



# ALL RIGHT NOW

FINDING CONSENSUS  
*on* ETHICAL QUESTIONS

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# 1

## **God Speaks Through the Bible: Why Do We Hear God Differently?**

In the first chapter I describe how I personally approach the Scriptures. Not every pious-sounding opinion about the Bible will necessarily help us to find guidance from the Scriptures. So, what convictions about the nature of Scripture will help us? I also address even more basic questions: What kind of book is the Bible? Which goals, approaches, and interpretive steps can help us make progress in our attempts to understand the Bible?

### **The Middle Way**

There are many Christians and many churches that would like to throw away all faith traditions of the past, recklessly and uncritically. “Out with the old, in with the new,” they declare, and they are quick to adopt almost any cultural fad. The Bible is quoted when it serves to support current trends, and it is shoved aside or seriously misinterpreted when it challenges what we want to do and think. When this happens, the Bible ceases to be a meaningful norm and guide for faith and practice.

For many churches, however, the danger is on the other side. They inherit church traditions and past conceptions of a Christian

worldview and defend them tooth and nail. Indeed, they usually know where to find a Bible verse to prove that their way of thinking is the only Christian option. Viewpoints are labeled as unquestionable biblical truth when in fact they are often no more than inherited traditions or, at most, applications of biblical texts that once made sense in a quite different context.

Whichever of these pitfalls we fall into—uncritically abandoning Christian tradition or uncritically holding on to it—we are guilty of abandoning the Bible as the guide for faith and practice.

There must be a middle way, a way that faithfully practices the principle that Paul taught: “Test everything; hold fast to what is good” (1 Thessalonians 5:21). Neither current cultural trends nor old faith traditions can serve as faithful guides. We need to learn what it means for the Bible to serve as our norm, and we need to learn to interpret the Bible appropriately so that it can indeed provide the guidance we seek and need.

### *Sola Scriptura*—Really?

The middle way is perhaps the hardest way. It requires us to keep the Scriptures central and simultaneously to take a critical stance toward both our culture and our church traditions. That is no small challenge, but it is necessary. After all, “the Scriptures alone” does not answer our questions. In fact the Scriptures alone do nothing at all. They sit quietly, closed and waiting for us to examine, interpret, and apply them. No matter what we mean by “the Scriptures alone,” we cannot claim that the Scriptures somehow interpret themselves without our involvement.

The guidance we seek is indeed to be found there, but it must be sought and recognized. Moreover, to find guidance in Scripture we need more than knowledge of the Bible’s contents, more than exhaustive concordances and Bible dictionaries, and more than a great reverence for the written Word of God. We need appropriate strategies for finding guidance within the pages of Scripture. And we need hearts that are ready to accept what

Scripture teaches, no matter which aspects of our church tradition, culture, or personal lifestyle choices the Bible may call into question.

What sometimes troubles us, perhaps even discourages us, is that many Christians diligently aim to find in Scripture the guidance they need, but then discover that they are in serious disagreement with others seeking just as diligently for the meaning of the texts.

### **Nothing But Timeless Truths?**

As much as we might wish it to be otherwise, the Bible is simply *not* a book that speaks only timeless truths designed to say the same thing to every person in every period and in every culture. The Bible is very much a historical book. It allows us to observe how God spoke in the past to various people and in various situations. If God is going to use these biblical texts to speak to us today, in our circumstances, it will often be an indirect word. *We* will hear God if we are attentive to how *others* heard God. The challenge is to listen carefully to how God spoke to others in the past, so that we might discern how God may wish to use the same texts to speak to us today. But God may not say the same thing to us today that God said to them in their day.

Take the promises of Scripture as an example. Most of them are specifically intended as promises to concrete persons in equally concrete historical situations. They are normally not intended for us to claim as our own. I know that we are often counseled otherwise: “Just hear and claim the promises for yourselves. When the Bible makes a promise, God is speaking directly to us!” Really? That sounds to me like a surefire recipe for unending disappointment (when claimed promises go unfulfilled) or for inconsistent and illogical interpretations (as we twist and turn texts into something we can claim for ourselves).

For example, God promised Abraham and Sarah that they would have a son in their old age. Indeed, he promised Zechariah

and Elizabeth the very same joy. Yet there would no doubt be numerous couples sorely disappointed if they were to claim that promise as though God were guaranteeing them the same blessing. Are my wife and I expected to claim this promise for ourselves as well? Should we still do so when we are in our eighties and nineties? Should everyone claim the promise whether they are married or not? If they did, would God be obligated to honor their expectations? Clearly not. The promise of bearing a son in old age was a specific promise given to specific people. It was never intended to be claimed by every Bible reader.

