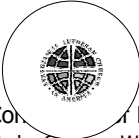
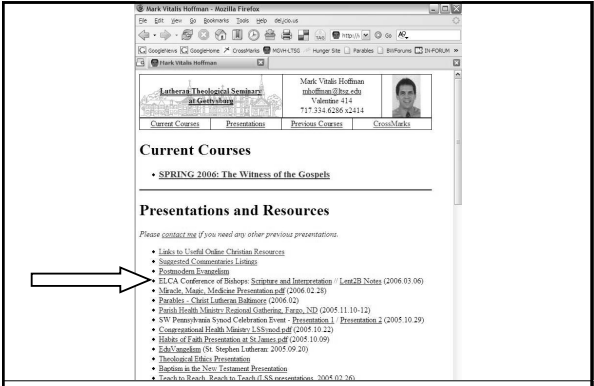


# Understanding Scripture



ELCA Conference of Bishops  
Lake Geneva, WI  
6 March 2006

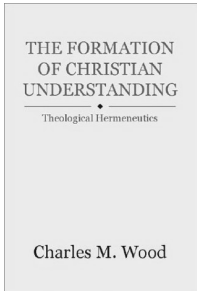
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## Outline

- Introduction and Background
- Methodological Considerations
- Case Study: Acts 15

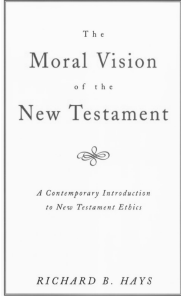


Theological hermeneutics is a reflection on the aims and conditions of what may be called the "Christian" understanding of Christian Scripture and tradition. (21)

"Understanding" is not a phenomenon but an ability, the ability to 'perform' the text appropriately. One function of the church is to serve as the community that assists and sustains persons in their growth in Christian understanding. (80)

Charles M. Wood

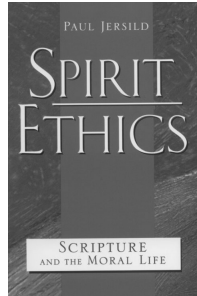
***The Formation of Christian Understanding***  
*Theological Hermeneutics*



... discovers in the biblical witness a unified ethical vision—centered in the themes of community cross, and new creation... Shows how the New Testament provides moral guidance on the most troubling ethical issues of our time, including violence, divorce, homosexuality, and abortion. (from back cover)

Richard B. Hays

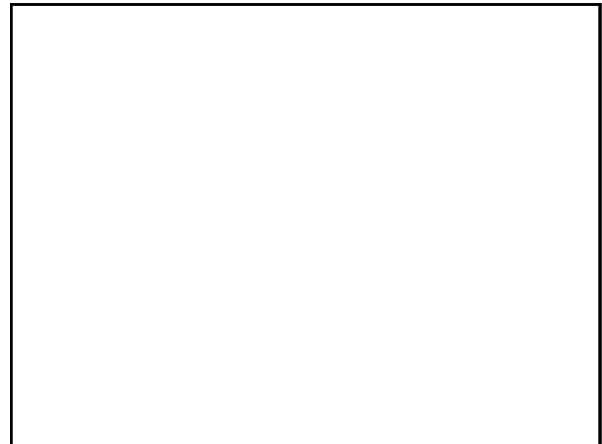
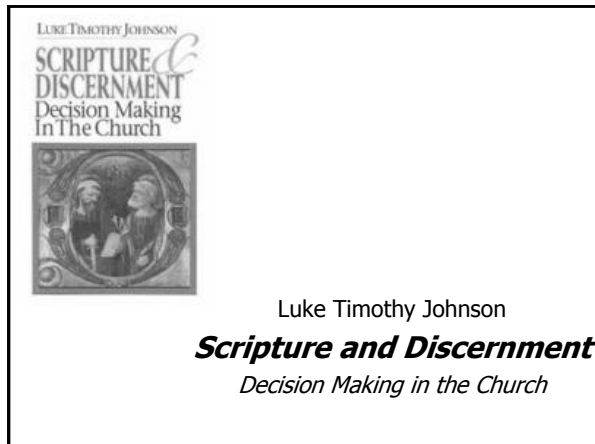
***The Moral Vision of the New Testament***  
*A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics*



There are three major focal points that ground my discussion here: the Bible, the church, and postmodern society... This act of assimilation and digestion of the biblical content ... involves the church identifying itself with the narrative of Scripture, taking seriously its call to discipleship, and then trying to discern what this means for disciplined, responsible living in this particular time.

