



The Authority of the Bible and Churchly Debates regarding Sexuality

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Recent churchly discussions regarding homosexuality raise significant questions about biblical authority.¹ My reflections assume that the Bible is the word of God. In saying that, I refer to two roles played by the Bible. Most basically, the Bible has a formational or constitutive role in and through the work of the Spirit. That is, the Bible has a unique capacity to mediate God's word of law and gospel, which can *effect* life and salvation for individuals and communities. Second, the Bible is the fundamental source for shaping and maintaining Christian self-identity. We turn to these books to discern what the Christian faith essentially is and what should be the basic shape for Christian life in the world. This claim grounds these reflections.

As a member of the ELCA Task Force on Sexuality (2002–2005) I interacted with many individuals and congregations regarding issues of biblical authority.

¹For an analysis of the characteristics of the current context that have problematized issues relating to the authority of the Bible, see Terence E. Fretheim and Karlfried Froehlich, *The Bible as Word of God in a Postmodern Age* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998) 81–87. I would emphasize even more strongly today that the Bible's own content creates problems for contemporary readers (e.g., its violence).

A "high" or "low" view of biblical authority does not accurately predict an interpreter's position in churchly debates on sexuality. Neither does the use of a particular exegetical method. Our differences seem based rather in the deep personal convictions we bring to the texts.

I was surprised at how common it was—indeed almost universal—that those who held widely diverse perspectives on the interpretation of biblical texts regarding sexuality were in basic agreement regarding the authority of the Bible.² From another angle, a shared high view of the authority of the Bible did not issue in commonality regarding the way in which biblical texts regarding sexuality were (to be) interpreted.³

I should not have been surprised. Such a “disparity” has existed through every century of the church’s life. Persons with a high view of the Bible’s authority have often disagreed over the interpretation of specific biblical texts (from Gen 1 to Rev 22) and specific biblical issues (from infant baptism to free will). Indeed, we know instinctively that the ascription of a high level of authority to the Bible does not guarantee the accuracy or truthfulness of our interpretations (witness the Jehovah’s Witnesses!), though sometimes we speak as if it does. Again and again, readers with such a view of biblical authority differ widely among themselves on many issues. Indeed, a traditional viewpoint regarding the Bible’s authority often issues in various interpretations of the texts relating to sexuality.

Why is this the case? Before responding to this question, I seek to complicate the matter from another perspective.

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People with a *low* view of the Bible’s authority can have a highly *traditional* view regarding same-sex relationships. Some powerful voices against change regarding this matter see no special value in biblical perspectives, except perhaps as part of a strategy in helping to swell the ranks of those who are comparably committed. Experience with such individuals has sharpened my conviction that issues relating to the authority of the Bible are largely irrelevant in this conversation. Though the heightened rhetoric may suggest otherwise, the importance of biblical authority on this issue does not run deep.

Why is this the case? It appears that there is no single or simple answer to this question, but further reflections are needed before responding.

Some readers claim that interpretations of texts vary as much as they do because of differences in the way the Bible is approached or used.⁴ This may be the case in individual instances, but the differences among us regarding the interpreta-

²The initial rhetoric in a conversation did not always bend this way, but upon closer examination this proved to be the case again and again.

³This experience confirmed several statements by Darrell Jodock (*The Church’s Bible: Its Contemporary Authority* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989]): “Voices claiming the Bible as their authority advocate widely differing views” on a considerable range of ethical and theological matters (ix). And so, for Jodock, “Scriptural authority is not foundational....Disagreements about the Bible are as much the symptoms as they are the causes of disunity” (5).

⁴See, e.g., Craig L. Nesson, *Many Members, Yet One Body: Committed Same-Gender Relationships and the Mission of the Church* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2004) 23–37.

tion of sexuality texts cannot be reduced to such a formula. Again and again, those who use the same methods of studying biblical texts (e.g., the latest in historical or literary criticism; a “Lutheran hermeneutic”) often come to different conclusions regarding the meaning of texts. This is a truism and characterizes much of the ongoing debate over specific interpretations of this or that element in the biblical texts, not simply the sexuality texts.

