

What most distinguishes scripture are not its specific moral teachings and rules, all of which are conditioned by the socio-cultural peculiarities of the ancient world and the special circumstances within and for which they were formulated. Indeed, in this respect, we must take account of "the law of diminishing relevance," according to which, to the extent that something is specifically fitting to one particular situation, it is less specifically fitting to any and every other particular situation.

But, then, what does distinguish the witness of scripture? Primarily, its understanding of God—according to which the whole of creation, nothing and no one excepted, has always already been graced and claimed by God's unconditional love. The Bible functions as scripture within the church by shaping and nurturing this understanding of whose and who we are: women and men who ever live out of God's grace and are therefore ever called to lead faithful, grace-filled lives.

Scripture thus helps to provide the context within which we as Christians examine our moral options; it does so, namely, by bearing witness to the norm by which these options are always to be assessed. This norm is derived from God's faithfulness and grace as decisively re-presented through Jesus Christ; the context is the faith and life of the believing community, including its experience and traditions. Thus, whatever the issue, Christians are called to consider what decisions are most faithful to the gift and claim of God's love.

Of course, apart from factual knowledge about an issue, nothing that the church teaches or does with reference to the issue will be credible or relevant. But in addition to what is credible and relevant, the church must always ask what is Christian. And for this it turns, above all, to the scriptural witness to the gift and claim of God's love, listening for the word that is most central to scripture and most definitive for the faith and witness of the church—which is the word that through Jesus Christ we are both graced and claimed by God's love.

The most fundamental witness of scripture concerns the gift and the claim of God's love. Therefore, the word that scripture really speaks and that

we are to listen for and live by is this word of God's unconditional love for everything and everyone, nothing and no one excepted.

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