Faith in Context:
Why Culture and Christian History Matter

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On June 10, 2026, during its meeting in Orlando, the Southern Baptist Convention voted that cooperating SBC churches may not "affirm, appoint or endorse a woman serving in the office or function of pastor/elder/overseer." This vote passed with 75% support from thousands of local church delegates—*some of them women*!

There are arguably four passages in the entire Bible that prohibit women from leading men in an ecclesial or domestic context. How many biblical texts are there that support the contrary? Five times as many! Exodus 15:20-21 (Miriam); Judges 4:4-5 (Deborah); 2 Kings 22:14-20 (Huldah); Micah 6:4 (re. Miriam); Esther; Romans 16:1-2 (Phoebe); Romans 16:3 (Priscilla); Romans 16:7 (Junia); Acts 16:14-15, 50 (Lydia); Acts 18:26 (Priscilla); Acts 21:8-9 (the four unmarried women prophets); 1 Corinthians 1:11 (Chloe); Colossians 4:15 (Nympha); Philemon 1:2 (Apphia); and that's not even all of them! So how is it that in the year 2026, we are still arguing about whether women are allowed to have a voice?

Northminster Church has a long history of welcoming women pastors and preachers, and that is not because you are reading a different Bible than the Southern Baptists. You're reading the *same* Bible, but you are reading it *differently*.

The debate over women's roles is not new information for any of you, but it is worth highlighting and foregrounding because it is exemplary for our purposes—as we prepare our hearts and minds for the Stricklin Lectures. Since this issue and the opposing views on it reflect not only the Bible's inherent ambivalence, but how biblical interpretation is as influenced by cultural conditioning, implicit assumptions, and personal biases as it is by faith and a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, if not more so! Even as we each read from a particular location and are not immune to the limitations of our context, experience, and education, the Bible itself was written from a particular location, each passage penned by a human and community, who–divinely inspired as they may have been–had their own cultural constraints and visibility gaps; and that's before the innumerable revisions and redactions over the course of the Bible's centuries of transmission and translation. The Bible passed through too many hands to identify all the fingerprints, which is precisely why we must read it through the eyes of faith *and* the lens of cultural and ideological criticism by asking at every turn, "Whose interests are served by this text, belief, or cultural product?"

In the weeks leading up to the Stricklin Lectures, you will spend time reflecting on the relationship between context, culture, Christianity, and colonialism in preparation for this year's lecture series, "The Gospel Decolonized: Deconstructing Christianity to Save Faith" with me, Dr. A. Paige Rawson. For some, this topic may feel exciting. For others,

it may feel uncomfortable or even threatening, or you might find yourself experiencing all three! This is all understandable. Regardless of where you find yourself and what you feel, I invite you to acknowledge any emerging emotions, inquiries, and ideas without judgment, and to embrace this all as part of the learning, and growing, process. All growth requires some sort of struggle and discomfort, but I am hoping you find consolation in the reality that we are in this together!

As we embark upon these preparatory conversations, I'd like for you to pause and consider the following question, which may not be new to many of you but is well worth revisiting:

What if following Jesus not only requires our examination of *what* we believe, but *how* we believe? That is, our implicit assumptions, cultural conditioning, and the interpretive lenses through which we understand and believe.

This is, of course, not a new question. Believers have wrestled with this same quandary for centuries, and we find the evidence of this struggle in the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation. In the Old Testament, there are texts prohibiting the worship of "foreign idols," laws against exogamy, and the fear of cultural, political, and physical threat from the Canaanites, Philistines, and Babylonians (the present-day Lebanese, Palestinians, Jordanians, Syrians, etc.). When we turn to the New Testament, there are similar concerns about paganism as well as Roman and Greek influence. The emphasis placed on purity and separatism in the Bible indicates not that the people of Israel were immune to cultural influence, but that they—like any of us—were amenable to surrounding cultures and came from their own particular cultural context, which indubitably influenced their understanding of God, faith, humanity, community, morality, ethics, justice, and the law.

The book of Genesis alone offers multiple perspectives on creation and the origin story of a people who called themselves "Israel." And, like any culture, religion, or text, Israel did not emerge *ex nihilio*. The people and their faith evolved over time within a diverse region, and they retained characteristics, philosophies, and traditions from the surrounding cultures. This is why biblical scholars, anthropologists, and historians of Ancient Mesopotamian cultures and civilizations consider the people of Israel to be a composite people. (In fact, scholars of the Hebrew Bible believe the texts' preoccupation with separatism betrays the difficulty "Israel" had in distinguishing itself from the Canaanites, Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, and even the Philistines [Palestinians]).

