

## **The Misuse and Abuse of Scripture and Tradition**

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Claims by some Christians that scripture and tradition “clearly” teach that gay and lesbian persons should be discouraged and marginalized in Christian churches are false. Real knowledge of the text of scripture and the history of Christian churches shows that opposition to gay and lesbian Christians and their full inclusion in the church is motivated not by loyalty to scripture and tradition but by prejudice and discrimination.

I offer here theses that for the most part summarize fuller arguments from Dale B. Martin, *Sex and the Single Savior: Gender and Sexuality in Biblical Interpretation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006).

### **The Bible doesn't “speak.” It must be interpreted.**

When people talk about “what the Bible *says* about sexuality,” they are using a metaphor that has confused them into thinking that the Bible actually exercises its own agency in “telling” people what to do. The fact is, the Bible, or any text, cannot speak. It must be read by human beings. The *necessity* of interpretation to get meaning out of the text of scripture is something all Christians must come to admit. Otherwise, they simply blame their own prejudicial interpretations of the text on scripture itself rather than on their interpretive activities.

Anglicans have recognized this for centuries, but conservative people in recent years, influenced by twentieth-century American forms of fundamentalism and evangelicalism, are ignorant of that Anglican history and theology and have adopted modern ways of speaking about scripture "saying" certain things. This is a modern epistemological foundationalism that did not plague premodern Christians.

As Rowan Greer has shown (Greer is professor emeritus at Yale University Divinity School and Berkeley Divinity School, having served as professor of patristics and Anglican studies from 1966 to 1997; he is also a priest), Anglican theologians repeatedly stressed that they also, along with more "radical reformers," confessed that scripture is "infallible." But they immediately added that *every human interpretation of scripture* is indeed "fallible." (See Rowan A. Greer, *Anglican Approaches to Scripture: From the Reformation to the Present* [New York: Crossroads, 2006].)

Richard Hooker (ca. 1554-1600) taught that Christians must not identify their own interpretations of scripture with scripture itself, and therefore we may never claim that the meaning we think we see in scripture is "infallible," *even if* we confess, as a matter of faith, that *scripture* is "infallible" (Greer, 15, 29). John Locke noted that even if we declare scripture to be infallible, "the reader may be, nay cannot choose but to be very fallible in the understanding of it" (Greer, 78). As Greer's study shows, the sentiment was repeated throughout the history of Anglicanism. When some people condemn modern lesbian and gay Christians

simply by saying that "the Bible says..." they are not only masking their own interpretive agency; they are also betraying a long tradition of Anglican teaching about the *necessity* of human interpretation and its fallibility. "The Bible" does not condemn modern homosexual persons; conservative Christians do by interpreting the Bible to do so. The fault is theirs, not that of scripture.

This is an important point. What Anglican divines were saying is that Christians may confess that scripture is entirely reliable on the essentials of faith, that scripture will not lead Christians to perdition. But *all* our access to the *meanings* of scripture must come through *human interpretation*. And we human beings are all quite fallible. Since there is no access to the meaning of scripture apart from human interpretation, and since we humans are fallible in our interpretations of scripture, any attempt by Christians confidently to base the condemnation of other Christians on some imagined "foundation" of "what the Bible says" is dangerous. What those Christians are using is not "scripture itself" but *their interpretation of scripture*, which is indeed open to error.

**The Bible does not clearly prohibit modern homosexual relations.**

Appeals to Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 must be dismissed entirely. As has been repeatedly pointed out, the same texts give rules about all sorts of activities – forbidding certain foods or wearing certain kinds of cloth – that modern Christians ignore. If people want to cite the laws of Leviticus as grounds for forbidding homosexuality, they should themselves command circumcision of

all Christian men and the following of a kosher diet. Otherwise, they are hypocrites.

