

Thus, first and foremost it is important to understand Scripture on its own terms, with its own cultural assumptions and perspectives – some of which views we regard as inapplicable in our time. Perhaps the best example of this is the Presbyterian Church’s stance on the role of women in church leadership. Scripture is quite explicit in its rejection of women for such leadership positions (1 Cor 14; 1 Tim 2), and yet the modern church argues (correctly) that the Spirit of God has led us to recognize that women have been gifted by God just as men, and therefore are appropriate candidates for positions of ordination and church leadership. This current position stands in significant tension with many biblical evaluations of women as being subordinate to men and of less value than men. And yet we are confident as a church that we are being faithful to the call of God’s Spirit, even though the inclusion of women in leadership roles caused tremendous conflict in the church.

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This observation leads to the second biblical response to the question posed above. It is one thing to say that the Bible’s passing references to practices significantly different from modern practices do not amount to an outright ban. But does Scripture provide any reasons to affirm same-sex relations or ordination of openly gay/lesbian Christians? I think it is important to state clearly that Scripture offers no direct evidence for such a case. But this is not the end of the story, as Scripture does not offer direct evidence for any number of concerns crucial to Christian faith and practice (e.g., various issues of modern bioethics).

Scripture did not provide Paul with all he needed to know, nor did he always have a “word from the Lord” regarding important new situations. But Paul did think he was able to discern the Spirit. For example, Paul appeals to the Galatians to reflect on their own communal experience of God’s Spirit (Gal 3:1-5) as the most important guide regarding whether or not they should observe the Jewish ritual law. Paul broke with established custom and even, arguably, with the teachings of Jesus in this regard (cf. Matthew 5:18-19). But Paul felt himself led by the Spirit and believed that the experiences of Gentile Christians confirmed their reception of the Spirit apart from the law.

The author of the Acts of the Apostles made the same kind of argument in his narrative of God’s inclusion of the Gentile Cornelius in Acts 10. Cornelius did not have to become a law-observant Jew in order to have proper faith in Christ. This went completely against early Christian tradition, as the controversy of Acts 10-11, 15, and Galatians 2 richly attests. God startled Peter with the rooftop vision and the firm