

BIBLICAL AUTHORITY AND HOMOSEXUALITY

Hardy Steinke - September 23,2015

One of my favourite authors, the Franciscan priest Richard Rohr writes:

"...every viewpoint is a view from a point."

For almost two thousand years there have been many viewpoints expressed about the Bible - what it is, and how it is understood with regard to many of life's questions and issues. In this paper I will try to share my viewpoint about what the Bible is, it's authority in general and with regard to the issue of sexual orientations. There is much more in my mind and heart than what I am writing here, and I welcome our upcoming discussions.

In order to be clear about the meaning of some key words as they appear in this paper, here are a few brief definitions:

I am using the word '**authority**' to mean the basis for belief and action.

When I use the word '**love**' in this paper, I mean self giving, sacrificial love.

By '**marriage**' I mean a lifelong commitment to mature in self giving, sacrificial love between two persons.

Another word which I use frequently is the word **'justice'**. I recognize that most of us have been taught in church and by society to primarily think about justice in terms of punishment and reward. In this paper, the primary usage of the word justice is when the Bible speaks of 'setting things right' or 'setting things in order'. The noted scholar N.T. Wright makes frequent reference to justice as it is understood this way in Scripture. When people are mistreated, poor, or oppressed, the Scripture says: "Let justice roll on like a river." (Micah 5:24) In other words, 'set this right'! This was the primary cry of the Old Testament prophets in the face of injustices, and it was a primary kingdom teaching of Jesus.

By **'spiritual thought'** I mean spiritual consciousness, understandings, beliefs and doctrinal formulations.

For many years, one of my research interests has been the history and development of spiritual thought and particularly how the Scriptures contribute to our understanding of God, our relationship with God, with each other and creation. I believe that spiritual understanding has been developing for thousands of years, even before the Scriptures were written and it continues to the present. The Bible represents and contributes vitally to this development. However, the writing, copying, redacting, editing, translating, interpreting and canonization processes of Scripture mark neither the beginning point nor the endpoint of the development of spiritual thought. It is a continuous process prompted by the Spirit of God. In the broadest sense I believe the Bible shows us how since the beginning, God has been revealing a path forward for all of creation toward redemption and

maturity in the beauty of love, justice and humility. Jesus' teaching about the Kingdom of God may be the most helpful metaphor describing this reality.

In my view, the following representative selected passages get right to the heart of this forward progress toward redemption and maturity in love, humility and justice.

Mark 12:30-31 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

30 you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' 31 The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these."

Micah 6:8 (NRSV)

8 He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

1 John 4:16 (NRSV)

16 So we have known and believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.

Matthew 5:43-44 (NRSV)

43 “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ 44 But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,

Romans 11:33 (NRSV)

33 O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!

John 16:13(NRSV)

13 When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth;

Within the Bible itself we can see some movement toward love, justice and humility regarding issues such as racism, prejudice, gender equality, slavery and violence. While we still have much more ground to gain with these, I am always hopeful that even with today's issues, which would include ethics pertaining to sexual orientation, stem cell therapies, genetic engineering, assisted dying and new issues which have yet to surface, we will move toward maturity as we discover God's revelation of love, justice and humility flowing into all categories. In fact I see it as our life vocation to steward this path faithfully by following Jesus Christ as we are guided by the Spirit.

I believe that for almost two thousand years, how Scripture has been understood has been the most determinative factor in the course of history for good but sadly, sometimes for bad. These would be instances where the Bible was terribly misunderstood, misinterpreted or misused resulting in abusive and violent behaviours which have resulted in untold hurt and bloodshed. In our lifetime it was used by some to justify segregation, to subordinate women, to forbid interracial dating and marriage and to make the case for war. For example, the Iraq war of 2002 was likened by some to be 'crushing satan'. Interpretations of the Bible have influenced practices of slavery, anti-Semitism and apartheid. In the Middle Ages the violent Crusades were fought and to this day Bible understandings play a key role in alliances and military strategies in the Middle East. I believe that how the Bible is understood going forward holds the same possibilities for good and evil. The stakes are high and we should give our most sincere diligence to the task of studying and rightly handling the Scriptures. Even though there is some anxiety about our upcoming discussions and we might rather spend our time doing other things, I am still glad that we are doing it, because it is a much needed discussion, learning and growth process for us all.

