

Christianity and the Great Moral Debate

- Part One -

Introduction

There seems to be a great deal of conflict in the “Christian” community these days over issues such as homosexuality, abortion rights and sexual freedom. One side claims that the Bible does not adequately address such issues. The other side claims that the Bible is abundantly clear on the issue and that there is no room for argument. Of course, there are many who stand somewhere in the middle – not really sure of which side to believe.

The issue is further clouded by the fact that both sides often claim to be “Evangelical” Christians. So, what is the distinguishing factor? How can both sides claim the same God, the same Savior, and the same Bible - yet be diametrically opposed on these fundamental moral issues? This is a valid and fair question and must be addressed, not only for the sake of believers – but for the sake of those observing from outside the Christian culture.

Generally speaking, it appears that the issues and conflicts underlying these debates fall under one or more of the following categories:

- Assumptions of Scripture Interpretation
- Culture and Interpretation
- The Nature of Jesus and His Purpose
- The Nature of Salvation

This article will address these issues individually with the following goals:

1. Survey and Analyze the primary competing views
3. Examine how Scripture responds to these views
4. Identify an appropriate logical and Scriptural conclusion

Assumptions of Scripture Interpretation

Of all the underlying issues surrounding the current moral debate within Christianity, this is clearly the most crucial. Every individual comes to the Bible with certain assumptions. These assumptions are the infrastructure upon which our interpretations are based and will largely determine our final conclusion.

We must realize this if we’re ever going to make any headway in discussion on moral

issues. We must understand the assumptions of the competing views and then identify the assumptions Scripture holds about itself. Integrity and honesty then hold us to lay aside our own assumptions and adopt the assumptions that Scripture holds of itself - if we are to claim it as the basis for our faith.

Survey

It would be impossible to analyze every competing view of Scripture interpretation to fine detail in a short article like this. There are many fine books that do a much better job. Please see the bibliography for just a few good examples.

It should be adequate, however, to survey the primary categories into which these assumptions fall. We can then analyze those assumptions and compare them with the assumptions Scripture holds about itself in order to determine the appropriate honest, logical and Scriptural assumptions with which we should begin any interpretation. Any means of interpretation will certainly still leave us with questions about many Scripture passages, but if we deal honestly and fairly with the text, we can be sure that the conclusions that we *are* able to reach will also be honest, fair and – to the best of our human abilities – true.

The simple primary categories into which nearly all assumptions about the Bible fall are as follows:

1. The Bible contains **some historical facts** but its **religious teaching is not true**
2. The Bible is **not generally true** but **contains wise moral teaching**
3. The Bible is **true**, but that **truth is different for different people**
4. The Bible is **true** (generally speaking) **but has errors**
5. The Bible is **true** and has **no significant errors**

Assumption #1 is really not helpful to our discussion - as this assumption is, by nature, opposed to the Christian belief. If an individual does not believe in the religious teaching of the Bible, they cannot be considered part of the Christian community. Since nearly everything we know of what Jesus did and said comes from the Bible, and pretty much everything Jesus says in the Bible is of a religious nature – it would be impossible to claim Christianity if you don't believe the religious teaching of the Bible. And since our discussion pertains to interpretation of the Bible *within* the Christian community, it excludes interpretations outside that community.

Assumption #2 seems to be a popular one in our culture, though it is fundamentally flawed. Without question, Jesus' central claim to authority and validity in his teaching was in his belief that he was the son of God – indeed that he himself was God in human flesh. In the words of C.S. Lewis in his book *Mere Christianity*, “A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on a level with a man who says he is a poached egg—or else he would be a devil of hell.” It is impossible to think otherwise. If Jesus really was just a

man, either he sincerely believed his own words and was delusional, or he was liar and deceiver of the worst possible kind.

Or if you happen to believe that the disciples made all of those teachings up – the logic still applies. If what they said was not true, they were either crazy or liars. There's just no way to get around it.