A second example: when Jesus said, “Do not worry beforehand about what you are to say; but say whatever is given you at that time, for it is not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit” (Mark 13:11), he certainly did not mean that those who preach the Word should depend on nothing but the spontaneous leading of the Spirit and therefore not prepare their sermons in advance. He was speaking specifically to apostles who would be dragged into court and would not have any time to prepare their defense speeches. I think that is obvious to most people. Yet it is astonishing how often well-meaning people assume that if we want to be true to the Scriptures then we must be of the opinion that everything contained in the Scriptures applies equally and directly to all readers in every situation. Many want to believe that nothing in Scripture is situation specific or time conditioned. They want everything to be timeless and universal. Some even believe that in order for the Scriptures to speak with authority, the message of Scripture and all its parts *must* be timeless and universal.

But the fact is, many parts of the Scriptures would produce nothing but nonsense if we forced them to apply to everyone equally and in all situations. And our grand attempts to preserve the authority of Scripture end up backfiring as we do all sorts of mental gymnastics, trying to figure out the interpretation of each text that is required for it to be something we can universalize.

The problem I have attempted to illustrate using the Bible’s

promises is just as easily demonstrated if we think of the Bible's commands and prohibitions. When Jesus instructed the apostles, "Take nothing for your journey, no staff, nor bag, nor bread, nor money—not even an extra tunic" (Luke 9:3), he intended those instructions to apply to his disciples on their upcoming missionary journey, not to all people, at all times, on whatever journeys they are planning to take.

Nevertheless, it is also true that there are timeless promises in Scripture; there are instructions that apply to all people at all times; there are prohibitions that everyone is expected to observe. It won't do to take Jesus' word in Mark 11:25, "Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone; so that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses," and get ourselves off the hook by saying, "That probably applies to other people in other situations, not to me in mine." We cannot quote Paul's word in Ephesians 5:1-2, "Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us," and then follow it up with, "But the text does not apply to me."

Turning our attention back to the promises of Scripture, what about this promise in Joshua 1:5-6: "I will be with you; I will not fail you or forsake you. Be strong and courageous"? Does it apply to me as well? Of course it does. But the other half of Joshua 1:6 clearly does *not* apply to me: "For you shall put this people in possession of the land that I swore to their ancestors to give them." Here God is specifically addressing Joshua about the possession of the Promised Land *back then*.

But precisely here we recognize the difficulties that arise. How do we know when a word of Scripture directly applies to us and when it does not? How do we know when the great promises recorded in Scripture are meant for us to claim for ourselves and when they were never intended to be taken that way? How do we know whether God is speaking *to us* when Mark 10:21 says, "Sell what you own, and give the money to the poor" or whether that

was meant only for the so-called rich young ruler? How do we know whether speaking in tongues is or is not intended as a gift for use in the church today? How do we know whether women should wear head coverings when they pray in worship gatherings or whether the instructions Paul gave the church applied only to the situation at hand and only to the culture of the day? How do we know which, if any, of the biblical restrictions placed on women in church ministry still apply to the western church in the twenty-first century?

The conviction, pious as it sounds, that everything is to be applied literally—all promises are to be claimed, all commands to be followed, all prohibitions observed by all people and at all times—in fact helps us far less than we would hope when trying to find appropriate applications of biblical teaching. The problem is that this conviction simply cannot be consistently practiced. And when we claim this principle but practice it inconsistently, it should not surprise us that we have a hard time finding consensus on what is to be believed and practiced, even among those who claim to live by this conviction. Many claim to believe that everything in the Bible is to be interpreted and applied literally. However, I have never met a person who came even remotely close to living consistent with this principle. Everyone abandons such a principle when it mandates beliefs and practices that are simply impossible and often ridiculous. And it is good that they abandon their principle, at least at times, for the principle itself is far from adequate in guiding our attempts to understand and apply the Bible's teaching.

The simple rules, the pious sounding claims, and the clear guidelines all seem attractive and helpful in theory, but they simply do not lead to the goal. They don't work well when we try to implement them, and they stand in tension with what the Bible is. The Bible is a collection of books, letters, and documents of various sorts written in specific concrete historical situations. If we want to hear God's voice through these, we need to do more than

simply read it directly off the page, regardless of who wrote it, to whom, and why.

In the end, the “simple clear guidelines” actually only *seem* simple. When those who profess to adopt these guidelines abandon them because they simply don’t work, we have a recipe for disaster. Seeking consensus on what the Bible teaches is made more difficult, not easier. The temptation is strong to bend and twist the Bible to make it say whatever I want to believe rather than honestly seeking guidance from the Scriptures as our norm for faith and life.

My goal in what follows is to present a series of considerations designed to help us think in a more nuanced way about the nature and the function of the Bible. I hope that when we do so, we will also be able to develop better strategies for hearing Scripture, both with sensitive ears and with obedient hearts.

