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This essay by Youtha C. Hardman-Cromwell gives a vantage point for lessening heterosexism when using scripture.

Burnishing Your Shield: Combating Heterosexism with Scripture

Introduction

In the midst of the controversies around the issues of homosexuality, of the status of LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgendered) persons in the ordained and general ministries of churches and of same-sex unions is the issue of scripture, its interpretation and relevance. Sermons that deal with the various scriptures that are used to argue the positions of those who would exclude LGBT people from the churches leadership, demonize their love relationships and deny to them civil rights as well as ecclesial rights are fertile ground for helping the ordinary person in the pew understand what scripture does and does not say that is pertinent to the arguments swelling around believers.

Many persons who are caught up in the controversies are not biblically literate. They do not understand that the Bible is a collection of books that have been impacted by a rational editorial process that has taken place over a number of centuries, first orally and then in written form. They sometimes fancy that God literally dictated the words (in English) to those who, in reality, understood that they were recording and editing, as they were inspired, a record of the relationship between God and God’s people. The Bible reflects human experience of God, and, therefore, it is influenced by the cultural context in which the people of God lived. Many are biblically illiterate because of the lack of rigorous teaching, studying, and hearing of the proclaimed word that honors the fact that Scripture is dynamic, living, alive, and lively, animated by the Spirit of God who is not dead. Because the various writings came out of a variety of time eras, the context of Scripture ranges over a wide cultural landscape; no part of which is a match for our current context. We appropriate Scripture into our context, one that is changing even as we live in our day and time. This creates enormous challenges to our understanding of what scripture has to say to us in our contemporary circumstances and struggles.

This does not mean that the questions the Bible asks and seeks to answer are irrelevant to our contemporary context. We still need to know:

- Who we are,
- Why we are here,
- What is the purpose of life,

- What does it mean to be good,
- What evil is and how to deal with it,
- How to deal with death.¹

The same questions apply, but we can help our people through our sermons to do as the Buddhist Saying challenges: “Seek not to follow in the footsteps of the men of old; rather, seek what they sought.”

The problem is not scripture itself; the problem is in the interpretation of the scripture. There are those who claim that scripture does not need to be interpreted, but each of us brings to anything that we read ourselves, which includes, at the very least, our context, our experiences, our inherited and cultivated beliefs. This is what the Wesleyan quadrilateral makes clear; we understand God through the lenses of Scripture, Tradition, Experience, and Reason. That explains why we can read a portion of Scripture, a verse of a periscope, with which we think we are very familiar, and find something there that we never saw there before. We have come to that scripture a different person than the one who encountered that passage previously. Do our sermons help our listeners understand and accept this phenomenon?

- There are, therefore, dangers in interpretation. Peter Gomes cites three:
1. The worship of the Bible, making of it an object of veneration and ascribing to it the glory due to God.
 2. The worship of the text, in which the letter is given an inappropriate superiority over the spirit.
 3. The worship of the culture, in which the Bible is forced to conform to the norms of the prevailing culture.²

Nevertheless, interpretation is unavoidable reality, even for the most pious student of the Bible.

Although the Bible has been used to divide and oppress, it has an inclusive nature. It has the power to draw very diverse peoples to its truth, its study, its teachings. It guided both those Christians who used it to support slavery in America, and it guided those American slaves who were oppressed. It gave the hope of and became the means of their liberation in both body and spirit. The Bible is true, not so much because it is factually true, but because it expresses a greater truth in its whole. So we can condemn the right of human slavery, which the Bible does not categorically condemn, and still hold the Bible as true and right. It speaks to the relationship between God and humans and to the dynamic of the yearning of both God and humans to be in a harmonious and life-giving relationship.

As we approach the scriptures to bring about some clarity concerning homosexuality, the first obstacle is that the term “homosexuality” is not a word that is found in the Hebrew or Greek languages in which the scriptures were originally recorded.³ Where the word is used in translation into English, it is translating a variety of terms in these languages that give expression to specific or unknown actions or activities. So we must continually ask: Does the Bible mean what we mean when we speak of “homosexuality.” It certainly is the case that we do not mean in our contemporary use of the term “homosexuality” the same thing that others with whom we are in dialogue may mean. For example: Much to

my surprise and chagrin, I learned in seminary in the early 1980's that some of my classmates thought of "homosexuality" and "pedophilia" as synonymous terms. We do not agree on what the term means, even in this day and time when it is much discussed and argued.

We turn now to a journey through the scriptures and an examination of the particular scriptural passages that relate to the subject at hand.

