

The Bible, Ethics and Homosexuality

Why Christians should disagree in Love

But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, knowing from whom you learned it, and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in justice, so that the godly person may be equipped for every good work. (2 Tim 3:14–17)

When this letter was first written, it was referring only to the Old Testament, or Jewish scriptures. It would be more than two centuries before the New Testament books were formally recognized as scripture. Yet we now bring the same confidence to the whole Bible, working towards fresh convictions that are enabled by the Holy Spirit. Paul provides us with a model of how to read the Old Testament with discernment, and in light of Christ.

As Christians, we have confidence in the whole Bible, interpreting each part of Scripture in light of the other parts. Often we are inspired by a single verse, but there are also instances where a single verse can only be understood in light of a wider context. For example, if every verse were an independent sanction for Christian ethics, we would:

- sacrifice animals in church
- eat only kosher food, in accordance with the law of Moses
- compel rapists to marry their victims (Deut 22:28–29)
- be justified in owning foreign slaves (Lev 25:44–46).

We do not do these things, because Jesus has reinterpreted the ethics of the Hebrew Scriptures. It is therefore extremely important to understand the principles of biblical interpretation that shape Christian ethics – the way we live before God.

One of the most important principles of evangelical biblical ethics is that we look for continuities between the two Testaments before arriving at values for the present. According to the apostle Paul, Gentile followers of Jesus were freed from the details of the Law of Moses, and instead bound by “the law of Christ” (Gal 6:2). The spirit of the law was summed up in two basic principles: love the Lord your God (Deut 6:5) and love your neighbour as yourself (Lev 19:18; quoted in Mk 12:28–31; Matt 22:35–40; Lk 10:25–28). Preserving these principles at the centre of Christian ethics, the church is free to discern what the Holy Spirit is telling us in new contexts (Jn 16:13).

Christians very quickly enjoyed their freedom to eat food that was not kosher, and to replace sacrifice with prayer. Even the Jerusalem Council’s agreement only to eat meat with the blood properly drained (Acts 15) was eventually left behind. Love for God and neighbour could be maintained while exercising these new freedoms. But on the issue of slavery, British and American Christians maintained the consistency of the biblical witnesses even up until the nineteenth century: as difficult as it is for us to grasp today,

both Old and New Testaments permitted slavery (1 Cor 7:20–24; 1 Peter 2:18–21). The American Civil War was fought over this issue, with Christians on both sides.

The Bible and Homosexuality

Today, it seems that the issue that is most divisive in the churches is homosexuality. A few biblical verses can be selected from both Testaments in order to conclude that homosexual practice is sinful. Yet many Christians dispute the implications of these verses, just as the slavery texts were disputed in the nineteenth century.

1 Cor 6:9–11 provides a list of people who will not inherit the kingdom of God: idolaters, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, slanderers, and the sexually immoral – whether adulterers, or men who have sex with men. A similar list of sins is provided in 1 Tim 1:9–10, this time adding murderers and kidnappers. 1 Tim 1:10 uses the same unusual Greek term for male homosexual practice that is used in 1 Cor 6:9, “man bedders”, a term that seems to be derived from the Greek translation of Lev 20:13. This verse in Leviticus prescribes the death penalty for male homosexual practice.

The New Testament does not see the Jewish civil law applying to Gentiles nor expect a banning of homosexual practice to be enforced by the weight of the state. But regardless of our sin in the past, hope is provided for all: “and this is what some of you used to be, but you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and the Spirit of our God” (1 Cor 6:11).

The male homosexual practices most evident in Graeco-Roman culture of the first century were exploitative in various ways, including pederasty (sexual use of adolescents). Paul regards these practices as examples of injustice. Those Christians who want to welcome homosexual people into our churches emphasize that any abusive or exploitative sexuality is sinful, but today we are able to conceive of a faithful homosexual relationship between equals, which is not an abuse of power.

Scholars disagree about whether Paul would have known examples of faithful homosexual relationships between equals. If he did know of such relationships, he would probably have condemned them on the same grounds that he condemns lesbianism in Romans 1:26–27. In both cases, he regards these sexual practices as “against” or “beyond nature”.

