

# HERMENEUTICS OF CONVENIENCE



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A REVISION STUDY

THE FELLOWSHIP OF AILBE

*Hermeneutics of Convenience*

Hermeneutics of Convenience  
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The Fellowship of Ailbe

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## Welcome to *Hermeneutics of Convenience*

The science of hermeneutics addresses the question of how best to understand the Bible. This Word that is able to save and sanctify, and which we read and study daily, is fraught with deep meanings that can only be ferreted out by following protocols outlined in the Bible itself.

We go wrong when we come to the Bible with preconceived notions about what it ought to teach, then use our own interpretive principles to twist and wrench the Scriptures off their God-given meaning onto our own.

How does such a hermeneutic of convenience operate? How can we recognize it and, more importantly, avoid falling into it ourselves? These are the questions we will address in this study.

*ReVision* studies are designed as brief introductions to the subject under consideration. We hope they will enlarge your worldview, help you to become more firmly rooted in Scripture, equip you to minister to others, and stimulate you to want to learn more about the Word of God and the Biblical worldview.

We're happy to provide this study at no charge. If you find these studies helpful, we hope you'll consider sending a gift to The Fellowship of Ailbe, to help us in making these resources available to others.

May the Lord bless your study of His Word.

T. M. Moore  
Principal

## 1 The Leaven of Convenience

*All Scripture is given by inspiration of God...* 2 Timothy 3.16

*Then Jesus said to them, "Take heed and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the Sadducees."* Matthew 16.6

### *Love wrongly focused*

As we have seen, there are right ways and wrong ways of reading the Bible. The discipline of reading and interpreting the Bible is called *hermeneutics*. The name derives from Hermes, the ancient Greek god who was believed to bring messages to men. Just as there are right and wrong ways of *reading* the Bible, so there are right and wrong ways of *interpreting* it. We want to make sure we're following proper guidelines as we seek to derive the message of Scripture for our lives.

As Augustine explained in his treatise, *On Christian Doctrine*, "There are certain precepts for treating the Scriptures which I think may not inconveniently be transmitted to students, so that they may profit not only from reading the work of expositors but also in their own explanations of the sacred writings to others." Those precepts for interpreting Scripture, Augustine insisted, can be discerned from the Scriptures themselves, as well as in the writings of the best teachers and thinkers of the Christian movement.

From time to time, certain people choose not to follow those tested precepts of interpretation. Instead, they come to the Bible with an agenda, a conclusion in their minds concerning what the Bible *ought* to teach about a topic or practice, and then they set about the task of forcing Scripture to justify their own preferred view.

Augustine wrote of such a person that he should be *angry* with himself for twisting the Scripture away from its plain meaning, "For if he takes up rashly a meaning which the author whom he is reading did not intend, he often falls in with other statements which he cannot harmonize with this meaning. And if he admits that these statements are true and certain, then it follows that the meaning he had put upon the former passage cannot be the true one: and so it comes to pass, one can hardly tell how, that, out of *love for his own opinion*, he begins to feel more angry with Scripture than he is with himself" (emphasis added).

The "angrier" such a person becomes at Scripture, because it won't go along with his agenda, the harder he twists it, and in more places, until it seems to be affirming his position after all – if only in his own mind.

We come to the Scriptures out of love for God and loving the time we spend with Him in His Word. We love to hear His voice, to meet Him in His glory, to grow in our salvation and be transformed into the image of Jesus Christ by the Word and Spirit of God, and to go forth loving God and others more truly as a result.

But if we come to the Bible loving our own views, opinions, or practices more than God and His Word, we will, in effect, *hate* the Bible whenever it disagrees with us, and we will twist and wrench and wrest and cajole the Scriptures into saying what *we* want to hear, rather than what *they* want us to hear.

### *Control freaks*

The religious leaders of Jesus' day were control freaks. Most of the real authority for ordering life and society had been taken away from them by the Romans. These leaders understood that, in many ways, they were puppets in the hand of Rome, to keep order as the Romans chose to define it. Their power was purely contingent upon the good pleasure of the Emperor or his civil lackeys and the military forces in Judea. The religious leaders lived in fear that the Romans might come and take away their place in the hierarchy of things (Jn. 11.45-48). The threat was real that the people might see through the façade of their status and pay more attention to Roman law than Hebrew Law. And where would *that* leave the leaders of Israel?

### *Hermeneutics of Convenience*

Over the years, therefore, the leaders of the Jews contrived to make themselves the focal point of Hebrew religion. They elaborated an extensive system of regulations and traditions, coupled with the threat of excommunication for dissenters (cf. Jn. 9), that was ostensibly designed to help the people practice the righteousness of God and avoid the temptations of Roman emperor worship and morality. The more the Jewish leaders proclaimed and enforced these “traditions”, the more two things began to happen.

