

Below the Surface

Brandon J. O'Brien on Cultural Icebergs, Adoption, Church History, and the Renewing of Our Minds

Brandon J. O'Brien

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Program Summary

In this Wednesday edition of Mark & Friends, Mark Burns and Pastor Jason Schifo conclude their Classic Conversation with Brandon J. O'Brien about Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes. Brandon first shares the deeply personal story of his family's adoption journey and how years of waiting helped him understand more fully what it means for believers to be adopted into God's family. The conversation then returns to culture and biblical interpretation. Brandon and co-author E. Randolph Richards picture worldview as an iceberg: some assumptions are visible above the surface, while deeper habits and values remain largely unconscious and can exert even greater influence on the way we read Scripture. Brandon explains why Christians benefit from listening to believers from other cultures and other centuries, because they often see truths we miss and make different mistakes than we make. The program closes with Romans 12:2 and a call to let God's Word continually renew our minds rather than allowing hidden cultural assumptions to shape us unnoticed.

Key Takeaways

- Long seasons of waiting and disappointment can become places where believers learn truths about God's goodness that cannot be learned in easier seasons.
- Brandon's experience of adopting his son gave him a deeper personal picture of the biblical truth that believers are adopted sons and daughters of God.
- Cross-cultural family experiences can reveal how identity, assumptions, and worldview develop over time.
- Reading Christians from other cultures and other centuries helps expose assumptions I may never recognize on my own.
- Older Christian writers are valuable not because they were perfect, but because they often made different mistakes than we make today.
- Culture can be pictured as an iceberg: the most visible beliefs are above the surface, while deeper values and assumptions remain largely hidden.
- Below-the-surface assumptions can be especially dangerous because I may treat them as obviously right rather than recognizing them as cultural.
- Removing cultural blinders is a process, not a quick technique or a set of three easy steps.
- Deep engagement with Scripture helps me become increasingly familiar with the Bible's own voice rather than merely hearing my culture echoed back to me.
- Romans 12:2 calls Christians to ongoing renewal of the mind so that thinking is increasingly shaped by God's truth.

Scripture References

Romans 12:2, Ephesians 1:3-5, Romans 8:14-17, Galatians 4:4-7, Psalm 119:18, 2 Timothy 3:16-17, Acts 17:11, Hebrews 12:1, Proverbs 11:14, Colossians 3:1-2

Quote of the Day

"Older writers can help us, not because they're smarter, but because they made different mistakes."

Broadcast Notes

Mark begins Part Two by revisiting Brandon's encouragement that God is not threatened by honest questions. Brandon then tells the story of the long journey he and his wife experienced while trying to begin a family. After years of waiting, they received a Friday call that a baby boy, James David, had been born and could come home with them on Monday. Brandon describes the adoption as a powerful personal illustration of believers being adopted into God's family. The discussion then returns to Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes. Brandon explains how the project grew from E. Randolph Richards' paper on misreading Paul and how the two expanded the idea to Scripture more broadly. Pastor Jason raises the value of Kenneth Bailey and older Christian writers, leading Brandon to explain how church history itself becomes a cross-cultural encounter. Reading Luther, Calvin, Athanasius, and others reveals both truths and blind spots that differ from our own. Brandon then explains the book's iceberg structure: above the surface are obvious cultural differences; just below are less visible habits and values; deep below are assumptions so embedded that we resist admitting they may be wrong. He closes by rejecting the idea that cultural blinders can be removed through a few easy steps. Instead, Christians need sustained engagement with Scripture and ongoing conversation with believers across cultures and generations.

