

Description and Prescription

There is a big difference between two similar words: description and prescription. When we have a sore back, for example, the doctor, after doing all the necessary tests, describes the problem by saying that an injury from years ago has caused deterioration in one of the disks, and that is what is causing the pain. A description often leads to a prescription: surgery will most probably correct the problem. We have little problem differentiating between description and prescription, especially when it comes to our health.

When it comes to how we use the Bible, however, we seem to have more trouble. When reading the Bible, we have to ask ourselves if what we are reading is description or prescription. For example, we read numerous times that the Israelites went to battle against neighbouring nations, often taking over their territory, confiscating their possessions and making them slaves. Some, when they read these stories, which are entirely description, want to make them prescriptive. During the time of the crusades, about 1000 years ago, these descriptive passages were used by church leaders to rally the people, and thousands joined ragtag armies to go and “liberate” Jerusalem from the “infidels.” Not only were people misled in their quest to Christianize Jerusalem, but on the way, sadly, they also killed many innocent people, causing great harm to the name of Christ and of Christianity in general. This is one example of making biblical description in prescription, and there are many, many more.

The Bible is not only descriptive; it also contains prescriptive passages. The 10 Commandments, for example, are prescriptive. They prescribe a certain kind of behaviour, one that Jesus says is rooted in love for God and neighbour. Paul's letters, likewise, are full of prescription, calling us to live in a way that is worthy of the calling we have received.

When we read the Bible, there are two pitfalls we must avoid. As was already mentioned, when we confuse description for prescription, we run into serious problems, for we tend toward randomness. One rather common example is the current trend to base diets on food described in the Bible, calling it a biblical diet. This is random, for seldom do we see people using biblical descriptions of transportation or battle armaments as prescriptive. We don't go to battle with spears and swords or walk or ride donkeys because we say that these are better because they are described in the Bible. Even more dangerous is to take someone's actions as prescriptive. We may emulate David as he writes and plays music that honours the Lord, but do we follow him as he and his men annihilate entire villages so that no one remains who can say who led the attack? If we make descriptive passages prescriptive, we must do so consistently, and we will find that to be impossible.

A second error which we must avoid is making prescriptive for them prescriptive for us. As an example, the Bible says that the Israelites may not mix two kinds of thread together as they weave cloth for a garment. That is prescriptive for them, but if we make it prescriptive for us, most of us are sinning at this very moment, for almost all of our clothing is made up of a combination of fibres. We end up becoming random in our choice of which prescriptions we will obey because we tend to focus on some and ignore all the rest. Another prescription which we have ignored completely is “Greet one another with a holy

kiss,” a command that appears several times in Paul’s letters. I haven’t seen that happen lately, not even in the council room on a Sunday morning, although we do shake hands.

When thinking about a prescriptive passage, we always need to ask the question, “To whom is this addressed, and what is the situation that it is addressing?” Further, we must ask, “Is this prescription meant to be universal or situational?” It is not always easy to find the right answer, although some helpful attempts have been made. For example, many people will say that we can divide the various commands (prescriptions) in the Old Testament into three categories: religious, civil, and moral. They go on to say that religious commands have been fulfilled in Christ (sacrifices, etc.), that civil commands are only for the nation of Israel (boundary stones, etc.) but that moral commands (don’t murder) are still in force. It is convenient to differentiate biblical prescriptions in this way, but it is also artificial, for the Bible does not recognize or practice this.

The best way to determine whether a prescription is still in force is to seek to understand it in its context and determine its force for the people then. For example, greeting one another with a holy kiss is a way of expressing unity, something that we can replace with a handshake. Commands about dress (women wearing head coverings or men having short hair – Jesus probably had short hair) also have some cultural background, and we must make sure that we understand as completely as possible the reason these commands were given in that culture and place before we apply them universally to all people. This does take some hard work and careful research, recognizing that while we can gain insight into most of the prescriptions in the Bible, we cannot into all of them. We simply are too removed from that culture and place.

So, to summarize, we should never make descriptive passages into prescription for us. That is a blatant misuse of Scripture and can create all sorts of problems. And second, when the Bible prescribes something, we must be careful that we understand fully what the force of scope of the command is before we apply it to our situation. All of this requires serious Bible study, something that we should always be ready to do.

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