

# Making Biblical Decisions

## Lesson 5

The Situational Perspective:  
Revelation & Situation

Manuscript



**thirdmill**

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# Making Biblical Decisions

## Lesson Five

### The Situational Perspective: Revelation & Situation

#### INTRODUCTION

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Every parent knows that children often misunderstand the simplest of instructions. It might be “Please help me with dinner,” or “Clean up your room.” But whatever the instruction is, children have a way of coming up with odd interpretations of what their parents require. Sometimes this is a willful decision on the child’s part, but at other times the misunderstanding is genuine.

Figuring out the right thing to do can sometimes be difficult. And there is a good reason for this: Whether we realize it or not, following even simple instructions requires us to have substantial knowledge about many things besides the instructions. This is easy to see when it comes to little children, since they often lack the knowledge they need. But even as adults we have to rely on our knowledge of many subjects when we follow instructions. And this is particularly true when it comes to understanding what God requires of us. For us to know what to do in any given circumstance, we must not only know the Lord’s specific instructions, but we must understand many other things as well.

This is the fifth lesson in our series *Making Biblical Decisions*. We’ve entitled it, “The Situational Perspective: Revelation and Situation.” In this lesson, we’ll turn our attention to the situational perspective on ethics. And we’ll focus primarily on how a proper understanding of situations can help us understand God’s revelation. As we’ve emphasized in previous lessons, ethical judgment involves:

#### **The application of God’s Word to a situation by a person**

This summary highlights the fact that there are three essential dimensions to every ethical question: God’s Word, the situation, and the person making the decision. In this lesson, we’ll focus on our ethical situation, especially in relation to the norms revealed in God’s Word.

Throughout this series, we’ve also described the relationship between God’s Word, situations and persons in terms of three perspectives on ethics. First, there’s the normative perspective, which looks at ethics from the perspective of God’s word. This perspective emphasizes the rules, or norms, that God reveals to us. Second, the situational perspective approaches ethics with an emphasis on the situation. This perspective considers how the details of our circumstances relate to our ethical decisions, and how we can work with these circumstances to bring glory to God. Third, there’s the existential perspective, which considers ethics from the perspective of the persons who make ethical decisions. This perspective emphasizes people’s roles and characteristics, and the ways they must change to please the Lord.

All three of these perspectives are true, valuable and complementary. So, the wisest course of action is to use all three perspectives together, allowing each one to inform our understanding of the others. In past lessons, we’ve looked at the normative

perspective in some detail. In these next few lessons, we'll approach ethics from the situational perspective, examining how the various elements of our situation should inform the decisions we make.

Our lesson on the relationship between God's revelation and our situation will divide into four major sections. First, we'll consider the content of revelation. Second, we'll speak of the situational nature of revelation. Third, we'll discuss some popular interpretive strategies toward revelation. And fourth, we'll turn to the application of revelation to our modern situations. Let's begin with the content of revelation.

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## CONTENT

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As you'll recall from earlier lessons, there are three basic types of revelation: special revelation, such as the Bible; general revelation, which comes to us through the creation in general; and existential revelation, which comes to us through persons. We must always remember that God reveals his will to us in all three of these ways.

Now, even though special, general and existential revelation differ in important respects, they all communicate facts, goals, and means concerning our situation. The facts include: events, people, objects, ideas, duties, actions — even the fact of God and his revelation. Goals are the intended or potential outcomes of thoughts, words, and deeds. They are the ends for which we do things, or for which we ought to do things. And means are ways of reaching our goals. They include everything we might think, say or do, and any tool or method that we might use, in order to accomplish our objectives.

We'll take a closer look at the content of revelation by looking briefly at each of these situational elements. First, we'll consider revelation in terms of the facts it presents to us. Second, we'll look at the goals that revelation obligates us to pursue. And third, we'll explore the means revelation teaches us to use as we pursue these goals. Let's begin with the general facts that revelation presents to us.

## FACTS

Now, for obvious reasons, it would be impossible to list every fact that special, general and existential revelation communicate to us. So, in order to illustrate the important role that facts play in our ethical evaluations, we'll focus on God himself as the most basic fact that we learn through revelation.

**God is our ultimate fact in that he is. He is the great I Am. He's the unmoved mover. And he's the necessary being that everything else depends upon. He's an uncaused being. We live and move in him. In him we have our very being. We love him because he first loved us. God is our ultimate fact because he is our point of reference for interpreting all of life and reality.**

— Rev. Clete Hux

We'll look at this topic more fully in a later lesson, but at this point, it will help to mention a few items. When we studied the normative perspective in previous lessons, we saw that God's character is our ultimate norm or standard. Correspondingly, from the situational perspective, God is our ultimate fact. That is to say, God exists, and his existence is the most significant and inescapable fact in our ethical situation. So, it's always the first fact we must consider in any ethical question. The reality of God's existence rules over every ethical question and obligates us to live by the standard of his character.

Of course, in order for us to know our obligations before God, he must first reveal himself to us. And this is where revelation comes in. Through revelation, God tells us facts about himself and facts about what he requires. Without revelation, we would still be bound to obey God, but we wouldn't know how.

Think in terms of the situation you face as a citizen of a country. The government is the authority of the land, and it communicates its requirements through its laws and structure. It has employees that carry out its bidding. It has maps that define its boundaries. It has treaties and other relationships with foreign countries. It has currency to administer the economy, and so on. The existence of the government is a fact in our legal situation. And its laws and structure are additional facts that explain the kinds of duties we owe to the government. And if we want to obey the government, these are facts we need to know.

In a similar way, God is the supreme authority over all creation. His authority is absolute, and his character is the perfect expression of his will. So, when he reveals his character, he communicates the facts about what he requires of us. And just as human beings obey civil laws because they submit to the *government's* authority, all creation must obey God's laws by submitting to *his* authority.

Besides communicating the facts to us, the content of God's revelation also conveys the proper goals for Christian behavior and decision-making.

## GOALS

When we speak of goals in ethics, we have in mind the expected outcomes of our efforts. In many ways, this is no different from the way we set goals to accomplish anything else in life. We might set a goal to wake up at a certain time each day, or to buy a birthday present for our spouse. Our goals can be small or large. They can be things we hope to accomplish immediately, or things we plan to do in the distant future. But in every case, our goals give direction to our actions.

Most of the time, our goals are rather complex. For example, consider a carpenter who measures and cuts wood for the purpose of building a house. When he does, his most immediate goals are to measure and cut accurately. A more distant goal is to build the house. He may also be working to earn money to feed his family. And if his actions are to be truly good, his ultimate goal must be to do it all for the glory of God.

And just as special, general and existential revelation each teach us important facts, each type of revelation also provides us with goals that we must adopt in Christian ethics. In the first place, special revelation gives us countless goals that must be considered in Christian ethics. For example, Scripture teaches us the goals of doing good

to our neighbors, raising children in Christ, and striving for the unity of the church. But among the many goals that special revelation teaches us, it presents God's glory as the highest and most important goal. In 1 Corinthians 10:31, Paul gave this instruction:

Whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God (1 Corinthians 10:31).

Even in smaller things in life, such as choosing what to eat or drink, our ultimate goal must be to glorify God.

**I believe that the apostle Paul says, "If you eat or drink or do anything else, do it for the glory of God." That is to say, in the most essential things in life, like eating, you have to have a relationship with God, which leads me to think that every minute, every second of my life has a relationship with God, and in every minute and every second of my life God is revealing himself... The apostle Paul also said that we must think of all that is good, pure, honest, even in our innermost selves. It's not just in what we do, but in what is within us that God must be manifested; God must be revealed.**

— Rev. Pablo Torres translation

In the second place, general revelation identifies many goals that are good and others that are evil. And like special revelation, it teaches us that the greatest goal is to glorify God. Listen to Paul's words in Romans 1:20-21:

Since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities — his eternal power and divine nature — have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse. For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened (Romans 1:20-21, NIV).

