

Adult Ed – 2/9/22

RCA and Beyond?

Session 5: Understanding Affirming Interpretations of Scripture

## 1. Understanding Affirming Voices

- a. Affirming/Revisionist View: Same-sex *marriage* should be *affirmed* as a legitimate moral option for gay/lesbian/same-sex attracted people.
- b. Two main approaches:
  - i. Challenging the Bible's authority.
    1. The Bible speaks to this topic but is flawed and should not be considered authoritative.
    2. **Review: there are those in the RCA who hold to this view. Can we live and work in a denomination where there is disagreement about the authority of Scripture?**
  - ii. Challenging past interpretation of the Bible.
    1. We need to reexamine Scripture in light of new interpretive questions.
    2. **Question: if we as a church affirm the authority of Scripture, how do we navigate differing interpretations of Scripture both in our doctrine and our discipleship?**

## 2. Biblical interpretation

- a. Basics
  - i. Interpretation
    1. We're all interpreters
    2. There are good and bad, better and worse interpretations
    3. There are some interpretations that we can agree to disagree about, and some we can't.
  - ii. Core principles for interpretation
    1. Scripture interprets Scripture
    2. Context, context, context!
    3. History and culture – theirs and ours
- b. Note on terminology: I use the term “same-sex sexual activity” when referring to the prohibitions found in Scripture.

3. The affirming view: revisiting past interpretations
  - a. The strategy:
    - i. NOT: the Bible clearly affirms same-sex sexual activity
    - ii. But: maybe the Bible's prohibitions aren't categorical (condemning the entire category of same-sex sexual activity). Maybe there are some sub-categories of same-sex sexual activity (consensual, monogamous) that the Bible does not condemn.
    - iii. Distinguish what and why the Bible prohibits something
4. Old Testament law is irrelevant for us today
  - a. Gen. 1-2 and Lev. 18 serve as the baseline for sexual ethics
  - b. Leviticus 18 is no longer applicable to us today
  - c. Response: The sexual ethics of Lev. 18 get reiterated in a variety of ways:
    - i. *Porneia* – “sexual immorality”
    - ii. Acts 15 – Jerusalem Council
    - iii. Repeatedly reaffirmed throughout the New Testament (incest, adultery, same-sex sexual activity, etc.)
5. “One flesh”
  - a. “One flesh” is about a kinship bond and two lives united.
    - i. (NOT about sexual difference or procreative possibility)
  - b. Sexual activity should happen only within this covenantal kinship bond.
  - c. In Bible times, you didn't have committed, lifelong, monogamous same-sex relationships. Now we do.
  - d. Response: This description of “one flesh” is more general and vague, whereas the biblical text is specific.
    - i. “One flesh” union of male and female.
    - ii. “One flesh” of sexual union between male and female. Sexual union between a man and a woman is the covenant-making act.
    - iii. One flesh union ordered toward procreation, the “one flesh” of the child, who is the embodiment of the “one flesh” union.
6. Appeal to eschatology / new creation
  - a. Creation lays the foundation – male and female.

- b. In Christ, there is neither male nor female.
  - i. The Christian community doesn't reproduce via procreation but evangelism.
  - ii. So male and female are irrelevant for our definition of marriage.
- c. Response:
  - i. Jesus himself (in Matt. 19) points to Gen. 1-2 (male and female) as normative for marriage.
  - ii. In the resurrection, it's not that there are all kinds of marriages, but that marriage itself is done away with (Matt. 22:30)
  - iii. The new eschatological reality opened up by Jesus doesn't redefine marriage but
    - 1. Opens up singleness as an option, in large part because the most basic unit is not the nuclear family but
    - 2. The new family created by Jesus (John 19:26-27)

## 7. Appeal to cultural differences

- a. The "abuse/exploitation" argument: The Bible condemns same-sex sexual activity because all same-sex sexual activity in Bible times was abusive.
  - i. Pederasty
  - ii. Prostitution
  - iii. Rape (of slaves, etc.).
  - iv. In Bible times and cultures, they didn't have the possibility of life-long, monogamous, same-sex relationships/marriages. Key question: *why does the Bible condemn same-sex sexual activity?* The reason the Bible condemns same-sex sexual activity is because it did not take place in the context of loving, permanent, committed relationships.
- b. The "orientation" argument: biblical authors didn't know about orientation (our modern concept).
  - i. We now have knowledge (about orientation) that they didn't, so we need to rethink our conclusions.
  - ii. Romans 1 condemns "unnatural" sexual relationships, but now we know that same-sex sexual relationships are "natural" for some (due to their orientation).
  - iii. Therefore, for those people, it's "natural" to be in a same-sex relationship.

## 8. Assessing appeals to cultural difference.

- a. Key question: does the historical evidence match these claims?

b. The “abuse/exploitation” argument

- i. There are numerous examples of loving, permanent, committed, life-long relationships of equals between same-sex couples (especially men, but also women), from ancient Greece all the way through the late Roman Empire (7<sup>th</sup> century AD)
- ii. The New Testament passages condemning same-sex sexual activity (especially between men) uses two words *arsenokoitai* and *malakoi*. If one person in the relationship is being abused and exploited, why does the New Testament see both parties as morally responsible and morally wrong? If some boys/men are being abused, assaulted, or raped (which could be the case for slaves who are part of these NT churches), why would Paul and other NT authors see them as morally wrong in the same way as their abusers? This argument essentially sees Paul and the NT as the ultimate victim-blamers.

c. The “orientation” argument

- i. Though they did not use our language in Bible times, both Greek and Roman cultures had something like our concept of orientation.
- ii. Important point:
  1. Previous era (“cure” vs. “affirm”): lots of discussion about “born this way”
  2. Current discussion (“care”): orientation as “pre-moral” disposition. The question is: how do we all (gay, straight, whatever) live in line with a biblical vision of sexual ethics?

d. The irony of the cultural differences argument

- i. In order to make the cultural differences argument work, affirming voices erase or ignore the historical presence of gay and lesbian people and their committed relationships from the ancient world.

9. Summary

- a. Many affirming scholars and writers have raised good questions about how we interpret the biblical text. Yet, nearly fifty years after some of the initial scholarly questions, these attempts to reinterpret Scripture have been shown to fall short, both in their interpretation of Scripture and the historical evidence.