

Making the BIBLE RELEVANT for the Moral Life

On a recent Sabbath morning I attended a church some distance from my home. The Sabbath school superintendent invited visitors to join any class, including the collegiate/young adult class in the balcony.

Although I am a long way from qualifying as a young adult anymore, I have spent most of my adult life on a college campus, and rationalized that this would qualify me to attend the class in the balcony. I took a seat on the front row and soon found that I could hear this class as well as both of those meeting on the main floor.

It didn't take long to discover that there was a much greater gap between the balcony and the main floor than the 15 or 20 feet that separated them. On the main floor, the teachers did almost all the talking. They read questions from the Sabbath school Quarterly and provided factual answers.

The balcony was a different world. Young adults talked about their lives—about personal problems and struggles ranging from alcohol recovery to infertility to sexual abuse. Interestingly, however, they made virtually no mention of the Bible.

In the balcony they talked about life and on the

main floor they talked about the Bible, and what went on the main floor had little to do with life, and the discussion in the balcony made little reference to the Bible. Is there any way to bridge this gap and bring the Bible to the balcony?

We seem to be developing two very different cultures in the church. An older generation studies the Bible because it is the right thing to do, while the younger generation finds it difficult to relate the Bible to the realities of life. Certainly, if we are to make the Bible more relevant to the younger generation, what happens in schools and colleges will play an important part.

To develop effective strategies for making the Bible relevant to the moral life, however, we must first understand the Bible's role in the moral life. One deterrent to the successful use of the Scriptures in moral reasoning has been unrealistic expectations about the Bible's role in our decision-making.

Unrealistic Expectations

The Bible as a Reference Book. Too often, the Bible has been understood as a reference book that we take down off the shelf when confronted with a decision. But most people who try to use the Bible this way feel disappointed. They often find that the Bible doesn't have much to say about

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their particular dilemmas.

For example, a student asked me what the Bible had to say about dating. He had a whole list of questions, such as what to do on dates and what kinds of physical activity were appropriate at various stages of dating. He insisted that he wanted biblical answers, not just my opinions.

He was a bit disappointed when I pointed out to him that the Bible doesn't say anything about dating because there was no dating in the Bible. Through most of the history of Scripture, marriages were arranged by the parents. This was usually accomplished at an early age, before the children started thinking about the opposite sex.

Of course, the Bible does have much to say about the values of marriage and family that ought to be relevant for the broad issues of sexuality, and even for dating. But one won't get much help from simply looking up terms in a concordance and then reading the key passages the way he or she would do with an encyclopedia. Rather, help comes from continual study so that through many different stories, incidents, instructions, and admonitions, one begins to understand God's purpose for marriage.

This is why Ellen White says of Scripture, *To skim over the surface will do little good. Thoughtful investigation and earnest, taxing study are required to comprehend it.*¹

In another passage she declared: *By Bible study and daily communication with Jesus we shall gain clear, well-defined views of individual responsibility and strength to stand in the day of trial and temptation. . . .*

*The Christian is required to be diligent in searching the Scriptures, to read over and over again the truths of God's word. Willful ignorance on this subject endangers the Christian life and character.*²

The Bible as Instruction Manual. I'm writing this just a few days after a wonderful Christmas with family, when my wife surprised me with a new computer. It has so many instruction manuals! There's one for the computer, one for the MS-DOS software, one for the Windows software, and on and on. I find that these manuals are not my favorite books. They seem to assume either more intelligence or more knowledge (or both) than I have. But once I figure out the language, the instructions are quite detailed. Usually

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The Bible doesn't do that. Too often we assume that the moral life is simply a matter of reading the Bible and doing what it says. But God's hopes and dreams for us are greater than that.

God does not merely call us to do what the instruction book says. That would be legalism. He wants us to learn to think and do as a response to His grace. There are plenty of examples in Scripture of people like the rich young ruler (Mark 10:17-31 and parallels), who outwardly kept all the rules but never understood what God really wanted of them.

Another problem with this approach is that life is complex. The same action may have quite different consequences in varying circumstances. That is why Paul had to spend three chapters (1 Corinthians 8-10) advising the Corinthians about the issue of food offered to idols. A simple "It is right" or "It is wrong" would not do, for the context of the action made a difference. In a private setting, Paul saw no problem with food offered to idols. Idols, after all, could hardly affect the food itself. But in other settings, the association with idolatry gave the act of eating food offered to idols a different meaning. In these cases Paul advised against eating it, lest another person be hurt or led astray. The context of the action made the difference.

So, if we cannot expect the Bible to be an encyclopedia of behavior or a detailed instruction manual outlining God's will, what can we expect it to do? How can the Scriptures make a difference in our lives? How do they become relevant to the realities of life?

