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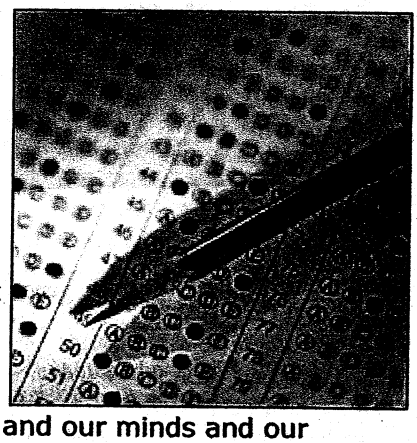
Leadership

The Hermeneutics Quiz

Your biblical blind spots and what you tend not to see.

by Scot McKnight



For some reason of late, I have become fascinated with the portions of the Bible we *don't* tend to read, passages like the story of Jephthah. Or how God was on the verge of killing Moses for not circumcising his son, and his wife stepped in, did what needed to be done, and tossed the foreskin at Moses' feet, and God let him alone.

I'm curious why one of my friends dismisses the Friday-evening-to-Saturday-evening Sabbath observance as "not for us today" but insists that capital punishment can't be dismissed because it's in the Old Testament.

I have become fascinated with what goes on in our heads and our minds and our traditions (and the latter is far more significant than many of us recognize) in making decisions like this.

What decisions? Which passages *not* to read as normative. The passages we tend *not* to read at all.

If we're all subject to selective perception, at least to some degree, it's important to recognize what we tend to miss or gloss over, especially if we're church leaders.

This quiz is designed to surface the decisions we make, perhaps without thinking about them, and about how we both read our Bible and don't read our Bible. Some will want to quibble with distinctions or agree with more than one answer. No test like this can reveal all the nuances needed, but broad answers are enough to raise the key issues. On a scale of 1-5, mark the answer that best fits your approach to reading the Bible. (If you fall between response 1 and response 3, give yourself a 2.) Your score will reveal where you land on our hermeneutical scale.

Take the Hermeneutics Quiz

Your score, our findings

I ran this test with about twenty pastors, professors, and former students. No one answered every question with "1" and no one answered every question with "5." I was surprised by the low score of an emergent friend and the high score of a professor at a very conservative Christian college. Some answer progressively on one controversial issue (say, women in ministry), while answering conservatively on others

(homosexuality, for example).

The fodder for conversation is how we discern when to be a "1," when to be a "3," and when to be a "5." Broadly speaking, there are three groups here.

First, the conservative hermeneutic group scores 52 or lower. The strength of this view is its emphasis on the authority, ongoing and normative authority, of all of Scripture. It tends to operate with the line many of us learned in Sunday school: "If the Bible says it, that settles it." Such persons let the Bible challenge them with full force. Literal readings lead to rather literal applications. Most of the time.

The problem, of course, is that very few people are completely consistent here. At times one suspects something other than strict interpretation is going on when the conservative is willing to appeal to history to suspend the commandment to observe a Saturday Sabbath, but does not to appeal to history on other issues (e.g., capital punishment or homosexuality).

The moderate hermeneutic might be seen as the voice of reason and open-mindedness. Moderates generally score between 53 to 65. Many are conservative on some issues and progressive on others. It intrigues that conservatives tend to be progressive on the same issues, while progressives tend to be conservative on the same issues. Nonetheless, moderates have a flexible hermeneutic that gives them the freedom to pick and choose on which issues they will be progressive or conservative. For that reason, moderates are more open to the charge of inconsistency. What impresses me most about moderates are the struggles they endure to render judgments on hermeneutical issues.

The progressive is not always progressive. Those who score 66 or more can be seen as leaning toward the progressive side, but the difference between at 66 and 92 is dramatic. Still, the progressive tends to see the Bible as historically shaped and culturally conditioned, and yet most still consider it the Word of God for today. Following a progressive hermeneutic, for the Word to speak in our day, one must interpret what the Bible said in its day and discern its pattern for revelation in order to apply it to our world. The strength, as with the moderate but even more so, is the challenge to examine what the Bible said in its day, and this means the progressives tend to be historians. But the problems for the progressives are predictable: Will the Bible's so-called "plain meaning" be given its due and authoritative force to challenge our world? Or will the Bible be swallowed by a quest to find modern analogies that sometimes minimize what the text clearly says?

Wherever you land on this scale, it is my hope we all will engage the seriousness of how we read the Bible—and don't read the Bible.

Scot McKnight is professor of religious studies at North Park University in Chicago and the author of the upcoming book, The Blue Parakeet: Rethinking How You Read the Bible (Zondervan, 2008).

