

Law and Principle:

Ancient Scriptures - Modern Questions

When our founding fathers formed our great constitution, by no stretch of the imagination could they have created specific laws that would regulate every circumstance in the lives of people living two centuries later. However, they provided for a legislative body to make relevant, up-to-date laws in succeeding generations, for courts to decide application of the laws, and provision for amendments to be made. That system of law continues to serve our nation well.

We must look to the Scriptures for the directives governing our conduct in all times. They are ancient and unchanging. We have not the luxury of a legislative body to make present-day regulations, provision for amendments, or a system of courts to interpret the meaning of those messages.

That would pose no problem if everything in life was static, frozen in first-century thought and practice. There are many modern questions and problems, however, in our generation that are not addressed in the Scriptures. No apostle had heard of them, and the Spirit did not anticipate them with specific prohibition or approval so that we can confidently point to a chapter and verse, saying, "Thus saith the Lord; that settles it!"

All right, you cannot tolerate open-ended questions and discussion. You demand instant answers to the most complex problems. Maybe you should just junk this in File 13, make yourself a cup of instant coffee, and watch the game where the winner is announced decisively. I am about to set forth a list of modern issues that are not touched on specifically in the Scriptures. For these, there are no easy proof-text answers.

1. Contraceptives, both medical and mechanical, have been the source of much controversy by sincere people, but no one finds the subject discussed in the Scriptures.
2. Fertility drugs are not mentioned. The nearest thing I can think of relating to the use of fertility drugs is Leah's use of the mysterious mandrakes found by her son Reuben (Gen. 30:14-14).
3. Artificial insemination was not anticipated in the Scriptures.
4. As much as both sides of the abortion controversy have sought for Biblical proofs, there is no discussion there of the matter of intentionally aborting a fetus.
5. What text do we use to determine whether freezing of sperm to be used after a man's death is appropriate?
6. Where do the Scriptures prohibit or approve the donating of sperm to be used anonymously to inseminate a woman other than the donor's wife? And may a woman rightly make use of donated sperm?

7. Although it was not a case of surrogate motherhood, the nearest thing to it that I can find in the Bible is the intention of Sarah and Abraham to use Hagar to bear the promised heir (Gen. 16). Surrogate motherhood is neither approved nor prohibited in the Bible.
8. May an unmarried woman appropriately choose to bear a child? Although this does not fit the case exactly, under the Law of Moses a man was allowed to provide offspring for his brother's childless widow (Deut. 25:5).
9. Paul did not give us a paragraph on genetic engineering or DNA alteration. Or on making use of animal genes or transplants.
10. Jesus was silent about cloning.
11. Jesus evidently approved of amputation (offending eye, hand), but he stopped short of do's and don'ts about organ transplantation. May we rightly make use of fetal tissue of the still-born infant? May we properly cultivate human embryos for research or implantation? Might the body of a headless clone be nurtured for organ transplants? That is so unnatural! But so are gall bladder surgery, intravenous feedings, and blood transfusions.
12. While the Law of Moses forbade cross-dressing, it gave no clue about sex changes. If you say that a sex change is prohibited, then if someone who has had one hears the gospel and obeys it, would that person be accepted? Would the person be accepted according to the present or former sexual state? If the change was from female to male, could he serve in male capacities in the congregation?
13. Most believers probably would not need a specific text to denounce "marriage" of homosexuals. However, would it be sinful for a non-practicing homosexual to adopt a child?
14. The voters of Oregon have approved doctor-assisted suicide. Do the Scriptures approve or disapprove of that? What of "pulling the plug" on the ventilator or refusing to put a hopeless patient on the ventilator and other sustaining devices? What of extreme and costly measures administered to an aged person? Must we go to all extremes to sustain the breathing of a patient? Is there a distinction between mercifully allowing a patient to die and taking steps to mercifully end the life? Book, chapter, and verse could end all controversy. Or would it?
15. Although alcoholic drink is approved by inspired writers as a beverage for moderate use and as a sedative, other kinds of drugs, including pain killers, anesthetics, tranquilizers, tobacco, caffeine, cocaine, and appetite suppressants are not mentioned specifically. How may we judge whether each is acceptable or prohibited?
16. If a person were to suffer a trauma which caused amnesia, the former life having been forgotten and a new course of life is being followed, should we accept the person according to the former or latter state?
17. Some of us of the older generation continue to be shocked by the brazen exposure of the human body and the vulgarity of language so common now. To what text do we turn to define decency in dress and speech? At what point does sexual attraction become pornographic?

