

Slavery, Homosexuality and Women – texts in context

Discerning the meaning and message of Scripture

It is generally agreed that the dominant tradition (within Scripture) clearly upholds the institution of slavery: “Tell slaves to be submissive to their masters and to give satisfaction in every respect.” (Titus 2.9). The tradition also assumes the subordinate place of women, and teaches accordingly: “Women should be silent in the churches” (1 Cor 14.34). It is also generally assumed that the Bible condemns all forms of homosexual relationship, and that, according to the teaching of the Holiness Code in Leviticus (20.13), such sexual behaviour warrants the death sentence.

Scripture and slavery

Returning to the subject of slavery, according to the Scriptures, the Jewish Faith at the time taught that it was in keeping with the word and will of Yahweh to buy and sell people as slaves, as long as they were not fellow Jews, but foreigners (Lev 25.42ff). Yet today, for obvious reasons, Jews and Christians alike, give no 'weight' to this particular passage in the Book of Leviticus. This teaching carries no 'authority' for us today, though it is clearly part of the text and doctrine of the Old Testament.

Scripture – Its authority and interpretation

This raises the question as to what we mean by the authority of Scripture. All Christians accept the authority of the Scriptures as the fundamental text of our faith. They tell the story of God's plan for salvation in Jesus, revealing the basic moral values and Gospel norms that we are to seek to live by in God's grace. However, our shared conviction and belief about the Bible, flows straight into the crux question as to how God intends that we approach, and interpret the Scriptures in order to discern his will for us.

Discerning

The essential problem is *how* we are to discern and distinguish between those teachings of Scripture which were 'of the times' and those which are 'for all times'. It is surely clear from the few illustrative texts above that there are some teachings in the Bible which reflect the cultural attitudes and outlook of the age in which they were written, and which are not intended by God to bind us today.

Scripture – its meaning and message

Concerning the question of faithful and committed same-sex partnerships in our congregations, some would argue that the Scripture is clearly condemning of all homosexual relationships. On a 'plain reading of the text' it would seem to be so. The same applies to several other 'plain readings' about for example the submission of slaves being “an ornament to the doctrine of God” (Titus 2.9f), or women being required to be “silent in church”. The assertion that certain 'plain texts' can have only one meaning, begs some crucial contextual and interpretive questions which must be addressed, if we are to do justice to the meaning and message for the Church today of the well known 'texts of condemnation'. Furthermore it is a crucial that any authentic interpretive process (hermeneutic) will consider the 'weight' of a particular text in the context of the primary and over-arching message of the Scriptures as a whole, as revealed in the life and example of Jesus Christ.

An approach to the authority of Scripture and its meaning, cannot be based simply on a 'plain reading of the text'. This cannot be the final criteria for the 'binding nature' and 'meaning for us today' of a particular teaching in the Book of Leviticus for example. We do not believe in an understanding of the 'authority of Scripture and its meaning' which would justify the buying and selling of people, *simply because this is what is presented in the Book of Leviticus* (25.42ff) by the writers, as God's Word. Such an approach would in fact be a travesty of what God intends.

Jesus – The key to the meaning and message

We believe that the true and authentic understanding of Scripture and its interpretation is found in Jesus Christ, and this involves a process of discernment. The criteria and touchstone for such discernment is ultimately found in the character of God, revealed in the person of Jesus Christ - his life and witness. Jesus Christ is both the key and the source our discernment as we seek for the meaning and 'weight' for us, of certain passages of Scripture.

Concerning the texts in Scripture which would seem, on the face of it, to constitute a clear condemnation of faithful same-sex partnerships in our congregations, we need to ask important questions of clarification, and then in addition we would need to consider their 'weight' and 'binding nature' for us in the light of the life and message of the person of Jesus Christ.

In the scriptures, homosexual acts are inseparably identified with idolatry and temple prostitution

So we ask, what kind of behaviour did they have in mind in what they condemned? What kind of meanings and associations did they attach to such behaviour and why? For them, homosexual behaviour was indelibly associated with temple prostitution, promiscuity, debauchery, idolatry etc - all part of a total letting go of decent values - a rejection of God's ways. This was the homosexuality that they had in mind, and which we too condemn, along with its heterosexual versions. The biblical writers never even contemplated the kind of homosexual partnerships we are seeking to have affirmed in our time. We can therefore legitimately argue that the texts were not condemning the faithful same-sex relationships that we are talking about, because their culture could not even envisage them. They had in mind a form of depravity. What we are talking about, and seeking to affirm is fundamentally different.

Biblical authors could not have had faithful Christian partnerships in mind in what they were condemning

A group of conservative evangelical scholars who met in Oxford (2003), produced a booklet with the title "True Union in the Body?", and they most significantly agreed to the following: "It is important that the Church respects (and engages in serious dialogue with) individual Christians who see loving and committed same-sex relationships in our culture as lying outside the scope of these passages of condemnation."(para 4.15). As with the Old Testament writers, so with Paul (and other New Testament writers), *what they had in mind and were condemning, is not what we have in mind in what we are affirming.*

They may have expressed their views in the form of a *general* condemnation of all homosexual behaviour, and this is what one would expect, precisely because they could not (from their culture) envisage the "loving and committed same-sex relationships in our culture". However, what we have in mind lies "outside the scope of the passages on condemnation". Given that the biblical writers would not have had in mind the kind of homosexual relationships that we are referring to today, it is misleading to assert, without qualification, that *all* homosexual relationships were being condemned. What we refer to was not envisaged in their culture.

God's gift of sexuality is for loving faithful relationships – 'gay or straight'

It is our conviction that Jesus affirms loving relationships which are faithful and committed. With Jesus as our guide to the interpretation of Scripture, we believe that our approach to these issues does deeper justice to the values of the Gospel, and to new unfolding insights about human nature. Above all we must seek to be open to the leading of the Holy Spirit, and avoid a judgemental attitude to others. Every person is loved by God, and we must love them with the love of Jesus.

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