### A ‘People of the Book’—Four Aspects

Christians often think of themselves as “people of the book.” But does that necessarily mean that we are expected to apply literally everything we find in the Bible? I don’t think so. Rather, to be people of the book means our approach to Scripture is characterized as follows:

**First, we put our trust in God’s Word.** When critical Bible scholars claim to know better than the authors of the texts what “really happened” in the biblical stories, when they presume to rewrite biblical history from their privileged position as “people who know” at the expense of authors who were much closer to the events described and inspired by God to write about them, we respond with a resounding no. The scientists change their theories every few years anyway. The Bible remains a reliable guide.

**Second, we seek in Scripture “the way, and the truth, and the life,”** and we find Jesus himself proclaimed there. Jesus said to some of those rejecting him: “You search the scriptures because

you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that testify on my behalf. Yet you refuse to come to me to have life” (John 5:39-40). If the book itself takes center stage, we are not truly a people of the book, for we will have adopted a different center than that spoken by the Scriptures themselves. To be a people of the book is to put Christ at the center.

**Third, we examine all claims in the light of the Scriptures.** If someone claims to have come to a new insight concerning God or God’s truth, we examine that claim in the light of the Scriptures. If someone claims the right to abandon a long-standing tradition of the church, we examine the Scriptures to see whether they allow for the new possibility; we look in the Scriptures to see whether the proposed new direction is a valid application of biblical teaching. If someone claims to have heard a word from the Lord, whether it came in private Bible reading, in prayer, or through a prophetic word, we go to the Bible and test it in the light of revealed truth. Does it correspond to what the Bible teaches? And of course we not only examine the claims of others in the light of Scripture but also our own claims. After all, we are not a people of the book if we use the Bible only to find support for our own convictions. When the Bible no longer has the power (or our permission) to call into question our own opinions, we have stripped it of its authority altogether.

**Fourth, we consider to be most important that which the Bible considers most important.** So often we fight about secondary issues and ignore the most important emphases of Scripture. Jesus regularly criticized those who “tithe mint, dill, and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith” (Matthew 23:23). Perhaps if Jesus had addressed us he might have criticized our overly scrupulous proof texting to defend our long-cherished beliefs about the Bible’s teaching while neglecting the weightier matter of working toward unity and mutual acceptance in the church—even with those who interpret texts differently.

## **Attending to Scripture—Four Goals**

It is clear that we all want to find guidelines for Christian living within the Scriptures. Unfortunately it is far less clear how that works. I want to share some of my personal priorities when attending to the Scriptures.

**First, I want to allow individual texts to speak to me** rather than merely using those texts to support a theory or bolster a conviction of mine. I have become increasingly convinced that God's Spirit shapes us when we allow texts of Scripture to work in us, that is, we hear the Word, we seek understanding, we allow ourselves to be spoken to, challenged, inspired, and formed. The foremost goal is not to extract from the text some hidden "answer" to questions that we bring with us. Our stance is rather that of a listener. We want to internalize the challenges and invitations of the text. Walter Brueggemann speaks of texts "funding the imagination."<sup>1</sup> That is the goal. We are not trying to find the one right answer to an ethical question or the one right doctrinal statement to resolve a theological issue. We are not looking for the missing puzzle piece that completes the picture or for the one elusive clue that harmonizes this text with the rest of the Bible. We are sitting under the Word and listening to it.

**Second, I search the Scriptures** not only for answers but also for appropriate ways of seeking answers. We have plenty of questions: Is divorce allowed? Is it right for a Christian to fight in the military? Is it a sin to disobey a traffic law? Is it always a sin to have an abortion? Would it be wrong to invest my money in this way? Yet often the Scriptures give us something other than clear answers. Instead, they give us guidance that enables us to deal with our questions honestly and with integrity. They provide us with principles that we need to take seriously if we are looking for concrete help. They teach us how to listen to God's Spirit, how to make wise decisions as a community, and how to work toward a consensus that God can support. Sometimes we even find clear answers—but only sometimes.

**Third, I want to be sensitive to God's plans and purposes,** not just assemble a list of rules and regulations. In Mark 10:3, Jesus responds to a question from the Pharisees with a question: "What did Moses command you?" As the Pharisees quote a passage in Deuteronomy, Jesus interrupts them and essentially tells them, "Wrong text!" He knew they were quoting a text that provided no help in determining God's larger intentions. If we try to determine God's will but in the process quote the "wrong" texts, our findings will not be biblical, even if we can cite chapter and verse. Some people wish that at the end of every Bible study we could establish a clear set of biblical guidelines, rules, and regulations regarding the topic at hand. Others fear the legalism that could easily result from such an approach. If we fix our eyes on God's larger purposes rather than only on the applicable rules, we often find a middle way between stifling legalism and unbridled freedom.