God's glory in creation reveals that we must be loyal to God and that we must praise him — that we must glorify him in all that we do. In short, it teaches us to set God's glory as our highest goal.

Finally, existential revelation also helps us to discern good goals from evil goals, especially through our consciences. In the case of believers, the Holy Spirit is another source of existential revelation, moving within us so that we pursue good goals and shun evil ones. As Paul wrote in Philippians 2:13:

It is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose (Philippians 2:13, NIV).

We see here that God works in us existentially, through the inward ministry of the Holy Spirit. He enables us and moves us to act according to his purpose, according to his goal.

God uses all three forms of revelation to teach us the goals that he approves. Special, general and existential revelation all communicate which goals we are to embrace and which goals we are to reject. In this way, revelation provides us with the goals that direct our actions and help us make ethical decisions.

Having looked at the situational content of revelation in terms of facts and goals, we're now ready to explore the means that God has revealed for us to use in our ethical situations.

## MEANS

In the early sixteenth century, the Florentine political philosopher Niccolò Machiavelli wrote a book that has come to be known by the title *The Prince*. In many languages, Machiavelli's name is synonymous with the slogan "the end justifies the means." His work has become somewhat infamous for teaching that, in many cases, politicians must violate moral principles to achieve goals that benefit the state. But God's revelation presents us with a very different idea. To answer any ethical question in a biblical manner, we must not only know the facts and goals God has revealed, but we must also find the appropriate means that God has revealed.

**People think that at the end of the day, if things are going to benefit you, how you got it is not an issue — which usually we call it as “the end justifies the means” ... And today we live in a world where it is very easy to use all sorts of means in order to find the end that will benefit people, but in reality, we'll be doing more harm to people than we would have done good to them. If that is the reality, then we need to realize that our ends and our means both have to be pure, both have to be good, both have to be holy so that God may be glorified.**

— Dr. Ashish Chrispal

Assessing facts and setting goals significantly influence our actions. But our actions themselves are the means we've chosen to accomplish our goals. And as all Christians are aware, the Bible has much to say about how we act. So, what God has said about the means we choose is a vitally important element of our decision-making process. Consider James' teaching in James 2:15-16:

If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and filled," without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? (James 2:15-16).

It's important to recognize the fact that there are poor people in need of food and clothing. And it's also important to set the goal of seeing them warmed and fed. But the

*means* of reaching this goal is critical — we must actually give them food and clothes. In other words, if we don't come up with godly means for meeting our goals, we haven't done anything good or praiseworthy.

In James 2, James called for his readers to seek insights primarily from general and existential revelation. He prompted them to consider practical means of helping the poor. Of course, there are also many passages in Scripture that teach us to use special revelation to discover the means to accomplishing godly goals.

One of the main ways Scripture teaches us about ethical means is by giving us examples to consider. On the one hand, we find many negative examples of people who did not perform so admirably. But on the other hand, we also find many positive examples of people who properly understood God's norms, properly assessed their circumstances, and then performed good actions in order to achieve good ends.

In 1 Corinthians 10:8-11, the apostle Paul drew attention to negative examples when he wrote these words:

We must not indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in a single day. We must not put Christ to the test, as some of them did and were destroyed by serpents, nor grumble, as some of them did and were destroyed by the Destroyer. Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come (1 Corinthians 10:8-11).

Paul drew these negative examples from the experiences of the ancient Israelites during their forty years of wandering in the wilderness. God had made many facts clear to the Israelites. He had also revealed the goals of their journey. But as they traveled, the Israelites sinned greatly by turning away from the means God had instructed them to use to accomplish their goals — means such as godly living, purity in worship, and prayer. Instead, the Israelites preferred the means of sexual immorality, idolatry, and grumbling. And so, they serve as a negative example, showing us some means that God disapproves of and strongly curses.

On the other hand, Paul also drew attention to positive examples, as in 1 Corinthians 11:1, where he gave this instruction:

Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ (1 Corinthians 11:1).

Here, Paul offered himself and Jesus as two positive examples of ethical behavior.

In Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, he spoke broadly of all the information the Corinthians had received about Jesus and about himself, whether it had come through special, general or existential revelation. And he indicated that by remembering the perfect life of Jesus, and his own imperfect but exemplary behavior, the Corinthians could learn not only facts and goals, but also godly means.

In summary, we see that the situational content of revelation includes facts, goals and means that are essential to making proper ethical choices. So, if we are to make biblical decisions in our daily lives, we have to understand what God has revealed about each of these dimensions of our situation.

Now that we've seen what the content of revelation tells us about our situation, we should turn to our second topic: the situational nature of revelation itself.

## NATURE

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God's revelation comes to human beings in the context of history. He gives specific revelations to specific people in specific places and times. And because of this, we need to consider questions like: What are the circumstances for which, and within which, God has revealed himself? And how does understanding these situations help us make ethical decisions? By asking these kinds of questions, we can begin to understand our duty to apply God's revelations to the circumstances of our own lives.

Recognizing what God's revelation says about facts, goals and means is an important part of knowing our duty. But it is also critical that we understand how revelation is influenced by its own situation. If we fail to understand how situations influence the way God reveals himself, we run the risk of misunderstanding what he has revealed.

As we've seen in other lessons, since the beginning of creation, general and existential revelation have always been accompanied by special revelation. In our day, the special revelation of Scripture has been given to us as a guide, as a lens through which we must interpret general and existential revelation. This means that Scripture has a practical priority over everything we may think we've found in general and existential revelation.

General revelation affirms Scripture, but it can never reveal any ethical norms that are not also revealed in Scripture. So, any contribution that general revelation makes to our knowledge is purely a clarification of what Scripture already offers us. And the same thing is true of existential revelation. Existential revelation affirms the teaching of Scripture, and never teaches us any ethical norm that is not also directly or implicitly taught in Scripture.

All of God's revelation is important, valuable and true. But because Scripture is the key to understanding everything God reveals, our discussions of the situational nature of revelation will focus particularly on the Bible. Still, we should keep in mind that much of what we say about the Bible is also true of the rest of God's revelation.

We'll divide our discussion of the situational nature of revelation into two parts. First, we'll speak about divine inspiration of Scripture's human authors. And second, we'll look at an example that confirms the importance of the situational aspects of inspiration. Let's begin with the inspiration of Scripture.

## INSPIRATION

Scripture is a divinely inspired human writing. The Holy Spirit motivated and superintended the writings of the human authors in order to ensure that everything they contain is true. The Spirit did this in ways that kept the human authors free from error,

but that also preserved their personalities and their intentions in their writings. As a result, the original meaning of Scripture is the meaning that the divine and human authors of Scripture jointly intended to communicate. This is not a composite meaning, as if the human author intended one meaning, and the Holy Spirit intended a different meaning. Rather, it's a unified meaning, in which both the Holy Spirit and the human author intended the same thing.

Unfortunately, many well-meaning Christians act as if God didn't give us Scripture within historical situations. They treat the Bible as timeless, as if it were written without human involvement. But when we consider what biblical writers said about their own books, we see that this is not the case. The Scriptures were written by historical authors who were inspired by the Holy Spirit.

This doctrine of inspiration is described in many places in the Bible, but we'll limit ourselves to two texts. The first text demonstrates the Holy Spirit's contributions to the content of Scripture, and the second highlights the human writers' contributions. Let's start with the Holy Spirit's role as the author of Scripture.

## Holy Spirit

Listen to the way Peter explained the nature of inspiration in 2 Peter 1:20-21:

No prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit (2 Peter 1:20-21).

As Peter mentioned here, the Bible is not merely a human writing. It is a book written by men who were "carried along by the Holy Spirit." Peter assured us that everything we find in Scripture carries God's authority and is utterly trustworthy.

