



Determining Right and Wrong from Scripture

Considering the Options

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While this article was written to help people in the Uniting Church in Australia as they discuss whether people with an open homosexual orientation should be ordained into the ministry, it nonetheless provides an accessible and helpful introduction to how Scripture can be interpreted.

People often disagree about how we should approach Scripture in determining right and wrong. I shall suggest later that this is not the only reason for approaching Scripture and, indeed, for most people of faith, not the main one. But let us begin with some models of approaching Scripture for determining right and wrong.

1. "These are the words of the Lord"

Scripture is to be believed and obeyed without question

This approach asserts that the Bible is God's word in the plain sense that all its instructions are to be read literally as God's instructions. To love God with all one's heart means nothing less than obeying all God's instructions

The advantage of this approach is that it seems to leave no room for interference from taking into account other factors, but stays simply with what it believes are God's instructions. It can, however, lead to inflexibility and also faces huge problems arising from the fact that there are differences among the various writings of scripture, both between the testaments and within each. Ironically it is the approach best represented by those who opposed Jesus and Paul on the grounds that neither shared this approach.

While many claim this as their stance, few hold to it consistently. Most set aside a large number of instructions. In the Old Testament these include stoning adulterers (Deuteronomy 22:22), not eating meat with blood in it (Leviticus 19:26), not eating certain kinds of animals (Leviticus 11), not mixing fibres of different origins in a garment (Leviticus 19:19), keeping the Sabbath, charging interest (Leviticus 25:27), to name only a

few; and in the New Testament: women not speaking in church (1 Timothy 2:11-12), women wearing head covering in worship (1 Corinthians 11), slaves obeying masters (Colossians 3:22), forbidding divorce absolutely (Mark 10:11-12), to name only a few.

2. "This is the word of the Lord"

Scripture is to be weighed selectively

This approach is very common and is, in fact, the approach of many who might assert that theirs is the approach outlined above (including many who call themselves "fundamentalist"). People do make selections and they do see some parts as more important than others. This is not arbitrary or disrespectful, but is seen to be consistent with the approaches within scripture, itself.

This was the approach of Matthew and Luke. They both portray Jesus as saying:

"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. It is these you ought to have practiced without neglecting the others" (Matthew 23:23; similar: Luke 11:42).

"Justice and mercy and faith" matter more than tithing, but tithing (even going into detail which Scripture itself did not enumerate) must be practiced (thus: "without neglecting the others"). We find the same approach reflected in Matthew 5:17-19 (and Luke 16:17), where we have a picture of Jesus asserting that not a jot or tittle is to pass from the Law and no Christian teacher should teach otherwise. But then in what follows Matthew shows Jesus focusing on such major themes as love for enemies, murder, adultery, and divorce (5:21-48).

The disadvantage of this approach is that it still apparently affirms all the instructions, even though some are deemed much less important than others. In reality, however, it makes exceptions where it believes God has changed the instruction, especially where this is indicated in the Scriptures, themselves. A good example of this is the command in Genesis 17 to circumcise Gentiles who join the people. While it infuriated some Christians of the time, most early Christian communities believed the demand for circumcision should be dropped (see Acts 15; some Christian missionaries who espoused the first approach were having success in persuading the Galatians that they should be circumcised - we benefit from knowing Paul's response).

A slightly different example is Jesus' approach to Sabbath law. A number of stories depict him as placing response to human need (which might include what some defined as work) ahead of the commandment not to work on the Sabbath. In many instances he could easily have put off the healing for a day, but chose to let the weightier matter of compassion override the Sabbath law. People do something similar, when they justify the speeding of an ambulance - but also in other areas such as killing and stealing in war. One law overrides another law.

The advantage of this approach is that it allows one to assess what is important and, if need be, set aside what is of lesser importance, especially where there is conflict between them. The disadvantage is that it raises the question of who decides what is weighty and what is not and that it leaves people open to the accusation that they are watering down the biblical instructions to suit their own ends or ideas. This was one of the reasons why people attacked Jesus and Paul.

There are, then, two additional factors which operate in this approach, which are not present in the first approach: (1) weighing and (2) overriding. The second factor is the most controversial. If compassion for Gentiles overrides the command to circumcise and the will to heal overrides the Sabbath law, should the same kind of concern also override biblical statements about slaves, women, and divorce, and even homosexual behaviour? Some will answer yes, in all instances. Some will say, no, to some. How people resolve the issue about homosexuals in leadership, for instance, usually has less to do with what the relevant texts in scripture say (which appear to be reasonably clear) and more to do with what people now understand homosexuality to be.

People on both sides of the debate in such issues may share a similar respect for Scripture (and should, therefore, not label those on the other side as “unscriptural”), but they are divided on how to balance what is said in one part of Scripture with values they may see it espousing at its heart.

3. “In this is the word of the Lord”

Scripture is to be engaged openly, including critically

This approach shares with the others the view that the Scriptures are special as a place where God speaks, but it neither equates all its instructions with God’s instructions nor assumes that such instructions remain valid and can only cease to be so when one part overrides another part. Commonly people espousing this approach will say that “The Word of God” is a person and that the Scriptures bear witness to the Word. The authority of scriptures thus lies beyond the Scriptures themselves. This is notably the approach of the “Basis of Union” of the Uniting Church in Australia.¹ “This is the word of the Lord” is commonly understood in this way.

