

the
Blue Parakeet

Rethinking How You
Read the Bible

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The Book and I

How, Then, Are We to Live the Bible Today?



When I was in high school, I went to a Christian camp in Muscatine, Iowa, with Kris, my beautiful girlfriend (now my wife), to horse around for a week. But one morning, we were asked by our cabin leader to go spend a little time in prayer before breakfast. So I wandered out of our cabin, down a hill, alongside a basketball court, and through an open field, and then I walked over to the campfire area, climbed a short incline, and finally sat next to a tree, and prayed what my cabin leader told us to pray: “Lord, fill me with your Holy Spirit.” I wasn’t particularly open to spiritual things, but for some reason I said that prayer as our counselor advised. The Lord to whom I prayed that prayer caught me off guard. To quote the words of John Wesley, “My heart was strangely warmed.” I don’t remember what I expected to happen (probably nothing), but what happened was surprising. That prayer, or I should say the answer to that prayer, changed my life. I didn’t speak in tongues, I didn’t “see Jesus,” and I didn’t “hear God.” My eyes didn’t twitter, and I didn’t become catatonic. When I prayed, something powerful happened, and I went to breakfast a new person. Within hours I knew what I wanted to do for my life.

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On that hot summer day, I unexpectedly became a Bible student with a voracious appetite to read. Prior to that prayer I had very little interest in the Bible, and when it came to routine reading, I read only what my teachers assigned and *Sports Illustrated*. Within a week or two I began to read the Bible through from Genesis to Revelation, four chapters a day. I finished my reading the next spring, getting ahead of schedule because there were too many days when four chapters were not enough. My habit at the time was to arise early to read at least two chapters before going off to school, and then to read two chapters or so at night before I went to bed. I read the *Scofield King James Bible*, and Paul's letter to the Galatians became my favorite book. The Bible was full of surprises for me, and my eyes, mind, and heart were stuck on wide-open wonder. All because I asked God's Spirit to fill me.

Some of my former Sunday school teachers were as surprised as I was by what was happening. My youth pastor encouraged me to read serious books, and he also modeled a way to study the Bible by teaching Romans to our youth group. He also suggested I learn Greek, which, because he had a spare beginning Greek grammar book, I began. I had no idea what I was doing, but I liked languages, so I plugged away, never knowing quite what to expect. My father gave me some books to read, like John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. I devoured books. My teachers observed that I read books for class, not because I had to, but to learn and to engage in conversation.

I had no idea what I was getting into when I asked God's Spirit to fill me. I had no idea that I would go to college in Grand Rapids and become a bookaholic, buying books with money I didn't have! I hung out at Eerdmans and Zondervan and Baker and Kregel looking for bargains. I knew the sales clerks by name and they knew mine. I had no idea that I would then go on to seminary and from there for doctoral studies in England (Nottingham). I had no idea how hard it might be to find a teaching position. But I have lived a privileged life, teaching at a seminary for a dozen years and now teaching undergraduates at North Park University for nearly fifteen years. I had no idea that I would

eventually get to travel to and speak in churches around the world, that I would get to write books about Jesus and Paul and Peter and the Bible, and that I would become friends with Bible scholars all around the world. I just had no idea that teaching the Bible meant these things when I asked God's Spirit to fill me. All I know is that from the time I was converted, I wanted to study the Bible. I'm sitting right now in my study, surrounded by books, books about the Bible, and I love what I do. I just had no idea.

The Discovery of a Question

Throughout this process of conversion and reading the Bible, I made discoveries that created a question that disturbed me and still does. Many of my fine Christian friends, pastors, and teachers routinely made the claim that they were Bible-believing Christians, and they were committed to the whole Bible and that—and this was one of the favorite lines—“God said it, I believe it, that settles it for me!” They were saying two things and I add my response (which expresses my disturbance):

One: We believe everything the Bible says, *therefore* . . .

Two: We *practice* whatever the Bible says.

Three: Hogwash!

Why say “hogwash,” a tasty, salty word I learned from my father? Because I was reading the same Bible they were reading, and I observed that, in fact—emphasize that word “fact”—whatever they were claiming was not in “fact” what they were doing. (Nor was I.) What I discovered is that we all pick and choose. I must confess this discovery did not discourage me as much as it disturbed me, and then it made me intensely curious (and it is why I wrote this book). The discoveries and disturbances converged onto one big question:

How, then, are we to live out the Bible today?

This question never has been and never will be adequately answered

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with: The Bible says it, and that settles it for me. Why? Because no one does everything the Bible says. Perhaps you expected this question: How, then, are we to *apply* the Bible today? That's a good question, but I think the word "apply" is a bit clinical and not as dynamic as the phrase "live out." But we will get to that later.