First, the people began to feel oppressed under the heavy burden of a works righteousness, that was bringing joy, hope, and spiritual freedom to no one. Second, and perhaps more important, the promulgation and enforcement of these traditions tended to redound to the power and prosperity of the religious leaders themselves. Every new regulation or tradition involved some twisting of Scripture to advantage the place and privileges of the religious leaders – and, as often as not, to ensure their material prosperity as well.

#### *Beware the Scripture-twisters*

Jesus warned His disciples to “take heed and beware” of those who bring their own brand of leaven to the work of understanding the Word of God. The leaven of the Jewish religious leaders was making the Bread of God’s Word into a poisonous loaf that distracted people from true love for God and neighbor, confused them as to the overall reliability of God’s Word, and made those same leaders appear as the only capable interpreters of the Scriptures.

These religious leaders practiced what we might call a *hermeneutics of convenience* – an approach to understanding the Bible that denies the plain meaning of Scripture, invents deeper or more abstract meanings, seeks to force the glass slipper God’s good Word onto the ugly feet of step-sister theologies and practices, and, conveniently enough, “proves” the preferred ideas of those who indulge this practice.

Of such teachers and ministers, brethren, we do well to beware.

#### *For reflection*

1. As you understand it, what are the primary factors to keep in mind as you approach reading and interpreting the Bible?
2. What do we mean by “Scripture twisting”? How might you be able to tell when someone is doing this?
3. What are the dangers of Scripture twisting? Why do you suppose people do this?

*Next steps – Conversation: Have you observed any evidence of Scripture twisting in the Christian world of our day? Talk with some Christian friends about this question.*

## 2 The Saw and the Key

*“Remember now, who ever perished being innocent?  
Or where were the upright ever cut off?  
Even as I have seen,  
Those who plow iniquity  
And sow trouble reap the same.”* Job 4.7, 8

### *Wrong from the beginning*

I’m not a carpenter, but I know a little bit about using a circular saw. What I know is this, if you don’t have the blade set at a right angle before you begin to cut, you’re not going to make a straight cut no matter how many times you try. If you want to make a straight cut, then the set of the saw is all important.

In his book, *The Cost of Discipleship*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer exposed a form of Scripture-twisting common in every age. An interpreter takes an idea – it may even be a Biblical idea, like grace, or love, or devotion to God, or companionship, or justice – and he elevates this idea to the status of a kind of master key for all Scripture interpretation. This master key used for opening a passage of Scripture in a manner not in line with its plain meaning, making the text say something entirely different – even the very *opposite* – of what it actually says. Bonhoeffer says we “do violence to the Scriptures by interpreting them in terms of abstract principles, even if that principle be a doctrine of grace.”

The wrong set of the saw will not make for a straight cut; and no faulty master key will open the door to truth. The same principle applies when interpreting the Bible. If you start from the wrong place, no matter how many texts you examine or how eloquent or passionate your argument may be, you’re not going to arrive at the truth. If the starting-point for interpretation is wrong, the interpretation will be wrong. Every time.

### *It’s all about convenience*

Why do we do this? Because, Bonhoeffer explains, it is not *convenient* for us, or *agreeable* to us, simply to obey the text before us. Because we have some other agenda we want to pursue, it is more convenient to our agenda to *twist* the Scriptures rather than submit to them.

Bonhoeffer explains, “By eliminating simple obedience on principle, we drift into an unevangelical interpretation of the Bible. We take it for granted as we open the Bible that we have a key to its interpretation. But then the key we use would not be the living Christ, who is both Judge and Saviour, and our use of this key no longer depends on the will of the living Holy Spirit alone. The key we use is a general doctrine of grace which we can apply as we will.”

In other words, we come to the Scriptures – or to a situation the Scriptures address – with our minds already made up as to the will of God concerning the matter. So it doesn’t really matter what the plain reading of the text indicates; we will twist those Scriptures to suit our interests, convictions, beliefs, or practices, all the while claiming that Scripture supports our view. We will “open” the Scriptures with the “key” we’ve brought to them, rather than the key of plain meaning and simple obedience. We will cut the Scriptures with an angled, rather than a straight, set of the saw.

The key being faulty, and the set of the saw wrong, our interpretation of Scripture will therefore be not a matter of truth, but of convenience.

### *Job’s friends*

In the book of Job, Eliphaz and his friends made this classic hermeneutical blunder. They took a valid Biblical truth – in this case, divine justice – and exalted it to an ultimate abstract principle, which they then

used to interpret God's will into Job's situation.