**We read in the Bible that the human authors interacted with the Holy Spirit in order to bring about the Scriptures as we know them. There are many places where that's referred to in the New Testament, but perhaps most obviously is in 2 Peter 1 where Peter talks about the light shining in a dark place — speaking about God's revelation — and then goes on to say in verse 21, "men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit." And you see there something of the interaction between humanity — man being "carried along" — and the Holy Spirit, who is doing the driving and the illuminating. And we have in the Scriptures fully human words and fully divine words so that the words written by a human being, because of God's intervention, become Spirit-filled, illuminated, inspired, infallible words for our benefit.**

— Rev. Dr. Simon Vibert

With regard to inspiration, Scripture not only emphasizes the Holy Spirit's authorship, it also insists that Scripture's human writers had tremendous input into their writings.

## Human Writers

Now, at various times, Christian teachers have misunderstood 2 Peter 1 and other biblical texts. And they've concluded that the Holy Spirit is the *only* true author of Scripture. These teachers have wrongly believed that the human writers made no contribution to their own writings. But this view is inconsistent with the rest of Scripture. In Matthew 22:41-45, we find the following conversation between Jesus and some Pharisees who opposed him:

While the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them a question, saying, "What do you think about the Christ? Whose son is he?" They said to him, "The son of David." He said to them, "How is it then that David, in the Spirit, calls him Lord, saying, 'The Lord said to my Lord, "Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet"'? If then David calls him Lord, how is he his son?" (Matthew 22:41-45).

Here, Jesus referred to Psalm 110:1. His point was that, to understand what the Holy Spirit meant in this verse, it was necessary to know two things: first, that David wrote it; and second, the original meaning David intended to communicate.

To understand the original meaning of any given Scripture, we have to learn many facts about its authors, such as their circumstances, their experiences, their education, their theology, and their priorities. Often, our understanding of these details can be enhanced by other information that comes from outside the Bible, such as historical, cultural and linguistic facts.

Beyond this, we have to pay attention to the goals of Scripture's authors. What were their motives? What audiences did they hope would read their writings? And what responses did they try to elicit from these readers?

Further, we have to consider the means biblical writers employed, such as: their original language, the genre of literature they used, their rhetorical techniques, and the structures of their thoughts and arguments. To rely on Scripture properly in Christian ethics, we must evaluate all of these facts, goals and means. They teach us why biblical authors wrote as they did, what they meant when they wrote, and how their original audiences would have understood them.

Now that we've described the situational nature of revelation in regard to the inspiration of Scripture, we should look at an example from the Bible that confirms the importance of considering these situational features.

### EXAMPLE

Admittedly, it's impossible to identify all the facts, goals and means that are relevant to any particular text of Scripture, let alone to understand how they relate to the original meaning. But fortunately, the Bible itself records many examples that can guide us. Biblical writers and reliable biblical characters often explained Scriptures that had been written by prior authors. And their examples provide us with many opportunities to see the importance of the situational aspects of Scripture. To illustrate the kinds of situational considerations we must keep in mind, let's look at 1 Corinthians 10:5-11, where Paul wrote these words:

With most of [our forefathers] God was not pleased, for they were overthrown in the wilderness. Now these things took place as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did. Do not be idolaters as some of them were; as it is written, "The people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play." We must not indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in a single day. We must not put Christ to the test, as some of them did and were destroyed by serpents, nor grumble, as some of them did and were destroyed by the Destroyer. Now these things ... were written down for our instruction (1 Corinthians 10:5-11).

Here, Paul focused on several historical details of Israel's wilderness wanderings. He drew these details from four Old Testament passages:

- Exodus 32, where the Israelites "rose up to play," that is, they engaged in idolatrous revelries like the pagans, and about 3,000 men were put to death as punishment;
- Numbers 25, where they "indulge[d] in sexual immorality," and 23,000 died;
- Numbers 21, where the Israelites tested the Lord, and many were "destroyed by serpents"; and
- Numbers 16, where they grumbled against Moses and many were killed by "the Destroyer," an angel who exacted God's punishment.

But notice that Paul didn't simply point out these historical details. Rather, he explained that Moses had recorded these details in order to provide an example for future readers. As he wrote in verse 11:

These things ... were written down for our instruction (1 Corinthians 10:11).

Here, the word "instruction," translates the Greek noun *nouthesia* (νουθεσία), meaning "admonition" or "warning." Paul believed that one reason Moses wrote the Pentateuch, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, was to warn future generations against repeating the failures of the Israelites.

Because Paul understood the situation of these passages to be warnings, he highlighted a number of the facts they presented. First, "God was not pleased" by the

actions of the ancient Israelites. Moses explicitly stated this in the texts to which Paul referred. Second, God had “overthrown them in the wilderness,” most likely meaning that he had killed them. This fact was significant because it indicated God’s extreme moral disapproval of the Israelites. Third, the Israelites committed specific sins that displeased God: idolatry, sexual immorality, testing, and grumbling.

In addition to the facts that Paul mentioned specifically, he also assumed many other facts. For example, he assumed that Scripture is true, it is authoritative, and it is applicable to Christians. And on the basis of many such facts, Paul was able to conclude that Moses’ goal was to use the means of inspired Scripture to record these things, so that future generations would learn from Israel’s mistakes.

**The Bible teaches us in many ways what a godly life is to look like, what sin is, etc., sometimes simply by stating it straight out — thou shalt or thou shalt not, or you shall or you shall not — but also by giving us the history of real people who lived out their lives, everyday lives. And as we read them, we know that we are supposed to learn from their example positively or negatively. It says in the book of Romans, “For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.” So, we have positive examples that we are to emulate, and we have negative examples that we are to shun. All of us are sinners, except Jesus, of course, and so we learn by precept what God’s purposes are, what his moral standards are, and then when someone fails to live up to those, we know that’s a negative example. Like when David committed adultery with Bathsheba, we know from the Ten Commandments that that was wrong. We know it from the account as Nathan accused him of sin. And we have other indications. So, we know that that’s a bad example by a man who generally was a good example, a man after God’s own heart.**

— Dr. Andrew Davis

Paul was concerned with at least two types of situational matters as he interpreted these inspired Old Testament texts. First, he was concerned with the details reported in Scripture. Paul accepted the Old Testament as factual and reliable, and he knew that the details of the stories were important to their meanings. And second, Paul cared about the author’s intention. He understood that Moses’ goal was not simply to tell us what happened a long time ago. Rather, Moses wrote to elicit a response from his readers.

Of course, these aren’t the only two matters we should pay attention to when we read Scripture. But Paul’s method for understanding the Old Testament is a good, and even an authoritative, example of the situational features we must consider when we interpret Scripture. We must consider things that Scripture makes explicit, such as the factual details it reports. And we must consider things that are implicit in Scripture, such as the author’s intention or goals in writing. By remembering the situational nature of Scripture in these and other ways, we can have greater confidence that we have understood it rightly.

Now that we've looked at how the content of revelation addresses the facts, goals and means of our situation, and at the historically situated nature of revelation, we should turn our attention to some popular strategies toward dealing with the situational character of revelation.

## STRATEGIES

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As we work in Christian ethics from the situational perspective, we're often challenged by the fact that we're dealing with two situations — the situation of Scripture and the situation of our own day. And this means we have to find ways to connect the situations of Scripture to our modern world. This process is often quite complex, and unfortunately, Christians have a tendency to look for shortcuts that oversimplify the issues involved.

As we consider these oversimplifications, we'll refer several times to an illustration of a house with a large yard surrounded by hazardous wilderness. The house represents those things that are clearly commanded or permitted in Scripture. The wilderness represents those things that are clearly forbidden in Scripture. The yard represents those commands and prohibitions that, to one degree or another, are unclear to the reader. Finally, there is a fence that can be built to separate the things that God approves from the things he condemns. All of the overly simplistic strategies build the fence in the wrong place.

We'll address three misguided strategies toward revelation. First, the strategy of laxity; second, the strategy of rigor; and third, the strategy that favors human authority. For the sake of time, we'll limit ourselves to discussing special revelation in Scripture. But we should be aware that these same strategies are often taken toward other types of revelation as well. Let's begin with laxity.