Here's an example of my discovery process as a young student of the Bible. When you and I read the letter of James, brother of Jesus, we hear these words:

Those who consider themselves religious and yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues deceive themselves, and their religion is worthless. Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world. (James 1:26–27)

James knew what he was talking about, and, truth be told, there's nothing hard about understanding what James said. It's about as plain as the directions on a stop sign. The clarity of these words is the problem. For all kinds of reasons, and we'll get to those soon, what James said had almost nothing to do with the Christian groups I knew:

- We didn't like the word "religious."
- We didn't measure Christian maturity by control of the tongue (according to what I was hearing).
- Pure and faultless—and that's pretty high quality, you must admit—religion, according to James, isn't measured by church attendance, Bible reading, witnessing, going to seminary, or anything else I found in our discipleship and church membership manuals.

Nope, for James, a pure Christian, the kind God approves of, was one who showed compassion to orphans and widows and avoided being polluted by sin at all costs. Frankly, we emphasized the not being polluted by sin, but we defined "polluted" in ways that had nothing to do with compassion for the marginalized and suffering. For instance, we

were dead set against movies, drinking wine, and sex before marriage. In our version of reality, these three were all related—if you drank with your girlfriend, you’d lose your senses and go to a movie and end up having sex. I’m not only making fun of my past, I’m emphasizing how distorted things got—a good, solid Christian was one who didn’t do specific things that were against the rules. It also had to do with what we *did*—which was go to church weekly, read the Bible daily, and witness as often as we could. These aren’t bad things; in fact, I learned to love the Bible because of this context. But the one thing we didn’t do was follow everything James said!

As I kept looking around me, this began to disturb me. How in the world were we reading the same Bible? One thing was clear, we were all reading the Bible the same way, and that meant we had somehow learned not to follow the plain words of James.

What I learned was an uncomfortable but incredibly intriguing truth: Every one of us adopts the Bible and (at the same time) adapts the Bible to our culture. In less-appreciated terms, I’ll put it this way: Everyone picks and chooses. I know this sounds out of the box and off the wall for many, but no matter how hard we try to convince ourselves otherwise, it’s true. We pick and choose. (It’s easier for us to hear “we adopt and adapt,” but the two expressions amount to the same thing.)

I believe many of us want to know *why* we pick and choose. Even more importantly, many of us want to know *how to do this in a way that honors God and embraces the Bible as God’s Word for all times*. We’ll get to that. First, I offer some examples of picking and choosing, or “adopting and adapting.”

Picking and Choosing

Sabbath

The Bible I read both instituted and did not appear to back down from the *Sabbath*. Observing the Sabbath meant not working from Friday night to Saturday night (Exodus 20:9–10), and I found numerous

references in the Acts of the Apostles to the Christian observance of Sabbath. But as I was learning how to read the Bible inside a bundle of serious-minded Christians, I knew no one who really practiced the Sabbath. I quickly learned that the Christian Sunday, which focuses on fellowship and worship, is not the same as the Jewish Sabbath, which focuses on rest from labor. (You can read about this in any good Bible dictionary or on Wikipedia.) The Sabbath was described in the Bible, and it wasn't a "that settles it for me!" for anyone I knew.

What really got me going was that nobody seemed interested in this question. Yes, I did hear that some thought a passage like Colossians 2:16 may—but only *may*—have given Gentiles permission not to keep Sabbath, but the issue was not crystal clear. I was learning that we sometimes, rightly or wrongly, live out the Bible by *not doing* something in the Bible!¹

Tithing

The Bible I read taught *tithing*, but the Bible does not insist that all of the tithe must go to a local church. Truth be told, the New Testament doesn't even bring up the tithe. In the Bible the tithe is a combination of spiritual support (for the temple) and social service (for the poor). Moses says tithes are to be given not only to the Levites (roughly the temple servants) but also to the alien, to the fatherless, and to the widow (Deuteronomy 26:12). The churches I was attending had nothing to do with immigrants, did little to help orphans, and so far as I knew did little to strengthen widows.

What was more, the tithe we were hearing about was something we were to give to our local church for buildings, maintenance, pastoral salaries, missionaries, and the like. But the Bible said that I—as a tither—was to give some of my tithe to the Levite and also to those who were marginalized and suffering. This was something neither I nor anyone I knew was doing. I was learning that we sometimes live out the Bible, rightly or wrongly, by *morphing* one thing into another, that is, by

taking a tithe for temple assistants and also for the poor and turning it into a tithe for the local church. It might be fine to read the Bible like this, but we should at least admit what we are doing: in a word, we are morphing.

