

Beyond: A Response to Richard Norris

DALE B. MARTIN

I knew and respected Richard Norris in his role as a great patristics scholar and historian of early Christianity, especially on topics of doctrine. Although I am now an Episcopalian myself, I did not know Norris in his roles as either a priest or a theologian engaged in constructive work on current theological or ethical issues in the church. So it was with pleasure—and as a new introduction to the man—that I read through his unfinished manuscript on homosexuality. Since I am a biblical scholar, I shall concentrate my comments on Norris's treatment of Scripture.

The most fundamental point Norris makes about Scripture here is simply the demonstration that a "literal" reading of the "historical" meaning of the text of the Bible cannot provide reliable answers to questions about the ethics of homosexuality. In reality, there is no one "literal" meaning of a text of Scripture, or of any text for that matter. What is taken to be the "literal" meaning, rather than a "figurative," "allegorical," or even "fanciful" reading, is what some community of readers (itself something of a fictive construction for the sake of interpretation) takes to be the simple, automatic, or common sense meaning of the text: the meaning that just about "any of us" would take the text to mean. This means, of course, that the literal meaning of a text will change given the contexts and assumptions of readers. This is what Norris is referring to when he says that "people have regularly differed" about the meaning of texts, and therefore "the matter is unlikely to be settled by appeal to the *prima facie* meaning of the bare text" (B.2.1)—that is, just by saying, "Hear what the text *says!*" My own way of making this point has been to demonstrate that texts don't "speak"; human beings must interpret them. Or in other words, "texts don't mean; people mean with texts."¹

¹ Throughout this essay I make points only briefly that I have elsewhere argued more fully. For this point, see my *Sex and the Single Savior: Gender and Sexuality in Biblical Interpretation* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2006), esp. 1–16.

In the modern world, and in the current “common sense” of most American Christians, the “literal” meaning of the text is supposed to correspond to the “historical” meaning of the text. By “historical” here, I mean what we imagine the author *intended* to communicate, or what the original readers, who occupied basically the same culture as the author, would have taken the text to mean. So Norris, when he gets around to discussing the meanings of various biblical texts taken by others to condemn homosexuality, offers a *historical critical* interpretation of those texts. He discusses Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 by attempting to figure out what those sentences would have meant at the time of their writing, or in the context of the ancient Near East among native speakers of ancient Hebrew. It is *not* clear, Norris insists, that the Leviticus passages, which forbid a male from lying with another male “as with a woman,” should be taken as condemning all homosexual sex. We simply do not know, for example, what precisely was “meant” by “as with a woman.” If this is taken to condemn men who treat other men as if they were women, it certainly wouldn’t apply to most modern gay men, who are *not* treating their sexual partners “like women”—precisely because *they don’t usually have sex with women*. They, as homosexual men, are treating their sexual partners *like men*. One of the reasons, after all, they are having sex with them in the first place is because they are *men* and not *women*.

Now this reading of Leviticus may not seem obvious to everyone, but whether one accepts the reading or rejects it does not mitigate the use of the example to demonstrate that the text’s “meaning” is not self-evident. Norris’s point is correct: the “literal” meanings of the texts are uncertain and disputed, “and that very circumstance makes it impossible to rest a case upon them” (B.2.1.1). One reason, therefore, modern Christians should not think we can get ethical answers about homosexuality from a simple reading of the Bible is because no reading of the Bible is simple. Readings involve complicated interpretation, they are likely to conflict with interpretations honestly offered by other Christians, and just saying, “Look at the text!” will not settle the debate.

Norris also points out, rightly, that even those Christians most conservative on the issue of homosexuality *do not themselves* read the Bible the same way when it comes to many other issues. What Christians have decided is ethical in the conduct of war was not based on some simple reading of the “literal” sense of Scripture, but rather on a “sense of what the message of the gospel ultimately implied about right relations between individuals and between states” (B.4.2.1).