In our thinking and discussions about the authority of the Scripture I am looking for ways to communicate more honestly, comprehensively, and helpfully what the Bible is. Our discussions need to acknowledge and take into account the many complex divine and human considerations that are involved. It appears to me misleading and not helpful to summarize our understanding of the Bible in a doctrinal, faith or belief document by simply

saying something like “We believe the Bible to be our authoritative guide for faith and practice.” In my view we should acknowledge right at the outset that the collection of writings comprising the Bible represent several thousand years of spiritual experience and thought development. Failing to do so can easily leave believers and non-believers with the false impression that everything in the Bible attributed to God - the nature, will, words and actions of God, is to be read as a static, perfectly accurate, and unchanging reflection of God then and now and forever. Careful reading of Scripture shows us that tremendous development in understanding the nature, Will, words and actions of God is reflected within the books of the Bible. The development moves from 'an eye for an eye' all the way to 'turn the other cheek'! The following are just a few of the issues and occurrences which reflect this progression of thought and understanding:

Who ordered the census of Israel and Judah?

According to the account of 2 Samuel 24:1 "Again the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel, and he incited David against them, saying, 'Go, count the people of Israel and Judah.' NRSV. The same event as it is reflected upon perhaps two hundred years later in the writing of 1 Chronicles 21:1 is "Satan stood up against Israel, and incited David to count the people of Israel." We see here that something that was deemed to be very negative, calling for a census, was earlier believed to be initiated by God, and in later years is attributed to satan.

Can women have authority over men? Should women be allowed to teach men?

“I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became the transgressor.’ 1 Timothy 2:12-14 NRSV Here the writer (I agree with the general mainstream scholarship consensus here that does not attribute this passage as one of Paul's writings.) gives not just a cultural, but a theological reason for disqualifying women from the task of teaching Scripture to men. I personally do not believe that this passage in the Bible reflects the truth or will of God, then or now, and in this sense is not authoritative and certainly does not reflect my faith or practice. I do however believe and accept that it reflects the understanding of some well meaning Scripture writers and interpreters in our history and that it has been 'authoritative' for some and continues to be for many who hold to a literalist reading, interpretation and application of the Bible today! For me this issue illustrates that both the writing of the Scriptures and the interpretation of Scripture reflects the spiritual understanding of the writer and interpreter - for good or for bad! One may ask, how is the Holy Spirit involved in this process? I believe the Holy spirit is always 'inspiring', 'breathing' and 'leading along' seeking to guide us into all truth. The problem we run into has to do with the limited understanding on the part of persons involved in the writing, copying, redacting, interpreting, translating and canonizing of the Scriptures. Even Paul, who is one of the writers acknowledges that "we see in a mirror dimly" and "Now I know only in part." (1 Corinthians 13:12 NRSV) Referring back to the above mentioned Timothy passage about women not having

authority over men or being allowed to teach, I do not look to this passage as a reflection of God's truth about gender equality or roles. Nor do I blame God that it 'made it into the Bible'. I see it as part of the developing story of human understanding of the role of women. I am also grateful that many other passages in the Bible provide a much needed corrective to this Bible passage. For example, consider Paul's reference to Junia, thought by some scholars to have been a female apostle:

Romans 16:7 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

⁷ Greet Andronicus and Junia,^[a] my relatives^[b] who were in prison with me; they are prominent among the apostles, and they were in Christ before I was. Footnotes:

- a. [Romans 16:7](#) Or *Junias*; other ancient authorities read *Julia*
- b. [Romans 16:7](#) Or *compatriots*

And even if Junia was not a female apostle, consider Judge Deborah in the Old Testament, or Priscilla in the New Testament, or the very evangelistic woman at the well, or Mary Magdalene, a close female ministry associate of Jesus. The development and diversity of thought about this issue in the Bible is plain for all to see.