It is interesting to notice, however, that Paul also regards God’s *grace* as “beyond nature” in Rom 11:24, using the same Greek phrase in a positive sense. While it might be “natural” to feel superior, Paul says in Romans 11, grace should lead us to act “beyond nature”, i.e., if we understand grace rightly, we can only act humbly and not be judgmental of others. This is very similar to his overall point in Romans 1. The chapter flows from the sexual sins mentioned in vs 26–27 to the longer list of sins in 1:28–31 in order to argue that all have sinned, and therefore, there are no grounds for boasting about one’s superior ethical life. Do not pass judgment, Paul says, lest you bring judgment on yourselves (Rom 2:1–4). Instead, simply persist in doing good (2:7).

So, if we are convinced that Paul sees both male and female homosexual practice as sin in Romans 1, regardless of whether it is abusive or not, we should still be challenged to

ask ourselves how this should impact on the church's policies and practices. How does the church humbly persist in doing good?

Setting Biblical Priorities

While there are five or six references to homosexual sins in the Bible, and each of these are subject to disputes about their meaning, there are some 2,000 references to poverty that are very clear in comparison. Even these raw statistics should make us wonder why the current round of bitter controversies within the churches is focused on gay marriage rather than on the eradication of poverty.

When Paul recounts his visit to Jerusalem in Galatians 2, he mentions the controversies about what minimal requirements should be expected of Gentile believers. The outcome was "They asked only one thing, that we remember the poor, which is actually what I was eager to do" (2:10).

It is unclear whether this was the same meeting in Jerusalem that is mentioned in Acts 15, but in Acts the list of requirements is outlined differently: "For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements: that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well" (Acts 15:28–29).

Even this list was open to interpretation. The question of food offered to idols returns in a surprisingly complex way in 1 Corinthians 8 and 10. Paul begins by acknowledging that idols are ultimately empty, and so we might wonder why meat offered to idols really needs to be avoided. His message to "the strong" is to take care with their freedom. While freedom from the Law of Moses may mean, in principle, that "everything is permissible", not everything builds up the community. People need to be sensitive to those whose consciences are troubled. Paul gives direct advice not to eat this meat in the temple of an idol (8:10), yet away from public view, where questions are not raised, the believer is free to eat anything (10:23–32).

Paul does not resolve these difficult questions by universal rules, applied without regard for context. Nor does he regard freedom as an absolute value. Rather, freedom is properly shaped by love, and directed to the goal of building up the community. Thus, Gal 5:13 says, "For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another". In effect, Paul has modified the conditions set by the Jerusalem Council, while remaining bound by the rule of love.

Can we discern an analogy between the issue of idol meat in Corinthians and the controversies concerning homosexuality today? Without seeking to identify who is now the "stronger" or "weaker" party, many gay Christians claim that their consciences are clear in asserting their new freedom, because they affirm the traditional Christian ideal of faithful partnerships and mutual self-giving. They exhibit the fruit of the Spirit in their lives (cf. Acts 10:45). Other Christians cannot find a clear conscience on these issues, and regard homosexual practice as a symptom of idolatry and misplaced sexual identity.

A key challenge before all of us, regardless of our sexuality, is not to lose sight of our

primary identity as brothers and sisters in Christ. We cannot afford to fall back into a new civil war, such as the war over slavery, or perhaps a new culture war. We should not delude ourselves into thinking that no blood has been shed in this war; a young gay Christian recently took his own life in Melbourne, as have many others in the past. Even if the majority of Baptist churches continue to regard committed homosexual relationships as sinful, we must find ways to be less judgmental – presuming bad faith on the part of others, or an insincere conscience. Otherwise we cannot claim to have a humble understanding of grace.

Regardless of the differences between the churches on these issues, we need to love one another. Are we to be known for our love, or for our infighting? What are the best ways for churches to be showing a loving way forward, rather than pressing for a scenario in which there are winners and losers?

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