Moreover, individuals who have a (highly) traditional perspective on issues of sexuality may have a “contextual” approach to studying the Scriptures, taking into full account the historical evidence available, both within and without the Bible.⁵ One thinks of Richard Hays and Robert Gagnon on the more traditional side of this issue and Robin Scroggs and Martti Nissinen on the other side.⁶ All of these scholars are quite at home with the historical-critical approach to the Scriptures, freely acknowledge this to be the case, and often come out at a different place regarding interpretations of these texts.⁷ In other words, individuals who use essentially the same hermeneutic can sharply disagree with respect to the interpretation of the relevant texts regarding sexuality.

Why is this the case? Most basically, the formal use of a specific hermeneutic will be shaped significantly by more “informal” matters, which will make the interpretation of sexuality texts more complex than commonly suggested. I explore two such matters: the “nature” of the interpreter and the nature of the biblical material.

THE “NATURE” OF THE INTERPRETER

Interpreters of the Bible are not blank slates when they read the Bible. As interpreters we are deeply affected by what we have been taught and, more basically, the broad range of our life experiences. Something of “who we are” as interpreters will inevitably be a part of any meaning we claim to see in a text. This point reveals the most basic issue that undergirds churchly differences with respect to the interpretation of sexuality texts. These differences have to do not with biblical authority, but with the often *deep personal convictions*—formed over time—that people have with respect to sexuality and, more specifically, homosexuality.

These personal convictions commonly have their roots in matters such as these: personal experiences with homosexuals, communal and familial influence, assessments of social/psychological and scientific studies (e.g., nature/nurture de-

⁵Nessan’s claim (*ibid.*) that “traditional” and “contextual” hermeneutics are “irreconcilable” does not prove to be the case in practice.

⁶Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross, New Creation: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996); Robert A. J. Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001); Robin Scroggs, *The New Testament and Homosexuality: Contextual Background for Contemporary Debate* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1983); Martti Nissinen, *Homoeroticism in the Biblical World: A Historical Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998). For a convenient review of the work of these four scholars on this subject, see Nessan, *Many Members*, 23–37.

⁷Though not always. For example, Richard Hays thinks that Gen 19 is “irrelevant” (*Moral Vision*, 381) to this discussion, while Robert Gagnon considers it of considerable importance (*Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 71–91).

bates; the “gay gene”),⁸ evaluation of the importance of the tradition,⁹ convictions regarding matters of “natural law” (e.g., gender complementarity), and one’s own personal sexual orientation, practice, and experience.¹⁰ In other words, powerful personal factors are in play—often beyond our knowing—in the varying assessments we make of the textual and contextual evidence. The greater the number and intensity of these factors at work in a particular interpreter, the greater will be the impact on the interpretive results. This will be the case regardless of where we stand on the spectrum regarding the issues involved. Such factors are decisive in *undergirding* our current understandings of texts regarding sexuality or in *challenging* interpretations of biblical texts that question our present perspective.

And so it may be said with some confidence that the differences among us regarding the interpretation of texts relating to sexuality are not basically due to a perspective on the authority of the Bible, but to personal convictions about the matter that may be more or less deeply set within ourselves as interpreters.

Bible readers through the centuries have always brought their experience and personal convictions to their reading of the Bible. But the interpretive situation in the present time is quite different in many respects. We now have a much more diverse group of Bible readers than ever before in Christian history—and more numerous (including, e.g., female and third-world biblical scholars). This new reality has complicated these interpretive issues immensely. A much more complex and wide-ranging set of experiences and convictions now characterizes the interpreters of these texts and influences their study of them.

This reality is not simply to be related to texts regarding sexuality, but to numerous texts on various topics. The range of “problem issues” is considerable, including scientific, historical, social, and theological matters. You know them well. Take matters scientific. How is the Bible’s talk about creation to be related to more recent scientific research and discovery? How is one to interpret those ancient manuscripts, unearthed in Near Eastern deserts, with numerous biblical parallels? Or, what of matters of human equality and social order across lines of race, gender, and social class? How are we to understand the Bible’s apparent acceptance of, say, patriarchy and slavery, and strong rejection of, say, usury and same-sex intimacy? Or, what do we do with the Bible’s pervasive violence, wherein both God and God’s people are often the subjects of violent verbs (e.g., 1 Sam 15:2–3; Jer 13:14; 19:6–9)? As with issues of sexuality, our experiences and convictions will deeply affect how we read and assess these texts.