Genesis 1 and 2

These scriptures get included in the discussions on the basis of silence. A common retort is, "It is Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve."⁴ What is the purpose of the creation stories (there are two of them in these two chapters)? They answer the question, "Where do we come from?" and that answer is the same now as it was then. We come from the sexual union of a man and a woman. More specifically we know now, what was not known then; we come from the union of an egg from a female and a sperm from a male.⁵ The creation stories establish human society and begin a genealogy. The stories are not about the establishment of relationships,⁶ such as friendship, marriage, singleness, celibacy. These are neither mentioned nor implied. The creation stories speak to the continuation of human society as based on the continuation of male and female alike. The creation stories deal with the continuation of human life, a necessity if human society is to exist. Nevertheless, sexual relationships between males and females do not always produce children, and society sanctions marriages in which the children are never produced and in which children cannot be produced.⁷

Genesis 19: 1-9

The story of Lot's encounter with the angels and the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah is often cited as evidence that God does not approve of homosexuality. The term "sodomy" is Latin, and it is not found in Biblical Hebrew, Aramaic or Greek. The word used here in Genesis 19 that is translated as sodomy is "kadash," which means "hallowed" or "sacred." One might then conclude that what is referenced in talking about sexual relationships is understood in the context of the pagan practice of male prostitutes associated with temple worship. Furnish notes: "In every instance in the KJV where the term 'sodomite' is used, the reference is to male prostitutes associated with places of worship."⁸ This is not what we are experiencing as we encounter homosexual practice in our contemporary context.

This is clearly an instance of attempted homosexual rape and, therefore, does not invalidate all homosexuals or homosexual activity. If that is to be the interpretation, then David's adultery in 2 Samuel 11 must condemn all heterosexual activity as sin. Are we to understand that Lot's offering of his daughters is a warrant for the sexual abuse of women? The story must be about something else other than sexual sin. Otherwise the moral lessons of the whole story become too conflicted to guide us in our lives.

In fact the grave wickedness of Sodom is unknown if we have only Genesis 19 to guide our understanding. Indeed God intends to destroy it BEFORE the angels arrive; that is

why the angels were there in the first place. But there are other scriptures, often ignored in relationship with Genesis 19, that can help us as we prepare to preach on this pericope.

Ezekiel 16; 46-56

- This scripture clearly identifies Sodom's wickedness as:
- Pride
 - Fullness of bread
 - Abundance of idleness in her and her daughters
 - Failure to strengthen the hands of the poor and the needy.

None of these can be interpreted as sexual wrongdoing in and of themselves. These scriptural statements provide content for examining the nature of the sins of Sodom. But Jesus goes even further in adding to our understanding.

Matthew 10:14-15; Luke 10: 10-12

These are parallel scriptures in which Jesus connects the rejection of the disciples he sent out with the sin of Sodom. This supports the conclusion that in the least, Sodom was inhospitable. Hospitality was a very high value in that culture and in the Jewish religion. Clearly the men of Sodom were inhospitable in their planned treatment of Lot's visitors, clearly planning to treat them like temple prostitutes. Jesus says that the cities that reject the apostolic emissaries will suffer a doom worse than that of Sodom.

Judges 19

This story is not as well known as many others, but it suggests that outsiders may display values and virtues closer to the biblical tradition than do God's own people. It takes place in Gibeah, a town of Benjamin, and contrasts the demand for Israelites to be hospitable and the extravagant hospitality of the concubine's father⁹ with this instance of inhospitable behavior among Israelites. The message is that the abuse or neglect of strangers is an affront to God.

Leviticus 18:22

This verse is an explicit condemnation of gay sexual intercourse: "You shall not lie with a male as with a woman, it is an abomination." Leviticus is part of the Holiness Code, which provides a standard of moral behavior that distinguishes the Jews from the Canaanites. An abomination is what Gentiles do. The purpose of the Holiness Code is nation building. Included in it are other prohibitions which we ignore. These include: kosher restrictions (eating of pork and crabs, for example), not wearing clothes made of two different kinds of materials, and forbids round haircuts, tattoos and intercourse during menstruation. All of these were seen as weakening the cultural identity of the Children of Israel because they were associated with pagan practices.

Leviticus 20:13

This is another explicit prohibition of gay sexual practice: "If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination, they shall be put to death, their blood is upon them." We need to be aware of the fact that there is not prohibition of lesbian sexual practice, raising the question of sexism as a factor in the prohibition. The

cultural understanding was that there were clear roles for women and men and a man should not take on any of the roles that were seen as roles of women. Therefore, one of the males in a gay sexual encounter was taking on the role of a woman, mixing roles.

