



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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By the Book?

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All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

We Christians believe that the Bible is the primary source of our knowledge of God and of God's will for us. The Bible gives us a big, overarching story to make sense of the smaller stories of our own lives. It tells us that we were made by God, and God loves us, and even though we fall short of God's will for our lives God is gracious and merciful, and comes in Jesus Christ to save the world, and will make us a new creation. The Bible also tells us how God expects us to live, individually and in community, so that we'll know what a life would look like that's fit for the kingdom of heaven.

We look to the Bible for guidance on how we should live, but that turns out to be a more challenging task than we might have imagined. Some people talk as though, on any given moral or ethical question, all you have to do is read the book and do what it says—as if you could just look up a word in the concordance, or search your Bible software, and whatever a particular verse has to say about the subject is what you're supposed to do.

But is it really that simple? The books of Exodus and Leviticus, for example, tell us that anyone who blasphemes the name of the Lord shall be stoned to death. Anyone who works on the Sabbath shall be put to death. Everyone who curses or strikes their father or mother shall be put to death, and a rebellious son, especially if he's a glutton or a drunkard, shall be stoned to death. Anyone who commits adultery shall be put to death, and anyone who consults a medium.

There are other capital crimes in the Bible, especially in the Old Testament, but the point for the moment is that almost no one—not even the most fundamentalist, literalist Christian—really thinks we should kill people who commit adultery or curse or strike

their parents. But some verses in the Bible call for the death penalty when people do those things, and the punishment is explicitly attributed to the word of God. What are we to make of that?

Unless we're prepared to put a lot more people to death, we need some principles of biblical interpretation that are more sophisticated than "Read the book and do what it says." But what exactly are those principles? They can't be as arbitrary as "Follow the parts you like and reject the parts you don't like." If it were that simple the Bible would have no moral authority at all. We'd have the Ten Suggestions rather than the Ten Commandments, and the very idea of "commandments" from God would lose all meaning.

As a matter of fact, Christian individuals and whole denominations have interpreted at least some moral mandates in the Bible very differently. Sometimes these interpretations contradict one another, even though Christians on both sides claim that their view is right and the other is wrong. In our own country's history, a great and tragic example is the fight over slavery.

If you want an eye-opening account of how people justified slavery in America, read Paul Finkelman's little book called *Defending Slavery*.¹ Finkelman is a law professor who offers a concise summary of the arguments used to defend slavery, and he includes selections from the proslavery writers so you can hear them in their own words. Not surprisingly, in the deeply Protestant culture of nineteenth century America, one of the main sources for justifying slavery was the Bible itself.

There are verses in the Bible that tell how slaves should behave and how masters are to treat their slaves, but nowhere does the Bible condemn slavery per se. On the contrary, the Bible

¹ Paul Finkelman, *Defending Slavery: Proslavery Thought in the Old South* (New York: Bedford/St. Martin's), 2003.

seems to take the existence of slavery for granted. If God was opposed to slavery, the slaveholders said, surely the Bible, which is the written word of God, would say so. But it doesn't. In fact, quite the opposite. Some of the Bible's heroes, like Abraham, owned slaves. Jesus himself tells parables about slaves and masters and he never questions the institution. Slaveholders in America claimed that the word of God so obviously supports slavery that anyone who opposed it must not be a Bible-believing Christian. In fact, the Presbyterian, Methodist, and Baptist denominations all split in the decade or so before the Civil War over the question of slavery, each side believing that the other was misrepresenting the Bible.

Abolitionists acknowledged that there were passages in the Bible that seemed to take the existence of slavery for granted, but they said that the deepest truths of the Bible, the fundamental commandments of God, point against the practice of slavery, beginning with the Golden Rule. Christ tells us to treat others as we want to be treated. Who wants to be a slave? Jesus says that the whole of the law and the prophets can be summarized as loving God and loving our neighbors as ourselves. If we really love our neighbors, how can we enslave them?

The slaveholding culture invoked all sorts of justifications for what came to be called their "peculiar institution." They appealed to history, pointing out that slavery was practiced in most times and places, and in fact it was a foundation of Greek democracy and the Roman republic, the most admired ancient civilizations. They appealed to science, where some biologists and anthropologists and medical doctors claimed that nature had clearly made some races superior and others inferior, some to rule and others to serve, and not to recognize that fact was to go against both nature and science. They appealed to economics, arguing that not only the plantations of the South but the manufacturing and trade of the North depended on slavery, and it would ruin the whole country's economy to do away with slavery. They appealed to law, while the United States Supreme Court consistently upheld the property rights of masters and found that

slaves had virtually no rights of their own. They appealed to politics, claiming that the union could not survive half-slave and half-free—and that turned out to be true, so that 600,000 Americans had to die in the Civil War before the issue was finally decided.

In retrospect, of course, none of us today would justify slavery on any grounds, and I trust that we'd all say it was a morally repugnant institution despite all the arguments made at the time to defend it. But 150 years ago, Christians in half the nation sincerely believed that history, science, economics, politics, law, and most importantly the word of God itself declared that slavery was not only legitimate but part of the very design of nature and of nature's God. And they had plenty of proof texts from the Bible to defend their claims.