On that note, it is important to remember that the Bible itself—the only surviving text with a recorded history of the people of Israel, Jesus, and the apostolic mission—is a document of faith and a cultural production. While scholars indubitably consider the Bible to be a historical document, it does not and was never meant to reflect the past in a historically accurate or factual way. Written and redacted over thousands of years (if you count the most recent interventions, iterations, and translations of the text), we have no

access to the Bible in its original form. What we can know for certain, however, is that the Bible emerged from oral people in a culture and cultures that had no conception of or need for literal, scientific reports, and that the very languages in which the Bible was originally pinned are rife with polysemy. When words have multiple meanings, transcribers and translators have great leeway; and this is especially true for Hebrew. For example, the Hebrew word *barak*, whose root is found around 400 times in the Bible, can mean both *blessing* and *curse*, and the Hebrew root *pakad* can mean *to appoint*, *visit*, *muster*, *care for*, *entrust, miss*, and, also, *to punish*! Interpreters derive connotation from context, but the very meaning of a passage can be easily misconstrued and manipulated when the context is unclear. (And imagine the exegetical and eisegetical liberties taken across the almost 1000 different translations in over 770 languages!)

The collection of folklore, narratives, law, poetry, prophecy, apocalyptic visions, and epistles function as a library, a communal code, a theological catalogue, a map and means to identity production, but do not provide accurate historical accounts meant to be interpreted and applied literally. (I always tell my students the gospels are a great example of this, since they often provide very different perspectives [accounts, details, and quotes] of the same story. None are "wrong," they were just unconcerned with historicity.) It was not actually until the late 19th and early 20th centuries that biblical literalism and the notion of biblical inerrancy emerged in the work of conservative Protestant scholars in response to the (threat of the) so-called Scientific Revolution and Age of Enlightenment. The biblical archives are a wondrous window into the past, and the absence of historical accuracy does not negate the sacred significance of the Bible. It offers us incredible insights into the power that context and culture have in the formation of faith, theology, community, and identity. On that note, let's continue our exploration of the peoples and cultures of *the good book*!

According to the New Testament, the first followers of Jesus were Jewish people whose ancestors were a composite people that called themselves "Israel" ("God struggles" or "one who struggles with God") after Jacob, reflecting their theo-cultural narrative. The original disciples of Jesus, then, worshiped in Jewish ways, observed Jewish customs, and understood God's story through Israel's history. As you will likely recall, we do find a few examples in the Gospels of non-Jewish (Gentile) followers in the Syrophoenician [Canaanite] woman, the Samaritan woman, the Roman centurion, and the Gerasene man. (See Mark 7:24–30; Matthew 15:21–28; John 4:1–42; Matthew 8:5–13; Luke 7:1–10; Mark 5:1-20; Luke 8:26-39; and Matthew 8:28-34.) And, after Jesus' death, as the gospel spread throughout the Mesopotamian region, and to other cultures, an important inquiry emerges: Must a Gentile become culturally Jewish in order to become a follower of Christ? We find this quandary in Acts and some of Paul's letters, and the apostles' emphatic and radical response is, "no!" (See Romans 11:17-24; Acts 11:1-18; Acts 15:1-31; and Galatians 2:11-14.) While this was hard for many Jewish Christ followers to embrace initially, Gentiles were welcomed into the family of God without first becoming

Jewish precisely because of the inclusive nature of the gospel. The gospel belongs to no single culture and, therefore, does not require cultural conformity or compliance.

But what is the gospel? What does it mean to follow Jesus as Christ? Why is this good news? And why would non-Jewish people want to follow the teachings of a Palestinian Jewish peasant or/as Christ?

The gospel, or "good news" (*euangelion* in Greek), at core is the message that God saves humanity from sin (ἁμαρτία, *to miss the mark*) through the resurrection of Jesus as the Christ (χριστός, *anointed one*). (See Mark 1:1; Romans 1:1-3, 16; and 1 Corinthians 15:3-4) Now, when we consider the gospel in its original contexts, languages, and through the lens of orality (not to mention the influence of culture, time, and individual bias), it becomes easy to understand why there are so many varied understandings of the gospel. It also becomes less important whether the Bible need be literal to be true. (Or whether the interpretation of Jesus' resurrection as literal is necessary for an authentic faith.) Is that not just the influence of modern "post-Enlightenment" Western European culture upon one's interpretive lens?

