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The church, Scripture, and adaptations: *Resolute in essentials, considerate in peripherals*—Part 2 of 2

In part 1 of this article (June 2015), we explored the role of the church in interpreting, applying, and even adapting certain scriptural instructions to the community of God. We reviewed the authority that Christ gave to the church in handling the “keys” of the kingdom (Scripture) and “binding” and “loosing” its teachings to its members (interpreting and applying scriptural standards to the Christian community and its members) and how this authority is exhibited in the statements of belief, standards of conduct, and redemptive discipline the church implements for the benefit of its community.

We also discussed the limits of all human law in trying to implement transcendent and eternal standards of justice and order in finite and imperfect human language. These limits made necessary human judges who could adjust written laws so the letter of the law would continue to advance the intent and spirit of the law. We noted the role the church plays in applying certain scriptural instructions in both the Old and New Testaments.

We also noted that moral law, especially as exhibited in the “principled rules” of the Ten Commandments, is not

subject to adaptation. It is always wrong to murder, steal, and commit adultery. But Christ Himself, in discussing the story of David eating the showbread reserved for the priests, revealed that ritual and organizational instructions may sometimes be adapted and even modified to meet human need and the mission of the faith community. In order to understand the way this principle of adaptation occurs, we are now going to look at examples of it in various scriptural stories.

A king in Israel

The Scripture makes it apparent that God’s ideal plan for the nation of Israel was not that of kingship (1 Sam. 8:10–20). God wanted them to be led by a combination of prophets, judges, priests, and elders. Still, when Israel desired a king, God accommodated this desire, even though the choice was prompted by the surrounding society and culture. “The LORD answered [Samuel], ‘Listen to their voice and appoint them a king’” (1 Sam. 8:22).¹

At that point, not only did the kingship become acceptable to God, the king himself became the Lord’s anointed, literally, when Samuel poured oil on Saul (1 Sam. 10:1). Thereafter, kings were

frequently anointed by prophets or high priests as a sign of divine appointment (1 Sam. 16:13; 1 Kings 1:39, 45; 2 Kings 9:1–6; 2 Chron. 23:11).

That the kingship was a burden to Israel and that individual kings fell into sin did not change God’s endorsement of the institution. This story of kingship shows that God is willing to vary His organizational ideal to accommodate cultural circumstances and the desires of His people. Since God was not willing to reject His people for rejecting one of His organizational norms, it should cause us to reflect seriously on how we relate to one another when there are differences in understanding such ideals.

Some will note that, already in the book of Deuteronomy, God Himself had made allowance for the variance of kingship (Deut. 17:14–20). Deuteronomy does indeed talk about Israel having a king at some point in the future. But the language used indicates that this is not God’s plan, but the people’s. It was the people who would say, “‘I will set a king over me like all the nations who are around me’” (Deut. 17:14).

God’s prediction of the variance—His foresight of Israel’s departure from the divine theocratic template—did not make it any less a variance from the

ideal, as both the prediction and the fulfillment reveal. But the Bible also reveals that not all variances need to be predicted, or revealed by God ahead of time, to be appropriate. Adaptations might come about in spontaneous response to circumstances and human requests.

The daughters of Zelophehad

In ancient Israel, sons were intended by divine law to inherit property (Deut. 21:15–17). But the four daughters of Zelophehad had no brothers, and once their father died, his name and property would be dissipated among the people. The daughters petitioned Moses that they be allowed to inherit property. Moses brought the case to the Lord, who said that “the daughters of Zelophehad speak right: thou shalt surely give them a possession of an inheritance among their father’s brethren” (Num. 27:7, KJV).

This is a remarkable event. Divinely given statutes being modified at the request of marginal, largely powerless members of the divine community. The Lord indeed explicitly approves the adaptation, but He does it in response to a human request. There was nothing in the law prior to the daughters’ entreaty that suggested adaptation or variation of the law was permissible. Rather, God modified His law, His civil statutes, at the request of not just important community leaders but of young, unmarried girls in a highly patriarchal culture. The story thus indicates that there is some role for the community of believers in adaptations of God’s plans for ordering His people.