GO DEEPER...

DISCUSS your quiz score on Leadership's blog, Out of Ur.

DISCOVER how John Ortberg, Dan Kimball, and other Leadership contributors scored on the hermeneutics quiz on our blog.

DOWNLOAD a lesson on the inerrancy of Scripture at ChristianBibleStudies.com.

RESPOND to the editors of Leadership at ljeditor@christianitytoday.com.

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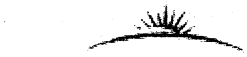

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INTERACTIVE ASSESSMENT

The Hermeneutics Quiz

Ever wonder how two people can look at the same passage of the Bible and come away with such different applications? The ways we interpret the Bible, and what enters into our process of applying the Bible, are important for us to be aware of. Without this self-awareness, we can have blind spots in our Bible reading and not even know it.

The Hermeneutics Quiz first appeared in Leadership journal's winter 2008 edition, and you can read the full article here. It is designed to clarify how you understand the Bible and how you apply it. Some people will quibble with the categories in the quiz or insist on more than one answer. That's okay. No test like this can reveal all the nuances needed, but broad answers are sufficient to benefit from taking the quiz.

On a scale of 1 to 5, mark the answer that best fits your approach to reading the Bible. (If you fall between response 1 and response 3, give yourself a 2.) Then total the points, and your score will reveal where you land on the quiz's hermeneutical scale.

1 The Bible is:

- ○ 1. God's inspired words in confluence with the authors.
- ○ 2. I fall somewhere between No. 1 and No. 3.
- ○ 3. God's inspired words that arise out of a community and then are written down by an author.
- ○ 4. I fall somewhere between No. 3 and No. 5.
- ○ 5. Words of an author who speaks out of a community's tradition, but which sacramentally lead us to God.

2 The Bible is:

- ○ 1. God's exact words for all time.
- ○ 2. I fall somewhere between No. 1 and No. 3.
- ○ 3. God's message (instead of exact words) for all time.
- ○ 4. I fall somewhere between No. 3 and No. 5.
- ○ 5. God's words and message for that time but need interpretation and contextualization to be lived today.

3 The Bible's words are:

- ○ 1. Inerrant on everything.
- ○ 2. I fall somewhere between No. 1 and No. 3.
- ○ 3. Inerrant on only matters of faith and practice.
- ○ 4. I fall somewhere between No. 3 and No. 5.
- ○ 5. Not defined by inerrancy or errancy, which are modernistic categories.

4 The commands in the Old Testament to destroy a village, including women and children, are:

- ○ 1. Justifiable judgment against sinful, pagan, immoral peoples.
- ○ 2. I fall somewhere between No. 1 and No. 3.
- ○ 3. God's ways in the days of the Judges (etc.): they are primitive words but people's understanding as divine words for that

day.

- 4. I fall somewhere between No. 3 and No. 5.
- 5. A barbaric form of war in a primitive society and I wish they weren't in the Bible.

5 The story of Hosea (the prophet) and Gomer (his wife) is:

- 1. A graphic reality that speaks of God's faithfulness and Israel's infidelity.
- 2. I fall somewhere between No. 1 and No. 3.
- 3. A parable (since, for example, God would never ask a prophet to marry a prostitute).
- 4. I fall somewhere between No. 3 and No. 5.
- 5. An unfortunate image of an ancient prophet that stereotypes women and too easily justifies violence against women.

6 The command of Jesus to wash feet is:

- 1. To be taken literally, despite near universal neglect in the church.
- 2. I fall somewhere between No. 1 and No. 3.
- 3. A first century observance to be practiced today in other ways.
- 4. I fall somewhere between No. 3 and No. 5.
- 5. An ancient custom with no real implication for our world.

7 The gift of prophecy is:

- 1. Timeless, despite lack of attention in the church today.
- 2. I fall somewhere between No. 1 and No. 3.
- 3. An ancient form of communication that is seen today in proclaiming scriptural truths.
- 4. I fall somewhere between No. 3 and No. 5.
- 5. No longer needed and dramatically different from today's preaching.

8 Homosexuality's prohibitions in the Bible are:

- 1. Permanent prohibitions reflecting God's will.
- 2. I fall somewhere between No. 1 and No. 3.
- 3. Culturally shaped, still normative, but demanding greater sensitivity today.
- 4. I fall somewhere between No. 3 and No. 5.
- 5. A purity-code violation that has been eliminated by Christ.