Practical Applications

- When I am in a long season of waiting, ask what God may be teaching me about His character rather than assuming delay means abandonment.
- Reflect on the biblical language of adoption and thank God that my identity in Jesus is rooted in belonging to His family.
- Read one Christian author from a different century and notice both what feels familiar and what challenges my assumptions.
- Listen carefully to a faithful Christian from another culture and ask what that perspective helps me see in Scripture.
- When I strongly think, 'Obviously the Bible means this,' pause and ask whether the certainty comes from the text or from a deeply embedded cultural value.
- Use the iceberg image during Bible study: what is visible above the surface, what assumptions may be just below it, and what deeper values might I never have questioned?
- Read Romans 12:2 slowly and identify one area where my thinking needs renewal rather than conformity.
- Avoid looking for shortcuts to mature interpretation; commit to the slower work of Scripture, prayer, study, community, and humility.
- Build a reading list that includes trustworthy voices from different cultures, denominations, historical periods, and life experiences.
- When I discover that I have misunderstood something, receive correction as growth rather than as a threat to faith.

Today's Challenge

Draw a simple iceberg this week. Above the waterline, write three cultural assumptions you already recognize in yourself. Just below the surface, write three habits or values that may influence the way you read Scripture. Deep below the surface, leave space for assumptions you have not yet recognized. Pray Romans 12:2 and Psalm 119:18, then ask God to use Scripture, faithful teachers, believers from other cultures, and Christians from other centuries to renew your mind.

Closing Prayer

Father, thank You that You are good even in seasons of waiting and that through Jesus You have welcomed me into Your family. Help me understand more deeply what it means to belong to You as Your adopted child. Renew my mind so that I am not unconsciously conformed to the patterns of my culture. Show me the assumptions I can already see and the deeper ones hidden below the surface. Give me humility to learn from faithful believers from other cultures and other generations. When an older Christian writer or a different perspective exposes one of my blind spots, keep me from becoming defensive. Teach me to love Your truth more than I love being right. Keep me deeply engaged with Scripture, patient with the lifelong process of growth, and willing to let Your Word challenge what I have always assumed. Open my eyes, renew my thinking, and shape me increasingly into the likeness of Jesus. In His 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. His background in church history gives him particular interest in learning from Christians across different centuries as well as different cultures. Brandon's teaching encourages believers to ask honest questions, engage Scripture deeply, and allow God's Word to continually reshape their assumptions.

About Today's Host

Mark Burns is General Manager of the WLUI 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.

Proofread Broadcast Transcript

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 Romans, chapter 12, verse 2. Do not be conformed to the world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind. That was Romans, chapter 12, verse 2. O magnify the Lord with me, let us exalt His name together.

It is Wednesday, September 2nd, 2026. Hi, listening friend. Welcome to the Wednesday edition of *Mark & Friends*.

With the continuation of our classic conversation with author Brandon J. O'Brien, Pastor Jason Schifo joining me in the studio as we continue discussing Brandon's book, *Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes*. Today, Brandon shares the remarkable story of his family's adoption journey. We'll also explore the cultural assumptions that can remain hidden behind the surface and influence how we understand God's word.

Let's return now to our conversation with Brandon J. O'Brien. I know yesterday we didn't quite leave our listeners on a cliffhanger, but I was hoping they would tune back in because I think you have so much to share about your book, *Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes*, removing cultural blinders to better understand the Bible. And I know yesterday you shared a little of your faith journey and coming to Christ and having a wonderful family and then people speaking truth, professors, and people guiding you into the scriptures, though you had many questions.

And the great thing about God is He's so awesome and omniscient and all-powerful. He's not challenged. He doesn't get embarrassed that we have a question.

He doesn't fluster, oh, how am I going to answer this? Because of His goodness, because of His character, we can just trust ourselves to Him when we waffle, when we misunderstand things. It's like He's not bothered by us questioning. Like, God, I don't understand this virgin birth and how you came as a man.

He delights to take us through that learning, that understanding. And then always, because of the mystery of the Godhead, there will always be that sense of us just having to have faith in Him. But He's good and He doesn't shy away from us because we have questions.

