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Dear People of God,

At the 1998 Lambeth Conference, a wide difference of opinion was evident among the Bishops of the Anglican Communion concerning the Holy Scriptures. Some at the conference suggested that those who did not accept their understanding of Scripture were ignoring its authority. However, we believe this difference of opinion is about not the authority of Scripture, but its interpretation, and that it is possible to maintain a high respect for the authority of Scripture while coming to different interpretations or understandings as to its meaning and application. Church history shows this to be true even in questions of dogmatic theology, and it should come as no surprise that in matters of moral theology we should similarly find different understandings. Such questions cannot easily be addressed without a deep and serious engagement with the whole of Scripture at many levels, and such engagement is truly respectful of the authority of Scripture.

It is such deep engagement that is called for at this time in the Church's life, and the task we set for the members of the committee who prepared this document was to outline as clearly as possible the means by which many of us, in our particular part of the Anglican Tradition, understand, interpret, and apply the Holy Scriptures. The Principles of Interpretation that follow provide an outline of a method for, and the limits to, our understanding of God's Word Written. The commentaries seek to expand and explain some of the thinking behind this method, and to provide examples of how the Church has, over time, understood Scripture in different ways. We offer it now to our brothers and sisters in this Diocese as well as in other parts of our Communion as a means of further conversations, understanding, and reconciliation.

We in this part of the Communion have profound respect for the Holy Scripture as the Word of God. It is our hope that this document will assure those with whom we disagree of this, and perhaps assist them in seeing how it is we have reached those conclusions in keeping with sound principles of scriptural interpretation.



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# Principles of Interpretation

**1** The Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are “the Word of God” and “contain all things necessary to salvation.” They are called the Word of God by the household of faith, not because God dictated the biblical text, but because the Church believes that God inspired its human authors through the Holy Spirit and because by means of the inspired text, read within the sacramental communion of the Church, the Spirit of God continues the timely enlightenment and instruction of the faithful.

The Oath of Conformity and the VI Article of Religion, the Book of Common Prayer (American), pp. 538, 868

An Outline of the Faith, the Book of Common Prayer (American), p. 853, the Holy Scriptures

**2** The Holy Scriptures are the primary constitutional text of the Church. They provide the basis and guiding principles for our common life with God, and they do so through narrative, law, prophecy, poetry, and other forms of expression. Indeed, the Scriptures are themselves an instrument of the Church’s shared communion with Jesus Christ, the living Word of God, who uses them to constitute the Church as a Body of many diverse members, participating together in his own word, wisdom, and life.

The XIX Article of Religion, the Book of Common Prayer (American), p. 871

**3** The Scriptures, as “God’s Word Written,” bear witness to, and their proper interpretation depends upon, the paschal mystery of God’s Word incarnate, crucified and risen. Although the Scriptures are a manifestly diverse collection of documents representing a variety of authors, times, aims, and forms, the Church received and collected them, and from the beginning has interpreted them for their witness to an underlying and unifying theme: the unfolding economy of salvation, as brought to fulfillment in Jesus Christ.

The XX Article of Religion, the Book of Common Prayer (American), p. 871  
“You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness to me.” John 5:39

Commentary 1, *Some Notes on Principles Three and Four*, Tobias Haller

Commentary 2, *Oikonomia: The Divine Plan*, Richard Norris

**4** The Scriptures both document and narrate not only God’s saving acts but also the manifold human responses to them, revealing that God’s unchanging purpose to redeem is fulfilled, not by means of a coercive, deterministic system, but through a divine plan compassionately respectful of human freedom, adapted to changing historical circumstances, cultural situations, and individual experience and need. In reading the diverse texts of Holy Scripture, the Church seeks an ever-growing comprehension of this plan and of the precepts and practices whereby believers may respond more faithfully to it, walking in the way of Christ.

See Acts 11:1-18, 13:46-48

**5** The New Testament itself interprets and applies the texts of the Old Testament as pointing to and revealing the Christ. Thus, the revelation of God in Christ is the key to the Church’s understanding of the Scriptures as a whole.