You probably have been checking these items off with a definite yes or no as we have enumerated them. But you cannot find a "thus saith the Lord" for each of your conclusions. Those of you who look upon the Scriptures as a book of law governing each activity in our lives

must confess that such is not true. There is no present-day prophet, church, scholar, or group of elders to give an officially correct interpretation. There is no new clarifying law or amendment.

Does that mean that these things are of no concern to God, or that we have no basis for making decisions? No. These all involve moral and spiritual matters. They are not to be judged by a code of law, for no such code has been delivered to us. We are to be guided by something higher than a legal code – the eternal principles upon which all of God’s directives are based. The principle is greater and broader than any itemized statement of law.

The Ten Commandments, for example, are based on principles far more comprehensive than specific items of law. Murder, for instance, is not sinful simply because it is a violation of a Commandment. It is a violation of love and respect for a fellowman which is the eternal principle upon which the Commandment is based. In like manner, each Commandment points to some principle which has always prevailed in moral conduct. The highest principle of all relationship is love for God and love for our fellowman. That has always been true and will always be true. It has always been wrong to ignore God, to take his name lightly, or to lower him to the status of a pagan deity. The Sabbath observance would remind mankind that man cannot live by bread alone, but special time should be given in love to God. Love for others, whether family members or employees, will constrain you to give them free time for their own spiritual renewal and observances. God’s society has always been built on the family. Honor to father and mother is fundamental to the family. This entity is safeguarded by prohibition of adultery and taking another man’s wife. Love will prevent the dishonoring of father and mother, the murder of a fellowman, slandering him, and coveting or stealing his wife, his house, and property in general. So, a person who has never heard of the Ten Commandments will keep all moral regulations by letting love rule his actions. Lack of love will open the floodgate for all sorts of damaging actions against one’s neighbor, whether the offending one knows the Ten Commandments or not.

Disciples do not serve under a legal code like the Ten Commandments, but we have the higher principle of all law written in our hearts (Rom. 5:5; Heb. 8:10). Any enumeration of do’s and don’ts would tend to focus on the narrowed list leaving us without principles by which to judge circumstances not on the list. Ours is a life motivated by love for God and man, rather than an effort to define meticulous details of a legal code which we try vainly to keep in order to please God.

How are we to determine answers to the many modern questions listed above when no reference is made of them in the Scriptures? We must study each question to see what principles relate to it with love being the over-riding principle. More than one principle may be involved in some issues. It is not always easy to discern the proper answer. Different persons will focus on different aspects, so we will not be surprised to find much disagreement on the solutions proposed.

We must allow other sincere students of the Word to reach their own conclusions. We must love fellow-disciples more than our own interpretations. We can love and respect a differing brother without endorsing all his views. Paul’s instructions in Romans 14 should always be respected. None of us can claim infallibility in making these hard decisions. Each of us must welcome

others even as Christ has welcomed us (Rom. 15:7). If he accepts any of us, it will be in spite of misunderstandings. Frankly, I do not know the answers to all the modern questions that I proposed. Maybe it is to my advantage that I have not met with the circumstances where I would have been compelled to find the answer to many of them. But in our crazy world, sooner or later, we are going to need the answers – unless we want to live as a cloistered sect isolated from our society. []

(Cecil Hook; 1998)