It goes beyond the second approach in its critical engagement with the Scriptures, although mostly the difference is a matter of degree and is often exaggerated. Commonly people taking this approach will view critically those parts of Scripture which contradict or are difficult to reconcile with “the weightier matters”, whether or not the conflict was seen in biblical times. This tends beyond the second approach. It will confront biblical statements which embody violence, discrimination, injustice and not feel under obligation to defend them as if they still have to be seen as the Word of God. Frequently such people argue that particular attitudes (for instance, towards women) reflect value systems which are in conflict with what they see as more fundamental ones represented in Scripture. While similar to the second approach, it is usually more thoroughgoing. They will also challenge biblical values which conflict with what they see as common sense or better information. They argue that in doing so they continue to affirm biblical values, especially those about openness to truth.

Mark illustrates this approach when he portrays Jesus as declaring that biblical laws about food and external impurity were not only no longer to be applied, but never had validity in the first place, because nothing from outside can make a person unclean (Mark 7:15-19). Food simply enters into us and what is left goes out into the toilet. Here an appeal to down-to-earth common sense (or the prevailing values of the time) sets parts of Scripture aside, which claimed to give God’s instructions about food and many related issues of holiness based on what are reported as God’s categorisation of foods and places.

¹ “The Uniting Church acknowledges that the Church has received the books of the Old and New Testaments as unique prophetic and apostolic testimony, in which it hears the Word of God and by which its faith and obedience are nourished and regulated. When the Church preaches Jesus Christ, its message is controlled by the Biblical witnesses. The Word of God on whom salvation depends is to be heard and known from Scripture appropriated in the worshipping and witnessing life of the Church.” Uniting Church in Australia, Basis of Union, Para 5.

People argue in a similar way in the homosexuality debate: biblical writers thought of homosexual behaviour as deliberate perversion or the result of deliberate perversion. Current observation suggests, at least to some, that this is incorrect. It is, then, an injustice (and against a key biblical value) to discriminate against authentically homosexual people in and beyond church. This third approach need not lead to that conclusion; it depends on whether one agrees with "current observation". The advantage of this approach is that it can give full weight to all insights available - from everywhere - and bring these to bear on its interpretation of scripture. The disadvantages are that it leaves open major issues of what is to be deemed authoritative, even more so than in the second approach.

4. "Your word is a lamp for our feet, a light for our path"

Scripture is beyond right and wrong

Approaching Scripture from the perspective of right and wrong runs the risk of missing what is probably the most common reason why people approach Scripture. Instructions are only part of it. The stories of God's engagement with people, witnessed to by writers from ancient Israel and from the first century of the Christian church, give us much more. Themselves inspired by such encounters, they inspire us to engage in new ways with God, with ourselves and with others. When we seek to live in the community where these stories are told and retold, something of their life and their hope catches us. The Word meets us, challenges us and engages us.

This may be far more relevant to our understanding of right and wrong than any of the instructions, because it focuses on a relationship and a vision and invites us to live in and through that relationship. Jesus' words, "The Sabbath was made for people, not people for the Sabbath" (Mark 2:27) illustrate this stance. In God's eyes people matter most; not laws, not even Scripture itself. Loving God and one's fellow human being encompasses and interprets all the commandments (Mark 12:28-34; see also Galatians 5:14). It also sets people free to live in such a way that their loving is not based on adherence to instruction, but is a fruit of the Spirit which inspires them (see Galatians 5:22-23). Paul argued that such an approach more than fulfils what the biblical laws demand (Romans 8:1-4). We live not by the letter but by the Spirit (Romans 7:6).

The Scriptures form the authoritative context for our reflection on how our feet walk on the path before us. That context also includes the community of faith and its story which, through history, connects with the story of Scripture itself and helped define and preserve it. The light that shines will not always be sufficient for us to see all of the path, nor to see where it is leading. We may sometimes hold up our hands in despair that before some issues we see no clear way or that we see it very differently among ourselves. But the alternative of reverting to the assertions of the first approach are no longer tenable, if they ever were.

We cannot escape our fallibility and our need to make judgements when we approach Scripture. It is naive and lacking integrity to pretend otherwise. This does not mean we are rudderless. The security is to remain engaged in the community faith which seeks to live by the Word which/who addresses us through these stories and to remain open at all times to new insights and new information.² For many people the need to identify with

² "The Uniting Church acknowledges that God has never left the Church without faithful and scholarly interpreters of Scripture, or without those who have reflected deeply upon, and acted trustingly in obedience to, God's living Word. In particular the Uniting Church enters into the inheritance of literary, historical and scientific enquiry which has characterised recent centuries, and gives thanks for the knowledge of God's ways with humanity which are open to an informed faith. The Uniting Church lives

one or other of these approaches has never arisen because their issue has not been right and wrong but life and nurture. When we must - and sometimes this is the case - the life and nurture needs to retain its centrality. We will, then, still find companions in all four ways.

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within a world-wide fellowship of Churches in which it will learn to sharpen its understanding of the will and purpose of God by contact with contemporary thought. Within that fellowship the Uniting Church also stands in relation to contemporary societies in ways which will help it to understand its own nature and mission. The Uniting Church thanks God for the continuing witness and service of evangelist, of scholar, of prophet and of martyr. It prays that it may be ready when occasion demands to confess the Lord in fresh words and deeds." Uniting Church in Australia, [Basis of Union](#), Para 11.