

Applying God's Word to All of Life?

The Use and Abuse of the Bible

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The motto that appears on the bulletin cover at my Delaware congregation reads: "Applying God's Word to all of life." It sounds very good, but it needs refinement. We hold that the Word of God is addressed to the whole man and to the whole of life. The problem is that there are a number of fallacies that can easily crop up. If followed, they lead down superficially attractive but misleading bypaths. We need to see what these traps are so we can avoid them.

The Liberal Fallacy

First, let's dispose of an obvious problem. There are those who hold that the Bible is unreliable. They pick holes in it. Some claim it is patriarchal and against women. It follows from this that there is little point in applying it to this or that aspect of life. If it is less than reliable about God and salvation, even less so for matters of this world, so these people say. For them, statements such as Paul's in 2 Timothy 3:16-17 are without force:

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be, thoroughly equipped for every good work.

In contrast, Jesus and the apostles believed the Scriptures and lived according to their teaching. Instead of calling on hosts of angels, Jesus was prepared to die on the cross to fulfill the Word of God.

When I began work on my doctorate at the University of Aberdeen, I was given a study overlooking the five-hundred-year-old quadrangle. I shared it with an American. After a day or two (and I assure you there was no connection with my arrival) he told me he was abandoning his studies and returning home. He had intended to enter the ministry but realized he didn't believe in Christianity after all; so he left. Now, I respect such a decision. He was honest and took a sensible view. Given his lack of faith, why should he waste his time in the Christian ministry?

However, there are many today who share that man's unbelief but still occupy Christian pulpits. There are many men and women who take a salary from Christian believers and spend their time undermining the Christian faith. They do not believe the Apostles' Creed. For them, the Bible is simply a book of human religious insights-some are of value, but others are based on an outmoded patriarchal social system. Many in Protestant denominations even practice goddess worship. If any of you come into this category and persist in this attitude, there seems to me only one honest thing to do: Get out! You have no right to occupy a Christian pulpit. As Oliver Cromwell thundered to a recalcitrant Parliament:

You have sat too long here for any good you have been doing. Depart, I say, and let us have done with you! In the name of God, go! (1)

The Pietist Fallacy

So much for the liberals. However, problems arise even with those who hold to the authority of Scripture. Firstly, there is what I term the *pietist fallacy*. By pietism here I mean the idea that God's Word relates to purely spiritual matters. When it comes to questions of politics or science, it has nothing substantive to say. These, some claim, are purely secular matters. The Bible is not interested in them. It is given to teach us salvation and guide us to heaven, and no other questions are relevant.

Why is this a fallacy? At the deepest level, it misses the point that God created all things, and thus there is nothing outside his concern. In turn, Christ is the mediator of creation (e.g., Col. 1:15-20), for he created and sustains all things. Abraham Kuyper once said that there is not a

single square inch of this earth of which Christ cannot say, "This is mine." The incarnation underlines the point - the second person of the Trinity took to himself a complete human nature, body and soul. So our salvation does not exist apart from the bodily Resurrection of Christ, and it is not complete apart from the resurrection of the body. You see, the problem with the pietist fallacy is it is based on an unbiblical dualism between spiritual and material, originally a Greek idea but one that has an ongoing life of its own. In consequence, those who take this position think that spirit is superior to matter.

The Fundamentalist Fallacy

Secondly, and from another angle, arises what I term the *fundamentalist fallacy*. I use these words in a different way than usual. What I mean here, in this context only, is the faulty notion that the Bible does pronounce on all of life *and does so explicitly on all conceivable matters*. In other words, it is *omnipotent*. Thus, if you want to know how the universe was created, turn to the Bible. If you want to understand true science, study the early chapters of Genesis. If you need to know how frequently you should spank your child, do a detailed study of Proverbs. For anything and everything, all we really need is the Bible, a good concordance, and an ability to find a collection of Bible verses that addresses our topic.