**Fourth, I want to pay careful attention to diversity,** both in the Bible and in life. The Bible has a variety of perspectives on issues precisely because life throws up so many different kinds of situations. God is faithful and true, loving and generous to all. But God often acts differently in response to varying situations. And in this, God is a model for us. The people we meet are not "cases." They are unique individuals whose experiences are never exactly the same as the experiences of others. The Bible often helps us to see things from more than one perspective, which in turn equips us to supportively help others as they encounter a variety of unique life situations. Each person is called to respond to Jesus, to discover what discipleship means, to act responsibly, and to experience God's guidance. But what that looks like will vary from person to person, from situation to situation. We err when we seek to eliminate the diversity we encounter in Scripture. Instead, we should value Scripture's diversity, trusting God's Spirit to lead us as we discern which text provides the guidance we need in the situations with which we are confronted. We

cannot live without any guidelines, but neither can we put people in boxes and expect identical behavior from everyone; nor can we apply rules without concern for the actual circumstances of the people involved. That is not the biblical way or the way of Jesus.

### **The Roles of Scripture—Four Metaphors**

I find various metaphors helpful for describing how the Scriptures actually “function.” The truth is that the Scriptures often function on more than one level, and not all texts do so in the same way.

**The Bible as window.** The Bible often serves to reveal to us what God did in history. It reveals how God was active, how God created a believing community, and how God was at work in the world. When we observe all this, we are looking *through* the text to what lies *behind* it. The text functions like a window into an earlier time. As we look through the window, we can observe how people lived, how God interacted with them, and how Jesus ministered to people. We see how the Holy Spirit led the early church, how Paul planted churches, and much more. Often a glimpse of what happened then sensitizes us to what God is doing today. The lessons God’s people learned back then become lessons we learn today. Thus the Bible becomes a window into God’s ways with humankind, and the history of God’s people becomes our history as well.

**The Bible as portrait gallery.** The Bible shows us a multitude of positive and negative models. The biblical characters are not only historical persons; they are also literary characters. Sometimes we do not look through the Bible and find something historical behind it, but rather we look *into* the Bible and find something *within* the text itself. We discover characters of all sorts, good and bad, presented to us by the biblical writers. Which are there to instruct and inspire us? Which are there to warn us? As we meet each character, we wonder which characteristics and

actions should be imitated and which are merely aspects of that character's culture. These are the questions that arise when the Bible functions as a portrait gallery. There is much to learn from the characters we meet there and much to learn from the authors who painted these portraits in such vibrant colors.

**The Bible as mirror.** The Bible shows me what I am like. In fact, quite often the historical and the literary characters are not central to the Bible's revelation. I am. The Bible helps me to recognize myself in its pages. I see myself there: "Yes, that is exactly what I am like." "I need that as well." "I have the very same question." And thus the Bible becomes a *mirror*. If I will let it happen, the Bible will *read me*. It will clarify my inner needs, my attitudes, and my hidden desires. When these are illuminated, God ministers to me by meeting my needs, shaping my attitudes, and fulfilling my desires.

**The Bible as glasses.** The Bible enables me to see more clearly. I learn to see not only the characters, not only myself, but everything else in a new way. I learn to see the world with God's eyes and to see God with new eyes of faith. Put another way, the Bible sometimes performs its desired role not by showing me something I had never seen before but by enabling me to see things I have always seen, but to see them from God's perspective. To be immersed in the Scriptures is to put on a new pair of glasses. If I can see myself, the world, and life itself from God's perspective, that is sometimes enough to make clear what God is asking me to do and be.

### **From Texts to Life—Four Tasks**

In his very helpful book on Bible interpretation, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, Richard Hays proposes four tasks, or steps, that can help us think biblically when we seek appropriate ethical guidance and Christian standards.

**First, the descriptive task.** What do the texts say? What is the correct way to interpret them? What diversity is there in the Bible on the topic at hand? What are the common themes?

**Second, the synthetic task.** How do the individual texts on a theme fit into the witness of the whole Bible on that topic? How do various helpful “lenses” (that is, theological perspectives) assist us in seeing the bigger picture? (For Hays, the best lenses through which to view the message of the Bible as a whole are “community,” “cross,” and “new creation.”)

**Third, the hermeneutical task.** What exactly does the Bible offer on the given topic? Does it provide rules to live by? Principles to guide our thinking? Examples and models to encourage, instruct, and warn us? Insights that help shape a Christian worldview? As we receive what Scripture offers, what roles are played by the traditions we have inherited, our past experience, the experiences of others, and human reason?

**Finally, the pragmatic task.** How are we to apply the Bible’s message? What does it mean to live faithfully in this world? In what ways do we stand out as a community of contrast to the ways of the world? How do we concretely practice the teaching of Scripture in the realities of life?

Naturally we do not have to follow precisely the steps that Hays outlines in order to gain guidance from Scripture. Nevertheless his suggestions and examples are instructive if we want the Bible to be a normative guide for faith and life.