So we talked a little about that yesterday, and that program is archived at greatnewsradio.org. But in our closing few moments, I said, hey, I also know that God orchestrated a unique adoption for you and your wife, something that you had worked on for some years. And I know we have lots of listeners that I think can be blessed by your decision to adopt and what led to that and how God was all over that. So before we start talking a little more about misreading Scripture with Western eyes, tell us a little of that adoption story.

Sure. Thanks again, Mark and Jason. It's great to be with you.

I'm personally not great at making long stories short, but I will try. The journey to adoption for us was quite long. We spent a couple of years and a little longer trying to begin a family naturally, biologically, with no success, and then really had always felt like adoption would be part of our plan for growing our family, but we didn't think initially that it would be our plan for beginning our family.

And we feel like God led us to sort of reversing the order of things and deciding that we would start the family through adoption. And that was one of the seasons, a season of about four years of waiting in different ways when my wife and I really did ask a lot of questions from God, and we wondered why we knew people who had no problem, you know, becoming pregnant, even when they didn't really want to. And while we were really expending a lot of energy and expense trying to begin a family, it just didn't seem fair.

And so we did a lot of questioning, a lot of soul searching, and always were reminded by the Scriptures and by our church family that this is difficult, but God is good. You know, we learned along the way that there are certain things that you can only learn about God through suffering, and we wondered from time to time if it was worth it. Maybe we wouldn't like to learn those things if this is the only way you can learn them.

But we were just blown away at about two years. After about two years of waiting, we received a phone call on a Friday afternoon that little James David had been born, and if we were willing to accept him, that we could pick him up Monday morning. And so we did.

After two years of waiting, we had, you know, a weekend to get ready, and it was a whirlwind of activity. To say the least, my wife had to go on maternity leave for her ministry positions essentially overnight. But we learned in that process with a healthy, happy baby boy that God really answered our prayers in ways that we couldn't have imagined.

And now we wouldn't trade anything because it was still painful for certain, and it still is to think back. But we see that God had a plan, and it helped us to realize, I think, at a sort of spiritual level, this process of adoption has reminded us that each of us is God's adopted child, and that this experience that we've had of waiting for and welcoming Jamie home has really, I think, been kind of an illustration of God's love for us, that Jamie is our adopted son, and we are God's adopted son and daughter. And that's something I could never, I think, have articulated or fully understood without this experience.

And so it's been a joy. He'll be 11 months old next week, and I'm still trying to figure out being a dad, but it's really great. It's a lot of fun.

I think people prepare you for the hard work, but they don't tell you how great it's going to be. And it's just been a real privilege and a real joy. You had mentioned, I think, off-air before we began the second session, about the dedications in the book.

And obviously your son being adopted comes from what country? He's actually with a domestic adoption, but he's African American, and so it's a cross-racial adoption. Okay, and then the person you co-authored the book with, there was a multicultural, or can you share that? Oh, sure. Yeah, Randy, both of Randy's children are biological children, but they were both born while Randy and his wife were serving as missionaries in Indonesia.

And so we found it sort of interesting after the fact that our children in some ways represent for us, within our own families, different kind of cultural perspectives. Obviously, Jamie was 10 days old when he came home, and so he didn't have any sort of cultural perspective to speak of yet. But he will develop it as he begins to understand himself and his role in our family and the way others view our family and the way it came about.

But Randy's children were very influenced by spending their formative early years in Indonesia. And so it's kind of an interesting—it's interesting that our families reflect this sort of grappling with culture and how it affects our worldview and our sense of the Scriptures. Now, in yesterday's program, you mentioned some of the things you hoped that people, that the readers would get from reading the book.

But what was the catalyst? Like, did you and Randolph one day say, hey, let's just write a book on Scripture and how we often misunderstand it or misread it or are influenced by our culture? What was the catalyst that brought you two together to pen this work? Sure. Well, we had been in conversation for years, been friends for years, and Randy actually wrote an article, a presentation for a conference that he called *Misreading Paul with Westernized*. His dissertation and his area of specialization as an academic is in Pauline Studies.

