

Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes

Brandon J. O'Brien on Cultural Blind Spots, Honest Questions, and Reading the Bible More Faithfully

Brandon J. O'Brien

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Program Summary

In this Tuesday edition of Mark & Friends, Mark Burns and Pastor Jason Schifo revisit a Classic Conversation with author Brandon J. O'Brien about Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes: Removing Cultural Blinders to Better Understand the Bible. Brandon explains that every reader approaches Scripture from within a culture, history, language, and set of assumptions. The problem is not that Scripture is unclear or defective, but that readers can unknowingly import meanings the biblical authors and original audiences did not share. His example from Jesus' words to Laodicea shows how historical and geographical context can challenge a familiar interpretation of 'hot,' 'cold,' and 'lukewarm.' The conversation then turns to Brandon's faith journey and the importance of honest questions. Rather than treating the Gospel as fragile, Brandon encourages Christians to trust God's character, admit the limits of their understanding, ask difficult questions faithfully, and remain on the lifelong journey of seeing Scripture and Jesus more clearly.

Key Takeaways

- Every Bible reader has a cultural context; none of us approaches Scripture from a completely neutral position.
- Cultural blinders do not mean Scripture is faulty; they mean my assumptions can distort or obscure what the biblical text communicates.
- Historical, geographical, linguistic, and social context can illuminate details that would have been obvious to the Bible's first hearers.
- Jesus' words about hot, cold, and lukewarm water in Revelation can be understood more clearly by considering Laodicea's local water situation.
- A familiar interpretation can feel biblical simply because I have heard it repeatedly; faithful study requires willingness to test assumptions.
- Translation itself reminds me that I am historically and linguistically distant from the original biblical texts.
- Acknowledging my cultural lenses is not a threat to biblical authority; it can help me submit more carefully to what Scripture actually says.
- Honest questions can strengthen faith when they are pursued with trust in God's character and a willingness to keep seeking truth.
- Christian mentors, teachers, pastors, and scholars can help shepherd difficult questions rather than shutting them down.
- The Gospel is precious but not fragile; Christians do not need to fear careful examination, ambiguity, or the lifelong process of growing in understanding.

Scripture References

Psalms 119:18, Revelation 3:14-22, 2 Timothy 4:2, Luke 24:13-35, Acts 17:11, 2 Timothy 2:15, Proverbs 18:13, Psalm 25:4-5, John 8:31-32, James 1:5

Quote of the Day

"The Gospel is precious, but it is not fragile."

Broadcast Notes

Mark opens with Psalm 119:18 as a fitting prayer whenever Christians open the Bible: 'Open my eyes.' He introduces Brandon J. O'Brien and Pastor Jason Schifo for a Classic Conversation about cultural assumptions in biblical interpretation. Brandon describes his own growing awareness that some aspects of the way he practiced Christianity were shaped as much by culture as by Scripture. He and co-author Randy Richards wanted to discuss culture and interpretation while maintaining a high view of Scripture as God's authoritative Word. Brandon's central illustration comes from Revelation 3 and the church at Laodicea. He explains that the common revivalist interpretation - hot means spiritually committed, cold means spiritually lost, and lukewarm means nominal - did not make sense to him because it would imply Jesus preferred people to be lost. Historical and geographical context, he says, points instead to hot and cold water both having useful purposes while lukewarm water was undesirable. The conversation broadens into the reality that no reader is culturally neutral, even when reading a translation in English. Brandon then shares his Christian upbringing, the influence of youth pastor Tad Thompson and professors such as Randy Richards, and his lifelong pattern of asking questions without abandoning faith in Jesus. The final section encourages Christians not to fear questions. Brandon distinguishes questioning his own understanding from distrusting God's character and describes Christianity as a lifelong journey with Jesus rather than a complete set of answers downloaded at the beginning.

