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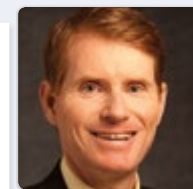
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The church, Scripture, and adaptation: *Resoluteness in essentials, adaptation in peripherals—Part 1 of 2*¹

The role the church plays in interpreting, applying, and adapting scriptural teaching is fraught with concern, at least for Protestants. The sixteenth-century Reformation was based, in a good part, on the principle that the Bible, and not the church, was the ultimate authority in matters of doctrine and practice. The Protestant Reformers contended that the church had erred from scriptural truths because human authority and tradition had been placed over Scripture. One of the ways in which this had happened was allowing the papacy to be the ultimate interpreter of biblical truth.

Yet the Reformers did not deny that the church, guided by its duly chosen teachers, had the role of proclaiming doctrine and disciplining members. Protestants hold Scripture as the ultimate and defining standard of truth, and at the same time they allow authority for the church to proclaim doctrine, discipline members, and uphold practices that govern the community of faith. These two positions have at times caused the church to carefully examine what Scripture posits as essential and what it offers as

peripheral. This article deals with how the church should understand what scripture considers as not negotiable and what it may consider as secondary organization matters that may be adapted, and even modified, to meet human need and the mission of the divine community.

We will approach the issue in two parts. Part 1 will deal with how the church resolutely relates to scriptural norms of faith and moral conduct. Part 2 will discuss how the church may employ adaptation with issues that are not critical or directly related to faith and doctrine.

We begin the first part by turning to Luther and Calvin. Both took seriously Christ's gift to Peter of "the keys of the kingdom of heaven" and the accompanying instructions that "whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven" (Matt. 16:19).² Both Luther and Calvin held that the church had a role in interpreting and applying scriptural standards to correct and discipline church members.³ They denied, however, that this role was especially given to Peter and his

successors in office, rather than to Peter as a representative of the whole church—all those that would join him in his confession that "Christ" is the "Son of the living God" (v. 16) and thus become living stones in the edifice of the church. As Luther put it, "The keys were given to St. Peter; but not to him personally, but rather to the person of the Christian church."⁴

Binding, loosing, and adapting

The Reformer's view of the meaning of "binding and loosing" is supported by Christ's teaching in Matthew 18, where He describes church discipline, including the removal of offending members from church fellowship. Here, Christ says again, "Whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven" (Matt. 18:18). This passage clarifies both who receives the keys ("the church," even a segment of it where "two or three have gathered together in My name," v. 20) and what actions are involved (i.e., the application of scriptural standards to the life of church members).

Christ's hearers would not have been puzzled by His words about binding and loosing. Josephus and early targumic materials from the time of the early church reveal that Jewish rabbis "bound" the law when they found it applicable to a certain situation and "loosed" it when they found that it did not apply.⁵ Christ moved this locus of this authority from the rabbis to the church and its leaders.

None of this description is particularly revolutionary. Most Christians acknowledge the need for the church community to both interpret and apply Scripture to its members. As one writer puts it, "A majority of scholars now recognize that the terms 'to bind' and

a scriptural injunction. But as lawyers know, at least some acts of judging involve not just interpretation (what the law says) and application (how the law deals with particular circumstances) but also filling in ambiguities in the law, as well as adjusting the letter of the law so that it will correspond with the spirit behind the law.

Letter versus spirit and the role of equity

To adapt a law involves making applications that fall between verbal cracks or vagueness in the text, or dealing with situations that are not foreseen by the text itself. Inevitably, the language of a statute, or even

tradition of England a branch of law known as equity.

Equity was a series of interpretive customs that a judge could call upon to adjust or adapt a law when the application of its letter would violate its spirit. Equity was *not* the same as situation ethics, or legal relativism. It was the opposite: recognition that there *is* something behind and beyond human laws, a higher justice and righteousness that these laws imperfectly reflected and must serve as a continuing guide and touchstone for them.⁷

With a loss of the sense of the transcendent in the educational and legal communities, there was a rise of legal positivism, which insisted all laws were

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'to loose' are best understood with reference to a practice of determining the application of scriptural commands to contemporary situations."⁶

As Protestants committed to the right of private judgment in scriptural interpretation, we might bristle at this sense of community interpretive authority. Yet, every statement of beliefs, set of baptismal vows, and list of grounds for discipline in a church manual show this example of the authority of the church community in interpreting and applying Scripture. It becomes even more so when a church actually applies and enforces these things on its members.

Careful readers may accept that while I have defended the duty of the church community to *interpret* and *apply* Scripture, it is not so obvious that the church has a role to *adapt* Scripture. Adaptation implies the possibility of not just applying but actually tailoring

constitution, can never be perfectly precise. The law also cannot foresee all possible circumstances to which it will be applied. Because of this, the language of a law may, under some circumstances, produce an effect contrary to the actual intent and spirit of the law. A simple example: Can the law against going faster than 55 miles per hour (88 kilometers per hour), which is meant to protect human safety, actually conflict with human safety when you are trying to get a dying person to the hospital?