Is God violent?

Another example of development and diversity in spiritual thought would be the extremely violent actions that are attributed to God. God is in some instances presented as a wrath and revenge filled violent deity who

commands the total destruction of enemies and at times even His chosen people, as these selected passages portray:

Exodus 32:25-29 (NRSV)

²⁵ When Moses saw that the people were running wild (for Aaron had let them run wild, to the derision of their enemies), ²⁶ then Moses stood in the gate of the camp, and said, “Who is on the LORD’s side? Come to me!” And all the sons of Levi gathered around him. ²⁷ He said to them, “Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, ‘Put your sword on your side, each of you! Go back and forth from gate to gate throughout the camp, and each of you kill your brother, your friend, and your neighbor.’” ²⁸ The sons of Levi did as Moses commanded, and about three thousand of the people fell on that day. ²⁹ Moses said, “Today you have ordained yourselves^[a] for the service of the LORD, each one at the cost of a son or a brother, and so have brought a blessing on yourselves this day.”

Deuteronomy 7:1-2 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

7 When the LORD your God brings you into the land that you are about to enter and occupy, and he clears away many nations before you—the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, seven nations mightier and more numerous than you—² and when the LORD your God gives them over to you and you defeat them, then you must utterly destroy them. Make no covenant with them and show them no mercy.

Referring to the revenge which Judah exercises against their Babylonian captors, the Psalmist writes:

Psalm 137:9 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

⁹Happy shall they be who take your little ones
and dash them against the rock!

Jeremiah 19:8-9 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

⁸And I will make this city a horror, a thing to be hissed at; everyone who passes by it will be horrified and will hiss because of all its disasters. ⁹And I will make them eat the flesh of their sons and the flesh of their daughters, and all shall eat the flesh of their neighbors in the siege, and in the distress with which their enemies and those who seek their life afflict them.

I am well aware that these passages are interpreted by some, to be expressions of the holiness, wrath and punitive justice of God. I am personally convinced from ancient civilizations historical background studies that they are more likely remnant expressions from the misinformed mindsets, world views and violent behaviours of polytheistic tribal peoples. It was common place with the help of a tribe's god, to destroy another tribe – before they destroy you! Several thousand years further along in the journey of spiritual thought, Jesus conveys the true heart and nature of God when he says: "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy. But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you..." Matthew 5:43-44 NRSV. In the same way that we realize today how our old mindsets are sometimes slow to

embrace truth and change, so too the thinking and behaviours of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Joshua, Saul, David and many others at points still reflected some of the violent tribalistic world views of their Sumerian polytheistic ancestors. We are still to this very day reaping the fruit of this violence. As a colleague friend of mine in the UK, Roger Mitchell, recently tweeted: 'Violence breeds violence, always.'

Having said that, it is time for us to shake loose of old tribal mindsets about God. Or will we impose old mindset understandings of God into the present day and continue to think of God in violent, militaristic and sadistic ways? In my view that kind of thinking arises from not taking into account the progression of understanding right within the Bible itself. I believe the Bible is the amazing story of an unfolding understanding of God and how we have related with God and each other through history. And there has been far too much violence and bloodshed along the way. Sadly, it has been attributed and even attached to our understanding of the very nature of God! It is time to break through to new levels of seeing and living in the redemptive love and justice and humility of God as revealed in Christ Jesus who demonstrated both in his life and death the self-giving, sacrificial nature of God's love. I would encourage each of us to ask ourselves honestly: What do I really feel when I read passages where God's approval is perceived to be upon infants getting dashed to pieces (Isaiah 13:16)? Or when a woman's hand is cut off when she intervenes in a dispute between two men? (Deuteronomy 25:11-12 see below) Or when two women are offered up to be raped in the place of a male guest of honour? (Judges 19:23-24 see below) Or God commanding a man to be murdered for

picking up sticks on the Sabbath Day. (Numbers 15:32-36). Are these accurate and static reflections of the nature of God? I think not!