Practical Applications

- Begin Bible reading with Psalm 119:18 and sincerely ask God to expose assumptions that keep me from seeing the text clearly.
- When a passage seems obvious, ask whether my interpretation comes from the text itself or from something I have repeatedly heard.
- Use a trustworthy study Bible, Bible dictionary, atlas, or commentary to learn the historical and cultural setting of a difficult passage.
- Remember that English words may carry associations that the original Hebrew or Greek words did not carry in exactly the same way.
- When another Christian from a different culture sees a passage differently, listen carefully before assuming my own reading is culturally neutral.
- Write down one difficult Bible question I have avoided and begin pursuing it prayerfully rather than suppressing it.
- Find trustworthy pastors, teachers, or mature Christians who welcome honest questions and remain anchored in Scripture.
- When I cannot resolve a question immediately, distinguish between doubting God's character and admitting the limits of my present understanding.
- Hold biblical truth as precious without treating it as fragile; careful study and honest questions need not threaten genuine faith.
- Approach Christian growth as a lifelong walk with Jesus in which understanding deepens over time.

Today's Challenge

Choose one familiar Bible passage this week and deliberately read it with fresh eyes. Pray Psalm 119:18, read the surrounding chapter, identify any cultural or historical details you may be assuming, and consult one trustworthy background resource. Write down one thing you saw differently or more clearly, and one question you still want to pursue.

Closing Prayer

Father, open my eyes that I may behold wondrous things from Your Word. Help me approach Scripture with confidence in its truth and humility about my own understanding. Show me where my culture, upbringing, traditions, preferences, or repeated assumptions may be shaping what I expect the Bible to say. Give me patience to study context carefully and wisdom to listen to faithful teachers and believers whose perspectives may help me see what I have missed. Keep me from fearing honest questions. When I do not understand, help me question my grasp of the truth without distrusting Your character. Thank You that the Gospel is precious but not fragile. Lead me on the lifelong journey of knowing Jesus more fully, reading Your Word more faithfully, and obeying what You show me. In Jesus' name, Amen.

About Today's Speaker

Brandon J. O'Brien is an author, teacher, and scholar whose work explores how culture, history, and assumptions influence the way Christians read Scripture and live out their faith. He co-authored *Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes* with E. Randolph Richards, inviting readers to recognize cultural blind spots while maintaining confidence in the authority of God's Word. Raised in a Christian home, Brandon credits mentors, pastors, and professors with encouraging him to ask honest questions while remaining captivated by Jesus. His academic work has included studies in religion, American life, and theology, and his teaching reflects a desire to make careful biblical interpretation both faithful and accessible.

About Today's Host

Mark Burns is General Manager of the WLJF Family of Stations and Great News Radio Network and host of *Mark & Friends*. For decades, Mark has been involved in Christian radio and ministry, with a heart for helping listeners know Jesus and grow deeper in God's Word. Through *Mark & Friends*, he brings pastors, ministry leaders, teachers, missionaries, authors, and everyday believers around the microphone for biblical teaching, testimony, conversation, and encouragement. His desire is that each program help listeners learn, grow, and faithfully live out their relationship with Jesus.

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We're glad you're here. We're glad you're here. Fellowship is sweeter,
knowing you're near. It's so good to see you. We hope that it's clear.

Everyone loves you. We're glad you're here. Reading from Psalm 119 verse 18.

Open my eyes that I may behold wondrous things out of your law. That was Psalm 119 verse 18. Providing a fitting prayer whenever we open the Bible.

Lord help me see what you truly want me to see. Oh, magnify the Lord with me. Let us exalt his name together.

It's Tuesday, September 1st, 2026. Hi, listening friend. Welcome to the Tuesday edition of *Mark & Friends* and another of our classic conversations.

Today we're reaching into the great news media archives for a thoughtful and still very timely conversation about the way we understand the Bible. Pastor Jason Schifo joins me in the studio, and our featured guest is author Brandon J. O'Brien. Brandon co-authored the book, *Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes, Removing Cultural Blindspots to Better Understand the Bible*.

Whenever we approach God's word, we naturally bring our upbringing, experiences, traditions, and cultural assumptions with us. Those influences do not necessarily mean that we are intentionally mishandling the scripture, but they can cause us to see something in a passage that its original hearers may not have seen, or to miss

something that would have been immediately apparent to them. In today's conversation, Brandon offers a fascinating example involving Jesus' words to the church at Laodicea about being hot, cold, or lukewarm.