### LAXITY

Our discussion of laxity will divide into three parts. First, we'll give a basic description of this strategy and its causes. Second, we'll offer some examples of the consequences of laxity. And third, we'll suggest some correctives that can help us avoid laxity in our handling of Scripture. Let's begin with a basic description of laxity.

#### Description

When dealing with the situational character of revelation, laxity is a strategy that tends toward permissiveness. Those who use this strategy are slow to identify and condemn sins in the modern world. As a result, they frequently end up permitting what the Bible prohibits and overlooking what the Bible commands.

Christians are predisposed to lax readings of Scripture for at least two reasons. Sometimes, they wrongly believe that the situations in the Bible are so different from situations in modern life that the Bible cannot be applied to our day. At other times, Christians adopt a strategy of laxity because they believe that the situations in the Bible are too vague to be applied to modern life. Often, this is because they think that the facts, goals and means in the Bible are ambiguous or even unknowable.

Think of our earlier illustration. As you'll recall, the house represents those things that are clearly permitted in Scripture. The wilderness represents those things that are clearly forbidden in Scripture. The yard represents those matters that are somewhat unclear to the reader.

Now suppose we want to build a fence around those things that Scripture permits so that we can define the boundaries of Christian morality. A strategy of laxity would tend to build the fence as close as possible to the edge of the wilderness to permit the things that are unclear.

But there's a problem with this lax practice. Not everything that is unclear to us is permitted. And if we put the fence at the edge of the wilderness, we'll almost certainly permit things that Scripture actually forbids. So, whether by assuming that the biblical situation is so different from ours that we cannot apply it, or by insisting that it's too vague to be applied with any confidence, lax understandings tend to place too few restrictions on Christian behavior.

With this description of the strategy of laxity in mind, we should mention some consequences that can result from this approach toward revelation.

## Consequences

The consequences of laxity are fairly predictable: A strategy of laxity encourages Christians to rationalize many sins. We'll mention just four of the many ways this can happen. First, laxity can encourage Christians to be satisfied with choosing the lesser of contrasting wrongs. In this way, they justify a wrong action on the basis that it appears to be more righteous than another wrong action.

Consider a husband and wife who have grown to despise each other. Now, we know that the Bible condemns divorce without proper justification, and that it requires spouses to love each other. But Christians who adopt a lax approach may argue that the Bible is unclear about what Christians should do in this particular situation. And they may advise divorce on the basis that it seems better than a hateful relationship. But when we assess the facts, goals and means of Scripture in a responsible way, we find that it does speak rather clearly to this modern situation. The true solution is for all husbands and wives to conform to the moral instruction of Scripture by repenting of their own sin, and by learning to love each other in the bonds of marriage.

Second, laxity tends to permit inappropriate exceptions to biblical commands, allowing Christians to justify wrongs that are not *explicitly* forbidden in Scripture. This often happens when Christians fail to see that scriptural commands apply to more situations than those specifically mentioned in the Bible. For example, in Jesus' day, some people believed that so long as they did not commit physical adultery, they were not violating the commandment against adultery. They were lax in seeing the true

implications of this commandment for situations other than physical infidelity. But in Matthew 5:28, Jesus corrected them, saying:

Everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart (Matthew 5:28).

When we fail to learn the facts, goals and means related to the commandment against adultery, we can easily deny that both adultery and lust violate God's will.

**In his Sermon on the Mount and many of his teachings also, we see that Jesus makes it very clear that it is not merely actions that God views as sinful. It's also motives. It's also the very orientation of our minds, of our hearts. When he speaks of the fact that one commits adultery not merely when one acts out the act of adultery, and is unfaithful in some physical way, but also just simply the lust, the lustful look, the lustful contemplation, is the sin. The Lord is looking at the orientation of our hearts. It is from the heart that sin is actually rooted... we need to be mindful that sinful acts aren't the only sins. It's sinful thoughts. It's the motive behind the action that actually gives birth to the act. And Jesus is causing us to realize that we have to have right motives also in order to please God.**

— Dr. John Norwood

Third, laxity tends to encourage Christians to add false qualifications to the Bible's commands. They imagine facts, goals or means that the Bible does not indicate, and use these imagined qualifications as excuses for ignoring the commands of Scripture. For example, in Deuteronomy 25:4, the Law prohibits muzzling an ox while it is threshing grain. A lax strategy toward Scripture might imagine the false qualification that this verse applies only to people who use oxen to thresh grain. We might think to ourselves, "I have no oxen; therefore, the command doesn't apply to me." But in 1 Corinthians 9:9 and 1 Timothy 5:18, Paul appealed to this law to prove that Christian ministers should be paid for their efforts. In cases like this, a lax strategy both discourages us from applying the principles of biblical commands to our own situations and hinders us from enjoying the blessings that come from obedience to God's Word.

Fourth, a strategy of laxity can lead us to think that good motives sometimes excuse evil actions. That is, when we believe that the facts, goals and means of Scripture are too different or too vague, we may be inclined to judge actions on the sole basis of our modern motives. For example, many of us might be inclined to excuse a starving man who steals food. Now, admittedly, the motivation of the person who steals to eat is very different from that of the person who steals for lazy profit. Nevertheless, God's Word still condemns both actions. As we read in Proverbs 6:30-31:

People do not despise a thief if he steals to satisfy his appetite when he is hungry, but if he is caught, he will pay sevenfold; he will give all the goods of his house (Proverbs 6:30-31).

In summary, a strategy of laxity tends to be too permissive, allowing what God forbids, and thereby hiding our true duty from us. It encourages us to navigate the details of God's law with as much personal license as possible, always looking for ways to avoid its obligations.

Having considered the description and consequences of laxity, we'll now offer some correctives to this mistaken strategy.

## Correctives

As we've said, laxity is commonly rooted either in the belief that Scripture is so different that it is inapplicable, or in the belief that it is too vague to be applicable. So, one of the best ways to avoid this error is to understand both the Bible's similarity to the modern world and its clarity.

On the one hand, the Bible assures us that the situations of Scripture are always sufficiently similar to our own for us to make modern applications. In one way or another, every passage of the Bible has something to teach us about ethics in the modern world. As Paul wrote in 2 Timothy 3:16-17:

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work (2 Timothy 3:16-17, NIV).

Whenever we're tempted to think that the Bible is inapplicable because its situations are so different from ours, we need to look more closely at the facts, goals and means related to Scripture, as well as the facts, goals and means of modern life. If we do, we may discover some correspondence that helps us apply Scripture. But even if the situations of Scripture and modern life still appear to be different, we shouldn't conclude that the Bible is inapplicable. Rather, we should admit that we don't yet know enough to come to a conclusion, and we should keep investigating.

On the other hand, with regard to the Bible's vagueness, the Bible also teaches that Scripture is sufficiently clear. As Moses wrote in Deuteronomy 29:29:

The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law (Deuteronomy 29:29).

God provided Scripture to give us knowledge of our duty. And he designed it to communicate not just to the original audience, but also to future generations, or as we read here "to our children forever."

The Bible is not equally clear in all areas, and not every person can understand every passage. But Scripture is always clear enough for us to draw ethical applications from it. So, whenever we're tempted to think that the Bible is unclear, we should remember that the fault lies with us, not with Scripture.

In order to correct this fault, we need to re-examine the facts, goals and means of Scripture searching for its original meaning. Sometimes this will help us to understand

Scripture sufficiently to apply it to modern life. And if it does not, we should admit our limitations, determine to keep studying the matter, and seek the counsel of those who are wiser than we are.

Having seen that errors arise when we adopt a strategy of laxity, we should now look at the errors that result from a strategy of rigor in our understanding and application of Scripture.

## RIGOR

Our discussion of the strategy of rigor will proceed in the same manner as our discussion of laxity. First, we'll present a general description of rigor as a strategy. Second, we'll offer some examples of the consequences of rigor. And third, we'll suggest some correctives that can help us avoid using this poor strategy. Let's begin with a description of the strategy of rigor.