⁸Most would agree that such studies were unknown to the biblical authors. If they had had full access to such information, however, we do not know whether they still would have written what they did.

⁹The church has long held convictions regarding this matter and, quite apart from personal preferences, some (many?) cannot set that traditional perspective aside—unless the evidence becomes much more decisive than it is at present.

¹⁰On the last-named, the language of Nesson, *Many Members*, seems right: “To speak of human sexuality is to discuss an aspect of human existence that is deeply rooted in what we hold very personal and precious. My beliefs and my emotions are greatly invested in a certain way of ordering sexual morality. When my own deep convictions confront your own deep convictions, this is a recipe for a clash of views” (23).

All of us are challenged to become as self-aware as possible regarding how these experiences and convictions affect our interpretation of texts. Whether or not we are fully aware of “who we are,” we should stand ready to acknowledge that our feelings, thoughts, actions, and associated experiences with regard to any number of issues—including sexuality—are present in *everything* we say about a text.

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Another way of putting the matter is to say that no interpretation of the Bible is value-free. How we interpret texts and the authority we give to the resultant interpretation will reflect (perhaps even promote!) the personal and social values we hold dear. At the same time, because our knowledge and experience are constantly on the move, not least because of the impact of the Bible on our lives, we will read texts with ever new eyes—which may reinforce, challenge, or dismantle our current understandings. Moreover, the culture (family, congregation, community, nation, and world)—always on the move—will continue to affect not only our understandings of biblical texts, but the kinds of questions that we ask of the text in pursuit of those understandings.

The proliferation of (English) Bible translations—and translations are always interpretations—reflects something of this diversity, in the last half century especially. This factor helps to demonstrate the openness of the text itself to different interpretations. And to that reality we turn below.

Authority, Bible, and Interpretation. But first, it should be noted that another reality is commonly at work in the interpretive process we have been describing. Differing personal experiences lead to differences in interpretation of texts and, in turn, lead—recognized or not—to the authority we give to specific interpretations of biblical texts. Over the course of the interpretive process, some *interpretations* of specific biblical texts often take on an authority that approximates the authority of the Bible itself. Not uncommonly, if those interpretations are challenged, then the very authority of the Bible is thought to be called into question. This ascription of authority to *specific interpretations* of texts often goes unrecognized and has, in and of itself, become a major problem in discussions of the sexuality (and other) texts.

At the same time, most readers would say—at least theoretically—that a text’s interpretation should not be elevated to a status comparable to the biblical text itself. Given the fact that all interpreters are both finite and sinful, most readers recognize the potential inadequacy of our interpretations and the need to check them over against the interpretations of other individuals and communities. At the same time, interpreters *will* want to make some basic claims about what the Bible says, especially in view of the scriptural center of which the tradition speaks (e.g.,

christology); but even those claims are not to be given an authority equal to that of the biblical text itself.

Hence, we must make a clean distinction between the text and our own interpretation of the text, for whatever we say *about* a Bible passage is never the same as what the Bible itself says. This includes every Bible translation. Strictly speaking, the only statement that should follow the phrase, “The Bible says,” is an actual quotation from the Bible in its original language (and even then our intonation will betray our interpretation!). It is to that biblical text that Bible readers are *finally* held accountable, not to some existing interpretation or tradition, however important these may be as, say, a place to begin and to ground the interpretive process.

To be honest to the interpretive process, we should read the Bible from within an explicit recognition of our own history and social location. These factors are the most basic reason why we remain accountable, first and foremost, to the text itself and not to the tradition of the interpretation of the text. This reality is also one of the most basic reasons why it is important to discuss our interpretations with other persons, including those who come from different traditions and have had different experiences. With regard to every text there will always be more for us to learn, and our openness to the insights of others is a part of what it means to be a faithful Bible reader.