Matthew 26:54; Luke 4:21, 24:27;  
Acts 8:35, 18:28  
“The Old Testament is not contrary to the New: for both in the Old and New Testament everlasting life is offered to Mankind by Christ, who is the only Mediator between God and Man, being both God and Man.”  
The VII Article of Religion, the Book of Common Prayer (American), p. 869

6 Individual texts must not, therefore, be isolated and made to mean something at odds with the tenor or trajectory of the divine plan underlying the whole of Scripture.

The Church has no right “so [to] expound one place of Scripture, that it be repugnant to another.” The XX Article of Religion, the Book of Common Prayer (American), p. 871

7 It must be concluded that the words of a scriptural text or texts, however compelling, may not in every circumstance be received by the Church as authoritative. Even if the Church has no authority to abrogate “commandments which are called Moral” — unlike its jurisdiction in “ceremonies and rites” — the true moral significance of any commandment is not simply given but must be discerned.

Commentary 3, *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* I.XV.3, Richard Hooker

The VII Article of Religion, the Book of Common Prayer (American), p. 869

8 Thus, for the Church’s judgment of the morality of actions and dispositions to be authoritative, it is insufficient simply to condemn those things that are condemned somewhere in Scripture, or to approve those things that are somewhere approved.

Commentary 4, *Applications of Principles of Interpretation*, Tobias Haller

9 Faithful interpretation requires the Church to use the gifts of “memory, reason, and skill” to find the sense of the scriptural text and to locate it in its time and place. The Church must then seek the text’s present significance in light of the whole economy of salvation. Chief among the guiding principles by which the Church interprets the sacred texts is the congruence of its interpretation with Christ’s Summary of the Law and the New Commandment, and the creeds.

The Book of Common Prayer (American), p. 370

“Unto the word of God, being in respect of that end for which God ordained it perfect, exact, and absolute in itself, we do not add reason as a supplement of any maim or defect therein, but as a necessary instrument, without which we could not reap by the Scripture’s perfection that fruit and benefit which it yieldeth.” Hooker, *Laws* III.8.10  
Matthew 22:37-40; John 13:34

**10** The Church's interpretation of Scripture is itself part of the human response to the economy of salvation, an essential means whereby the Christian faithful understand God's actions in their lives and experience and therein know God's power and purpose to judge, redeem, liberate, and transform.

See "A Note on Experience" at the end of Commentary I

See Romans 8:15, 21

**11** Yet precisely because the Church's members are human, their reading of Scripture is contingent and fallible, even in matters of faith and morals. In reading its Scriptures, the historical Church remains always a wayfaring community using discernment, conversation, and argument to find its way.

The XIX Article of Religion, the Book of Common Prayer (American), p. 871

**12** Interpretative security rests not in an indefectible community or infallible magisterium but in the tested deposit of the baptismal faith and, above all, in the covenant God who is faithful to a people who err.

See Luke 24:41-49

**13** To affirm the "sufficiency of the Holy Scriptures for salvation" is to enlarge the sphere of human liberty by acknowledging limits upon what may be required in matters of faith and morals. Taken in this way, the Scriptures do not lose their authority but on the contrary fulfill their ultimate intent, which is to bring all people to the blessed liberty of the children of God, whose service is perfect freedom.

The VI Article of Religion, the Book of Common Prayer (American), p. 868

# Some Notes on Principles 3 and 4

## Commentary I

Tobias Haller

If the Torah had been given in fixed and inimitable formulations, it would not have endured. Thus Moses pleaded with the Lord, “Master of the universe, reveal to me the final truth in each problem of doctrine and law.” To which the Lord replied: “There are no pre-existent final truths in doctrine or law; the truth is the considered judgment of the majority of authoritative interpreters in every generation.”

pSanhedrin 4.2

God’s plan or strategy for humanity — that human beings should love him and one another — subsists outside of time, but the implementation of this plan must necessarily take place in time. God’s will is eternal but his acts are temporal. The human response to God also takes place in time, and God allows people to grow and change in relation to him. Indeed, God forbids the substitution of fixed and lifeless forms (idols) for the dynamic, vital and mobile presence of God in their midst as flame and pillar of smoke, free to descend upon and depart from the holy habitation as he chooses. God forbids his people from making graven images and bowing down before them, but chooses instead to be worshiped in song and story.

