

The Bible, Homosexuality and Us

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Full disclosure. I have long been an advocate for LGBT persons, for their full inclusion in the church and for their full inclusion in society and its laws. My former church in charlotte, Myers Park Baptist church, formalized its full inclusion of LGBT people in 2002 through an amendment to its Covenant which read, “As a community of God’s New Creation we are open to all and closed to none.” We took this step, not because we were a nice progressive group of people, but because we believed this is what God is up to in the New Creation. More about the New Creation later.

Our full inclusion of gay persons got us into trouble with the Southern Baptist N.C. State Convention of which we were a part. To make a long story short, their Executive committee voted unanimously to oust us. We appealed the decision to the Convention as a whole, numbering about 3,000 “messengers” (delegates). The vote to oust us passed by about 2,970 for and 25 against. We did not ask for a recount.

Additionally, I have worked for the recognition of same sex marriage in church and in N.C. law.

Recently, in late August, a group of conservative evangelical leader convened to write what they called the “Nashville Statement”. It is in the main a condemnation of LGBT persons and their advocates. It is composed of 14 sets of affirmation and denials. Here are two:

“We deny that sexual attraction for the same sex is part of the natural goodness of God’s original creation.”

And

“We affirm that it is sinful to approve of homosexuality or transgenderism and that such approval constitutes an essential departure from Christian faith and witness.”

So I am a sinner. Nevertheless I proceed.

The Nashville statement is a sex-obsessed document which talks over and over about same sex sexual attraction- and nowhere mentions love between people of the same sex. It speaks of “drawing courage from Jesus” but does not and cannot quote a single statement of Jesus on the subject.

Evangelical Christian writer Jen Hatmaker, herself blackballed because of her acceptance of LGBT people wrote: “The fruit of the ‘Nashville Statement’ is suffering, rejection, shame and despair.”

I

Well, how did I, a Southern Baptist raised, Bible-loving follower of Jesus get to where I am on these issues? I hope this presentation will show. “The Bible, Homosexuality and Us.”

I start by saying that the easiest way to read scripture on this issue is to read it as condemning of homosexuality. But easy is not always best. Human sexuality is a complex reality, and the Bible is a complex document. I will try to follow the maxim: “Make it as simple as possible, but not simpler.”

This presentation is an exercise in Biblical interpretation in hope of a greater inclusion of homosexual persons in church and in society.

The message of the gospel to homosexual persons- and to us all- is: God loves you exactly as you are, and it is from where you are that you are invited to build with us the banquet of the Kingdom of God and manifest God's New Creation.

II

I will examine first the five Biblical passages that address homosexual conduct. I say "conduct" because the biblical writers had no conception of anything like homosexual orientation.

Text number one is from Genesis 19, the story of Sodom. Two angels in the guise of men come to visit Lot's house. All the men of Sodom gather at Lot's house and issue this ominous demand:

Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us, that we may know them (19:5).

What the men have in mind is rape, gang rape. Lot refuses and offers them instead his daughters- which reveals the low estate of women at the time. The men insist on Lot's release of the guests. The angels strike them blind, and later the city is destroyed.

The sin here is not homosexuality, but rape. Later scripture identifies the sins of Sodom variously as inhospitality to strangers, injustice, greed, lack of care for the poor and general immorality (see Wisdom 19:13, Ezekiel 16:48-9; Jeremiah 23:14; Matthew 10:5-15; Jude 7). It is we who have forced a focus on homosexuality. Ezekiel 16: 49 says: "Behold this was the guilt of you sister Sodom; she and her daughters had pride, surfeit of food and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy."

Text number two: Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13:

You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination (*toevah*)...If a man lies with a male as with a woman both of them have committed an abomination (*toevah*); they shall be put to death.

These verses are from the Holiness Code, which had hundreds of rules about cleanness and uncleanness. Homosexual conduct between men is forbidden as *toevah*; but if you take a careful look at the whole code, you see that it forbids a wide range of conduct, some of which we still consider destructive and immoral such as incest and adultery. Some we now consider morally neutral; for example, sex during a woman's monthly flow. Some we would never consider *toevah*, like eating barbeque ribs- that is, unless your cholesterol is high.

Jews and Christians alike take these passages and determine what parts still hold moral force and which do not. Our communities agree on the Ten Commandments, but not on all the multiplication of these commandments nor the penalties imposed. In Numbers, a man who picks up sticks on the Sabbath is put to death (Numbers 15:32-36). In Deuteronomy, a son is to be put to death for disobeying his parents (Deuteronomy 21:18-21).

The challenge is to make our moral discernments about these laws thoughtfully and as consistently as possible.

I use two main criteria in my own interpretation of scripture. The first is from Augustine: Does my interpretation increase the love of God and neighbor, or decrease it? If it increases it I am on the right track; if it does not, I'm headed in the wrong direction. The second is to use Jesus, the Word made flesh, as a key to interpretation: What seems consistent with who he was, how he lived and what he taught?

And we all seek the help of the Spirit of God as we interpret scripture. As Paul said, “The letter kills, but the Spirit brings life.”

