

Reasoning with Scripture

ELLEN F. DAVIS

At the heart of the church's controversy (in most quarters it has not risen to the level of reasoned "debate") about homosexuality is the accusation from each side that those on the other side ignore, misunderstand, or mishandle Scripture. In these "Notes," Richard Norris goes far toward establishing the base on which an edifying debate would need to rest. As an historical theologian, he could appreciate (as biblical scholars may be less disposed or even able to do) that "a scriptural text can be open to more than one reasonable interpretation" (B.2.1). I focus here on the hermeneutical issues raised by the several texts bearing most directly upon the church's understandings in this matter. Before turning to the texts themselves, I note several points of Norris's discussion that are pertinent to my comments.

(1) Norris writes in order "to turn the efforts of church people toward clarifying the issues and reaching for a solution" (A.1.3). It is not clear to what extent he thought that general agreement about the place of homosexuals in the church was achievable; I myself am doubtful. A desirable "solution" might be widespread recognition that the issues are complex enough to allow for thoughtful and faithful disagreement, with neither side vilifying the other as either negligent of the Bible's authority or unsophisticated in its interpretation.

(2) One task of ecclesial interpreters is to discern how different passages from both Testaments may interact with one another—in George Herbert's image, "O that I knew how all thy lights combine" (*The Holy Scriptures II*). Citing the Council of Jerusalem as described in Acts 15, Norris says the apostles and elders "relativized . . . the scriptural laws in question" (B.4.1). Although he acknowledges that word choice to be deliberate, it may not summarize well the deliberative process in which the early church leaders engaged with respect to the law and its established interpretation. Rather than dismissing Torah as relatively less reliable or binding than (say) their

own conscience, they traced its logic through their present experience of God. That is, they relied upon the ancient scriptural promise that God's Spirit would be present and active within the community bound to God by covenantal faith (Gal. 3:5), and, reasoning *with* Scripture, they heard the Spirit calling them to new practices of faith in Jesus Christ (see Gal. 3:21–5:1).

(3) A crucial fact about scriptural interpretation, then, is that “the perceived meaning of a law or regulation may . . . change in response to the problems and prepossessions that [are] referred to it for solution, i.e., in response to its historical and social context” (G.2.2.1.2). Yet this observation points obliquely to why it is unlikely that “church people” throughout the Anglican Communion will all agree on interpretation and application of the passages that bear on homosexuality. “We live in the Old Testament,” said Archbishop Daniel Deng Bul of the Episcopal Church of Sudan, explaining why my Sudanese students and colleagues warm so readily to study of Exodus and Leviticus, whose legal codes presuppose a kinship-based agrarian society. Many in the African church do *not* view ancient Israel's social organization as inconsistent with their own, as Norris rightly finds to be the case in post-industrial cultures (B.4.3). Moreover, the important fact that Ugandan Christianity received its impetus from the 1886 martyrdom of courtiers who refused (homo)sexual favors to the king of Buganda seems, to Archbishop Orombi and others, to close the distance entirely between the Bible and recent experience.¹ My point is not that African Christians read and follow the regulations in Torah more “literally” than do their North American counterparts (a claim that cannot be sustained in any thoroughgoing way), but they do bring different historical and cultural experience to their reading of the text, and that greatly complicates the task of reading in communion.

In what follows I try to reason with Scripture in response to the current controversy about committed homosexual relationship as an option for faithful Christian life. Wisely or not, I begin (as Richard Norris refrains from doing) by stating my own bottom-line view: no individual or church community can in good faith reach a position on this issue without reckoning seriously with Scripture. Nonetheless, the Bible does not unambiguously endorse any position, either for or

¹ See Henry Luke Orombi, “What Is Anglicanism?”, *First Things* 175 (August/September 2007): 23–28.

against committed same-sex unions, and both positions are open to serious challenge from the gospel. So whatever position we may take, we are constrained in all humility to listen to the views and just criticisms of our fellow Christians who disagree. Based on the church's historical experience, it seems likely that Christians will disagree on this for a long time, perhaps centuries, to come. So here I suggest how one could responsibly read the Bible to arrive at either of two opposing positions; further, I point to difficulties encountered in maintaining either position.