Christians eventually came to believe that slavery was terribly wrong and sinful, “but it was not a conclusion the Scriptures explicitly imposed” (B.4.2.2). Christians *never have* based their ethics simply on a literal or historical reading of the text, as historical and empirical observations demonstrate.

In some cases, the contrast between what might seem the “clear” teaching of a text and Christians’ own behavior borders on hypocrisy. The Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, has gone on record as declaring that homosexual relations are in conflict with the teachings of Scripture. He has supported an Anglican resolution that condemns “homosexual practice” as “incompatible with Scripture” and claims that Scripture teaches only “faithfulness in marriage between a man and a woman in lifelong union” and that “abstinence is right for those who are not called to marriage.”² This is in conflict, of course, with Williams’s earlier statements and publications, which were much more accepting of gay and lesbian people in the church, without insisting on their celibacy or abstinence. Yet the change is there: a condemnation of homosexuality is said to be mandated by the teachings of Scripture.

It is curious, though not surprising, that neither the Archbishop nor the Anglican Communion has taken any such “biblical” stand on divorce. It would be difficult to find a more obvious statement of ethics than those about divorce and remarriage found in the New Testament: “Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her, and if she, having divorced her husband, marries another man, she commits adultery” (Mark 10:11–12); “To those who are married I command—not I but the Lord—that the woman must not separate from her husband—if indeed she does separate, let her remain unmarried or be reconciled to her husband—and a man must not put away his wife” (1 Cor. 7:10–11); “What God has joined together, let no one separate” (Matt. 19:6).³ Yet most modern Anglican churches generally do not forbid divorce or remarriage. No congregation or diocese is threatening to leave the Episcopal Church over the

² See <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/4252795.stm> and <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/4252795.stm>. Accessed January 10, 2008.

³ The translation of the Matthew passage is from the NRSV. The other two are my own. For my discussion of the divorce passages and their use by Christians in our day, see *Sex and the Single Savior*, 125–147.

issue of divorce and remarriage. And the same Archbishop of Canterbury voiced warm approval of the marriage of Prince Charles and Camilla Parker Bowles (both of whom were divorced), even leading “a service of prayer and dedication” after their civil marriage ceremony.⁴ This is clear enough evidence that the current debate isn’t really about “the authority of Scripture” at all, in spite of claims by those advocating schism. Rather, given their quiescence about divorce, and given that there is much more “clear” teaching in the Bible against divorce than against homosexuality, the motivation is obviously and simply opposition to full participation of gay and lesbian Christians in the rites and offices of the church.

I do not believe the opposition to homosexuality has ever been motivated by an attempt to be “true to Scripture.” Thus far, I have rehearsed and agreed with Norris’s arguments. But there is one important point that Norris does not here make: there is no one “teaching of Scripture” about sexuality in the Bible. Scripture can be taken to condone or advocate: polygyny, concubinage, sex with slaves, asceticism, sexual relations only for the purposes of eradicating sexual desire, permission for divorce but without remarriage, the entire forbidding of divorce and remarriage, and yes, sexual relations within marriage.⁵ Of all these different teachings found in the Bible, conservative Christians—who continue to insist against all evidence that they are the ones being “true to the Bible”—choose only one: the last.

Norris implies that we should continue to read Scripture but that we must do so in a fuller context of tradition, reason, experience, and community. The way I have made this point is by arguing that we must give up what I have called “modernist foundationalism” in our use of Scripture. Modern Christians have too often treated the text of the Bible as something like a rule book, a constitution, or an owner’s manual. We have thought that the text supplied us with a firm foundation for knowledge about doctrine and ethics if we just learned to read it properly, in the same way that we have sometimes assumed that “nature” provides scientists with firm epistemological foundations for the construction of scientific knowledge. But nature has never actually

⁴ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/4252795.stm>. Accessed January 10, 2008.

⁵ For demonstration of some of these points, see *Sex and the Single Savior*. On Paul’s teaching of sex within marriage *but for the purpose of avoiding sexual desire*, see pages 65–76.

worked that way for scientists, and the Bible has never worked that way for Christians.