The relation between *plan* and *implementation* is similar to that between *strategy* and *tactics*, or *mission* and *ministry*.

See Exodus 13 and 20, and Ezekiel 1 and 10

Even the Law itself, though subsisting in fixed letters written on stone tablets, is imbued with a living spirit as the people of God engage in understanding it. The Scriptures witness to this process. God appears (from a human perspective) to “change his mind” as circumstances change.

2 Corinthians 3:3-11

In Genesis 2, God first creates Adam as a solitary creature, and then perceives that this solitude is not good. God then creates the animals, but for Adam no true companion can be found. Only then does God create Eve from Adam’s substance, and he leaves it to Adam to pronounce that this is the acceptable solution.

Later, the book of Numbers records a change in inheritance law, each time issued as the direct command of God through Moses, but clearly changing to meet a changed situation, an apparently unforeseen eventuality. The Hebrew Scriptures also witness to a significant tension between the priestly and prophetic traditions on the question of sacrifice.

Numbers 27:1-11 and 36:2-9

Compare Leviticus 17:8-9 with Amos 5:22-25

In the New Testament, Jesus expands and reinterprets the Mosaic Law in his Sermon on the Mount, and sets aside (or is understood to set aside) the dietary laws. Acts and the Pauline epistles show us the Church engaged in this same process of reinterpretation, setting aside one of the most solemnly delivered of all laws, the covenant of circumcision.

Mark 7:19

To attempt to turn the Scriptures themselves into an unchanging “thing” rather than approaching them as the story and song and case history of which they largely consist, is to come very close to a form of idolatry. The Scripture, like the Sabbath, exists for the good of the people of God, and it is they who have the right to engage it and understand it in each succeeding generation.

## A note on Experience

Experience is not a source of authority, but — like Reason — is a “necessary implement” without which the Scripture itself cannot be comprehended. For example, the Church’s decision to admit Gentiles to its fellowship rested initially not on Scripture, but on Peter’s vision of the sheet let down from heaven and his experience with Cornelius’ family when the Spirit descended upon them. Only later did the Church come to recognize that Isaiah’s prophecy in Scripture was thus fulfilled. Similarly, it is only the experience of the Risen Christ (in person or in the preaching of the Good News) that empowers understanding the Scriptures that were there all along.

Peter offers his “witness” in Acts 11:1-18

Acts 13:46-48

John 20:9,20; Luke 24:25-29, 41-49; Acts 8:30-39, 13:46-49

*Oikonomia*:

## The Divine “Plan”

Richard Norris

Ephesians 1:9-10 says that God “has made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure which he set out for us in [Christ] for the sake of his plan with view to the fullness of time, to sum up all things in him...” The word “plan” here translates the Greek *oikonomia*, a term that originally and literally meant “the art of running a household,” and which here refers to God’s “policy” with — God’s way of managing — God’s own household, the creation. It means, one might say, “what God is up to” with the creation.

This idea of a divine *oikonomia*, thus introduced (at least as far as the word itself is concerned) by the author of Ephesians, became crucial for orthodox Christianity in the 2nd-century debate with Marcionites and Christian Gnostics. These movements, different though they were in some respects, had at least one thing in common: they taught that the God and Father of Jesus Christ was distinct and different from the God of the Mosaic covenant — from, that is, the Creator God of Genesis and the Lawgiver of Exodus, Numbers, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy. This contention they defended largely on the basis of texts in the Pauline letters and in the Gospels — texts that in one way or another contrasted the values and teachings of Jesus and his apostles with those of the Mosaic dispensation, and depicted the former not only as novel but also as intrinsically superior to the latter.

The orthodox — people like Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Tertullian and Origen — were by contrast committed to the belief that the God of the Pentateuch (and for that matter of the Psalms and the other prophetic writings) was the very same God who had sent Jesus Christ and raised him from the dead. They nevertheless saw and admitted significant differences between Torah and Gospel: there was, they thought, a genuine novelty, a “new thing,” to be discerned in the dispensation whose focal realities were the incarnation, death, and resurrection of the Word of God and the gift of the Spirit.

