

Biblical Application: A Case for Standards

(by Pastor Graham West)

“Howbeit in vain do they worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men.... And he said unto them, Full well ye reject the commandment of God, that ye may keep your own tradition.” (verses 7 and 9). Jesus clearly denounced and rebuked those who taught a man-made tradition (a commandment of men) as if it were a divine truth (a commandment of God).¹

I am thankful that I saw the error of these religious customs. I was encouraged that our Independent Baptist churches are free from such traditions because we adhere to the principle of sola scriptura - scripture only. That is, we believe and teach that the Bible is our sole authority for faith and practice.²

I. LEGALISM OR LIBERTY IN FUNDAMENTAL CHURCHES

After making this statement, the author of this article makes the point that he believes that in some cases Fundamental churches are guilty of teaching the commandments of men as if they were inspired Scripture. He finishes by warning that some such churches have exchanged liberty for bondage.³

I will be the first one to concede that the believer who is in earnest about living a holy life is in a far greater danger of legalism than a believer who is not so intent on pleasing God, (see sermons from Romans series *The Law of God and the Heart of Man* Part B and especially Part C, Romans 7:7-25).⁴ Biblical standards will always provoke rebellion from the flesh (Romans 7:8). The unsaved live in the flesh. The saved have a distinct advantage for they have the spirit dwelling within, but they also have a battle with the flesh. Therefore what are we to do with laws and Biblical standards derived from those laws? Does that mean we should jettison the traditional Fundamentalist approach to teaching Biblical standards? Should we just let the Holy Spirit do the work on the new converts as they read Scripture for themselves? Is there really no Biblical warrant for bringing clarity to the many complex yet critical contemporary issues that war against the souls of multitudes of believers today? Over these questions Bible believers today are divided.

¹ M Tossell, 'Bible truth or Baptist tradition', *Biblical Builder*, July-Aug 2011, p. 14-15.

² *ibid.*, p. 14.

³ *ibid.*, p. 18.

⁴ *The Law of God and the Heart of Man*, audio recording, Tamworth Bible Baptist Church, Tamworth, 2008, www.tbbsc.org.au.

II. TWO DIFFERENT METHODS OF BIBLICAL APPLICATION

Scott Aniol has put his finger on a key theological practice that has largely determined the thinking of Bible believers of our day when it comes to formation of Bible standards in general. This practice is foundational to every area which touches on practical holiness and will certainly also determine how we approach the formation of a music philosophy. That is why it appears as the very first chapter under the first section, 'Laying the Foundation', of Aniol's book, *Worship in Song*. The chapter is entitled, 'Biblical Authority in Matters of Faith and Practice'.⁵ It evaluates two different ways that Bible believers apply the Scriptures in their lives. It is not talking about differences in how believers understand Biblical inspiration, neither is it discussing literal versus allegorical interpretation of the Bible. It is dealing with two different methods of Biblical application. Aniol describes these two different methods.

Generally, approaches to the Bible's applicability to life fall into two categories. Some deny that the Bible can be applied to contemporary moral situations with any real authority, and yet others insist that as long as the Bible is interpreted and applied correctly, authoritative ethical standards may be formulated even for issues not explicitly addressed in Scripture.⁶

Aniol describes the essential features of the first position which he calls 'An Encyclopedic View of Scripture'.⁷ Then he outlines three distinctives of the second position, calling it 'An Encompassing View of Scripture'.⁸

Though the encyclopedic view of Scripture seems initially to be a very strong position, upon closer examination it proves to be wanting. Aniol cites Murray, Robinson and Swindoll as proponents of the encyclopedic view. They make their appeal to Romans 14 and I Corinthians 8-10, using these Scriptures as the basis to dismiss the formulation of values on any subject that is not explicitly addressed by Scripture, from skimpy swimwear to abortion.⁹

The argument goes like this: that on the basis of a mere difference of opinion over things not expressly addressed in the Bible, there should be no division in the body of Christ and room left for Christian liberty to be exercised. However, Romans 14 and I Corinthians 8-10 deal only with types and shadows that are not inherently good or evil in themselves. The actual grievances dealt with in these passages were over merely trifling matters of the ceremonial law, things to do with Jewish dietary regulations and observance of days.¹⁰ Therefore, it would appear that these Scriptures do not constitute an adequate precedent to dismiss all intelligent discernment and formulation of principles about the many complex and weighty contemporary issues that believers have to contend with in our day. So the

⁵ S Aniol, *Worship in song*, BMH Books, Winona Lake, USA, 2009, p. 1.