And he had written this article, and he sent it to me as—I'm an editor, and he wanted some editorial feedback on how to make it shorter. And I read through it and made some suggestions, and then in an email back I said, you know, this would make a great book if you expanded each of these points. Instead of being a paragraph, you make it a chapter and illustrate it with your experiences as a missionary.

And this could be enormously helpful for people. And then expanded beyond Paul to the scope of the Scriptures. And he emailed back and he said, a book's a great idea.

Let's do it. And I said, well, I didn't mean me, and I didn't mean now. But it just sort of, from then on, was in both of our hearts to pursue it.

And it became a really interesting journey together, again, since we were once—it was once my professor and now my colleague. It was a really great experience with him in bringing this book into life. Yeah, when I read through the book, and I got a chance to go through it when that young girl handed me a copy, and then when we got a copy from the press.

But I noticed that there were some really good, strong ties between the work that I've read by Kenneth Bailey, too. Kenneth Bailey having reading Jesus through Middle Eastern eyes, reading Paul through Middle Eastern eyes, some different books there. How much did Kenneth Bailey's work, either Randolph or yourself, impact you guys? Great question.

I would say Randy is probably more familiar with Bailey's work. And at a certain level, we tried to be—we tried to not let it influence our approach, because we kind of come at it from the opposite direction. Instead of trying to explain in great detail how others interpret the Scriptures through their cultural lens, we're really trying to help Western readers understand what they bring to the text that they may be unaware of.

And we do that by way of contrast, obviously, to non-Western perspectives. But the emphasis is a little different. Rather than focusing on the non-Western eyes, we're trying to focus on the Western eyes.

And so we certainly relied on his work for some particular, specific insights, but on the whole tried to take kind of the opposite approach. And I would say that by reading it, that's what I appreciated, is that you kind of land the plane in the fact that me as the Western person needs to own up to my position, my context, where I'm at culturally, and then needs to move from there. And in that, we'll find revelation.

I think that what happens with, say, Bailey's work, because I've read most of it, is that we find revelation in Bailey's revelation. And we go like, wow, look at what he brought to the table. Wow.

And it's not a revelation or that intimate revelation that we find when we read God's Word with maybe, say, some of those blinders off that our culture has placed on it, when we are able to look at it from our context and allow it to speak to us here. The same as I think that people allowed throughout time Scripture to speak to them culturally and contextually where they were at. That's right.

Yeah, and my academic credentials are as a church historian, and Randy's is in New Testament, and what I felt like was really great about the partnership is that his perspective is, you know, largely the sort of ancient biblical perspective and then the contemporary one. And what I love about church history is that really all church history is a cross-cultural experience because you hear Luther or you hear Calvin or you hear Athanasius or whoever read a passage and say, obviously, clearly this passage means X. And you read it and go, huh, I would never have come up with that in a million years. By sort of identifying what they take for granted when they read, it helps me identify what I take for granted when I read.

And so that historical experience sort of element that I feel like I brought to the project and having lots of practice by reading ancient Christians, older Christians, and identifying their blind spots helps me identify mine. In fact, we quote T.F. Lewis in the book who mentions that that's the big appeal. That's why you should read older writers, not because they're smarter, but because they made different mistakes.

And what they got right can instruct us, but also what they got wrong can instruct us. And so we want people to read the Bible better, but we also want them to be in conversation with living Christians from different cultures but also past Christians from different ages to help them really begin to see what we take for granted as Westerners. So do you think in the Western culture that we, because of, say, the advent of our connectedness, the Internet, things like that, that we seek maybe a shallower pond instead of the deeper water? I would just say this, you're kind of ringing my bell because I have a practice that once a month I go to a used bookstore that's in Bloomington Normal, and I buy three or four books, and they have to be pre-1930 authors.