Paul's statements in Romans 1 likewise provide no grounds for condemning modern homosexuality. Paul nowhere explicitly prohibits homosexual sex. In Romans 1, Paul refers to the beginnings of idolatry and polytheism and claims that God punished the Gentiles (not the Jews, who, according to the legend Paul refers to, avoided idolatry and polytheism) *for their idolatry* by "giving them up to desire" (Romans 1:26; note that Paul does not specify this as "homosexual desire"; for Paul, all sexual desire is objectionable and polluting, and he never differentiates homosexual from heterosexual desire; see *Sex and the Single Savior*, 65-76). Paul says that women exchanged "natural intercourse for unnatural." He does not say what exactly counts as "unnatural." Modern people who read this as a reference to lesbian sexual relations are reading that into the text. In the ancient world, sex was considered "unnatural" simply if the woman took an "active" role in any kind of sexual behavior (such as penetrating a man, or being "on top"). All oral sex was considered "unnatural," and that could be what the text here refers to. We simply do not know.

Paul does refer to men having sexual relations with one another in Romans 1:27. But it must be noted that Paul mentions same-sex behavior here *not* in a simple condemnation of it, but as an instance of God's punishment of Gentiles for the sin of idolatry and polytheism. Modern Christians do not believe (as Paul did) that homosexuality is the result of polytheism and idolatry. Modern

homosexual Christians are no more guilty of polytheism and idolatry than modern heterosexual Christians. Since the rationale and reasoning undergirding Paul's statements about homosexual sex are not shared by modern Christians, they need not share his views of male homosexual sexual relations expressed in Romans 1. To do so is to turn a mythological narrative assumed by Paul into a modern ethical rule. That is not sound interpretation of scripture. (See *Sex and the Single Savior*, 51-64.)

The translation of the Greek word *arsenokoitês* in 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10 to refer to modern homosexuals is erroneous. The word is often said to mean "men who have sex with men" because it is a compound word combining "male" (*arsen*) with "bed" (*koitês*). But defining a compound word by taking it apart and defining each component or by looking for its etymology is bad scholarship. "To understand" does not mean "to stand under." Words must be defined by examining their usage in different contexts. And the truth is that *no one*—no scholar, no historian, no expert in Greek—*knows* what *arsenokoitês* meant in the first century because we possess too few occurrences of the word in extant literature.

The few times we do find *arsenokoitês* (or related forms, such as *arsenokoitia*) independent of mere quotations of Paul's own list suggest that the word did *not* refer to simple male-male sexual relations. In *Sibylline Oracle* 2.70-77 the word (in the form of a verb) occurs in a vice list that includes stealing, withholding wages from workers, oppressing the poor, and other acts deemed

"unjust." No "sexual" sins are listed in the section. These are all sins related to economic injustice, which suggests that whatever *arsenokoitein* referred to, it must have been understood as relating to economic injustice, not simply sex. This observation is strengthened by the fact that the same Sibylline oracle elsewhere *does* provide a list of "sexual" sins, and *arsenokoitein* is not in that list (2.278-82).

The same situation occurs in the second-century *Acts of John*. The word *arsenokoitês* occurs in a list of sinners including "poisoner, sorcerer, robber, swindler, thief." Nowhere in this context are specifically "sexual" sins mentioned, though, again, they *do* occur elsewhere in the *Acts of John*, and again, there is no mention among the sexual sins of *arsenokoitês*. (For more examples, see *Sex and the Single Savior*, 37-50.) We have little evidence, but all we possess indicates that the word taken by some modern Christians to refer to homosexual men in fact must refer to some kind of economic exploitation and injustice.

The other Greek word taken by some modern Christians as a reference to homosexual men is *malakos*, which also occurs in 1 Corinthians 6:9. In this case, we do know the normal meaning of the word in ancient Greek. And contrary to false translations, it is *not* "homosexual" or "the passive partner in male-male homosexual sex." The word literally means "soft," and in the ancient world it was taken, when used in reference to men, to mean "effeminate." Indeed, the word *malakos* was *correctly* translated as some form of "effeminate" in almost all English translations from the 16<sup>th</sup> century until the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, at which time translators began substituting some word that implied

homosexuality, such as "catamite," "sodomite," "male prostitute," or simply "perversion." These are ideological translations rendered to condemn or marginalize gay people.

