

“How should Christians make decisions”

Sermon

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Most of the following is based on the Teachings of Rev. John Wesley (founder of the Methodist Church) and Rev. Adam Hamilton (a leading Methodist theologian and prolific Christian Author).

INTRODUCTION

1. Every-day Christians have to make decisions. In their homes, in their businesses or places of employment, in their communities, and in the political arena, that affect not only themselves and their families but their neighbors, also. So how should they do this in keeping with God’s Will?
2. Wesley’s quadrilateral: Wesley taught and preached on a process that has come to be known as his quadrilateral.
 - a. The four elements:
 - i. Scripture
 - ii. Tradition
 - iii. Reason
 - iv. Experience
 - b. Both Wesley and Rev. Hamilton feel that Scripture is always the primary Place the Christian should go for guidance.
 - c. However, Wesley thought that the other 3 elements of the quadrilateral:
 - i. Help with interpreting and understanding Scripture
 - ii. Provide guidance in making decisions where Scripture does not
 - d. However, both of these theologians feel that all 4 elements, including Scripture, can both help and hinder in understanding God’s Will.
3. So, let us explore these four elements and how they might help us to discern God’s will for us and decisions we make.

SCRIPTURE

“A closed mind is a wonderful thing to lose”

1. As a lifelong scientist, I long ago learned the best way to discern the truth is to ask questions with an open mind, not to try and prove preconceived notions.

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2. To truly understand Scripture, one must start with open mind.
 - a. A Christian should not explore Scripture by trying to justify what they already believe.
 - b. Rather, start with an open mind seeking to find God’s Will.
3. “The Bible out of context is pretext”.
 - a. The definition of pretext is:
 - i. A reason given in justification of a course of action that is not the real reason
 - ii. A purpose or motive alleged or an appearance assumed in order to cloak the real intention or state of affairs
 - b. Almost anything can be justified by taking Scripture out of context.
 - i. Slave owners and the pre-Civil War church used it to justify slavery.
 - ii. Hitler used it to justify genocide.
 - iii. Men for centuries have used it to subjugate women.
 - iv. The Crusades and the Inquisition were both based on Scripture.
4. So, what is the context of the Bible?
 - a. It was almost exclusively written by Middle Eastern Jewish men, 2,000 to 3,000 years ago.
 - b. It was written at a time:
 - i. When much of what is now common knowledge was not known
 - ii. When slavery was widely practiced
 - iii. Women were widely considered the property of men
 - c. Not all Scripture is of equal importance.
 - i. The Gospels clearly are the most authoritative books of the Bible.
 - ii. The Prophets are most likely a direct reflection of God’s will.
 - iii. Most of the rest may only be the inspired word of God as recorded by men in an attempt to better understand God’s will.
 - d. The Gospels are the only recorded words of God (Jesus Christ) that were witnessed by anywhere from a dozen men to thousands of men, woman and children.
 - e. The Gospels are the context by which all other Scripture should be judged.
 - f. The Gospels are where we should go first for guidance from the Scriptures.

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5. What do the Gospels (Jesus) teach us?
 - a. God Is Love, (John 3:16) and he loves the entire world, not just Christians, nor whites, nor men, nor Americans, etc. but every living and departed soul.
 - b. The Great Commandments:
 - i. Love God.
 - ii. Love thy “neighbor”.
 - iii. Who is our neighbor? Through the parable of “The Good Samaritan” Christ makes it clear he places no limits on “neighbor”, literally he counts every human being as our Neighbors.
 - c. The Golden Rule
 - d. The Beatitudes/Sermon on Mount:
 - i. Meek will inherit the earth
 - ii. Merciful will receive mercy
 - iii. Peacemakers will be called the children of God
 - iv. Anger and/or insulting another can subject you to judgement
 - e. The Great Commission: “Make disciples of all nations”
 - f. Matthew 25
 - i. Christ is crystal clear about how he expects his followers to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, visit the prisoner.
 - ii. This is not a suggestion, but a commandment.
 - iii. He makes it clear that failing to do this will result in condemnation.
6. How do we interpret other Scriptures?
 - a. Adam Hamilton talks about the Gospels being as a Colander through which all other Scripture should pass.
 - b. If it stays (agrees with the Gospels), then almost certainly it reflects God’s will.
 - c. But, if they pass through (are against the teachings of the Gospels), then Christians are permitted, even expected by God, to question if they truly reflect his will.
 - d. Using such Scriptures out of context can easily mislead us into decisions that are not in keeping with God’s will.
7. Wesley taught that the other three elements of the Quadrilateral can help us in these situations. Let’s explore them.