THE NATURE OF THE BIBLICAL MATERIAL

The Bible itself often makes interpretation difficult and contributes to the problem of its own authority. It has been said that the Bible is its own worst enemy. In addition to matters of content, such as those noted above, is *the way in which the Bible expresses itself*. There are numerous textual uncertainties in the Bible. Such a reality means that the reader will participate more than usual in the making of the meaning of the text. Put more positively, there are points of openness in the text that invite interpreters to use their imagination. Some examples among many that could be cited:

- Grammatical ambiguities, polysemic words, and other uncertainties of translation. For example, there are three perfectly legitimate translations (and at least four interpretations!) of Gen 1:1–3. Which will you choose and why? Could more than one reading be a “right” (authoritative) reading? Your choice will affect how you read the rest of the chapter and beyond.
- Matters of genre and historicity. Is the book of Jonah parable, history, or something else? Is only one decision appropriate? Your decision will deeply affect how you read an entire book.
- Metaphor. Bible readers are invited to unpack metaphors, with the understanding that every metaphor has a “yes” and a “no” (or a “like” and an “unlike”). How will you unpack, say, the various metaphors for God in any given context (e.g., father in Isa 63:16–17 or warrior/mother in Isa 42:13–14)? Will

only one interpretation be the right one? Or, is there an openness in the metaphor that allows for several right readings?

- Point of view. The Bible does not always commend the viewpoints it reports. For example, the book of Job gives a negative evaluation of the extensive speeches of Job's friends. Might the author give a comparably negative evaluation of Job's confident words in 1:21 ("the Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord") and the less confident 2:10? Is only one response the authoritative one?

"Gaps (openness) in the text invite the use of our imagination in the task of interpretation. This is one basic reason why reading the Bible is always a creative activity."

- Silences and gaps. Biblical narratives often do not tell us everything we would like to know. For example, in the story of Cain and Abel (Gen 4:1–17), we are not told why God chose Abel's offering rather than Cain's, where Cain got his wife, for whom he built a city, or why Cain was afraid that someone would kill him. Such gaps in the text invite the use of our imagination in the task of interpretation and occasion much disagreement among scholarly readings. Among the sexuality texts, Lev 18:22 ("You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination") contains several such gaps. Why is only male-male sexual activity referred to? What motivation(s) led to the formulation of this law (for example: threat of disease; creation theology; procreation; idolatrous worship; sexual violence; gender complementarity)? Is this text a command related to sexual activity on the part of *homosexuals* or, inasmuch as the sexual activities in the context of Lev 18:22 always relate to forbidden heterosexual actions, might this text be concerned about *heterosexuals* "behaving badly"?¹¹

These and other questions regarding the text have led to detailed scholarly investigations and, often, speculation. Indeed, gaps (openness) in the text invite the use of our imagination in the task of interpretation. The common "gaps" in the text will foster more new insights, give more room for the play of the imagination, encourage deeper conversation, and provide more avenues in and through which the word of God can address people in our ever more diverse communities. This is one basic reason why reading the Bible is always a creative activity.

The net effect of this reality has been that Bible readers commonly emerge from their studies of texts with more than one possible reading. With respect to such efforts regarding almost any text or topic, there will be a common lack of

¹¹For this angle of interpretation, see Samuel E. Balentine, *Leviticus* (Louisville: John Knox, 2002) 158–159. Of course, one still has to deal with other texts on the topic, e.g., Rom 1:26–27. But if Richard Hays (*Moral Vision*, 281) is right that Gen 19 is "irrelevant," then the issue could be said to be primarily a New Testament issue.

unanimity among interpreters. In this situation, is only one reading the right reading? May more than one reading be appropriate? Readings of texts will always be open-ended to some extent; textual meaning is not as stable as we might think. Think of sermons you've heard on a given text over the years (e.g., the parable of the prodigal son)! Has the interpretation you've developed or discerned always been the same? Is one interpretation more right (authoritative?) than all the other possibilities? The meanings of texts have evolved in some ways in view of the ever-changing experience of both preacher and congregation, new knowledge of the text, and prayerful relationship with the God whose Spirit works in and through our readings.

But these difficulties in the biblical text itself again raise the question of whether the issue of biblical authority is relevant to the interpretation of the details of such texts. The interpreter's view of biblical authority is basically not going to determine how these gaps are bridged. People with widely variant senses of biblical authority may agree (again and again!) on a given interpretation, while those who are like-minded regarding authority may sharply disagree! Personal experience, knowledge, and convictions will once again often come into play.