### Description

For our purposes, we'll describe rigor as a strategy that is extremely concerned with guarding against sin. When Christians are inclined to follow a rigorous strategy toward revelation, they often focus especially on prohibitions. As a result, they tend to err on the side of overly restricting behavior rather than on the side of permitting it.

Like the strategy of laxity, the strategy of rigor also commonly results from mistaken beliefs about the Bible's similarity to the modern world and about its clarity. With regard to the Bible's similarity to the modern world, a strategy of rigor often views the situations of the Bible as being so similar to our own that the Bible is applicable to our lives. This strategy gives little or no consideration to the ways that the facts, goals and means of Scripture differ from those in the modern world. Christians who endorse this approach often argue that proper application amounts to doing precisely what was expected in biblical times. With regard to the Bible's clarity, Christians who endorse a rigorous strategy mistakenly believe that when the Bible's facts, goals and means appear to be vague, the proper response is to apply Scripture in restrictive ways.

Recall the illustration of the house, yard and wilderness. Once again, suppose that we want to build a fence around those things that Scripture permits, so that we can define the boundaries of Christian morality. While a strategy of laxity would build the fence at the edge of the wilderness, a strategy of rigor would tend to build the fence very close to the house. In this way, it would forbid most or all of what is unclear to avoid stumbling into immorality.

But there's a problem with this rigorous practice. Many of the things in the yard that are outside the fence are actually permitted, or even commanded, in Scripture. When we respond to the Bible's teaching in such restrictive ways, we often end up forbidding some things that God permits and other things that God actually commands. So, whether by assuming that the biblical situation is so similar to our own that we can directly apply

it, or by responding with inappropriate restrictiveness to the Bible's apparent vagueness, rigorous understandings tend to place too many limitations on Christian behavior.

With this description in mind, we're ready to speak of the consequences of the strategy of rigor.

## Consequences

There are many negative results of this rigorous approach, so for the sake of time we'll mention only two.

First, it destroys Christian freedom by prohibiting behaviors that are wrong under certain conditions, but good under other conditions. The Bible teaches that Christians have certain freedoms of conscience. That is, there are some actions that may be good for some people and evil for others. The classic examples of this are in Paul's discussions of food that had been sacrificed to idols in 1 Corinthians 8, 10. In Romans 14, there's a similar discussion of eating meat and the observance of special days. In these, Paul indicated that eating food that had been sacrificed to idols was acceptable for those with strong consciences, but sinful for those with weak consciences. In light of this, Paul offered parameters for who could eat this food and under what conditions. But the ultimate determination depended on the individual's conscience.

Since matters of conscience are often unclear, a strategy of rigor would tend to prohibit everyone from eating this food in order to ensure that no one ever violated his conscience. But this would necessarily involve prohibiting Christians with strong consciences from receiving God's blessings. And Paul taught that such blanket prohibitions are wrong. As he wrote in 1 Timothy 4:4-5:

Everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer (1 Timothy 4:4-5).

Second, a strategy of rigor inspires despair by turning God's word into a heavy burden. God gave his word to his people to bless them, not to oppress them. And there are many, many places in Scripture that state this idea. For instance, listen to Jesus' words in Mark 2:27:

The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath (Mark 2:27).

Jesus taught that God had given the Sabbath commandment in order to bless his people, not to burden them. And in Romans 9:4-5, Paul included the law in his list of God's tremendous blessings to Israel. He wrote:

To them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises. To them belong the patriarchs, and from their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ, who is God over all, blessed forever. Amen (Romans 9:4-5).

No one would dispute that every other item in this list is a great blessing. So, why did Paul include the law? The answer is simple: Because the law really is one of God's greatest blessings to his people.

**The Psalms speak of God's Law as a light to our path and a lamp to our feet. David in the Psalms describes it as sweeter than the honeycomb, more precious than gold, in keeping them his servant is warned, and there is great reward in them. In fact, the whole Psalms begin that way — "Blessed is the man who doesn't walk in the counsel of the wicked nor stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of scoffers, but his delight is in the Law of the Lord," and then Psalm 1 goes on to paint an image that the one who fears God and keeps his commands is like a tree planted by a stream that never ceases to bear fruit. And so, the Law is a place of blessedness. But it's only a place of blessedness for those for whom God has first granted forgiveness, that forgiveness which comes through Christ. But the Law then is a guide to how to live life under Christ as a life of blessing.**

— Rev. Michael J. Glodo

Sadly, the tendency to condemn whatever is not explicitly permitted tends to turn God's Word into a long list of prohibitions. This tendency causes Christians to be so preoccupied with law-keeping that they begin to think of God as a harsh taskmaster rather than as a loving father. Many even feel that God is greatly displeased with them when they fail to live up to their self-imposed rigorous standards. By destroying our Christian freedom and inspiring despair, a strategy of rigor both hinders our attempts to learn our duty and hampers our ability to take joy in the God of our salvation.

Having presented our description of the strategy of rigor, as well as some of its consequences, we should now turn to some correctives that can keep us from this error.

## Correctives

As we've seen, a strategy of rigor generally depends on one of two illusions. It can result from the mistaken belief that Scripture is so similar that the Bible is directly applicable to us, or from the belief that Scripture's facts, goals and means are vague or even unknowable.

A good corrective to the first mistaken belief is to realize that because modern situations are sufficiently different from biblical situations, we can't simplistically mimic the applications we find in Scripture. We must always account for differences between our situations and those in the Bible. Consider, for example, the commandment of Exodus 20:13:

You shall not murder (Exodus 20:13).

This commandment can be applied rather directly to some aspects of modern life. For instance, it's easy to see that this commandment prohibits killing a man in order to steal his property. But it becomes harder to apply this commandment directly to modern life for situations like self-defense or war. A strategy of rigor might tend to forbid all killings of human beings, believing that the commandment intends to address all such situations in the same way. But this conclusion is incompatible with scriptural passages where Israel's military heroes are blessed for killing God's enemies. For instance, listen to these words from Hebrews 11:32-33:

Time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets — who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises (Hebrews 11:32-33).

Notice that the first thing for which these men are praised is that they conquered kingdoms. They were military leaders and judges who had great success in defeating God's enemies in war.

In light of facts like these, we must look for a more biblical approach when we apply the commandment against murder. We must recognize that the situations addressed in the commandment against murder are not precisely the same as the situations involved in war and self-defense. And we must explore other biblical passages that also bear on these issues, looking for a conclusion that accords with all of Scripture. The answers will likely vary from case to case, and even from person to person.

In addition to gaining a proper view of the differences between biblical and modern situations, we can also avoid a strategy of rigor by remembering the clarity of Scripture. Scripture is always sufficiently clear to communicate God's will with regard to Christian ethics. We've already spoken of this corrective in our discussion of laxity. So, how does it apply to the strategy of rigor? Listen once more to Moses' words in Deuteronomy 29:29:

The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law (Deuteronomy 29:29).

God provided Scripture so that the ancient Israelites, as well as future generations like us, would know what is required. And this implies that the facts, goals and means of Scripture are clear enough for us to discern our obligations. We don't need to appeal to quick and easy strategies like rigor.

Having discussed the strategies of laxity and rigor, now, let's turn our attention to a third mistaken, yet popular, strategy — the strategy of human authority.

## HUMAN AUTHORITY

Once again, we'll proceed by considering first a description of this strategy, then by moving to its consequences, and finally to a corrective. Let's begin with our description of the strategy of human authority.

## Description

When interpreters are predisposed toward human authority, they have too strong a tendency to defer to the judgment of other human beings. This human authority could be an influential church leader, a secular teacher, or even a parent or friend. Or it may take the form of traditional or ecclesiastical views of the Bible's ethical teachings.