We'll also consider why Christians should not be afraid to ask honest questions as we seek faithful answers from God's word. So, with the prayer of Psalm 119 still before us, open my eyes, let's join this Mark & Friends classic conversation with Brandon J. O'Brien and Pastor Jason Schifo. *Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes, Removing Cultural Blinders to Better Understand the Bible.*

So, Brandon, why did you write this, and what do you hope for the listener, for our readers to get when they read through this book? All right. Well, thank you, Mark and Jason, for having me along today, and I want to say thank you to the Great News Radio listeners for spending their time with us this morning, or this evening. You know, we wrote this book together for a couple of reasons.

My co-author Randy and I met when I was a student in college at Ouachita Baptist University. He was one of my professors, and we hit it off, struck up a good friendship then. And I was in sort of the process, having grown up in a Christian family and always having taken my faith very seriously, I was beginning to recognize that there were some aspects of my faith that were not Christian, strictly speaking, that were cultural, that they were sort of, you know, the way I practiced Christianity was influenced by where I was from and where I lived.

And part of that came from living with a roommate who was from Austria, who had a very different sense of certain, you know, behaviors or morals, or even the relationship with, say, faith and politics, that sort of thing. And so I've been on this journey for many years of trying to sort of figure out the way our culture influences the way we experience the Christian life and how we read the scriptures. And Randy was very helpful in sort of guiding me on that journey as a student.

And then as I entered the Academy in higher education and as a teacher, it became clear that this conversation had been going on for a while, often among more liberal scholars who take the role of culture to be determinative of religious experience, and the scriptures then kind of get second place in certain discussions. And so we wanted to take the opportunity to have this discussion about the role of culture and the way we read the Bible, but take the perspective of people who take the scriptures to be the Word of God and to be authoritative and inerrant, and yet recognize that we—not that the scriptures are to blame, but that we have sort of faulty lenses sometimes when we read through the lens of our culture. Can you give us an example? Like, I'm an American, so certainly, you know, I'm influenced by my culture, my Americanisms.

But first and foremost, you're really saying, Mark, you're a Christian, you're a follower of Jesus, so it's very important that you understand the context, the meanings behind these certain words. So maybe give us a couple illustrations or examples how we really do misread it because of our culture, our influence of where we're at. Absolutely.

I'll give you two that we address in the introduction of the book. One has to do—one's an example that was very close to my heart growing up where I did in a sort of revivalist tradition in the South. And we often heard the passage from Revelation where Jesus is speaking to the church at Laodicea and says, you know, because you're neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth.

And I wish that you were one or the other, but you're neither. And the way that was often presented to me is that hot was committed to Jesus, and cold was totally lost and separate from Jesus, and that this lukewarm condition was being sort of nominally Christian, right? Calling yourself Christian but really not pursuing the Lord. And it never really made sense to me why Jesus would prefer that I would be lost rather than to be lukewarm, but that's the way it was presented to me.

He wishes you would either get totally committed or just stop faking it. Well, I visited with Randy and a group of our students from OBU. We took a tour in Turkey and Greece, and we were staying in the ruins of Laodicea.

And if you look off in one direction, you see Hierapolis, which is this really beautiful city that has natural hot springs. And the hot springs bubble up in the desert and create this really strange white sort of deposit, calcium deposit. And they call it in Turkish Pamukkale, which means snow castle or something like that.

And so it's this gleaming white spot in the desert. And if you look off in the other direction, you see Colossae. And Colossae was known in the first century for its cold water springs, which is great in the desert.

And Laodicea was right between them. And in order to get hot water from Pamukkale or Hierapolis or to get cold water from Colossae, they had to pipe the water in via aqueduct. And by the time the hot water got there, it was lukewarm.

And by the time the cold water got there, it was lukewarm. And so Laodicea knew better than anybody what lukewarm water would like, and it was basically useless, right? You can't take a bath in it. You can't drink it.

But what Jesus was saying then, and what Laodiceans would have known, is that hot water is great because it's got certain uses, and cold water is great because it's got certain uses, but lukewarm water is kind of useless. And so if you apply that to Revelation, Jesus isn't saying, I wish you were on fire for me, committed to me totally, or I wish you were lost, because hot and cold are both equally good. One's not bad, you know, one's not spiritually cold, and one's not spiritually hot.