We consider just a few more categories of development in thought, attitudes and behaviours:

Misogyny – The hatred of women.

Deuteronomy 25:11-12 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

¹¹ If men get into a fight with one another, and the wife of one intervenes to rescue her husband from the grip of his opponent by reaching out and seizing his genitals, ¹² you shall cut off her hand; show no pity.

Judges 19:23-24 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

²³ And the man, the master of the house, went out to them and said to them, “No, my brothers, do not act so wickedly. Since this man is my guest, do not do this vile thing. ²⁴ Here are my virgin daughter and his concubine; let me bring them out now. Ravish them and do whatever you want to them; but against this man do not do such a vile thing.”

Prejudice

Leviticus 21:16-23 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

¹⁶ The LORD spoke to Moses, saying: ¹⁷ Speak to Aaron and say: No one of your offspring throughout their generations who has a blemish may

approach to offer the food of his God. ¹⁸ For no one who has a blemish shall draw near, one who is blind or lame, or one who has a mutilated face or a limb too long,¹⁹ or one who has a broken foot or a broken hand, ²⁰ or a hunchback, or a dwarf, or a man with a blemish in his eyes or an itching disease or scabs or crushed testicles. ²¹ No descendant of Aaron the priest who has a blemish shall come near to offer the LORD's offerings by fire; since he has a blemish, he shall not come near to offer the food of his God. ²² He may eat the food of his God, of the most holy as well as of the holy. ²³ But he shall not come near the curtain or approach the altar, because he has a blemish, that he may not profane my sanctuaries; for I am the LORD; I sanctify them.

Racism

Leviticus 25:44 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

⁴⁴ As for the male and female slaves whom you may have, it is from the nations around you that you may acquire male and female slaves.

Slavery

Exodus 21:20-21 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

²⁰ When a slaveowner strikes a male or female slave with a rod and the slave dies immediately, the owner shall be punished. ²¹ But if the slave survives a day or two, there is no punishment; for the slave is the owner's property.

Ephesians 6:5 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

⁵ Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, in singleness of heart, as you obey Christ;

1 Peter 2:18 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

¹⁸ Slaves, accept the authority of your masters with all deference, not only those who are kind and gentle but also those who are harsh.

With this sampling of issues as they are presented in the Bible, I submit that we let the Bible be what it was given to be - an honest and at points even a humiliating record of humanity's growing understanding of God, our own nature, our relationship with God and each other in a significant season of human history and showing us the life transforming way forward in Christ Jesus. What a gift and treasure it is for us, as we learn from these enduring recorded experiences and continue to search out the unsearchable riches, and grow in grace and knowledge, and taste of the living water, and even the powers of the age to come, as the Scriptures point us in that direction.

My great concern is that we have created and asked compliance to over simplified creedal statements about the Bible being authoritative in all matters of living. Perhaps we never realized some of the things that are in the Bible? Perhaps we failed to recognize the development of spiritual thought within the Bible itself? Perhaps we underestimated the complexity

of all the divine and human factors that contributed to 'how the Bible became the Bible'? Just quoting certain Bible passages with the unquestioning assumption that they reflect the nature, Will, words and actions of God then and now can turn out to be a terrible misrepresentation of God. History reveals to us that we have at times been racist, prejudiced, misogynistic and quick to resort to violence to deal with conflict, and have given ourselves permission to do some horrific things while claiming the Bible as our authority.

It can be a learning curve in grace and humility to stay engaged with persons with whom we disagree on these issues. Historically, the Scriptures were studied, discussed, debated, meditated and acted upon before, during and after the canonization processes. We see this even in the fact that several canons have emerged over the several hundred year canonization processes resulting in various combinations of writings being accepted as orthodox and therefore 'authoritative' for varying groups of Christians. So, we would need to ask 'Which Bible are we even talking about?' Are we talking about the Roman Catholic Bible? The Greek Orthodox Bible? The Protestant Bible? They each have differences and so when we state that the Bible is authoritative, are we saying that 'our Bible' (the Protestant Bible) is the one which is entirely authoritative but the others not quite as much? Scholarship is uncovering that Christianity has from its beginnings been very diverse. The diversity has not let up, from the early church fathers right through to present day scholarship, beliefs and practices.