To them, *justice* was the key to understanding God's will concerning Job's situation. Their case was carefully reasoned and highly logical, even salted with claims to some kind of special revelation from God (cf. Job 4.12-21), but they conveniently overlooked some important facts in order to make their case – such as the fact that upright and righteous people often do suffer and perish.

Job tried valiantly to point out their inconsistencies, but to no avail. They were undeterred and continued to press their point, seeking to convert Job to their view and thus to vindicate their claim. In the process, they lifted many true and valid Biblical teachings, and twisted them to fit their interpretive framework, thus rendering those *true* teachings *invalid* in the situation, and thereby casting doubt on the reliability of God's Word. They had made up their mind *en route* to see Job what the problem was, and they were determined to stick to their guns, come what may. Despite the many truths they cited (Paul endorsed one of their claims in 1 Cor. 3.19, cf. Job 5.13), these men were condemned by God for not speaking correctly of Him (Job 42.7).

Eliphaz and his friends decided that Job was only getting what he deserved – he who was so wealthy and esteemed and pious, that, given his present troubles, they concluded it must have all just been a sham. It was convenient for them to argue thus because here was an opportunity to “help” a “friend” in need. In fact, here was an opportunity, as they seem to have really seen it, to take Job down a few notches and validate their pop theology, pastoral smugness, and superior – because *they* were not suffering – righteousness.

Scripture-twisters don't really care about people – except themselves and those who agree with them. If they did, they would understand that the way to love God and others is through simple and consistent obedience to the plain teaching of the text, and not by means some contrived ideal of justice or grace or love or you-name-it.

Beware those who can look the plain teaching of Scripture in the face and rationalize their way around simple obedience. Their “key” to God's Word will not open the truth for you; rather, the set of their saw will rip God's Word to shreds.

*For reflection*

1. Eliphaz and his friends made up their mind about Job and his situation before they even arrived to be with him. Then they made every effort to bend Biblical truth to support their view. Do people still do this sort of thing today? Can you give an example?
2. Scripture-twisting can seem to be very Biblical – just like Eliphaz in his response to Job's situation. How can we tell when someone who appears to be very Biblical is practicing the hermeneutics of convenience?
2. Meditate on 1 Corinthians 2.12, 13 (see the ESV marginal note here) and Acts 17.11. What do these passages suggest as a way of guarding against Scripture twisting?

*Next steps – Conversation: How can we determine when a text of Scripture is speaking plainly enough that we can obey it, just as it requires? Talk with a Christian friend about this question.*



### 3 The Wrong Motivation

*“Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. Many will say to Me in that day, ‘Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?’ And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!’”* Matthew 7.21-23

#### *Lawlessness*

Jesus said these people who claimed to have done many good works *in the Lord’s name* were actually practicing a form of lawlessness.

*Lawlessness?* How could that be?

To practice lawlessness is to act in a manner *not* motivated by love for God and neighbor, since love is the fulfilling of the Law, as is plainly revealed in the books of Moses and throughout the rest of the Scriptures (cf. Matt. 22.34-40; 24.12). It is obviously possible to do many things in the name of the Lord which might seem to be good works, even mighty works. But if these are performed apart from love for God and neighbor, out of mere self-interest, such “good works” cannot please Him. Instead, they will be only lawless, loveless works, motivated by nothing more than self-interest.

All such works, undertaken to gratify self, as a means for boasting about or parading one’s goodness, bring only condemnation from the Lord. They represent another form of a hermeneutics of convenience, in which the plain teaching of Scripture is interpreted and applied not for love of God and neighbor, but for mere self-interest, as a way of gaining respectability and esteem in the eyes of others.

*What were they thinking?*

How do they reason who undertake such works? What are they thinking?

Since love for God and neighbor, and boasting in the Lord, are not the set of their interpretive saw, then they must see in good works an opportunity to attach some merit to themselves and to attract the praise of men. The key for them becomes whatever makes them feel self-satisfied or look good.

That is, knowing that Scripture teaches that doing good works is commendable (though by and for God only), such people undertake good works, sometimes at great sacrifice and with impressive results, however, not for God’s praise and the honor of Christ (though doubtless these are mentioned), but for *their own honor* and to be *admired by men*. Their key to opening Scripture with respect to good works is to do works in a way which makes them look good.

They take up the teaching of Scripture, not according to its purposes, but for their own self-vaunting ends. In so doing they rob God of His glory, Who alone does good works in and through people (Phil. 2.12, 13). When it is *convenient* to give them something to boast about, and to *draw attention to themselves*, they will do good works. When they do good works, they make sure others know about them. But in doing good works to gain respectability for themselves, they wrest the Scriptural teaching off its intended course, and twist and bend it away from its designed end.