And my ministry has grown exponentially in my understanding of the Word and my ability to do a lot of different things by reading Spurgeon, by reading Luther, by reading Francis Folks, by reading, you know, Schweitzer's Lordship of Christ, I mean, reading a breadth of work from maybe in an age where liberalism wasn't quite as profound and people didn't write a book solely questioning everything about God. Instead, they were trying to espouse who God was. Sure.

Yeah, well, I could easily get off track here because I think part of the problem, part of the challenge specifically for American Christians, not, I won't say all Western Christians, but specifically American ones, we have a really sort of, we have a strange view of history in that we tend to not be very historically aware, but often when we talk about our heritage and our history, we don't go back all that far. And so I know a lot of Christians who will say they're very committed to the evangelical heritage, and as far as they're concerned, that starts with, like, Billy Graham. Well, really, the evangelical heritage begins, you know, in the 1700s, Great Awakening, and even before that.

And so, you know, there's a sense in which we have a really truncated view of history, and our heritage is only 50 years old or 60 years old, rather than, you know, 200 or 300 years old. And so I think, obviously, expanding that helps to put us in perspective. When you hear people who call themselves evangelicals talking about certain issues in certain ways, you realize that a lot of what we think and do is sort of idiosyncratic today.

I think that, you know, that that's kind of a general problem. You know, in the book, we talk less specifically about kind of modern issues and more about certain habits that can kind of lead us to misread the scriptures. And I think that historical one is one we might have liked to have included.

It didn't really fit in the overall scheme of the book. But we really emphasize more certain things that we don't even—we're not even aware that we make certain decisions. And that's why they're dangerous, because we're unconscious of them.

And so our effort is to try to help people become conscious of them, and then hopefully that can lead to making, you know, more conscious decisions about what the scriptures mean. And the book we're talking about and the author that we have on the line is Brandon J. O'Brien. He co-authored this book with Randolph Richards.

The book is called *Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes, Removing Cultural Blinders to Better Understand the Bible*. And we highly recommend it. We hope that all of our listeners would purchase a copy, not only because it's a good read, but to support that little James of yours.

You've got to sell some of these books. So we highly recommend that. You can purchase it by going to ivypress.com. Ivy Press, that's InterVarsity Press.

We have a lot of great friends up there. But those of you that can purchase a copy or multiple copies, it's a great one to have on your bookshelf, but much more to have in your hands, reading ivypress.com, and then search *Misreading Scripture*. Talk a little about above the surface, just below the surface, and deep below the surface.

Good, yes. The way we sort of envisioned this discussion about culture is that often evangelicals especially talk a lot about worldview, but often what we talk about as worldview issues are issues that are obvious to us. You know, that we have a sort of Christian perspective versus a secular perspective.

These are very obvious differences. The approach we take in the book is to say that culture is like an iceberg. Our worldview is like an iceberg.

And the things that are above the surface, that are easily visible, and that we are quite aware of, tend to be the least important or the least dangerous parts of our worldview. But the further down an iceberg you go, the bigger it gets. The vast majority of an iceberg is below the surface, and it's the part that sinks ships, that deep underwater part.

And so, in the book, it's divided into three sections. In the first section, we talk about cultural issues that are above the surface, that are easily identifiable, and that can cause some misunderstanding. But really, once you're made aware of them, they're easy enough to identify because they're clear.

They're above the surface. In section two, we move just below the surface to some deeper cultural values, some cultural habits that are less easily detected, and because of that, they're more dangerous for our interpretation. And then in the final section, we go deep below the surface to things that most of us just never even think about, and because of that, they can lead to deep misunderstanding.

And they're the things, when we're made aware of them, we have a hard time admitting that we might be wrong. That's where, if you have a cross-cultural experience and you're in another culture, when you threaten those deep below-the-surface values, you assume, well, surely, in this case, we're right and they're wrong because they're so deeply a part of us. Let me also point out that you have a web page or a website.