He's using an example that they would have been very much familiar with from their daily life. And that helped me get a better sense, you know, in practice, of essentially the nature of Christ, that He doesn't wish that we were lost. He wishes all of us were saved, but we could get the wrong impression by misreading a passage like that.

Yeah, I think it's funny. I think I heard, maybe it was Erwin Lutzer said it last Founders Week, or Founders Week message before he talked on this, and he said that we always fixate on the hot and the cold, and most Christians don't want to fixate on the fact that Jesus is outside the door banging on it, wondering if you're ever going to let Him in. Sure, yeah.

Well, and I think one of the reasons we do fixate on the hot and cold is because culturally we use that language, especially if we come from revivalist traditions like I do, of hot and cold being sort of gauges of spiritual temperature, right? And so we may pick that up in another place, and that hot is on fire and cold is uninterested, and then we apply it, we read it into the Bible where it really never had that connotation. And so we kind of import our view of that language without taking into consideration that maybe the biblical authors had a different connotation for those very same words. Yeah, I find it interesting because I think that, and I'd love to hear your thoughts on it, that we come to the Bible and we try and pretend as though we're culturally neutral, like we can come onto some sort of neutral ground because we're all Christians, as though our Christian ground is a neutral playing field.

And yet I think I listened to, it was a couple weeks ago, a question-and-answer session with Albert Moeller, president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, and he says everybody has a context. There's nobody who's culturally neutral. If you got up today and you brushed your teeth and you're wearing a certain kind of clothes and you have shoes on your feet and you're speaking a certain language, you're instantly inside of a contextual bubble.

You have a context to you. So do you think that it's helpful that people would just admit that and then from there find a point of reference? Absolutely, yeah. I think, you know, a great example of this is we were at a, it was either Founders Week or something, maybe a Moody Bible, a Moody Pastors Conference a few years ago, and the introduction was for John Piper, who was going to preach, and this glowing introduction about a man who's preaching and he never adds anything to the Scriptures.

He doesn't impose on the Scriptures and all this kind of stuff, which I think as a general rule is true of John Piper, but I leaned over to the friend I was with and I said, well, is he going to be preaching in English? Because if he's preaching in English, then he's imposing something on the Scriptures, because the Scriptures were written in Greek and Hebrew. And that's not to say that he's doing something dishonest with the Scriptures, but we can't escape the fact that our social location, our historical location as Christians in the 21st century means that we're distant from the Bible in no other way than by language, because the Bible wasn't written in English. And so I think what we hope to accomplish in the book is essentially to say the first, you know, kind of the first step in addressing a problem is admitting you have a problem, right? We're trying to help people say that if we just acknowledge and begin to have the tools to identify the ways our expectations are different or our associations are different from those of the biblical writers, then we're much better equipped to correct our errors.

But if we never acknowledge them, then we're just kind of doomed to them forever. Yeah, and I know how many times we can come to the Scriptures with our own presuppositions. I mean, we already have various, if you will, baggage that we impose on the Scriptures, and that's why I so appreciate this book.

In case you're just tuning in, I have co-author Brandon J. O'Brien on the phone with us. Pastor Jason Schifo and I are having a conversation on his new book called *Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes, Removing Cultural Blindness to Better Understand the Bible*. Now, if you don't mind, I'd like to just transition.

I want to continue to talk about this book and the ways it can be helpful for our listeners and those that will read it in the coming days. And Lord willing, I'm looking at the clock, and there's so much more to cover, and I know Jason's attended a number of your seminars and has been impressed with some of your writings and postings. But can you take us back? Were you always understanding the Bible clearly from childhood? Who were those people or that person that helped lead you in that relationship with the Lord? So I want to talk a little about that.

And did you know that where you work at the College of DuPage, it's also called UCLA? I don't know. What's that? See, I attended there like 30-plus years ago. It's UCLA, University Closest to the Lombard Area.

You know, I guess that was just something years ago. That's what we called it. Oh, yeah, I attend UCLA, University.