I see all of this as part of the healthy process of the Spirit prompting us toward maturity in love, justice and humility. I think we all have a lot to learn about having these kinds of discussions. In my view we can welcome this process and trust the guidance and love of the Spirit to continue to lead us forward into the fullness of life in Christ. God and people have always been vitally involved together in the process of Scripture and I think God has been gracious and exceedingly patient.

For me the authority of the Bible is the brilliant, God breathed and inspired, transparent, way in which it shows us the journey and points us to God's life giving and transforming redemption, love, humility and justice in Christ Jesus. If one does not take this view of Scriptural authority then some very unthinkable, conflicting and even evil traits and actions that are attributed to God must be reconciled. Was God at one point genocidal and years later decided it is better to love your enemies? Did God favour men over women, but now they are equal? Did God condone slavery but now it is wrong? Did God condemn interracial marriage but now it's OK? What is the nature of God? This is the crucial question and our view of Biblical authority in large measure determines our view of the nature of God. I can say from my own solitude with God and my life of service in the church and my experience of working with people in health care that there is very little resonance with a God who was or is violent, misogynistic, racist or prejudiced. There is however an 'ahaaa' of agreement with many, that this is a sad chapter in the story of our developing spiritual understanding!

I believe that everything in all creation is subservient to the redemption, beauty, love, humility and justice of God revealed in Christ Jesus! And the Bible tells the story of that unfolding. This is Good News! This is very Good News! God never was genocidal. God never was a woman hater. God never condoned slavery or any other violations of human dignity and freedom. God is the author and creator and generous giver of redemptive healing love, humility and justice. The problem is that it has taken us this long to 'get it'! Why would we today attribute characteristics to God that are actually rooted in pagan polytheistic tribal mindsets? Why would we let some of those old mindsets be the basis for our thinking, attitudes and actions today? Violence is wrong. Slavery is wrong. Misogyny is wrong. Racial prejudice is wrong. Injustices are unjust! God never commanded any of these. But in all humility we must confess that they are part of our journey on the way to maturity in love, justice and humility. They are part of our redemption, healing story. And the Bible tells that story.

Finally about Homosexuality

Much has been written about each of the Biblical passages that mention homosexuality. Biblical scholars as well as those of us working in the trenches are praying and working diligently to search out meanings and lead according to the Spirit's guidance. As we have been seeing, minds

are sharply divided on this issue and we all have much more to learn about both the truth and love of the matter.

My perhaps oversimplified 'view' at this time is that most or all of the Biblical passages about homosexuality are spoken about persons who are exercising their lusts and passions in selfish and/or violent and abusive ways, certainly not consistent with self-giving, sacrificial love. No one among us is trying to make a case for that or any kind of promiscuous sexual behaviour regardless of what sexual orientation we may be talking about. What we are talking about today is a small percentage of the population across racial and geographic boundaries comprised of same sex oriented persons who genuinely desire to give their lives in self-giving, sacrificial loving covenant relationships with each other. This is in my view very different from the matrix of most or all of the passages mentioning homosexuality in the Bible and I realize that scholars are divided on this.

Further, consistent with the first part of this paper, I understand the passages in the Bible about homosexuality to be part of the unfolding story and understanding of human sexuality. I think there was either little or no scientific or sociological concept at the time of the writing of Scripture (approximately 800 B.C.E. to 200 C.E.) that somewhere in the range of 3-5% of the population has a sexual orientation other than heterosexual. Projecting forward, I believe that in the age to come we will share a genderless dimension of love. While I am not inclined to build an entire theology of marriage on one verse in the Bible, I think Jesus gives us a very insightful clue of what awaits! Jesus says that in the age to come

there will be no marriage in the way that we now experience it. Matthew 22:30 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) ³⁰ For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels^[a] in heaven.