The question, therefore, that they had to answer was, How it was possible to conceive of a God who did and said different things at different times? It was as an essential part of the answer to this question that Irenaeus deployed the idea of a divine *oikonomia*.

The result is best studied in Irenaeus’ response to Valentinian Gnosticism. Over and over again Irenaeus speaks of “the one God” who by the Word and Wisdom (=Spirit) not only “created and harmonized all things,” but lovingly revealed himself through the Word that first of all spoke by the prophets and then “in the last days was made a human among humans.” God has willed, says Irenaeus, to be seen *prophetically* through the Spirit, *adoptively* in the Son, and *paternally* in the Age to Come: i.e., in three successive and different manners. “From the beginning, then, the Son reveals the Father because from the beginning he is with the Father. To humankind, at the moment that is useful for them [*apto tempore ad utilitatem*], he has displayed prophetic visions, and differences of charisms, and his own works of mediation, and the glorification of the Father, in a regular and coherent order: for where there is a regular order there is also coherence, and where there is coherence there is also timeliness, and where there is timeliness there is also useful-

ness. That explains why the Word became the dispenser of God's grace for the sake of the well-being of human beings, on whose account he effected so many dispensations [*oikonomiai*]."

For all this see *Against Heresies*  
4.20.4-7

There is one divine "economy" or dispensation in the sense that all that God does seeks one end ("for the glory of God is a living human person, while the glory of the human person is the vision of God"); but there are within that many different and successive "economies" by which the Word makes God known, "lest, deprived entirely of God, humanity should cease even to exist."

On this view the divine "plan" is governed by a single, unchanging aim that is pursued and effected by means adapted to the changing circumstances — and the relative maturity, Irenaeus would say — of those to whom God is revealed by the Word. Or, to put the matter in another way, God's salvific activity seeks one end for all but "fits" itself to the circumstances of those whose liberty it seeks to turn to love of God and neighbor. There is a certain relativism — indeed an historical relativism — implicit in the very idea of God's "household management" of the cosmos, and hence different circumstances may call for changed modes of obedience to the Word who speaks the same truth in a variety of adaptations for the sake of its utility to human creatures whose circumstances and understanding themselves change.

# The Mutability of Divine Law

Richard Hooker

## Commentary 3

*The Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity, Book I.XV.3*

[Laws] being instituted are not changeable without cause, neither can they have cause of change, when that which gave them their first institution remaineth for ever one and the same. On the other side, laws that were made for men or societies or Churches, in regard of their being such as they do not always continue, but may perhaps be clean otherwise a while after, and so may require to be otherwise ordered than before; the laws of God himself which are of this nature, no man endued with common sense will ever deny to be of a different constitution from the former, in respect of the one's constancy and the mutability of the other. And this doth seem to have been the very cause why St. John doth so peculiarly term the doctrine that teacheth salvation by Jesus Christ "an eternal Gospel;" because there can be no reason wherefore the publishing thereof should be taken away, and any other instead of it proclaimed, as long as the world doth continue: whereas the whole law of rites and ceremonies, although delivered with so great solemnity, is notwithstanding clean abrogated, inasmuch as it had but temporary cause of God's ordaining it.

# Applications of Principles of Interpretation

Tobias Haller

## Introduction

As Principle 8 states, “for the Church’s judgment of the morality of actions and dispositions to be authoritative, it is insufficient simply to condemn those things that are condemned somewhere in Scripture, or to approve those things that are somewhere approved.” This insufficiency is evident in that the Church has come to oppose or forbid acts mandated or tolerated in Scripture, and to allow acts or behaviors forbidden there. Examples of the former include levirate marriage and polygamy; examples of the latter include remarriage after divorce and intercourse during menstruation.

In making such determinations, the Church applies interpretative principles similar to those outlined in this report, asking, Do the mandates or prohibitions rest on the isolated letter of the text alone, on inner consistency with Scripture taken as a whole, or with some accepted guideline such as the Summary of the Law (itself scriptural)? Are the regulations held to be eternal and absolute, or temporary and relative to human society and the situation?