This approach is helped to no end by copies of Scripture containing instructions as to where to turn in different situations. Are you sad? Turn to Psalm this or that. Are you depressed? Turn to this passage. Are you happy? Look at this verse. These are well-meaning attempts to help and encourage, but they create a mentality that treats the Word of God either as a command manual (where we have no option but to follow instructions) or merely as an answer to our personal problems.

This fallacy has spawned a number of damaging consequences. For science, all that's needed is to read Genesis 1 (not Job 38 mind you, we don't want anything that questions our own exegesis, do we?), to be sure we have the approved system of interpretation and - presto! - we, too, can create science. Forget about geology, of course, it doesn't conform to the truth as we know it. The most fatuous comment I ever heard from a pulpit came from a lay preacher who declaimed, "We learn from Scripture that a lion roars after its prey."

As for child-raising, many want exact and precise details regarding how to treat their child in this or that situation. There are self-styled Christian child-raising experts who provide what is needed, complete with Bible verses to back it up. Should your toddler have this piece of furniture or not? When should the infant nap? How should you load your kids into the car? Just turn to the Word of God: It has all the answers you will ever need.

On a wider political and social level, some say thoroughgoing instruction for law-making and for economic life is given us in the Mosaic civil law. All we need today is to take that law and drop it into our world, and God will bless us greatly. Detailed laws and penalties, taxes, interest rates, property law, and more, it's all there. There is no escaping it, in political discussion as in literally everything else one can think of, the best book to read is the Bible.

Where the pietist confines Scripture to an interest in the purely spiritual, fundamentalists consider the Bible to have the precise answers to each and every question and dilemma we will ever face. All we need to do is to dig deeply and we will find the solution. This view is very common among conservative Christians. It sounds good, since it purports to have a high view of Scripture. It keeps its followers in a secure, protective cocoon away from unbelieving scientists and others who may disturb their faith. It provides a sense of certainty.

However, all is not so clear as it seems. Calvin has some very sage comments in his commentary on Genesis, on the first chapter. He writes that God accommodated himself to our condition, describing the creation in terms the ignorant and unlearned could understand. He underlines the integrity of scientific activity. From our angle it seems that the moon is much larger than Saturn, but if we ask the astronomers they tell us that Saturn is much larger than the moon. Thus, if we want to learn astronomy we should go elsewhere. Genesis was not written for this purpose.

Moses wrote in a popular style things which, without instruction, all ordinary persons, endued with common sense, are able to understand; but astronomers investigate with great labor whatever the sagacity of the human mind can comprehend.... [Moses] chiefly chose those subjects which would be intelligible to all. If the astronomer inquires respecting the actual dimensions of the stars, he will find the moon to be less than Saturn; but this is something abstruse, for to the sight it appears differently. Moses, therefore, rather adapts his discourse to common usage ... for he does not call us up into heaven, he only proposes things which lie open before our eyes. (2)

The Westminster Confession of Faith says the Bible is utterly sufficient for salvation, faith, and life: "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" (1:6). In short, while the Bible addresses certain questions of creation, politics, and family life, it paints these with a broad brush for its central concern is our salvation. In this, the pietists were right. On the other hand, the advocates of the fundamentalist fallacy have a point in that Scripture does address a wide range of concerns. It speaks "of many things, of shoes and ships and sealing wax, of cabbages and kings." (3)

Where this fundamentalist approach goes wrong is in undermining the clear teaching of Scripture (in Genesis 1) on our God-given duty to subdue the earth. In fact, in the very next chapter we find Adam engaging in a primitive form of science, in classifying the animals. God does not hand us everything on a plate. He expects us to think, to work, to labor. He does not treat us as children who are to be told everything they must do. He expects us to grow up. If the fundamentalist view were true, we would be like automatons following some preset command manual. As the Confession states in the section previously quoted, some things are set down expressly, but there are a vast range of matters that are not.

The Solution

The Bible does address all things. Sometimes it does so directly and specifically. The Ten Commandments are an obvious case-together with all they entail. The commandments effectively restate and reinforce God's creation ordinances - marriage and the family, work and rest, life, property, personal reputations, and, over all, the duty to love and worship God. The great moral exhortations of Old and New Testaments take the Decalogue and apply it to new situations and new times.

