

Homosexuality and the Bible

Summary

The 1998 Lambeth Conference Resolution 1.10 rejects homosexual practice as ‘incompatible with Scripture’. This claim makes sense only from the perspective of a certain type of biblical interpretation.

The Christian tradition has appealed to different systems of scriptural interpretation at different times. In New Testament times Jews and Christians were aware that many commands were irrelevant, out of date, no longer suitable for their purpose, contradictory or apparently immoral.

In early and medieval times these problems were resolved by means of allegory; the literal meanings of texts were subordinated to their spiritual meanings. In practice allegory made it possible to give any scriptural text virtually any meaning. From the third century allegory lost interest in history and interpreted the Bible in terms of universal and timeless truths.

At the Reformation allegory was rejected and literal meanings reaffirmed. Texts continued to be interpreted as having universal and timeless authority. This is the tradition within which Resolution 1.10 has significance.

In response to the conflicts of the Reformation, English theologians developed alternative principles of biblical interpretation, which laid the foundations for the critical scholarship later developed by German theologians. The process is more empirical, deriving judgements about the meanings of biblical texts by examining their context rather than by imposing external theories upon them.

Within Anglicanism, Reformation and critical interpretations have coexisted since at least the early seventeenth century. Resolution 1.10, however, illustrates an attempt to impose the Reformation system onto the Communion as a whole. This would be a retrograde step as critical scholarship has far better resources both for understanding the original meanings of biblical texts and for meditating on their significance for Christians today.

Text

The 1998 Lambeth Conference Resolution 1.10 rejects homosexual practice as ‘incompatible with Scripture’. This has been widely interpreted to mean that the Bible condemns homosexuality and therefore it is immoral for all people at all times.

There are two areas of debate. One explores the meanings of the relevant biblical texts. The other asks what authority biblical commands like the condemnations of homosexuality have for Christians today. This article responds to the second of these questions.

Christian interpretation of the moral commands in the Bible has varied from time to time. Currently there are two main approaches. Describing homosexuality as ‘incompatible with Scripture’ is meaningful within one of them but not the other.

The problem

There are over a thousand ethical commands in the Bible. Nobody, Jew nor Christian, seriously attempts to obey them all. At the time of Jesus it was common knowledge that there are 613 in the first five books alone, and there was already much debate about the status they should be given. The main issues are as follows.

1) Many texts seem to us irrelevant. We all ignore them because they do not seem to have any significance today, even if they did in ancient Israelite society. Thus Leviticus 19:26-28 strings together commands which seem to us not only unimportant, but unrelated to each other:

You shall not eat anything with its blood. You shall not practise augury or witchcraft. You shall not round off the hair on your temples or mar the edges of your beard. You shall not make any gashes in your flesh for the dead or tattoo any marks upon you.

Some commands would seem to be harmful today. An example is Leviticus 25:3-4, which stipulates that all fields and vineyards are to be left untended throughout every seventh year. Today there are no proposals to reintroduce this law. It is possible to argue that it was God's command to ancient Israelites but not to us; but in that case we need criteria for distinguishing the commands which do apply to us from those which do not.

2) Some commands are laid down for a clearly expressed purpose, but in our society the purpose would not be achieved. An example is Leviticus 19:9-10, which forbids farmers to reap to the edges of their fields, so that they leave some of the harvest for the poor and foreigners. Applying the law in our modern urban society would not provide free food for either the poor or asylum-seekers. On the one hand, if we insist on the commands as obligatory *because they have been given by God*, and not because we consider them good laws, it seems that we should continue the practice regardless of consequences. On the other hand, if we give priority to the intention, and use the biblical text as an argument for modern welfare state provision, we are making greater use of our own judgements and whether they have biblical justification becomes less certain.

3) Many commands are common to most moral traditions. Few would disagree, for example, with the command against stealing in the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:15). Jews and Christians who obey them believe we are thereby conforming to Scripture. Unbelievers reply that they also obey these commands, but without needing instruction from the Bible. Do Jews and Christians, they ask, need extra help to be moral? It is therefore not clear what extra significance these commands have by virtue of being in the Bible.

4) Many commands strike modern Christians as immoral, or at least sanction immoral practices. In 1 Samuel 15:9-10 God condemns king Saul for not killing all his defeated enemies. Other examples are the many regulations governing slavery.