The word means simply an "effeminate man." But modern interpreters have not wanted to translate it that way because they no longer see "effeminacy" as a "sin," though many of them *do* think homosexuality is a sin. So they changed the translation in the 20<sup>th</sup> century to reflect modern prejudices, not for good historical or philological reasons. Neither *arsenokoitês* nor *malakos* can be shown to refer simply to modern homosexuals. In the first century, *arsenokoitia* referred to some kind of economic exploitation (perhaps by means of sex, though we don't know); *malakos* referred to effeminacy, expressing the dominant gender bias and misogyny of ancient cultures. This is not to say that we in the modern church should return to misogyny. It is just to point out that these texts do not support the condemnation of gay men or lesbians.

### **The texts are problematic as "rules" for modern sexual guidance.**

The Bible does not "say" what modern conservatives claim it says. There are very few references to sexual contact between men or between women in the Bible at all. To take those few references to function as "laws" or "rules" for modern behavior is ideological misconstrual. In fact, the Bible, if read historically and literally (and this may not be always the best way to read scripture, as Christian history and tradition can show), can be made much more easily to

forbid marriage and the family, to prohibit divorce and remarriage, to condemn wealth (in fact, anything but poverty), and to deny equality to women. (See *Sex and the Single Savior*, 77-90, 103-147.)

Simply comparing the scores of different interpretations of Romans 1 demonstrates that just "reading the text" *cannot* provide a dependable consensus for Christian ethics – precisely because so many honest and well-trained scholars read the text in different ways, often coming to *diametrically opposite* conclusions. (See *Sex and the Single Savior*, 17-35.) The modern use of the Bible as an epistemological foundation for ethics has led churches and Christians into terrible conflicts and confusion. Scripture must be used differently than as an "answer book," a "rule book," or an "owner's manual." That is not the way Anglicans have traditionally read scripture (see further, for example, Greer, *Anglican Approaches to Scripture*), and it should not be the way we read scripture today.

Scripture may indeed provide guidance for issues related to gay and lesbian people today, but not in a simplistic "rule-giving" manner. For example, some scholars have suggested that the modern church should look to the Acts of the Apostles. Just as the early Jewish church accepted Gentiles *as Gentiles* without requiring circumcision or dietary observances from them, so the modern heterosexual church should accept gay and lesbian Christians as full members of the church *as they are*. After all, all Jewish tradition and scripture were then taken as requiring Gentile men to be circumcised before they could become part of the

"people of Israel." The early leaders of the church, according to Acts, looked beyond what they had always accepted as the clear teaching of *scripture and tradition* in order to accept fully the Gentiles on the basis of evidence that God had accepted them by giving them the Holy Spirit. Early Christian leaders looked at the lives of the Gentile converts and took their *experiences of receiving the Spirit* to be evidence that God had already accepted them as full members of the church. Churches today should do the same with regard to gay and lesbian Christians. God has accepted us, as is witnessed by the gift of the Spirit we have received. Why can't Christians today?

**The church's stand on different sexual and familial issues has changed radically over the centuries, with modern Protestantism a "heresy" by the standards of most of Christian history.**

Conservative Christians claim that the acceptance of homosexuality in the church would be a radical, even "heretical" departure from centuries of Christian tradition, practice, and belief. But this denies that the church has in its history made changes no less fundamental regarding sexuality and the family. In fact, those same conservative Christians, along with just about all modern Christians, would be considered "heretical" by the standards of centuries of previous Christian orthodoxy.

Modern Christians, especially but not exclusively Protestants, assume that sexual relations within the confines of marriage are just as virtuous as celibacy.

In fact, most modern Christians really consider the married state the "better" or at least more "normal" Christian state. They regularly identify the modern heterosexual nuclear family as *the* traditional Christian ideal. Nothing could be further from the long sweep of Christian tradition and doctrine.