⁶ *ibid.*, p. 4.

⁷ *ibid.*

⁸ *ibid.*, p. 5.

⁹ *ibid.*, pp. 4-5.

¹⁰ D Moo, *The epistle to the Romans*, W. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1996, p. 827.

bottom line is, if you want an argument that justifies not taking any stand on hot potato moral issues of our day, you cannot use Romans 14 and I Corinthians 8-10 as the escape hatch.

However, like Murray, Robinson and Swindoll, many believers understand that extra Biblical contemporary issues, such as music, clothing, entertainment and 'methodology of ministry' should fall into the category of things that are indifferent.¹¹ They say they are of no consequence and because the Bible is silent, they also will remain silent.

III. CONSISTENCY IN BIBLICAL APPLICATION

Now, theological consistency in the ministry is an area we all fall short in, but when we realise that inconsistency we should make adjustments in our thinking accordingly. Some of us are inconsistent when it comes to our approach to Biblical application. We vacillate between the encyclopedic view and the encompassing view. There are those who perhaps would not go as far as Murray, Robinson or Swindoll, but on some occasions they find themselves tempted to drift into the encyclopedic mindset because it is convenient. However, they see no inconsistency, if it suits them, to switch to the Encompassing approach to application.

For example, consider the fundamentalist who magnifies his belief in *Sola Scripture* (Scripture only) and makes that his theological justification for remaining passive on 'hot potato' contemporary issues; yet he, for example, believes strongly that he must contend for the 'KJV only' position. Now, if he is to give any reasonable defence for his position, he must at some point, move beyond general Scriptural statements to the actual data itself (the handling of which is informed and guided by those general Scriptural statements). This necessarily involves the technicalities of sifting through both historical and manuscript evidence.¹² The moment he does that, he concedes to the validity of the *Encompassing* approach to application. In short, he becomes hypocritical. He condemns others for using information from outside of the Bible to buttress their convictions while he does exactly the same thing himself when it suits him. This is precisely why he cannot have his theology of Biblical application both ways. Either the Encompassing approach is right and the encyclopedic approach is wrong or the encyclopedic approach is right and Encompassing approach is wrong.

We need to think very clearly about this. If any theory about any thing does not hold up in every particular case, it is not watertight and should therefore be jettisoned.

Scott Aniol proposes another test case which highlights the flaws in the encyclopedic theory: the abortion scenario.

¹¹ M Tossell, 'Some things are worth fighting for', *Biblical Builder*, Nov–Dec 2008, p. 11.

¹² RB Ouellette, 'A more sure text: the superiority of the Received Text', *The Biblical Builder*, July-Aug 2011, pp. 4-6.

One example of such a process that even proponents of the encyclopedic view practice is with the issue of abortion. Few, if any, conservative Christians would defend the practice of abortion. They insist that abortion is murder. But do they find explicit statements within Scripture condemning it as murder? They may reply that the killing of a human being is always murder. However, where does the Bible explicitly state that unborn infants are human beings? Furthermore, is all killing murder?¹³

IV. REFORMERS SAY 'SOLA SCRIPTURA' MANDATES ENCYCLOPAEDIC VIEW

Actually the theological roots of the encyclopedic view do draw upon Baptist soil for the nurturing. It is a view that originated in Protestantism and is held to most tenaciously today by evangelical Calvinists who come from a Reformed background. Of course, they believe that they are standing on the highest possible ground Biblically. In fact, they claim to be standing exactly where Martin Luther stood when he argued against the Roman Catholic Church on the basis of *Sola Scriptura* (a Latin term indicating that Scripture should be our sole authority). Naturally, they feel they have the weight of Protestant tradition on their side. But is this really what Luther and the Reformers meant when they coined the theological term *Sola Scriptura*? Scott Aniol does not think so.