There are biblical texts on other subjects that continue to divide churches even today. The role of women in ministry is a conspicuous example. The Roman Catholic Church does not ordain women to the priesthood, and some Presbyterian and other Protestant denominations will not ordain women either, citing specific passages from the Bible to support their position. On the other hand, our Presbyterian Church (USA) and many other denominations do ordain women, and it seems self-evident to us that individuals like our own associate pastor are enormously gifted by God and called to be ministers in Christ's church.

When we Presbyterians seek to know the will of God, we turn first of all to the Bible for guidance. But our approach to the Bible cannot be as simple as "Read the book and do what it says" for every individual verse, nor can it be as arbitrary as "Follow the parts you like and reject the parts you don't." So what principles can we use to help us discern God's will, seeking always to be faithful to the God we know in Jesus Christ, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit?

The American church's experience with slavery and abolition points to part of the answer. There are some

fundamental themes, some deep principles, in scripture that show us the way, and they do so consistently, in spite of particular passages that seem to justify other practices. Jesus quotes two Old Testament texts, one from Deuteronomy and one from Leviticus, and he says everything else depends on these: love God with all your heart and mind and soul and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself. When a lawyer asks, “Who is my neighbor,” Jesus tells the Parable of the Good Samaritan, by way of saying that everyone is your neighbor and therefore you are to love everyone in the sense of wanting and doing whatever is best for that person. Jesus reminds us of the Golden Rule to treat others as we want to be treated, and that simple rule alone would eliminate all sorts of injustices people try to rationalize. He says, echoing the Old Testament prophets like Amos and Isaiah, “Woe to you scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith.”

Over time, many Christians have come to see that some specific practices tolerated or even prescribed in the Bible are no longer binding on us—not because we reject the Bible, but because the Bible itself has a trajectory within it and a deeper logic that reflects the logic of the mind of God. There are consistent, fundamental themes in the Bible such as love and justice and compassion and reconciliation that override any practice to the contrary, even if, like slavery, it appears to be tolerated in the Bible.

We believe that the Bible is the uniquely inspired witness to God’s love and will for humanity, revealed to us most clearly in Jesus Christ. But the light of God’s word often comes to us refracted by the limitations of human understanding, some of which are conditioned by the assumptions of culture and the expediencies of self-interest. The only unrefracted light comes to us in Christ himself, the Word of God made flesh. We are not saved by the Bible. We are saved by Christ, and we read the Bible most faithfully when the written word points us to the living Word,

who is Christ himself, and encourages us to discern the will of Christ in all the changing circumstances of our lives.

There is an analogy to some of this, I think, in our American experience as a nation. The Declaration of Independence says “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness....” But Thomas Jefferson, who wrote those words, also wrote a few years later, in his *Notes on the State of Virginia*, one of the strongest arguments in defense of slavery, articulating themes that were amplified and staunchly defended right down to the Civil War. It’s a deep irony of American history that the same man who most clearly articulated our commitment to liberty and equality also made one of the most influential arguments for servitude and discrimination. The reason, of course, is that Jefferson was a slaveholder. His own self-interest and the interests of his socio-economic class were so dependent on slavery that he managed to rationalize an institution that violated his own fundamental principles.

Over time, though, the deeper logic of liberty came to trump the particular contradictions of society. The American Revolution that Jefferson helped to inspire began to undermine injustices that had been taken for granted. George Washington was a slaveholder, too. At first he resisted having black men fight in the Revolutionary War, but eventually he saw the need to enlist them, and when he witnessed their bravery and effectiveness on the battlefield, many of the stereotypes that were piled up in defense of slavery began to crumble until finally, in his last will and testament, Washington freed his own slaves.

If it’s true that “all men are created equal,” as the American Revolution proclaimed, then it wasn’t long before other men besides property-owning white men began to ask, “Am I not a man, too?” And it wasn’t long before women began to ask, “Aren’t we part of mankind, too, and shouldn’t we be equal in the eyes of the law?” It took more than a century before women’s

right to vote was recognized in the law, but here again, the deeper logic of liberty ultimately triumphed over the inherited prejudices of culture and tradition.

Something like that has been the story of Christians' understanding of the Bible throughout the centuries. Over time, the deeper truths of scripture have qualified and reinterpreted some of the particular trappings of earlier cultures, with their refracted understanding of God's will. The Bible itself shows us that people's understanding of God becomes clearer over time, as Christians in the New Testament came to interpret some Old Testament texts very differently in light of their experience of Jesus.

We believe that the Bible is the uniquely authoritative witness to the Word of God, and for that reason we will always live "by the book." But the Bible is a witness and a sign, and its own pages point beyond itself to the living Word, who is Jesus Christ. If we would read the Bible faithfully we need to pray for the Holy Spirit's guidance, because only the living Word can rightly interpret the written word in every time and place. A great deal of harm has been done when people bent the words of scripture to suit their own interests, or used specific texts to justify actions that violate the deeper sense of the scriptures themselves. The psalmist said, "Your word is a lamp unto my feet." If we continue to walk in the direction the Bible points us, we will be guided by the living Word, and we will learn to see more clearly God's will for us along the way, until we come at last into the light of the presence of God.



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