Another question to consider is whether or not accepting Jesus as the Christ means that a believer must also consider him to be the one true God, particularly when Jesus was himself a Palestinian Jew who never claimed to be God because any human, no matter how holy, claiming to be divine is blasphemy and, therefore, a sin for a Jewish person. Equally as interesting, from an anthropological lens, is that the story of a divine savior being resurrected to save his people is not a unique narrative, nor was Jesus the first. In fact, we find this same motif in the sacred texts of Hinduism (Krishna), Egypt (Horus and Osiris), Persia (Mithras), Syria/Phoenicia (Thammuz), and Mesoamerica (Quetzalcoatl), to name a few. These resonances reveal a common thread among cultures around the world and across time that is worth honoring and exploring, and maybe even better help us understand the global appeal of the gospel and Jesus as Christ.

While the core message of the gospel has remained the same, history has revealed its ability to take root within various cultures around the world. Its dissemination reveals something profound about the nature of the gospel itself. Namely, that it is versatile, translatable, and universally relevant. On the other hand, as we will address in mid-September, these same characteristics have also made the gospel easily appropriated for non-liberative, exclusionary, and harmful means. Throughout history, Christianity has travelled around the world—a process that was expedited by the relationship of imperialism, colonial expansion, and the Christian mission (beginning around the early 4th century with the Roman Emperor Constantine).

As Christianity spread into Africa, Asia, Europe, and the Americas, believers have expressed their faith through different languages, art, architecture, music, customs, and ways of thinking, believing, and practicing. Some of these expressions reflected the

beauty of the gospel in new contexts; others reflected the assumptions and limitations of the cultures that carried it. And, quite often, the expansion of Christianity and Western colonization also entailed the condemnation, appropriation, and annihilation of indigenous peoples, their cultures, traditions, histories, and practices.

Though this is a difficult truth to confront, it is important that we acknowledge the ambivalent legacy of Christianity and the deployment of "the good news" for bad. While we all reside in the same country, and many of you attend the same churches, grew up in the same community, and went to the same schools, each of us is an individual with unique experiences that influence how we think, live, and act. We also each read the Bible from somewhere, our own social location. None of us approaches the Bible as a blank slate. We read as people shaped by families, traditions, education, economics, nationality, race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, language, ability, neurotype, and personal experience. These influences do not prevent us from connecting with the divine, but they *do* shape the questions we ask, the passages to which we pay particular attention, and the assumptions we might often overlook; this is true for us and for believers across time and around the world.

Recognizing this is not an admission that truth is relative as much as it is an acknowledgment that finite people can only access God's infinite truth from a particular vantage point. This might be the main reason the global Church is a blessing, and why we benefit from the proliferation of biblical interpretations, like African and Asian Biblical Hermeneutics, Black and Latin American Liberation Theologies, Womanist and Mujerista Theologies, as well as biblical interpretations from Queer Theory & Disability Studies, to name a few. Believers from other cultures and perspectives often notice aspects of Scripture that you and I might have missed, just as we will notice things they may overlook.

In 1 Corinthians 12, the Apostle Paul compares the Church to a body with many members. No one part can say to another, "I don't need you;" perhaps this is true not only within communities but also with regards to cultures. We need diverse cultural perspectives because no culture could ever perfectly reflect the beloved community. And herein lies an important distinction: there is a difference between the gospel and cultural expressions of Christianity.

The gospel, at core, is God's good news of redeeming love and abundant life, expressed in Jesus Christ. However, our interpretations and expressions of that gospel—our worship styles, traditions, values, assumptions, theological emphases, and political instincts—are always shaped by culture; that is unavoidable. Sometimes those expressions reveal the beauty of the gospel and sometimes they obscure it. The blessing (Hebrew, *barak*) of the good news has always been accompanied by a curse (*barak*), a poison (Greek, *pharmakon*) and a remedy (*pharmakon*) simultaneously; and this has been true in every

era of Christian history. While we will explore this idea more together during the Stricklin Lectures, I'd like for you to pause to consider a few examples before continuing.

Churches defended enslavement with Scripture, and they opposed it. (A pharmakon we know too well as Baptists.) Christians justified segregation with the Bible and they dismantled it. Believers have resisted scientific discoveries, and they have pioneered them. They have voted against women in leadership and have advocated for it. People of the Christian faith support ICE and they condemn it, they are pro-Israel and they are pro-Palestine. Looking back on some of these examples, we may wonder how sincere believers could have failed to recognize what now seems obvious to us; other examples may still perplex us. Perhaps future generations will ask similar questions about us.

