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William J. Bartels Rev

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ARE HOMOPHOBIA AND HETEROSEXISM SINS?

by Bill Bartels

Protestant Chaplain, University of Rhode Island

I’d like to begin with a couple of disclaimers. First, some of the publicity of this event has given the impression that I am attacking evangelical Christianity and therefore, John has come here to defend it from these attacks. The history of how this forum came to be is somewhat different. In fact, it was a group of faculty here who were upset with the existence and work of the Committee to Eliminate Homophobia and Heterosexism. They are the ones who wanted to challenge the committee. This forum is how they chose to do it.

Secondly, while I hope that the discussion tonight will prove enlightening and thought provoking and may actually change some people’s minds, I’d also like to point out that it is essentially irrelevant to the work of the committee. The University of Rhode Island has already written into its policy statement that it will not discriminate on the basis of sexual orientation. This is already a value the university has officially adopted. The committee then, contrary to what some seem to believe, is not trying to force some radical agenda down the university's throat. It is just trying to make sure that the university lives up to and follows through on its own policy statement. Now on to the matter at hand.

Homophobia refers to the range of fear, disgust and hatred that many heterosexuals feel and act out toward homosexuals; Heterosexism as I am using it refers to social customs, structures and beliefs that legitimize and institutionalize homophobia. Are they sinful? Let’s move from the realm of abstract definition to the lives of people affected by homophobia and heterosexism.

In a small southern town recently a lesbian couple has been the subject of continual harassment from town folk, many of them calling themselves Christians. They have been verbally abused, threatened, and even had hung on their mailbox a dead female dog that had been mutilated.

In Palos Heights, IL two men, shouting anti-gay slurs, punched a gay man, stepped on his face with spiked shoes, beat him with tree branches. One assailant gouged a finger into the victim's eyes and punctured the victim's eardrum with a stick.

In Grand Chute, WI three off-duty policemen grabbed a hat from a 20 year old gay man and called him "fag." When the man tried to leave one of the officers tackled him in the parking lot, then beat and kicked him while calling him "faggot."

This is what homophobia and heterosexism do to real people. And don’t think these kinds of things don’t happen here.

* Originally presented during a debate held at URI in March of 1994.
Here at the University of Rhode Island, a gay student who was a member of a fraternity was assaulted by two of his heterosexual frat brothers who were drunk from a party got a passkey, went into the man's room, and tried to force him to perform oral sex.

-- Here at URI, when the Gay and Lesbian Alliance was meeting at the Women's Center, male students watched the house to see who was entering so they could follow, harass, and threaten the gay students with violence.

-- Here at URI, a student whose sexual orientation was disclosed in the dorm began receiving obscene remarks and hate mail at his door.

-- Here at URI, a fraternity hung up a banner saying "We Hate Homos." The banner was taken down when a professor complained, but then, after a vote of the brothers, it was immediately put up again.

-- Here at URI, a student came to an honors class with his face and body severely bruised. After class he began to tremble as he told the professor how he had been beaten up and thrown out of the house by his own father. Why? He had told his parents that he was gay. With no financial or parental support, he left school within one week of this incident.

So are homophobia and heterosexism sins? How can they not be? Christianity teaches that all people are created in the image of God and are worthy of respect and dignity. Christianity teaches that God loves all people equally. Christians are also called to love all people. This means that, according to some of the most basic beliefs of Christianity, to make fun of homosexuals, to put them down, to make them the brunt of jokes, to condemn them, ridicule them, carry out violence against them or to discriminate against them in any way, is to act unlovingly toward them and is wrong. Yes, in religious language it is sinful. Furthermore, if these actions are sinful, then the refusal of Christians to speak out against them is also sinful, and the refusal to actively try to put an end to such actions is also sinful.