Allowing the spirit of the law to be used to refine, or even reshape, the letter may sound radical or heretical to a theologian; lawyers, however, are somewhat more used to the idea. Legal philosophers were long aware of the problem of expressing transcendent and immeasurable principles of justice in imperfect and finite human words. Because of this problem, there developed in the grand common law

purely human constructs. Thus, the theory behind equity was lost sight of and basically abandoned as a legal category. But the practice of equity, I would argue, continues today in at least one important community: Christian churches. As one scholar has put it: "virtually all Christian sects and individuals will grant that some prescriptions and proscriptions of Scripture are no longer relevant or applicable to Christians in the world today."⁸

Such judgments are made not just with Old Testament (OT) law but also with New Testament (NT) instructions. Most Christians have bank accounts and pension funds despite Christ's injunction to "not store up for yourselves treasures on earth" (Matt. 6:19). Likewise, almost all Christian churches in the West allow women to attend worship services with uncovered heads (1 Cor. 11:10), and most Western Christians do not practice the art of

the holy kiss, despite Paul repeating this instruction in four separate places (Rom. 16:16; 1 Cor. 16:20; 2 Cor. 13:12; 1 Thess. 5:26).

Christ, David, and two kinds of law

The most prominent scriptural advocate of equitable adaptation of scriptural instruction is Christ Himself. Christ used David's eating of the showbread, which the law reserved for the priests alone, to defend the actions of His own disciples in "harvesting" and eating grain on the Sabbath day (Matt. 12:1-9; cf. 1 Sam. 21:1-7). Indeed, if it were not for Christ's teaching on this point, one would be tempted to ignore the above Pauline examples as just other "difficult" things to understand from Paul. But Christ's clear and prominent use of the Davidic example tells us that there is something important to know and understand about the limits of *some* scriptural instruction.

And I say *some* scriptural instruction for a reason. Let me focus for a moment on a category of law that these equitable principles of adaptation *do not* apply to. One cannot make sense of Christ's teachings in the Gospels without realizing that Christ views there being at least two kinds, or categories, of scriptural law. Just focusing on the book of Matthew, which contains the "bind and loose" instructions, clearly reveals this duality.

The Christ who tells us that the church has the power to "bind and loose" (Matt. 16:19) in relation to the law, and who applauds David's adaptation of the law regarding the showbread (Matt. 12:7, 8), is the same one who insists that "till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled" (Matt. 5:18, KJV). So important is *this* law that whoever "shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven" (v. 19, KJV).

The tension between these two sets of commands is heightened when we recognize that in the Greek, the instruction to not "break" the law in

Matthew 5:19 uses the word *luo*. This is the same word used by Christ in giving the disciples the power to "loose" the law in Matthew 16. So in one text, Christ condemns "whoever" might "loose" the law, and in another He gives the power to "loose" the law to His disciples. What are we to make of this apparent contradiction? The solution would seem to lie in the different uses that the New Testament has for the word *law*.

It can mean human civil law (Matt. 5:40), the entire OT corpus (Matt. 11:13), the books of Moses (John 1:17; 7:19), the natural moral law (Rom. 2:14), or the Ten Commandments (Rom. 7:7-9; James 2:8-12). These distinctions have roots in OT legal usages. We find an interesting distinction between the Ten Commandments, which were written by the finger of God on stone and placed inside the ark of the covenant, and the civil, ritual, and organizational statutes of Israel, written by Moses and placed in a compartment outside the ark (Deut. 31:24-26).

If we look carefully, we find Christ's differing approaches to the law in Matthew reflecting at least some of these distinctions of legal meaning. On the one hand, where Christ says the law should not be broken or loosed, He explicitly references by way of example two of the Ten Commandments (Matt. 5:21, 27). He also references other injunctions, but these are also of the moral variety, for example, not swearing oaths to deceive others, not seeking vengeance, and loving others (vv. 33, 34, 38, 39, 43, 44).

On the other hand, the story of David and the showbread involves ritual, not moral, law. The law of Moses contained clear, express injunctions against non-priests eating the bread (Exod. 29:32-34). Both David and Ahimelech view this rule as being "adaptable" in light of human health, hunger, and true need. The showbread story does not end well in some respects; Saul slaughters the priests for aiding David. But this horrible conclusion comes about from David's concealing the truth of his flight rather than from his eating the showbread. This is the way Christ

views the story, anyway. His defense of His disciples to the Pharisees makes absolutely no sense if He invokes a story that is itself morally indefensible.

The later passages in Matthew where Christ invokes the "binding and loosing" do not give specific examples of the acts being referred to. But if what I am saying about judging, law, and application is right, God's community must always have some role in "binding and loosing," because that is the nature of law in human community. Thus, Christ is not creating a new power for His community, merely transferring its locus. Given this, we should be able to find examples and instances of it throughout the OT that can serve as a guide and template for the church's actions.

Moral law versus organizational and ritual instructions

Unsurprisingly, we do find such stories of modification. Throughout these stories we find a consistent theme of ritual and organizational law being modified, while moral law is left untouched. All the examples are based on the difference between (1) God's absolute moral commands and eternal truths and (2) His organizational, ritual, and ceremonial instructions. The former includes the Ten Commandments, as well as consistently articulated scriptural requisites on personal moral behavior. The Ten Commandments do not exhaust the moral law but rather are concrete expressions of its central principles. Thus, the command against adultery is a central component of sexual morality but does not exhaust the biblical sexual ethic, and we look elsewhere in the Bible for further indications of sexual moral limits.

