

“When the Bible Speaks Concerning Homosexuality, Why Does It Seem to Say Different Things to Different People?”

A Lecture by Virginia Ramey Mollenkott

I want us to think together about the question I have posted as my title: “When the Bible speaks concerning homosexuality, why does it seem to say different things to different people?” First, a little story to illustrate the problem we face.

There is a professor of New Testament at Yale University named Dale Martin. Once upon a time he was invited to deliver a lecture about what the Bible says about a certain topic – I’m not sure of the specific topic, but I am sure he was supposed to describe the biblical view of it. His audience was large and eager. After an introduction from his host, he strode to the lectern, opened a large Bible on the lectern, and then sat down in the front row. A very L-O-N-G silence ensued. When the audience began to get restless, Dr. Martin finally returned to the podium. He sighed and said, “Well, it looks as if the Bible is not going to speak to us after all, so I guess we’ll just have to interpret it for ourselves.”

Professor Martin's clever act was intended to teach that audience something absolutely basic to any discussion of biblical meaning. Like any other text, the Bible is simply print on a page until the reader reads and interprets the text. Every reader will come to the Bible with a lifetime of experiences, learning, and basic assumptions that will affect what she or he thinks the text means. The Bible cannot speak for itself any more than a volume of Shakespeare's plays can speak for itself. Even if texts are read aloud and not commented upon, the reader's inflections, pauses, and emphasis will form an interpretation. That's why someone who loves Shakespeare's *Hamlet* will go to see the play for the tenth time if word goes out that a certain great actor is playing the role of the Prince of Denmark. A whole new, previously unthinkable, set of meanings may emerge.

Part of the problem about letting the Bible “speak” to us is the inexactness of language. When we say that a certain text “speaks” to us, we usually mean that our interpretation of it stimulates or inspires or challenges us. So far, so good. But then we forget we are moved by our own interpretation of the text. We act as if the text on the page has provided its own clear indisputable statement, has communicated an unbiased and inescapable objective reality that will mean the same thing to everybody no matter how much their life-experiences may differ from our own. We talk as if the Bible preaches its own sermon, rather than providing a text upon which we readers then proceed to preach our own sermons based on what we think the text means.

So at this point the first answer to our question should be coming clear within our minds. When the Bible “speaks” concerning homosexuality it seems to say different things to different people because each reader comes to the text with different experiences and different assumptions. A rip-roaring heterosexual male preacher who can't imagine being attracted to another man and who believes in hell-fire for those who oppose God's will – which for him means sex only within marriage, and marriage only between one man and one woman – that preacher is going to see damnation for homosexuals in the Bible, even though the original texts did not contain the word homosexual and even though the huge collection of texts we called the Bible makes direct mention of certain abusive same-sex action

only a few times throughout.

A young woman who discerns she is attracted to other women, who desperately struggles against that attraction, and who hears her priest or rabbi or minister preaching that God despises homosexuals, is going to feel that the Bible is telling her to kill herself, or else she might as well give up her faith and live as dissolutely as she pleases. But if she comes across a Bible scholar who shows her there is a different way to read the texts about same-sex relating, she may find hope and may eventually be enabled to accept herself as God's beloved lesbian child, created in God's image just like everybody else.

Then there are the people who are sure the Bible denounces homosexuality but who secretly engage in same-sex relations. These people are the greatest danger to queer society, because they not only live hypocritically but also attack open and honest homosexuals with all the hatred they feel toward themselves. In all my years of speaking about God's love for everyone, including queer people of every sort, I have many times been attacked by young men who quote the Bible to me in voices quivering with rage. I try to be kind when I respond to them, because I assume they are struggling against their own homosexual impulses, which they hate but find impossible to resist. I want always to leave the door open for such people to discover that God's love for them is unconditional and has nothing to do with merits or demerits, sexual orientation, gender identity, or any other human diversity.