God also demands that we treat people with justice, and failure to do so is sinful. But where is justice when 30 percent of teenage suicides are committed by gay and lesbian youth who cannot bear to face the hatred and stigmatization of homosexuals by this society? Where is justice when 80 - 90 percent of gays and lesbians have been verbally harassed during their lives? Where is justice when 20 - 25 percent of gays and lesbians have been physically assaulted? Where is justice when many gay and lesbian students and faculty at this university live in constant fear of being harassed if their sexual orientation were made public? Where is justice when the state of Rhode Island has for ten years refused to pass legislation that would merely prevent discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation in the areas of housing, employment, credit and public accommodation? And where are the Christians who should be working to achieve justice? Many are silent. Some actively oppose it. To do either is to let injustice prevail and is sinful.
Now I fully expect Rev. Rankin to agree with me that hateful words and violent actions directed toward homosexuals are wrong. But I also expect he will suggest that some kinds of discrimination are acceptable because the Bible says that homosexuality is itself sinful. He might well ask of me, "how can you be faithful to scripture and not consider homosexuality sinful?" Here is my answer. I speak to you as a Protestant for whom the Bible is the highest authority on matters of religious faith and practice. The problem is that the Bible must be interpreted, and there's the rub.

For the key issue here is how does one properly interpret the Bible? Some would have us believe it is as simple as saying "the Bible says it, I believe it, that settles it." But is it really that simple? The Bible also forbids slaves from trying to gain freedom. It says if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. It says that the penalty for certain homosexual acts, for adultery and for children who show disrespect for their parents is death! Can we really dispense with our interpretation of these passages by saying "the Bible says it, I believe it, that settles it?"

What I hope these few examples demonstrate is that one must follow some sort of principles or guidelines in interpreting scripture to insure that one is in fact doing justice to what the text meant in its own day, and what it can be said to mean for our day. Principles for biblical interpretation that are generally agreed to even among conservative evangelicals include literary, historical, and theological guidelines. Only by carefully following such guidelines as these can one finally figure out what a scripture passage meant in its own day and then whether and how that meaning would apply to our own situation.

What is the result when we apply these principles to those passages dealing with homosexual acts? There are only four or five places where the Bible refers clearly to some form of homosexual activity. What are we to make of these? In Genesis 19, the men of Sodom try to abuse the guests at Lot's house by subjecting them to homosexual rape. While Sodom is often used as a symbol of evil in the Bible, no where is its evil specified as homosexuality. When the sin of Sodom is specified as in Ezekiel, it is said that Sodom "... had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not help or encourage the needy. They were arrogant and this was an abomination in my eyes." The sin of Sodom then is arrogance, inhospitality, and abuse of the needy, not homosexuality.

Two of the most quoted references to homosexual acts are found in Leviticus (18:22 and 20:13). Literary considerations reveal to us that these passages are part of something called the Holiness Code that had to do with ritual cleanness and uncleanness of the priests. It therefore forbids all kinds of things that are thought to be ritually polluting. It forbids using mixed cloth, pork, intercourse with menstruating women, etc. It also prescribes
"lying the lyings of women." This was also thought to be "unclean." But Jesus, Peter, and Paul all came to reject such distinctions about ritual cleanliness and uncleanness as non-binding for Christians. And even the 
 Fundamentalist Journal says that this Code condemns "idolatrous practices" and "ceremonial uncleanness" and concludes: "We are not bound by these commands today."

Two other passages that condemn some form of homosexual activity are found in 1 Corinthians (6:9) and in Paul's letter to Timothy (1:10). This brings us to the historical considerations. What was the nature of homosexual relationships at the time of these biblical documents? In general, at the time of the New Testament, the rule for homosexual relationships in the Greco-Roman world was pederasty, i.e., an older male, who was probably already married, takes a male youth, a slave, or a male prostitute as a lover. There was a basic inequality in these relationships (in sexual roles as well as in age) that made them potentially very degrading for the younger partner. This pederastic model of homosexuality is what Paul would have had in mind in these two references and this is what he was condemning here.

Finally there is the first chapter of Paul's letter to the Romans (1:26-27). This passage says "their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women, were consumed in passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving within themselves the penalty of their error." This scripture has been used not only to condemn homosexuals, but even as "proof" that AIDS is God's judgment against them! Following our literary guidelines tells us that this is a small and relatively insignificant part of a larger theological treatise. Paul's larger purpose here is to make the case that all are sinners before God. Also, as Victor Paul Furnish has pointed out, "...in [Paul's] view the fundamental sin from which all particular evils derive is idolatry." In the first chapter of Romans Paul is ridiculing pagan religions by showing how they worshipped idols rather than God. It is in this context that the passage quoted above occurs. Why? Again let's examine the historical and cultural situation.