What We Can Expect

The Bible as Proclamation. The first and most important thing that the Bible does for us is share the story of God's good news. It tells us that God is our Creator, and since the very beginning He has been actively involved in rescuing us from the consequences of our destructive decisions. It tells us that Jesus Christ our Saviour died for us. He lives and will come again. This incredibly good news is, according to Paul in Romans 1:16, 17, the power of God for salvation. Our success in finding meaning and purpose in this life, as well as our eternal destiny, is determined by our response to the gospel. This response of faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word (Romans 10:17).

Unfortunately, the Valuegenesis material tells us that our students have not sufficiently heard this good news. A large percentage of them do not understand that their salvation is based not on their rule-keeping, their achievements, or anything else they have to offer, but is purely based in God's goodness. Leading our students into the Word and helping them discover this good news is the most important first step in making the Bible relevant for everyday life.

The Bible as a Revelation of God's Character and Values. It is impossible to understand the good news and not find God worthy of worship, adoration, and emulation. The Bible shows us what God values, and then calls us to live lives worthy of the gospel of Christ. (See, for example, Philippians 1:27, Colossians 1:10; and 1 Thessalonians 2:12). The Bible's most important contribution to the moral life is this continual shaping of our values as a response to the good news. This process requires regular reading of Scripture to lead us in our contemplation of God and His goodness. Ideally, this kind of study shapes who we are on a daily basis. When we are confronted with difficult situations, the Christian response then comes naturally because we have learned what God values and we want to please Him.

For example, a husband whose values are shaped by Christ's love for us will take seriously Paul's portrait in Ephesians 5 of the husband who loves his wife as Christ loved the church. He will not only be faithful to his wife because the law says he has to, but will also value faithfulness and

commitment to his vows of love. By applying this approach in other areas, we come to see that many actions are simply inconsistent with the good news of salvation.

That's why, in Galatians 2, Paul accused Peter of not walking straight with the truth of the gospel when Peter refused to eat with Gentiles. The gospel proclaimed that God loves and accepts all people, and for Peter to refuse to do the same violated the gospel. Thus, we see that the gospel has implications for the moral life. The Bible teaches us those implications and shapes our values.

The Bible as a Source of Christian Reflection. But Christians still face some difficult dilemmas. There are situations where values come into conflict, where no solution seems ideal. And even though the Bible doesn't give us instruction manual-type advice for these problems, it is nevertheless useful for Christians to reflect on what the Bible does say that relates to the issues and values in a particular situation.

How do we go about this? First, we should pray for the guidance of the Spirit as we study. This isn't a matter of looking in a reference book to find an appropriate answer. Rather, it is a way of letting a personal God speak to us through Scripture. Therefore, we begin by asking for God's presence.

Second, we can gather material related to the issue at hand. Then we should look at each passage and ask some questions. Scholars often make biblical interpretation seem as if it can be accomplished only by a professional. But good interpretation is more a matter of good sense, under the guidance of the Spirit, asking questions and probing for meaning.

As you study the passages, note the kind of material in which each appears. Is it a historical story? A proverb? A Psalm? An admonition? Ask yourself how the type of literature might make a difference in your understanding of what God is trying to communicate.

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Now look at the literary context. Where does this passage come in the flow of the argument or narrative within the particular book where it is found? Does the context offer any clues to the author's original purpose? What issues or principles are at stake in the situation as it is presented in the Bible?

Also of concern is the historical context. What situation was being addressed? Can you tell this from the book? If not, do commentaries provide any helpful information? What was the situation of the people in the story? Can you determine the direction in which God was trying to get them to move?

After you have struggled with the biblical material, reflect on your own situation as well. How do the issues and principles you have discovered relate to the specifics of your situation?

Some will feel uncomfortable with this kind of reflection because of the danger that it might lead to rationalization. That is always possible. In fact, that is why we pray before we enter this process. We pray not so much that God will drop an answer from the sky as that He will guide us and keep our motives honest as we seek His will. And we must remember that rationalization is equally possible when one uses the legalistic instruction-manual approach.

If we teach students to use this process of reflection in applying the Bible to their lives, God's Word can become much more meaningful to them. I find that one of the most helpful ways to involve students in this kind of reflection is through case studies. I give them a situation, and then ask them to find biblical material they think is relevant to the problem. Then they go through the process of asking questions. Later, I have them provide case studies from their own experience.

This is obviously not a science. My students do not all come up with the same answers. But that in itself is good preparation for living in a church and a society where not everyone agrees. Only by involving students in this kind of diligent process of using Scripture to reflect on issues of life will the Bible become relevant.

Conclusion

Our students will soon become the membership of our churches and will eventually be its leaders. If they can genuinely hear the gospel and be taught to use scriptural principles to reflect upon the nature of the gospel as they address the complexities of contemporary life, I predict that the Bible will make it back to the balcony and real life will even make it to the main floor. ✍

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