

Ethics and the Bible

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How should we live? To answer that question, many people turn to the Bible. What they find is often inspiring, although it may set standards that are uncomfortably high: love your neighbor as yourself, treat others as you would like to be treated, and walk humbly with God.

Inspiration, however, can be found in a great many books. *To Kill a Mockingbird* teaches the virtue of tolerance, and *A Tale of Two Cities* impresses us with the nobility of self-sacrifice. William J. Bennett, a philosopher who served as U. S. Secretary of Education, edited a collection called *The Book of Virtues* that includes dozens of stories and poems designed to teach courage, self-reliance, and responsibility.¹ But the Bible, many people think, is different. It has an authority that other books lack. Therefore, they look to the Bible, not just for inspiration, but for answers to specific moral questions, such as questions about abortion and homosexuality.

Clear Teachings vs. "Interpretations"

The search for a solution to the vexing problem of abortion illustrates how hard it can be to find guidance in the Bible. What would it be like for the Bible to provide a clear answer? There might be a passage like this, perhaps among the words of Jesus: "But I say unto you, the child in its mother's womb, tiny and yet unformed, is precious unto God, and he who kills the child, even before it is born,

commits murder.” But there is no such passage. In fact, the Bible says nothing about abortion.

Nevertheless, certain passages are taken to be relevant. Is a fetus a full human person, with a full-fledged right to life? A sentence from the first chapter of Jeremiah is often cited to justify an affirmative response: God says to Jeremiah, “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you.” These words are taken to mean that the unborn, as well as the born, are “consecrated” to God.

In context, however, these words look very different. Here is the whole passage in which they occur:

Now the word of the Lord came to me saying, “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.”

Then I said, “Ah, Lord God! Behold, I do not know how to speak, for I am only a youth.” But the Lord said to me,

“Do not say, ‘I am only a youth’ for to all to whom I send you you shall go, and whatever I command you you shall speak. Be not afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you,” says the Lord. (Jer. 1: 4-7)

There is nothing here about abortion or the moral status of the unborn; rather, the subject is Jeremiah’s authority as a prophet. Jeremiah is saying, in effect, “God authorized me to speak for him; even though I resisted, he commanded me to speak.” But he puts the point more poetically; he says that God intended him to be a prophet even before he was born.

This often happens when the Bible is cited in connection with controversial issues. A few phrases are lifted from a passage dealing with some other subject and “interpreted” in a way that supports the favored moral position.

This is most likely to happen when there is no passage that bears unequivocally on the question at issue. When this happens, is it accurate to say that the person quoting the scriptures is “following the moral teachings of the Bible”? Or is it more accurate to say that he is searching the scriptures for support of a moral view he has already decided is right, and reading the desired conclusion into whatever likely-looking phrases he can find?

The same use is made of other sacred texts. Islamic fundamentalists quote the Quran to justify Holy War against the West, but what does the Quran really say? Mohammed Atta, who led the September 11 attack on the World Trade Center, left behind four pages of instructions to his men, which included 21 quotations from the Quran.ⁱⁱ Most of the quotations were exhortations to patience, promises of eternal life, and the like. As for justifying the attack itself, here are the three most belligerent passages: “And the only thing they said Lord, forgive our sins and excesses and make our feet steadfast and give us victory over the infidels.” “Strike above the neck, and strike at all of their extremities.” “Oh Lord, pour your patience upon us and make our feet steadfast and give us victory over the infidels.”

It is remarkable that this was the best the terrorists could do; a Christian would have no trouble producing much more warlike passages from the Old Testament (although their meaning for today would be just as problematic). It is easy to imagine what a Quranic justification would be like, if one existed: it would be a passage that said, “Your duty in all times and places is to kill infidels, and the strictures against suicide and killing the innocent, which are promulgated elsewhere in this Holy Book, are suspended when you are carrying out this duty.” But of course there is no such passage; and so those who are intent upon finding this doctrine in the Quran have no choice but to paste together whatever bits and pieces they can find and pretend that they add up to the passage that does not exist.