The Church has authority to set aside or ignore its own decisions, even when these decisions are recorded in Scripture, and based upon other Scriptures to which divine mandate is attached. It does this by deciding that the divine mandate was temporary, allowing the law to lapse through disuse, or by interpreting the law in a new light. In this commentary I explore two examples of regulations recorded in Scripture, which nonetheless were later rejected on the authority of the Church. The first is a prohibition that has come to be ignored; the second a mandate that has been condemned.

## Commentary 4

There is scant unanimity within the universal Church on most of these matters — *nor on the Canon of Scripture itself*. So when a national or particular Church makes a judgment, it should have confidence in its competent authority to do so, tempered by the humility to acknowledge that it might be mistaken. In the absence of any universal and authoritative body representing all the baptized, all decisions of particular Churches can only have authority within those particular Churches. Finally, even if there were such a universal synod, it might still err. (Articles of Religion XIX, XXI)

The simplest consistency is demonstrated by citing an identical or similar prohibition or mandate in both the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament. However, the situation is not always quite so simple. For example, when Jesus forbade divorce (and remarriage after divorce in even stronger terms, as equivalent to the capital crime adultery), he acknowledged that Moses allowed it, but rested his own prohibition on another text of the Pentateuch, thereby pointing out an inconsistency even within texts at that time attributed to Mosaic authorship. Until this century, Churches for the most part accepted Jesus’ prohibition as binding. Recently some who oppose the ordination of homosexual Christians have publicly repudiated the abrogation of Jesus’ teaching on divorce within the Church — though they stop short of calling for the resignation or deposition of divorced and remarried clergy.

## The eating of blood

In both Genesis creation accounts God restricted human beings to a vegetarian diet. After the flood, God granted humanity (through Noah) all birds, fish, and animals that move as food, with the proviso that eating their blood was forbidden. This prohibition was repeated in the Levitical Code, which forbade eating blood to Jews and sojourners alike. In the New Testament, the Jerusalem Council upheld this law as binding upon Gentile converts.

Genesis 1:29, 2:16-17

Genesis 9:2-4

Leviticus 17:10-14

Acts 15

Early Church canons continued the ban, and it is maintained in the Eastern Churches: “If any bishop, or presbyter, or deacon, or indeed any one of the sacerdotal catalogue, eats flesh with the blood of its life... let him be deprived; for this the law itself has forbidden. But if he be one of the laity, let him be suspended.” “If anyone henceforth venture to eat in any way the blood of an animal, if he be a clergyman, let him be deposed; if a layman, let him be cut off.” Eusebius records the defense of a Christian against accusations of infanticide: “‘How,’ she said, ‘could those eat children who do not think it lawful to taste the blood even of irrational animals?’”

While the Eastern Orthodox collection of church law, the *Pedalion* (“Rudder”), includes this prohibition, it is doubtful as to whether it is observed with great strictness even in the East.

*Constitutions of the Holy Apostles*  
VIII.63

Quinisext Council, Canon 67

The testimony of the martyr Biblias,  
*Ecclesiastical History* 5.1

As noted, the East continues to hold these regulations “on the books.” The West, from a fairly early period, has sought formally to set aside the Apostolic injunction. This was done primarily by noting the surmised *purpose* for the Apostolic regulation, to allow for fellowship between Gentile converts and Jewish Christians who observed the prohibition on eating meat with its blood in it, and who would have been scandalized by such actions.

Augustine of Hippo is among the first to argue that since the Church has become overwhelmingly Gentile in constitution by his time, the regulation of the Apostles has lapsed. Calvin much later made the same argument and held that the law could lapse as circumstances changed (*Institutes IV.10.20*) — that the purpose of the Jerusalem edict was “charity” rather than cultic regulation. The Lutherans (*Conf. Aug. II.7. [29]*) had taken a similar approach, emphasizing that the ordinance was for charity and quietness’ sake, and no longer binding: “The Apostles commanded to abstain from blood. Who observeth that nowadays? And yet they do not sin that observe it not.” Anglicans went further and simply held the Jerusalem Church to have erred. (Article XIX)

But the matter still engendered debate long after the Reformation. Witness this citation from John Wesley’s journals:

A young gentleman called upon me, whose father is an eminent Minister in Scotland, and was in union with Mr. Glass, till Mr. Glass renounced him, because they did not agree as to the eating of blood. (Although I wonder any should disagree about this, who have read the fifteenth chapter of the Acts, and considered, that no Christian in the universe did eat it till the Pope repealed the law which had remained at least ever since Noah’s flood.) Are not these things in Scotland also for our instruction? How often are we warned, not to fall out by the way? O that we may never make any thing, more or less, the term of union with us, but the having the mind which was in Christ, and the walking as he walked!

