

Homosexuality revisited

Colleagues,

This time a review of a book on homosexuality. I've been asked to discuss the topic—this very Thursday evening June 28—with a Lutheran congregation in suburban Chicago. Their last speaker was Stanton Jones, one of the two authors of this book. So for my input at the meeting this evening I've opted to do a review of that book. Here's what I came up with.

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

Stanton L. Jones & Mark A. Yarhouse
HOMOSEXUALITY. THE USE OF SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH
IN THE CHURCH'S MORAL DEBATE.
Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000. 189pp.
Paper

Recently a ThTh reader wrote to tell me about the discussion at her (Methodist) congregation on homosexuality. Betty [not her real name] said: "We have identified the main problem. It's how we regard and interpret the Bible." Wow! I thought. How fortunate to have gotten to the jugular so soon. Seems to me that she couldn't have been more on target.

But that "problem"—"how we regard and interpret the Bible"—is a very, very big one. It may just be the whole ball of wax. Not just in today's debate on this issue, but throughout Christian history—right from the beginning. For example, the conflict

between Jesus and the Judaism of his age, wasn't that a tangle between 2 conflicting ways of reading the Hebrew scriptures? Both sides often said so. Ditto for the 16th century Reformation: two different ways of reading the Bible (both OT and NT). At the time of the Augsburg Confession [1530] both sides said so. At first that perplexes. Didn't Jesus and his critics both read the Bible as devout Jews? Didn't Luther and the scholastics both read the Bible as scholarly competent late Medieval Christians? Yes to both questions. Well, thenwhence the clash?

Bob Bertram once articulated it for us at Semineax years ago with an axiom: "Biblical hermeneutics is at no point separate from Biblical soteriology." In nickel words: "How you read the Bible is always glued to how you think people get saved."

Jones and Yarhouse's book on homosexuality is a classic case study for Betty's Aha! mentioned above, how they "regard and interpret the Bible." It's also a classic for the other half of the Bertram axiom: "how they think people get saved." The first part is relatively easy to illustrate in their work; the second part not so easy. But it is nonetheless true. I shall try to show that their proposal for "how people get saved," even though they always call it "classic historic Christianity," is one proposal within Christian history. It is not the proposal coming from the Lutheran Reformation, nor the one—I know this sounds feisty—coming from Jesus as he argued both hermeneutics and soteriology with his critics.

Both authors are American evangelicals with impressive scholarly credentials in psychology from evangelical and secular schools. They know the "scientific research" literature on the subject on homosexuality. They sift it and test it by what sounds to me to be good statistical and critical analyses. They lean to the "conservative" pole in their judgments on fuzzy data—and much of

the data still is that way, I think. For example, they make a plausible case for moving the numbers down from Kinsey's (now canonical) figure of "10%" for the homosexual segment of the general population to smaller single digits. They pull no punches, but they are not ravers and screamers.

The kind of Christians they are they 'fess up from the very start: "We are defending the historic understanding of the church, grounded in the Bible's teaching, that homosexual behavior is immoral. Let us give away our punch line at the very start: We will show, persuasively we hope, that while science provides us with many interesting and useful perspectives on sexual orientation and behavior, the best science of this day fails to persuade the thoughtful Christian to change his or her moral stance. Science has nothing to offer that would even remotely constitute persuasive evidence that would compel us to deviate from the historic Christian judgment that full homosexual intimacy, homosexual behavior, is immoral. . . . We have aspired to have this book be a case study in good scholarship conducted 'through the eyes of faith.'"

"Through the eyes of faith" – aye, there's the rub. They do indeed read the Bible through the eyes of THEIR faith, and they claim that THEIR faith represents "the historic understanding of the church, grounded in the Bible's teaching." It is the final phrase "grounded in the Bible's teaching" that I want to examine. They have a specific way of reading the Bible. To give away MY punch line at the very start: their way of reading the Bible is contrary to the Bible's own Gospel, and thus in conflict with "Faith" in that Gospel. So "through the eyes of FAITH" is indeed the right way to read the Bible, but what faith, whose faith is the lens for that right reading of the Bible? And if the "faith" is badly focused, as I shall try to show, then we have here a faulty hermeneutics, which—ala the Bertram axiom—is always linked to a faulty soteriology.

The authors' way of reading the Bible is what's technically called "revelationist." The Bible reveals the will of God. That will of God is fundamentally informational. It informs us readers of things, very important things, that we would not know apart from this revelation—what God wants us to believe (faith life), how God wants us to behave (moral life), to worship, etc. From that notion of the Bible comes a parallel notion of salvation. Salvation = following the will of God by believing what God wants us to believe, behaving as God instructs us to behave, etc. Unbelievers ignore what God reveals for us to believe. Immoral people ignore God's mandates for how we are to behave.

"Through the eyes of this sort of faith" the Gospel of Jesus is one more thing, yes, the most important thing, revealed by God. And, of course, it is at the top of the list of what you "ought to believe." When you believe it you are righteous; when you don't you aren't. And the same applies to God's moral revelation. When you behave as God tells you to behave, you are moral. When you don't, you are immoral.

