

St. John's Lutheran Church Winter Bible Study
"The Bible and Homosexuality"
Session Two – How the Church Changed

Questioning Culture

In considering the affirmation of publicly accountable, lifelong, monogamous same-sex relationships, two related questions frequently arise

- aren't we just following 'culture'?
- how can we change centuries of church teaching and tradition?

These questions assume...

- ~ The views of 'culture' are inherently morally wrong and the views of the church are inherently morally right
- ~ Listening to voices 'outside' of the church is wrong
- ~ Changing centuries of church tradition is wrong
- ~ The church is not *already* aligned with the prevalent culture in its understanding
- ~ The teachings and practices of the church have always and continue to align with the moral vision of the Bible

The Ongoing Work of the Holy Spirit

Jesus said to the crowds: "*In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets* (Matt 7:12) – the Golden Rule

Jesus said to the disciples: "*So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.*" (John 13:14-15)

"I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come." (John 16:12-13)

Paul wrote to the church in Galatia: "*There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.*" (Gal 3:28)

"For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything; the only thing that counts is faith working through love." (Gal 5:6)

Jew or Gentile – The Council at Jerusalem (Acts 15)

Must Gentiles become Jews in order to be Christians?

According to Scripture and Tradition

- ~ The Jewish people were God’s chosen people (Gen 12:1-3, Gen 17:9-14, Exodus 19:3-8); the Gentiles were not
- ~ God’s election of the Jewish people was made evident in circumcision (Gen 17:9-14, Ex 12:43-50, Lev 12:3) and the law of Moses (Ex 19:3-8, Deut 26:16-19, Ps 1)
- ~ According to Scripture, God specifically commanded his people to be circumcised and to keep the law of Moses
- ~ According to (approx 1500 years of) tradition, God’s chosen people are defined by circumcision and by the law of Moses

A compelling argument could be made from Scripture and tradition for ... yes.

The Movement of the Spirit

Peter and Cornelius (Acts 10)

The “law of Moses” included divisions between foods that could be eaten and foods that could not – “clean and unclean” (Lev 11) – *“But I have said to you: You shall inherit their land, and I will give it to you to possess, a land flowing with milk and honey. I am the LORD your God; I have separated you from the peoples. You shall therefore make a distinction between the clean animal and the unclean, and between the unclean bird and the clean; you shall not bring abomination on yourselves by animal or by bird or by anything with which the ground teems, which I have set apart for you to hold unclean.”* (Lev 20:24-25)

- ~ Peter has a vision of “unclean” animals, is told by God to “kill and eat,” and when Peter refuses, God responds, “what God has made clean, you must not call profane.” (10:9-16) – God transforms Peter’s view of Scripture, *in Scripture*
- ~ Cornelius, a Gentile and a “devout man who feared God,” is told by God to send for Peter (10:1-8) – when Peter arrives and listens to the experience of Cornelius (10:17-33), he responds, *“I truly understand that God’s show no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.”* (10:34-35)
- ~ Peter shares the good news with them (10:36-43), the Holy Spirit falls on all who hear (10:44-46), Peter orders them to be “baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.” (10:47-48)

The Council at Jerusalem (Acts 15)

- ~ Peter testifies (15:7-11)
- ~ Paul and Barnabas testify (15:12)
- ~ James interprets Scripture in their present context (Act 15:13-21; Amos 9:11-12)

The Council decides – ***Gentiles do not have to become Jews in order to be Christians.***

“For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to impose on you no further burden than these essentials: that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from fornication. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell.” (15:28-29)

In light of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit, the early church expanded the definition of God’s chosen people.

Regarding the ‘issue’ of Gentiles, the early church...

- ~ Interpreted Scripture in light of the Gospel of Jesus Christ
- ~ Followed the moral vision of Scripture in reforming centuries of tradition
- ~ Listened to the experience of those who had previously been excluded from the definition of God’s chosen people
- ~ Followed the work of the Holy Spirit in setting aside the letter of the law

How might this apply to the ‘issue’ of homosexuality in the church today?

Slave or Free – The Institution of Slavery in Church and State

Slavery in Biblical Interpretations

- ~ No passage in the Bible explicitly condemns the institution of slavery
- ~ Several passages in the Bible implicitly condone the institution of slavery
- ~ Difficult to argue against slavery from a ‘literal’ interpretation of the Bible

Many Christians in the U.S. used the Bible to justify the institution of slavery, stating:

- › Africans (and other indigenous peoples) are the descendants of Ham and therefore cursed to be slaves – though Scripture nowhere states this connection
- ~ Noah becomes drunk; his son Ham, “the father of Canaan,” sees Noah’s nakedness; Noah wakes up, says, “*Cursed be Canaan; lowest of slaves shall he be to his brothers. He also said, “Blessed by the LORD my God be Shem; and let Canaan be his slave.” (Gen 9:20-27)*