Now, it's important to remember that all these human authorities can play positive roles in the interpretive process. We have a long and honored tradition of theology in the church. And many scholars have discovered helpful information about the facts, goals and means of Scripture. Even the secular community has produced many valuable insights into the situations of Scripture. So, we are right to consider these human authorities as we search the Scriptures for ethical teachings. Nevertheless, these human traditions and communities are fallible, so believers must never blindly submit to such authorities.

Recall once again the illustration of the house, where the wilderness represents those things that are clearly forbidden, the house represents those things that are clearly permitted, and the yard represents those things that are somewhat unclear in Scripture. As we saw, a strategy of laxity would build the fence at the edge of the wilderness to permit the things that seem to be unclear. And by contrast, a strategy of rigor would tend to build the fence very close to the house in order to forbid most or all of what is unclear. Well, not surprisingly, Christians who follow a strategy of human authority do not decide for themselves where to put the fence. Instead, they put the fence wherever the authority figures instruct them to put it.

Of course, there are various reasons that people rely too heavily on human authority. Some are members of churches whose leaders claim to have exclusive insight into the Scriptures, or exclusive authority to interpret them. Others may believe that their knowledge is so insufficient that they simply have no basis for confidence in their own study of the Bible. And some are simply lazy. But in every case, whenever a Christian abdicates his or her responsibility to search the Scriptures, and ultimately submits to the decisions of mere human beings, that Christian is employing the strategy of human authority.

Keeping in mind this description of the strategy of human authority, let's turn to the consequences that this strategy can have in the life of believers.

## Consequences

We'll consider just two of the many problems that can arise when we depend too heavily on human authority. First, a strategy of human authority rejects the supreme authority of Scripture. For all practical purposes, when people entirely submit to the judgments of human authorities, they reject the Bible as their ultimate revealed norm. We see this clearly in the New Testament. For example, in the Gospels, Jesus encountered many Pharisees who rejected the supreme authority of Scripture in favor of traditional interpretations. Listen to Jesus' words to the Pharisees in Matthew 15:4-6:

For God commanded, "Honor your father and your mother" ... But you

say, “If anyone tells his father or his mother, ‘What you would have gained from me is given to God,’ he need not honor his father.” So for the sake of your tradition you have made void the word of God (Matthew 15:4-6).

The Pharisees did not reject Scripture. On the contrary, they held Scripture in very high regard. But they valued their traditional interpretations of Scripture too highly by comparison. They should have compared their human understandings to Scripture and found them lacking. But instead, the Pharisees accepted interpretations that did not align with the facts, goals and means of Scripture. And so, Jesus condemned them.

**The human authority cannot be elevated over against God’s authority. And the Scripture, because it is authored by God, it has its authority over against all human institutions and people because, as fallen human beings, we have a tendency to corrupt. The Word of God is not corruptible. Also, it is through the Word, God speaks to us. And when God speaks to us through the Word, that Word becomes more authoritative than human words or our institutions, or our power structures.**

— Dr. David Samuel

A problem that is related to revering human decisions more highly than the authority of Scripture is the endorsement of false interpretations. All human beings make mistakes. So, when we blindly endorse the decisions of others, we inevitably endorse some mistakes. This is particularly problematic when the church itself advocates false interpretations. At times, such false interpretations are even enforced by church discipline. For example, at the Council of Nicaea in A.D. 325, the church officially, and rightly, refuted the heresy of Arianism. Arianism denied the doctrine of the Trinity. However, at the Second Council of Sirmium in A.D. 351, the church changed its position and affirmed Arianism. And several local councils confirmed this change in subsequent years. During this time, Athanasius, the Bishop of Alexandria, was repeatedly exiled for opposing Arianism. At the time, he was considered a heretic for holding to views of the Trinity that we now consider to be orthodox.

In summary, a strategy of human authority can have devastating results. Among other things, it can constitute a rejection of Scripture’s unique authority. And it can lead to the endorsement of false doctrines. In these kinds of ways, the strategy of human authority obscures the truth of God’s revelation, so that our obligation to apply God’s revelation faithfully is hidden from us.

Now that we’ve looked at the description and consequences of the strategy of human authority, let’s discuss a corrective that can help us avoid this error.

## Corrective

The corrective for this strategy is fairly simple: We must always maintain the supremacy of Scripture as our ultimate revealed norm. The church and its traditions are

lesser authorities over us, and they really can help us understand Scripture. But they cannot bind our consciences the way Scripture does. As Jesus demonstrated in his arguments with the Pharisees, our obligation is to obey the words of Scripture according to the original meaning. *The Westminster Confession of Faith* Chapter 1, section 10, presents a useful summary of this idea. There we read:

**The supreme Judge, by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits, are to be examined, and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture.**

The Scriptures are the very words of God. And no human tradition or interpretation can speak with the unquestionable authority of God. So, we must submit to what we believe Scripture to reveal through its facts, goals and means.

**One of the slogans that became popular in the churches of the Reformation was *Sola Scriptura* — Scripture alone... *Sola Scriptura*, rightly understood, means that only the Scriptures are our supreme authority, our unquestionable authority. It does not mean that we should never consider what church authorities, for example, say in their creeds or in their major leaders or even your local pastor, your elders. Rather, in the end, all opinions of all religious controversies must be submitted to the teachings of Scripture as the final and absolutely authoritative point of view.**

— Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr

Practically speaking, this means that we should measure every human judgment against Scripture. Rather than being satisfied simply to accept fallible human judgments — even the church's judgments — we must search the Scriptures to see if the things these authorities say are true. In Acts 17:11, this was the very thing for which Luke praised the Christians in the city of Berea:

Now the Berean Jews were of more noble character than those in Thessalonica, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true (Acts 17:11, NIV).

Like the Bereans, we must always test human testimonies and doctrines by the standard of Scripture. No mere creature — not even the apostle Paul — is so authoritative or accurate in and of himself that we should rely on his word above that of Scripture.

The strategies of laxity, rigor and human authority offer easy but untrustworthy answers to difficult questions. At first glance, it may seem wise to adopt a strategy of freedom, or caution, or tradition. But in reality, these strategies can be harmful. You see, when we overemphasize laxity or rigor or human authority, we ignore the facts, goals and

means of Scripture. As a result, we don't know our duty as we should, and we can't conform to God's character. And this is why we must always try to discover and submit to the original meaning of Scripture.

Having looked at the situational content of revelation, the nature of revelation itself, and some popular strategies toward the situational dimensions of revelation, we're now prepared to consider the proper application of revelation to the modern world.

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## APPLICATION

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You'll recall that in our model for making biblical decisions, ethical judgment involves:

### **The application of God's Word to a situation by a person**

As we've said, we're wise to look at ethical decisions from three perspectives: the normative perspective of God's Word, the situational perspective, and the existential perspective that involves the person making the decision. When it comes to the situational perspective, if we are to apply God's word rightly, we need to know more than its content and nature. We also need to know something about our modern situation.

Now, God's word is so sufficient that if we knew it exhaustively — if we knew every way that special, general and existential revelation reflect God's character — we would always know precisely what to do. After all, each perspective on ethics ultimately includes the others. So, if we could see every ethical implication of the normative perspective, for instance, we wouldn't gain any new insight by considering the situational and existential perspectives.

But in reality, our knowledge of God's norms is not exhaustive. Rather, God's Word provides us with limited information about God's character. Of course, this revelation is sufficient for all our ethical endeavors, but not because it tells us precisely what to do in every instance. Instead, it provides us with enough information about God's character to *figure out* what to do in every instance. And a very important part of figuring out what to do is understanding the situations to which we are applying God's Word.

Our discussion of the application of revelation will draw attention once again to three situational considerations. First, we'll consider the need to understand the facts of our modern circumstances. Second, we'll focus on modern goals. And third, we'll consider the modern means by which God permits us to pursue these modern goals. Let's begin with the facts of our modern circumstances.