In light of the fact that the vast majority of the world's Muslims are peaceable, Prime Minister Tony Blair, together with other world leaders, has insisted that the terrorist attacks were "wholly contrary to the proper teaching of Islam."ⁱⁱⁱ A more pertinent assessment, however, was provided by Fareed Zakaria, an Indian Muslim who edits the international edition of *Newsweek*:

The Quran is a vast, vague book, filled with poetry and contradictions (much like the Bible). You can find in it condemnations of war and incitements to struggle, beautiful expressions of tolerance and stern strictures against unbelievers. Quotations from it usually tell us more about the person who selected the passages than about Islam.^{iv}

The Reasons Behind the Teachings

Unlike abortion, homosexuality is plainly condemned in the Bible. Leviticus 18:22 says "You may not lie with a man as with a woman; it is an abomination." Despite this, some commentators have urged that the Bible is really not so harsh about homosexuality, and they explain how each relevant passage (there seem to be nine of them) should be understood.^v But suppose we take the passage from Leviticus at face value, and we concede that the Bible really does teach that homosexuality is an abomination. What may we infer from this? May we infer that it really *is* an abomination? There are problems with this, even for believers. One problem is practical and one is theoretical.

1. The practical problem is that sacred texts, especially ones composed a very long time ago, give us more than we bargain for. Not many people have actually read Leviticus, but if they did, they would find that in addition to prohibiting homosexuality, it gives instructions for treating leprosy, requirements

concerning burnt offerings, and an elaborate routine for dealing with women who are menstruating. There is a surprising number of rules about the daughters of priests, including the notation that if a priest's daughter "plays the whore," she shall be burned alive (21:9). Leviticus forbids eating fat (7:23), letting a woman into church until 42 days after giving birth (12:4-5), and seeing your uncle naked. The latter, incidentally, is also called an abomination (18: 14, 26). It says that a beard must have square corners (19:27) and that we may purchase slaves from neighboring states (25:44). There is much more, but this is enough to give the idea.

The problem is that we cannot conclude that homosexuality is an abomination simply because Leviticus says so unless we are also willing to conclude that these other instructions are moral requirements; and in the 21st century anyone who tried to live according to all those rules would go crazy. One might, of course, concede that the rules about menstruation, and so on, were peculiar to an ancient culture and that they are not binding on us today. That would be sensible. But if we say that, the door is open for saying the same thing about the rule against homosexuality.

Fundamentalist leaders such as Rev. Jerry Falwell say that, in opposing homosexuality, they "have no choice" but to accept the Biblical teaching—as Falwell puts it, "I must be obedient to the Lord."^{vi} He does not, however, think he has no choice but to oppose eating fat. In fact Rev. Falwell does what any sensible person would do—he pays attention to the precepts that seem reasonable to him and ignores the rest. How could it be otherwise? No sensible person can completely set aside his own judgment, even when consulting a respected authority. (If the voice of God tells you to do something that your own good sense tells you is crazy, you will probably conclude that it isn't really God you are hearing.) That is why people inevitably "interpret" scripture to fit their own ideas about what is right.

2. The theoretical difficulty is equally serious: nothing can be morally right or wrong *simply because an authority says so*, not even an authority as esteemed as the Bible. If the precepts in the text are not arbitrary, there must be some reason for them—we should be able to ask *why* the Bible condemns homosexuality, and expect an answer. That answer will then give the real explanation of why it is wrong, if indeed it is wrong. In the logic of moral reasoning, the reference to the text drops out, and the reason behind the pronouncement (if any) takes its place.

It is worth pausing over this last point. Here is a different example: the Bible says we should not lie about our neighbors (Ex. 20:16). Is this an arbitrary rule that God imposes on us for no reason? On the contrary, it is easy to see why this rule makes sense. Lying causes harm and violates the trust that others have in us; and lying about our neighbors (“bearing false witness”) is insulting to them and harms them unjustly. If you want to know why lying is wrong, those are the reasons. The critical question about homosexuality is whether comparably good reasons can be found to explain why it should be condemned. If we are told only that an authority condemns it, we haven’t yet been told why it is wrong.

Two Clear Teachings of the New Testament

It is hopeless to approach the Bible naively, looking for simple answers to complicated moral and social issues. A text composed so long ago will not address the problems of the 21st century—there may be rules about leprosy and burnt offerings, but there will be no advice about polluting the environment, the rights of workers, the use of atomic weapons, just rates of taxation, or physician-assisted suicide.