Maybe they can even friend you on Facebook, but I know if they go to brandonjobryan.com, they can pick up different resources, other things that you're doing. I think you blog or you post some things there. So tell us a little about what our listeners can find at brandonjobryan.com. Sure.

I blog there somewhat infrequently, but I do update the website there. There's a blog. There's also a page dedicated to misreading Scripture with Western eyes.

If listeners want to hear more about that book, they can get some details there. I have a page dedicated to a previous book. The thing that I find is often the most helpful is there's a contact page on the website.

If someone has questions that come to mind after hearing this, they should feel free to email me, and I will eventually get back or they can contact me there to talk about a speaking event or anything like that. So the website is a great place to find me online. You know what, Brandon, just real in our closing minutes, there's two things I want to ask you.

Hopefully you can cover for us. Number one is I love the conclusion in the book where you said that you guys reached out to a friend of yours who was Syrian and for practical steps that they could take in terms of removing those cultural blinders. And the second one is really interesting.

How much say do you and Randolph have in the cover of the book? Because Mark and I were really taken by it. And not only that, but looking up and reading through Psalm 32 and 33, which is kind of quoted on the cover there. Yeah, your first question is, yeah, the conclusions, I'm afraid some people will find them frustrating because it's a little tongue-in-cheek, you know, three easy steps to removing cultural blinders, question mark.

My Syrian friend said that, you know, when I approached her about that, that we were having trouble making the book practical, she said, well, Americans want to have three easy steps. She said sometimes there just aren't three easy steps. And so it's kind of a tongue-in-cheek title.

But what we want to do is we just want to prepare people for the fact that removing cultural blinders, becoming aware of them, and then eventually removing them is a process. It's not something that happens overnight. There aren't any shortcuts and there aren't any easy ways to do it.

What we hope will happen is that people will just deeply engage the scriptures, and by doing that and immersing themselves in the scriptures, will become more aware of the voice of the Bible and kind of letting it speak in its own cultural terms. So the conclusion, don't lose heart. There is guidance there, but it's not necessarily easy steps.

And as for the cover, you know, I wish we could claim greater input into the cover because people tend to really like it. I wish I could take credit for it, but that was the designers at IVP just did a fabulous job, and I think it's a very striking sort of visual representation of what we're getting at in the book. I'm asked fairly regularly if that's me on the cover.

I don't think there's really any resemblance except that I wear glasses, and so does the person on the cover, but it's not me, if anyone else is wondering. The book is entitled *Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes*. We highly recommend it.

You can purchase multiple copies. That would certainly help by going to ivpress.com, ivpress.com, and just in their little search link type in *misreading scripture*, and I think it'll be a great asset for your church library, for your personal reading, for maybe even a small group to go through it and talk about how oftentimes we do misread scripture because of our Western eyes, because of our own bias, or our own perspective, or just our living environment, and how oftentimes we have blinders. Jason's giving me the sign.

He's putting two little blinders up, I think, over his eyes. Well, thank you, Brandon, for carving out time and joining us on *Mark & Friends*. Thank you so much.

It's my pleasure to be with you. Brandon, thank you again for sharing your heart, your family's adoption story, and these helpful insights into reading and understanding God's Word. Today's conversation reminds us that some of our strongest cultural assumptions remain hidden beneath the surface.

Like the largest portion of an iceberg, we may not immediately recognize them, but they can still influence the way we see scripture, other people, and even ourselves. That is why we need the renewing work of God's Word and the wisdom of believers from other cultures and generations. Reading older Christian writers can be valuable, not because they were perfect, but because they often saw truths we overlook and made different mistakes than we make today.

May Romans 12:2 become more than a familiar verse. May we truly allow God to renew our minds so that our thinking is increasingly shaped by His truth rather than the unconscious assumptions of our culture. You can listen to both parts of this classic conversation and find additional scriptures, summaries, practical applications, and other encouraging resources under the Mark & Friends tab at greatnewsradio.org and wluj.org. Thanks for listening.

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