The historical Jesus certainly did not encourage marriage and the traditional family but rather actively discouraged marriage and attempted to replace the traditional household with a new, eschatological community. (For this and what follows, see *Sex and the Single Savior*, 91-124.) Jesus probably did forbid divorce and remarriage (see Matthew 19:6; Mark 10:6-9). But that implies no advocacy of marriage. After all, almost all the church fathers viewed marriage as only a "second best" alternative to celibacy – and many believed that *any* sexual activity *even in marriage* polluted Christians – yet they also believed that divorce was absolutely prohibited. (See Elizabeth A. Clark, *Reading Renunciation: Asceticism and Scripture in Early Christianity* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999].)

Paul, in 1 Corinthians 7, taught that the avoidance of marriage and sex was a superior state to the married state. He taught that Christians should avoid sexual desire entirely. "It is better to marry than to burn" offers only an either/or: "burn" with desire, which is sin, or marry in order to avoid "burning" with desire. Paul is even clearer, though, that Christians who avoid marriage and sex have chosen the better way. If they do marry, they are not to divorce. And if

they do divorce, they are not to remarry. The church has become remarkably silent about these texts of scripture.

Until the sixteenth or seventeenth centuries, the entire church taught much the same thing. In the 390's in Rome, a Christian named Jovinian began teaching that the married state equaled celibacy in virtue. He taught not that marriage was superior to celibacy, as is assumed by most modern Christians, but merely that those who married were of equal virtue with those who were celibate. And he taught that married Christians would enjoy the same rewards in the afterlife as would virgins.

Jovinian and his associates were condemned by a council and the bishop of Rome, Pope Siricius. Siricius not only declared Jovinian's teachings an "error." He proclaimed that any teaching that made marriage of equal virtue with celibacy was "heresy." He excommunicated Jovinian and his friends. Bishop Ambrose thereafter called a council in Milan and also condemned Jovinian and his teaching. St. Jerome followed suit with a scathing attack on Jovinian and called his teachings "heresy." St. Augustine also wrote against Jovinian. The Pope and three of the most important church fathers all declared it "heresy" to believe that marriage was *equal* to celibacy, much less superior. The official Christian doctrine became Augustine's position: sexual activity was "good" *only* in the context of marriage and *only for purposes of procreation*.

This was Christian teaching until Anglicans and Puritans reversed those values and began teaching, in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, that marriage was better

than celibacy. This was a radical departure and an *overturning* of fifteen centuries of church orthodoxy. For modern conservatives to say that advocating same-sex marriage is "heresy" and a departure from centuries of church doctrine is ironic at the very least. The modern valuing of marriage as equal or superior to celibacy would have been considered heretical by popes, bishops, and saints for the first fifteen centuries of Christianity. In comparison, advocating the recognition of same-sex unions along the lines of already recognized heterosexual marriage constitutes a modest innovation indeed.

**The rule of interpretation should be love.**

Rather than thinking we can "base" modern ethics on some simplistic appeal to scripture or tradition, Christians should follow St. Augustine and other fathers and teach that the best guide for the interpretation of scripture and decision-making about ethics is whether something promotes the "love of God and neighbor." It is not loving to take the position of conservative bishops and Anglicans. If sex is good, then it must be good for gay people also. If sex is not good, then the church should discourage sex for all Christians — *as the church did for most of its history.*

The difference between the "conservative" and the "progressive" positions on this issue is *not* that one is "true" to scripture and tradition and the other is not. Rather, the difference is that the conservative position rejects the obvious truth that scripture must be interpreted — and that interpretation is an

active and ethical activity. Scripture, in Anglican tradition, may be "infallible," but also, in Anglican tradition, human interpretation of scripture is always "fallible." The issue is not what scripture "says," but how we, as Christians attempting to be moral and Christian, should *interpret* scripture and tradition. To interpret scripture and tradition to exclude gay and lesbian Christians is to advocate injustice and intolerance. It is not the way of interpretation advocated by St. Augustine: to make sure all interpretations advance the love of God and neighbor.