

# Introduction to Christian Ethics

Scripture, Tradition, and  
Reason in Christian Ethics

# **'Using' the Bible**

- **The hardness of 'using' the Bible**
- **Possible reasons:**
  - it seems to lack unity within itself
  - what is it actually referring to?
  - the 'immorality' of Scripture
  - mind the gap - cultural differences between then and now
  - 'new' issues today
  - silence in the Bible on certain issues
  - much of it not addressed to us

**The problem is  
the question**

# Putting back some pneumatology

- God *speaks* rather than God spoke
- More than dos and don'ts
- Whole life with God (prayer, character, holiness)
  - Forming and transforming his people

# **How God uses the Bible: the whole narrative**

**...to reveal God's own heart/character**

**'Be holy as I am holy'**

**...to reveal the world**

**...to show us how we are made  
creation**

# **How God uses the Bible: the whole narrative**

**...to reveal sin**

**...to show us what we are *for***  
life in the Kingdom of God here and now

**...to reveal Jesus as Saviour and example**  
the new humanity is true humanity

**...to show us who God wants his people to be**  
the vocation of the church

# Exploring the territory...

## Exercise:

‘grading’ biblical commands!!

“This exercise should convince almost every modern Christian about the complexity of applying the biblical text. Moving from the ancient text into our modern world is not a simple matter.”

# How God uses the Bible: ...to communicate God's will

## Discussion:

- What criteria did you use to decide which commands were still in force?
- What particular reasons were behind your conclusions?

## So...:

- Discerning which commands apply today not arbitrary
- Can find *general* criteria to help us
  - Church's rejection of Marcionism

# How God uses the Bible:

## ...to communicate God's will

Towards

“Time alone cannot be a relevant consideration. By allowing ourselves to be hypnotised by the passage of two thousand years, we enter the realm of irrationality.

Two thousand years are of no account; it is what has changed *during* the two thousand years that will make the difference. We must show how circumstances have changed to make the New Testament norm inapplicable to our own situation. Perhaps the amount of change which two thousand years can bring about in the human condition may be exaggerated.”

Oliver O'Donovan, 'Towards an Interpretation of Biblical Ethics,' *Tyndale Bulletin* 27 (1976)



# How God uses the Bible: ...to communicate God's will

Towards some criteria (See O'Donovan article)

“Paul did not suggest that if a Galatian Christian was circumcised, it represented a misunderstanding of the circumcision command. He would understand the command very well: it is the Gospel that he would misunderstand. There is, therefore, in Paul's treatment of circumcision an issue of *authority*, rather than of *claim*. **He finds grounds within the Gospel for denying that some of the Old Testament commands ... have any right to be obeyed.**”

Oliver O'Donovan, 'Towards an Interpretation of Biblical Ethics'

# A threefold stool?

“revealed in the Holy Scriptures  
set forth in the catholic creeds  
and to which the historic formularies  
of the Church of England bear witness ...  
which faith the Church is called upon  
to proclaim afresh in each generation.”

- The Declaration of Assent

# **Scripture and the Holy Spirit**