I wonder if the possibility (and inevitability) of their moral clarity on these issues might not fill us with shame, but, instead, invite us into humility. As a recovering Southern Baptist, to admit the constraints of my own knowledge and perspective, and to not feel ashamed of those limitations, has been a struggle and an area in which I am still growing. It has brought me much comfort to learn that research indicates intellectual humility is directly correlated to intelligence and emotional maturity. The smarter we are, the more willing we are to admit our limitations, to learn, and to grow. What a huge relief to know that the measure of Christian maturity is not omniscience, and that faith has no business with or investment in certainty. If maturity in the Christian faith is evident in anything, from what we find in the Bible, it appears to be found in one's capacity for growth!

As we enter this upcoming series, perhaps the most important question is not, "Will I agree with everything I hear?" It is highly likely that you will not, and that is a good thing. (Another thing that has been true of the church and present since its inception is disagreement.) A better question to ask ourselves may be, "Can I approach this with intellectual humility and be willing to listen, to learn, to share, and to grow?" (Okay, okay, so that's technically two questions, but they are intimately interconnected.)

Sometimes new data will confirm what we already believe, sometimes it will deepen what we know to be true, and sometimes it presents us with opportunities for reflection, correction, redirection, and resurrection—where our old ways of thinking, being, and believing die so new ones may emerge. Is this not the essence of discipleship? If, as Jesus asserted, "the truth will set [us] free," does that not require willingness to look at the truth—about the past, history, Bible, Christianity, and ourselves—and to grow from new information and newfound realizations? As Lauryn Hill so astutely put it, "Anything that isn't growing, is dead." And as much as my daddy claims, "you can't teach an old dog new tricks," I know that growth can happen at any age because, as my granny showed me, "where there's a will, there's a way!"

My hope and our desire in the lectures, and the conversations leading up to them, is not to diminish our faith or confidence in Jesus, Christianity, the Bible, or the church, but to

distinguish ever more clearly between them and the cultural kit within which we have encountered them. If the love of God is accessible to every people and every nation, then no one culture can claim to embody that love, or the divine, perfectly. And this is very good news precisely because it means the gospel is always already larger than our assumptions, more magnificent than our traditions, and capable of speaking fresh words of grace and truth to every culture—including our own.

As we prepare for these conversations, may we come with open Bibles, open hearts, and confidence that the Spirit, who has guided the Church throughout history, is still leading us into the truth.

Questions for Reflection:

Week 1 (August 15):

1. Can you think of something Christians once believed was "obviously biblical" that most churches no longer believe today? What about in your own life? What changed the church's stance? What changed your opinion?
2. What are some examples of issues on which the church is still divided? What, from your perspective, is that division based upon?
3. How do you understand culture to influence the questions we ask of and about the Bible?

Week 2 (August 22):

4. If Christians from another country visited Northminster, what parts of your worship might seem more cultural to them? What are some practices in other churches you've attended that you now understand to be cultural?
5. When has learning from believers with different backgrounds, from different cultures or contexts, or with different viewpoints deepened your faith and understanding of Jesus, Christianity, and the church?
6. What emotions arise when someone suggests that our understanding of Christianity may have cultural limitations that inhibit us from seeing or acknowledging certain things? Why do you believe those emotions emerge?
7. What would faithful humility look like if we discovered that some of our assumptions come more from culture than the Bible or the life and teaching of Jesus?

Week 3 (August 30):

8. What are some of your favorite aspects of Christianity, the Bible, the church, and your faith? What has remained the same for you since you became a Christian?

9. What are some examples of how your own faith has been challenged by new perspectives, ideas, or information? In what ways did you change or grow?
10. What is one belief you inherited from Christianity that was harmful to you, to others, or in some way? In what ways have you reimagined or even resurrected those harmful parts of Christianity?

Week 4 (September 5):

Faith is personal and individual, but it is also cultural and communal. In the week leading up to the Stricklin Lectures, set aside some time to write out your faith story through a socio-cultural lens. In other words, focus on the primary influences upon you and your faith from your childhood until now. As you look back, who and what have been the most influential elements? Who were the most influential people? What were the most significant events? Are there any points in your life when you were introduced to new people, cultures, ideas, or perspectives that changed you and led you to grow? Were there times you were challenged and not ready to grow? What are some of the ways you've grown that you are most proud of and what, if anything, would you pass on to the next generation of believers? (Feel free to reference and incorporate any of the questions from the past few weeks as you construct your personal faith narrative.)