We all tend to be selective literalists. We can only hope to interpret consistently and thoughtfully and in ways that bring life and healing.

III

Those are the Old Testament texts. There are three New Testament texts (I hope you’re noticing how few there are).

The first is I Corinthians 6:9-10. In Chapter 6, Paul describes appropriate conduct for Christians. He begins the chapter by saying Christians should not take other Christians to court. No lawsuits between Christian brothers and sisters!

Then in verses 9 and 10, he lists behaviors not fit for the kingdom of God:

The immoral (*pornoi*), idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes (*malakoi*), homosexual offenders (*arsenokoitai*), thieves, the greedy, drunkards, slanderers and swindlers.

Note our inconsistencies. Do we ever have church discussions about letting *greedy* people join the church, or about greedy people becoming deacons or greedy people being married in the church? Do we exclude alcoholics, slanderers, and swindlers?

But we also need to take a look at the two Greek words here often associated with homosexuality. *Malakoi* literally means “soft”; and *arsenokoitai* joins two words: “men and “bed”. We have tended through the years to translate these words in line with our current prejudices.

I think they are most accurately translated: male prostitutes and homosexual offenders. They, I think, refer to the most prevalent forms of homosexual conduct in the Greek/Roman/Hellenistic world: the use of young males and feminized men as prostitutes and the older man/younger boy form of sexual behavior called pederasty. We are speaking here of exploitative, abusive and promiscuous forms of sexual conduct. The Biblical writers could have had not conceptions of homosexuality as an orientation, or of a lifelong committed and monogamous same-sex relationship.

The second text: I Timothy 1:9-10. Here is another list of behaviors presented as contrary to Christian doctrine and practice: “men-slayers, immoral persons (*pornoi*), homosexual offenders (*arsenokoitai*), men-stealers (think kidnappers and slave traders), liars, perjurers...”.

Again, I would translate the word “homosexual offenders”- emphasis on the word “offender”- describing exploitative forms of homosexual conduct.

The third text, Romans 1: 18-2:1. Paul is describing what happens when we worship ourselves, the creature, rather than God the Creator. Idolatry takes many forms. Paul groups them into three. The phrase “God gave them up” introduces the three groups:

1. “God gave them up in the desires of their heart to uncleanness (*akatharsian*), to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves”: This is a general description of sexual immorality.
2. “God gave them up to dishonorable passions. Their women exchanged natural relations (*physin*) for unnatural (*para physin*), and their men likewise gave up natural relations (*physin*) with women and were consumed with passion for one another.” This refers, I believe, to the patterns of exploitative and abusive homosexual conduct I have described above. *We may ask, what does “against nature” mean to a same-sex oriented person?*

3. “God gave them up to an unfit mind to do unseemly things.” In this group are those who engaged in “*pornoï*”, immorality, and *poneria*, evil,” those “full of covetousness and malice, envy, murder, strife, deceit, evil constructions, gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, proud, boastful, inventors of evil things, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, merciless.” (Have we left anyone out?!)

Now Paul turns to the Jews who had been holding their noses through Paul’s description of the first three groups and says: And so you my fellow Jews, you too “have no excuse when you judge others, for in passing judgment upon the others, you condemn yourselves, for you, the judges do the same things...”

This passage is part of a five-chapter-long theological discourse which I summarize:

Point One The pagan Gentiles are without excuse because they have broken God’s laws revealed in nature and conscience (1:18-32)

Point Two The pious Jews are without excuse because they have become judges of others while themselves breaking God’s law revealed to Moses and Israel (2:1-24).

Point Three All have sinned and come short of the glory of God (3:23).

Point Four But miracle of miracles, we unrighteous folk have been set right with God by his grace as a gift through the redemptions which is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a mercy-seat (3:21-26). The “mercy-seat” is an allusion to the high altar on the Jewish Day of Atonement. The death of Christ has become the Day of Atonement for the whole world, the once-and-for-all forgiveness of sins, past, present, future.

Point Five In Adam, the old humanity, we all die; in Christ, the New Adam and New Humanity, we all are made alive (5:1-20)

Are you getting the point of the great good news being announced here?! We're all in the same boat, the same belovedness, the same vulnerability and same capacity for sin, but God's grace is for all and in all. Sin is strong, but grace is stronger. The old creation is being transformed into a New Creation.

IV

Those are the Biblical passages used by some Christians to condemn homosexual persons. What did Jesus say about homosexual conduct? If he is our guide to interpretation of scripture, it is important to know what he said.

There's a pamphlet I saw in a church narthex along with all the other tracts which address one thing or another. The bold title reads: What Jesus Said about Homosexuality. You turn the page and see four blank pieces of paper. On the back are the words: That's right, nothing!

Jesus is silent on the subject. Jesus' ethic did not deal with lists of clean and unclean rules. (If this were all the gospel was about, I would not be here today.) His focus was on the heart. And his ethic had a seriously practical purpose: Did it hurt or help people? Moreover, he seemed especially tenderhearted toward those who had made sexual mistakes, perhaps because sexual sinners were trying so hard to love and to be loved. And perhaps because religious people were so fixed in their judgment upon them.

