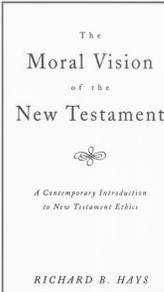


**Life Along the Way  
Using Scripture for Decision Making and  
Discernment in the Church**

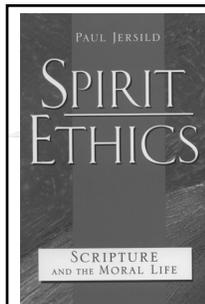
**Mark Vitalis Hoffman**

**Southwestern Pennsylvania Synod  
Synodwide Celebration Event  
29 October 2005**

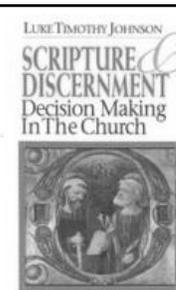
**[www.gettysburgseminary.org/mhoffman/](http://www.gettysburgseminary.org/mhoffman/)**



**Richard B. Hays**  
***The Moral Vision of the  
New Testament:  
A Contemporary Introduction to  
New Testament Ethics***



**Paul Jersild**  
***Spirit Ethics: Scripture and  
the Moral Life***



**Luke Timothy Johnson**  
***Scripture and Discernment:  
Decision Making in the Church***

**Why is this issue important?**

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

*Luke T. Johnson, Scripture and Discernment*

As a Christian, reaching decision should be an articulation of faith.

**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 is the Bible like or unlike the following?

- |                  |                  |
|------------------|------------------|
| book of proofs   | law book         |
| story/novel      | book of prophecy |
| owner's manual   | TV Guide         |
| science textbook | newspaper        |

### **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?**

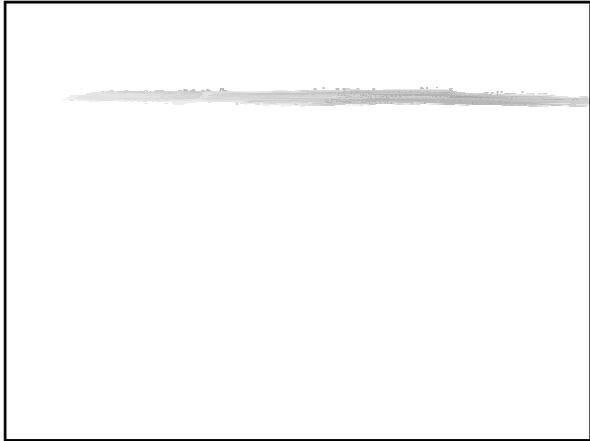
In the example of discussing the death penalty, Scripture might be cited as:

- 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 Questions

For each of the test cases listed on the next slide, ask these questions:

- What exactly is the problem?
- What factors shape the understanding of what is right or necessary?
- How is the decision made?
- What is the decision, and why is it made?
- How does this apply to us?

### Test Cases

- 1 Corinthians 8.1-13
- 1 Corinthians 5.1-5
- Acts 1.15-26
- Acts 6.1-6

### 1 Corinthians 5.1-5

It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not found even among pagans; for a man is living with his father's wife. 2 And you are arrogant! Should you not rather have mourned, so that he who has done this would have been removed from among you? 3 For though absent in body, I am present in spirit; and as if present I have already pronounced judgment 4 in the name of the Lord Jesus on the man who has done such a thing. When you are assembled, and my spirit is present with the power of our Lord Jesus, 5 you are to hand this man over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.

### 1 Corinthians 5.1-5

- What is problem:  
man is living with his father's wife
- Factors:  
Old Testament law; social mores
- How decision made:  
Top down: Paul independently acts in the name of JC
- What and why:  
Remove offending party >>> so that his spirit may be saved
- Application:  
Communal responsibility to the individual and how that works  
Confronting people with their behavior

### Acts 6.1-6

Now during those days, when the disciples were increasing in number, the Hellenists complained against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food. 2 And the twelve called together the whole community of the disciples and said, "It is not right that we should neglect the word of God in order to wait on tables.

## Acts 6.1-6

3 Therefore, friends, select from among yourselves seven men of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this task, 4 while we, for our part, will devote ourselves to prayer and to serving the word." 5 What they said pleased the whole community, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, together with Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. 6 They had these men stand before the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.

## Acts 6.1-6

- **What is problem:**  
Hellenist widows neglected
- **Factors:**  
Concern for widows in need and preaching the Word
- **How decision made:**  
Executive decision (by apostles) and delegation: Church approved and selected and defined qualifications
- **What and why:**  
7 selected; both needs served; symbolic transmission of authority (blessing for ministry and mission)
- **Application:**  
Recognition of various gifts; sharing for sake of M&M, role of leadership

## General Observations

- Acknowledgment of personal responsibility but also implications for the Church
- Role of leaders in guiding, making, enacting, and modeling decisions
- Role of group in being discerning and approving
- Appeals made to:
  - Scripture (with interpretation)
  - Knowledge and Experience
  - Cultural norms
  - Principles
- Key principals are:
  - Love of God
  - A concern for the "weak"
  - That the Church is an expression of Christ