Some of the best thinkers in Christendom have fallen prey to this desire for respectability in their interpretation of God’s Word. The Apostle Paul called out Peter on this failing in Antioch, as he reports in Galatians 2. John Frame argues that even some Christian academics do this, twisting Scripture and bending their teaching in ways that dodge or re-interpret the plain meaning of the text to curry favor with secular

scholars. Frame explains, “the quest for respectability, a frequent quest in the history of Christian thought, is often motivated by ungodly pride” (“Inerrancy: A Place to Stand,” *JETS*, March 2014).

Certainly preachers and theological popularizers are guilty of this, too, who bend their teaching to the whims of men or the spirit of the age, and thus gain attention for themselves as “relevant” or “compassionate” or “thoughtful.”

So also many people who do good works at various levels and in various arenas of the Church, of which they talk boastfully, without actually seeming to boast. Their “testimonies” about how God “used them” show both the reality of God’s goodness and their own ungodly desire to look good to their peers.

Such dealing with Scripture for mere personal benefit rather than the honor and glory of God, reveals lack of true knowledge of Christ, and provokes His condemnation. Doing good works to look good to others is actually a form of lawlessness, and Jesus condemns it. Good works undertaken as a convenient way of gaining attention and vaunting ourselves are just another form of Scripture-twisting that might have appeal to men, but that earns the condemnation of God.

When it comes to interpreting the Bible, the only respect we should be seeking is that which is due God’s Word, the plain meaning it sets forth, and the simple obedience it requires.

*For reflection*

1. Why did Jesus say that these people who had done such good works were really workers of lawlessness
2. How might you be able to tell when love for yourself was beginning to supplant love for God and your neighbor?
3. What does it mean to rob God of His glory in the works we do in His name?

*Next steps – Conversation: Does this mean we can never give a testimony concerning how God has worked in or through our lives? And if we do so, how can we avoid our good work ending up as a lawless deed instead? Talk with some friends about these questions.*

## 4 Choking on the Law

*It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and such sexual immorality as is not even named among the Gentiles—that a man has his father's wife! And you are puffed up, and have not rather mourned, that he who has done this deed might be taken away from among you.* 1 Corinthians 5.1, 2

*What to do?*

We are describing an approach to interpreting the Bible which we call a “hermeneutics of convenience.” The chief characteristic of this practice involves twisting Scripture to fit one’s pre-conceived ideas or preferences concerning doctrines, subjects, or practices. Those who practice a hermeneutics of convenience begin their approach to understanding Scripture with what they regard as a key idea or principle. But they have set their interpretive saw at a wrong angle, preferring their own ideas to the plain teaching of God’s Word. From there, they twist the Scripture as much as is necessary to support their view, thus “conveniently” using the Word of God to endorse a belief or practice which does not cohere with the plain meaning of the Bible.

Another form of a hermeneutics of convenience is to simply reject or ignore parts of Scripture which are either too difficult or simply not convenient for our purposes.

Let us imagine a situation in which a young person has come to our church full of enthusiasm for Christ and eager to get growing in the Lord. He doubtless has a large network of young people whom he could influence for the Gospel and perhaps bring with him to church. His love for Christ seems genuine, and his enthusiasm for the Lord is infectious.

There’s just one problem: He’s living in an immoral relationship – a relationship that is clearly out of line with the teaching of Scripture throughout.

What do we do? We are reluctant to confront him because we might dampen his enthusiasm for the Lord, or he might move along to some other church. He probably doesn’t see this relationship as immoral because, after all, many of his friends are similarly involved. It might even be that he will be the way God brings his lover into a saving relationship with Christ. So what do we do?

*Choking on the Law*

If you are the leaders of the church in Corinth in Paul’s day, you do nothing.

You just put up with the situation and hope for the best. You know that the Law of God – and, indeed, all the rest of Scripture – forbids and condemns such relationships (cf. Deut. 22.30, Lev. 20.11; Matt. 14.3, 4; etc.). It even prescribes severe punishment for those who persist in them.

But because you’re not in a position to enforce the plain meaning of the Law of God – the Church, after all, does not bear the sword – you either don’t know *what* to do, or you simply choose to do nothing. You choke on the Law and, like anything else you choke on, you cough it up and spit it out.

It’s clear that the leaders of the church in Corinth were pleased with their decision to let this young man continue in his adulterous relationship. In fact, they boasted about their “tolerance” or “patience” or “understanding” with respect to this situation. They had elevated a principle of “grace” or perhaps “tolerance” above the plain teaching of Scripture. And, since they could not fully understand what obedience to the Law required, even though the plain teaching of the Law was not to be denied, they set that plain teaching aside and submitted to their principle as a matter of convenience in keeping peace in the church.