## **Exegesis and Hermeneutics**

Many Bible interpreters (for example, Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart in *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*) propose that we make a clear separation between exegesis (which approximately corresponds to the first two of Hays’s tasks) and hermeneutics (the last two of his tasks). I find it helpful to carefully distinguish between these two, though admittedly they cannot and should not be completely separated. If we want to be guided by Scripture we first need to ask what the text says (exegesis) and then examine what is involved in appropriately applying the message of the text (hermeneutics). When we exegete the text,

we are attempting to hear what God said through the original author to the original readers. When we practice hermeneutics, we are seeking to hear God's message to us in our situation through the ancient texts.

Tools that help us with exegesis are good translations (they actually do a lot of the exegetical work for us), some information about the circumstances in which the texts were written, a general knowledge of the Bible and its message, and an understanding of the primary message of the book we are examining. These tools will help us to read the texts as the first readers did, and thus in the way the author originally intended. Of course, our exegesis is never guaranteed to be correct. We depend on God's Spirit to help us, but even so our knowledge is always imperfect. It is the Bible, not our attempts to understand it, that merits the term *infallible*. We learn to listen to each other, to benefit from the insights of Bible interpreters and commentary writers, and thus to pursue the goal of "hearing Scripture." But the results of all this exegetical work are still just the first step. We have attempted to hear what the texts say, but we have not yet begun the second step. The results of our exegesis do not automatically provide us with insight as to what we are to do with what we have understood. For that we need to take the second step.

An attempt to understand 1 Corinthians 11 provides a good example. Our goal is to correctly discern what Paul was telling the Corinthians in this chapter. Most interpreters are persuaded that Paul was teaching the Corinthians that when they prayed or prophesied in a Christian gathering, the women should have long hair and a head covering, while the men should have short hair and no head covering. As part of our exegesis, we examine this conclusion (for there are indeed other options!). Have we correctly heard Paul?

But even when we have completed our exegetical work, we are far from finished. Those who claim that a literal application of all texts is the only way to be faithful to Scripture might think we

are done, but we have already seen that this claim is both inappropriate and impossible to follow through on. What is needed is the second step. We have heard Paul speak to the Corinthians. But we must now ask, “What is God saying to us through the word that Paul spoke to the Corinthians?” That is the question of application, of hermeneutics, and to answer that question we need to consider a number of valid approaches.

### **How Does the Textual Message Address Us?—Four Approaches**

Without making it more complicated than necessary, I would like to describe four different approaches to moving from the original message of the texts to an appropriate application of these messages in another time and place.

1. Applying the text directly. We hear what the text said back then and allow the same message to directly address us today. That is, the commands obligate us to obey, the prohibitions name things we too must avoid, the promises are there for us to claim for ourselves, and so forth.
2. Applying the text’s principle(s) in new ways. Here we listen to the text, discern which principles are being taught or applied, and then find appropriate, though often quite different, ways of applying those principles to a new situation.
3. Moving into the world of the text. Here the goal is not to bring the text’s message to us, but rather to transport ourselves into the world of the text, allowing ourselves then to be guided by what the text is teaching.
4. Listening to the voice of the Spirit. Here we take the posture of a discerning listener, even when we cannot provide objective proofs that what we have discerned is logically derived from rational exegetical and hermeneutical work.

I would like to examine these four approaches more fully and suggest ways of evaluating their contribution to the task of

understanding and applying Scripture, discerning God's will for us personally and corporately, and working toward consensus in the Christian community.

**Applying the text directly.** I have already addressed this approach. In theory it sounds so "biblical," "reliable," "simple and safe." Just do what the text says! If not *always*, at least that should be the default position. Unfortunately this approach is not as easy or as appropriate as it sounds. Though there are many texts for which a literal and direct application is both possible and desirable, there are literally hundreds of situations in which that is not the case. If our only option is to "apply literally," we will quickly discover that we need to excise from our Bible huge parts of the Old Testament. Otherwise we would find ourselves in a situation in which selling our daughters into slavery would be allowed, in which we would be required to stone people who do not keep the Sabbath, and in which it would be forbidden to cut the edges of our beards. It would mean we would have to avoid all clothing made of two kinds of thread (for example, cotton and polyester), that farmers could not sow two kinds of seed in the same field, and so on. In fact, we would also have significant difficulty practicing this approach with a large number of New Testament texts.

We know that the New Testament expressly releases us from some of the obligations that applied in Old Testament times (for example, food laws and regulations concerning animal sacrifices). But even so we are left with numerous situations in which no New Testament texts guide us in discerning the appropriate application of Old Testament prohibitions and commands. If we were to assume that wherever there is any doubt, we are obligated to apply the text directly to our situation, we would have to put a huge question mark over hundreds of things that average Christians take for granted, or else cut out huge parts of the Old Testament (and not a little of the New as well!). Otherwise (and in my opinion this is a better alternative) we would have to

look for other approaches to Scripture to help us in places where the direct-application approach is either impossible or probably not what God expects of us.