In addition to pederasty, the other form of homosexual behavior in Paul's day was found in the fertility cults of the pagan religions like those that worshipped Aphrodite at Corinth— which is where Paul was while writing this letter. The sacred prostitutes of these religions not only indulged in same sex sexual activity, but they would take on the dress and mannerisms of the opposite sex as well. In addition, some of these males would voluntarily castrate themselves, wear feminine dress and, since they were considered to have exchanged their sexual identities, they would engage in same-sex orgies. This occurred in pagan temples all along the coasts of Paul's missionary journeys. Thus, what Paul says here about same sex sexuality, exchanging the natural for the
and receiving a bodily penalty clearly accords with these idolatrous pagan practices that he is denouncing in the early part of Romans.

On a more general note, and this is a telling point in my mind, though there were words or phrases for certain kinds of homosexual acts, neither the Hebrew nor the Greek language even had a word for homosexuality as such, like we do in English. Why? Because the very concept of one who would be by nature or constitution interested only in members of the same sex same was unknown to these cultures. The idea of a relationship of equality, mutual love and respect between two people who are by nature oriented toward others of the same sex was entirely unknown to the biblical authors.

In short then, what the biblical authors condemned was a kind of homosexual behavior that was part of idol worship or that had an inherent tendency to be degrading to one partner. Furthermore, the type of homosexuality that exists today would have been totally unknown to the biblical authors. One can conclude that the specific teachings of these passages are basically irrelevant to the discussion of homosexuality today. And I conclude this not because I consider the Bible to lack authority, but because the proper application of generally accepted principles of interpretation forces it upon me.

If these particular passages are irrelevant to the contemporary discussion, then what can one find in scripture that is relevant to the issue? Here we apply the theological principle mentioned above. What are some of the core teachings of Jesus and what are their implications for homosexuality? Jesus tended to turn the usual and customary upside down. He scolded many of the religious leaders of his day as being more concerned with external appearances than with internal motivations. He fought against what he considered an overly literalistic and legalistic interpretation of Jewish scripture, and argued instead for the primacy of the basic principles. The most basic principles were love of God and love of neighbor. All else was subservient to these. His basic idea was that in the Kingdom of God it is this kind of love that should be the guide. What does this mean for today?

As for homosexuality today, it is clear first of all that it is more a fact of one's existence than a fault in one's character; it is, for most, something one discovers about oneself rather than merely being a choice one makes. Does one display Christian love by saying to a whole class of people that for reasons that were not of your own choosing, you are none the less excluded from ever experiencing sexual fulfillment in a non-sinful way? Is it love or justice to say that, at best, you must force yourself to conform to a celibate lifestyle? Even Paul allows heterosexuals to find sexual release in marriage if they cannot remain celibate. Is it fair or just to deny this kind of relationship to homosexuals?
It seems to me that the biblical guidelines are that all sexual relationships, homosexual and heterosexual, should be based on the central notion of self-giving love, and the ideas of equality and respect for other persons that flow from that notion. Thus, sexual relationships, heterosexual or homosexual, should be governed by mutual love and respect, they should be an expression of genuine commitment and intimacy, and they should not be harmful either to the parties involved or to third parties. This would mean that some homosexual relationships could be right while some heterosexual relationships would be wrong. In short, it would mean a principled adherence to the "Law of Love," rather than a blind adherence to irrelevant rules.

Returning now to the issue of heterosexism and homophobia. My claim is that the Bible cannot be legitimately used as an excuse to discriminate against homosexuals. My claim is that the Bible actually requires us to defend justice and the basic rights of all people. Failure to do so is itself sinful.

My questions are these:

1) How long will people claim the Bible as their authority while failing to interpret it consistently according to these generally accepted principles of interpretation?*

2) How long will people who call themselves Christian focus more on condemning homosexuality than on condemning the many acts of harassment, violence, and discrimination that plague homosexuals?

And finally, I was once asked how I could be a Christian and yet work on the Committee to Eliminate Homophobia and Heterosexism. I would rather ask:

3) How can you be a Christian and NOT work against the sins of homophobia and heterosexism?*

My point here is that few have trouble applying these same principles of interpretation in some other contexts, e.g. where Paul writes that women should keep their heads covered in church. The history was that in that place and time only prostitutes went around with their heads uncovered. Clearly then Paul's command cannot be literally applied to our very different cultural setting today. Why then is it so hard for us to be consistent and deal with the passages mentioned above in the same way?