



Leviticus, Jesus, and Homosexuality: Some Thoughts on Honest Interpretation

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Conservatives and liberals alike use the Bible to justify their political positions. Frequently, politicians take verses of Scripture out of their original context to prove whatever policy argument they wish to make. Consider, for example: “An eye for an eye” (to justify capital punishment); “The least of these” (in support for government anti-poverty programs); “Blessed are the peacemakers” (the promotion of pacifism).¹

One of the most striking examples is President Obama’s statement endorsing same-sex “marriage” based on the Golden Rule. On May 9, 2012, the President said:

[Michelle and I] are both practicing Christians and obviously this position may be considered to put us at odds with the views of others but, you know, when we think about our faith, the thing at root that we think about is not only Christ sacrificing himself on our behalf, but it’s also the Golden Rule, you know, treat others the way you would want to be treated.²

Promoting a harmful public policy— which essentially is what the President has done— is an intellectually dishonest application of this ethical directive of Jesus. Yet the patina of sanctity hovers over Mr. Obama’s comments as he cloaks them in Scripture. In his remarks, Mr. Obama even tipped his hat toward what he knew would be an attentive Evangelical audience and spoke of the atonement.

This is not the first time Mr. Obama has been guilty of questionable exposition. In his speech to Jim Wallis’ “Call to Renewal” conference in 2006, then-Senator Barack Obama dealt seriously with issues of Christian faith, public policy, and progressive politics. The speech was irenic in tone and more reflective than most political speeches. It also contained some particularly striking statements, memorable because they indicate that Mr. Obama has an unsteady grounding in biblical theology.

In this, Mr. Obama is not atypical of American politicians. But he is now in a unique class of such leaders: He is President. His decisions affect everyone, and he makes them

based on a philosophy grounded less in the Hebrew and Christian Testaments (or even in a broader context of natural law) than the sentiment of subjective feeling and perceived political advantage.

At the “Call to Renewal” conference, Mr. Obama said:

Which passages of Scripture should guide our public policy? Should we go with Leviticus, which suggests slavery is ok and that eating shellfish is abomination? How about Deuteronomy, which suggests stoning your child if he strays from the faith? Or should we just stick to the Sermon on the Mount - a passage that is so radical that it's doubtful that our own Defense Department would survive its application? So before we get carried away, let's read our Bibles. Folks haven't been reading their Bibles.³

This statement trivializes serious biblical interpretation. The Bible, according to Mr. Obama, becomes a Rorschach blot to which we each bring our own meaning. This is particularly troubling in a President who, like many of his predecessors, frequently invokes the Bible in his speeches to justify his political stances. The result, as *Washington Post* columnist Michael Gerson wryly observed, is that “[e]ven when Obama changes his political views, Jesus somehow comes around to agreeing with him.”⁴

Mr. Obama’s argument deriding the Levitical code is a common one. In an article on Mr. Obama’s announcement in *The New York Times*, Rev. Susan Schneider of Trinity Lutheran Church in Madison, Wisconsin is quoted as telling her congregants the following:

Yes, it’s true that the Bible says some nasty things about homosexuality. It’s also true that the Bible has passages that prohibit men from cutting their hair, and that forbid anyone from wearing mixed fiber clothing, or planting two different kinds of seed in their fields, or eating shellfish. The Bible also commands slaves to obey their masters, parents to stone unruly children, and upholds as heroes of the faith men with multiple wives and concubines.⁵

Rev. Schneider’s dismissive evaluation leaves a good deal of exposition and exegesis to be desired.

The Danger of Selective Exposition

Mr. Obama says that he takes his faith in Christ seriously. Over the past two years, he has offered theologically sound and rhetorically elegant Easter messages to groups of religious leaders at the White House.

Sadly, that commitment seems grounded in a selective acceptance of what the Bible teaches. In his view, the Gospels tell us the real story about Jesus, or at least offer a

clear-enough portrait that we can believe them. Apparently the rest of the Bible is shrouded in the mists of ancient prejudices and ignorance, out of which propositional truth can be drawn only with deliberate caution.