Nonetheless, some moral issues are timeless, and on some of these issues the teaching of the New Testament is clear. What should be our attitude about violence? Should we think it is a legitimate means to achieve our ends? A Christian might take note of the fact that pacifism is the settled, consistent view of the New Testament. Pacifism is not just hinted at; it is clearly expounded in several places. It is, moreover, the view of Jesus himself: “But I say to you, Do not resist one who is evil. But if any one strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also” (Matt. 5:39). St. Paul adds that we should not return evil for evil, but leave vengeance to God (Rom. 12:17-21). These words, and others like them scattered throughout the New Testament, are so familiar that we may not notice how radical they are. But the earliest Christians did. During the first three centuries of the Christian movement a large proportion of its adherents were pacifists; it was only after the conversion of Constantine, when Christianity was on its way to becoming the religion of the Empire, that pacifism gave way to the idea of the Just War and the right of self-defense.

Another timeless question is what attitude we should take toward money. On the one hand, it seems wrong to spend money on luxuries for ourselves while children in third-world countries are dying for lack of food and basic medical care. On the other hand, you might think that you are not responsible for the welfare of strangers in far-off places; and if you lead an honest, decent life, you cannot be faulted for enjoying the money that you earn by your own labor. Faced with these plausible yet incompatible ideas, what are we to think?

Once again, a believer might reasonably notice that only one of these ways of thinking is consistent with the New Testament. In the Old Testament, riches are a sign of God’s favor. In the New Testament, however, the association of riches with godliness is dropped, and it is the poor and meek who are said to be doing God’s work. Again, familiarity may have robbed the relevant passages of their power to shock:

And as he was setting out on his journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

And Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments: ‘Do not kill, Do not commit adultery, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Do not defraud, Honor your father and mother.’”

And he said to him, “Teacher, all these I have observed from my youth.”

And Jesus looking upon him loved him, and said to him, “You lack one thing; go, sell what you have, and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.”

At that saying his countenance fell, and he went away sorrowful; for he had great possessions. And Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, “How hard it will be for those who have riches to enter the kingdom of God!” (Mark 10: 17-23)

Having noticed all this, a believer might decide to commit herself to a way of life that renounces both violence and riches. But would these commitments be *justified*? Once again, if justification is the issue, we would need to know the reasons behind the scriptural injunctions. Accepting them “on faith” would be like taking advice from a trusted friend. Although you should not conclude that the advice was correct simply because it came from your friend, you might nevertheless be confident that he had good reasons for his counsel. A friend, however, would not keep you in the dark about his reasons. He would tell you what they are, so that you could judge for yourself which path is best.

At any rate, a Christian who accepted these ideals would be following the teachings of the New Testament. But she would not have much company. Nowadays, Christians support their countries' wars; and where money is concerned, Rev. Bruce Wilkinson's ideas are more popular. Rev. Wilkinson is the author of a 96-page devotional book, *The Prayer of Jabez*, which celebrates an obscure four-line prayer buried in the genealogy of I Chronicles. Jabez, we are told, asked God to "enlarge my territory," and God did. That is all we know about him. So Rev. Wilkinson concludes, "When Christian executives ask me, 'Is it right to ask God for more business?' my response is 'Absolutely!'"^{vii} His little book was published two years ago, and so far it has sold a million copies.

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ⁱ Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird* (New York: Harper and Row, 1960); Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859, available in many editions): William J.

Bennett, ed., *The Book of Virtues* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993).

ⁱⁱ The document, including the passages from the Quran, was translated by Imad Musa and published in *The New York Times*, 29 September 2001.

ⁱⁱⁱ Prime Minister's Press Conference, 15 October 2001.

^{iv} Fareed Zakaria, "Why Do They Hate Us?" *Newsweek*, 15 October 2001, p. 24.

^v See Peter J. Gomes, *The Good Book* (New York: Avon, 1996).

^{vi} Jerry Falwell, "My Open Letter to Mel White," *National Liberty Journal*, July 1999.

^{vii} Bruce H. Wilkinson, *The Prayer of Jabez* (Sisters, Oregon: Multnomah Publishers, 2000). p. 31.