

WHAT IS “CLEARLY CONTRARY TO SCRIPTURE” IN DISCUSSIONS OF THE CHURCH AND HOMOSEXUALITY?

Reflections on the Eastern Synod Assembly 2004

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At our recent Synod Assembly, I heard some delegates say that homosexual practice is “clearly contrary to Scripture.” In the words of Luther’s *Small Catechism*, “This is most certainly true” — in the few passages that actually mention homosexual practice. When I tried to engage some of those speakers in a discussion of where homosexuality or homosexual practice fits in the wider witness of the Bible, and how we decide what in the Bible most informs our faith and life, I was told that I was not taking the Bible seriously enough. Some even said that this one particular issue is at the root and base of our faith.

Really?

When I read the Bible I don’t hear Jesus talk about homosexuality at all. By contrast, he roundly condemns divorce, which, as serious a problem as it is, no one is saying should be a “make it or break it” issue for the church.

To say that all proponents of the motion welcoming gays and lesbians (along with many members of other minorities) are ignorant of or willfully undercutting “scriptural authority” is simply not true. Maybe some do so in honest ignorance, just as some who object to the welcoming motion act in honest ignorance. Certainly, the issue of scriptural authority requires more thought and less accusation than it often receives.

Sadly, there are indeed persons representing what might be called a “liberal” position on homosexuality who do in fact undercut scriptural authority. Shortly after returning from the Assembly I heard on the radio two B.C. clergy (whose denomination I didn’t catch) who said they decided to bring up the topic in their Sunday sermon. To my surprise, what they said was something like this: “Some say the Bible condemns homosexuality. We are twenty-first century Christians. We don’t need a book to tell us what to do”.

That is not what I believe. I *do* think that our book — the Bible — is, after Christ (1 Cor. 3:11), the foundation and bedrock of our faith. Here I agree with those I spoke with at Synod Assembly about these issues who insist on the authority of scripture. But unlike them I very much disagree that the welcoming motion we affirmed, or the motions to study blessing of same-sex couples or the ordination of qualified gays/lesbians are “clearly contrary to Scripture”. And I think the answer to

our differences lies in whether we base ourselves on the *whole* Bible, in getting to know it better, not picking and choosing what we choose to apply and then assuming we are listening to the whole of scripture.

In summary, my argument is this:

1. We Lutherans are a church built on the authority of Scripture. Unlike those preachers I heard on the radio, we should, with Luther, say: Yes, we do rely on a book to tell us what to do, for sometimes the Bible knows us better than we know ourselves (cf. Luther's *Large Catechism*, Lord's Supper, #75, p 455 in the Tappert edition of *The Book of Concord*). "The Bible is our "mirror," for it shows us, not what we want, but as we really are...what God wants us to see. We are a scriptural church, and the Bible is the basis for our preaching, teaching, community life and prayer.
2. BUT, having said that, we must really get to know the Bible instead of brandishing it as a selectively-quoted, discussion-ending, silenced-except-when-we-want-it-to-speak heavyweight. That means getting to know the detail of scripture, its complexity in both Old and New Testaments, and the Bible's overall message, starting (but not ending), I believe, with the great commandment to love God and neighbour. Martin Luther again (Preface to the *Large Catechism*): "Nothing is so effectual against the devil, the world, the flesh, and all evil thoughts as to occupy oneself with the Word of God, talk about it, and meditate on it" (Tappert edition, p. 359). It is never enough to quote one passage and then assume no one else can say anything. That is the route to sinful ignorance, not Biblical knowledge. The Bible is not a weapon — it is in the first place a proclamation of God's love and grace, as well as a guide to life and most of all to love.
3. Whether or not we know it, we are already taking some parts of the Bible more seriously — and more literally — than other parts. Everyone does. Jesus did. Which is more important? The prohibition against stealing (Exodus 20:15) or the prohibition against tattoos (Leviticus 19:28)? In fact, the latter is if anything more strongly stated, because it is tied to the name of the Lord. In the verses that follow (Lev. 19:33-34) one finds some interesting instructions that we could apply to our current immigration policies. Are we Christians picketing tattoo parlours or Canada Customs and Immigration offices? How many are aware that Scripture forbids charging interest to anyone but "a foreigner" (Exodus 22:25; Deut 23:19-20) or for that matter to anyone (Ezekiel 18:5-13, where the taking of interest occurs alongside idolatry, adultery, robbery, and murder as mortal sins; at the Assembly I didn't hear any objections to the Synod's investments' earning money through charging of interest). If we were only to go by frequency of mention in the Bible, then the usual marital pattern "condoned" by the Bible would be polygamy! Such examples of how we Christians selectively apply scripture abound.
4. We need to be more honest about how we apply the Bible to our daily lives. I am not saying this to undermine the authority of Scripture, but to show how the Bible has MORE authority when we are honest about how we already live in relationship to God's Word. If we were not supposed to take some parts of Scripture as being more important than others, we would

