

November 11, 2018
Wrestling with the Hard Questions
Galatians 5:13-25

On many issues we could and do put to the Bible, it gives us a clear and straightforward answer: Do not lie; do not steal; love one another as Jesus loves you. On other issues we could and do put to the Bible, it doesn't give such clear and straightforward answer. What about war? What about politics? These are just a few of the "tough" questions ...

What the Bible IS and IS NOT

The Bible is a collection of 66 books, written by many authors in many places at many times using different genres, all inspired and united by God's Spirit. It was written for and is relevant for hundreds of generations in thousands of cultures. We cannot expect it to speak clearly and definitively to every specific situation in every place and time.

The many different voices and different themes help provide a rich, dynamic, multi-faceted picture of who God is and what God is up to, more than if one person had written a textbook about God. As the story develops and many different writers weigh in, we gain a variety of insights, some more helpful and relevant than others, on a whole variety of topics. But we sometimes must look for themes rather than specifics.

The Bible tells the overall story of God's purpose for His world, from the beginning of creation to the coming of the kingdom of God in the final future. It is a complex story, with all sorts of developments, twists, and turns in the plot, many small stories and lots of great teaching embedded within it. The goal of the Bible is the final achievement of God's kingdom in all creation – or, to put it another way – the new creation of all things. Though the story is incomplete so far, God's purpose and His Spirit are constantly moving the story toward the fulfilment of God's Kingdom.

When we deal with some of the difficult themes of Scripture, then, we see movement from a less than ideal toward an ideal situation. For instance

- in the Old Testament, there is a tacit acceptance of the reality of slavery. But there is a movement forward toward a reality in the kingdom of God where barriers of economy and freedom are abolished, and all are equal before God.
- Despite the subordination of women in the predominantly patriarchal societies of the Middle East, the clear goal of God's purpose for humanity is full equality and mutuality. That's the direction we are moving in.
- Despite some tendencies toward a narrow nationalism in some parts of the Old Testament, God chose Israel as his own people for the sake of all peoples, and the fulfilment of God's purpose is international and global in its reach. Paul writes, *"So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you*

who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” (Galatians 3:26-29).

This new Kingdom reality is ***in part already here: within the church*** Paul is assuming those Kingdom values of equality and mutual love already exist. Within the church we are called to live by principles and standards that model this new way of being and relating. Within the church, we are called to live in step with the Spirit: *“Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control”* (Galatians 5:22-23). We pray, *“Your Kingdom come, your will be done ...”* and we work toward fulfilling this among us.

There is a sense in which this Kingdom is, ***in part, waiting to be fulfilled in the world at large.*** In a world where few people know God, God’s will is not done, and His kingdom has not yet come. We don’t see the breaking down of barriers, equality, mutuality, and unity in the Spirit that will come one day, some day, when Jesus returns.

In this in between time – when God’s Kingdom has come in part and yet is not fulfilled – the Bible is not a straightforward question-and-answer book for all situations in all places and times. We have to study, think, and infer what God’s Kingdom values are, and apply those to our circumstances. On some topics it is really challenging:

- For instance, if we take the general theme of war and peace, despite the massive prominence of war in the Old Testament, it is clear, even from other parts of Old Testament itself and certainly in the New, that the overall direction of God’s purposes is peace. But how do we handle specific conflicts?
- If you think of the theme of politics, you see an acceptance of absolute monarchy but a movement toward a world where all people are involved, all people are equal, and God’s peace and grace are preeminent. There is radical compassion, people sell their own possessions so no one goes without. But we live in an imperfect world; how do we live well, politically?

War

In the Bible, war is never something you do just because you want to go to war. It’s never portrayed as glamorous or good. War It is always portrayed (at best) as a necessary evil. It’s never more than an imperfect means to a good end.

Some Christians would argue that war is never acceptable. Jesus does say, *“Do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well. If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles ...”* and *“You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbour and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you, love*

your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matthew 5:36-44). One of the Ten Commandments is *"You shall not kill."* Jesus did not violently resist those who arrested and executed Him. In 1527, a Baptist named Michael Sattler appeared before court of the Holy Roman Empire arguing his only allegiance was to Jesus. He argued for pacifism despite the threat of an invasion by the Ottomans: *"If the Ottoman comes, he should not be resisted, for it stands written: "thou shalt not kill" (Matt 5:21). We should not defend ourselves against the Ottomans or our other persecutors, but with reverent prayer should implore God that he might be our defence and our resistance."* (He was tortured and burned at the stake as a heretic! Yikes!)