Assumption #3 is really the worst kind of nonsense. I realize we live in a world that believes that truth is relative, but basic common sense tells us otherwise. Two plus two equals four. That is a fact. My father is still my father, even if I choose to believe he is a Greyhound bus. "Oh, that's different!" you might say, "that's objective truth". Yes, it is – such is the nature of truth, to be objective. So to claim that religious truth is different from any other form of truth is a obvious attempt to sidestep the issue. We can't all be right if our basic assumptions conflict with each other.

If I say, "the Bible says Jesus wept" (John 11:35) very few people would argue with me. But if I say, "the Bible says homosexuality is wrong" (Leviticus 20:13 and Romans 1:24-27) or "the Bible says Jesus is the son of God" (Matthew 16:16-17) – I will be informed that this is merely my opinion. Why do you suppose that is the case? The Bible very clearly contains all three of the above statements.

It's because there is conflict of religious opinion. So, to keep harmony we resort to tactics of political correctness to make ourselves and those around us feel better – the ultimate in human vanity. Still, we cannot cast off common sense in order to save the egos of those around us.

"But you can't prove the existence of God or the validity of your religion!" Well, I could... but that would require dying. And I'm just not quite ready for that. Of course, neither can I prove with absolute certainty the existence of aliens... or that my consciousness is not just an illusion ... or that the universe is not a great spinning ball of goat cheese.

In the words of Josh McDowell:

"The problem is a misunderstanding of the nature of proof. The key is *not* a perfect or absolute certainty, as some believe, but a standard of proof that amounts to a moral certainty or puts the matter beyond a reasonable doubt.

This is the standard used in our courts of law historically. When a judge charges a jury, he or she tells them to decide based on probability, not certainty; based on the evidence presented, not the certainty of having viewed the crime."

If we're going to be difficult about the issue... let's face it, there's no way to really *prove* anything beyond a shadow of a doubt. Mathematics and logic could all just as easily be an illusion or a freak temporary stability in the physics of the universe. For that matter, this entire universe might be the product of the imagination of a delusional madman. But flights of fantasy aside, it seems we have been given the tools to make some basic

observations about the world around us and come to some legitimate conclusions. These conclusions must be based on sound reason and judgment - but when we are *able* to reach them, we can be reasonably sure that they are true. And we can be sure that if two truths conflict, they cannot both be true.

Consider the above examples with me again. My conscious cannot be both an illusion and a reality. Likewise, the universe can't both be a great spinning ball of goat cheese and *not* be a great spinning ball of goat cheese. And aliens can't be in both a state of existence and non-existence at the same time. They must either exist or not exist... just like God. The Bible must either be the Word of God... or not. And if it is, Scripture can have only the meaning God intended it to have - not whatever meaning our whims assign to it. So let's dispense with this ridiculous notion that - unlike any other subject - when it comes to religion and philosophy, truth is relative.

Many even among the evangelical Christian community have ascribed to Assumption #4. The most common explanation for adherence to this assumption is usually stated like this: "The Bible was written by men and men are fallible, therefore the Bible must have errors."

There are some basic problems with this view, and they can be summarized as follows:

1. Method and consistency of textual transmission by Jewish scribes indicates that the Israelites were meticulous in their preservation of Scripture and considered it inspired by God and without error.
2. Method and consistency of textual transmission by the early church indicates that early Christians were meticulous in their preservation of their writings and considered them to be inspired by God and without error.
3. Jesus and the Apostles quoted from the Scripture as though it were authoritative and inspired.
4. Scripture itself claims inspiration by God.
5. If the Bible truly contains significant errors, then how are we to trust it?

It is generally accepted that there have been slight errors by scribes in the textual transmission. However given the number and consistency within the record of textual witnesses to the New Testament (in particular) and the Old Testament (including the Dead Sea Scrolls) we can be quite confident that the text we have today is particularly accurate.