When Christians find biblical texts morally repulsive, it means that as we read the Bible we bring to it moral values which we hold independently of what the Bible commands, and use them to pass judgement on biblical texts. This raises the question of how we legitimize these external moral values. If they are, ultimately, derived from - or consistent with - biblical values, we need some account of how they relate to these difficult texts.

5) Some biblical texts reveal development in moral thinking, or even contradict each other. The most significant case for Christians is Paul's insistence that Christians are freed from the laws laid down elsewhere in Scripture. The New Testament describes a debate among the leaders of Christianity, culminating in a decision that Gentile converts to Judaism should be expected to obey only four of the Jewish laws: they were to 'abstain only from things polluted by idols and from fornication and from whatever has been strangled and from blood' (Acts 15:20). This meant that none of the other commands had any authority for non-Jewish Christians.

Allegory

By the time of Christ Jews recognized that nobody was making a consistent attempt to obey all the laws in the Bible. They were acutely aware of the problems listed above. In order to justify their situation without rejecting the Bible's authority, they borrowed the pagan practice of allegorizing their scriptures. Beneath the literal words, they believed, lies a spiritual message.

An example is Deuteronomy 25:4: 'You shall not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain'. Paul responds:

Is it for oxen that God is concerned? Or does he not speak entirely for our sake? It was indeed written for our sake, for whoever ploughs should plough in hope and whoever threshes should thresh in hope of a share in the crop (1 Corinthians 9:9-10).

Paul's predicament was typical. If he interpreted the text literally, it had nothing to say to urban Christians of his own day. If it was to be understood as relevant to his own place and time, it needed to be given an alternative meaning.

From the third century onwards biblical commentaries became popular, and often attempted to extract a Christian meaning from every phrase. Origen argued that the true author of Scripture was the Holy Spirit, and every text contained a deeper meaning than what appeared on the surface. Thus Augustine was for many years repelled from Christianity by its poor style and obscurity, and the unedifying stories of the patriarchs – hardly what anyone would expect from a supreme God – but was converted by Ambrose, who explained how to understand them allegorically.

The main problem with allegory is that it allows virtually any meaning to be drawn out of any text. In practice the early Christians did not allegorize at random. They built up a tradition of exegesis on the basis of two principles: the meaning of each text had to be consistent both with what the Church already believed, and with other texts.

Another change from around the third century was that Christian allegory lost interest in history and instead concentrated on general observations about morality and life which were universally and eternally true, and therefore applied to all Christians in all ages.

Literal truth

The leaders of the Reformation inherited the doctrines that Scripture is the supreme guide to life, and is self-consistent. However they rejected allegory, and instead reaffirmed the literal meanings of texts. As they also rejected the authority of the Catholic Church, the question arose as to who had authority to interpret Scripture. Initially the Reformers insisted that it did not need an interpreter. Thus they developed the doctrine of perspicuity, which claimed that anybody who could read should be able to make perfect sense of any biblical text.

In practice, however, different people interpreted texts in different ways. The doctrine did not stand the test of time, but as one of the central ideas of the Reformation it has been reaffirmed from time to time.

Most Reformers continued to believe the Bible's ethical teachings were equally applicable to all times and places. Some even claimed that we should refrain from doing anything not commanded in it. The Anabaptists came closest to applying the theory; they aimed to carry out consistently the demands of the New Testament, especially the Sermon on the Mount. The task was made easier by the fact that they did not accept the ethical authority of the Old Testament. More often, however, Protestants gradually developed interpretative methods for limiting the application of moral commands. Thus Article 7 of the Thirty-Nine Articles divides biblical commands into two types, ceremonial and moral, and denies the need to obey the ceremonial ones. Biblical scholars note that the Bible itself does not recognize any such distinction.

Faced with the problem that the Bible recorded a great many immoral acts, like the polygamy of the patriarchs and the suicide of Samson, without any hint of disapproval, and sometimes with approval, the Reformers usually assumed that the biblical characters had received special commands from God. This raised the possibility that God might command people in their own day to commit acts which were otherwise immoral, and some, like the Anabaptists at Münster, believed this of themselves.