From another angle, how can we speak of biblical authority when the text itself, again and again, allows for differing interpretations of textual detail? Is only one interpretation of each biblical text authoritative? Is one interpretation more authoritative than another? Or, are all possible interpretations authoritative? What criteria are to be used to decide?

BIBLICAL READING AS DYNAMIC PROCESS

Reading the Bible should be understood as a dialogical or conversational process in which the Spirit is at work (along with other factors), potentially opening up new possibilities of meaning beyond those with which we are familiar. There is, however, no sure move from the "objective" exegesis of the text to its meaning; contemporary issues are in the room at every stage of the process. The effects of our experience upon our study of the Bible mean that readers do not have direct, unmediated access to meanings the author may have intended or to "naked" meanings of the text itself. Recognizing that we can make no clean distinction between "what the text meant" and "what the text means," the most that we can expect is a *relative* objectivity in reading texts. Yet, for all the uncertainties thereby introduced, that relative openness is a good thing, finally, for *the Holy Spirit works in and through the person you are and the skills you have* in unpacking the text.

The meaning we see in a text is always a product of the *interaction and integration* of the text itself, who we are as individual readers and readers in community, and the Holy Spirit working in and through our hearing and study of the texts. Yet, are there no constraints on meaning possibilities?¹² At least three factors come into play.

¹²For detail, see Fretheim and Froehlich, *The Bible as Word of God*, 90–93.

1. The text itself is a relatively stable element in the task of interpretation; it influences readings in certain directions and not others. Texts do shape readers; readers do not create meanings out of whole cloth. As such, the text stands reasonably independent of interpretations. At the same time, as we have seen, textual and translation difficulties can present significantly different interpretive options. So, even the texts themselves can be a source of instability in interpretation; the proliferation of differences in Bible translations is witness to this reality. Yet, while texts may mean many things, they cannot mean just anything. Because the texts are what they are, we can eliminate certain interpretations with a reasonable level of probability and we can accept others with a similar probability.

2. Something of the community and tradition of readers will inevitably be a part of the meaning of biblical passages. Texts are not autonomous, independent of long usage in religious communities. This influence, ranging from the reader's inherited/adopted religious traditions (e.g., Lutheran; local congregation) to historical analysis and to the ongoing hearing of the word, will affect meaning possibilities. But, these influences have led communities astray over the centuries, so they are not an absolutely sure guide to biblical interpretation.

3. Prayerful study under the guidance of the Spirit is a key element in the interpretive process. But, even then, not every prayer-filled interpretation is thereby guaranteed to be trustworthy. The language of Acts 15:28 seems appropriate for *every* interpretation of biblical texts: "For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit *and to us*" (italics mine). On the one hand, what readers bring to the task of interpretation can be aligned with and reinforce the work of the Spirit. On the other hand, we can resist the work of the Spirit in our lives even when our reading of the Scriptures is surrounded by prayer and devotion. Prayer-filled interpretations can often go astray.

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We should focus our energies to work with specific biblical passages and interact with one another regarding divergent interpretations. More abstract and technical discussions will be necessary, but the hundreds of congregational studies generated by the ELCA Task Force's *Journey Together Faithfully* showed that *nothing* is more important than getting people together and discussing specific texts and ways of interpreting them.¹³ Differences will never go away, but the conversations will lead to greater understanding and open up the Bible for more and more readers. That is good.

These various developments lead me, finally, to ask several questions: Do we need a high view of the authority of the Bible to be effectively about God's purposes

¹³*Journey Together Faithfully, Part Two: The Church and Homosexuality* (Chicago: ELCA, 2003).

in the world? Is the church wasting its time and energy being defensive about the Bible or engaging in debates about its authority, especially when it seems not to affect the basic meanings we see in the text? The word we are to bring to the world is *not* a word about the Bible and its authority. Any view of the Bible, or any use we make of the Bible, must be of such a nature that it does not detract from the hearing of the word of God. Should we not then just proceed to preach and teach from biblical texts and let whatever esteem the Bible may have grow out of that encounter? This is a “theology of the cross” approach to the Bible; that is, the Bible exemplifies its power in and through weakness. Would not such an approach to the Bible be more consistent with some of our most basic theological instincts? ⊕

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