Foot Washing

Another discovery I made was that Jesus explicitly commanded *foot washing* in John 13:14. Widows who received benefits from the church were known as those who had washed the feet of saints (1 Timothy 5:10). St. Augustine, three and a half centuries later, writes about Christians washing the feet of the freshly baptized, so I knew that the practice continued well beyond the New Testament days. But I was surrounded by Bible believers and had never seen this happen. I learned that some Christians still practice this, but no one I knew (except a high school friend's church) was doing it. We were either ignoring what the Bible taught or morphing it into a cultural parallel like hanging up one another's coats and offering our guests something to drink. A New Testament scholar, Bill Mounce, in his exhaustive study of 1 Timothy, draws this conclusion about what Paul says of widows: "Paul is not asking if the widow followed church ritual [physically washed feet]; he is asking if she was the type of person who had done good deeds throughout her life."² In other words, Paul is not speaking of something literal—real washing of feet—but of an underlying principle—serving others. What I learned is that sometimes we *look behind the text to grasp a timeless principle and the principle is more important than doing the actual words.*

Bill Mounce might be right, but my question as a college student was this one: "How did we know Paul's words were really only describing a symptom of a person of good deeds instead of a literal requirement?" Some suggested to me to quit asking such pesky questions and just follow along, but inside I was learning to ask what for me has been a lifelong joyous ride of exploring how we live out the Bible.

Charismatic Gifts

The more I became aware of the rise of the charismatic movement, the more I discovered Jesus, Paul, and Peter had the power to work *miracles* (Matthew 4:23; 10:8; Acts 4:1–12; 16:16–18). In my first year of Bible reading I learned that Christians in Paul’s churches *gave words of prophecy* (1 Corinthians 12–14). And I knew Jesus said that his followers would do even greater things than he did. No one that I knew was doing miracles or giving words of prophecy. What I learned from this experience is an expression that sums up the way many read the Bible: “*that was then, but this is now.*”

In other words, I learned that God spoke in various ways in various times. And I was taught that God wasn’t saying *those* things today. I was only beginning to wonder just how enormous a dragon that little expression — “that was then, but this is now” — was hiding. I learned that sometimes *the Bible expects things that were designed for that time but not for our time*. I wasn’t sure how we knew that, but I was sure we were making decisions like that. This really sealed my question: How do we know how to live out the Bible? But there are a few more examples for us to consider.

Surrendering Possessions

There is nothing clearer than this statement by Jesus about *possessions*: “In the same way, those of you who do not give up everything you have [possessions] cannot be my disciples” (Luke 14:33). Two chapters earlier Jesus said, “Sell your possessions and give to the poor” (12:33). If there is anything that is straightforward, those two verses are. I knew enough about church history to know that St. Francis did exactly what Jesus ordered, or at least he got very close. I also knew that we weren’t following Jesus’ words at all. In fact, I knew that most Christians were not living below their means and were in fact living well beyond their means.

The most common explanations I heard were either “but that was then” or “there were special expectations for Jesus’ personal disciples.” Others suggested that what we could take away from these statements by Jesus was that we should “cut back” on our spending so we can be more generous. However we read them, these are statements made by Jesus, seemingly without condition; we weren’t doing them as Jesus said; and they evidently belonged to a different era and a different culture (this principle kept coming up). How did we decide such things? How do we know what to do and what not to do? (I can’t tell you how much these two questions have energized my thirty-plus years of Bible study.)

Contentious Issues

On top of these discoveries I was encountering *contentious issues* like evolution, Calvinism, Vietnam and war, abortion, and homosexuality. I must confess I loved the thrill of these debates. These hotly disputed issues took some of these discoveries of mine and stood them up into questions—questions of practical and present significance, questions that started to mound up into my one big question:

Do we conform the Bible to science, science to the Bible, or . . . ?

Is Calvinism or Arminianism right? Are both right? Is neither right?

What kind of music should we play in church? (God bless Larry Norman and Cliff Richard.)

Are the charismatic gifts relevant today? All of them? Even miracles?

Should we oppose the conflict in Vietnam?

Which view of the second coming is biblical?

Should women be ordained? Can they preach and teach?

What do we do about abortion?

What do we do about capital punishment and nuclear war?

Is homosexual behavior a sin?

And they became the one big question for me: How, then, are we to live out the Bible today?

The Question Is “How?”

What made me so curious and what gave me a deep discontent was *how* we came to our answers. Some people went straight to the Bible and stayed there; some people took one passage and overwhelmed another; yet others read the Bible, appealing to history and change and then to theologians, science, pastors, psychologists, and even to “that’s the way we do things at my church.” I began to see that Christians read the Bible differently and I began to see that no one group seemed to get it all right. At that time in my life I was asking questions like these:

Why is it that one group thinks the charismatic gifts are dead and gone while other groups vibrate with tongue-speaking and words of prophecy?

Why is it that two of us can sit down with the same Bible with the same question—Should Christians participate in war?—and come away with two different answers? One can appeal to Joshua and Judges and the other can appeal to Jesus’ statement to love your enemies and to turn the other cheek.

