

DOES THE BIBLE CONDEMN HOMOSEXUALITY?

Y E S!

I have great empathy for Christians who are against homosexuality for religious reasons. They take a stand, not out of hatred for homosexuals, but because pastors in some churches have taught them that the Bible, their holy book, *condemns* homosexuality *and* homosexual individuals. Are they right? Yes they are! The Bible *does* contain passages that condemn both one's engaging in homosexuality *and* all persons who do so.

The earliest and most blatant biblical condemnation of male homosexuality (female same-sex relations aren't mentioned here at all!) is in Leviticus 18:22: "You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination." And if a man *does* have sexual relations with another man, the penalty, without exception, is that both individuals are to be put to death (20:13). Clearly, the Bible *does* condemn acts of male same-sex relations *and* all persons who engage in them.

So, isn't that the end of the story? Actually, it isn't, because even though the aforementioned biblical condemnation of same-sex relations is so undeniably obvious, a huge preponderance of well-informed biblical scholars rejects that teaching in Leviticus as having *validity* for us today. How can that be? After all, the scholars who do so are not atheists! They are not even agnostics. They value the Bible *so* deeply that they have devoted their entire life to the study and interpretation of it, and they approach that arduous task with an admirably extensive knowledge of Hebrew, Greek, and, in many cases, Aramaic. Their goal is to help us to be able to grasp and apply abiding biblical teachings, *without* which, both we and the world would be impoverished. So how could so many of these highly competent people go *against* what Levitical passage in our Bible seems to teach on the subject?

Since most of you who are reading this article would never claim to be a highly trained biblical scholar, I am going greatly to simplify my explanation of the reason so many of those who *are* biblical scholars reject the Levitical denunciation of homosexuality and the harsh judgment that anyone who engages in homosexuality must be put to death. Indeed, I am doing so because the matter we're discussing deserves a coherent explanation that the average, open-minded, reasonably intelligent person who is *not* a scientist or a highly trained theologian can understand. Also, seriously devoted

Christians who are confused about this issue deserve a straightforward, easily understandable response.

For starters, we need to realize that the *presuppositions* with which we approach the Bible are important. So let's look at the most important presupposition of *all*. In fact, let's frame it as a question: Is the Bible infallible or is it not? In the part of the country, most of us connected with a church have been taught that the Bible *is* infallible. That teaching usually is based on this passage in the New Testament: All scripture is inspired by God and is profitable..." But what we are *not* told (since the great majority of pastors and Sunday school teachers are not Greek scholars) is that the *Greek* text does not say that. The word "is" just isn't there. The Greek text *really* says: "All scriptures inspired by God is profitable..." and that more accurate translation makes a huge difference. "All scripture (which is) inspired by God" means, for example, that all of the horrendously violent passages in the Bible that portray God as loving some people but not others do not have to be accepted as accurate. Passages such as one that speaks of bashing the brains of an enemy's baby against jagged rocks do not have to be accepted as God's will (even if done by people who might have *thought* they were doing God's will)!

So although the Bible is a treasure trove of incredibly valuable spiritual wisdom, the wheat therein needs to be separated from the chaff. That which accurately reflects God's boundless love needs to be separated from that which does not. God's will and God's actions are never inconsistent with or contrary to God's nature of unconditional, unending love as taught by Jesus as *well* as the highest revelation within the Hebrew Scriptures, our Old Testament. So the viewpoints or *presuppositions* with which one approaches the Bible are of *overwhelming* importance. At no time and in no place does the Bible claim to be infallible. But the truth that all scripture inspired by God *is* profitable and of immense value remains unchanged.

Here's a second consideration of which you might want to be aware. The vast majority of books and teachings in our Bible do not mention homosexuality at all—surprising, considering the amount of attention the subject is given by some people today. In fact, there are only six passages that directly touch on the issue, most of which, unfortunately, tend to be seriously misinterpreted—especially since the *word* homosexuality does not appear ANYWHERE in scripture. Actually, most well-meaning but

uninformed people do not realize that. But why do so many good people think that the Bible *does* talk about homosexuality as we know it today?

The fact is that advances in medical science have made it possible for us to realize that homosexuality is not a choice. One cannot just wake up one day and make a conscious *decision* to be either heterosexual or homosexual. At about the age of puberty, each person simply *discovers* his or her sexual orientation. The person *discovers* that he or she is attracted primarily to men or to women. Again, it is not a *choice*, and one cannot be held responsible or denigrated for any situation about which he or she has had no choice.

Moreover, we now know that the sexual orientation of a person cannot be changed. There have been *efforts* to change one's orientation, but people who discover that they primarily are homosexual cannot become heterosexual simply by willing to do so, any more than a truly heterosexual person can change his or her orientation to a homosexual one. What science now tells us is that sexual orientation is a *given*, and it is *discovered*, not *chosen*!