Love is not ruled by gender. Love is not determined by gender. Love is not limited to gender.

As a heterosexual oriented person I was attracted to Cindy and we got married at a time when my 'love' was very immature. My 'love' for Cindy was selfish and controlling more than self giving and sacrificial. Marriage is primarily about a commitment to maturing love. In the fulfillment of the kingdom, gender will be a mute point. The futuristic and mature perspective, in my view, would be for all of us to take our focus off of gender and instead focus on relationships and marriages that are characterized by maturing, self giving, sacrificial love. We are missing the main point by being preoccupied with the gender component. Even the Genesis 1-2 accounts are interpreted by some, to be better understood and applied with a kinship priority while others hold to a gender priority. In my view the main point in marriage and all other relationships is self giving sacrificial love.

On a personal note

Cindy and I have had a number of gay friends over the past 35 years. We have observed their beautiful lives and love for the Lord. They have the same desires, struggles, failings and victories that we have. We have never

doubted the integrity of their testimony and service for the Lord. We understand the complexity of the Biblical issues, still it has been painful to see how difficult it has been for the church to be accepting and inclusive. We are hopeful that our prayerful studies and discussions will help us all move forward with love.

One of the aspects of the Church of God movement we have appreciated immensely over the years is that we are called to be a movement. A small percentage among us and in society with an orientation other than heterosexual has been a reality for a long time. I'm asking us to recognize and embrace this reality of diversity.

Concluding thoughts

The real authority of Scripture is that it transparently and steadfastly unveils the story of God and humanity moving together toward the full manifestation of love, justice and humility in Christ Jesus. (Exposing a lot of hits and misses and bumps and bruises and lessons learned and yet to be learned.) Definitions of right and wrong, morality, orientations, sexual ethics, science, civil law and even the Scriptures themselves are all subservient to love. Sexual orientation is no more the real issue than is racism, slavery, gender equality, divorce and remarriage, or stem cell therapy, genetic engineering or assisted dying. Yet for hundreds of years we argue and debate the right or wrong of each of the above. Right now and likely for years to come, sexual orientation is on the hot seat. I would

say, it is time for us to take the next steps of maturity in love. The real issue is, how does self emptying, serving, laying life down, turning the other cheek, sacrificial love inform each of these apparent issues. In my view love always includes. Love is powerful enough to absorb and overwhelm. Love 'sucks it up' and keeps right on loving. Are we afraid of something? That we may lose our life? Jesus teaches that this is precisely the place where we find it. By faith let's trust the perfect love of God to drive out any fears and keep moving us all to ever deepening dimensions of love and life.

Some Quotes

I want to end with some quotes of just a few of the persons whose thinking has influenced my thinking about spirituality, the Bible or even specifically the issue of sexual orientation.

St. Augustine

“Whoever, then, thinks that he understands the Holy Scriptures, or any part of them, but puts such an interpretation upon them as does not tend to build up this twofold love of God and our neighbor, does not yet understand them as he ought.”

– Augustine of Hippo, On Christian Doctrine

David Gushee, is a Christian ethicist, historian, public intellectual, and Holocaust scholar. I recommend his book “Changing Our Mind”.

“You do know, I hope, that not every Christian agrees with your interpretation of the Bible on the gay issue itself. Some of us have come to the conclusion that the church has been wrong on gay people and how God relates to them — and therefore how Christians should do so. You probably will never agree with me or others like me who have taken a more embracing view, but I hope you will at least consider that view — and certainly remember that you do not speak for all Christians.”

Luke Timothy Johnson is an American New Testament scholar and historian of early Christianity.