An evangelical scholar named David Dark has recently published a book called, *The Sacredness of Questioning Everything* (Zondervan, 2009). In it he points out that “Jesus often refused what was in his time the reigning interpretation of scripture” (p. 159). “[Jesus] insisted that the words mean more than they had up to that point,” as when he announced that he himself was the fulfillment of a Scripture he had just read to the congregation (Luke 4:21). Dark also points out that just quoting the Bible is not enough. For instance, there are whole chapters in the Book of Job that are spoken by Job's judgmental friends, all of whom God says are absolutely wrong toward the end of that very same book. So quoting from those Bible chapters would be totally misleading. Instead of simply quoting proof texts we have to “make sure our use of biblical language is in line with what was being talked about at the time of the writing” (p. 150). We have to ask ourselves constantly, “Am I a faithful and accurate interpreter of these 'infinitely provocative texts' ” (p.150).

It is easy to flip from dogmatic certainty about what the Bible says to a scornful and cynical assumption that any interpretation is as valid as any other, so why even bother with the Bible? Well, we need to bother with the Bible because it is at least a great classic, and because it is immensely influential in our culture, especially the negative and judgmental interpretations of it. And by no means is any interpretation just as good as any other. Two professors at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, an evangelical seminary, point out two very basic rules for interpreting ancient texts like the Bible: first, “A text cannot mean what it could never have meant to its author or [the original] readers.”¹ And second, “Whenever we share comparable particulars (such as specific life situations) with the first century setting, God's Word to us is the same as God's Word to them.” The key words in principle #2 are “whenever we share comparable particulars” (or life situations), because in many cases we do **not** share the life experiences of 1st century Bible interpreters.

¹ Gordon Lee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All It's Worth*, as quoted in Mollenkott, *Sensuous Spirituality*, pp.202-212.

I really like the Gordon-Conwell professors' book, which is called *How to Read the Bible for All It's Worth*; but I regret to tell you that the authors violate their own principles when it comes to homosexuality. The biblical authors did not know the term homosexuality or that there was such a thing as a same-sex orientation; that was first recognized in the 1890's. The biblical authors knew about certain same-sex abuses, but they did not have a clue about an authentic life-long orientation toward loving one's own gender/sex. So if we obey the 1st rule, that "A text cannot mean what it could never have meant to its author or [the original] readers," we have to acknowledge that the Bible says nothing whatsoever that maligns or judges sincere same-sex lovers. The biblical authors attacked same-sex rape and loveless abuse of one another; but they also attacked **heterosexual** rape and loveless abuse of one another. If we do not therefore assume that all heterosexual love-relationships are evil, we cannot honestly assume that all homosexual love-relationships are evil either. "A text cannot mean what it never could have meant to its author or [the original] readers."

The Gordon-Conwell professors also violate their second basic rule for interpretation: "Whenever we share comparable particulars (i.e., specific life situations) with the first-century setting, God's Word to us is the same as [God's] Word to them." The prohibition in Leviticus against two men lying together stems partly from a small and embattled Israel's need for population, whereas our situation today is quite different and we are vastly overpopulated. Paul's words in Romans, chapter one about men with men and women with women probably refer to the same-sex fertility priesthoods that Paul associated with idolatry – and clearly, the context of Romans 1 indicates that Paul is writing about idolatry, not homosexuality. For the most part, the major model of same-sex relating known to 1st century readers was pederasty (that is man-boy love) with all its abusive possibilities. So for all these reasons our Gordon-Conwell professors are wrong to claim that here in the 21st century we share comparable particulars (specific life situations) with the authors and listeners of 20 centuries ago.