One reason I know this hermeneutics/soteriology well is that it describes the faith-life of my childhood nurtured by my parochial school education. It was subsequently the focal point for the *Kirchenkampf* in the Missouri Synod Lutheran church 30 yrs ago. I know. I was in it. I've got scars. And I now know that a proper label for this hermeneutics/soteriology is legalist Biblicism. It is not THE Gospel. As Paul designates it in Galatians, it is an "other" Gospel.

It was not until I learned, really learned, what the Lutheran Reformation was all about, that I saw the difference between THE Gospel and this other Gospel that I knew so well. Of course, I had teachers who showed me the way in college and seminary years: Bertram, Caemmerer, Elert, and others.

So what is the Lutheran Reformation's alternative for how to read the Bible? Long-time readers of Crossings on the Internet may begin to yawn. For that is what the text studies in "Sabbatheology" have been doing for six years. Ditto for these musings called "Thursday Theology" now in their fourth year.

How to make it simple and concise—both for the potential yawners and the more recent seekers?

1. In one of his off-the-cuff comments Luther says that when he discovered the difference between Moses and Jesus, it was his "breakthrough" for reading the Bible. "When I discovered that the law of Moses is one thing and the Gospel of Christ is something else, 'da riss ich herdurch.'" Jones-Yarhouse [hereafter JY] , as they quote the standard "clobber texts" about homosexuality from the OT and the "clobber texts" from the NT, make no distinction between them. It makes no difference that Jesus came during the time between these texts. Nowhere in their 182 pages do they ever ask: What difference does Jesus make in all this? They do note that Jesus is never quoted in the gospels saying anything about homosexuality. But the really BIG question: Since God was in Christ reconciling the world, how should we now read the Bible? How did Jesus himself "read the Bible" as he debated with his critics? They never touch that. Never ever. And from their perspective, they need not do so, since all of the Bible—old and new—is revelation from God. It is all authoritative, all equally authoritative—to be believed, to be practiced. As pious as that may sound, it is the piety of those who opposed Jesus at the outset.
2. When folks arguing from the other side of the fence on homosexuality use the Bible, they all too often use it in the same way: Biblicistically and legalistically. Both sides—the pro and the con—often concur that salvation is

fundamentally linked to doing the right thing, and sin linked to doing the wrong thing. The “libs” find ways of reading Bible passages that prove “it’s okay,” and the JY Biblicists do likewise to prove that it’s not okay. But in both instances “doing the right thing” is the measure of what’s faithful and what’s not. The common view of the Bible is: The Bible tells us what to believe and how to behave. Wasn’t that the sort of Bible-believers who rejected Jesus—and eventually crucified him? My point here is that this kind of Bible-reading can be regularly heard coming from both sides in this debate. Both are reading the Bible as a law-book of what’s Okay and not Okay. No Christ-component factors in to make any serious difference in how they read the Bible. It’s my opinion that the original hassle between Jesus and his critics was fundamentally the same: Two very different ways “to regard and interpret the Bible.” And the difference was not because one side in the argument had better scholarship, knew more Hebrew, etc. than the other. It was two different soteriologies, to different answers to how God saves folks.

3. Okay, [A] according to THE Gospel how does God save folks? [B] How does that give us a hermeneutics for “those ” passages? [C] What help does that give for the issue at all—even apart from the Bible passages?

- A. How God saves. Sinners are saved when they get Christ-connected. Call it faith. Faith in Christ is the new criterion for what’s righteous and what’s sinful. Faith in Christ is the new criterion for everything that can be called “Christian,” behavior and morals included. It is even the criterion for what sin is: “Sin is that they do not believe in me,” says Jesus in John’s Gospel (16:9). For Paul it is: “whatever does not proceed from faith is sin”

(Rom.14:23). *[Imagine for a moment that this is the concept of sin Jesus was using when in John's Gospel (8:11) he told the woman: "Go and sin no more." Did she, could she, now trusting Christ's word "Neither do I condemn you," have gone back to the same job the next day? Dostoevsky teases us with that prospect in the person of Sonja, a Christ-trusting prostitute, in his classic novel Crime and Punishment.]*

1. Reading the Bible with this soteriology (=how people get saved) is at the very heart of the Augsburg Confession (June 25, 1530), the Magna Charta of the Luth. Reformation. Philip Melancthon spells it out in Apology article IV of that document. Summarized, it is a law/promise hermeneutic. Like this: Scripture's law serves as God's diagnostic agent—diagnosis of our malady, not prescription for our healing. God's Law is X-ray, not ethics. The healing for patients diagnosed by the Law is in God's promise, the Christ-quotient of both the OT and the NT. The law's purpose (Paul said it first—after he received his "new" hermeneutics beginning at Damascus) is to "push sinners to Christ."
2. Once Christ-connected they come into the force-field of his "new commandment," and it really is new, not a refurbished "old" commandment, not "Moses rehabilitated." Christ supersedes Moses—not only for salvation, but also for ethics. In Paul's language the touchstone for this new commandment is the "mind of Christ" and "being led by, walking by, his Holy Spirit." More than once Paul

makes it “perfectly clear” that this is a new “law-free” way of life. Especially in Galatians, e.g., (5:18) “But if you are led by the Spirit you are not under law.”

