

The Greater Danger

Differences over the interpretations of texts among those who claim allegiance to Christ is a long-standing problem that continues. We often debate the meaning of texts and sometimes the differences are too great to bear. Unity is at stake, especially when the consequences of some differences do not favor fertile grounds for fellowship among believers.

Yet in our current cultural and religious climate, there is an even greater danger we face: whether or not we are free just to move beyond what we know the Scriptures teach because we do not see Scripture as authoritative any more.

People claiming to honor Scripture, seeking to know what it means and abiding by what Scripture teaches, often disagree on meaning. Yet they can share a common view that Scripture comes from God and needs to be respected and followed, whatever its intended meaning (which is what they are trying to flesh out). That starting point is vital, for if differences over a text will be resolved, those seeking resolution need at least to see that the text is authoritative (because it is God's word) and needs to be understood and followed.

The greater danger, however, is that many no longer share the concern of following what the text actually teaches. They know what the text teaches, but that does not matter because their view is that the text, while fine for its time, is not equipped to handle our current age. Consequently, we need to move beyond what Scripture teaches and give primacy to our experiences and feelings.

Do we doubt that this is what is happening? As an illustration, consider this quote from Luke Timothy Johnson in defense of same-sex unions (in 2007). He admitted that such a position demands "intellectual honesty." He also said, for himself, that he has "little patience with efforts to make Scripture say something other than what it says, through appeals to linguistic or cultural subtleties." He then wrote:

"I think it important to state clearly that we do, in fact, reject the straightforward commands of Scripture, and appeal instead to another authority when we declare that same-sex unions can be holy and good. And what exactly is that authority? We appeal explicitly to the weight of our own experience and the experience thousands of others have witnessed to, which tells us that to claim our own sexual orientation is in fact to accept the way in which God has created us. By so doing, we explicitly reject as well the premises of the scriptural statements condemning homosexuality—namely, that it is a vice freely chosen, a symptom of human corruption, and disobedience to God's created

order." (*Homosexuality and the Church*, <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/homosexuality-church-0>)

The point I'm making here is not to debate whether or not Scripture teaches against homosexual practice. Even the author above agrees that this is clear. My point here stretches beyond that particular issue, and that is to see a view that Scripture is not finally authoritative at all. If it can be done with this particular issue, why can it not be done with virtually every issue? And that, I believe, is exactly what we are seeing today. Scripture just isn't seen as authoritative.

The author recognized what Scripture plainly and clearly teaches. He had no doubts about that. However, the reason he takes the position he does is because of an appeal to "another authority," which is "the weight of our experience..." In doing so, "we explicitly reject as well the premises of the scriptural statements..." At least he is being honest about that.

Focus for a moment on those statements. There is an explicit rejection of Scripture replaced by an appeal to "another authority" that resides solely in "our" experiences and feelings. This is what I want us to see here. This is the greater danger, for it is no longer about interpretations of biblical texts. Why do the interpretations of the texts matter at all if we are going to reject them explicitly anyway in favor of our own feelings and experiences? If they support what we already think, well and good. If they don't, then we just move beyond them in favor of our own authority. Scripture has little to no bearing then.

Once that door is opened, why do the experiences and feelings of one (or a group) take precedence over the feelings and experiences of others who disagree or experience things differently or in contradiction? Now who gets to decide what is right or wrong? Those in power? Where does that leave us?

We expect people of the world to reject explicitly the teaching of Scripture. That is no surprise. What is becoming increasingly more common, however, is that those who claim allegiance to Christ are doing the same thing. With this attitude, it does not matter what Scripture teaches. It only matters how we feel about it. Consequently, people think that we are free to move beyond the actual teachings of Scripture when our feelings and personal experiences are at stake.

This mentality is, indeed, the greater danger, for it is based upon the affirmation of self rather than the revealed will of God (cf. Matt 7:21-23). The plea to get back to Scripture is as vital now as it ever was.

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