He cites Article VI of the Westminster Confession of Faith, a theological treatise very highly regarded in reformed tradition.

The whole counsel of God, concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man's salvation, faith, and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, *or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture*: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men.¹⁴

This paragraph clearly contains a clause which mandates obedience to that which follows as a good and necessary consequence of logical deductions based upon the principles that are clearly taught in Scripture. It seems plain that some contemporary Reformers have either missed what their forefathers have written or else they have succumbed to the enormous pressure of our day to accommodate their theology to worldly practices.

In any case, it is very certain that the Bible will not sustain this error any more than would the Westminster Confession of Faith.

Firstly, I would point to a basic principle of Scripture which relates to the subject at hand. It is what theology books call 'general revelation': the revelation of truth being deduced from observation of the things that God has created.

¹³ Aniol, pp. 17-18.

¹⁴ *ibid.*, p. 7.

V. ON WHAT BASIS IS MAN ACCOUNTABLE TO GOD?

The question ought to be asked, 'Does God hold man responsible for truth revealed to him from other sources apart from the Scripture?' We are being told that God does not expect us to take information outside the Bible into account to determine truth. If this is true, how can God be just in holding human beings to account on the basis of truth revealed through extra-Biblical sources, like, for example, creation?

On this subject, the Bible is not silent.

The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handywork. Day unto day uttereth speech, and night unto night sheweth knowledge. There is no speech nor language, where their voice is not heard. Their line is gone out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world.¹⁵

...Verse 1 is a summary statement: the majestic creation is evidence of the even more majestic creator God... Even though creation does not speak audibly in words (cf. NIV marg.) its message (voice) goes out to the ends of the earth. The message from nature about the glory of God reaches all nations, and is equally intelligible to them all (cf. Rom. 1:18-20).¹⁶

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold the truth in unrighteousness; Because that which may be known of God is manifest in them; for God hath shewed it unto them. For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse.¹⁷

From these powerful Scriptures we see that all men on the planet, as intelligent beings, created in the image of God, even in their fallen state, have knowledge of things about God through the observation of creation alone. The Scriptures says specifically they understand 'his eternal power and Godhead'. Then it goes on to say that on that basis 'they are without excuse', but Paul does not say anything about a coming judgment in this particular instance.

It is taken for granted that they can reasonably deduce that they are liable to judgment. Although we are not told specifically how they obtain the knowledge of judgment coming (Romans 1:32), it is implied that it is by virtue of their powers of reason and conscience that they know they are accountable to the all-powerful God of truth Whose righteousness they knowingly suppress.¹⁸

¹⁵ Psalm 19:1-4.

¹⁶ JF Walvoord & RB Zuck, *The Bible knowledge commentary: an exposition of the Scriptures by Dallas seminary faculty, Old Testament edition*, Victor Books, a division of Scripture Press Publications Inc, USA, 1985, p. 807.

¹⁷ Romans 1:18-20.

¹⁸ Moo, pp. 104-105.

From this we can see that God does expect man to use his reasoning power and his conscience to discern truth. Surely, it is not as certain as Scripture, but it is certain enough to render them without excuse on the day of judgment. We also see that this use of his powers of reason to deduce truth from his surroundings is not optional for man. God requires it of him, to the extent where he is culpable if he does not exercise this faculty of discernment to arrive at moral truth.

VI. ACCOUNTABILITY BEYOND THE KNOWLEDGE OF GOD TO 'ALL THINGS'

Beyond this basic faculty of deducing knowledge available to all men on the basis of the things in the creation that are clearly seen, God requires those men who have been regenerated, who have been born again by the incorruptible word of God, to pass moral judgments about things that are not immediately obvious.

