

THE PRINCIPLE OF ACCOMMODATION/ ADAPTATION IN THE CHARACTER OF GOD

When Israel asked for a King, the Bible clearly tells us that it was a sin for them to do so. God had told them that he alone was their King, but they wanted a King like all the other nations. God respected their choice while telling them what a king would do to them as a people. He then gave them the best choice at the time, all the while knowing that sooner or later, they would live to regret their choice. Page 109

He know the raw material that He was working with, and so He had to meet the AT THE LEVEL THAT THEY WERE AT. A God who intend to win people must meet them where they are. The O.T reveals what the people were like. They had just come out of Egyptian bondage and had learned the way of the enemy in solving problems. Then we saw what God was willing to do to reach them in their twisted condition.

The Scriptures presents Jesus as coming to reveal the Divine Will of God versus God's permissive Will. What we find in the O.T is never an absolute reflection of God. While everything points to God, it can never become God. "For My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are My ways your ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways , and My thoughts than your thoughts." Isaiah 55:8,9.

"The writers of the Bible were God's penmen, not His pen....." 1 SM.19-21.

"The writers of the Bible had to express their ideas in human language. It was written by human men. These men were inspired of the Holy Spirit.... The Bible is written by inspired men, but it is not God's mode of thought and expression. It is that of humanity.

God, as a writer, is not represented. Men will often say such an expression is not like God. But God has not put Himself in words, in logic, in rhetoric, on trial in the Bible. The writers of the Bible were God's penmen, not His pen. Look at the different writers."

"It is not the words of the Bible that are inspired, but the men that were inspired. Inspiration acts not on the man's words or his expressions but on the man himself, who, under the influence of the Holy Ghost, is imbued with thoughts. But the words and thoughts receive the impress of the individual mind. The divine mind is diffused. The divine mind and will is combined with the human mind and will; thus the utterances of the man are the word of God.--- 1 SM 21.2

While God wanted the high road of "idealism", that is, to convey His divine will, many times He had to take the low road of "Realism", to convey His permissive will, for the purpose of communication to a people who were stiffnecked, blind, and warlike in nature. The low road approach is the conviction that God wants to win the hearts of His followers, not just bully them into submission. While God doesn't have to justify His course of action to anyone, He is a God who values human choice and ADAPTS to where the people are in order to win them.

When Jesus was here on this earth He said in respect to the practice of adultery and divorce, "Moses because of the hardness of your hearts suffered you to put away your wives, but from the beginning it was not so." Matthew 19:8.

So there was a beginning with a Divine Will, then there was the time of Moses, where permission was given to divorce on certain grounds.

Jesus also said, “You have **heard it said**, “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth” (as though He had nothing to do with it), “but I say unto you that ye resist not evil.” Matthew 5: 39.

This is the principle of radical divine adaptation that runs right through the Bible where God was meeting the people where they were. God did not approve of the practice of Polygamy (having more than one wife as the heathens practiced), but men of God and in Israel adopted the practice of having more than one wife. Nevertheless God worked with them at the level at which they were. Abraham, Jacob, David, etc were involved in the practice, yet God worked along with them seeking to show them the dangers of adopting heathen practices.

This is known as the principle of “condescension” or “accommodation”. Some use the term “contextualization” where God comes down to the level of the people in order to communicate with them, much as a father stoops to a son. These words are all equivalent, although each word carries a different connotation. “Adaptation” is where God reaches people where they are, in order to bring them to where He wants them to be or carry them.

This principle is used to explain many difficult Bible passages where God seem to be sanctioning Slavery (as in the case with Onesimus and his slave master). Polygamy (Abraham, Jacob, David), Divorce, the Wars of Israel, and the Commands to kill and destroy the enemy.

Since God is eager, to save us and to help us improve our lives, then growth, change and diversity are all inevitable in meeting us where we are. Although it was not His Divine Will for them to engage in these practices, since they had adopted them, He accommodated them, adapted His dealings with them, condescended to their level, working along

with them where they were to bring them to the clearer Divine Will for them when Jesus should come on the scene.

Because of not understanding this principle, many misunderstand the Wars of Israel as well as the Commands to kill and destroy, using them to justify their practices today, not understanding that God was simply giving them the BEST ADVICE IN THE SITUATION at the level at which they were at.

When Jesus began His Ministry He began with the Sermon on the Mount declaring the manifesto of His government in the Beattitudes—the attitudes we should be.(Matthew 5). In six (6) comparisons, Jesus contrasts His way with that of the Old Testament, some of which were mentioned before and need to be repeated here.

His first comparison is between the act of murder and murderous anger. “You have heard it said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder...’ But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister....” (Matthew 5:21, 22, NRSV).

Another of the six comparisons focuses on adultery. “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery’. But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust, has already committed adultery with her in his heart”. (Matthew 5:27, 28, NRSV).

The most challenging contrast involves enemies: “You have heard that it hath been said, ‘Thou shalt love your neighbour and hate thine enemy’. But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you and pray for them which despitefully use you and persecute you; that ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven.....” (Matthew 5:43, 44, KJV).

(Hate your enemy—probably referring to Psalm 139: 21, 22 as a good example of a psalm that called down curses on God’s enemies).

Although Jesus was clearly presenting God's divine will as the better, clearer, stronger and deeper way, He took pains to preserve the authority of the Old Testament by saying: "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets, I have not come to abolish but to fulfil (Matthew 5:17, NRSV).