From his article ‘Homosexuality and the Church’

“Our situation vis-à-vis the authority of Scripture is not unlike that of abolitionists in nineteenth-century America. During the 1850s, arguments raged over the morality of slave-holding, and the exegesis of Scripture played a key role in those debates. The exegetical battles were one-sided:

all abolitionists could point to was Galatians 3:28 and the Letter of Philemon, while slave owners had the rest of the Old and New Testaments, which gave every indication that slaveholding was a legitimate, indeed God-ordained social arrangement, one to which neither Moses nor Jesus nor Paul raised a fundamental objection. So how is it that now, in the early twenty-first century, the authority of the scriptural texts on slavery and the arguments made on their basis appear to all of us, without exception, as completely beside the point and deeply wrong?

The answer is that over time the human experience of slavery and its horror came home to the popular conscience—through personal testimony and direct personal contact. Through fiction like Uncle Tom’s Cabin, and, of course, through a great Civil War in which ghastly numbers of people gave their lives so that slaves could be seen not as property but as persons. As persons, they could be treated by the same law of love that governed relations among all Christians, and could therefore eventually also realize full civil rights within society. And once that experience of their full humanity and the evil of their bondage reached a stage of critical consciousness, this nation could neither turn back to the practice of slavery nor ever read the Bible in the same way again.

Many of us who stand for the full recognition of gay and lesbian persons within the Christian communion find ourselves in a position similar to that of the early abolitionists—and of the early advocates for women’s full and equal roles in church and society. We are fully aware of the weight of scriptural evidence pointing away from our position, yet place our trust in

the power of the living God to reveal as powerfully through personal experience and testimony as through written texts. To justify this trust, we invoke the basic Pauline principle that the Spirit gives life but the letter kills (2 Corinthians 3:6). And if the letter of Scripture cannot find room for the activity of the living God in the transformation of human lives, then trust and obedience must be paid to the living God rather than to the words of Scripture.

For me this is no theoretical or academic position, but rather a passionate conviction. It is one many of us have come to through personal struggle, and for some, real suffering.

In my case, I trusted that God was at work in the life of one of my four daughters, who struggled against bigotry to claim her sexual identity as a lesbian. I trusted God was at work in the life she shares with her partner—a long-lasting and fruitful marriage dedicated to the care of others, and one that has borne fruit in a wonderful little girl who is among my and my wife’s dear grandchildren. I also trusted the many stories of students and friends whose life witnessed to a deep faith in God but whose bodies moved sexually in ways different from the way my own did. And finally I began to appreciate the ways in which my own former attitudes and language had helped to create a world where family, friends, and students were treated cruelly.

These are significant recognitions, ones that arise from hard-fought daily experience. It is extraordinarily important, however, that those of us who

base our convictions on experience do not make the category of experience a form of cheap grace, as though whatever feels good is morally acceptable. By “experience” we do not mean every idiosyncratic or impulsive expression of human desire. We refer rather to those profound stories of bondage and freedom, longing and love, shared by thousands of persons over many centuries and across many cultures, that help define them as human. The church cannot say “yes” to what the New Testament calls porneia (“sexual immorality”); but the church must say yes to the witness of lives that build the holiness of the church.”

Tony Campolo is an American sociologist, pastor, author, public speaker

“It has taken countless hours of prayer, study, conversation and emotional turmoil to Bring me to the place where I am finally ready to call for the full acceptance of Christian gay couples into the Church.

For me, the most important part of that process was answering a more fundamental question: What is the point of marriage in the first place? For some Christians, in a tradition that traces back to St. Augustine, the sole purpose of marriage is procreation, Which obviously negates the legitimacy of same-sex unions. Others of us, however, recognize a more spiritual dimension of marriage, which is of supreme importance. We believe that God intends married partners to help actualize in each other the “fruits of the spirit,” which are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness,

faithfulness, gentleness and self-control, often citing the Apostle Paul's comparison of marriage to Christ's sanctifying relationship with the Church. This doesn't mean that unmarried people cannot achieve the highest levels of spiritual actualization – our Savior himself was single, after all – but only that the institution of marriage should always be primarily about spiritual growth...