3. What then do Christians do with all those imperatives –do this/don’t do that–both in the OT and the NT? First of all, this new hermeneutic relativizes them. Even though they come from God, they are not automatically universal. Luther often called OT laws the “Juden-Sachsenspiegel,” the civil law code of the Hebrew theocracy analogous to the civil law code of Saxony. Different peoples have different civil codes, though the same God is active in all of them. The larger picture behind this notion of Luther is the “old creation/new creation” distinction arising from the law/promise hermeneutic. God manages the OC by law, the NC by promise–in Biblical imagery, God’s Left Hand and Right Hand, respectively. In the old creation, God’s law functions (so said the reformers) as the “law of recompense” (giving people their just deserts, call it justice) and the “law of preservation” (preventing the fallen creation from going directly to total chaos). With the promise God is out to redeem that old creation. Christians are God’s agents for both of the jobs. “We dedicate our lives to the care and redemption of all that you [God] have made,” as we say in one of the offertory collects. Caring for the old creation is the “preservation and just recompense” agenda and witnessing to the Gospel is the redemption

agenda.

Human sexuality is clearly a component of the OC, God's left hand work in the world. Do's and don't's about sexuality are over there. That's why the Reformers removed marriage from the list of sacraments. Its home is "over there," not in the "new deal" that Christ has brought. They "secularized" sex. Luther would often use the word "secular" ("weltlich") for the old creation, not meaning "god-less" (as today's meaning often signals), but God's work in the "old seculum," the "old age," now being replaced by Christ's "new age/new creation." So whatever "those passages" in the OT might have meant in the ancient Hebrew theocracy, they are first of all "left-hand" kingdom regulations. They do not automatically have anything to say to folks who are "in Christ," any more than the laws of 16th-century Saxony obligate us wherever we are today—unless we live in Saxony! And there is always this additional item: it is not easy to decipher what "those passages" really meant in the Semitic world of 3,000 years ago.

What about the NT passages, esp., the "pretty clear" words of Paul in Romans 1? Once more, what Paul actually had in mind with those two Greek terms —malakoi and arsenokoitai— is not easy to determine. But even if they were "perfectly clear" and meant what the word homosexual means in our language, then what? In keeping with Reformation hermeneutics, then this: Christians today need to read them with the "new hermeneutic" that comes from Christ. That includes—at the center—the new definition of "sin and righteousness" and above all the "new ethics/new morality" coming from the "Lordship of Christ and the leadership of the Holy Spirit" in any particular believer. The Lutheran Reformers practiced this very hermeneutic on the "rules-and regulations" passages in the NT. "Thus even the apostles ordained many things that were changed by time, and they did not set them down as though they could not be changed." "The

apostles did not wish to burden consciences In connection with the [apostles'] decree[s] one must consider what the perpetual aim of the Gospel is." [Aug.Conf./Apology Art. 28]

So, even if Paul's words in Romans 1 are "perfectly clear," it might have been valid then in terms of the aim of the Gospel, but not valid now because of "many things that were changed by time."

It is also possible that he could have been mistaken even in his own time that a Christ-trusting practicing homosexual was an impossibility. His own words about women are conflictive. Could his words about malakoi and arsenokoitai be the same? And once more even if Paul is not "mistaken" here, we today "must consider what the perpetual aim of the Gospel is" as we carry out our Christian callings. "The apostles did not wish to burden consciences. They did not set them [the rules] down as though they could not be changed."

Summa:

1. I have come to know too many practicing homosexuals who are committed Christ-confessors to go back to my own former Biblicist perspective. For outsiders to "require" celibacy of them as a prerequisite for the validity of their Christ-confession is parallel to the Roman church's "requirement" of celibacy for the clergy. Concerning that requirement the Lutheran Reformers said: God created the sexual "pressure" that surfaces at puberty. To "require" celibacy for the clergy—or anybody—is blatantly contradicting God. For those whom God "wired differently" as a student once described himself—regardless of how that different wiring came to pass—requiring celibacy for him sounds like the same thing to me. It's God, not the gay guy, who is being contradicted.

2. A recent editorial in the ELCA monthly THE LUTHERAN, calls for a moratorium on disciplinary action by the ELCA leadership when congregations decide to call and ordain homosexuals "in committed relationships" to be their pastors. That's happened in at least three ELCA synods recently. If the congregation really is "the church," such a decision wherein they followed the rubric "one must consider what the perpetual aim of the Gospel is," cannot be countermanded by some supposed higher church authority. Not only do the Lutheran confessions say so, so does the church's Lord.