9 The unity of the Bible is:

- 1. God's systematic truth that can be discerned by careful study of the Bible.
- 2. I fall somewhere between No. 1 and No. 3.
- 3. The gospel call to living by faith that is expressed in a variety of ways by different authors in the Bible.
- 4. I fall somewhere between No. 3 and No. 5.
- 5. Not found by imposing on the integrity of each author in the Bible to conform to overarching systems; the unity is in the God who speaks to us today through the Word.

10 The Holy Spirit's role in interpretation is:

- 1. To guide the individual regardless of what others say.
- 2. I fall somewhere between No. 1 and No. 3.

- 3. To guide the individual in tandem/conversation with the church.
- 4. I fall somewhere between No. 3 and No. 5.
- 5. To guide the community that can instruct the individual.

11 The injunctions upon women in 1 Timothy 2:9-15 are:

- 1. Timeless truths and normative for today.
- 2. I fall somewhere between No. 1 and No. 3.
- 3. Culturally shaped but, with proper interpretation and transfer, for today; e.g., we can learn from how Paul addressed a situation with uninstructed women in Ephesus.
- 4. I fall somewhere between No. 3 and No. 5.
- 5. Needed for early Christians, bound in the first century, but not for today.

12 Careful interpretation of the Bible is:

- 1. Objective, rational, universal, timeless.
- 2. I fall somewhere between No. 1 and No. 3.
- 3. Dialectical, relational, culturally shaped, timely.
- 4. I fall somewhere between No. 3 and No. 5.
- 5. Subjective, personal, culturally bound, time specific.

13 The context for reading the Bible is:

- 1. The individual's sole responsibility.
- 2. I fall somewhere between No. 1 and No. 3.
- 3. The individual in conversation and respect for Church traditions.
- 4. I fall somewhere between No. 3 and No. 5.
- 5. The confessional statement of one's community of faith.

14 Discerning the historical context of a passage is:

- 1. Unimportant since God speaks directly to me.
- 2. I fall somewhere between No. 1 and No. 3.
- 3. Often and sometimes significant in order to grasp meaning.
- 4. I fall somewhere between No. 3 and No. 5.
- 5. Necessary and dangerous to avoid in reading the Bible.

15 The Bible:

- 1. Can be examined and understood without bias.
- 2. I fall somewhere between No. 1 and No. 3.
- 3. Can be understood but with bias.
- 4. I fall somewhere between No. 3 and No. 5.
- 5. Can be partially understood by a reader with bias.

16 Capital punishment:

- 1. Should be practiced today because the Bible teaches it.
- 2. I fall somewhere between No. 1 and No. 3.

- 3. Should be examined carefully to determine if it is the best option today; some instances of capital punishment in the Bible are no longer advisable.
- 4. I fall somewhere between No. 3 and No. 5
- 5. As delineated in the Bible pertains to ancient Israel; such practices are no longer useful and should be universally banned.

17 Tattoos:

- 1. Are forbidden because of Leviticus 19:28.
- 2. I fall somewhere between No. 1 and No. 3.
- 3. Are forbidden in Leviticus as idolatrous marks, which we know from study of the ancient Near East.
- 4. I fall somewhere between No. 3 and No. 5.
- 5. Are permissible, because the purity codes are not for Christians today.

18 The requirement of the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15:29) not to eat any meat improperly killed (strangled instead of having the blood drained properly):

- 1. Is a permanent commandment for all Christians today.
- 2. I fall somewhere between No. 1 and No. 3.
- 3. Is for Jewish Christians only.
- 4. I fall somewhere between No. 3 and No. 5.
- 5. Is a temporary custom for first-century Jewish Christians, and is no longer a concern for Christians.

19 Adultery:

- 1. Deserves the death penalty, as stated in the Old Testament.
- 2. I fall somewhere between No. 1 and No. 3.
- 3. Was not punished by death when Jesus confronted it, and therefore death is not a Christian punishment.
- 4. I fall somewhere between No. 3 and No. 5.
- 5. And divorce were governed by Old Testament laws from a primitive culture, very different from our own; just as these concepts developed within Bible times, our understanding of proper punishment has been improved.

20 Sabbath:

- 1. Was never eliminated by New Testament writers and should be practiced by Christians (on Saturday).
- 2. I fall somewhere between No. 1 and No. 3.
- 3. Developed into a Sunday worship observance for Christians, and Christians should not work on that day.
- 4. I fall somewhere between No. 3 and No. 5.
- 5. Turned into Sunday for Christians, who need to worship together (on the weekend, at least) and can work if they think they need to.

Hit "Submit" to see where you scored and what your score means in terms of how you read the Bible. The total scores range from a possible low of 20 to a possible high of 100.

To read more about the Hermeneutics Quiz, click here.

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