Why do some churches ordain women and let them preach while other churches have folks who get up and walk out when a woman opens her Bible for some teaching in front of men?

As a faithful attendee of churches, as one fully committed to the faith, as one who read his Bible daily, and as one who watched and listened to debates unroll and even unravel, I became convinced that it was not so easy to “apply” the Bible as I thought it was. In fact, when it came to contentious issues, how we read the Bible discerns how we are to live. To be perfectly honest to this young student of the Bible, I knew there was plenty of picking and choosing *on both sides of every question*. I pressed on for two more decades and I have now come to the conclusion that this question—How, then, are we to live out the Bible today?—is a pressing question for our day. I believe we need to begin asking this question and “start splainin’ ourselves.” I believe there

is an inner logic to our picking and choosing, but I believe we need to become aware of what it is.

Until we do, we will be open to accusations of hypocrisy. It's that simple, and it's that lethal. If you tell me you believe the Bible and seek to live out every bit of it, and if I can find one spot that you don't—especially if that spot is sensitive or politically incorrect or offensive—then we've all got a problem. I teach college students the Bible, and I can assure you that they are fully aware of the “pick-and-choose” method. They are fully convinced, at least many of them, that the pick-and-choose method is an exercise in hypocrisy or worse.

What I've learned is this: *People are afraid of this question once they turn it inside out on themselves and others.* Too many of us don't want to think about this. Too many of us don't want to admit that we are picking and choosing. Even if we prefer (as I do) to say “adopting and adapting,” we are doing something similar. But I think we need to face this squarely and honestly. I've learned that it is time to think about why and how we pick what we pick and why and how we choose what we choose. What can we do to get ourselves to face this question honestly?

What Will It Take to Get Us to Ask This Question?

Sometimes it is a classroom setting that provokes this question. I once had a student ask me point-blank in class a question about this passage: “As you go, proclaim this message: ‘The kingdom of heaven has come near.’ Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons.”

“Yo, Scot.” [Evidently “Yo” now means “Dr.”] “Yo, Scot, since you believe we should preach the kingdom of God today, as Jesus said in Matthew 10:7, why don't you also believe we should heal the sick as in Matthew 10:8?” What he was asking me, in his playful snarky way, was why I pick one to do and choose not to do the other. I have done lots of

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verse 7 but have never done any of verse 8. He had me, but it was one of those moments when I got to ask my favorite question: How, then, are we to live out the Bible today?

There's a story here, as there so often is. Joel Martens, the student, is an active member in a Vineyard Church where charismatic gifts are emphasized. I wasn't either Vineyard or charismatic (though I always say "I'm open!"). Does that mean he's given to exaggerating or that I'm given to minimizing Matthew 10:8? You answer the question. When I talked to Kris about this classroom experience, she asked why I didn't ask him, "Do you raise the dead at your church?" You can answer that one, too. (When I see Joel next, I'll ask him in a snarky way.) Anyway, Joel got our class thinking about this question and his question hasn't yet gone away for me.

More often than not it is a *person* who enters into our world that shakes up our thinking that gets us asking this question. Perhaps we encounter someone who speaks in tongues or someone who thinks they can heal others or a friend's daughter who is a lesbian and also a Christian. It's one thing to say we think homosexuality is sin, but it's completely different when we know a gay or a lesbian and that someone happens to ask us why we believe in Leviticus 20:13a but not in 20:13b—the first prohibits homosexuality and the second insists on capital punishment for it. Or if we are asked why we think the instruction from *nature* in Romans 1 about homosexuality is permanent and applicable today, but the one in 1 Corinthians 11 is evidently disposable.

Here's what Paul says about "nature" in Romans 1:26: "Even their women exchanged *natural* sexual relations for *unnatural* ones." But those same persons don't think Paul's instructions about *nature* in 1 Corinthians 11:14 are permanent: "Does not the very *nature* of things teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a disgrace to him, but that if a woman has long hair, it is her glory?" (emphasis added in both passages). So, a lesbian asks why some embrace the appeal to "nature" in Romans 1 while our wives have short hair and our sons have hair pulled back into a ponytail. Again, before you answer that question, it would

be really good if you pulled up to a coffee table with a few friends and opened up your Bible to these passages and asked yourselves this question: How, then, are we to live out the Bible today?

By such personal encounters we are driven to think aloud about what we believe, we are driven to think more carefully about what we think, we are driven back to the Bible and how we read it, we are driven to ask how it is that we are living out the Bible, and we are sometimes driven to our knees to ask for wisdom about contentious issues. One such issue, which will be the focus of the last part of this book, is the giftedness of women for various ministries in the church, including teaching and preaching and pastoring.

Perhaps we need a visitor to come by, and maybe this book will be that visitor, who gets us to ask this question. I believe we need to ask the question and, together, begin to work it out.