The following quotes regarding the New Testament textual transmission have been excerpted from Josh McDowell's *Evidence That Demands A Verdict*:

Sir Frederic G. Kenyon, who was the director and principal librarian of the British Museum and second to none in authority for issuing statements about MSS [manuscripts], says, "... besides number, the manuscripts of the new Testament differ from those of the classical authors, and this time the difference is clear gain. In no other case is the interval of time between the

composition of the book and the date of the earliest extant manuscripts so short as in that of the New Testament...”

***J. Harold Greenlee* states, “... the number of available MSS of the New Testament is overwhelmingly greater than those of any other work of ancient literature. In the third place, the earliest extant MSS of the N.T. were written much closer to the date of the original writing than is the case in almost any other piece of ancient literature.**

Regarding the Old Testament, McDowell makes the following observation:

“With the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, a number of O.T. manuscripts have been found which scholars date before the time of Christ. When the facts are known and compared, there is an overwhelming abundance of reason for believing the MSS we possess are trustworthy.”

It is beyond the ability of an article such as this to address all the issues of the textual transmission of our Bible - as volumes of books are dedicated to it. For further reading, please see the bibliography concluding “Reliability of the Bible” - Chapter 4 of McDowell’s book *Evidence That Demands A Verdict*.

We must also note that the attitude of the Apostles and Jesus himself seems to have been that the Scripture which they possessed, studied and quoted was reliable. To the extent that Paul, in Galatians 3:16 appeals to the plural aspect of the noun “seed“!

Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his descendant. † It does not say, “And to descendants,” as referring to many, but as referring to one, “And to your descendant,” who is Christ. (NKJV)

Jesus personally references two of the most controversial issues in modern theological debate - Creation and the Flood - authoritatively from Scripture:

Creation Account: Matthew 19:4-5 (NKJV)

And He answered and said to them, “Have you not read that He who ¹made *them* at the beginning *made them male and female,*’ and said, ‘*For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and ^ethe two shall become one flesh*’ ?

Flood Account: Matthew 24:38-39 (NKJV)

For as in the days before the flood, they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark, and did not know until the flood came and took them all away, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be.

We must also consider the claims to inspiration Scripture makes of itself:

2 Peter 1:19 (NKJV)

And so we have the prophetic word confirmed, which you do well to heed as a light that shines in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts; knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation, for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke *as they were* moved by the Holy Spirit.

2 Timothy 3:14-17 (NKJV)

But you must continue in the things which you have learned and been assured of, knowing from whom you have learned *them*, and that from childhood you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus.

All Scripture *is* given by inspiration of God, and *is* profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.

We should add that the method of textual criticism has identified the degree of true difference between manuscripts (with regards to the New Testament) to be somewhere in the area of less than 1%. It is important to note that the vast majority of conflicting passages involve such minor errors as one-word changes or omissions and spelling errors and most would agree that none of the identified textual variants affects any primary doctrinal issue.

Finally, *if* the Bible really is “full of errors”, it seems ludicrous to base one’s faith on a book that was merely “written by men” when the core claims of that book are based in the assumption of its inspiration. And if it truly has come down to us so corrupted as to be untrustworthy in its current form... given the sheer volume of extant copies and their practically miraculous degree of agreement, it seems we should have to toss the whole thing away all together. How may we determine which parts are truly corrupt and which have been carried through in true form?

The primary issue here is *significant* error. The vast majority of potential errors that have been identified (mainly copyist mistakes) - are really *insignificant* and occur in relatively few areas - and conservative textual criticism has identified these quite well. We can safely say that there is little or no room for the argument that the Bible is “full of errors” or even to claim that the Bible contains *significant* error.