For those with a low view of Scripture, appealing passages are accepted; inconvenient or unpleasant passages are rejected. This concerning pattern is typical of professing Christians who elevate their own judgments ahead of the accurate exposition and full acceptance of that Word itself.

The view of Scripture Mr. Obama expresses is widespread among professing progressive Christians. Self-described “Red Letter” Christians tend to give the words of Jesus greater weight than those of Moses or Paul. Some biblical critics speculate about the veracity of the biblical accounts to the point that, once they are finished raising textual concerns, there is little left of the actual text. Others see through a lens so politically filtered that the Bible becomes a vehicle for whatever agenda – environmentalism, militarism, etc. – they advocate.

None of these paths of interpretation guide us to a correct understanding of the meaning or significance of biblical teaching. On the contrary, as was apparent in Mr. Obama’s “Call to Renewal” remarks, a rather derisive approach to the Bible can lead both to reductionism (it can’t *really* mean that) and subjectivism (I like some of Jesus’ sayings, but that Paul guy is another matter).

The danger of selective exposition – picking and choosing what one will accept and reject based on personal preferences – is that neither truth nor context survive. The individual’s presuppositions become the authority for life and belief, rather than what Christians affirm are the clear teachings of the objective Word of God.

A Primer in Interpreting Old Testament Law

When one fails properly to understand the Bible – to see it through an intellectually credible and coherent template – the likelihood of its misapplication grows significantly. With misapplication grows the potential for doing much harm. This is true for every biblical interpreter, regardless of status, income, culture, or education.

Historic Christian interpretation (both Protestant and Catholic) sees three types of law in the Old Testament: The moral, the ceremonial, and the civil or judicial. Church Fathers Tertullian, Augustine, Aquinas, Calvin and many others have articulated some form of this view.⁶

Yes, Jesus saw the law as unitary (see Matthew 5:17-19). Yet the frequent restatement of the moral tenets embedded in the law, from the earliest pages of the Bible through the last, underscores the permanence of the moral code. New Testament passages like

Romans 1 and I Corinthians 6 state, unarguably, that homosexual behavior is wrong in God's sight. Christians should affirm that these passages are as much "God-breathed" as the Gospels and, thus, as authoritative as anything Jesus said. According to orthodox Christian teaching, the written Word of God was inspired by a common Author.

It is true that Jesus never condemned homosexuality explicitly. Nor did He condemn necromancy, bestiality, pedophilia, non-coital intercourse, or any other deviation from God's standards for human sexual conduct. To do so would have been unnecessary, even bizarre, given that there was universal agreement among the Jews of his day - both those in religious leadership and ordinary practitioners - that all such behaviors were an affront to the God of the Bible.

Jesus condemned those sins that most poignantly affected the time and place where He lived. Thus, He spoke a great deal about self-righteousness, hypocrisy, and wrongful heterosexual desire ("everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart," Matthew 5:28).

However, Jesus did condemn *porneia* (Matthew 15:19), which refers to "extramarital, unlawful, and unnatural sexual intercourse."⁷ This would, of course, mean any kind of non-heterosexual, non-marital, non-monogamous intimacy.⁸

The civil and ceremonial laws provide a different scope and relevance. Here are a few examples of such rules: do not trim the edges of your beard; do not plant two kinds of seeds in one field; rise in the presence of the elderly (all Leviticus 19). Ceremonial laws were relevant for Israel's theocratic period and into the epoch of the Hebrew kings. However, as explained below, they are not binding today. God's eternal moral law is.

Additionally, the fact that the three aspects of the Law are interlaced throughout the Torah calls for discernment, not dismissal. It is simplistic (and often sarcastic) to trot out the anachronistic (wearing two kinds of interwoven cloth) with the immoral (bestiality). Yes, both actions are condemned within the book of Leviticus, but the two actions are not morally equivalent. Each represents a different facet of the Mosaic code.

