

Are Evangelicals Unreasonably Subjective In Their Selection of the Scriptures They Keep And Those They Reject?

Evangelicals are sometimes criticised for their reading of Scripture in that they are seen to be 'selective' as to which passages they take as normative.

For example, there are passages in Leviticus that are widely agreed as non-normative for today's world (e.g. Leviticus 19 and its prohibitions on mixed-fibre clothes and particular haircuts). So – the criticism goes – why is it then possible/appropriate to take seriously/literally what Leviticus says about same-sex relations?

In response to this criticism, it is reasonable to argue that the 'selectivity' of evangelicals towards such parts of the Old Testament law is entirely justifiable. This is because Old Testament law is a composite mix of sacrificial law (e.g. ritual), legal law and moral law/teaching. The death and resurrection of Jesus meant that the religious requirements of the old covenant no longer have purchase on Christians. Equally so, the 'punishments' for crimes in the Old Testament were part and parcel of their legal system – something that is now superseded.

However – by way of marked contrast – there is nothing in the New Testament to suggest that the moral and ethical foundations of Old Testament thinking have been in any way superseded. Indeed Jesus himself endorses the Old Testament law (Matthew 5:17).

A second criticism is sometimes made of the way evangelicals sometimes interpret Paul and certain New Testament passages. In a nutshell – the argument goes – evangelicals do not see Paul's injunction that women should 'stay silent' to be normative for the 21st century. So why should we take Paul's writing on sexuality as binding?

With regard to this, it is reasonable to suppose that the prohibitions in 1 Corinthians 14:34–38 and 1 Timothy 2:9–15 address specific cultural situations rather than being universally applicable. However – and by way of contrast – the reason evangelicals still abide by what Paul says about homosexuality in Romans 1:24–27, 1 Corinthians 6:9–10 and 1 Timothy 1:10 is because there is nothing to suggest that this teaching is culturally specific in the same way. Rather it is offered to its original readers as normative – and therefore to us in the same way.

The evangelical approach to Old Testament law and Pauline teaching is therefore neither as arbitrary nor as subjective as is sometimes made out.

RESOURCES:

[Wes Hill, 'Disputable Matters? Sex vs Food'](#)