Position I: Committed Homosexual Relationship Is Not an Option for Faithful Christian Life

At first look, there would seem to be an open-or-shut case for this view; all the texts that speak explicitly of homosexual acts prohibit them. Another text frequently adduced is Genesis 2:24: "Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife. . . ." Yet in no case is it obvious how to extrapolate from the text to the kind of relationship currently under review; in other words, while the texts may not raise difficult exegetical questions, the hermeneutical difficulty is substantial. To take them in turn:

Genesis 2:24. This is a positive statement or commandment, enjoining a man's lifelong commitment to a woman. The hermeneutical question is, Can we readily convert that positive statement into a *prohibition* of lifelong committed sexual relationship between members of the same sex (a phenomenon that as far as we know was not publicly recognized as a social possibility in ancient Israel)? Producing a valid prohibition from a positive biblical statement is a dicey matter. For example, some Roman Catholics might read "Be fruitful and multiply" (Gen. 1:28) as supporting a prohibition on artificial birth control, but many others, and also many Protestants, would not concur that the interpretation is valid or binding.

Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13. The main problem here is that apart from citing these two verses, Christians almost never bother to read, let alone study, Leviticus. Yet there is probably no book of the Bible that is so difficult to interpret, because of the complexity of its symbolic representation. The central problematic of Leviticus, and especially of this section of the book, the "Holiness Code" (chaps. 17–26), is how holiness may be embodied in Israel. How can Israel host God's

holy Presence, and indeed survive with that high-voltage Presence in its midst? The two systems whereby biblical Israel seeks to mediate the radical incompatibility between God's pure holiness and the ordinary human condition are practices of personal "purity" (including sexual, dietary, and farming practices, among others) and the sacrificial system. The church has from the outset rejected most of the ways Leviticus symbolizes holiness, starting with the dietary regulations (Mark 7:19, Acts 11:9). Leviticus says a priest should not take a razor to the "corners" of his beard (Lev. 21:5); in the Western church (though not in the Eastern) we allow male priests to be clean-shaven and often prefer it. For Leviticus, these are not matters of personal taste; they are violations of holiness.

So how do we justify our departures from most of the regulations in Leviticus and yet still claim that this part of the Bible is authoritative for the church? Commonly Christians have answered that we are bound by the moral law, not the ceremonial law. The problem with that defense is that it makes a distinction that Leviticus itself seems not to recognize. A priest trimming his beard might readily be granted to be a ceremonial matter, but what about the further regulation that the high priest cannot marry a widow, nor can any priest marry a divorced woman—or a prostitute (21:7, 14)? The prohibition seems to blur into the moral sphere, touching as it does on "the ecology of the family"; certainly it bears directly on the role of priests in the relatively small kinship-based communities that were the norm in ancient Israel. Reading through Leviticus, one easily crosses, from one verse to the next, the imagined divide between ethical injunctions and regulations that have nothing to do with ethics as we understand it. For example, Christians, like Jews, regard "Be loving to your neighbor as to yourself" (Lev. 19:18) as a most basic religious obligation. Yet in the very next verse, the Holiness writer insists that domestic beasts are not to be bred across species, nor are two kinds of seed to be sown in the same field, nor is blended fabric to be worn; these mixtures evidently constitute an infringement on the sphere of the sacred. My point is that Leviticus does not recognize a distinct sphere of "morality." Rather it presents a comprehensive, highly integrated understanding of how those who worship Israel's God are to embody and symbolize holiness in both communal and individual life. If Christians want to argue that we are free to accept one small piece of the purity legislation and reject the rest, then the warrant for that extraction requires

careful theological explication. Jacob Milgrom, probably the foremost Leviticus scholar of this generation, argues that the prohibition on homosexuality is clear and binding, but its application is strictly limited: to males, to Israel (that is, to those who accept the purity practices as the basis of the life of faith), and to inhabitants of the holy land.²

Romans 1:18–2:1, 1 Corinthians 6:9–10, 1 Timothy 1:10. In *Romans*, Paul decries a complex of behaviors that, *taken as whole*, reveal contempt or hatred for God; these include idolatry and, prominently, lustful homosexual acts. Lustful homosexual acts are a diagnostic symptom of a pervasive sickness of soul that manifests itself in “every kind of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice” (1:29, NRSV). In *1 Corinthians* and *1 Timothy*, Paul points to sexual behaviors that are prurient, exploitative, wholly devoid of commitment or mutual nurturance. The hermeneutical question with which the church must struggle is whether the acts that Paul condemns belong in the same category with mutually committed homosexual relationships between persons whose lives may on multiple grounds attest to a deep commitment to Jesus Christ and an exemplary love of neighbor.