The Corinthians, being largely Hebrews, knew the Law, but they assumed that they were no longer bound by

it because of the grace of the Gospel. They were under grace, not Law. So, rather than deal with this situation as the Law requires, by removing the offender from their midst in a manner consistent with the teaching of Jesus (cf. Matt. 18.15-20), they decided not to do anything and were proud of their “non-judgmental” attitude toward their fellow believer. Why, they even exceeded the Gentiles in their toleration of this situation!

They had become puffed up with their non-judgmentalism and tolerance, and their manifest scorn for the revelation of God. They were doing exactly what Bonhoeffer warned against in *The Cost of Discipleship*, turning an abstract principle into a general hermeneutical norm, and thereby twisting Scripture to fit their own convenience.

*Not “no” interpretation, but “better”*

It fell to Paul to set them straight. He showed them that the solution to this difficult situation was not *no* interpretation of God’s Law, but *better*. No, the church does not bear the sword, and so it could not apply the death penalty to this young man. But that didn’t mean it should not condemn his immoral practice and call him to obedience. Paul’s understanding of the Scriptures drew on the fact that, in the Law of God, separation from the altar and community of the Lord was a condemnation which had the same practical effect as the death penalty – removing unrepentant sinners from the holy community of the Lord. The church does not bear the sword, but the church should put out from its membership those who flout the plain teaching of God’s Law, until repentance is evidenced and they can return. Even Jesus had taught this.

Those who twist the Scripture for their own convenience will also simply reject as “no longer relevant” those texts which do not fit their ideas, views, or practices. They have to deal with them nonetheless, so rather than seek help for *better* interpretations, they simply choose *no* interpretations at all, and reject whatever of Scripture is not convenient for them.

And thus they wrest and twist the Scriptures to their own – and the church’s – destruction.

*For reflection*

1. How would you describe the place of God’s Law in your relationship with Jesus?
2. What place does the Law of God have in the educational program of your church?
3. What is the fallacy involved in saying, “I’m not under Law, I’m under grace.” In what sense is this true?

*Next steps – Transformation: Do you see any evidence that your church leaders have “choked” on the Law of God? How about yourself? What will you do to bring more daily meditation on God’s Law into your walk with the Lord (Ps. 1)?*

## 5 The Right Tradition

*He answered and said to them, "Why do you also transgress the commandment of God because of your tradition?"* Matthew 15.3

### *Scripture and tradition*

It is a mistake to think that traditions of interpreting the Bible should *not* be considered when it comes to how we read and understand the Scriptures. As we have seen, and as Augustine noted, we need the best teachers of the Church from every age to help us in understanding the Word of God.

Every believer will affirm that we need the guard rails of reliable tradition to keep us on the right path of Scripture interpretation. This is why we have creeds and confessions, why we cling to the old hymns and forms of worship, why we venerate certain thinkers and expositors from previous generations, and follow the teaching of reliable contemporary interpreters. We recognize in all these that Magisterium of the Spirit which has preserved sound teaching in every age.

The history of the Christian movement has accumulated a venerable tradition of interpretation that is indispensable to right reading and understanding of Scripture. We reject or ignore that tradition to our peril.

At the same time, we must always be careful that the tradition we embrace does not lead us to interpret the Bible in a manner at odds with the plain teaching of the text. Any tradition of interpretation – or any teacher or expositor or preacher – which leads us to ignore, side-step, or disobey the plain teaching of the Bible is a tradition *outside* the true understanding of Scripture which the Church has maintained over the centuries. All such interpretations are usually some form of a hermeneutics of convenience, embracing a “new way” of understanding the Bible as the key to interpreting all of Scripture and, as typically happens, of endorsing something someone would like to do or believe for his own advantage.

### *Devoted to God*

The religious leaders of Jesus’ day were masters at this. We might all agree that it’s a good idea to devote things to God. Everything that we have comes from the Lord, and therefore it makes sense that everything we have should be devoted to Him. We should devote ourselves daily to the Lord in every aspect of our lives (Rom. 12.1, 2).

As a general principle, that’s true enough. But when you take that general principle, then abstract it as *the key* to understanding the Bible, and you *set your interpretive saw* to cut Scripture along those lines, Scripture-twisting is not far away.

The religious leaders of Jesus’ day, as we have seen, were the keepers of a body of spiritual regulations designed to order Jewish religious practice and to keep the people from wandering toward the religious practices of paganism. As part of this system, they had determined that it was a good thing to encourage special offerings to God – “things devoted,” as the Law of God describes them – as a kind of sacrificial, extra gift for the temple and its services. Since the temple was always in some stage of construction or repair, and services there were constant, the need for such extra offerings might have been apparent. All the religious leaders had to do was dress their demands up in the garb of noble spiritual tradition, and it would be easy enough to entrap a trusting populace.

