

BIBLICAL LAWS & AUTHORITY IN A CHANGING CULTURE

Steve Taylor

Concerning:

- the difference between literal interpretation and interpretation based on the context and intention of the biblical writer, and
- how the Bible can remain authoritative in a modern society that has changed so drastically from biblical times...

FIRSTLY, let's consider the changes from the Old Testament (OT) to the New Testament (NT), especially as the gospel reached Gentiles (non-Jews). The laws given in the OT are often understood in three broad categories:

a. Ceremonial laws – These governed Israel's religious practices, such as sacrifices for forgiveness, purification rituals, and dietary rules. Some practices (like food restrictions or clothing regulations) reminded Israel of their distinct identity as God's people. These laws pointed forward to Christ and were fulfilled by Him; Jesus' once-for-all sacrifice made such rituals no longer necessary (see Hebrews 10), and He declared that true defilement comes from the heart, not from what one eats (Mark 7:19).

b. Civil laws – These organized Israel as a theocratic nation, covering matters like governance, penalties, and tithing. While the specific laws are no longer binding for Christians, they reflect God's concern for justice, compassion, and social order, which remain relevant in principle. The NT does not require Gentile believers to obey these laws (Acts 15).

c. Moral laws – These express God's unchanging standards for human conduct (e.g. commands against murder, theft, adultery). Rooted in God's character and creation, they remain binding for all people. In the New Covenant, Christians are called to live out these standards by the power of the Holy Spirit.

It's important to note that this threefold division is a helpful theological framework rather than a strict biblical categorization, as many laws overlap. Still, it aids in understanding how Christ's coming changes our relationship to the Old Testament law.

SECONDLY, what about changes in culture?

For example, society no longer tolerates slavery—and in fact, many abolitionists were Christians—even though the Bible regulated slavery rather than prohibiting it. Similarly, the role of women in teaching and

leadership has evolved. In biblical times, women were often uneducated and instructed to remain silent in gatherings, but this was reflective of the cultural context of the time.

QUESTION: Should changes in societal values render the Bible irrelevant to modern issues (such as those involving LGBTQ+ topics)? How can a text written in an ancient world still speak authoritatively to us today?

ANSWER: On a linear scale, the Bible is a record of God's interaction with humanity. It begins in Genesis 1–2 with the goodness of creation and God's original purpose for mankind. It then describes how God related to people in their fallen state across various historical contexts. Finally, it gives glimpses—especially in Revelation—of how all things will be restored through Christ and the coming new creation.

Thus, the Bible's authority today doesn't rest in isolating proof texts written in vastly different circumstances. Instead, it comes from understanding the trajectory of Scripture—that is, asking:

- What was God's original design?
- What developments or exceptions are seen in Scripture's own narrative?
- Where does Scripture point us in terms of God's ultimate purposes?

Example: Slavery

Although the Bible doesn't directly outlaw slavery, its trajectory suggests that its abolition aligns with God's will. From the creation account, all humans come from one couple and are made with equal dignity in the image of God. When slavery existed, laws were given to protect and provide for slaves. The Bible contains antecedents regarding the freeing of slaves. The early Church emphasized the oneness of believers—slave and free, Jew and Gentile, male and female (Galatians 3:28)—which pointed to a future where distinctions like slave or free no longer exist. The direction of Scripture clearly moves toward the abolition of slavery.

Example: The Role of Women

Men and women are both created equally in the image of God. Eve's role was to be a strengthener to Adam, not an inferior. The Bible includes examples of female leadership in both Old and New Testaments. Jesus allowed women to learn from Him (Luke 10:39). Paul also encouraged women to learn (1 Timothy 2:11). The Bible's trajectory supports growing inclusion of women in leadership and teaching, according to their gifts. Therefore, the broader arc of Scripture is supportive of increased roles for women in the church today.

Concerning LGBTQ+ Behavior

However, in this area, there is no clear trajectory toward acceptance or affirmation of homosexual behavior. From the beginning, gender as male and female, and marriage as the union of one man and one woman, are presented as God's blueprint. Throughout Scripture, there are no positive antecedents showing God affirming same-sex sexual relationships. Rather, the Bible consistently warns against them. Therefore, Christians should not interpret Scripture in a way that endorses LGBTQ+ behavior, even under the banner of love. Instead, love should be expressed in truth and grace, guided by God's revealed design for human relationships. Similarly, there is no precedent in Scripture for a man adopting the gender of a woman. While the prohibition against a man wearing women's clothing (Deuteronomy 22:5) may have originally addressed a cultic practice common at the time, it may also reflect concern over behaviors akin to modern expressions of gender transition. Regardless, the goodness and intentionality of God's design—creating the man as male and the woman as female—cannot be dismissed. Furthermore, God's purpose in making us His image bearers, representing Him to all creation as "male and female," both now and in the age to come, reinforces this design. Scripture offers no indication that we will lose our sex or gender in our glorified bodies—only that procreation will cease. Moreover, the Bible presents a unified view of the body, soul, and spirit (holistic). Therefore, what is true of the body is also true of the soul and the spirit, even if there may be conflicting feelings. These truths should encourage us to honor God's design and avoid gender-identity confusion in our present lives.

Conclusion and Caution:

When applied thoughtfully and in the ways suggested above, we find that the Word of God remains authoritative across all cultures and throughout all time—not through isolated "proof-texts," but by understanding the overarching message and direction of Scripture. The Bible describes itself as "sharper than any double-edged sword; it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart" (Hebrews 4:12). It can be likened to a surgeon's scalpel—precise and powerful—requiring careful and respectful handling so that Truth and Grace remain inseparable.

Many of today's social issues are deeply personal and sensitive, especially those concerning LGBTQ+ matters. For this reason, a deep dependence on the Holy Spirit is essential. It is He who brings

illumination and conviction in His perfect timing. Both personal experience and the broader witness of history remind us that God is patient and gracious when revealing His truth.

As we seek to speak the truth in love, may the Holy Spirit continue His transforming work—bringing healing, abundant life, and true freedom.