The results of modern scientific research obviously involve information that the biblical writers and other ancient people did not know. They thought that everyone was *born* heterosexual and voluntarily chose to *disregard* their heterosexual orientation to *become* homosexual—that is, to go *against* their God-given, natural *heterosexuality*. We see that clearly in Romans 1:26-27. Paul writes that women *exchanged* their natural inclination of heterosexuality to become lesbians, while men *gave up* their natural heterosexual orientation to *become* consumed with passion for one another. *Without* the benefit of modern medical wisdom, Paul *assumed* that these people made a conscious decision to *disregard* their natural, God-given *heterosexual* orientation to engage in actions and activities that were completely foreign to their nature.

Many devout biblical scholars have emphasized that Paul's prescientific understanding of reality on this issue is not an excuse for and, ethically, does not legitimize contemporary prejudice against people who did not *choose* their sexual orientation any more than they chose the color of their eyes. Instead, of responding as did Paul, based upon an erroneous *assumption*, our well-informed biblical scholars point to the example of Jesus regarding the same-sex relations issue. Well, what was Jesus' stance?

Although same-sex relations, as we stated earlier, is condemned in Jesus' own scriptures, ironically, *he* did not mention the issue at *all*. Ever! So biblical scholars have had to ask themselves why that might be. And their conclusion is that since Jesus seems never to have shied away from dealing with *any* issue that he deemed significant, apparently he didn't think the matter was of overwhelming importance. Actually, there are *other* issues condemned by his own scriptures that he chose not to mention—not because of fear, but apparently because he considered them to be of no major concern *OR* because they were inconsistent with love.

What *are* some of the scriptural teachings that Jesus chose not to emphasize—or even to *mention*? The same book (Leviticus) that denounces same-sex relationships and says that those who have them are to be put to death *also* condemns (1) having a tattoo, (2) eating lobster, shrimp, oysters—indeed, *any* kind of shellfish, (3) eating pork, (4) touching a dead body, (5) planting two kinds of seeds in the same field, and (6) wearing a garment made of more than one fabric. I could go on—so I will. Scripture also insists that (7) if a child disrespects his or her parent by talking back or cursing, the parent must kill the child. Moreover, (8) fornication—*any* sexual relationship between two people who are not married is strictly forbidden; and (9) anyone who commits adultery should be put to death. *All* of the aforementioned issues are concerns that Jesus may have considered not to be overwhelmingly important *OR* to have punishments that were inconsistent with the love of God. Indeed, if we were to follow them today, our churches, synagogues, mosques, and ashrams probably would be completely empty. We would have killed one another off—all in the name of the God of love, of course. And it is probable, Christian ethical scholars have suggested, that huge numbers of people in churches who eat seafood and have sex without being married hypocritically condemn same-sex relationships when their *own* behavior is forbidden in the very same biblical book that denounces homosexuality!

Speaking of the biblical commandment to kill adulterers, as we know, Jesus actually went *against* the teaching of *his* own scriptures to save the life of a woman who *was* about to be killed for committing adultery. He even refused to condemn her as a person, although he begged her not to hurt her husband, her children or herself by continuing her activity.

So here is an important lesson that we all need to recognize if we are not to *misuse* the Bible: It is obvious from Jesus' effort to save the life of the woman caught in the act of adultery that Jesus did not consider *everything* in scripture to be an infallible representation of God's will or God's love. *More* important to Jesus was to take care to embrace everyone, *everyone* with love and compassion, no matter who the person is or what the person may have done. For that reason, many of our most outstanding biblical scholars have elected to follow Jesus in dealing with biblically prohibited sexual issues in which no one is hurt, especially if a relationship is genuinely loving.

So, in light of the aforementioned insight, some Christians have decided to follow Jesus in the same way by making love the primary criterion for their response to same-sex issues. But you may wonder: did anyone else in the biblical accounts follow Jesus by going contrary to the teaching of scripture when a scriptural injunction did not seem to represent Jesus' emphasis on a *loving* response to others? The answer is, absolutely.

In the New Testament book of Acts, it is reported that the Spirit of God commanded Peter to eat meat that Peter's Holy Scripture strongly prohibited. To prove to God and others what a righteous, orthodox man he was, Peter refused to eat the meat that his Bible condemned as unacceptable. For Peter, scripture ruled, always and in all ways. But we're told that God, in a vision, commanded Peter to *ignore* a scriptural injunction and to *do* precisely what his scriptures *prohibited*. That command from God had to be repeated three times before it penetrated Peter's thick skull; but, finally, got the message: He was to obey the Spirit of the God of love who was trying to move him to a higher level of living and relating than that for which even his highly revered scripture called. Apparently, the Holy Spirit of God always *trumps* scripture. Later, Peter had to learn the same lesson in another situation by accepting a man whom he thought was unacceptable to God, a person he considered 'unholy.' It was exceedingly difficult for Peter to override his previous religious indoctrination, his holy book, and his own prejudice by following the path of love and to realize that God was leading him to an even higher level of spiritual development; but Peter did it, answering the call to grow, just as God still calls us to do.

