

When Scripture Is the Controversy

The real controversy among evangelicals in the coming days will be about the Bible, not homosexuality

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If we learned anything from last week, maybe it's that the real controversy among evangelicals in the coming days will be about the Bible, not homosexuality.

Beneath the surface of the recent scuffle is the more vital issue of how disciples of Jesus posture themselves toward God's word. It's not simply about our grasp of what Scripture is, or our conviction of Scripture's inerrancy, or even where we land with different interpretations. It's fundamentally about how we approach the words of God, even before we get to the interpretation part. It's about how we look when we're looking at Scripture.

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When Consensus Is King

One approach is to say that the way Christians understand Scripture should be determined by the values of the church itself. The authority isn't the Bible, but what the church says as a whole. Advocating this view, one scholar writes, "For Christians, scriptural interpretation should shape and be shaped by the convictions, practices, and concerns of Christian communities as part of their ongoing struggle to live and worship faithfully before God" (Fowl, *Engaging Scripture*, 62, emphasis added).

But if the church's "convictions, practices, and concerns" should shape how they read the Bible, where do these actually come from? According to this approach, these values are formed by the church's consensus. It's all about what the church thinks collectively — whatever the church feels is important in this "ongoing struggle" to live and worship faithfully. But how do we know what's important in this ongoing struggle?

As one scholar goes on to argue, our discernment is supposed to come by the Spirit's leading. We need to "read the Spirit." Now, that may sound nice, but it's very unclear. How do we follow the Spirit when the text he illumines is disregarded? How can we hear his voice when his words

are silenced? Is it okay to muffle some of what God says because many professing Christians think it should be different?

Chasing the Wrong Spirit

When it comes down to it — when the consensus of what’s important relies on the church’s feelings that are disconnected from what the Bible says — then the only legitimate motivation for the consensus is the pressure of society. The spirit of the age becomes the real spirit we follow, and then that becomes the path of life into which we try to cram God’s word, lopping off whatever parts don’t fit. Here is where is found the “convictions, practices, and concerns” that shape the understanding of Scripture.

And when it comes to taking actual stances, if the consensus is unclear — say, if the issue remains divisive — then the only option is to claim neutrality. Until the real authority of consensus comes out to play, all we can do is buy time on the sidelines and say this whole thing is about personal sensibilities.

This posture toward Scripture is far removed from the discipleship to which Jesus calls us. He says teach them to obey everything I have commanded you. Take up your cross, let the dead bury the dead, don’t look back. Not turn your back on my word. Not take your fill of popular opinion. Not keep calm and make sure everyone likes you.

Humbled in Hope

There is a better way. It’s not new, though, or profound. It’s the approach that simply wants to let Scripture have its say.

Sure, the Bible must be interpreted, and that matters. And there are disagreements on some parts, and there have been ridiculous things in history that were supported by wrong readings. But humility here isn’t throwing our hands up in the air and saying that everyone’s reading is legitimate. Humility isn’t looking at one another and confusing hermeneutics with human dignity.

Humility has to do with how we come to the Book.

It means we move toward Scripture, even before we open its pages, by clinging to God, not ourselves. We come yielded, with eager ears, hoping for God to sanctify our minds, not our minds sanction his will. As Calvin puts it, we “bid our reason give way, submit, and subject itself to the Holy Spirit” — who works with his word, not apart from it. Never against it.

The humble heart gives way to God’s word, even when it’s unpopular, and prays,

*O God, make me know your ways.
Teach me your paths.
Lead me in your truth and teach me,*

*for you are the God of my salvation,
and for you I wait all the day long. ([Psalm 25:4–5](#))*

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