## FACTS

When we look at our modern situations, it's important to recognize that changes in facts require changes in the application of God's Word. To illustrate this idea, we'll look at three historical periods and the way Scripture itself changes the application of the

dietary laws from one period to the next. We'll explore the days of the exodus under Moses, the days when national Israel inhabited the Promised Land, and the days of the New Testament church after Christ's ascension into heaven.

Now, it's important to strike a balance as we consider the facts of these three periods of history. On the one hand, there are many similarities between them. In each of these three periods, the fact of God's existence, and the particular attributes of his character, remained the same. In addition, in each period, humanity was fallen and sinful, desperately needing moral guidance from God. With specific regard to dietary laws, in each of these periods, food was to be eaten for God's glory. And these factual situations remain true in our day as well.

On the other hand, Scripture makes it clear that there are also differences between the facts in these three periods. This means that some actions that were counted as sinful in some periods were not sinful in other periods. Let's look at how the application of the dietary laws changed throughout history.

In the days of the exodus, the people of Israel were governed by relatively strict laws, being permitted to eat only clean animals in particular ways. As just one example, according to Leviticus 17:3, 4, during the Israelites' travels to the Promised Land, it was sinful to slaughter and eat certain clean animals unless they were first presented as an offering to the Lord at the tabernacle. But when the Israelites were well established and spread throughout the Promised Land, the Scriptures make it clear that they were governed by relatively relaxed laws. In fact, Moses himself anticipated this later situation. According to Deuteronomy 12:15, when the Israelites settled in the land, they would be permitted to slaughter and eat any clean animal in their own towns, without presenting it to the Lord at the place of worship. And after Jesus' atoning death and ascension into heaven, the church was governed by far more permissive laws regarding diet. As we learn through Peter's vision in Acts 10:9-16, God declared all animals to be clean, so as not to pose a stumbling block to the inclusion of the Gentiles in the church. And listen to Paul's words in 1 Timothy 4:2-5:

Liars ... require abstinence from foods that God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth. For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer (1 Timothy 4:2-5).

The circumstances of the New Testament church had changed with the coming of Christ, so the application of dietary laws changed as well.

The reality is that these factual similarities and differences influenced ethical judgments. Insofar as the facts were the same, the judgments based on these facts were also the same. For example, the judgment that God is good, the judgment that humanity is sinful, and the judgment that food must be eaten to God's glory all remained the same. These and many other ethical judgments were relatively unchanged throughout these periods because the facts on which they were based remained unchanged.

But to the degree that the facts were different in each period, the ethical judgments were also different. During the exodus, with regard to certain animals, the judgment was: eat only clean animals that have been offered to God. In the Promised

Land, the judgment was: eat only clean animals. And in the period of the New Testament church, it was: eat any animal. In each period, God's character remained the same. But the obligations his character placed on behavior varied in light of the changing circumstances.

Now, as we look at these similarities and differences, we can see that they are instructive for modern Christians. In broad terms, the same facts are shared in common for all ages. God's existence and character have not changed, humanity is still fallen and sinful, and food must still be eaten to God's glory. As a result, the associated judgments have not changed. But how should we judge dietary sinfulness in light of the factual changes that have occurred? Well, there are many differences between our facts and those of Israel in the days of the exodus and Israel's life in the Promised Land. During the exodus, strict laws applied, leading to a judgment to eat only clean animals that had been offered to God. And in the Promised Land, relaxed laws applied, leading to a judgment to eat only clean animals. We can and must learn from these laws as Christians today, but they are not in force in the same ways in our day. Therefore, their applications have changed.

On this issue, our circumstances parallel those of the early church. And because of our situational similarities regarding food, Peter's vision in Acts 10:9-16, as well as other passages such as 1 Corinthians 8-10 and Romans 14, indicate that the judgment to eat any animal continues to be normative for the church today. To one degree or another, every ethical judgment requires us to identify the similarities and differences between the modern facts and the biblical facts, and to render ethical judgments accordingly.

**The Israelites had a culture of worship and liturgical language — the laws in the Old Testament concerning offerings, the cleanliness or uncleanness of things, the Holy Temple and the office of the priest, and so on. But if we read the book of Hebrews, we see that in the era of the New Testament these laws no longer needed to be followed because Jesus Christ had already fulfilled them... In dealing with food offered to idols, Paul had two different teachings. For those who had knowledge [of the truth], Paul said, “knowledge puffs up,” in order to humble them, and he asked them to have love for their brethren by refraining from eating if it caused someone to fall... As for those who were weaker and more sensitive, Paul had a different teaching. He said that everything in the market can be bought and eaten, because the food sold there had been removed from the temple and the scenes of worship... So they didn't need to be afraid. Whenever Paul taught, he had different teachings, according to culture, for the Jewish person, the Greek person, the weak person, and the person with knowledge. Therefore, we should carefully study the Bible and then apply it in appropriate ways.**

— Dr. Peter Chow translation

Now that we've seen how important it is in application to consider the similarities and differences between the facts in the Bible and the facts in our own lives, we should turn to the question of goals in the lives of modern Christians.

## GOALS

Let's consider once more the dietary laws from the times of the exodus, Israel's life in the Promised Land, and the New Testament church. In the days of Moses, the purposes of the dietary laws included bringing glory to God and ensuring the sanctification of his people in his service. The goal was human holiness that mirrored God's holiness. For example, in Leviticus 11:44-45, the Lord told his people:

You shall not defile yourselves with any swarming thing that crawls on the ground... [B]e holy, for I am holy (Leviticus 11:44-45).

These rather general goals continued to be in effect throughout the periods of the exodus, Israel's life in the Promised Land, and the church. Even though the dietary laws were changed in these later periods, the goals of God's glory and human holiness remained the same. For instance, in Isaiah 62:12, the prophet encouraged the people in the Promised Land to strive for holiness, so that they might be called:

The Holy People, The Redeemed of the Lord (Isaiah 62:12).

And in 1 Peter 1:15-16, the apostle wrote these words to the church:

As he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, since it is written, "You shall be holy, for I am holy" (1 Peter 1:15-16).

In fact, when Peter instructed Christians to be holy, he quoted from the dietary law we just read in Leviticus 11:45.

But despite these similarities, each period also had particular goals for holiness that differed from the goals in other periods. During the exodus, one goal was to separate Jews from Gentiles. And the same goal was maintained while Israel lived in the Promised Land. But in the New Testament church, the circumstances changed when God converted many Gentiles. At that point, the goal was no longer to separate Jews from Gentiles, but to unite Jews with Gentiles in the church.

Necessarily, the similarities and differences of the goals of these periods shaped ethical judgments. With regard to similar judgments, the goals of God's glory and human holiness that mirrored God's holiness were affirmed in all periods. So, the ethical judgments that God is holy and that humanity must strive to be holy were rightly affirmed as well.

At the same time, each period also contained ethical judgments that were different from the other periods. In the days of the exodus, the goal for Jews to separate from Gentiles led to the judgment to refuse invitations to eat Gentile food. And this judgment would have been echoed during Israel's time in the Promised Land. But the proper

judgment for the New Testament church was to *accept* invitations to eat Gentile food. After all, this was precisely what God had commanded Peter to do in Acts 10. In each period, God's character remained the same. But the goals implied by his character were somewhat different.

As we saw earlier, the similarities and differences among our three time periods are instructive for modern Christians. With regard to similarities, the goals of God's glory and our holiness have not changed. For this reason, they should still lead us to the judgments that God is holy and that humanity must strive to be holy. But we must also consider differences between modern goals and judgments and goals and judgments in Scripture. During the exodus and during Israel's time in the Promised Land, the goal was to separate Jews from Gentiles. So, the judgment was to refuse invitations to eat Gentile food. But our goals today are different from the goals in those time periods. Consequently, we shouldn't make the same judgments they made. Instead, our circumstances reflect those of the New Testament church. There, the goal was to unite Jews with Gentiles. So, because our goals are similar to the early church, our judgment, like theirs, should be to accept invitations to eat Gentile food.