Prove all things; hold fast that which is good. Abstain from all appearance of evil.¹⁹

Here the Greek word that is translated 'prove' means: 'to test (literally or figuratively); by implication to *approve*: - allow, discern, examine, X like, (ap-) prove, try.'²⁰ Mr Thayer is more detailed in his definition. He gives it under two main headings: '1) to test, examine, prove, scrutinise (to see whether a thing is genuine or not), as metals 2) to recognise as genuine after examination, to approve, deem worthy'.²¹

The main point is that the application of this word is to 'all things', not just the things that are written verbatim in Scripture. If it referred narrowly to things contained literally in Scripture, then that would require merely an accurate knowledge of Scripture, not an ability to discern as the meaning behind the original word translated 'prove' mandates.

Further to that, after the discerning process we are expected to have made distinctions between two categories: on the one hand, '**that which is good**' [emphasis added], on the other hand '**all appearance of evil**' [emphasis added]. The words 'all appearance' are Greek words which, in contemporary language, would be more accurately understood as 'every form'.²²

To summarise, the passage requires us to abstain from *every form* of evil, not just those forms catalogued in Scripture, and it tells us to do so after having scrutinised 'all things' of which 'all appearance of evil' is a subset. The use of the superlative, 'all' in both the main

¹⁹ I Thessalonians 5:21-22.

²⁰ J Strong, *The exhaustive concordance of the Bible*, Greek dictionary of the New Testament, Riverside Book and Bible House, Iowa Falls, Iowa, USA, p. 24.

²¹ JH Thayer, *The new Thayer's Greek - English lexicon of the New Testament*, Hendrickson Publishers, Peabody Massachusetts, USA, p. 154

²² AT Robinson, *The epistles of Paul*, Word Pictures in the New Testament, vol. IV, Harper & Bros Publishers, New York, 1931, p. 38.

set and the subset demand that we reject *every form* of extra-Biblical evil, after a thorough examination of the evidence.

VII. DISCERNING JUDGMENT, A PROOF OF THE SINCERITY OF OUR LOVE

All means all. That means there can be no exemptions. So, every single form of evil that impinges upon our spiritual lives, whether it is mentioned in Scripture or never mentioned in Scripture, is to come under the scrutiny of the believer's discernment process.

And this I pray, that your love may abound yet more and more in knowledge and in all judgment; That ye may approve things that are excellent; that ye may be sincere and without offence till the day of Christ;²³

Here again we have the same Greek word which means: '1) to test, examine, prove, scrutinise (to see whether a thing is genuine or not), as metals 2) to recognise as genuine after examination, to approve, deem worthy'.²⁴ It is the word translated 'approve', contained in verse 10. We are told to '**approve things that are excellent**' [emphasis added] in order that we might '**be sincere and without offence**' [emphasis added].

The passage therefore teaches that one means of demonstrating our love towards God and our fellow man is by being desirous to '**abound yet more and more in knowledge and in all judgment**' [emphasis added]. Why does God connect abounding love this way with ever increasing knowledge in all judgment? This is the reason: To make enquiry into true knowledge and judgment in difficult, yet needful, areas is pleasing to God and truly helpful to our fellow believers. In fact, it provides a much-needed service to the church and that service glorifies God because it edifies the body of Christ. Essentially, it answers Jesus' challenge to Peter to prove the genuineness of his love in John 21:16-17. Emphatically and repeatedly in that text, Jesus told Peter that, as a shepherd of the flock, the best way he could demonstrate love for the Master was to 'feed [his] sheep'.²⁵

The faculty to be able to discern right from wrong in difficult, yet critical, areas is something that God highly prizes and is a mark of Christian maturity. Therefore, a thorough examination of extra-Biblical things that are questionable is not only permissible, it is commanded. If we fail to obey this command, the Scripture itself here calls into question the sincerity of our love for God and/or the brethren. Again: if we fail to exercise this kind of discernment ourselves or, by implication, if we discourage the exercise of it by others we fall short of a genuine demonstration of love. The Scripture indicates here that this will be taken by God as an 'offence' for which we will give account in 'the day of Christ'.

²³ Philippians 1:9-10.