It seems to me that biblical interpretations tend to fall into two broad categories, those that emphasize God's anger and those that emphasize God's love. I was brought up in a fundamentalist evangelical family and community that emphasized a God who hated evil so much that His anger had to be satisfied by blood sacrifice – no longer the blood of lambs and goats, but the blood of God's only son, Jesus Christ. As a child who was often beaten unfairly, I cried at the thought that my sins had necessitated the sacrifice of Jesus' blood; and as I grew older I struggled to love the God who would punish one Child for the sins of other children. It was not until I was in graduate school, writing a doctoral dissertation about John Milton, the great 17th century Puritan poet and theologian, that I began to learn a different way of interpreting the Bible and the God of the Bible. Milton insisted that the Law of Love is the principle by which every scriptural text should be measured. And then I learned that long before Milton, St. Augustine had written that "if a text of Scripture seems to advocate actions that do not promote the love of God and neighbor, it should be interpreted figuratively. If it advocates love, it is literal." And finally, I learned to see that St. Paul had taught the same principle of interpretation. For instance, Romans 13:8 says "Owe no man anything, but to love one another; for [the one] that loves another has fulfilled the law." St. Paul goes on to say that all of the laws are comprehended or summarized in the one law saying that we should love our neighbors as ourselves. "Love works no harm to [its] neighbors," writes Paul; "therefore love is the fulfilling of the law" (Rom. 13:10). Jesus said practically the same thing, according to Matthew (22:37-40); he said that the greatest commandments are to love God and to love our neighbor as ourself. "On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets." "The law and the prophets" was the phrase that in Jesus' day

denoted the Hebrew Bible (often called the Old Testament); so Jesus is claiming here that the entire message of the Bible is captured in loving God and loving others as we love ourselves.

Now of course we come up against a new problem: how do we define what is loving? There are people who believe that the way to love homosexuals is to warn us of hellfire, and to repudiate us, deny us church membership and keep us 2nd class citizens, in order that we may realize what God thinks of us and repent before it is too late. And here is why I think the Bible stresses loving others **the same way we love ourselves**. The point is that we must define what is loving by what would feel loving to us, if we ourselves were on the receiving end. If you said to me, "I love you, you're perfect – now change," I would not feel loved by you. If you cannot love me the way I am, if you must change me in basic ways in order to find me truly loveable, then I must look elsewhere to find love. As Christian historian Gary Wills has written, "Both [Jesus and the apostle Paul] were liberators, not prisoners – so they were imprisoned – so they were killed. Paul meant what Jesus meant, that love is the only law." ²

Personally, I would feel imprisoned if someone told me I'd be acceptable if only I remained celibate all my life. Although the Book of Genesis says that "It is not good for the human being to be alone," a lonely and despairing singleness is all that many ministers and some rabbis have to offer to homosexuals and often also to transsexuals, gender-benders, and people who seem queer in any way.

Imagine the outcry if the heterosexual majority were told, "It's okay to be heterosexual as long as you don't touch anybody or have any loving companionship for the rest of your life." I doubt that such a commandment would be considered loving, don't you?

Let me share with you some of the things I have noticed about the Bible once I began to approach it from the standpoint of the Law of Love. For one thing, there is in the Bible a trend toward inclusiveness of sexual and gender minorities. For instance, Deuteronomy 23:1 bans eunuchs from entering the temple or being part of God's congregation – and eunuchs would be the equivalents of today's intersexuals, transsexuals, and homosexuals, all of whom cannot reproduce ourselves by doing what comes naturally for us. All eunuchs were outsiders. But Isaiah 56:4-5 welcomes eunuchs into the temple community; and Jesus praises eunuchs (in Matthew 19:12); and the Ethiopian eunuch is promptly baptized into the church (Acts 8:26-29). For another example, Deuteronomy 22:5 forbids cross-dressing, but Romans 13 (verses 12 and 14) encourages spiritual cross-dressing; and Epimenides, a cross-dressing and homoerotic shaman, is quoted favorably in Acts 17:28 and the Book of Titus (1:12-13).

Genesis chapter 2 depicts Adam, the Earth Creature, as an hermaphrodite or intersexual being, later divided into the human male and female, while Genesis 1:27 states that both male and female were made in the image of God. Therefore God the Creator must be androgynous or in some mysterious way inclusive of all genders. In other words God **transes** human gender; by traditional standards, God is queer. I find it amusing that the same people who insist that homosexuality is wrong also insist that the Holy Trinity is made up of a male Father, a male Son, and a male Holy Spirit, all of whom profoundly love one another. (What is this if not a homoerotic trio?) And the same people who insist that homosexuality and gender-bending are disgraceful also insist that everybody needs to be "born again." But it is women who give birth, not men; so if God is male, he's got to be a motherly male –