Deborah and Barak

Some will note that the Lord explicitly approved Moses’ inquiry and request of the daughters of Zelophehad. But other stories show such variation without obvious and direct divine intervention. Deborah “led” or “judged” Israel, and “held court” under a palm tree, where she decided the “disputes” of the Israelites (Judg. 4:4, 5, NIV). There are indications

in the story that a female judge was a rare and unusual event. Deborah is the only woman recorded in the Bible to have been a judge of Israel. This uniqueness is supported by Ellen White’s comment that “in the absence of the usual magistrates, the people had sought to her [Deborah] for counsel and justice.”²

Further, when it came time to mount a military campaign against Sisera and his army, rather than take command as most judges did, Deborah called on a warrior, Barak, to lead the troops. He was unwilling to assume the command unless she came along to support him at the battle. This she agreed to, but in a rebuke of his failure to carry out his role as a man, she told him that the glory for the victory would go to a woman (Judg. 4:9).

Deborah’s role as judge and military escort was unusual, made necessary by circumstances, including the failure of men to accept their expected roles. Circumstances of national peril called for a response, which was then taken in light of the organizational and missional needs of God’s people, and the response, which varied from the divine pattern, then received divine blessing in terms of national success and prophetic proclamation in the song of Deborah.

King David and the Moabite restriction

The laws of purity and organization that God gave Israel could even be modified to allow a forbidden outsider to play the most powerful leadership roles in the land. The reigns of David and Solomon, and the genealogy of Jesus demonstrate this. Because the Moabites had seduced the Israelites into idolatry, God had commanded that a Moabite shall not enter into “the assembly of the LORD; . . . even to the tenth generation, shall ever enter into the assembly of the LORD” (Deut. 23:3). This was relevant to David because his great-grandfather was Boaz, who married Ruth, the Moabite (Ruth 4:16–20) but had done so contrary to a Mosaic prohibition that had been repeated by Joshua (Deut. 7:3; Josh. 23:12, 13).³

Under a strict application of the Levitical code, Boaz’s marriage to Ruth was illegitimate. She and her descendants should have been forbidden from playing any formal roles in the nation of Israel until ten generations had passed. This would have excluded David from being king. The Babylonian Talmud records that this was indeed one of the objections to David’s kingship. The book of Ruth can be seen as including an extended defense and legal argument as to why Ruth was really a Jewess and no longer a Moabite.⁴ Her famous soliloquy, “where you go, I will go, and where you lodge, I will lodge. Your people will be my people, and your God my God” (Ruth 1:16), takes on a whole new significance when this larger context is understood.

Once one understands the truly spiritual nature of Jewish identity, all these arguments work. Obviously, they worked in their historical context, as a majority of Israel and Judah accepted David as king. None of these “exceptions,” however, can be found in the law itself! They were all created, or at least understood, by the circumstances of the story itself, as Israel’s legal and spiritual expositors and leaders wrestled with the meaning of God’s laws and the *spirit behind them* in a particular concrete context.

David, the showbread, and Christ

We have already discussed at some length David’s act in eating the showbread and Christ’s approval of it (1 Sam. 21:1–6; Matt. 12:1–4). Just to add a point, it is intriguing that Ahimelech was willing to break one ceremonial rule—non-priests eating the showbread—but desirous of keeping another rule—ritual purity from sexual relations. Remember, he inquired as to whether David and his companions had been chaste for the three days prior (1 Sam. 21:4, 5).

This partial adaptation is characteristic generally of individual and spontaneous human attempts to adapt and modify ritual or organizational laws to new or exceptional circumstances.

One alters the original only as much as needed to deal with the exigent circumstance. It is evidence that the exception granted was a spontaneous, human-devised alteration and not one found in the original law itself or in some other legislatively created standing law.

This nuanced caveat is what one would expect from a human agent engaged in ethical or legal reflection, thinking about how he would explain his conduct to others. “Well, I did give him the bread, but it was an emergency, and also I made sure he was ritually pure . . .” The story ultimately shows that God’s ritual and organizational ideals are expected to be applied in a common-sense manner, in an orderly way, to further the larger values, mission, and unity of the community.