Instead of thinking of Scripture as a textual foundation for knowledge, I have argued that we think of Scripture in new and more creative ways, for example as a space we enter and move around in, something like a cathedral, which *does* “communicate” the truths of the gospel to us, but not in any simplistic or linear manner. We must “live in” Scripture, not just ask it simplistic questions.⁶

Similarly, and here is a point I wish Norris had dwelt on more, we need to treat sexual ethics the way we treat all other ethical issues. This will mean a much more robust use of analogy in ethical reasoning about sex, rather than simplistic “rule following.” For example, what are our “ethics” of friendship? Are there Christian guidelines to “how we should be friends”? Do we have ethical notions of how we should be friends with different “kinds” of friends or acquaintances? Should I treat “acquaintances” in ways different from the way I treat my “friends”? Does the gospel have anything to say about that?

Do we have an ethics of “play”? Is the gospel irrelevant for how we teach our children to play? Or for notions about what is “fair” even in play, not to mention business or politics? How do we “think ethically” and “Christianly” about play? I believe one could come up with a “Christian ethics of play,” though we seldom do so self-consciously. Perhaps we should.

My point is that how we make decisions about right and wrong behavior with other issues—such as friendship or play, to mention only two examples—should not be radically different from the way we make decisions about right and wrong in sexual relations. On very few other relational issues do Christians take the immediate response of just saying, “What does the Bible say?” We reason, if we reason at all and not simply act automatically, within a context of many different sources of knowledge and values. We attempt to live out the gospel in our friendships, I would hope, as in our sex. So how we learn to live out the gospel in our jobs, our friendships, our citizenship, and our families should inform how we reason about Christian sex. We may use Scripture, but we must reject all attempts at epistemological and ethical foundationalism, textual or otherwise.

⁶ See *Sex and the Single Savior*, chap. 11.

As I have said, I don't believe the issue in this debate is the authority of Scripture or what "Scripture says" at all. Many of us have made arguments similar to these mounted by Norris many times before, and the same false accusations continue to be made on the other side: that we gay and lesbian Christians are "abandoning Scripture." So I don't believe making the same counter-arguments and interpretations of Scripture will settle the debate, as I sense Norris also felt.

Yet I do believe we will get past this, and that gay and lesbian people, at least in most churches in North America and Great Britain, will eventually be fully accepted, welcomed, and included without any insistence that we have to battle or hide our homosexuality. Perhaps that change will be abetted, at least a bit, by those of us urging a re-reading of Scripture and tradition on sexuality. After all, I do continue to publish my arguments and pleadings. But I believe the change is inevitable not because of our arguments, but because the division on this issue is now largely a generational one.

As a college professor, I am surrounded by young people, both liberal and conservative. Over the past twenty years, I have witnessed a striking change. Young people used to be bothered about sexuality and wary of if not hostile to homosexuality. Increasingly, that is not the case. Young people now wonder what all the fuss is about. It seems that they are now just predisposed to think that homosexuality is "no big deal." Sometimes they have brothers or sisters who are gay, or aunts or uncles—or fathers or mothers. Many in college have at least some friends or acquaintances who are gay and "out." They *know* that being homosexual *and sexual* doesn't *in itself* hurt anyone. They know this because they see it to be true. They seem to think nothing of having a religious studies professor (me) who is both gay and sometimes preaching at the Episcopal church on the corner. This may not happen in Africa or Latin America—or perhaps not at the same rate. But it is happening in the U.S., among young people even in traditionally conservative and evangelical churches and movements. As the older generation loses influence and is replaced by younger people in the broader society as well as churches, we will have to move along and find some other issue to fight about. The current vestigial opposition to gay and lesbian people will eventually seem bizarre and embarrassing.

So I think things will change, though not much due to all our arguing. Yet the debate will have served a larger purpose, perhaps, if it leads us into new knowledge, imagination, and creativity about how we read Scripture.