Paul Jersild

***Spirit Ethics***  
*Scripture and the Moral Life*



Why is this issue important?

Reaching decision in the church should be an articulation of faith.

Luke T. Johnson, *Scripture and Discernment*

It is not just the decision but also **how** we reach the decision that is important.

What are 'safe' topics people can talk about?

- ◆ Weather
- ◆ Sports
- ◆ Family
- ◆ Work
- ◆ Person's health / weight (?)
- ◆ Fashion: clothes, hair, body piercing (?)

What makes these topics 'safe'?

What are controversial topics?

- Sexual issues: premarital, homosexuality, same-sex marriage
- Abortion
- Religion: prayer, creationism, end time issues, salvation, other religions
- Politics
- Values
- Euthanasia / Assisted suicide
- Financial issues: inequality, taxes
- Justice issues: death penalty, immigration, wars, economic injustice, labor
- Gambling
- Racism
- Gun control

Controversial topics

Which of these are:

- Political issues?
- Social issues?
- Personal issues?
- Religious issues?

*It is my contention that all such controversial issues have political, social, personal, and (especially to Christians) religious dimensions.*

## What is needed if useful discussions are to occur?

*Some ground rules...*

## What is needed if useful discussions are to occur?

- A commitment to the process of the discussion
- An openness to listen and perhaps have one's mind changed
- Sufficient information about and understanding of the situation
- Some shared basis of agreement upon which to build

## How do we make decisions about controversial issues?

We are likely to argue for a position by appealing to:

- Laws
- Traditions
- Experience
- Reason and Science
- Values (*cultural, family, American, Christian, etc.*)
- Scripture

## How do we use Scripture?

How do we interpret a text with which we feel bound always to agree?  
The process is not favorable for the ascertainment of the truth.

paraphrasing William Newton Clarke

## How do we use Scripture?

How is the Bible like or unlike the following?

book of proofs	law book
story / novel	book of prophecy
owner's manual	newspaper
science textbook	TV Guide
library of related books	

## How do we use Scripture?

We need to be aware of the following concerns when we appeal to Scripture:

- What texts are used or not? What is our "canon within the canon"?
- How do we deal with texts that are in tension with each other?
- What biases do we bring to the text?
- How do we handle the differences between the Old and New Testaments?

*"How do you read?"*

Luke 10.25-29

And now a certain lawyer stood up to test Jesus, saying,

"By doing what things will I inherit eternal life?"

And he said to him,

"What is written in the law?  
How do you read?"

*"How do you read?"*

Luke 10.25-29

And answering, he said,

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart,  
and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and  
with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself."

And he said to him,

"You have answered correctly.  
Be doing this, and you will live."

*"How do you read?"*

Luke 10.25-29

But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus,

"And who is my neighbor?"

>> The Parable of the "Good Samaritan"

How do we use Scripture to  
make decisions?

In the example of discussing the death  
penalty, Scripture might be cited as:

- Moral law (*Whoever sheds the blood of a human,  
by a human shall that person's blood be shed.*)
- Principles / ideals (*Love one another*)
- Analogy (*Cain and Abel*)
- Analysis of world / humankind  
(*Live by sword, die by sword*)
- Understanding of God (*God is love*)

The Process of Developing a  
Christian Ethics

- The Descriptive Task  
Reading the texts carefully
- The Synthetic Task  
Placing the texts in canonical context
- *The Communal Task*  
*Discussing the texts within the faith community*
- The Hermeneutical Task  
Relating the texts to our situation
- The Pragmatic Task  
Living the texts

Richard Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*

## Test Case: Acts 15

- The matter of Gentiles becoming Christians as Gentiles was divisive but critically important
- An 'ideal' case for observing the early church making a decision
- A study in practical (*both in terms of being useful and something to practice*) theology

How do Christians make decisions?

## Acts 15

### THE PROBLEM

Acts 15.1:

"Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved."

Can Gentiles be Christians?

## Can Gentiles be Christians? *Background*

Luke 2.32

Simeon says of the baby Jesus:  
"My eyes have seen your salvation, ... which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel..."