Richard D. Phillips is the former preaching pastor at the historic Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia. Using the Westminster Confession as a touchstone⁹, he outlined the three types of law in the Pentateuch:

The moral law, that which represents God's own moral character, is summarized in the Ten Commandments. These are forever binding, in both old and new covenants. The (Westminster) Confession puts it this way: "*The moral law doth forever bind all, as well justified persons as others, (i.e. both Christians and non-Christians) to the obedience thereof*" (WCF XIX. 5). In other words, the moral law as summarized in the Ten Commandments, but also emphasized in many other

places of the Bible, is binding upon us today. Therefore, it is our duty to not worship ... idols, to honor our mother and father, to bear no false testimony, etc.

The moral law is not limited to the Decalogue. It encompasses the broad stream of biblical teaching regarding human sexuality. From Genesis 2 through the Pauline epistles, God's norm for marriage is clear. Marriage is a life-long, monogamous covenant between one man and one woman. Scripture also teaches that the only God-honoring sexually intimate behavior between two persons takes place within the marital union of one man and one woman.¹⁰

We are sinners by nature and choice. We fail to meet God's standard of moral perfection internally or in our words and conduct. However, this failure makes us no less obligated to attain to God's moral perfection – which is why the Righteous One, the God-Man, Jesus Christ, Who met that standard completely, could die on the cross on our behalf, taking the punishment we deserve for our sins. Still, God's moral law obligates every person and the company of persons – the society – in which we live.

Phillips continues:

The second category is **the ceremonial law**. These [laws] are, according to the Confession, "*typical ordinances, partly of worship, prefiguring Christ*" (WIW. 3). What this mainly refers to is the sacrificial system of the old covenant, although it also includes the whole cleanliness code including restrictions on food and the like ... Heb. 10:1 tells us, "*The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming-not the realities themselves.*" The context of Hebrews 9 and 10 makes very clear that it is the sacrifices he has in mind; it is the ceremonial law that is a shadow set aside when the reality comes, not the unchanging moral law of God. This gets to the question about coming to see a (Levitical priest) when you have a boil. That regulation was wrapped up in the ceremonial law. It served to make a statement about sin, which corrupts the flesh, and the sacrifices the priest offered in that case very blatantly represented the saving work of Jesus Christ. The point here, however, is that the ceremonial law pointed forward to the work of Christ, which now has come so that they are set aside.

The ceremonial code (which includes the prohibition on eating shellfish noted by Mr. Obama) was designed to teach purity in vivid representational terms. Shellfish, pigs, etc. are scavengers. God's people were forbidden to eat them as a reminder of their role in God's life-giving covenant: Do not eat creatures that draw their life from the dead but only those that draw life from life.

The whole ceremonial code was rooted in a system of present and future sacrifice. The Jewish people were commanded to slaughter animals at their temple not because God delighted in the death of lambs and small birds. Rather, it was because the death of the

animals symbolized the gravity of sin. Sin deserved death, and the offering of the sheep, *et al.*, was a constant graphic reminder of the human need for atonement – a reconciliation between God and man made by Jesus on the cross, when He “became sin for us” (2 Corinthians 5:21), taking upon Himself the penalty we deserve.

Thus, Jesus is the true Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. With His sacrifice, no further sacrifice is needed. The Old Covenant, articulated in the Mosaic Law, has “become obsolete” (Hebrews 13:8).

There is a third element of OT law, the civil or criminal code. Phillips continues:

These are the laws that represented **the criminal code**, with its procedures and punishments, as well as a myriad of regulations and restrictions. These would include the various capital crimes, like murder, adultery, and many other sins. The Westminster Confession describes them as “*sundry judicial laws, which expired together with the state of that people; not obliging any other now, further than the general equity thereof may require*” (XIX. 4). In other words, these laws were for regulating the nation of Israel, which was then but no longer is the particular people of God. While there is an undisputed wisdom contained in this civil law it can not be made applicable to any nation today, since there are no biblically sanctioned theocracies now.

Phillips’ basic point is that ancient Israel’s criminal code applied only to its own unique nation-state. These strict laws were to govern the theocracy of Israel – an extraordinary historical circumstance in which pious Jew lived under God as King and were to obey God’s word as Law, not an elected democratic system.