Again, our view of this story does not arise merely from the narrative itself. It is Christ Himself who ratifies what David and Ahimelech did. By extension, He ratifies human ability, at least in community, to adapt biblical instructions that provide ecclesiastical order in pursuit of higher principles of the preservation of the life, health, and well-being of the community and its members.

The Jerusalem Council: Differences over divine ideals

These Old Testament (OT) stories provide the backdrop to the first major event where the Christian church grappled with what to do with clear OT commands that some thought to be obsolete but others viewed as of continuing validity. We sometimes lose sight of the dramatic nature of the circumcision discussion. Circumcision was a vitally important act for every male Israelite. It was a sign of God’s everlasting covenant with Abraham, to be kept “for the generations to come”; in fact, those who were not circumcised were said to have “broken the covenant” (Gen. 17:9–14). Remember, the Lord “sought to kill” Moses when he failed to circumcise his son (Exod. 4:24–26). Circumcision, from an OT view, was

considered essential to the identity of Israel as God’s covenant people.

There is no record of Christ doing away with circumcision as a sign of the covenant. Rather, this would have to be worked out from the significance of His death and the implications that flowed from it, and from the rending of the temple veil. In our day, we have all sorts of New Testament (NT) scriptures that we rely on to argue that the OT system of sacrifice and ceremony was disbanded and that this includes circumcision, as an ethnic identity marker of Israel. But the NT church itself had to test the authority of the NT letters on their coherence with the OT scriptures.

Just because Paul might tell them that circumcision was a thing of the past does not mean it was so, because Paul himself had to be checked and tested, just as the Bereans themselves did (Acts 17:11). It took a combination of experience, scriptural study, and sanctified reasoning and discussion for the group to come to believe that the Holy Spirit was leading them to the conclusion that the OT passages about the validity and importance of circumcision had been superseded by a circumcision of the heart and were no longer applicable to the people of God (Acts 15:28, 29; Rom. 2:29).

Conclusion: Steadfast in absolutes, tolerant in secondary matters

As the above examples show, God in His love and grace accommodates His divine organization and ritual ideal throughout Scripture and salvation history. Again, this reasoning does not apply to universal moral commands or truths. None of the examples set out above involved variations or deviations from God’s moral laws, whether it be the Ten Commandments or other injunctions from the natural moral law against sexual immorality. Sin is sin, and adaptation of organizational and ritual ideals should not obscure this.

But these organizational ideals are different from moral absolutes. They should not be lightly or cavalierly disregarded, certainly not defiantly so,

for then they do become a moral issue. But the Bible reveals that, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the divine community may adapt them to further the mission of God’s church. Some may apply and adapt these organizational ideals differently than others—such differences are inevitable given different cultural and social perspectives. But under biblical principles of mutual Christian liberty, we should grant tolerance and forbearance to each other in these applications.

The Bible describes Christians as “submitting yourselves one to another” (Eph. 5:21, KJV). Submission only has meaning when we do not actually agree with each other; if we agree, there is no need to submit. Submission involves tolerating a brother’s or sister’s views or practices that we do not agree with, that we might even think as being biblically erroneous. Yet, if it is not a moral absolute, an issue of salvation, we tolerate the difference and continue the fellowship. Toleration sometimes seems crabbed and ungenerous, but it is actually a vital part of church fellowship.

Irwin Evans, editor of *Ministry* in 1931 and senior church leader for many decades, wrote an editorial on the importance of Christian *tolerance* in the church that I believe speaks profoundly to our situation today and our need to make allowances on differing views of nonmoral biblical instruction:

“Controversies that have divided Christians into various sects have seldom been on vital elements of faith, essential to salvation, but on nonessentials, so far as salvation is concerned. Truth cannot be compromised, but nonessentials, which do not enter into our salvation, directly, ought not to bring alienation between brethren. Here is a wide sphere for tolerance.

“Tolerance is not always found where we might naturally look for it. . . . All leaders in religious revivals, and promoters of the deeper spiritual life among the people, should possess this indispensable Christian grace. Yet how often do these seem to lack the spirit of tolerance. They not only assume that

they have the correct interpretation of all Scriptural doctrines, but they feel constrained to condemn all who do not accept their teachings as special light from God. . . .