**Applying the text's principle(s) in new ways.** Often a direct application is not possible or, even if possible, not appropriate. Often a direct application is not the goal of the text. In many such situations we take the text seriously and follow its guidance by identifying the principle that lies behind the direct teaching of the text and then applying this principle in new and appropriate ways in our very different situation. Let me illustrate.

If we truly believed we were required to obey every command we found in the Bible, we would have a great deal of difficulty with this text: "Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you" (Matthew 2:13). Am I really supposed to imagine that I am being addressed by this text? Should I go book a flight to Cairo? Which of my children should I take with me? Even if I could figure out how to obey this command literally, what about all those who have no wife or no child? How will they obey the command recorded in this text? They cannot, neither do they need to. The text reports what an angel told Joseph in a dream when the baby Jesus' life was threatened, not what God is saying to everyone who reads the text. But might we discern principles in the text that do apply to us? Certainly.

An example of such a principle might be this: It pays to listen for God's guidance; God might want to warn us and thus protect us from imminent danger. Or perhaps we might uncover the principle that God's plan of salvation will be brought to completion, for God is a faithful God. Human attempts to thwart God's plans will not succeed. The principles taught by a text can be identified and applied even when no direct application is possible or desired.

Here is a second example. A great deal that Paul writes to his young co-worker Timothy applies directly to us. He writes, "Hold to the standard of sound teaching that you have heard from me,

in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. Guard the good treasure entrusted to you, with the help of the Holy Spirit living in us. . . . Be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus” (2 Timothy 1:13-14; 2:1). The apostle might well have been speaking directly to me. But I feel less directly addressed when Paul writes later in his letter, “Bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas, also the books, and above all the parchments” (4:13). Even if I could undertake a pilgrimage to Troas, Paul’s coat and books (and for that matter Carpus) would no longer be there, nor does Paul need them anymore. Does that mean that this text has lost its relevance or that we can simply ignore it? Not at all. We can continue to learn from a text like this. It teaches, for example, that it is a Christian virtue to help each other in times of need and therefore completely appropriate also to ask for needed help. God is concerned not only for spiritual matters but also for our physical well-being and the stimulation of our minds.

Of course, none of us would ever have imagined we were obligated by the Scriptures to make a trip to Egypt or to Troas. But why then do so many Christians respond in other situations by saying, “Don’t ask about the historical situation of a text; just listen to it and do what it says, otherwise you are not being faithful to Scripture”? It’s one thing to say that, but I will start taking them seriously when I see that they have booked their flights to Egypt and to Troas. The fact is that virtually every text in the Bible is linked to a particular historical circumstance. Taking that into consideration is not avoiding the message of Scripture or adopting a situational ethic. It is in fact our best chance of truly hearing Scripture as it was intended to be heard. This does not mean that an appropriate application of a text’s principle will always be completely different from the application written into the historical text. Often they will be similar, sometimes identical. But we still have to question what lies behind the concrete instructions in a text. What does that text have to say to a situation that is different from the original one?

Though it may not always be easy to discern the principle being illustrated or taught in a text, it is always worth the effort of attempting to discern it. Doing so will often lead us to the goal of the text. For this reason, this second approach to Scripture is often sufficient to determine an appropriate application. Nevertheless, I have three small words of caution:

First, we must guard against examining the text, discerning the principle, *and then discarding the text*. The principles we discern are intended to help us discover suitable applications. They are not intended to become substitutes for the text. God gave us *texts*. The principles we claim to discover must be continually reevaluated in the light of the texts themselves. In fact, when our situation changes, we might well find ourselves discovering new principles in the same texts we once thought we fully understood.

Second, we must admit that our search for principles can be very subjective. The truth is that we will often find in a text precisely those principles we need in order to support our previously held opinions or justify our lifestyles. If a text is no longer permitted to call into question our conclusions or our behavior, the Bible is no longer an authority over us, no matter how strongly we may affirm that it is.

Third, though the search for principles is important, it does not guarantee consensus. Christians often disagree about what the Bible teaches on a given topic. But that is not always the result of interpreting the words and the sentences differently. In fact we might well agree on what an author was saying to the original readers. Our exegesis might be identical. Still we disagree on the teaching of Scripture. Why? Because we discern different principles in the texts.

With some texts, this is not likely to happen. For example, it is not hard to discover the principles in a text like Romans 14:13-23. Paul is instructing the Roman Christians how to deal with their disagreements over whether Christians may eat “unclean” food. He urges them to be sensitive to the possible negative

impact of their actions on other Christians. If the full exercise of their freedom causes other believers to stumble, they should be willing to restrict their freedoms for the sake of others. At the same time he teaches that Christians should follow their own convictions and not stand in judgment over each other. Principles like these can certainly be applied in a variety of other situations.