It was convenient that all such special offerings, such “acts of devotion” to God, also redounded to the advantage of the religious leaders in two ways. First, they made the leaders and their role in the community more central and significant, if only because now more authority and revenue were flowing their way; and, second, the practice of encouraging special gifts devoted to the Lord’s service provided a source of additional

funds from which the leaders could draw for their own purposes. Because these funds were “devoted to the Lord,” all some priest had to do was come up with something in his own interests under that rubric, and his project would be funded from the *Corban* of the people (Matt. 15.5).

Meanwhile, funds that might have been available to help take care of one’s elderly parents were being siphoned off as *Corban*, things devoted to God. God is clear that people should care for their parents as for all those in their household. Paul regarded this as so important that, to ignore it, he insisted, would make one worse than unbeliever (1 Tim. 5.8). This regulation concerning things devoted to God created for the religious leaders of Jesus’ day a way of appearing to be very spiritual within the community of faith; but it weakened an important bond of love between parents and their children and introduced a further measure of corruption and injustice into Judean society.

The religious leaders had, for their own convenience and the as a way of controlling the resources of the believing community, established a tradition which sounded like it had a noble purpose, but distorted a Biblical idea and, in the process, introduced unnecessary tensions and want in the households of Judea. Doubtless trumpeting “service to God and His temple” as the motive for such a scheme, they established a tradition which trapped people in disobedience to God by encouraging them to neglect certain requirements of the fifth commandment.

*The sacrifice of love*

As with every practice of Scripture-twisting, something done in the name of love – in this case, love for God’s temple – actually ends up compromising and corrupting love as God defines it. People may have considered that their special gifts of devotion, entrusted to the religious leaders, were a kind of “sacrifice of love.” But what they were actually doing was sacrificing love as *God* defines and intends it on an altar of mere *self-love*, thus weakening both the authority of Scripture and the bonds of love within families and the community as a whole.

Is it any wonder that this community, following those leaders, would act out of mere self-love and self-interest in failing to recognize Jesus, and in condemning the Messiah of God when He came among them, pointing to the Scriptures to validate His message and His claims?

*For reflection*

1. Why is tradition absolutely essential for sound Biblical interpretation?
2. How can we know when tradition is beginning to usurp the authority of the Bible in the way we interpret Scripture?
3. What are some ways believers can become “trapped in tradition” in our day?

*Next steps – Conversation: How can we tell when self-love is dominating the way we read Scripture? How can we check this tendency before it robs us of the ability to love God and our neighbors as we should? Talk with some Christian friends about these questions.*

## 6 The Grace Mistake

*But now we have been delivered from the law, having died to what we were held by, so that we should serve in the newness of the Spirit and not in the oldness of the letter.* Romans 7.6

*Under grace*

In our day one of the most widespread ways the hermeneutics of convenience operates to eviscerate the authority of Scripture and rob the Church of love for God and neighbors, is by neglecting the Law of God. Having persuaded ourselves that we are “not under Law, but under grace”, we set the Law of God aside and pretend to define our Christian ethics by some abstract principle of grace or love or compassion.

Do you hear that? We have taken a perfectly good Biblical idea – grace – and made it *the* interpretive key to the Bible. We have set our interpretive saw to cut *all* of Scripture according to this mold, and in doing so, we are headed into the trap of a hermeneutics of convenience.

The only legitimate interpretive key to the Bible is the Holy Spirit, Who gave us the Word, teaches us the Word by comparing Scripture with Scripture, and empowers us to obey the Word according to its plain teaching. And the Holy Spirit is not *merely* the Spirit of grace. He is also the Spirit of truth, of judgment, of power, of discipline, of illumination, and of a sound mind.

Put *grace* in the place of God’s Spirit, and you will always interpret the Word of God in a way designed to convenience your own understanding of grace.

And, typically these days, this entails ignoring or even disobeying the Law of God.

*Delivered from the Law?*

But Paul says we have been “delivered” from the Law. In what sense have we been delivered from the Law? Not from its role as definer of good and evil, for Paul says that through the Law comes the knowledge of sin (Rom. 7.7), and John teaches that sin is lawlessness (1 Jn. 3.4).

Not from the standard of goodness and good works which the Law provides, for if it shows us our sin it must also, being holy and righteous and good (Rom. 7.12, 16), indicate the way of righteousness (cf. Ps. 1; 1 Jn. 2.1-6). The Law thus remains established as a standard of goodness (Rom. 3.31). We are in no way delivered from needing this standard.