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TRADITION

1. The Church’s long-held traditions should not be discarded lightly.
2. They are often based on the collective wisdom of many knowledgeable Christians.
3. But they also can be wrong:
 - a. Until the Civil War, most southern churches and many northern churches supported the institution of slavery and tried to justify it through Scriptures.
 - b. Throughout history many evils were carried out in the name of Christian tradition.
4. So how are Christians to decide when tradition is keeping with God’s will? Ask the following:
 - a. Does it agree with Christ’s teachings or the spirit of his teachings?
 - b. Does it benefit the least of Christ’s children?
 - c. Does it avoid benefiting the Church/Christians to the detriment of others?
 - d. Does it promote mercy, peace, and/or reconciliation?
 - e. Does it promote Love or deter Hate?
 - f. Is it how we would want to be treated?
5. If so, then Tradition is likely in keeping with God’s Will. If not, we should question it!

REASON

1. God gave us a brain and intelligence and He expects us to use it.
2. When a scientific proof that is well-established disagrees with an apparent explanation in the Scripture, remember the Bible is primarily a religious text, not a scientific one.

This does not necessarily negate the role of God.

3. Hamilton relates a story where, at a gathering of agnostics and atheists to which he was invited as the token pastor, a College Physics professor said that at a State College, look to the Religious Dept for atheists and the Physics Dept for Christians.

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4. While physics can describe four forces that may govern the universe, what it fails to do is explain where those four forces originated. As such, most physicists believe there is a higher power behind the universe and in the Western world, most are Christians.
5. We should use criteria similar to the above to judge if our reason is likely in keeping with God’s will. In addition:
 - a. We need to be careful that our reason is not being used to justify our own selfish or misguided motives.
 - b. We should ask, is our reason in keeping with Jesus’ call to Love Our Neighbor?

EXPERIENCE

1. Most of us do not know what it is like to be in another person’s shoes.
 - a. Men do not know what it’s like to be a woman and vice versa.
 - b. Whites do not know what it’s like to be a minority.
 - c. Straights do not know what it’s like to be an LGBTQ person.
 - d. Non-addicts do not know what it’s like to be an addict and have your whole life consumed by an addiction.
2. Yet, Christ calls upon us to try and do so.
 - a. We, as Christians, should always strive to understand that our experience may be very different from that of other Christians, as well as others who are non-Christian.
 - b. Accepting our differences and trying to understand others’ perspectives is the first step in truly loving our neighbors.

IN SUMMARY: HOW ARE CHRISTIANS TO DECIDE ISSUES?

1. We can do all of the following:
 - a. Try to honestly discern what Christ would do.
 - b. Be careful not to substitute your own desires/opinions for God’s.
 - c. Avoid being judgmental.
 - d. Argue/discuss policy, not the personality.
 - e. Always respect others, even those with whom we disagree.

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- f. Seek the facts and truth.
 - g. Reject negative advertising/attacks on persons, not policy.
 - h. Determine if it is beneficial for others, even if it is not for yourself.
 - i. Follow your conscience, not your wallet.
 - j. Try to look at it from the perspective of others.
2. A few of my own suggestions:
- a. Listen to those on the other side.
 - i. Liberals should occasionally listen to Fox News.
 - ii. Conservatives should occasionally listen to CNN.
 - b. All should regularly listen/read what, though not perfect, are reasonably good sources of in-depth, unbiased news such as National Public Radio or TV, the BBC, Network news, and major newspapers.

FINAL THOUGHTS

1. A modern-day paraphrase of Matthew 25:
- I was a refugee at your border, fleeing violence and seeking a safe place for my family, and you gave me shelter and refuge, and you kept my family together, and you did not turn me away.**
2. Remember if it does not promote **LOVE** or deter **HATE**, it's probably not in keeping with Christ's teachings nor God's Will.
3. **AMEN.**