Luke 4.24-27: Jesus at Nazareth

## Can Gentiles be Christians? *Background*

- Luke 7.2-10: The worthy (Gentile) centurion whose slave was sick
- Luke 17.12-19: The ten lepers and the one Samaritan
- Luke 23.47: The centurion at the cross

## Can Gentiles be Christians? *Background*

- Luke 24.46-48: Jesus said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things.
- Acts 2.21: (Joel 2.32) "... everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved."

## Can Gentiles be Christians? *Background*

The narrative has prepared us for expecting a Gentile mission, but...

Can Gentiles be Christians?  
*Background*

**Acts 10-11: Peter and Cornelius**

10.15: "What God has made clean, you must not call profane."

11.17-18: If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?" When they heard this, they were silenced. And they praised God, saying, "Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life."

Acts 15

Then certain individuals came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved." <sup>2</sup> And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to discuss this question with the apostles and the elders. <sup>3</sup> So they were sent on their way by the church, and as they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, they reported the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the believers.

Acts 15

When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they reported all that God had done with them.

<sup>5</sup> But some believers who belonged to the sect of the Pharisees stood up and said, "It is necessary for them to be circumcised and ordered to keep the law of Moses."

Acts 15

The apostles and the elders met together to consider this matter.

Acts 15

<sup>7</sup> After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, "My brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that I should be the one through whom the Gentiles would hear the message of the good news and become believers. <sup>8</sup> And God, who knows the human heart, testified to them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us; <sup>9</sup> and in cleansing their hearts by faith he has made no distinction between them and us. <sup>10</sup> Now therefore why are you putting God to the test by placing on the neck of the disciples a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear?

<sup>11</sup> On the contrary, we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they are!

Acts 15

<sup>12</sup> The whole assembly kept silence, and listened to Barnabas and Paul as they told of all the signs and wonders that God had done through them among the Gentiles.

## Acts 15

After they finished speaking, James replied,

"My brothers, listen to me. <sup>14</sup> Simeon has related how God first looked favorably on the Gentiles, to take from among them a people for his name. <sup>15</sup> This agrees with the words of the prophets, as it is written, <sup>16</sup> 'After this I will return, and I will rebuild the dwelling of David, which has fallen; from its ruins I will rebuild it, and I will set it up, <sup>17</sup> so that all other peoples may seek the Lord -- even all the Gentiles over whom my name has been called. Thus says the Lord, who has been making these things <sup>18</sup> known from long ago.'

## Acts 15

<sup>19</sup> Therefore I have reached the decision that we should not trouble those Gentiles who are turning to God, <sup>20</sup> but we should write to them to abstain only from things polluted by idols and from fornication and from whatever has been strangled and from blood. <sup>21</sup> For in every city, for generations past, Moses has had those who proclaim him, for he has been read aloud every sabbath in the synagogues."

## Acts 15

HOW DECISION MADE?  
Debate  
Testimony  
Leadership's discernment  
Consent of all

## Acts 15

### WHY THIS DECISION MADE?

- Information
- Tradition: "...according to the custom of Moses..."
- Experience of Peter, Paul, & Barnabas
- Principle: "We believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they are."
- Scripture: (set in context, selected, interpreted)  
Amos 9.11-12

## Acts 15

WHAT DECISION MADE?  
15.18 "I have reached the decision that we should not trouble those Gentiles who are turning to God, but we should write to them to abstain only from things polluted by idols and from fornication and from whatever has been strangled and from blood."

## Acts 15

### HOW WAS THE DECISION COMMUNICATED?

- 15:22  
Then the apostles and the elders, with the consent of the whole church,
- 15:28  
For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us ...

## Acts 15

### APPLICATION

What were **not** decisive factors in why this decision was made?:

- Tradition
- Finances
- Democratic majority vote

## Acts 15

### APPLICATION

- Are we bound by this decision to keep kosher?
  
- >> Another principle:  
Table fellowship, eating together

## Acts 15

### APPLICATION

- How does one deal with Scriptures that are in tension with each other?
- What do we learn from their decision-making process?

## Understanding Scripture

In the case of Acts 15, the experience of the Spirit and the theological principle of salvation by faith trump Scripture, or more precisely, provide the interpretive keys for understanding Scripture.

## Understanding Scripture



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