

Ask The Pastor



Question: How do we interpret relevant Scriptures in a changing culture?

Several people have asked about the relevant Scriptures pertaining to our present dilemma in The United Methodist Church. This seems like a simple question, but it is not and speaks to the difficulty for the denomination to find a compromise after many years of this discussion. As a minister in the North Georgia Conference, we even had a day where we gathered to have a conversation regarding the divide. Around my table, we had active and retired, and male and female, traditional and progressive clergy. I was looking forward to a holy conversation even though it can be difficult at times. However, I left that day disappointed, along with many others, because we did not have that holy conversation. We tiptoed around the issues and talked about how many would leave the denomination if a vote went one way or the other. As I reflected on that meeting, I wonder if we did not have a true conversation because it's almost impossible to have one. I wonder when our District Superintendent said that he wanted us to have more time for a conversation if people really want to have a conversation. I say this because whenever we begin to have a conversation about Scriptural authority, then we begin to ask the "what about" Scriptures. What about the old covenant laws that we don't follow? What about women in ministry or slavery? These are valid questions and should be discussed if one really wants to have a conversation. But they are also used to avoid a conversation about scripture pertaining to same-sex marriage and the ordination of self-professing homosexuals. We also don't have a serious conversation because we all know and love people who are gay. We are a welcoming church and we are afraid that having a conversation about the two issues before us is saying we don't welcome. So we ignore it, refuse to have a hard conversation, and hope that it will just go away. I agree with our District Superintendent when he said that there will be another controversy after this one. There is always a "what's next". So if we avoid the hard conversations now regarding the authority of Scripture and how it relates to a changing culture, how much harder will it be next time?

So, since you've asked, I will try to talk about the relevant Scriptures in the next couple of "Ask the Pastors". Following our town hall, several people asked about the comment that we don't follow many of the laws of the Old Testament anymore. There are a couple of ways to respond to this statement. One is, who is the "we" that is being referred to? There are some orthodox Jews that try to follow many of the laws that are still pertinent to them. Just like us Christians, there are traditional and progressive Jews with different viewpoints on how to follow their Scripture.

But for us as followers of Christ, there is a different response. Actually, the early church dealt with this situation. When Christianity began to spread beyond the Jews, the question arose asked if Gentile (non-Jewish) converts had to convert to Judaism and follow the Mosaic laws to become a follower of Jesus. In Acts 15, this was discussed at the Jerusalem Council. Peter made the statement that they have been saved by grace and should not have "this yoke (following the Mosaic Law) placed around their neck". The Jerusalem Council decided upon four rules that

should apply to all to promote peace in the early church: food polluted by idols, sexual immorality, the meat of strangled animals, and blood. This is why we don't follow the Mosaic law, it's because we don't have to. That issue was settled almost two thousand years ago.

In His Grace,
Pastor Jim