²⁴ Thayer, p. 154.

²⁵ John 21:16-17

For every one that useth milk is unskilful in the word of righteousness: for he is a babe. But strong meat belongeth to them that are of full age, even those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil.²⁶

A contrast is drawn here between the 'babe' who 'useth milk' and the mature saint to whom 'strong meat belongeth'. Immediately this suggests a difference in maturity. There are many categories of difference when comparing immature individuals with mature. The specific point of difference being compared here is the level of skill in handling 'the word of righteousness'. Commentators differ on the exact meaning of 'the word of righteousness', though the context would seem to favour the leaning of A.T. Robinson.²⁷ Walvoord and Zuck articulate Robinson's leaning more thoroughly.

He has not yet learned to put "the teaching about righteousness" to effective use. He lacks skill which goes with maturity and which results in *the ability to make appropriate moral choices* [emphasis added]. *Such ability is exactly what is possessed by those who..... Have trained themselves to discern good from evil.*²⁸

Regardless of the exact meaning of 'righteousness' here, one thing is clear. Mature saints are described here as those 'who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil'. Mr Strong tells us the Greek word translated 'discern' refers to a 'judicial estimation'.²⁹ Mr Thayer says that it means 'a distinguishing, discerning, judging'.³⁰ There are two crucial elements in both of these definitions. Firstly, they contain the element of judgment, and secondly, the making of a decision based upon that judgment. This exposes the shallowness of Satan's lie, so widespread in contemporary Christianity, namely that Christians ought never to pass judgment on people or on movements.

Yes, Jesus did warn about the danger of passing judgment, but what are believers to do with all these other Scriptures in the New Testament which actively encourage judgment, even going so far as to say it is a sign of spiritual maturity? The answer is obvious. There are times when believers ought not to judge, and there are times, a great deal many more times, when Christians are called upon to pass judgment without hesitation. Failure to do so is indicative of retardation in spiritual growth. Where Biblical discernment is not actively encouraged it will stunt and discourage the development of a robust masculine Christianity (Hebrews 5:13-14).

²⁶ Hebrews 5:13-14.

²⁷ AT Robinson, *The forth gospel the epistle to the Hebrews*, Word Pictures in the New Testament, vol. V, Harper & Bros Publishers, New York, 1931, p. 371.

²⁸ JF Walvoord & RB Zuck, *The Bible knowledge commentary: an exposition of the Scriptures by Dallas seminary faculty, New Testament edition*, Victor Books, a division of Scripture Press Publications Inc, USA, 1985, p. 793.

²⁹ J Strong, *The exhaustive concordance of the Bible*, Greek dictionary of the New Testament, Riverside Book and Bible House, Iowa Falls, Iowa, USA, p. 22.

³⁰ JH Thayer, *The new Thayer's Greek - English lexicon of the New Testament*, Hendrickson Publishers, Peabody Massachusetts, USA, p. 139.

VIII. CONCLUSION

An encyclopedic view of Scripture application has very serious consequences and therefore should be discarded. It flies directly in the face of the clear teachings of the New Testament passages raised in this article. It renders the Bible to be without teeth, effectively making it irrelevant in many areas of practical life. It builds a system around the letter, albeit the New Testament letter, of the law (Romans 7:6, II Corinthians 3:6), from which the Spirit of God is forbidden to take His people on to practical obedience in the labyrinth of complex and multifaceted moral issues that believers face today. Without a doubt this is, paradoxically, a modern form of legalism, which stifles the liberty of specific application of Biblical principle to contemporary situations: situations into which the Spirit of holiness wants to speak and to give His people guidance in an increasingly confusing world.

The encyclopedic view champions merely the letter of the law, and in so doing does violence to the Spirit of liberty. It should therefore be discarded. The encyclopedic method of Bible application certainly appears to be a convenient deviation from what Scripture actually teaches and could be interpreted by others as an act of theological cowardice on the part of some contemporary Reformers. In fact, in the long run, they may be found to be of an altogether different spirit to their godly forefathers who bravely risked their lives for the sake of truth.

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