- › Slavery is an accepted practice in the Old Testament and is therefore morally acceptable today. For example:
 - ~ Abraham (Gen 12:16, 39:17), Isaac (Gen 26:19, 25), and Jacob (Gen 32:5, 17) owned slaves
 - ~ The Commandment regarding Sabbath includes rest for “male and female slaves” (Ex 20:10, Ex 23:12, Deut 5:14)
 - ~ Joshua made slaves of the Canaanites not killed in the Conquest (Josh 9:23)
 - ~ Levitical law states Israelites may acquire slaves from the surrounding nations (Lev 25:44), and the law establishes stipulations for slavery (Ex 21:1-27, Lev 25:38-55, Deut 15:11-18)

- › Slavery is an accepted practice in the New Testament and is therefore morally acceptable today. For example:
 - ~ “Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, in singleness of heart, as you obey Christ.” (Eph 6:5)
 - ~ “Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything, not only while being watched and in order to please them, but wholeheartedly, fearing the Lord.” (Col 3:22)
 - ~ “Let all who are under the yoke of slavery regard their masters as worthy of all honor, so that the name of God and the teaching may not be blasphemed.” (1 Tim 6:1)
 - ~ “But as for you, teach what is consistent with sound doctrine...Tell slaves to be submissive to their masters and to give satisfaction in every respect; they are not to talk back, not to pilfer, but to show complete and perfect fidelity, so that in everything they may be an ornament to the doctrine of God our Savior.” (Titus 2:1, 9)
 - ~ “Slaves, accept the authority of your masters with all deference, not only those who are kind and gentle but also those who are harsh.” (1 Peter 2:18)

In the Civil War era, Christians justified slavery with biblical arguments. For example:

Thomas Stringfellow, *Scriptural and Statistical Views in Favor of Slavery* (1850)

- ~ “And if the modern views of abolitionists be correct, we may expect to find the institution marked with such tokens of divine displeasure, as will throw all other sins into the shade, as comparatively small, when laid by the side of this monster.”
- ~ “Now, to suppose that Jesus Christ left his disciples to find out, without a revelation, that slavery must be abolished” in light of commandment to love each other, assumes “that they would be able to spy out a discrepancy in the law of Moses, which God himself never saw.”
- ~ Attempts have been “made to force political slavery upon us in the place of domestic, by strangers who have no right to meddle with our matters.”

James Henley Thornwell (quoted in Rogers, pages 20-22)

- ~ Concedes that the “laws of love, and the condemnation of tyranny and oppression,” seem logically to condemn slavery, but Scripture treats slavery lawfully, and Scripture does not contradict itself, so “slavery is, by necessary implication, excepted.”
- ~ Employs a ‘natural law’ argument: “Whatever is universal is natural. We are willing that slavery should be tried by this standard.”

These arguments posit

- ~ ‘Modern’ abolition stands against Scripture and tradition
- ~ If abolition was right, Jesus would have said so
- ~ People have a religious right to their social views regarding slavery
- ~ Scriptures’ “law of love” does not override Scriptures’ approval of slavery
- ~ Slavery is natural and right because it is ‘universally’ accepted

Thanks be to God, Christians did argue against slavery from a biblical foundation centering in the words and example of Christ and the moral vision of Scripture

“The Bible’s moral principles argued against the social practices to be found within the Bible.”

(Gomes, pages 93-95)

- ~ Bishop Bartoleme de Las Casas stated (in 1550) that the biblical texts used to justify slavery were historically conditioned and overruled by the biblical principles of love and charity; the Bible cannot “be used to justify actions contrary to the moral law of Christ.”
- ~ John Wesley stated that slavery was inconsistent with the “New Testament’s paramount teachings on spiritual rebirth, sanctification, and evangelism.”
- ~ Quaker John Woolman stated that slavery was inconsistent with New Testament principles, based partly on the *Parable of the Sheep and the Goats* (Matt 25:31-46).
- ~ David Walker, an African American writing in 1829, based his argument against slavery on Peter’s statement in Acts 10:34.
- ~ Abolitionist John Rankin stated, “The whole Bible is opposed to slavery. The sacred volume is one grand scheme of benevolence. Beams of love and mercy emanate from every page, while the voice of justice denounces the oppressor.” (Rogers, 32)

Slavery is a powerful example of minds and hearts being changed while the biblical text did not:

“No one in contemporary America, except perhaps the most hard-bitten white supremacist, would read scripture with regard to race in the same way as the Southern Baptists read it a century ago...and no one feels that some travesty of scriptural integrity has happened because of that fact...It is not scripture that has changed, but rather the moral imagination by which we see ourselves, and see and read scripture.” (Gomes, 99)

How might this apply to the ‘issue’ of homosexuality in the church today?