Every ethical judgment requires us to consider the modern goals in light of the biblical goals, and to focus on the similarities and differences between them. Where there are significant differences, we should hesitate to adopt the same judgments. But where there is significant similarity, we should accept the ethical judgments. In some cases, such as in the matter of food, our judgments will be different from those made in the Old Testament, but very similar to those made by the New Testament church. But in other ethical matters, we may determine that even the judgments made by the New Testament church are inappropriate for our modern setting.

**Anytime we try to understand how to apply the New Testament, the key word that has to come out all the time is "context." And we usually think of that in terms of the context of the passage itself and the cultural setting of the original audience. But our cultural context also affects that, especially when it comes to application, because we are in different settings. And as much as we might like to have the application of Scripture be very cut and dried, almost wooden, that wasn't the case even in New Testament times. I've always been fascinated by the fact that Paul in one case says, "Yes, Timothy, you must be circumcised for the sake of the gospel." And in another case he says to another one of his companions, "No, you must not be circumcised for the sake of the gospel." So, the same act was right or wrong depending on the cultural setting, if you will. So, we need to really understand what our current cultural situation is and how the biblical principles apply to that. And that means we need to really understand the culture as much as we understand Scripture.**

— Dr. Dan Lacich

Having looked at the application of revelation with regard to facts and goals, we should turn to our final topic: the correspondence between the means approved in Scripture and the means available to us in the modern world.

## MEANS

Let's turn one last time to the dietary laws in the periods of the exodus, the Promised Land, and the New Testament church as we consider the similarities and differences of means. On the one hand, the similarity between the means in these three periods is fairly basic. Simply put, the people were to use diet to achieve holiness in all three periods.

The differences, however, are more extensive. For instance, during the exodus, the means of striving for holiness through diet included the need to sacrifice animals at the tabernacle before eating them. This means of regulation worked well during the time that the Israelites wandered in the wilderness. During those days, the entire nation lived in the vicinity of the tabernacle. Moreover, Exodus 16:35 indicates that their diet primarily consisted of manna, not of meat from domestic animals.

But in the Promised Land, many lived far from the tabernacle, and far from the temple that Solomon later built in Jerusalem. Moreover, God had ceased providing manna, and the people were eating more domestic animals. So, in Deuteronomy 12:15, God adapted his requirements to fit the new circumstances of his people's lives. Specifically, he permitted the people to slaughter animals in their own towns. He still required holiness, but he gave the people a new means to fulfill this requirement.

The requirements changed again in the days of the New Testament church. As God's kingdom spread beyond Israel, there was a great influx of Gentiles into the church. As a result, holiness no longer required those of Jewish descent to remain separate from those of Gentile descent. Rather, as Peter learned in Acts 10:9-16, holiness now required them to unite with regard to their diets, so that all Christians might fellowship with one another. Appropriately, God used a change to an unrestricted diet to create unity between Jews and Gentiles in the church.

And just as we saw with facts and goals, the similarities and differences of means between these time periods was manifested in ethical judgments. To the degree that the means were similar, a valid judgment could have been that food should be used in ways that honor the holiness of God and sanctify his people in his service. But to the degree that the means were different, different judgments should have been rendered.

During the exodus, the means was to sacrifice animals at the tabernacle. And this should have led to the judgment that animals must be sacrificed at the tabernacle before eating them. In the Promised Land, the means was to slaughter animals in towns, and this should have led to the judgment to slaughter clean animals. And in the New Testament church, the means of an unrestricted diet should have produced the statement "eat what the Gentiles eat" because it was made holy by God's decree and through prayer. This was the appropriate ethical judgment.

Modern Christians have much to learn from these similarities and differences. Because of our similarities to the periods of the exodus, the Promised Land, and the New Testament church, we should echo their determination to use diet to achieve holiness.

The means of diet should lead us to the judgment that food should be used to honor the holiness of God and to build holiness in his people, even today.

We can also learn from the differences between the means used in these periods of history. We don't sacrifice animals at the tabernacle, as God's people did during the exodus. And we don't slaughter animals in towns, as was the case in the Promised Land. And, because our modern situation is different than that of God's people in these periods, we do not employ the same means or make the same judgments.

But consider the New Testament church. They used the means of an unrestricted diet, sanctified through prayer, and made the judgment to eat what the Gentiles eat in order to pursue unity within the church. And because our situation is essentially the same as theirs in this regard, we should use the same means and render the same judgment.

As with facts and goals, there will be some cases in which the situation of the New Testament church differs from our own. In these instances, we can't always use the same means and render the same judgments that the New Testament church did. Every norm revealed to us must be applied with diligence and wisdom, and not with simple imitation of the behavior in Scripture. And we can determine which means are appropriate to use in the modern world by looking at the relationship between the situations described in the Bible, and the situations of our own lives.

## CONCLUSION

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In this lesson, we've investigated four topics that help us understand the relationship between revelation and situation. We've explored the content of revelation as it pertains to situations, the situational nature of revelation itself, several popular interpretive strategies toward revelation, and the application of revelation to our modern situations. And we've seen that to make biblical decisions, we must consider the ways that each one of these situational factors contributes to our knowledge of our obligations before God.

As believers who want to make ethical decisions, it is very important for us to understand our ethical situation. And as we have seen, it is helpful to think of our situation in terms of facts, goals and means. By paying attention to these concerns, we can better understand God's revelation. And when we do, we'll be better prepared to make judgments that conform to the biblical model for making ethical decisions.

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## GLOSSARY

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**Arianism** – Heresy developed in the fourth century A.D. that denied the Son’s full membership in the Godhead and rejected Trinitarian doctrine

**Athanasius** – (ca. A.D. 296-373) Fourth-century Bishop of Alexandria and theologian who affirmed the Trinity and refuted Arianism

**Christian ethics** – Theology viewed as a means of determining which human persons, acts and attitudes receive God’s blessing and which do not

**Council of Nicea** – Church council held in the city of Nicea in A.D. 325 that affirmed the doctrine of the Trinity and refuted Arianism

**ecclesiastical** – Relating to the church, especially as an established institution

**ethical judgment** – The application of God’s Word to a situation by a person

**ethics** – The study of moral right and wrong; the study of what is good and what is evil

**existential perspective** – Ethical perspective that considers the person, the motives, and the inner leading of the Holy Spirit; one of the three perspectives on human knowledge used by theologian John Frame in his Tri-Perspectivalism; concerned with the response of the believing heart through emotion and feeling

**existential revelation** – God’s revelation through human persons

**general revelation** – God’s use of the natural world and its workings to make his existence, nature, presence, actions and will known to all humanity

**Gentile** – Non-Jewish person

**heretic** – A person who adopts beliefs that are in opposition to the official teachings of an established religion

**inspiration** – Theological term that refers to the way the Holy Spirit moved human beings to write God’s revelation as Scripture and superintended their work in a way that made their writings infallible

**laxity** – The quality of being too loose or relaxed, not strict or rigid enough; an interpretive strategy toward God’s revelation that tends toward permissiveness

**Machiavelli, Niccolò** – (1469-1527) Sixteenth century author who wrote *The Prince*; known for arguing that "the end justifies the means"

**normative perspective** – Ethical perspective that looks to God’s Word as the norm or standard for making ethical decisions

**nouthesia** – Greek term (transliteration) meaning “admonition” or “warning”

**rigor** – The quality of being overly strict, harsh or meticulous; an interpretive strategy toward God’s revelation that is extremely guarded against sin

**Second Council of Sirmium** – Church council held in A.D. 357 that affirmed the Arian heresy

**situational perspective** – Approach to ethics with an emphasis on the situation and how the details of our circumstances relate to our ethical decisions

**special revelation** – God’s disclosures of himself and his will to a select number of people through dreams, visions, prophets, the Scriptures, and other similar means

**Westminster Confession of Faith** – An ecumenical doctrinal summary composed by the Westminster Assembly of Divines and published in 1647