Therefore, it seems - if we are to legitimately and securely claim the faith of Christianity - that we must adopt the view of Assumption #5: the Bible is true and contains no significant error. This is the area into which *most* evangelical believers fall. Most would claim the belief that the Bible is inspired (which implies inerrancy) in its *original autographs* - in the original documents before any copyist errors could have been introduced - and that it is trustworthy and sound in its current form through the supernaturally active and preserving hand of God.

Adopting an assumption other than that the Bible is true and contains no significant error leaves us with significant problems:

1. If some parts of the Bible contain significant error, can we trust any of it?
2. Who determines which part is erroneous and which is true?
3. There is no safe way to make doctrinal statements of any kind - including the doctrine of salvation.

It seems that the evidence clearly and strongly supports Assumption #5. And all other assumptions leave us with a faith based on human opinion and fly in the face of Scripture's claims of itself. Faith must be based in something more than mere human idea and opinion, otherwise we commit idolatry by worshipping a God we have created for ourselves. Throughout both Old and New Testaments, Scripture claims its own inspiration - and its primary message is based on this claim to inspiration. Without this assumption, the Christian (and Jewish) faith crumbles with no foundation.

Unfortunately, even among those who start with the assumption that the Bible is true and contains no significant error there is still some substantial disagreement. Why is this?

Largely it is because beyond these basic assumptions, we all carry the history of everything we have ever learned about religion, Christianity and the Bible. That's a lot of baggage - and much of it is usually faulty. Added to this, we have the assumptions that are inherently part of our surrounding culture as well as our own personal prejudices, emotions and tendency to justify our sinful behavior. Without careful attention to our method, intentions and scriptural honesty - we can easily end up filtering our biblical interpretation through all that baggage resulting in quite the neurotic blend of interpretation!

With that in mind, we must move on to identify some crucial things we must remember with respect to Biblical interpretation:

1. Realize the Bible's historical/cultural context
2. Realize that the Bible is a really big book
3. Realize that the Bible wasn't written in English
4. Realize that many words have multiple and/or loaded meanings

All of the above fall under the category of *context*. There is no more important concept in all of Biblical interpretation than the concept of context. Scripture passages do not exist independently in a vacuum - every passage of Scripture exists within its own context.

First of all, the Bible is based in a completely different historical/cultural context. It spans thousands of years of history, it was written in at least three different languages (Hebrew, Greek and Aramaic) and it was written by many authors in several different cultures. It is absolutely miraculous that the theme of the Bible remains the same across all those different authors and cultures: *God's relationship with mankind*.

It's important to remember these things when we sit down to read the Bible in modern day [insert your nation/culture here]. We *cannot* read our culture into the Bible. Even the New Testament was written 2000 years ago. Let that sink in for a minute. Imagine how our culture has changed over the past 200 years, now multiply that time period by 10. The past 100 years have seen an astounding degree of cultural change in the world in means of transportation, communication, medicine, etc... The world today is not the world of the Bible and if we try to read our own culture into theirs - we will walk away with misunderstanding.

One of the most difficult issues to deal with in Biblical interpretation in the Western world is remembering that the Bible is borne out of the middle-eastern Jewish culture. We think differently in our Western culture - much of our thought continues in the tradition of Greek and Roman philosophy and mathematics. We have to set aside some aspects of these modes of thinking in order to address the Bible in its original historical/culture context.

That is not to say that the Bible is not relevant outside of its original context. Quite the contrary, the Bible deals with basic human issues that are common to all people: the meaning of life, origins, purpose, faith, etc... However, in some senses, we must travel back in time 2000 years or so to understand it fully. Neither is this to say that you have to have a degree in religion and/or history to understand the Bible. Generally speaking, the core message of the Bible - God's love for mankind and desire/effort to bring them to Himself - is clear from even a child's reading. But as we go deeper into the Bible, it often requires some additional effort and learning. Fortunately, the effort is well rewarded!

Secondly, it's important that we remember that the Bible is a very big book! We cannot crack open the Bible, pick a verse at random, read it and expect to walk away with the full understanding. It just doesn't work that way.