The view that such relationships do not constitute a faithful expression of Christian commitment must meet the following challenge from the gospel: Every Christian should live by certain spiritual disciplines, chief among them being the discipline of examining and criticizing ourselves more harshly than we do others. Further, the gospel affirms that every committed Christian life involves costly self-sacrifice. It follows from this that whenever I find myself in the position of asking other Christians to make a sacrifice for which I am ineligible—if I as a heterosexual ask homosexual Christians to give up the possibility of committed sexual relationship—then I should feel the inherent vulnerability of my position, because my “proclamation” of the gospel is costing others more than it costs me. That vulnerability does not in itself mean that the demand is misguided, but it should cause me to regard my own position with healthy self-suspicion. At the same time, it should deepen my respect and compassion for the others whom I am calling to make such a costly sacrifice.

² Milgrom argues that the prohibition aims at conserving semen, and so lesbian relationships (though known in the ancient Near East) are not mentioned. See Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 17–22* (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 1786, 1790, and *Leviticus* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress, 2004), 197.

The fact that some opponents of the ordination of non-celibate homosexuals use the language of disgust to characterize both homosexual relationships and the theological position they themselves oppose indicates that such respect is often missing. At the end of his condemnation of wicked behavior in Romans, Paul exposes the bad faith lurking in that sort of contemptuous judgment: "Therefore you have no excuse, *whoever you are*, when you judge others; for in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things" (Rom. 2:1). Richard Hays, himself an advocate of this first position, terms Paul's challenge to those who condemn "a homiletical sting operation."³ If we renounce the language of disgust, then we will discover that the gospel gives us language that better expresses the often painful experience of homosexual Christians, with respect to their families, the church, and society as a whole: they have a cross to bear. That language does not in itself prejudice our view of whether or not permanent celibacy is an appropriate or necessary sacrifice for such Christians to make.

Position II: Committed Homosexual Relationship Is an Option for Faithful Christian Life

I treat this position more briefly, as there is no *specific* scriptural support for it; that is the obvious difficulty for those who wish to embrace it. Nonetheless, the most thoughtful proponents of this position do engage in reasoning with Scripture. New Testament scholar Walter Wink argues that, while the Bible has no sexual ethic as such, it does have a love ethic, "which is constantly being brought to bear on whatever sexual mores are dominant in a given . . . culture."⁴ Those who hold this position view the mutual loving commitment demonstrated by same-sex couples within the Christian community as a faithful witness that constrains the church as a whole to reevaluate how the Spirit of God is working among us. Bishop Peter Lee of the Diocese of Virginia would see an analogue in the action of the first Council of Jerusalem (cited also by Richard Norris). The first Christians, all of whom were Jews, evaluated the work of the Holy Spirit as they saw it operating among the Gentiles, and thus they came to the radically new

³ Richard Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross, New Creation* (San Francisco, Calif.: HarperSanFrancisco), 389.

⁴ Walter Wink, *Homosexuality and the Bible*, 1996 (privately printed).

understanding that one does not have to be circumcised and keep the law of Moses in order to be saved by the God of Israel (Acts 15). God was doing something no one had previously thought possible.

This position, at least as it has recently been expressed in the Episcopal Church, must also meet a challenge from the gospel as it is found in both Testaments. The way in which Bishop Robinson's ordination was ratified has created a rift in the global Communion that may largely divide the church of the rich (especially in North America) from the church of the poor (in the Southern Hemisphere). Isaiah, Luke, the biblical sages, and psalmists, among others, variously assert that whenever the rich think they can do without the poor, they fatally separate themselves from God. This separation of rich from poor is especially grievous in view of the fact that in some parts of the global South, Christians face contempt and sometimes persecution as "infidels." In my judgment, then, the most serious challenge to this second position comes not from the few texts that speak directly of (homo)sexuality, but from the many that speak of the essential unity of the body of the faithful. Reckoning and reasoning with the complex unity that is our Scripture may be the best way for us to learn to reason with each other.