But what is the principle behind Paul's counsel to the Corinthians that women should wear head coverings and that men and women should have different lengths of hair (see 1 Corinthians 11:2-16)? Here are some possibilities:

1. The outward appearance of Christians should not violate the norms of a given culture, so that people do not take offense at the gospel for the wrong reasons.
2. Characteristic differences in appearance between men and women should be carefully maintained in order to symbolize the fact that the man is the head of the woman.
3. It is appropriate for women to practice precisely the same spiritual gifts and ministries as men, as long as they do not attempt, by their appearance, to deny their womanhood.

If we discover mutually contradictory principles in a given text, it should not surprise us to discover that this second approach is not a surefire secret recipe for consensus in the Christian community. It is a helpful approach. But it provides no guarantee that all our problems related to the application of Scripture will be solved.

**Moving into the world of the text.** Here I want to try to reformulate the second approach (discerning principles), not because it necessarily makes things easier, but because it seems to take more seriously the nature of Scripture. Some people read the Bible as though it were nothing but a book of hidden principles, hidden theological claims, hidden ethical teachings. They assume that our assignment is to find all these hidden lessons and

to reorganize them, collecting together all the lessons on similar themes. Out of these collections, we are to derive our ethics, write our theology, and offer our books of practical advice for the church. What emerges is a normative systematic theology or a code of ethics or a manual for church organization, or whatever. And if we were completely honest, we would have to admit that these often play a more significant role in our lives than the texts from which we extracted our hidden principles.

But the Bible is not merely a preparatory stage in the development of clever theology. In fact, it is not even first and foremost a theology book itself. The Bible is a story, a grand story consisting of many sub-stories. The Bible is the story of God's dealings with humanity.

We are a part of this story. Of course, the Scriptures do contain doctrinal statements and ethical instructions and promises. But these are all embedded in a story. Our goal is not merely to extract principles from the texts. Rather it is to follow the texts' invitation to enter into them, to be immersed in the story they tell, to become participants. When we enter the story, we learn from and alongside all those others who have participated in the story—the prophets, the men and women who followed Jesus, the early missionaries, the Corinthian Christians, and so on. Along with them we learn what God is like, how God deals with people, how God leads, what it means to follow Jesus. In other words, we are not extracting principles out of the texts; we are entering into the texts.

Yet the difference between these two approaches is not as large as it might seem. In this approach we still need to build a bridge connecting the world of the text to our own world. We cross this bridge in one direction when we enter the world of the text; we cross it again in the other, taking what we have learned and bringing it with us back into our own world. After all, our task is not to live out the lessons of Scripture in the *ancient* world, but in *our* world. When we cross the bridge from the

ancient world back into ours, we are not doing anything very different from those practicing the second approach, discovering the appropriate principles and reapplying them in a new context. But at least with this present approach we are treating the Bible as a story and not as a book of hidden doctrines and hidden ethical guidelines. That is a step forward, even if it does not automatically make the matter of application simpler.

**Listening to the voice of the Spirit.** This is my suggested fourth approach. It sounds very spiritual. Who could possibly say anything against it? Before I do in fact say something against it, let me assert something very clearly: I believe that the Holy Spirit does speak to us when we read and study the Scriptures. Indeed, the Spirit sometimes throws our preconceived ideas completely overboard, showing us things in Scripture that we never thought we would discover there, things that we did not even *want* to find there.

Still, not everything that “occurs to us” when we read the Bible is a direct communication from the Spirit of God. Even things that occur to us when we are putting our best efforts into listening for God’s voice are not necessarily revelation from God. I would go so far as to say that we ought to have a fairly healthy skepticism about the private revelations we think we are receiving, especially when others around us cannot confirm those insights. The church needs to discern carefully whether people claiming such revelations are truly hearing directly from God’s Spirit.

In our quiet times with God, we can indeed expect to meet God and to hear God’s voice. I don’t want to cast any doubt on that. But when people claim God has directly told them what a passage of Scripture means, how it should be applied, what the rest of us should believe and practice, then I want to be very cautious. Not because things like that don’t happen, but because they need to be confirmed.

The early church was indeed able to say, “It has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us” (Acts 15:28). But that was after the

gathered community was able to reach a consensus, which is very different from one Bible reader saying, “It seems good to the Holy Spirit and to me.”

I suspect that what we sometimes call “the voice of God” or “the leading of the Holy Spirit” is more likely a mixture of what God is indeed saying, our inherited traditions, our personal preferences, our wishes, and insights we think we have gained from the texts but have sometimes read into the texts. My personal convictions—no matter how sure I am that God was speaking—are seldom a reliable guide on their own.