The story in John 8:1-11 captures Jesus' spirit. Some men drag a woman to him who has been caught in an act of adultery. (Where was the man? It takes two to tango.) They ask him if they should follow the Law of Moses and stone her to death. Jesus stoops and writes something on the ground. Then Jesus says, "You who are without sin cast the first stone." He then stoops again and writes something on the ground. One by one, they all slink away. Jesus turns to the woman and says, "Where are your accusers?" "They are gone," she replies. "Neither do I condemn you," Jesus says, "Go and sin no more."

Here we have a Lord who forgives all our sins and who calls us to a higher moral path. Can we be such a community? A community of morals and mercy? Of character and compassion? Here is the narrow way that leads to life. There are plenty of communities that are one at the expense of the other.

V

There is one more set of texts. The first is in Acts, where Peter and the church are struggling with what to do with unclean Gentiles who are believing in Jesus and wanting join up. Those of Gentile "orientation" and Gentile "life-style."

Peter is struggling with the moral and racial repugnance he feels toward Gentiles whom he had been taught to consider *toevah*, unclean. In Acts 10, a voice comes to him in a vision and commands him to eat unclean food he has always been commanded to avoid. Peter refuses to

eat: “No Lord, I have never...!” But the voice says, “What God has cleansed, you shall not call unclean or common.”

At that moment, messengers show up from Cornelius’ house, inviting Peter to come to his house and tell him the gospel of Jesus. Cornelius is a Gentile; Peter is forbidden by Jewish law to stay with him and eat with him. But the Spirit drives home the point: Those whom God has cleansed I cannot call common. Peter goes and shares the gospel. Cornelius believes and is baptized. The Holy Spirit falls upon him. And Peter says, “How can I hinder God, whose Spirit has fallen upon them?” (Acts 11:1-18)

This has been my experience over and over for forty-plus years: I’ve seen the Spirit of God demonstrably present in gay persons. How can I hinder God?

The last set of texts are from the Apostle Paul.

In Galatians 6:15, Paul writes in an unforgettable flourish:

Circumcision means nothing

Uncircumcision means nothing (speaking here of both anatomy and theology)

The only thing that matters is the New Creation!

The church today seems fixated on battling over old-creation distinctions while God is calling us to something more, something greater: The New Creation.

Circumcision means nothing

Uncircumcision means nothing

Jew means nothing

Gentile means nothing

Male means nothing

Female means nothing

Race means nothing

Class means nothing

Gay means nothing

Straight means nothing

The only thing that matters is the New Creation!

The New Creation is everything!

The New Creation was Paul's way of talking about what Jesus called the kingdom of God. Though Christ a new Creation was coming into being, transforming the world.

In II Corinthians 5, Paul says, "From now on we regard no one from a human point of view- that is, by race, class, looks, money, sexual orientation, I.Q. or percentage of body fat. "For if anyone is in Christ, there is a New Creation. The old is gone; look, everything has become new."

VI

In our day new light is breaking forth from scripture, from science and from our own spiritual experience. I think it is saying, Let us do away with sexual orientation as a moral

category. Morality has to do with behavior, not wiring. And the rules of healthy and loving behavior are the same for everybody.

We have an important role to play in a society still filled with hatred and discrimination toward gay persons. This will not be easy, and it may even go against the “conscience” which has been shaped more by culture than by God.

In *Huckleberry Finn*, Huck is caught in a moral dilemma between his conscience shaped by church and culture to accept slavery and deeper conscience which has been influenced by his friendship with Jim the slave, owned by Miss Watson. Huck leaves home and is joined by Jim, who is now a runaway slave. Will Huck return him to his owner? Huck writes down a letter to Miss Watson telling her of Jim’s whereabouts, and feels temporarily better. But he can’t escape the dilemma. He looks at Jim and at the letter. This is how Mark Twain captures the scene, in Huck’s words:

I took it up, and held it in my hand. I was a trembling, because I’d got to decide, forever, betwixt two things, and I knowed it. I studied it a minute, sort of holding my breath, and then says to myself: “All right, I’ll go to hell”- and tore it up.

Huck was willing to go against his culture and church and go to the hell they told him he’d be sure to end up in, in order to be true to something truer he’d gotten hold of by benefit of relationship to Jim.

I think what he got hold of as well, or what got hold of him, was the New Creation, the New Creation whose door is opened to us by Jesus Christ.

If anyone is in Christ, look,

there is the new creation...

All this is from God, who

through Christ reconciled you

to God's own self and gave to us

the ministry (service, calling)

of reconciliation.

Jesus calls us to follow and become part of the New Creation. Here is the invitation of the gospel:

God loves you exactly as you are; and it is from where you are that we invite you to build with us the banquet of the kingdom and manifest the New Creation.

I believe God is calling us to tear up all the letters and documents which condemn and demean LGBT persons, those on paper and those in our hearts. God is calling us to new light breaking forth from scripture and the Spirit of God.