The people who came out of Egypt in the Exodus Experience were not a nation or cultural group. They were a motley crowd of folks who had experienced oppression in Egypt, originating not only as the enslaved descendents of Jacob, but people who had come from a variety of cultural backgrounds. The Holiness Code was meant to help them, a frontier nation that was seeking cultural identity, protection, and procreation. Children could not result from gay sexual activity. The fledging nation needed to increase their numbers to face the challenges of entering the Promised Land. The Code addressed all the perceived threats to nation creation. Note that while death was the penalty for gay sexual activity, it is also the penalty for children cursing their parents, adultery, incest, and bestiality.

Christians ignore most of the Holiness Code and deem its precepts as irrelevant to a New Testament understanding of purity of heart. A question that presents itself is why do we ignore some of the Holiness Code and hold other specific parts as relevant to our current lives as Christians. We need to wrestle with these issues as we prepare to preach on these and related passages.

Acts 10:47

Peter's vision in Acts 10 deals with the elimination of some of these Holiness Code restrictions and prohibitions. Peter is instructed by God to eat foods that are prohibited by the Kosher food laws. He also is instructed to respond to the invitation of a Gentile to be in his home, another prohibition against association with non-Jews. Peter's full revelation of God's inclusive nature comes when the Gentiles in Cornelius' household receive the Holy Spirit without the necessity of following the Law of Israel. Peter says: "Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" v. 47 and "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears God and does what is right is acceptable to God." v.34. How do we justify refusing the inclusion and ministry of LGBT who are believers? It is a question that requires profound pondering, even as we may hold to particular standards for church membership and baptism.

Romans 1:26, 27

In these verses Paul describes evidence of our fallen human state—pointing out the need for redemption. These verses speak to sexual impurity as an expression of idolatry. Because of their idolatry, Paul states that they have been given over to shameful lusts, "women exchanged natural relations with unnatural ones. In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women.... Men committed indecent acts with other men...." But the treatise does not stop there. In verses 28-31 Paul includes a wide variety of other feelings and actions: envy, murder, strife, deceit, malignity, hating God, gossiping, slandering, insolence, haughtiness, boastfulness, inventing evil, disobeying parents, foolishness, faithlessness, heartlessness and ruthlessness which he says deserve death. These verses raise challenging issues:

1. Are all these feelings and actions equally evil and condemned?
2. If so, how do we bring our rejection of them and those who practice them into equal punishment and exclusion? Do we want to punish with death, even if that is interpreted only as death from the community of faith?
3. Is Paul's understanding based on a cultural understanding that maleness is superior to femaleness? If so, how does that influence his thinking?
4. What does Paul mean when he uses the terms "nature" and "natural"? Both terms can and are used to mean different things. Usually Paul means, when using these terms, a continuation of an organism with its past. We see this when he speaks of the natural branch versus the grafted branch. He also speaks of those who by nature are without the law [Romans 2:14] or uncircumcised [2:27] or not Jewish [Gal. 2:15]. Paul seems to presuppose that same-sex conduct is a voluntary choice. Suppose there is an inbornness as the basis for homosexuality? Is it then unnatural for the homosexual to act as a heterosexual? Being born homosexual, how can lesbians and gays "give up" their "natural" for "unnatural" sex? Would, according to Paul, that be a perversion?
5. What is the penalty to which Paul refers?
6. Why does he use the term "unnatural" and not "sin"? Is Paul dealing with the purity laws here, raising again the issue of pagan practices?
7. Is Paul contrasting Jewish and Gentile culture as he writes to the Romans? Is his idea of same sex relationships based on the practices of the use of "call-boys" and "males who go to be with males," pederasty?
8. Does Paul deal here with non-exploitative, committed, and monogamous same-sex relationships?

1 Corinthians 6:9-10

Paul writes here in response to a case of heterosexual immorality, chapter 5's case of a man living with his father's wife. This leads him into a discussion of acceptable Christian behavior, and he gives a list of sinful characteristics. He states that these behaviors are symptomatic of sin and not its roots and essence. This list of symptoms includes: willful, avaricious, lustful, self-deceiving, exploitive, self-absorbed actions. All of which are seen as unrighteousness. Depending on the translation you consult, here are included fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, sodomites, homosexuals,¹⁰ thieves, the greedy, drunkards, slanderers, swindlers. Paul's understanding of these behaviors must have been influenced by this fact: "All of those instances consider abuses; none of those texts concerns itself with relationships in which there is not exploitation."¹¹

Galatians 2:11-21

These verses make clear that Jewish dietary laws could not be required of Gentiles, as they became Christians. Belief, not circumcision, is the mark of a Christian.

