

Homosexuality & The Use of Scripture

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Over the course of my adult life I have witnessed a remarkable falling away, for many people, of the biblical foundations for one after another of our deepest and most destructive prejudices:

- Racial discrimination and bigotry: stemming from slavery, class, old empires. But with religious justification in selective reading of words of the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures.
- Anti-Semitism: prejudice rooted in some 2000 years of history culminating in the convulsive horror of the 20th Century Holocaust. But with religious justification and encouragement from selective reading of words of Scripture.
- Subjugation of women/Male chauvinism: rooted in older lifestyles and physical attributes. But with religious justification in selective words of Scripture.

None of these are wholly absent today, but their most virulent expressions in human behavior are much more under control. Equally importantly, the biblical foundation in selected words of Scripture is increasingly less convincing. Not because Scripture carries no authority, but because 'the Bible says' followed by a few carefully chosen words is no longer adequate, in the face of the great themes of Scripture: God's creative love; God's saving grace in Torah and Gospel; human freedom; the ubiquity of sin; the law of love; the call to obedience, the promise of healing. No one can claim that these great themes have produced religious folk prepared to break with centuries old prejudice. Quite the contrary. Change has often come in other, less "religious" ways. Our understanding of the historical and social milieu from which biblical writers record the "mighty acts of God." The increase in our knowledge of human behavior, of good and evil. The victims of prejudice have themselves risen up to appeal to both justice and love. Has not God been present in all this? And, isn't this what theology is all about? Theology—and the study of the Bible—is at least partly about learning to reflect on the events around us from a God perspective. For Christians it is learning to look through the eyes of the living Christ guided by the Holy Spirit into the changes of our time.

To me the similarity is striking between the struggles against prejudice which have marked this century and our present efforts around gender orientation, around homosexuality. Like racism,

anti-Semitism, and male chauvinism, homophobia is deeply rooted in many things. Like them, an entire group of people have been marked for ridicule and discrimination not by their behavior but simply by their identity. (One great difference is obvious. Jewish and Black children are held in the arms of family and church or synagogue. Children who believe themselves homosexual often have neither family nor church.) Like them, we have been told to find the answer—God’s answer—in a selective reading of a few words in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures. And finally like them, more and more of us are coming to recognize that that sort of selective reading has largely served to undergird old prejudices rather than discover truth. We have been battered with those few words of condemnation in the Scripture. I will leave it to others to deal with them. Instead I want to change the scene and ask you, in your study of the Bible to hear its witness to those great themes of our salvation that provide both light and truth for a society deeply confused and rudderless about human sexuality, about moral commitment, about the self-discipline without which we nor our children will ever achieve true freedom or maturity. The strange thing is that I scarcely need recite the passages that bear out these themes. Many we have heard from childhood, but somehow they never get quoted in this context. I offer a few of the multitude of illustrations:

- The frank recognition and poetic celebration of human sexuality in the Hebrew Scriptures. (*Creation stories, Song of Solomon, Leviticus 19:17ff; 33*)
- The oft quoted verses from Paul on love. (*7 Cor 13*)
- Jesus’ openness to the outsider; his call to discipleship, to faithful commitment, to purity of heart. (*Matt 11:28-30; 12:9-14;16:24. Mk 3.3Iff. Lk 7:36ff. Jn 15:12-17*)
- Again in Paul, a profound view of freedom and equality in Christ and of the presence and power of sin. (*Gal 3:28, 5:16-2 4*)
- Peter’s vision and call for inclusiveness in the early church. (*Acts 10*)

Despite the too frequent outbursts of obscene violence, there is a growing tolerance abroad in the land. Some will tell you this is but one more sign of a slide to moral relativism. For most of us here certainly, it is a sign of enlightened common sense. Enlightened by what: by a better understanding of the nature of homosexuality, knowledge not available to biblical writers. By an awareness of the many friends, children, neighbors whose lives bring us not shame but joy. By a new sense of the ever enlarging community of our human family. And by the will and courage of those who call themselves gay or lesbian to affirm and lay claim to all the rights and responsibilities of a mature, loving, and gifted human being. This is the kind of enlightenment that I celebrate as the creative work of God’s free Spirit, the healing work of Christ in a world and among people who surely are held in God’s love.

The experience of my denomination (UCC) has been, like others, a difficult and often painful one. We have all had a great deal to learn, a long pilgrimage which many find it too hard to take. Fourteen years ago, in 1985, our General Synod called for the creation of so-called Open and Affirming churches. At the present time a number of our churches have declared themselves thus or are engaged in programs of study and dialogue. For us it is primarily an issue to be decided by our regional Associations. We have, across the country, a number of openly gay or lesbian ministers.

There is no doubt in my mind that, as with racism and anti-Semitism, we are on our way toward answering a call from God. We know the terrible cost of hatred and fear. We know too the power of the message we receive in faithful reading and meditation on Scripture. We take courage that slowly the blot of another prejudice is disappearing. We rejoice where families are reconciled. We reaffirm our commitment to live as St. Paul says, by the "fruits of the spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control" (Gal 5:22). In the world we live in today, that will be no small accomplishment.