

# The Bible

Picking and Choosing  
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SCM

## Picking and Choosing

When I was a student, I found myself in a Bible study group led by someone who was on the committee of my university Christian Union. The subject was the authority of scripture. The verse we had got to was 2 Timothy 3:16 ('All scripture is God-breathed'). The question was, 'How would you use this verse to counter someone who told you that the Bible wasn't true?'

It was apparent to me that the answer they wanted was something along the lines of 'the Bible says it's all true and inspired, right here'. I must have been in a bad mood that day, because instead, I suggested that telling our hypothetical non-believer that the Bible was true because the Bible said that the Bible was true wasn't going to convince anyone who wasn't convinced already, and that therefore the question was stupid. Although a couple of the other people in the room expressed sighs of relief (because they weren't going to say it), I will never forget the look on the face of the girl leading the study, a look of genuine confusion, genuine puzzlement. She honestly couldn't see the argument.

The girl leading that Bible study was one of a whole load of people I've known over the years who held to the idea that the Bible is an organic, consistent, and dare I say it, infallible whole. She accused people who thought that maybe there were other interpretations of scripture of 'picking and choosing' those verses that suited them. She, on the other hand, reckoned that she took every word of the Bible to heart.

*'According to orthodox Christian belief, the Bible is a self-interpreting book. That is, the criteria and principles needed to interpret the Bible aright are found in the Bible itself. No principles or ideologies from external sources are to be used as a key to understanding the Bible. When someone takes a nonbiblical [sic] ideology—say, socialism, for example—and puts it in front of his eyes like a pair of tinted lenses, and then looks at the Bible, what he sees is bound to be coloured by the tinted lenses. This bends or distorts the teaching of the Bible... Bible benders may claim to accept the Bible as the infallible Word of God, yet really they deny its authority by their attitude to its contents. Their real authority is their own reason or their own emotions, not the statements of Scripture. They pick and choose among the statements of the Bible, taking what appeals to their prejudiced, sin-darkened minds and bypassing the rest. This "pick and choose" attitude to the Bible is very sinful.'*

Or, leaving out the rhetoric, if you don't cleave to 'biblical Christianity', however the writer imagines that, you're interpreting the Bible in the light of your own prejudices and ideologies. And this is a deadly sin.

I don't know if this is a deadly sin or not. I don't think it is. I know that, personally speaking, I do indeed pick and choose those themes and ideas from scripture which make sense of my life. I freely admit it. But then, who doesn't?

Everyone picks and chooses those aspects of scripture that make sense in the light of their own worldview. Take, for example, our American minister. He's a Calvinist Protestant. And he's American. I'm guessing that his view of salvation and justification is as presented in the Gospels, but filtered through the version given in Paul's letter to the Romans, which is very much a post-Luther, post-Calvin way of looking at things. His interpretation of some passages is uniquely American; for example, he goes on in his article to talk about why people who want to abolish the death penalty are operating in defiance of scripture. Imagine any mainstream British evangelical trying to justify that with a straight face.

Our minister sees a Bible that screams out the doctrine that Jesus was killed as a direct quid pro quo payment for the sins of those who have been elected to follow him. The minister sees a Bible that openly condemns homosexual practice, disallows the right of women to speak in church meetings and promotes the ownership of small arms, but which also condemns slavery and is fine with the eating of (for example) cheeseburgers. He sees a Trinitarian Bible, and a Bible which gives an accurate historical account of a creation that was no more than 7,000 years ago, and which took six days.

He's picking and choosing, too, of course. The Old Testament might condemn homosexual acts (Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13), but it also encourages slavery (Exodus 21). Yes, the New Testament might also condemn homosexual acts (Romans 1:27), but it's also fine with slavery (Philemon 8–22). I don't know if the American minister has ever eaten lamb korma or black pudding, or, for that matter, a really rare steak, but he's on shaky ground if he has (see Exodus 34:26 and Leviticus 17:1–14). Pork chops? Bacon? Right out (Leviticus 11:7). I wonder if his wife has to wash everything she touches and stay

out of his way for a week when she has her period (Leviticus 15:19–30). Does his bank manager risk his immortal soul when he handles his mortgage (Leviticus 25:27)? If socialism is so very 'non-biblical', how do you account for the way that the first church in Jerusalem held everything in common (Acts 2:44–45)?