What is the implication for the rest of Leviticus? How do we judge the status of LGBT persons in the community of faith who profess and live out faith? In Romans 10:9 Paul clearly states that faith is what saves: "because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved."

1 Timothy 1:8-10

Included here is the term ‘sodomites’ in a list of the lawless and disobedient. The term refers in scripture almost exclusively to ‘male prostitute.’ The term “malakos” means: sick, liquid, cowardly, refined, weak willed, delicate, gentle, debauched. Traditionally, and until the 19th century, it was deemed to refer to masturbation. Neither of these is congruent to the term “homosexuality” which we use today.

Jesus’ Silence

We end where we began, on an issue of silence. What does Jesus say or not say? Except where Jesus names the sin of Sodom as “inhospitality,” Jesus is silent on both the behaviors identified in Leviticus and those Paul cites that have been interpreted to speak to the contemporary manifestations of LGBT presence and behavior. What Jesus says is that persons are blessed of God by their faith, rather than behavior, origins, or status. He makes that clear as he deals with the Canaanite Woman, who is outside the Jewish community. She is blessed by Jesus for her faith, regardless of her ethnicity, gender, religious practice, or anything else. See Matthew 15:21-28. What Jesus does is include the marginalized, the outcast, those deemed impure, the sexually condemned, the feminine, and, by implication, all those who were considered to be outside the acceptability of God, and, hence, the Jewish religious community. Jesus includes the whole of creation as graced and claimed by God’s unconditional love. This meant that he welcomed into relationship with himself lepers, women who are bleeding, sexually loose women, and Samaritans. Jeffrey Siker summarizes the situation in these words:

Thus the Bible has relatively little to say that directly informs us about how to address the issue of homosexuality, but neither does it expressly exclude loving monogamous homosexual adult Christian relationships from being within the realm of God’s intentions for humanity.¹²

But the values that the Bible holds as true can inform our thinking and our preaching as we help our people wrestle with the LBGT controversy that pervades the Church and society as a whole. But we as preachers must wrestle with the issues ourselves and not shy away from the scriptures that speak to the issues both directly and indirectly, keeping in mind that the true meaning and spirit of scripture are not found in its parts, but are found most honestly and authentically in its whole.

Additional Resources

- Birch, Bruce C. and Larry L. Rasmussen. *Bible and Ethics in the Christian Life*. Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1989.
- Boswell, John. *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1980.
- Countryman, William L. *Dirt, Greed, and Sex: Sexual Ethics in the New Testament and Their Implications for Today*. Philadelphia PA: Fortress Press, 1988.

- Spong, John Shelby. *Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism: A Bishop Rethinks the Meaning of Scripture*. San Francisco, CA: Harper Collins, 1991.

Notes

1. Gomes, Peter J. *The Good Book: Reading the Bible with Mind and Heart*, New York, New York: Avon Books, p. 14.
2. Ibid, p. 36.
3. Perhaps the first task of our preaching is to disabuse our congregants of the idea that the original Bible is the King James Version, that the Scriptures were “dictated” in English. This concept is widely held, even when it is not articulated, and is supported by Christian leaders who denigrated the use of any other translation of the scriptures for use in their communities of faith.
4. The fact that you do not hear such a statement as, “It is Adam and Eve, not Alice and Eve,” for example, give pause for thought about how heterosexism and sexism in general are related. Even when homophobia is operative heterosexism holds sway.
5. An old belief was that the baby came from the man, with the woman contributing only an “incubator” for the baby’s development and a channel for its delivery. See Sebastian Kramer’s “The Origin of Fatherhood: An Ancient Family Process.” *Fam Process*. 1991; (Dec) 30:377-392
6. Note that the relationship between Adam and Eve is not formalized by any ritual approximating marriage, not is their relationship based on personal choice, such as status or power, nor on feelings, such as love or lust. It is a God-given relationship, according to God’s own choosing and creation.
7. This includes marriages where either or both the husband and wife are unable to produce children because of fertility issues of health or age.
8. Furnish, Victor, *The Moral Teachings of Paul*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1979, p.57.
9. See *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, Volume II, Nashville; Abingdon Press, 1998, pp. 876-9.
10. Which is also translated as effeminate and those who abuse themselves with mankind.
11. *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, Volume X, Nashville; Abingdon Press, 2002, p. 859.
12. Siker, Jeffrey. “How to Decide: Homosexual Christians, the Bible, and Gentile Inclusion,” *Theology Today*, July 1994, p.229.