But that's the College of DuPage, so I know you teach there. It'll be okay, Brandon. John MacArthur has a number of his grandchildren's names begin with M. So he asked if he had some sort of fixation with M&M.

Well, I think it's important that you know that you work at UCLA now, so you could relay that. But anyways, on the phone with me is Brandon J. O'Brien, came out with this book. And thank you for sharing insights out of your book.

But share some insights into your own personal faith journey. Sure. I mentioned a little earlier I was raised in a Christian home and had the kind of profound honor and privilege of really never having the sort of crisis moment in the sense that I ever doubted that Jesus was my Savior and that God loved me and that I was in need of redemption through His Son.

I always believed those basics of the faith and honestly always loved church. My mom was the secretary of our church when I was growing up, and so I didn't just spend Sundays and Wednesdays there. I was there most days after school and really felt kind of at home there, you know, stuffing mailers and doing that kind of thing during the week.

And I think it was really in high school I had a youth pastor who I've always greatly respected named Tad Thompson, and Tad really reached out to me in high school, and we met regularly. And he was the first person to ever really introduce me to theological reading in any way. He had me read R.C. Sproul's—I've lost the title now—not chosen by—is it *Chosen by God*? There's *Holiness of God*, *Chosen by God*, and then he wrote the one on sola scriptura.

Yeah, it was Chosen by God, the one on election. Yeah, Chosen by God. And I had never really thought—I had asked him some questions about, you know, how does God's choice kind of relate to my choice in being a Christian or that kind of thing.

And so we read that book together, and we talked together, and I really credit Tad with sort of beginning my journey of asking questions. Intellectual journey sounds a little highbrow. Really, for me, it was sort of academic pursuit and personal religious, personal Christian pursuit were always closely related.

I've always researched the questions that, to me, were important for me practically. And so kind of going from that meeting, those meetings with him in high school, to college at Ouachita Baptist University. I had some great professors there, and Randy, my co-author, was chief among them as people who took the time to really listen to my questions and to point me in the right direction.

And I like to clarify that I never had really a rebellious streak. I never wandered from the faith. I was always sort of...the problem I had is I believed that Jesus existed, and I believed that he was who he said he was, and I just had a lot of other questions.

I wasn't sure how things all fit together, but I think I was sort of captivated by the person of Jesus, and so that kept me close. And it's been, you know, several degrees now. I went to Wheaton and pursued a degree in religion and American life, and that's where I really kind of began to understand my faith tradition in context, sort of how it relates to the American experience broadly and that sort of thing.

And really that helped me begin to sort of sort out what aspects of my faith were strictly Christian and what aspects were kind of largely American and which of those it's okay for this to be an American thing. And some of them think, well, maybe it's more faithful if I work on this or just that. And then most recently I'm completing my Ph.D. at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, and Trinity really, I think, helped bring that whole discussion around and renewed a real passion for the scriptures in me, and again, I was blessed with real life giving faculty there who not only know their stuff academically but are people who really live their Christian conviction in authentic ways.

And I know a lot of people get sort of burned out in the academy. I'm burned out on writing a dissertation, to be honest with you, but my faith, I think, has been strengthened by my encounters with these really wonderful men and women who've shepherded my honest questions by taking the time to give me honest answers. And so we're hopeful, I think, to bring this back to the book, that our book does the same thing.

I mean, we want to give people difficult issues to sort of wrestle with, but I'm hoping that sort of in honor of these great folks that have shepherded me, that the book reflects a safe and sort of faithful effort at asking difficult questions that I hope will make the Bible richer and more accessible to people in their daily walk with the Lord. Well, you raise a good point, or if you will, raise a good question. Is it okay to have questions? Because I'm thinking of that listener that's tuned in, that's scanning the dial, and it's like, gosh, this guy sounds pretty sharp, he sounds pretty intelligent, he's got his degrees, his Ph.D., he's written a book, and he questioned God or he had questions about God, so do I. So are you saying that it's okay to have questions? I sure hope it is, because I have questions.