² Wills, *What Paul Meant*, p. 175 as quoted by Mollenkott, *Sensuous Spirituality*, p. 198.

and so again, God is queer, God transes human gender expectations. And we who are queer or homosexual or cross-dressing (or whatever) are made in the image of this mysterious and all-inclusively loving Holy One. In fact, both the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures contain imagery of God as male but also contain some images of God as female: God giving birth, God as Lady Wisdom or Sophia; bakerwoman God, and so forth.³ The point here, of course, is not that God is literally either male or female, but that the Divine Ground of our Being encompasses both male and female as well as all the “in-betweens” we find in the created universe.

If we read Matthew 1:23-5 literally, then the Virgin Birth of Jesus was a parthenogenetic birth. In that case, Jesus would have been chromosomally female, as all virgin births are. Yet according to the Gospel accounts, he appeared to be a normal male. So anyone who takes the Virgin Birth literally must acknowledge that Jesus was intersexual (which is one form of transgenderism) and therefore Jesus was a perfect incarnation of the entire sex/gender continuum of males, in-betweens, and females. Accordingly, an early baptismal formula recorded in Galatians 3:28 testifies that in Christ “there is no longer male and female.” And Christian theologian Theodore Jennings has pointed out in his book *The Man Jesus Loved* that when the crucified Jesus told his mother to “behold her son” standing next to her at the foot of the cross he was not doing that to point out who should provide for her future. Matthew tells us that Mary had other sons to take care of her in her old age (Matthew 12:46-7). No, what Jesus was saying as he died was that the beloved disciple was **family** to him and also therefore **family** to his mother. Judging by Jesus' close relationship with the Beloved Disciple and also with Mary Magdalene, I would guess that Jesus' orientation was bisexual, and therefore “queer.” It's none of our business whether or not Jesus was sexually active, but it would appear that his orientation was toward loving both males and females. Again, it is ironic that so many who claim to be Jesus' followers are so judgmental against bisexuals, homosexuals, transgender people, and also the poverty-stricken people Jesus liked to hang out with.

As I applied the Law of Love to the Bible, I noticed that the Christian Scriptures contain many queer or gender-bending images. Christian women are called brother; Christian men are called the brides of Christ(!), Jesus and Paul are depicted as mothers (John 16:21, 12:6; Galatians 4:19); Jesus is depicted as Wisdom, or Holy Sophia (Matthew 11:19; I Corinthians 1:24); the church is described as a female body with a male head (Ephesians 5:23-33), and in fact, the female “body of Christ” is urged to grow up and become the male head (Ephesians 4:15).

In Matthew 5:22, Jesus warns that “anyone who calls his brother Racha shall be in danger of the council.” **Racha** is a non-Greek word that was a total mystery until 1934, when an ancient Egyptian papyrus was published that used Racha in reference to one particular person. The context of that papyrus indicates that the word Racha is the equivalent to the Greek word **malakos**, meaning “effeminate.”⁴ So Jesus was apparently warning against mockery of men who do not meet the traditional standards of masculinity – in other word, people who are “gender-queer” or possibly homosexual. Such mockers or bullies will be judged by God!

I have already mentioned a wonderful book by Theodore Jennings, Jr., called *The Man Jesus Loved*,

3 See V.R. Mollenkott, *The Divine Feminine: Biblical Imagery of God as Female*.

4 Will Roscoe, *Jesus and the Shamanic Tradition of Same Sex Love* (San Francisco: Suspect Thoughts Press, 2004), p. 200.

which describes in detail the gay and queer-friendly passages in the New Testament that are completely overlooked by those who want to depict God as vindictive and angry. Theodore Jennings Jr., who teaches Bible at the Chicago Theological Seminary has also written two other books that I strongly recommend. *Jacob's Wound* is one of them, and it describes the many gay and queer-friendly stories in the Old Testament or the Hebrew Scriptures, especially the stories of Saul, Jonathan, and David as seen through the lens of their historical era and compared to the epics of Homer, where warriors traveled with their male lovers as an accepted part of ancient warfare. The third Jennings book I recommend is called *Plato or Paul?* In it, Jennings argues that the Holiness Code in Leviticus was influenced by Plato's *Laws*.

