify that the same problems exist in the text of the New Testament Greek as we try to translate the text. A random check of any passage in two or three Bible translations will verify the difficulty: no two translations will match exactly (otherwise, of course, they wouldn’t be separate translations).

When Bible translators go into other cultures they face difficult questions regarding the meanings of words and phrases. For instance, some translators had to explain “Behold, the Lamb of God!” ([John 1:29](#)) for a culture that had no sheep and thus no words for lambs. The culture did, however, have pigs, and used them for sacrifices. But if they translated it “Behold, the Pig of God!” (which does not ring nicely to our American ears, and certainly would have offended

ancient Jewish sensibilities even more), what would happen when they had to translate passages in the Old Testament where pigs were unclean but sheep were not? Perhaps they could best solve the issue by putting a footnote in the text and by translating with some combination of words that communicated the concept as best as possible in their language, like “hairy pig.” Old Testament translators have had to resort to similar methods when rendering the Hebrew words for different kinds of locusts into English ([Joel 1:4](#); [Joel 2:25](#)). English does not have enough different words for locusts to match all the Hebrew terms, perhaps because the many varieties of locusts were more of an issue for the Israelites than they are for most of us.

But there is a bigger problem than just the words in the text in front of us. What happens when Paul makes an allusion to a whole concept that was important in his day? How do we translate that? Or do we just mention the issue in a footnote? The allusion that Paul makes is part of his meaning, yet sometimes even those who are otherwise competent to translate the text cannot catch the allusions Paul makes.

Some Christian readers during and before the Reformation period tried to figure out the situations that biblical texts were addressing. It was good that many scholars recognized the need to read the New Testament in the context of its own world, rather than viewing it as if it had been written in German or English directly to readers in the Renaissance or some other period. They were not, however, the majority. Most readers still read too much of their own culture into the text, just as we do when we fail to look at it in the light of the original culture. Medieval and Renaissance intellectuals did the same thing; most of us have seen paintings of biblical scenes with Europeans in European dress filling all the roles of the biblical dramas. They were painted as if most of the biblical characters were Europeans, even though we know that few biblical characters were Europeans, and none was northern European.

Fortunately, some knowledge about the ancient world was still available in the Reformation period. Many scholars from medieval days up through the nineteenth century were so competent in the Greek classics that they could catch all sorts of allusions to Greek customs in the New Testament. The problem is that many Greek customs had changed from the time those classics had been written to the time of the New Testament.

Another danger in assuming that all the background to the New Testament was classical Greek may be illustrated from the first few centuries that the New Testament was in circulation. The Gnostics often read the New Testament more in the light of Plato than in the light of the Judaism from which it emerged, and this was the source of many of their doctrines which other Christians rejected as heretical. Plato did have some influence on the world of the New Testament, but he was hardly the most important influence.

Some writers, like John Lightfoot in the 1600s, challenged the predominant classical grid through which the New Testament was being read and offered Jewish texts as New Testament background. Lightfoot bent over backward to cover himself against the attacks of anti-Semites, explaining at some length that he indeed thought these Jewish texts were unspiritual, but that the work was necessary if one were to understand the New Testament.

Today, when anti-Semitism is less popular than in Lightfoot’s day, it is more obvious to us that the Greek texts Lightfoot’s contemporaries were using were much more pagan than the texts for which he found it necessary to apologize to his readers. Today it is generally recognized that Judaism forms the *primary* context of the New Testament. Its basic, broad context is Greco-Roman society, but Jewish people had lived in and adapted to Greco-Roman culture, paving the way for the first Christians’ witness in the context of pagan culture. Further, the first Christians were Jewish, and outsiders perceived Christianity as a form of Judaism. Moreover, the earliest Christians themselves saw their faith in Jesus as the true fulfillment of the Old Testament hope and hence saw themselves as faithful to Judaism. (Indeed, the New Testament writers affirm that only Christians were faithful to biblical Judaism; although some other Jewish groups also

claimed to be the faithful remnant of Israel, these groups do not seem to have survived into subsequent centuries.) Both the specific Jewish and the broader Greco-Roman contexts of the New Testament are crucial for its interpretation, just as a good translation is.