Then are we delivered from the Law as a means to spiritual health and growth? No, because, as Paul says, the Law is spiritual (Rom. 7.14), and it is the core curriculum by which the Spirit brings us to the glory of God and forms us into the image of Christ (Ezek. 36.26, 27; 2 Cor. 3.12-18). We’re thus not delivered from the need to learn and obey God’s Law.

Perhaps the Law has been superseded by the Spirit and Kingdom of God? But Jesus said that keeping the Law and teaching it to others is the way to greatness in the Kingdom of God (Matt. 5.17-19), and Paul insisted that any mind hostile to the Law of God is not the mind of the Spirit (Rom. 8.5-9).

How then are we delivered from the Law?

We are delivered from the Law’s power to condemn and kill us, which power it wielded within our souls while we were yet in our sins (Rom. 7.5, 6; cf. Rom. 2.14, 15). Our conscience is no longer a slave to the Law but to Christ, so that, whenever we would be condemned by the Law for transgression, we know that there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ, and to whom the righteousness of Christ is credited by grace

through faith (Rom. 8.1, 3.19-22).

*The right use of the Law*

So while the Law no longer *condemns* those who are in Christ, it still *convicts* us of sin, righteousness, and judgment in the classroom of the Spirit (Jn. 16.8-11). And while it does not *save*, it is a primary means by which the Spirit enables us to *work out our salvation* in ways that are pleasing to God and beneficial for us in realizing the life and good works for which we have been redeemed (Phil. 2.12, 13; Lev. 18.1-5; Eph. 2.8-10).

The Law guides us in realizing the liberty we possess as sons and daughters of God (Jms. 2,8-12), and it teaches us both the ways of love and how to read all the rest of Scripture in order truly to understand the ways of love (Matt. 22.34-40). This does not mean that *all* the Law remains valid (cf. Heb. 7-9), or that the *letter* of the Law must be applied as originally given; we seek to know the *spirit* of the Law in these latter days of the Spirit of God, not merely the letter of it (cf. Deut. 30.1-10; 2 Cor. 3.5-11; 1 Cor. 5.1ff, cf. Lev. 18.8; 1 Cor. 9.8-14).

But to neglect, minimize, or scorn the Law, pleading that we are *delivered* from it and no longer obligated to it, since we are under grace not Law, is to be in danger of failing in the way of righteousness (Ps. 1), compromising the ways of love (Matt. 24.12), and of making even one's prayers an abomination in the sight of God (Prov. 28.9).

Why do we do this? I suspect because it simply isn't *convenient* for us to learn and obey the Law of God. And, sadly, this is particularly true with respect to the commandments related to Sabbath-keeping. We have become expert at making the fourth commandment serve our purposes and entertainments, rather than following its teaching to make us better servants of the living God.

So if we can dispense with the Law as a guide to moral conduct, substituting instead an abstract principle of "grace," then we can pick and choose from the Law as suits our understanding of grace, that is, as suits our *convenience*.

*For reflection*

1. Why do you suppose many Christians find it convenient to downplay the role of God's Law in their walk with the Lord?
2. We're not saved by Law, but we're not saved without it. Explain.
3. Meditate on Ezekiel 36.36, 37, John 16.8-11, and Matthew 5.17-19. In what sense should the Law of God be regarded as the *core curriculum* of the Spirit?

*Next steps – Conversation: What evidence do you see that Christians still think the Law of God is valid? What evidence do you see that Christians do not regard the Law as Jesus or Paul did (Matt. 5.17-19; Rom. 7.12)? Talk with a Christian friend about these questions.*



## 7 Read with the Right Eyes

*Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is that they may be saved. For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. For they being ignorant of God's righteousness, and seeking to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted to the righteousness of God. For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.* Romans 10.1-4

### *A classic case*

The Jewish teachers and theologians of Jesus' day present a classic case of the hermeneutics of convenience. Enslaved by the Romans, they clung to their religious beliefs and the social structures these prescribed as a way of preserving their dignity against the humiliations of an Edomite puppet king, having to pay taxes to Caesar, and the presence everywhere of Roman soldiers and petty officials. They looked upon their traditions as making them righteous in comparison to the barbarians in their midst, and they, with all zeal and some good intentions, subjugated their own people to their interpretations and traditions, thus enslaving and misleading them, all in the name of the Lord.

Thus, being servants of Rome, they made all their Jewish brethren servants of a tradition which, ostensibly grounded in the Law of God, was in fact a mere human contrivance, put in place for the convenience of men.

Blindness to their traditions, and to their supposed infallibility in knowing the will of God, caused them to miss the Messiah when He appeared in their midst, opening the truth of God's Word with the true key of interpretation.

