

254 Change? – When? Where? How?

My starting premise today is that the Bible is the inspired word of God; it was given to help people of every age to live and behave in a more God-like way. But because even the most recent writings are almost 2000 years old – when the world was a *very* different place – it's sometimes difficult to know how God can best use the Bible to inspire us to live in 2023.

Thankfully, in addition to the words of the Bible, albeit written in languages that few of us understand, we have the Holy Spirit, who inspires individual believers – and groups of believers (churches) – to study those words, translate them into languages that we do understand, and then we can make ethical decisions on how best to live.

Fine, but because the world is changing (faster now than ever?), churches do have to change their minds sometimes, and that can be painful, can cause disagreement, and can even split the church. So is it ever right to take the plain meaning of Scripture, plus the church's accepted teaching, and say, 'Actually we now think that teaching is wrong; we need to change'?

When churches are inflexible, unwilling to be humble and say, 'Actually, we got it wrong,' we end up hurting one another and – far, far worse – hurting people **outside** the church, for whose benefit, I hope we agree, the church exists.

For example, given that the plain meaning of Scripture sees nothing wrong with slavery – indeed, it teaches people how to live in a slavery-based system – how did the church change its mind? They started with the overall teaching of the Bible to treat one another with respect and dignity and care (especially those on the margins). Then they gave special weight to the sayings and teachings of Jesus, and the way he related to the Old Testament. Then they looked at the cross and saw Jesus' self-giving, self-sacrificing example.

Result? They agreed that, despite the plain meaning of Scripture, slavery is evil.

And what happens when situations come along that didn't apply in Bible days? How do we know what Jesus would do if he were alive today? Exactly as I just outlined. We ask the Holy Spirit to inspire us as we think through the issues, look at the situation, look at things we now understand (that were not known and would have been meaningless to the Bible writers), compare that with the words of Scripture and make a decision – sometimes to change, sometimes not to change.

What will stop our churches splitting? We need to think the issues through carefully, but we need to respect one another's views. We may need to agree to disagree, allowing each other to hold different views, without looking down on one another.

But does the teaching of the churches ever (rightly) change? My current read, Andrew Davison's *Amazing Love*, mentions the major changes made on celibacy, contraception and women's ministry and, as you probably guessed, then tackles the issue of gay marriage.

Paul Bev. 16.3.23