You know, what helps me enormously is identifying that for me, my having questions about certain doctrinal truths or certain passages in Scripture, for me, I've identified that the questions are dangerous if you question God's character or you question God's intentions. I think what's become clear for me is that what I question or what I try to make clear to myself is that what I question is my grasp of these truths or my understanding of God's character, or that I'm in a situation where it makes me frustrated that God's doing what He's doing or I'm wondering if God's doing anything at all. And I think as long as you don't stop asking the questions, if you just keep pushing and trust that God has answers and I just don't know what they are yet, that absolutely it's important to ask.

And in my teaching at UCLA, at the College of DuPage, I've frequently heard from my students who are not necessarily Christians, some of them are but many of them are not, that many of them grow up in religious homes

and the reason they say now in college they're not religious is because they had these questions about their faith, Islam or Christianity or Judaism or Buddhism, and when they asked those questions, their parents or their ministers shut them down and said it's wrong to ask questions. And being shut down really disillusioned them and made them feel like they won't answer my questions because there aren't any answers. And so I think that asking honest questions and finding folks that will give honest answers can be hugely life-giving to a person's faith.

Yeah, when I attended a conference that you did two years ago, some sessions in a conference, I pulled up my notes here on my iPad, and you made a really great statement that I think is applicable here and then I want to make a comment and I'd love to have you comment on my comment, but you said that we should view the gospel as precious but not fragile. Instead we should take what 2 Timothy 4 says, that the gospel has a power whether we're in season or out of season, that the gospel has its own power, that God doesn't need us, He wants us, and He's chosen us, but that the gospel isn't made of glass. It isn't a Tiffany piece that we've got to huddle, but do you think that that's part of the Western context where we feel the need to be the expert, we feel the need to know everything or appear as though we do so we don't admit our questions, or we think that somehow we'll shatter the gospel if we ask a question? And you have to answer this in the closing like minute and a half.

Okay, well I would say that I think we addressed this at some length in the book, that one of the things in Western culture that's unique to Western culture is we assume that everything is either or, there's a right answer or a wrong answer, we don't like ambiguity and we don't like tension, and so we do feel like I think if we can't answer a question clearly and succinctly and in a way that sort of answers all the related questions, then whatever we're saying must not be true or complete. And I think what Jesus, the original sort of title of Christianity was The Way, right? And it's this journey that you walk on with Jesus, and he, like on the road to Emmaus, he sort of gradually and eventually helps us to see the truth of the gospel in its fullness. And I think what we want is we want to be able to download it or get it from a vending machine or something at the very beginning, and the fact is we're on this walk with Jesus forever, and it takes forever, all of our life, to really begin to know Christ in his fullness.

And we say the same in the end of the book about learning to sort of remove our cultural blinders. You know, we develop them over a lifetime, however old we are. At the moment we've been developing Western assumptions that long, and we can't remove them tomorrow.

It's a journey. And so we're sort of inviting people on that journey with us in the book, and then, you know, with the Christian community ongoing, and hopefully at the end of it we'll see scriptures and see Christ as he is. What a helpful reminder that the gospel is precious, but it is not fragile.

God is not threatened by an honest question, and the truth of his word does not crumble when we examine it carefully. Our questions can actually draw us into a deeper study of Scripture and a greater dependence upon the one who gave it to us. Today, Brandon J. O'Brien has reminded us that every person reads the Bible from within a particular culture and life experience.

The important question is whether we humbly recognize those influences and allow Scripture, not merely our assumptions or traditions, to shape our understanding. Perhaps Psalm 119, verse 18, can become our personal prayer this week. Open my eyes that I may behold wondrous things out of your law.

Lord, help me read your word carefully, understand it faithfully, and obey it wholeheartedly. We'll continue this classic conversation with Brandon as we explore additional ways our Western perspective can affect how we understand the Bible. You can listen to Mark & Friends anytime and find additional biblical encouragement at GreatNewsRadio.org and WLUJ.org. Simply look under the Mark & Friends tab.

Join us again for part two tomorrow, and thanks for listening, thanks for being a part of our radio listening family. This is Mark Burns, Pastor Jason Schifo, and guest Brandon J. O'Brien with the Ministry of Great News Media. God bless you, and have a great day and night.