I know that many of us have assumed that Plato was homosexual or at least gay-friendly, but the fact is that by the end of his life when he wrote the *Laws*, Plato was viciously heterosexual and homophobic and introduced all the most disgusting rhetoric of contemporary homophobia: that homosexual acts resemble men having sex with dogs or other animals; that no pair of animals would ever stoop to same-sex activity; and other lies and distortions intended to make homosexuals either go into hiding or commit suicide. But Jennings shows that the *Laws* were written early enough to have influenced the re-codification of the Bible's Leviticus Code that repudiates men lying with men as if with a woman.

And even so, it took Christians many centuries after Plato to begin to use the snarling tone that Plato uses in the *Laws*. The point here is that homophobia did not originate in Judaism or in Christianity or in Islam, it originated in pagan Greece! And there is no reason on earth to assume that Judaism, Christianity or Islam must continue to reject homosexuals, bisexuals, or gender queer people.

To wrap up this part of the program, let me summarize a few of our main points. First of all, we must remember that the ancient texts cannot “speak” to us on their own, that we are forced to interpret them as accurately as possible. To do so, we must do the work of finding out what the text would have meant to the author and to the contemporaries that the author was addressing. We also need to find out whether the situations of our lives are comparable to the situations that were being addressed by the author and experienced by the original hearers. If so, the text may be applied to our lives here in the 21st century; if not, we are being invited to figure out how the text might be applied to our very different life-situations in a loving way that affirms and supports life and human justice or fairness.

We know that however we interpret a text, we must interpret it in a way that will be loving and respectful toward our fellow human beings. We can be sure of that because the scriptures themselves teach us that all God's commandments are wrapped up in loving God and our neighbor as ourselves. If Jesus, a Jewish teacher, says that the whole meaning of the Bible is to love God and to love others as we love ourselves (Matthew 22:37-40) that should be enough to guide our reading of the Bible.

We know from our own experience that it does not feel loving to us if people discount our lives and reject our feelings as worthless. Therefore, when dealing with people unlike ourselves, we know that the loving thing to do is to listen to what they feel to be true, and then respectfully share with them what we feel to be true, offering our evidence but not assuming that any of us is infallible. (David Dark urges us to “let go of the psychic burden of certainty,” to liberate ourselves from “imagined infallibility”).⁵

5 Dark, pp. 148-9.

When dealing with homosexuality and what the Bible “says” about it, we do well to read responsible scholars in order to find out what new insights may emerge by approaching the topic under the banner of unconditional love. I have shared with you some of the surprises I have encountered as I made this journey, but there are many more that I challenge you to discover for yourself.

As I close, I want to make one final point: during my many years as an evangelical feminist and a biblically-oriented queer activist, I have often been told something like this: “I wish I could accept homosexuals like you, but I just can't, because I believe in the Bible, and the Bible says you are wrong and are living under God's judgment.” But that statement simply does not hold water. A quick review of biblical scholarship will show anybody that some people read the Bible as anti-queerness, anti-homosexual and anti-other gender anomalies, while some other people read the Bible as very queer-friendly. Therefore, every reader does have the choice concerning whether to come down on the judgmental side or the loving side. Since Jesus tells us that the entire message of the Bible is to love God and other people, I prefer to come down on the side of love in the case of homosexuality and every other imaginable social issue. What I will no longer tolerate is the idea that we are not responsible for which interpretations we choose. The Bible does not force us to be judgmental and rejecting of other people; if we choose to interpret the Bible as if it does, then we must take responsibility for the interpretation we have chosen. We are not entitled to shift responsibility for the interpretation to the text, which remains silent until we place our interpretations on it.

I close with the word of St. Paul from Romans 13:9-10: “Thou shalt not commit adultery, thou shalt not kill, thou shalt not steal, thou shalt not bear false witness, thou shalt not covet, and if there be any other commandments, it is briefly comprehended in this saying, namely, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. Love worketh no ill to [its] neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.”