

Are we 'that people'?

The question opens up new ways to appreciate the Bible as God's word



The question of whether and how a particular passage applies to our situation is a crucial one.

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The televangelist intones, "The Bible says" The two strangers at the door are equally intent, quoting verses about whether to worship on Saturday or Sunday, whether your baptism as an infant was valid, whether only men should be public leaders in the church. The Bible is God's word and is authoritative, but how can a person be sure it applies to them?

One important question to ask, especially when dealing with its rules and regulations, is whether a particular passage applies to us in the present. Some may question whether we have the right to pick-and-choose one Bible passage over another.

And yet, we know from the story of Jesus that people who are deeply immersed in Scripture may follow all the rules—and miss the point.

Thus, in John 5:39-40 Jesus says to his opponents: "You search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that testify on my behalf. Yet you refuse to come to me to have life." So the question of whether and how a particular passage applies to our situation is crucial. One thing that separates Lutherans (and most other Christians) from fundamentalists is precisely asking this question seriously: Does this apply to me?

In the mid-1520s, Martin Luther was opposed by, among others, Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt, a former colleague at the University of Wittenberg, who argued that Christians must follow Old Testament commandments literally, including those on the Sabbath and tithing.

In response, Luther wrote: "One must deal cleanly with the Scriptures. From the very beginning the word has come to us in various ways. It is not enough simply to look and see whether this is God's word, whether God has spoken it; rather we must look and see to whom it has been spoken, whether it fits us. That makes all the difference between night and day. The word in Scripture is of two kinds: the first does not pertain or apply to me, the other kind does. The

false prophets pitch in and say, 'Dear people, this is the word of God.' This is true; we cannot deny it. But we are not that 'people'" (*Luther's Works [Amer. Ed.] 35: 170*).

Consider some examples of how this works.

- In 1 Corinthians 11:6, Paul suggests that women who don't cover their heads when praying should shave them. Is this in the Bible, the word of God? Yes. Are we "that people"? Although some of us are old enough to remember when women were expected to wear hats to church, no one would say that it's either that or off to the barber.
- The 10th Commandment about coveting wives, servants "or anything that is your neighbors,'" as Luther pointed out in the Large Catechism, implied that women and servants are property. But, as Luther also stated, we aren't "that people" in the sense that our societies should not treat spouses or laborers as property.
- We learn from Jesus about the Third Commandment (keeping the Sabbath holy) and from Paul about circumcision that these commandments, too, although in the Bible, don't apply to us.
- In Acts 15 the Jerusalem Council prohibited Gentiles from eating blood. In societies famous for *Blutwurst* (blood sausage), however, it was clear to Luther (and to my grandfather) that they were no longer "that people."

Asking the question, "Does this apply to us today?—or are we that people?" opens up new ways to appreciate the Bible as God's word. It's not simply a rule book filled with obscure regulations. Rather it is God's word of law, which reflects back to us the truth of the human condition—our sinful, mortal selves—and gospel, which proclaims the unconditional truth of God—God's mercy in Christ. □

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