As we said earlier, every passage of Scripture exists within its own context. John 3:16, for example, exists within the context of the book of John (it exists within chapter 3 as well, but the chapter divisions weren't in the original manuscripts). The book of John exists within the context of the writings on the life of Jesus - the gospels. The gospels exist within the context of the New Testament. The New Testament exists within the context of the entire Bible.

Not only that, but the message of John 3:16 exists within the context of the series of ideas being communicated in the book of John. It exists within the style of writing attributed to the apostle John as well as within the form of writing which the Gospel of John takes - narrative.

Context can be a complicated thing. For example if I say to you,

“Inca went with me to the store today and we bought some food. She met some

of her friends and they played for a while before we went home. She gave Eli a kiss before he went to bed.”

Without additional information, you might draw the conclusion that Inca was a human being instead of my dog. You might also draw the conclusion that we went to the grocery store instead of the pet shop. Given the knowledge that Inca is a dog, you might guess that Eli is my other dog - when in reality he is my son.

Or as a more practical example, have you ever walked past a storefront sign that read something along these lines?

!! Free Video !!

when you purchase any two videos of equal or greater value at regular price.

The context of the next line (no matter how obscure or tiny) makes all the difference in the world. Fortunately, the message of hope in Jesus Christ doesn't have any hidden clauses.

When considering the Bible, there are even greater complications. There are *types* (a kind of foreshadowing common between the Old and New Testament passages and events), *prophecies* (predictions of coming events), *traditions*, *analogies*, *embedded/implied Scripture references*, etc... In conjunction with the sheer size of the Bible and the fact that it spans thousands of years and multiple authors, makes context the single most important issue in Biblical interpretation.

My Greek instructor in seminary shared with us the three secrets of accurate Biblical interpretation:

1. Context
2. Context
3. Context

This cannot be stressed strongly enough!

Additionally, we must remember that the Bible was not written in English. The Old Testament was written originally in Hebrew - the language of the Israelites. And though Hebrew exists today as a language, it is important to remember that languages evolve over time and that modern Hebrew is not always the same as ancient Hebrew.

It is believed that most of the readers of the Old Testament in Jesus' time read from the Septuagint - a Greek translation of the Old Testament. And it is generally believed that the Gospels and some other parts of the New Testament were originally written in Aramaic - though the extant copies we have today are all in Greek. At least three different languages (Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek) - all of which vary distinctly from their modern counterparts were used in writing our Bible. How are we to bridge this gulf?

Fortunately, much work has gone into methods of translation and study of those original languages and books on the subject are plentiful and readily available. Many tools exist even for the novice who has no formal training in these languages. There may always be some nuances and aspects of certain words and phrases that remain vague to us, but generally speaking, understanding of the books in their original language is within the reach of any who are willing to study and learn.

Also, we must always be constantly aware that many words have obscure, difficult and often multiple meanings. The meanings of most of these ambiguous words are to be determined from the... context - you got it! We must also take into account that many religiously loaded words like *sanctification, salvation, glorification, heaven, ad infinitum...* have collected additional meaning from our religious culture, our teachers and our personal experience beyond that which is implied in the text. We must be careful not to read into those words our modern theologically loaded definitions. Instead, we must determine their real meaning from the text of the Bible itself. This is often a difficult and laborious task, but no less necessary for the amount of work involved.

So, if we begin by setting aside our own personal biases and prejudices, keep context foremost in our mind in all aspects of Biblical interpretation, and are honest with the Scripture instead of bending it for our own purposes - will we all arrive at all the same conclusions?

Not likely - at least not on all issues. There are many things about God that He has chosen not to reveal to us as explicitly as we might have chosen. Nonetheless, on the vast majority of issues which Scripture directly addresses we should generally come to the same basic conclusions - assuming, that is, that we are able to overcome that one ever tempting obstacle: to selfishly justify our own culture, opinions and/or sinfulness.

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