still be like the religious leaders of his day whom Jesus called “white-washed tombs” (in other words, dead on the inside) because of their superficial Biblical exegesis (Matthew 23:27). Jesus condemned those religious leaders precisely because they “tithed...but ignore the weightier matters of the law.” He then spelled out what these more important parts of scripture actually are: “justice and mercy and faith” (Matthew 23:23). When we throw Bible passages at each other (or more often, just “the Bible says...” without specifics), how often is it in the service of “justice and mercy, and faith”?

5. If we are accused of ignoring or over-riding scripture, we are in good company. This is what Jesus was often accused of (see the Appendix below).
6. The Bible can be made to prove opposing points of view. Don't believe me? Check out the Devil and Jesus in Luke 4:1-15 — BOTH of them are quoting scripture, the point being that some uses of scripture are spurious and others valid. I am constantly amazed by those Christians who believe that there is only one way of reading the Bible. Our own Lutheran birth as a church of the Reformation should tell us otherwise. The Reformation came about when Luther (and other reformers) began to read the Bible differently than the religious leaders of the day did. Since there is more than one way to read the Bible, it follows necessarily that all of us use some kind of guiding principle when we read the Bible — whether we want to admit it or not. Better to make it conscious, I should think.
7. Our guiding principle for reading the Bible (that is, the most important part of the Bible that can then be used to help interpret the other parts) should be those parts which point to Christ and to God's love for the world in Jesus. This is the principle Luther used (it is the reason that he didn't want to include the book of James in his translation of the New Testament, and was reluctant about Revelation).
8. I challenge you to discover what your “primary” Biblical themes and passages are. Some call this the “canon within the canon” approach. After study, you will no doubt have your own “favourite passages” that will guide your reading of the rest of the Bible. Some of mine are the following: “If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who has reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation” (2 Cor 5:17-18). “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you” (John 15: 12). “Everyone who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. The rain fell, the floods came, the wind blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock” (Matthew 7:24-25). “[Christ] has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins” (Col 1:13-14). “By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things” (Gal 5:22). I could go on a long time -- Isaiah 55:1-3, and many, many others, but this list is a good start for me. What about you?

So, yes, let's talk about scripture when we talk about homosexuality. But let's talk about the WHOLE Bible, and avoid throwing around accusations about who is and who is not taking our Good

Book seriously. I believe that to welcome gays and lesbians is following the example of Jesus, for in my reading it was not he but the religious leaders of his day, and his disciples on a couple of occasions, who were unwelcoming. I for one do not believe that the issue of homosexuality is a central issue to our faith. But I *do* believe that how we treat the Bible is one of those central issues, and so in light of those who claim this issue as central to the Bible and to their faith I have written this little piece to offer an alternative view that I believe takes the Bible seriously.

APPENDIX

Jesus was accused of ignoring and contradicting Scripture by his opponents because (a) he didn't agree with their interpretations of Scripture, especially when it came to his reception of "immoral" people, and (b) because he claimed that he was a higher authority even than the Scripture.

- In stories like the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) Jesus specifically reinforced the Biblical priority of acts of "loving kindness" and overrode certain Scriptural prohibitions (for example, "cleanness" and "uncleanness," and what is required to be in God's presence) in favour of what he called "the greatest commandment." The greatest commandment, or the summary of all commandments, is to "love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind, and your neighbour as yourself" (Luke 10:27; Mark 12:30-31; Matt. 23:37-39).
- In another incident (Matthew 12:1-8) when Jesus was attacked as ignoring Scripture by letting his disciples work on the Sabbath, Jesus responds by citing the example of King David, who broke certain holiness rules, and a passage from the prophets (Hos. 6:6). Most importantly, he declares that he is the Lord of the Sabbath, and by implication, a more important authority even than the Scriptures. Centuries later, Luther would say the same thing about Jesus, by noting that we do not worship the Scriptures and they are not Christ himself; rather, they are "the cradle of Christ."
- In his Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5-7) Jesus again and again quotes Scripture and then reinterprets it for his listeners using the words: "you have said...but I say to you". "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets," he says; "I have come not to abolish but to fulfill." It is this kind of leadership from Jesus that led the early Christians to call their scriptures the "New" Testament, and to see in them a life-giving revelation of what God's love means interpreted through the life, death, and especially resurrection of Jesus, the Christ.