There is one other issue of which devoted biblical scholars are aware that enables so many of them to reject the few references of condemnation for persons of a different sexual orientation. As you may remember, before

Jesus left the world physically, he told his disciples that they would not have to struggle alone without dependable spiritual guidance. They would have the Holy Spirit to lead them *into* all truth. Why did Jesus tell them that? As do many otherwise good pastors and church members today, it seems that Jesus' followers thought that they *already* had all the truth! After all, they constantly had been with Jesus and listened to his teaching for three years; and, besides, they had their highly revered holy scriptures. Didn't *they* contain all the truth? And hadn't Jesus told them everything they needed to know? Jesus had to burst their bubble of self-confidence. He told them that there were things that he wanted to share with them to facilitate their deeper spiritual awareness, but they were not open enough to *hear* such insights yet. They were not yet *open* enough to love those they considered *unlovable*, to accept those whom they deemed unacceptable. Just as was the case with Peter, he had to allow the Holy Spirit to lead him *into* that fuller, more loving potential—to realize that there is no one whom Jesus rejected *because* there is no one whom *God* rejects, although God never ceases to long for *all* of us to realize our highest spiritual potential.

So, does the Bible condemn homosexuality and persons of a non-heterosexual orientation? YES! And so do many Christians—would be followers of Jesus who need the help of the Holy Spirit to lead them *into* Jesus' message of God-like unconditional love: love for those we may consider unlovable, and acceptance for those whom we may deem unacceptable. And as we respond, we become more like our non-discriminatory God—sending rain on the just *and* the unjust—and everybody in between.

On Mother's Day, Sunday, May 1, our own Harriet Hancock will tell us about *her* response when one of her three children broke the news that he was not heterosexual. Her response *was* one of unconditional love, caring rather than condemnation. Can we learn from her?

Please remember that, even with my having studied six languages, I do not have a vocabulary adequate enough to tell you how much I love and value you.

**Your pastor and friend,
John**

IT'S HAPPENING AT CCM!

Sunday, May 8 - Second Sunday of the Month

10:00 a.m. WORSHIP

Parents have dreams for their children. Almost always, they want the best for them; and, understandably, that doesn't include being "different," especially, if the difference happens to be a child's sexual orientation. But, unfortunately, any potential problems can be magnified many times over if the parents have grown up in or been subjected to a fundamentalist church or minister who has not kept up with critical advances in science and biblical scholarship, or one that is punitive, denunciatory, or *rejecting* of differences. For a period in her adult life, Harriet Hancock was involved in such a church—and *survived* it! Good thing, because when she learned that one of her three children is not heterosexual, she was able to relate to him with acceptance, love, and grace. Harriet has been invited to share her story in a number of churches, but today she graciously has agreed to share some key aspects of her journey with *us*.

It seems particularly appropriate for a *mother* to be speaking to us on Mothers' Day; and Harriet not only has something worthwhile to say, she says it well. There will be a special, additional surprise. We anticipate that her son, about whom she will be speaking, will travel to Columbia for the weekend and be in our congregation for worship today. We hope that you will be present to greet him!

(In order to enable family members visiting from out of town to have a bit more time together before they have to return home, we will not have our usual talk-back-to-the-message following worship on Mothers' Day. Consequently, our gathering today will be much briefer than usual. We will be out by about 11:00 or 11:15 a.m.)

Sunday, May 22 - Fourth Sunday of the Month

10:00 a.m. EDUCATION: THE ADULT FORUM

Today, we'll have the privilege of being able to see and discuss a riveting video that some caring people thought was so important that they forfeited their lives to make it available to us. The film will feature some extremely sobering undercover footage shot secretly by several brave Muslims who are working to protect people from ISIS. Indeed, two or three of them were apprehended and, for their reward, stoned to death. Few (if any) of us probably have been aware of the full *extent* of the violence and brutality of which ISIS is capable or their plan to bring their sub-human savagery to bear on Christians in the United States. This exceptional video should be an eye-opener—in fact, a wake-up call for Christians everywhere!

Our incredible presentation will begin at 10:00 a.m. sharp and will last for about 50 minutes. After viewing it, we'll reserve about a half hour for discussion and adjourn at 11:30 a.m.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Good news. By special request, the honored guest speaker at our worship gathering next month (**Sunday, June 12th**) will be Imam Omar Shaheed, spiritual leader of a local progressive mosque, Masjid as Salaam (House of Peace). His stance will be a hopeful antidote to the horrific agenda of ISIS that will be revealed in our remarkable video this month on Sunday, May 22nd. Let us give Imam Shaheed a warm CCM Welcome!