So Jesus gives us permission to say that His way is clearer than that of the Old Testament. Yet the Old Testament retains its full authority because it documented God's way of dealing with a stubborn, hardhearted and stiff-necked people who had just come out of Egyptian bondage and could not see God's clear divine will at that time. It was an example of how God dealt with imperfect people, reaching down to them at the level they were at, adapting, condescending and accommodating them where they were in their thinking and understanding. (See 1 Cor.10:11).

Knowing the raw material He was working with, a God who intends to win the people must meet them where they are. So while the O.T narrative revealed what the people were like, we can see what God was willing to do to reach them in their twisted condition. God says, "My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts..." (Isaiah 55: 8, 9, KJV).

Moderns struggle with the idea of a God who would command Abraham to sacrifice his firstborn son. But Abraham didn't struggle with it as we do. There was no apparent conflict in Abraham's mind other than how the promise of the Messiah would be fulfilled if he sacrificed his only son of promise. (Remember he had some heathen background and training—Joshua 24:2). In his world, sacrificing the firstborn son was the highest gift one could give to the gods. Abraham did not quarrel or resist, He simply trusted and obeyed, and got full credit for his willingness to sacrifice his son.(Genesis 22:12).

They question how Abraham could confront God over the fate of the innocent in Sodom, but he would not, could not, did not question God's command to sacrifice Isaac.

Moderns struggle with how God could send David out to battle to kill and route armies, but then refuse him in building the temple saying that his hands had shed too much blood. It is found to be puzzling and troubling that God would tempt David to number Israel, to do wrong, and then punish him for it. (See 2 Sam.24:1 vs 1 Chron.21:1—Satan is identified as the one who made him do it). They struggle with how holy men of God could have multiple wives in polygamy in the O.T and yet in the N.T the Apostle Paul would say that ideally to be qualified as a Deacon or a Bishop, they "must be the husband of one wife." 1Tim.3:2, 12. While God did not approve of polygamy, He allowed for the practice, yet improved on the status quo by ensuring that women were at least taken care of in this male-dominant society. (Exodus 21:10)

All of these paradoxes, can be clarified when we understand God's purpose in adapting to the needs of the people, and radically adapting his message to the people he was trying to reach. When we read the O.T, we can recognize that God is not giving the people absolute truth, but truth adapted to their particular needs, all the while progressively unfolding His will to the and seeking to lead them to a clearer and better understanding of Himself.

God took enormous risks with His reputation, as an incredibly patient God who is willing to put His reputation on the line in order to reach violent people. The Bible is detailed with accounts of His dealings with humanity, condescending to meet people in various times and cultures that are markedly different than our own.

In order to understand why God gave certain rules during this time that seemingly condoned ungodly practices, we must always remember the context of Mt. Sinai. God was dealing with a people who were

dancing around a golden calf (practising idolatry) just forty days after witnessing His glory on the mountain. These were people who needed rules not to have sexual relations with animals and that a man should not sleep with his mother. Nevertheless, God stuck with them in their spiritually immature behaviour, while pointing them toward a better way.

What about the Wars of Israel where God commanded His people to go out and fight, kill and destroy their enemies? Does God sanction killing, fighting and killing today? First of all, the Scriptures tell us where wars come from in James 4:1, 2,

“From whence come wars and fightings among you? Come they not hence, even of your lusts that war in your members? Ye lust, and have not: ye kill and desire to have, and cannot obtain: ye fight and war, yet ye have not, because ye ask not.”

At some point in Israel’s history after God had led His people in the theocracy and had fought battles for them without the use of the sword, Israel began to use the sword and even asked for a King like all the other nations. God gave them the best choice at the time. Although they chose the sword and wanted to fight their own battles, they still desired God to protect them and desired His presence with them in battle. God had promised them the land of Canaan and had promised that He would send hornets to drive the Canaanites out of the land so that they need not fight, still Israel chose the swords and began to fight their own battles. God did not intend for them to conquer the land by warfare. But since they had chosen the method of the sword and fighting, God accommodated them at the level at which they were at and worked along with them protecting them and giving them signal victories so that His people and His cause would not become extinct on the earth. Genesis 12:3. He gave them THE BEST ADVICE how to protect themselves from the enemy. He adapted His method of dealing with them hoping to bring them

to His higher purpose. So, while Numbers 25:8-13 is one of many Biblical accounts where killing was required to eradicate sin, this does not mean that God confirms or sanctions wars, fightings or killings today.

Earthly kingdoms rule by the ascendancy of physical power; but from Christ’s kingdom every carnal weapon, every instrument of coercion, is banished. Christ told Peter and later Pilate,

“Put up again thy sword into his place: for all they that take the sword shall perish with the sword”. Matthew 26: 52.

“My kingdom is not of this world: if My kingdom were of this world, then would My servants fight, that I should not be delivered to the Jews: but now is My kingdom not from hence.” John 18:36.

In Matthew chapter 5, Jesus summed up the Divine will of God which He came to establish compared to the permissive accommodating will of God during the Old Testament era in these words.

“You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” Mat. 5:43—48.

Every time that Jesus says “You have heard that it was said” He is pointing back to the Old Testament laws and when He says, “But I tell you”, He is showing God’s better, more precious, excellent and permanent way.