Consequently, Mr. Obama’s remarks about slavery and shellfish lack any proper context. Leviticus never teaches that slavery is a moral good, as such. It simply imposed regulations on a widespread economic institution, both limiting the circumstances under which slavery was practiced and setting boundaries for the way slaves were to be treated. For their day, these limitations were generous to the socially downtrodden. Levitical teachings about punishment also put a strict limit on retaliation and better defined retributive justice.

As Jesus said of divorce – “it was allowed because of the hardness of your hearts” (Matthew 19:1-10) – so the possession of slaves was indicative of the callousness of a people once owned as slaves themselves. Moreover, the fact that God did not eliminate slavery (or war, unjust judges, corrupt kings, etc.) does not mean He condoned it – only that in His providence, His foremost goal was the establishment of a homeland for His people, not immediate social transformation.

The Book of Hebrews tells us that the symbols of purity and ceremonial reminders of the need for holiness have passed away. Now under a new and better covenant, Christ Himself, in whom all moral purity dwells, lives in us. His sacrificial death accomplished all, in moral and practical substance, that the ceremonial law pointed to with its various sacrifices, symbolic priestly attire, and eating requirements (Hebrews 9-10).

The Lamb of God, in His death on the cross, bore the penalty for the sin of the world (John 1:29). No other sacrifice is needed, now or ever. Christ's sacrifice was once, for all and thereby wholly sufficient (Romans 6:10, Hebrews 10:10, I Peter 3:18).

The ceremonial law, in all its parts and in its entirety, was fulfilled in the Person and work of Jesus Christ. The civil law's authority ended with the dissolution of ancient Israel as a political entity. The moral law continues to bind all of us, in all cultures, at all times. It endures as the litmus test of human character.

Additionally, while many aspects of the ceremonial law, such as dietary limits and circumcision, are explicitly set aside in the New Testament, this is not true of any of the Torah's teaching regarding human sexuality (with respect, specifically, to homosexuality, see Romans 1:18-27, I Corinthians 6:9-17, I Timothy 1:9-10). On the contrary, the Old Testament's teachings on sexual ethics are only made stronger in the New Testament. Not only does the Apostle Paul raise the bar; Jesus Himself notes that even lust in one's heart constitutes adultery (Matthew 5:28).

The Bible's consistent teaching on human sexuality, in the Old and New Testaments, boils down to this: The only sexually intimate behavior approved by God exists between a man and a woman within marriage.

Even those who call for the social and moral acceptance of homosexuality admit that the Bible's teaching is clear and consistent. No exegetical gymnastics or desperate excursions into possible alternate readings of the biblical passages can make the text say something it does not, or diminish the force of what it does say.

For example, Dr. Luke Timothy Johnson of Emory University writes:

I have little patience with efforts to make Scripture say something other than what it says, through appeals to linguistic or cultural subtleties. The exegetical situation is straightforward: we know what the text says. But what are we to *do* with what the text says? We must state our grounds for standing in tension with the clear commands of Scripture ... I think it important to state clearly that we do, in fact, reject the straightforward commands of Scripture, and appeal instead to another authority when we declare that same-sex unions can be holy and good. And what exactly is that authority? We appeal explicitly to the weight of our own experience and the experience thousands of others have witnessed to, which

tells us that to claim our own sexual orientation is in fact to accept the way in which God has created us. By so doing, we explicitly reject as well the premises of the scriptural statements condemning homosexuality—namely, that it is a vice freely chosen, a symptom of human corruption, and disobedience to God’s created order.¹¹

Dr. Johnson at least is honest: He admits an open and conscious rejection of biblical teaching and seeks other means of vindicating his argument that homosexual behavior is a moral good.

Biblical norms of chastity and celibacy are the standards outside of monogamous heterosexual marriage. This is true for heterosexuals and those with same-sex attraction. It is true for singles and those who are married. It is true for adolescents and adults.