The religious leaders of Jesus' day searched the Scriptures, because, as Jesus explained, they believed that what they read there – the righteousness of the Law – was the way to eternal life (Jn. 5.39). But, as Jesus elsewhere explained (Matt. 22.29), and as Paul affirms in our text, they were mistaken, because, blinded by their socially- and culturally-induced prejudices and preconceptions, they *did not really know the Scriptures*, and they did not know the power of God. They did not begin their search for dignity, meaning, and life from the Scriptures themselves, from their plain meaning, but from the prejudices and predispositions which emerged from their cultural circumstances. They read their Bibles through the eyes of culture and personal preference, rather than through the eyes of God and Christ.

The result, over the course of a century prior to Jesus and Paul, was the imposing of a social structure that was agreeable to Rome – the ultimate pragmatists in such matters – and comfortable for the Jewish leaders, who feared losing their place of social significance more than offending their God (cf. Jn. 11.47, 48).

### *Loving the blind*

It seems strange to say that these theologians did not know the Scriptures, but we recall this is Jesus' judgment, not ours. They knew a good deal of Scripture, that much is clear. And they knew how to twist the Scriptures to support their preferred views and schemes. But in so doing, they were mistaken, as Jesus observed, and the power of God for love eluded them.

We note that Paul, like Jesus Who wept for the blindness of the Jews, neither despised nor condemned these interpreters and their benighted followers; instead, he loved them, pled and argued with them, and subjected himself to their anger and scorn. He never ceased proclaiming the Kingdom and righteousness of God (Acts 28.30, 31), which are in Jesus, Who alone is the end of God's Law.

### *A proper hermeneutic*

A proper hermeneutic begins, not with social and cultural conditions and how we define ourselves against and within these, but with Jesus, as revealed throughout Scripture, and the Law and righteousness of God, as

interpreted by the Prophets and Apostles and consummated in Jesus. To serve God and Jesus Christ we must *begin* with God and Jesus Christ and follow the plain meaning of the Word of God and Christ as this is revealed in Scripture.

Any other starting point for interpreting the Word of God will be *imposed* on the Word from *outside* the Word, rather than *derived* from Scripture under the leading of the Holy Spirit. Thus, it will always have to bend and twist the Scriptures to support and endorse the conclusions, views, or practices implicit in whatever may be the preferred interpretive key or set of the saw. All who allow their understanding of Scripture to be shaped by abstract principles imposed on the Bible from beyond its pages will end up serving the views and interpretations of men, and not of God.

If we want to serve God, by loving Him and our neighbors, we must begin *with* God, in His Word, following the plain meaning of the text as it points to Jesus Christ and the way of obedience. If we allow our culture, preference, or charismatic leaders to define the terms by which we read and study our Bibles, we will no longer be serving God but merely the interests of self-love, by twisting God's Word to make it agree with or endorse whatever opinion or practice we prefer.

In our reading and study of the Bible, we will either serve God, allowing Him to explain the terms of love and to guide and empower us for obedience. Or we will serve something outside the Bible, something from the spirit of the age or the temper of the times, something that will deceive us about the true nature of love and trap us in human perspectives and schemes.

*For reflection*

1. If we will not serve Jesus Christ, as He speaks to us from His Word, we *will* serve someone or something else. Do you agree? Explain.
2. What are some ways that things from *outside the Bible* – from culture or the times, for example – shape the way people read and understand the Bible? Is this a good thing?
3. We need to *apply* the Scriptures to the culture and the times in which we live. But we must not try to make Scripture *conform* to the culture and the times. Suggest some ways of doing the one and avoiding the other.

*Next steps – Conversations: How could Jesus say, and Paul insist, that these religious leaders didn't "know" their Bibles? Is it possible that some leaders and teachers today don't know their Bibles, either? Talk with some Christian friends about these questions.*

*Hermeneutics of Convenience*

*Questions for reflection or discussion*

1. What is hermeneutics, and why is it important that we understand the best principles for interpreting the Bible?
2. What do we mean by a “hermeneutics of convenience,” and how can we tell when we someone is practicing it?
3. Why is the Holy Spirit the proper key for understanding God’s Word?
4. How can we make sure we begin with Jesus as the proper “set of the saw” for interpreting the Bible?
5. What’s the most important lesson you’ve learned from this study? How are you applying that lesson in your walk with and work for the Lord?

*For prayer:*

## The Fellowship of Ailbe

The Fellowship of Ailbe is a spiritual fellowship in the Celtic Christian tradition. Our goal is to promote revival, renewal, and awakening, following the teaching of Scripture and the example and heritage of our forebears in the faith.

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Thank you.