

1. Do we need to go 'beyond the Bible'?

*It seems paradoxical to read scholars, who respect the Scriptures as the authority in matters of both faith and practice, talking about going 'beyond the Bible'. Yet in recent years a vibrant discussion has grown up around this expression. Major contributors include: I. Howard Marshall (longstanding British Evangelical New Testament specialist); Kevin J. Vanhoozer (doyen of US Evangelical writers on hermeneutics); and William J. Webb (Baptist pastor and New Testament scholar). ((See e.g. I. Howard Marshall, Kevin J. Vanhoozer, and Stanley E. Porter. *Beyond the Bible: Moving from Scripture to Theology*. Baker Academic, 2004; Gary T. Meadors, *Four Views on Moving Beyond the Bible to Theology*. Harper Collins, 2009 [contributions from Walter C. Kaiser; Daniel M. Doriani; Kevin J. Vanhoozer; William J. Webb].)) In this post we will explore why going 'beyond the Bible' is a necessary part of reading the Bible faithfully. Then in subsequent posts we will explore how this may be done, and how this evidently dangerous freedom may be properly restrained.*

Changed circumstances

Reading the Bible using the approach outlined in the first section of this material is sufficient for many everyday needs. It is certainly a good way to get faithfully from a Bible passage to a message/application for today. Yet even here there is often a need to go "beyond the Bible".

Often when we look to Scripture for guidance about complex moral, or social issues, even when the Bible addresses the issue we cannot make our application directly.

To consider why moving beyond the direct teachings of Scripture is necessary we will consider loaning money as an

example. The Bible teaches in several places about loaning to those in need. This teaching can be simply summarised in neat principles.

We should **loan what others need**, even if they may be unable to repay us (Proverbs 19:17; Luke 6:34-38; cf. Matthew 5:42); charging **interest is wrong** (Exodus 22:25; Leviticus 25:35-37; Deuteronomy 23:19-20 ((Though it is apparently OK to charge interest to those outside the community of God's people!)))

Now suppose for example that someone in your church needs to borrow money. ((Or perhaps 'wants to' borrow money, in a complex society it is difficult, except at the extremes, to distinguish needs from wants, with everyone judging cases differently. But let us assume "needs" for this example.)) They cannot get a bank loan because of previous poor credit history. You are retired, and living on your superannuation payments, supplemented by the earnings from your savings. What should you do?

The Bible teaching is clear and almost unequivocal. ((If you had only a little to supplement your basic superannuation you might be able to resist the claim on the grounds of your own poverty, but even this excuse involves stepping a little beyond the strict letter of the biblical texts, which envisage no excuses for someone who has the resources to lend.))

But, our situation is different from that in Moses' or Jesus' time. Then, there was no money ((They exchanged goods much of the time: "I'll give you 2Kg of my barley for that cup...", and for large-scale trade used silver weighed in scales.)) and even the needs and the loans were usually made in "kind". Someone borrowed a sack of grain to feed their family, and repaid it when the next harvest came in. Now we have money (that is paper or coins that represent units of value, and are subject to inflation or loss of real value in other ways). Then, only greedy merchants charged interest, now (almost) ((

See post on [Kingdom Banking](#) for an exception.)) everyone charges interest and savers are paid by banks and building societies for the use of their money. Then, fraternal loans were part of a close-knit communitarian society. Now loans are “big business”.

If the possible helper in our example above is living from the interest, or other investment returns of their savings, then to make a loan at no interest (especially to someone who may not be able to repay) effectively takes future income from them!

Notice what is happening here, as we translate the clear biblical principles from their world to ours they have ceased to be neatly and simply appropriate. This has happened because the social and economic contexts are quite different in ways that directly impact the biblical principle’s application. We cannot live **directly** by those principles in many 21stC contexts. ((Kingdom banking and this scheme to [assist farmers in the north of Myanmar](#) offer nice examples of how the biblical principles can inspire action today. In a later post we will consider these for what they can show us about going “beyond the Bible” in ways that are faithful to the Bible.))

We need principles by which we can go beyond the Bible, in ways which are faithful to Scripture!

Issues the Bible could not address

As well as issues like that above where changed circumstances make biblical principles not directly applicable, there are also many issues today that the Bible’s teaching simply do not address. Taking human life is wrong (Gen 9:6; Ex 20:13 cf. Dt 5:17).

But at what stage does life begin? The question is important for **our** decisions about some forms of contraception, for if fertilised eggs are human life even in the first minutes, then

IUDs and some other forms of birth control are killing.

The Bible did not know of such technologies and so does not talk about the exact moment when a human life begins. Though one might argue that passages like Ps 139:16 and Jer 1:5 provide enough guidance to answer this question.

However, what about other forms of birth control? The issue did not really arise in Scripture because the technological means of contraception were not known to the Bible writers (including perhaps the rhythm method which relies on information about conception and fertility that was not available in biblical times).

Conclusion

In this post, I have argued that there are two main, and pretty clear, ways in which change in circumstances between us and the Bible writers mean that we **must** “go beyond the Bible”. There may be others but there are at least these two.

If we are to “go beyond the Bible” then we need principled and faithful ways to do so, and/or ways to ensure that our conclusions are still faithful to Scripture. (For if we do not ensure this, we can no longer claim that Scripture is our authority.)