However, the Bible mostly addresses day-to-day affairs only indirectly. It does spell out the boundaries of right conduct with great clarity. But there is a huge area, and a host of matters within these boundary fences, on which it is silent. This silence is not a silence of indifference or lack of interest. It points to areas in which we are given discretion and the responsibility to exercise the wisdom God gives us.

In other words, the Bible provides a framework - better, a window - through which we view the world around us, ourselves, and other people. By looking through this window we will view the panorama appropriately. For example, it teaches that the world is created, and thus contingent. It points to God as the creator of all things. Over the course of biblical revelation, it impresses on us that God is triune and that our own distinct personality, since we are made in his image, echoes his on a creaturely level. It teaches that we are put here to rule the earth. It shows that God gave his law to regulate human life. The creation ordinances are reaffirmed in the Ten Commandments. In so doing it teaches that we have a moral responsibility toward God and other people - to their life, property, marriage, and reputations, and that we are to worship God in the way he chooses. It teaches that the human race is alienated from God, and under his wrath, due to sin. It declares that only through Christ, the eternal Son of God made flesh, can our relation with God be repaired.

From this window, science can take place. The scientist will go elsewhere than to Genesis 1 in his theoretical and empirical work but in some way with the assumptions Genesis 1 provides. Indeed, where a scientist does not expressly share these assumptions, it is only by some axiomatic basis

derived from the Judeo-Christian worldview that pure science as we have known it can even occur. Only a cosmos that is orderly, that displays rationality, that has unity-in-diversity and diversity-in-unity can produce on the human level a rational investigative science. Postmodernism's denial of objective truth spells the end of science.

Again, the freedom and responsibility this window provides is the basis for a corresponding balance of freedom and responsibility in society. It is no accident that the rule of law emerged in specifically Christian contexts that were grounded on the Word of God. And it is where this worldview is abandoned that we see the rule of law increasingly under threat. The great philosopher of science, Michael Polanyi, argued that freedom under law is utterly necessary for science to exist and flourish. (4) Now an important point to make is that all this can only truly exist where the holy Trinity is worshipped. Only then, when the human mind is saturated-soaked through-with the recognition that the God we worship is one and yet lives in three persons can an acceptance of human persons emerge and can an appreciation of the world in both its unity and diversity flourish. To sum up, the Bible doesn't solve every question for us, but it gives us the tools to do the job ourselves, under the sovereign direction of the Holy Spirit. Only then can the central theme of Scripture be properly appreciated. Paul puts it in a nutshell: "*Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners*" (1 Tim. 1:15).

In England, all roads lead to London for "he who is tired of London is tired of life, for there is in London all that life has to offer." (5) Dr. Johnson was right-and he still is. Far more so even than that, in the Bible all roads lead to Christ, to his Cross, to his Resurrection. The fundamentalist position misses, for it can obscure the wood for the trees amidst all the heated polemic on recondite matters (days of creation), on theories of child-raising, on the application of biblical law, or other issues. Because all roads lead to Christ and to the triune God, we must read everything else on which it speaks - the whole of life - in this connection. Unless we do, we misread them. The Bible can be considered to be a bicycle wheel: All points on the rim of the wheel are connected by spokes to the hub. So all the parts of the Bible, and so the whole of life, find their focus, their meaning, in Christ. All parts of life, and every aspect of it, are connected in some way to the holy Trinity. "In him we live and move and have our being." (6) Clearly, this is a topic beyond the reach of a single article: It is the task of a lifetime! Let us ask the gracious and wise God for the wisdom we need.

1 Oliver Cromwell, cited by Winston Churchill, *The Second World War: The Gathering Storm* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1948), 659. Also cited by Lady Antonia Fraser, in her biography of Cromwell, *The Lord Protector* (also issued under the title, *Our Chief of Men*).

2 John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses called Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), 85-86.

3 Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass*.

4 Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958).

5 Famous quote attributed to Dr. Samuel Johnson.

6 Acts 17:28.

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