As a social scientist, I have concluded that sexual orientation is almost never a choice and I have seen how damaging it can be to try to "cure" someone from being gay. As a Christian, my responsibility is not to condemn or reject gay people, but rather to love and embrace them, and to endeavor to draw them into the fellowship of the Church. When we sing the old invitation hymn, "Just As I Am", I want us to mean it, and I want my gay and lesbian brothers and sisters to know it is true for them too.

Rest assured that I have already heard –and in some cases made – every kind of biblical argument against gay marriage, including those of Dr. Ronald Sider, my esteemed friend and colleague at Eastern University. Obviously, people of good will can and do read the scriptures very differently when it comes to controversial issues, and I am painfully aware that there are ways I could be wrong about this one.

However, I am old enough to remember when we in the Church made strong biblical cases for keeping women out of teaching roles in the Church, and when divorced and remarried people often were excluded from fellowship altogether on the basis of scripture. Not long before that,

some Christians even made biblical cases supporting slavery. Many of those people were sincere believers, but most of us now agree that they were wrong. I am afraid we are making the same kind of mistake again, which is why I am speaking out.

I hope what I have written here will help my fellow Christians to lovingly welcome all of our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters into the Church.

Richard Rohr is a Franciscan friar ordained to the priesthood in the Roman Catholic Church

Julian of Norwich sometimes refers to God as Father and sometimes refers to Jesus as Mother. Gender means almost nothing to her because she is beyond that. There's something deeper than gender. As alluring and as important as gender is, as it is our metaphor held in our body, it is not our ontological identity. It is not our foundational, essential truth. Your gender is not the True Self. It's part of the False Self.

That's what Jesus is referring to when he says, "...in heaven, they neither marry nor are given in marriage" (Mark 12:25). But because gender is so deep in our early conditioning, in many of our lives we cling to it until the very end.

Male and female are most different at their most immature levels and most alike at their most mature levels. When you have matured to the point

where you are beyond the dualisms that our dualistic minds have imposed on reality, then you know you are children of the resurrection. You are children of light and there is no male or female, as both Paul and the Gospel of Thomas say. People who already begin to experience such unity in this world will usually find it very easy to be compassionate toward lesbian, gay, and transgendered people, because they know that the True Self, who we objectively are in God, is prior and superior to any issues of gender, culture, or sexuality. Gender is important, but it is still an “accidental” part of the human person and not its substance.

The object and goal of all spirituality is finally the same for all genders: union, divine love, inner aliveness, soul abundance, forgiveness of offenses, and generous service to the neighbor and the world. Here “there is no distinction...between male and female” (Galatians 3:28). Mature Christian spirituality leads us toward such universals and essentials. Yet people invariably divide and argue about nonessentials!

Walter Brueggeman is an American Protestant Old Testament scholar and theologian. Brueggemann is widely considered one of the most influential Old Testament scholars of the last several decades.

“I know those texts are in the Bible, but the Bible is a dynamic tradition that’s always on the move to new truth. If you track that out, probably the ultimate statement about that is made by Paul in Galatians 3, that in Christ there is neither male nor female, Greek nor Barbarian, slave or free. We are all one in Christ. And what we know in the gospel is that God’s love reaches toward all of God’s creatures. To sort them out in terms of who are the deserving and the qualified and who are not is imposing a judgment on human reality that simply cannot be done.

But some Christians fear disobeying God when it comes to LGBTQ issues. Because of What the Bible says, they fear that they are compromising the gospel. Well, what we do is to pick and choose things out of the Bible that conform to our fears. It’s not a matter of obeying the Bible — it’s about obeying the gospel. The gospel is about God’s saving love that wants to restore all of humanity to full communion. To reach back to an ancient text that has now been corrected by the revelation of God in Jesus Christ is simply a bad maneuver and poor methodology and theologically irresponsible. Those texts are not the determinative texts.

The texts that are determinative are those that talk about the love of God that has been shown to us in Jesus. We can’t compromise that.”