The Ten Commandments can be called "principled rules." That is, laws that, unlike most other laws, actually fully capture the principle behind them. The verse of Scripture "The law of the LORD is perfect, converting the soul" (Ps. 19:7, KJV) applies to all of God's moral law. But it applies in a special way to the written moral law, the Ten

Commandments, which allow for no exceptions, unlike almost all other written laws. It is never right or moral to steal, murder, or commit adultery; these things are always wrong. (Though in defining theft, murder, and sexual morality, we will need the spirit of the law to guide us.)

The second set of laws—ritual, ceremonial, and organizational norms—exist to bring order to the community of believers, safeguard the identity of God’s people, and enhance their mission. They are to be taken with great seriousness and faithfulness. Unilateral, defiant, or even frivolous violations of them can be met with extreme consequences, including exile from God’s people or even death. These dire consequences can be seen in Miriam’s leprosy and exile for questioning Moses’ authority (Num. 12:1–10); the punishment of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram for the same (Num. 16:1–35); the death of the sons of Aaron for offering strange fire (Lev. 10:1, 2); and Uzzah’s

death from touching the ark (2 Sam. 6:6, 7).

Organizational rules are not, strictly speaking, without a moral element because they have the authority of the divine community behind them. Respect for the ordering and authorities of the community is itself a moral principle because these powers exist through the ordination and providence of God. The safety and order provided by organizational rules are also a moral good in themselves.

But the question becomes whether the community of God itself or subsets of it can modify these rules for appropriate reasons in an orderly manner that furthers the spirit and purpose of the rules. The above stories of enforcement of organizational and ritual norms should not obscure the fact that many other biblical stories show such norms being flexed or modified by God’s community to further the mission and well-being of God’s people. In the next installment of this article, we will

consider some of these stories and the principles they reveal that can guide the church to properly apply and adapt scriptural instruction.

Part 2 will appear in the September 2015 issue. ❖

- 1 This article is excerpted from a book titled *Ancient Word, Modern Faith: The Reformers Speak to Today’s Church*, to be published by Pacific Press Publishing Association, Fall 2015.
- 2 Unless otherwise stated, all Scripture references are from the New American Standard Bible.
- 3 John Calvin, *Calvin’s Commentaries: Matthew* (Olive Tree Bible Software), 555–62; Martin Luther, “The Keys,” in *Luther’s Works*, ed. and trans. Earl Beyer and Conrad Bergendoff (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1958), 40:365, 366, accessed November 16, 2014, as quoted in James Swan, “Luther: Christ Gave the Keys to Peter?” *Beggars All: Reformation & Apologetics* (blog), November 6, 2010, beggarsallreformation.blogspot.com/2010/08/luther-christ-gave-keys-to-peter.html.
- 4 Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works*, 51:59, quoted in “Luther,” accessed November 16, 2014, beggarsallreformation.blogspot.com/2010/08/luther-christ-gave-keys-to-peter.html.
- 5 Mark Allan Powell, “Binding and Loosing: Asserting the Moral Authority of Scripture in Light of a Matthean Paradigm,” *Ex Auditu* 19 (2003):81.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 82.
- 7 For an overview of equity in English common law, see W. S. Holdsworth, “The Early History of Equity,” *Michigan Law Review* 13, no. 4 (Feb. 1915):293–301.
- 8 Powell, “Binding and Loosing,” 81.

My efforts should never cease

A nine-year-old was unconscious for three weeks after a classmate threw a rock that smashed in the center of her face. Friends and family feared she would die. When Ellen Harmon finally regained consciousness, she soon discovered that her dream of finishing school was also dashed, her injuries preventing her from being able to study. Friends proved fair-weather, drifting away. On top of all this, Ellen came to entertain the thought that God was a tyrant who would burn her forever. So distraught was Ellen over all this that she thought of suicide.

But through a series of providential events, Jesus became a precious friend to Ellen. She realized with surprise and awe that God had a great purpose for her life, and the events that had seemed so harsh and random were really part of a divine

plan. In her own words, here is what she did next:

“I arranged meetings with my young friends, some of whom were considerably older than myself, and a few were married persons. A number of them were vain and thoughtless; my experience sounded to them like an idle tale, and they did not heed my entreaties. But I determined that my efforts should never cease till these dear souls, for whom I had so great an interest, yielded to God. Several entire nights were spent by me in earnest prayer for those whom I had sought out and brought together for the purpose of laboring and praying with them.

“Some of these had met with us from curiosity to hear what I had to say; others thought me beside myself to be so persistent in my efforts, especially when they manifested

no concern on their own part. But at every one of our little meetings I continued to exhort and pray for each one separately, until every one had yielded to Jesus, acknowledging the merits of His pardoning love. Every one was converted to God.”*

This often comes to my mind when I think of revival and reformation.

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* Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1948), 1:33, 34.