This raises an important question: even if the Council was held to have erred, or its regulations to have lapsed by virtue of a change in circumstances, how does one address the clear prohibition given to Noah? Though the Mosaic Law *included* the prohibition, the Jerusalem Council did not hold it to be on the same level as the dietary regulations that they believed to have been set aside by Jesus. Even Paul, while he disagreed with the Council on the

*Contra Faustum* 32.13. The entire chapter 32 of *Contra Faustum* presents an interesting mirror for our own debates. Faustus criticizes Christians for simultaneously embracing the Old Testament as divinely inspired while ignoring its mandates and prohibitions (not because Manicheans wanted to follow it themselves, but because they wanted to do the same with the New Testament). Augustine responded that the Church is able both to embrace the Old Testament as divinely inspired *and* reject certain of its provisions as temporary mandates for the “old dispensation” and as “being symbolical to us of truths in which they still have a spiritual use, though the outward observance is abolished.” Thus the Church’s application of interpretative principles to the letter of the text is productive of meaningful governance for the Christian life.

Wesley’s *Journals*, October 29, 1745

Ironically, Augustine uses Noah’s ark as a type for the apostolic Church, including both Gentiles and Jews, in the very passage in which he discounts the relevance of the commandment given to Noah concerning blood.

matter of food offered to idols (witness the Corinthian correspondence) is not recorded as having contested the matter of meat with blood in it. Augustine only argued for setting aside this commandment under Christ's general rubric, "that which is outside does not defile," as an afterthought.

However, to this day some particular Churches and communions still forbid the consumption of blood or red meat (or even blood transfusion — understood as a form of "eating blood" among Jehovah's Witnesses) on the basis of the Noachide commandment or the decision of the Jerusalem Council. This has not prevented the vast majority of the western Churches from setting this commandment aside through the application of interpretative principles.

## Slavery

The institution of chattel slavery is mandated in the Hebrew Scriptures and tolerated in the New Testament. Interestingly enough, Scripture also traces slavery back to the time of Noah. After Ham sinned against his father Noah, Noah cursed Ham's son Canaan to slavery. Leviticus 25 set out the rules for slaveholding to be practiced by the Israelites, and slavery became and remained a well-established institution. The New Testament shows remarkable toleration for slavery as a part of the social fabric, and while Paul called for good treatment of slaves, he nowhere suggested that slavery in itself was sinful (though he did speak against *voluntary* enslavement). He called upon slaves to be obedient and compliant, and personally returned a slave to his master.

Ephesians 6:9, Colossians 4:1

1 Corinthians 7:23  
Colossians 3:22, Titus 2:9, cp. 1 Peter 2:18; Philemon

As an institution, slavery was an intrinsic part of most Christian cultures, a crucial element of the social fabric, and the Church defended it from attacks by humanists. Very rare instances of moral opposition to slavery exist in the patristic era, Gregory of Nyssa being one of those exceptional

See *Against Eunomius*. Gregory's opposition would hardly qualify as ardent.

voices. For the most part, as long as slaves were well treated, no moral issue was raised. That is, slavery was held to be *morally neutral* in itself, and only *cruelty* to slaves was deemed culpable.

Roman Catholic opinion in the post-Tridentine era ran along these lines:

It is certainly a matter of faith (*de fide*) that this sort of slavery in which a man serves his master as his slave, is altogether lawful. This is proved from Holy Scripture, Lev 25:39-55; 1 Pet 2:8; 1 Cor 7:20-24; Col 3:11-22; 1 Tim 6:1-10... It is also proved from reason for it is not unreasonable that just as things which are captured in a just war pass into the power and ownership of the victors, so persons captured in war pass into the ownership of the captors... All theologians are unanimous on this.

