

The Bible Says...

By David Chandler -- May 2005 Pastor's Column

Billy Graham's trademark has always been the phrase, "The Bible says..." There is no denying the Bible is a powerful presence in our society. But Biblical literalism has been used to justify war, the death penalty, corporal punishment of children, oppression of women, gays, and blacks, and even slavery.

Slavery is an important case in point. Slavery is universally recognized as evil, today, but as Jefferson Davis correctly observed, slavery "is sanctioned in the Bible, in both Testaments, from Genesis to Revelation." Once you realize that "servants" in the Bible were actually "slaves," you can see references everywhere. Servants are even described as property in the Ten Commandments itself: "You shall not covet your neighbor's ... manservant, or his maidservant, ..., or anything that is your neighbor's." The Apostle Paul returns a runaway slave to his master. He urges that he be treated well, but he returns him nonetheless.

The ancient Israelites committed genocide against the Canaanites. The Book of Judges suggests that their sin was in not finishing the job. Some people today argue that since the Bible says war will continue to the end of time, efforts to end war stand in defiance of God. Contrast this kind of thinking with the words of Jesus: "Blessed are the Peacemakers... love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." Every act of love, whether it is bringing peace to the world or bringing a cup of cold water to one who thirsts, is building toward a better world. How can those who would follow the "Prince of Peace" *not* work for peace?

Don't we have to find some way of interpreting the Bible that doesn't obligate us to approve of what we know deep down is evil? Must we tolerate the beating of children and the subservience of women because these practices were advocated in Proverbs? Shouldn't gays, and other sexual minorities, be allowed to speak for themselves about their own sexuality, and shouldn't we listen with compassion rather than sit in judgment?

Jesus himself refuses to take the Bible literally. His refrain was, "You have heard that it was said, ...But I say to you," He rejected legalistic adherence to the law of the Sabbath, saying, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath." He refused to condemn the woman taken in adultery, in accordance with Mosaic Law. He did not condemn the Samaritan woman at the well who was living with a man out of wedlock after five previous marriages. He was derided for eating and drinking with prostitutes, drunks, and other outcasts from society.

The Bible comes wrapped in all the pettiness and cruelty of human nature, but buried within it there is spiritual Truth. We have the capacity to recognize and respond to that Truth because the same Truth already lives in some deep place within us all. If the Bible is to speak to us spiritually, we must call on that inner Truth and read it with spiritual discernment.