THE WORK THAT REMAINS

Christians, especially those most committed to cross-cultural missions, have always recognized the importance of reading the Bible in the light of its original cultural context. But while translations are available to most Christians, the cultural “footnotes” are not. Many helpful commentaries do exist, but no single commentary provides easy access to all the requisite background in one or two volumes. The more volumes in a work, the less accessible it becomes to most readers. Only a small percentage of people who read the Bible today have full sets of commentaries, fewer of them would have access to adequate cultural information in each of those commentaries, and fewer still can regularly take time to sort through them.

Many earlier biblical scholars gave their lives to translate the Bible and so to begin to make it intelligible to whoever wanted to read it; but the work has never been completed. Many Bible readers still have very limited access to the background. Although many tasks demand the attention of Christian biblical scholars, this is surely one of the most important.

The need to understand the cultural context of the Bible should be as clear today as the need for translation was in the Reformation period. In our industrial, Western society, we are moving farther and farther from any vestige of biblical roots; our culture is becoming more and more alienated from the cultures in which the Bible was written and our young people are finding God’s Book more and more foreign. It does no good to lament that most people will not visit our churches and learn our Christian language. God has called us to be missionaries to our world, so we must make the Word of God intelligible to our culture. We must not simply read it; we must understand it and explain it. We must explain what the writers meant when they wrote it to cultures long since changed or vanished, and how its message applies to us today.

Most of the church in North America today seems asleep to its mission, largely because we have not allowed the Word of God to speak to us in all its radical power. We have allowed it to be a foreign book, and allowed the people it addresses to be a people far removed from our own lives. The tragedy is that the stakes have never been as high as they are in our generation: the world boasts a population five times as high as it did one and a half centuries ago, when the church was stirring to its missions call in another great move of the Spirit. Now, with millions of international students, visitors and immigrants moving into our own world here in the West and other regions with high concentrations of Christians, the opportunities are greater than ever before, as is the need. Not only can we send out many of our number as laborers for the harvest; all the rest of us must labor for the harvest here. We cannot afford to sleep.

God is making more than one important demand to His church, but one crucial demand is that we understand His Word. In a culture full of Bibles and teachings, those who value the Bible’s authority still need to know and understand it better. Pastors, usually overworked, rarely have the time to investigate all the necessary resources to acquire background for each text on which they preach. Yet the need to understand God’s message and to awaken the whole church to His call so we can fulfill the commission our Lord has given us is urgent.

Among the resources God provides for that task are specialists gifted in the body of Christ as teachers who can provide various valid insights to help us understand and apply God’s Word. Just as missionaries must learn a language and a culture to communicate God’s message to another culture, we need servants of God on the other end, learning the language and culture in which God’s Book was written. Such teachers labored in the past to provide translations and

labor today to provide other tools to make the treasures of the Bible more widely accessible to all its readers.

That certain segments of the secular academic community privately or publicly deride those who devote scholarship to God's glory or want their conclusions to be of practical value in the world makes it difficult for some scholars, who must answer to such critics, to write for the church. That some Christians have connected research with impiety does not help, either. But a long list of Christian scholars throughout history demonstrates that research can make the biblical message more available—scholars from Justin, Jerome and Augustine, to the monks who led the medieval universities on which modern universities are based, and later Luther, Calvin, Wesley and others. Charles Finney and Jonathan Edwards, leading figures in America's Great Awakenings, were academicians as well as devout servants of God. Likewise, many scholars today have pursued scholarship because this was God's call for them. Many of the tools they developed have aided the preparation of this commentary.

But the biggest task does not fall to scholars alone. All believers are called to hear God's voice in the Scriptures, to start with what is already clear and to go from there. One need not be a scholar to read passages of the Bible in context or to read the cultural footnotes to the Bible that a commentary like this one is meant to provide. May God give us all grace to do our part, to obey Christ our Lord and to reveal him to the needy people of our generation.

—Bible Background Commentary