I could go on, but to be honest, it would be disingenuous of me to do so. The minister would argue that he is under the New Covenant that was sealed by Christ's blood, and not subject to the Old Testament Law. He'd cite, perhaps, Acts 10:9–15 which says that actually, all those laws about food are obsolete.

But what about those bloody steaks? Acts 15:20 reckons that they're still out. Ah, you say, but that was a specific injunction for the early church, right? Yes but, no but, the fact is, what you're doing there is you're picking and choosing. Perhaps you'd say that the common ownership of goods was fine for first-century Jerusalem, but that God's principle is really for each to have ownership of goods and be a good steward, collecting his own pay (1 Timothy 5:18), but what you're doing there is picking and choosing.

Jesus says that it's easier for a rich man to go through the eye of a needle than it is to get into the Kingdom of Heaven, right? (Matthew 19, Mark 10, and Luke 18) But hang on, you live in the USA. You run a church. You probably make a pretty decent living from it. If you're not one of the top five per cent of the world's people in terms of wealth, I'd be really surprised. But no, you say – Jesus is just being figurative there. That's hyperbole. He's just saying it for effect, he doesn't really want us to give away all we own, he just wants us to be less attached to our wealth. Yes, but you know what you're doing? Picking and choosing.

And the simple fact is, in our day and age, in our world, in our culture, it is impossible to do otherwise. Some people claim to take the whole Bible as literally true, but they don't, not really. They know that Jesus' parables are just stories told for effect. They're happy to come down hard on some sins that the Bible is against, but never seem to mention others.

But then, people like me, we do the same. We're affirming of LGBT+ people. We're fine with remarried people going to our

churches (and maybe even being ministers). But just get us started on justice for the poor, or for asylum-seekers. Get us going on equality, and oh, we'll reel off the Bible verses till our faces turn blue. And what are we doing? We're picking and choosing.

And we can't do anything else. Look at it this way. If you were to try to live up to every command in the Bible, New and Old Testaments alike, you'd have to become what would be for all intents and purposes a sociopath, taking slaves, observing attitudes to foreigners which swerve between extreme tolerance and vicious racism, and treating women in a manner that would, in this day and age, be considered – and this is putting it really rather mildly – extremely misogynistic.

The really ironic thing is that even in the historical period covered by scripture, people picked and people chose. The separate books that comprise the Bible took centuries to write, and even though the march of change in the ancient world was a whole lot slower than it is now, things in Israel had moved on. They weren't as distant from the whole nomadic-herdsmen-turned-invaders thing as we are, obviously, but there had been a fair amount of history. A lot had changed.

People were finding loopholes in the old laws (take, for example, the people to whom Jesus speaks in Matthew 5:27–42). And there were factions – the conservative Pharisees and the rationalist Sadducees – that drew their interpretations of their religious texts from differing basic assumptions, and came to different conclusions about what was real and what was important.

And then there was Jesus. On the one hand, Matthew's Gospel could have Jesus saying that he wasn't going to contradict a single word of the old scriptures (Matthew 5:18); on the other, in Luke, Jesus openly flouts the Sabbath laws (Luke 6:1–11). A contradiction? Possibly. But possibly something else.

It seems to me now that Jesus, of all people, had a good idea of how to treat scripture. In Mark's account, he's asked why he's not observing the Sabbath, and he replies, 'The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath' (Mark 2:27). It's one of a whole corpus of statements that present the idea that the religious people of Jesus' day had lost sight of the meaning of

the laws. They were observing the letter of the law, and not the spirit, not the intention.

He's not really picking and choosing. Perhaps in the eyes of the literalist, he is. But actually, he's doing something completely different here. He's taking a more difficult route. It's one thing to pick laws out from a grab-bag of rules and regulations, deciding fairly arbitrarily that these rules are superseded by the New Covenant, and those aren't, but it's quite another to try to discern what the point of these rules originally was. We've got to make the most informed decisions we can, based on who we are and what we know. We have to be honest with ourselves and with God about our tendency to cherry-pick the bits we like and about the glasses through which we see the scriptures. We have to be humble enough to accept that we might be wrong. And we have to be brave enough to eschew hard-and-fast rules that contradict each other for a consistent synthesis that may, on face value, appear to fly in the face of many of the rules we could so easily stick with.

But then, I could be wrong. After all, this whole argument depends upon references I picked and chose.

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