By such methods Protestants modified, in order to defend, their new theory: that all the Bible's commands are both to be understood literally and also apply to all Christians at all times. Even so, the theory simply reopened the questions which had faced the first Christians. In practice the Reformers ignored most biblical commands but focused on a few which were relevant to the controversies of their own day - just as the opponents of homosexuality are doing today.

Thus there arose the tradition of imposing a specific set of axioms onto the text of the Bible: that all the biblical commands are from God, that no two commands contradict each other, and that Christians of every age and place are obliged to obey them. These principles were introduced as attempts to avoid the problems which the early Church had faced. The tradition of interpretation based on them remains

popular today, and is often described as 'literalism', 'fundamentalism' or 'conservative evangelicalism'. It is the tradition within which the Lambeth Conference 1998 Resolution 1.10 has significance.

Critical scholarship

The Reformation debates about Scripture also paved the way for a different movement. Rather than imposing onto Scripture an external set of harmonizing principles, it began with the Bible itself. It aimed to understand the meaning of each biblical text in its own terms, and allow the meanings of the texts to determine any general principles about the Bible as a whole.

Accepting that the early Christians' problems with the Bible had to be faced again, this movement recognized that the Bible's commands could not be applied as God's laws for all Christians at all times. It was therefore necessary to distinguish between them.

Critical scholarship accepts that in order to understand the meanings of biblical texts, we need tools of interpretation. It therefore reaffirms the value of trained experts, whose studies enlighten the rest of us. The task of these experts is to establish the meanings intended by the original authors, and secondly - in canonical criticism - the meanings affirmed by those who included the text in the list of approved scriptures.

The focus is therefore on the meanings intended by human authors rather than God. However inspired the texts may be, they remain the products of human work. We cannot, therefore, assume that they express God's will perfectly. Some texts express what was wisdom in a particular place and time, but not always and everywhere. The texts which seem immoral to us may indeed be immoral; they may have been included because they formed part of a work which was valued for other reasons. Some texts contradict each other, but were included because both were judged of value.

By focusing on the human authors' meanings, critical scholarship puts the books of the Bible back into their historical contexts. When we recognize the historical development within the Bible, as different human authors contributed to their tradition, it becomes possible to see ourselves as a continuing part of the same tradition. Just as Chronicles uses Samuel and Kings, but proposes new interpretations, so also we today may affirm the tradition but find new insights within it.

Critical scholarship is a well-established part of Anglican theology. Although Germans led the world in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it was largely English clergy in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries who laid the foundations for it by seeking principles of scholarship to solve the dilemmas of Reformation literalism.

It responds to the problems which faced the early Church, not by reinterpreting every text to make it fit an ideal scheme, but by examining carefully what the authors meant in their own context. Once a view has been taken about what the author of a text intended to convey, it should help set the context for a second judgement: about whether, and how, the text is authoritative for Christians today.

From the perspective of critical scholarship, the Resolution's statement that homosexual activity is 'incompatible with Scripture' has very little meaning. It appears to mean that homosexuality is forbidden by one or more biblical texts. This is certainly true; but it only puts homosexuality on a par with trimming one's beard or ploughing a field in the seventh year. There are other ways of judging what is, or is not, compatible with Scripture. It may be more helpful, for example, to seek common themes which run through most or all of the biblical books. However, the condemnation of homosexuality would certainly not be one of these, as it rarely appears in the Bible at all.

The Resolution's statement, therefore, does not speak the language of critical scholarship. In the circumstances, both the statement itself, and the repeated reaffirmations of it - by the Windsor Report and Primates' Meetings, for example - function as rhetorical affirmations of the conservative evangelical tradition. The unspoken implication, every time it is reaffirmed, is that the conservative evangelical interpretation of the Bible is now the only one permitted by the Communion's governing structures.

Summary

Christianity has, from its inception, faced problems with biblical interpretation. For over a thousand years the dominant resolution was by means of allegory. Since the Reformation, allegory has been rejected and two alternative systems of interpretation have developed. Within Anglicanism, the two have coexisted since at least the early seventeenth century. Today, however, some church leaders are making strenuous attempts to impose the conservative evangelical system onto the Communion as a whole. The effect would be to suppress critical scholarship.

The MCU believes that the tradition of critical scholarship has far better resources both for understanding the original meanings of biblical texts and for meditating on their significance for Christians today. On the ethics of homosexuality, its judgements are very different from those of conservative evangelicals.