Is this an easy standard? No. As sexual beings, refraining from sexual intimacy is difficult, especially for younger men and women whose body chemistry is geared to procreate. But this is the norm given to us by the God of the universe for our good and for His glory.

God does not ask us for input; He does demand obedience. He has a creative and loving master plan for how human sexuality works. He has a deep desire for purity in our lives, a purity which faithfully represents His own character. Such purity means abstention from sexual intimacy of any kind outside of heterosexual, traditional marriage.

Conclusion

Jesus, wrote the great Dutch theologian Geerhardus Vos in his book *Biblical Theology*, is “the confirmation and consummation of the Old Testament in his own person.”¹² Jesus affirmed the Law, and fulfilled its demands perfectly. If we now think we selectively can accept and reject its moral teachings based on faulty interpretative templates, His example reproves us.

Politicians use the Bible to give ballast to their views and objectives. This is understandable, given the Book’s inherent power and its continued standing among many Americans.

However, this does not justify Scripture’s misuse, whether such is done casually or deliberately. Truth is too precious, and written revelation has been passed down to us at too great a cost, for us not to handle it honestly and accurately.

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¹ Leviticus 24:20, Matthew 25:40, Matthew 5:9

² Elizabeth Tenety, "Obama: Christ and the Golden Rule informed support of same-sex marriage," *The Washington Post*, May 10, 2012, accessed on June 12, 2012, http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/under-god/post/obama-christ-and-the-golden-rule-informed-support-of-same-sex-Marriage/2012/05/09/gIQAeJshDU_blog.html.

³ "Obama's 2006 Speech on Faith and Politics," *The New York Times*, accessed on June 12, 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2006/06/28/us/politics/2006obamaspeech.html?_r=1&pagewanted=all.

⁴ Michael Gerson, "Romney at Liberty: The case for conservatism," *The Washington Post*, May 14, 2012, accessed on June 12, 2012, http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/romneys-liberty-speech-rejects-religion-as-a-partisan-trump-card/2012/05/14/gIQACIWDPU_story.html.

⁵ Laurie Goodstein, "Unions That Divide: Churches Split Over Gay Marriage," *The New York Times*, May 13, 2012, accessed on June 12, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/14/us/gay-marriage-issue-divides-churches.html?pagewanted=all>.

⁶ See, for example: Thomas Aquinas, *The Basic Writings of Saint Aquinas* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1997), 823; John P. Burgess, "Calvin's Use of the Third Law," Pittsburg Theological Seminary, accessed June 19, 2012, <http://faculty.samford.edu/~whbunch/Chapter9.pdf>; Francis Nigel Lee, "Are the Mosaic Laws for Today?," Queensland Presbyterian Theological College, 2004, accessed June 19, 2012, <http://www.dr-fnlee.org/docs4/atmlft/atmlft.pdf>; Jonathan F. Bayes, *The Threefold Division of the Law* (Newcastle: The Christian Institute, 2005).

⁷ Darrell Bock, *The Bible Knowledge Word Study: Acts-Ephesians* (Colorado Springs: Victor, 2006), 408.

⁸ Knox Chamblin, Th.D., "Commentary on Matthew: Commentary and Lesson on Matthew 5:17-48," *IIIM Magazine Online*, April 12, 1999, accessed June 19, 2012, <http://thegospelcoalition.org/resources/a/Jesus-and-the-Law-Matthew-517-48>.

⁹ Richard D. Phillips, "Which Old Testament Laws Must I Obey?," Tenth Presbyterian Church, August 6, 2000, accessed June 19, 2012, http://www.tenth.org/qbox/qb_000806.htm.

¹⁰ Timothy J. Dailey, *The Bible, The Church, and Homosexuality* (Washington, DC: Family Research Council, 2004), accessed June 19, 2012, <http://www.frc.org/content/the-bible-the-church-and-homosexuality-1>.

¹¹ Luke T. Johnson, "Homosexuality & the Church," *Commonweal Magazine*, June 15, 2007, accessed June 19, 2012, <https://commonwealmagazine.org/homosexuality-church-1>.

¹² Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1975), 358.