Other Christians, however, argue that the Old Testament command was specifically about murder, and the New Testament commands did not anticipate the evils of Adolf Hitler or Bashar al-Assad. Therefore, in some circumstances, these believers argue, war may be a necessary evil. War is the lesser of two evils. After all, the sin and evil of allowing a man like Hitler to annihilate millions of people, enslave millions of others, and cause untold suffering was far worse than the sin and evil associated with war.

Which is right? You can cherry pick texts to support either view. Unfortunately, you cannot say definitively that the entire Bible says one view or the other is correct.

If we lived in a totally Christian world, there would be no more reason for war. That is the future we look forward to one day, some day, when Jesus returns, a time when *"The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them. The cow will feed with the bear, their young will lie down together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox. The infant will play near the cobra's den, and the young child will put its hand into the viper's nest. They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea"* (Isaiah 11:6-9). We're not there yet.

In the less-than-perfect meantime, a just war may, on a very rare occasion, be necessary. In a world that does not acknowledge Jesus as Lord, war may still be a necessary evil (or not?). (There are of course lots of problems associated with this: who decides what is a "just" war? What strategies/weapons are "ethical"?).

Politics

Politics is another tricky area (I'm purposely bringing this up in a non-election season). If we look simply at the entire Bible we would argue that the most common political system is a benevolent dictator – either a judge or a king. Even in the New Testament, Paul and Peter, both executed by Nero, urge people to *"Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human authority: whether to the emperor, as the supreme authority, or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right"* (1 Peter 2:13-14) and to pray *"with thanksgiving ... for*

kings and all those in authority”(1 Timothy 2:1-2).

However the trajectory in Scripture is toward a world where all people, everywhere, are led by His Spirit. The trajectory is toward Spirit-led democracy, or, more correctly, a ***theo***cracy, in which God, through His Spirit, is in charge. In the church, therefore, believers pray and come to decisions by consensus, led by the Spirit. The Spirit leads them to compassion and mercy; they sell their possessions and share with one another, so no one is in need (Acts 2:44-45, 4:34). Ultimately this kind of radical equality, compassion, care, and concern is God’s goal for all human society.

But in the real world, where the majority of people don’t know Jesus, this ideal is not a reality – yet. How do we handle ourselves politically? Believe it or not, there is no chapter/verse that says you should (or should not) vote Conservative, Liberal, or NDP.

If the direction of God’s story is His will that world become more and more like His Kingdom, then we have to do some hard work to ask ourselves, which party BEST approximates Jesus’ values. We have to look at Jesus’s life and hear His teachings about righteousness and compassion and His warnings against greed and pride. We have to hear His emphases on health, healing, welcome of outsiders, and unconditional love and reflect on which policies best mirror His values. We need to see through how politicians appeal to our innate selfishness. We have to ask ourselves which candidate best exemplifies biblical character like integrity, honesty, compassion, forgiveness, love, kindness, goodness, gentleness, self-control, and other fruit of the Spirit.

It’s not easy. It’s not clear cut. If we try to cherry pick specific texts to support one party or another, we will fail. In a less-than-perfect world, we have to read the story, know the story, be shaped by the story well enough that we can see the goal of unconditional love, compassion, equality, peace, and hope, and use that as our evaluative framework.

In the hard questions of life, we have to think deeply. There are no clear answers. We have to wrestle with God’s will, purpose, and way. What are Kingdom of God values? Where is God leading us? What direction is He pointing in? Then we have to apply those as best as we can in the mucky-muck of the real world. We may come to different conclusions. We still respect and love one another.

“Let the Holy Spirit guide your lives,” says Paul. *“Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit”*(Galatians 5:16, 25). In a world that operates by different values, that’s our challenge. Can we stand apart and really ask ourselves what God’s purpose, values, and will are? Then, will we actually live it?

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