

A Rule About Rules

The purpose (or justification) behind a biblical moral rule carries greater weight than the rule itself.

Christian moral debate often involves appeals to the moral prescriptions of the Bible. Sometimes these appeals are to the “letter,” other times to the “spirit” of a biblical prescription. The language of “letter” and “spirit” can be put more precisely as *rule* and *rule purpose*. The purpose or aim of a rule is also the justification or rationale for the rule... The justification or rationale for a rule always includes its purpose: it is the purpose of the rule and the reasons supporting that purpose.

There are basically three ways of conceiving the force of rules in relation to their justifications:

1. Rules carry greater force than their justifications.
2. Rules and their justifications cannot be ordered in a hierarchy; where they conflict in a particular decisional situation, one must weigh the claims of each for that situation.
3. Rule justifications carry greater force than rules.

The subject... is a rule about rules: a hermeneutical rule — the “rule of purpose” — about appeal to moral rules (prescriptions) in the Bible. The rule of purpose states the third position listed above as a normative principle of biblical hermeneutics: rule justifications (purposes) carry greater weight than the rules they support.

(Charles H. Cosgrove, *Appealing to Scripture in Moral Debate: Five Hermeneutical Rules*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002, 12-13; Excerpt from Chapter One, The Rule of Purpose)