“Tolerance must certainly be one characteristic of the last church. Without it there must come breaking of fellowship.”⁵

May God grant us the courage to know when we need to stand firm and make no compromise. To resist attacks on basic Christian and Adventist doctrine, such as a six-day creation, a worldwide flood, the atonement, the sanctuary, and the three angels’ messages. To oppose attempts to modify central biblical morality on marriage, divorce, and homosexuality. But may He also give us the wisdom to know when issues are secondary, and peripheral, less important than the principles they were given to protect.

It is a dangerous mistake to miss the distinctions between primary and secondary matters. To equate the

peripheral with the essential is a danger Christian doctrine and fellowship can ill afford. The fate of such an approach is actually the destruction of the more important first-tier principles themselves. History shows that many of the liberal, mainline churches usually went through a split around the beginning of the twentieth century, where a vocal, agitated minority pressed an extreme, absolutist reading of Scripture, which scared the moderates into the arms of the liberals in the church.

The result was often a small conservative splinter group, enduring just beyond the edges of the mainline church. The larger part of these denominations typically became liberal and generally shrunk rather dramatically. In short, it was a disaster for both the “conservative” and “liberal” segments of these church bodies.⁶

May we learn from history and Scripture, and commit to being faithful and firm where God would have us be so and to being flexible and submissive

where an understanding of God’s grace and equity teaches us to do so. 

- 1 Unless otherwise stated, all Scripture passages are from the New American Standard Bible.
- 2 Ellen G. White, *Ye Shall Receive Power* (Silver Spring, MD: E. G. White Estate, 1995), 259.
- 3 A number of commentaries on Ruth recognize the central focus of the book as dealing with and making acceptable the identity of Ruth as a Moabite: see Robert L. Hubbard Jr., *The Book of Ruth*, *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1988), 40–42; Murray D. Gow, *The Book of Ruth: Its Structure, Theme, and Purpose* (Leicester, UK: Apollolis, 1992), 132–36 (Gow notes that both the Babylonian Talmud and the Midrash on Ruth reference ancient arguments made against David’s legitimacy based on his Moabite ancestry); Kirsten Nielsen, *Ruth: A Commentary*, *The Old Testament Library* (London, UK: SCM Press Ltd, 1997), 23–28.
- 4 That the purpose of the book of Ruth is to “promote the interests of David and his dynasty” is the position of a “large consensus” of modern interpreters: Hubbard, *The Book of Ruth*, 37.
- 5 Irwin H. Evans, “Tolerance,” *Ministry* (October 1931): 5, 31; emphasis added.
- 6 This story is well told in terms of the American Presbyterian Church in Bradley Longfield, *The Presbyterian Controversy: Fundamentalists, Modernists, and Moderates*, *Religion in America* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1993).

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A revival ministry made of postal boxes

From time to time I receive boxes delivered to my home. My name is on the box along with the sender’s, but other than that, the box looks like just an ordinary box. What makes each box special, however, is not what is on the outside but what is on the inside.

This is what ministry is all about—*carefully opening and nurturing the lives of those around us*. This is no easy challenge. During the past several years I have grown concerned once I realized that many “boxes have not been opened.” The treasure on the inside was not being appreciated

because it is not always easy to get past what we can see on the outside. The vast worth and potential of the individual is seemingly overlooked. Such is the case of the deaf. Such is the test of our own character.

“I saw that it is in the providence of God that widows and orphans, the blind, the deaf, the lame, and persons afflicted in a variety of ways, have been placed in close Christian relationship to His church; it is to prove His people and develop their true character. Angels of God are watching to see how we treat these persons who need our sympathy, love, and disinterested

benevolence. This is God’s test of our character.”*

Revival and mission, regardless of the outside appearance, begins wherever we are.

—Larry Evans, associate director, General Conference Stewardship Ministry, Silver Spring, Maryland, United States.

* Ellen G. White, *Christian Service* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1947), 191, 192.