*Leander, Quaestiones Morales Theologicae*, Lyons 1668-1692, Tome VIII, De Quarto Decalogi Praecepto, Tract. IV, Disp. I, Q. 3.

This was Augustine's opinion in *Civ. Dei* 19.15

Scripture was often cited in support of slavery. Rabbi M.J. Raphall, of Congregation Beth Jeshurun of New York, in an address delivered on January 15, 1861, expressed his personal distaste for slavery, and his embarrassment at appearing to speak in its defense, but was nonetheless forced to acknowledge “as a teacher in Israel” that the Bible did not declare slavery to be sinful. In his most vehement protection of the divine prerogative, he cited the final law of the Decalogue (Exod 20:19), and challenged those who set it aside:

That the Ten Commandments are the word of G-d, and as such, of the very highest authority, is acknowledged by Christians as well as by Jews...How dare you, in the face of the sanction and protection afforded to slave property in the Ten Commandments—how dare you denounce slaveholding as a sin? When you remember that Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Job—the men with whom the Almighty conversed, with whose names he emphatically connects his own most holy name, and to whom He vouchsafed to give the character of “perfect, upright, fearing G-d and eschewing evil” (Job 1:8)—that all these men were slaveholders, does it not strike you that you are guilty of something very little short of blasphemy?

Episcopal Bishop of Vermont John Henry Hopkins, writing that same month, similarly rejected the notion that slavery was a moral sin, while he acknowledged it could be a “physical evil.”

Here, therefore, lies the true aspect of the controversy, and it is evident that it can openly be settled by the Bible. For every Christian is bound to assent to the rule of the inspired Apostle, that “sin is the transgression of the law,” namely the law laid down in the Scriptures by the authority of God—the supreme “lawgiver, who is able to save and to destroy.” From his Word there can be no appeal. No rebellion can be so atrocious in his sight as that which dares to rise against his government. No blasphemy can be more unpardonable than that which imputes sin or moral evil to the decrees of the eternal Judge, who is alone perfect in wisdom, in knowledge, and in love.

*A Scriptural, Ecclesiastical, and Historical View of Slavery, from the Days of the Patriarch Abraham to the Nineteenth Century, 5*

Both the Rabbi and the Bishop felt that the division of the Union was a far greater evil than the continuance of slavery, as unpalatable as slavery might be. And since the Bible did not say slavery was a sin, it was purely (and presumptuously) human judgment to declare it so.

On the other side of the issue, those who opposed slavery did so predominantly on the grounds of human rights, citing such general texts as the Summary of the Law and the Golden Rule and declaring slavery to be inconsistent with these more fundamental principles. Some, such as Rabbi Raphall, responded that if this argument was correct then most of the Church for most of its history, Saint Paul included, had been working at cross purposes with God’s will.

Anglicans, because of the crucial admission that the Church can and has erred even in matters of faith and morals, can admit this possibility freely.

However, as is evident, the interpretative principle of consistency with the Summary of the Law and the Great Commandment eventually carried the field, and today few would seek to defend the institution of slavery, even armed with the explicit texts of Scripture, against a broader understanding of moral law informed by growing respect for individual human rights in the light of the Gospel.

## Conclusion

Briefly, then, it is clear that the plain text of Scripture alone, without the interpretation and authority of the Church in response to the needs of the world, does not serve well as a simple rule-book for right and wrong, and, more importantly, has only rarely been employed in this way. Moreover, upon many occasions in which Bible texts have been employed to “settle the matter,” the decisions reached are judged — in subsequent generations — to have been erroneous or worse.

The morality of homosexual acts, and the even further removed ecclesiastical issues of the ordination of homosexual Christians or the blessing of their relationships, are not readily “settled” through the simple application of a handful of texts. The Scriptures tell us little about ordination or marriage, and even less about homosexuality. However, this is not a rejection of the resort to Scripture for guidance. On the contrary, the whole tenor of this paper concerns the *importance* of interpreting the Scripture and the *method* by which the Church does so. It is our purpose rather to advise caution, care, and consistency in the exercise of sound judgment, and to defer or resist the temptation to act as if these matters must have final solutions to be imposed universally rather than interim provisions to be applied locally, as we continue to “see as through a glass darkly.”