Nevertheless, I do not believe our insights are merely distractions to be ignored. Even if we give a new label to these insights, even if we stop calling them “the voice of the Holy Spirit” and instead call them no more than impressions or “gut feelings,” they nevertheless can play a helpful role in learning to understand and apply biblical texts. Everyone has gut feelings about certain texts, and not everyone can explain exactly why they are convinced that one interpretation of the Bible on a given topic or in a given text is preferable to another.

Where do these gut feelings come from? Well, as already suggested, they might well come from various factors working together—tradition, the insights from Scripture, convictions about what God is like, our sense of what is most important in the Bible, our beliefs about the topics addressed in a text, our logical thinking, *and* the leading of the Spirit, which we so much want to experience. As mixed as these gut feelings may be, they can protect us from serious error. When we look closely at what has counted as “biblical exegesis” throughout church history—when we note what impossible strategies have been used, what sorts of allegorical playing with the texts has been tolerated and even valued—we cannot help but be horrified. At times every text was thought to have four different levels of meaning and those thus convinced somehow found all four, whatever they had to do to fabricate them. Nevertheless, even these Bible interpreters (if

we can use the expression loosely) often stayed closer to the core teaching of Scripture than a host of others whose methods were more defensible and whose logic was more solid, but their hearts were not in close contact with God, the church, and the claims of Scripture on their lives.

Well-considered and carefully practiced interpretive methods provide no guarantee of reliable exegesis and hermeneutics. The gut feeling of a sincere follower of Jesus seeking truth through the pages of Scripture is often more reliable than the logical thinking of many theologians.

Let me say this still more provocatively. Imagine I have two people in front of me. One is a young theologian, a recent graduate from seminary, well equipped with Bible knowledge, with a carefully worked-out systematic theology, even with a working knowledge of the original biblical languages. Moreover, our imaginary student is clever, can think logically, and can argue persuasively. The other person is over eighty and has never been to seminary or Bible school. In fact, he never even finished high school. He has never read a theology book, but he has had a lifetime relationship with Jesus and the church. He loves the Bible dearly and reads it daily.

So now the church is struggling to reach consensus on a controversial issue. What does the Bible teach? Both of our imaginary believers hold strong convictions. The young theologian can argue his case with persuasive words and powerful logic. The older member is no match in terms of logic and persuasion, but he's very uneasy about the direction the young theologian wants the church to go.

Whose viewpoint should the church take more carefully into consideration? My response: the church should pay at least as close attention to the gut feeling of the elderly Jesus-follower as to the clever arguments of the seminary graduate—maybe even more! Of course, they need one another, and the church needs them both. But it would be a grave error if the

intuitive gut feeling did not count because it could not be logically defended. God's Spirit brings into being such gut feelings at least as often as God's Spirit produces clever theological arguments.

## **Conclusion**

I have described and evaluated four different approaches to applying Scripture: we apply directly, we apply principles, we move into the text, and we listen to God's Spirit. Which is the *right* approach? All of them are. All of them can be appropriate, depending on the situation and the text and the topic. Each approach can correct the weaknesses of the others. We are better off if we take all four into consideration than if we pick our favorite and try to make it answer all our questions.

It may well be more difficult to reach a consensus if one person favors the first approach, another the second, and still others the third or the fourth. But my view is the decisions we make will far more likely be within appropriate biblical boundaries if we permit this diversity than if we recognize only one of these options and disallow the other three. This of course assumes that each person in the community is willing to listen sympathetically to the viewpoints of the others and that each person is willing to join a growing consensus, even if that consensus moves in a direction that some individuals do not see as the best possible choice. In the church we must learn to make decisions together that not everyone considers the correct ones. When we do, we must not label these decisions "God's perfect will" or "the true biblical teaching." Rather, we call our decisions the best we could do under the circumstances. We reached them through careful attention to what the Scriptures say and equally careful attention to what kind of application is appropriate for our situation.

May God give us great patience with one another, much joy in studying the Scriptures, and an extra measure of eagerness to find common convictions in our life together. When we are able

to make good decisions, we celebrate! And ten years later, at the very latest, we open up all the same questions again and ask, “Do we still see it that way? Have we gained new insights as to what the biblical texts say? Has our situation changed sufficiently that the unchanging Word of God should be applied in a new way today?”

### **Discussion Questions**

1. How can the Bible most effectively speak into our lives?
2. Which of the claims presented here, either about the Bible itself or about the best strategies for interpreting and applying it, seem to you to be most helpful? Which are you skeptical of?
3. How have you experienced the Holy Spirit helping and guiding your congregation as you have sought guidance from the Scriptures?

### **For Further Reading**

- Fee, Gordon, and Douglas Stuart. *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth: A Guide to Understanding the Bible*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003.
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