

**“Challenging Issues in Our Ancient,  
Ambiguous, and Diverse Bible”  
Rev. Dr. Brian Q. Newcomb – David’s United Church of Christ  
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The question I was asked to take up in this morning’s sermon, comes from a lesbian woman in our congregation who has been told all her life that the Bible condemns people like her, and therefore she is destined for Hell. Of course she is referring to the several verses of Scripture that some have used to beat up LGBTQ people, which are commonly referred to as “clobber” verses. Now, entire books have been written on the subject, one by the author & theologian Walter Wink, but for brevities sake, I’ve shared the link to a relatively short article that deals succinctly with this topic, since I can’t reiterate all he has to say here this morning.

Now, you’ve heard a couple of those verses read here this morning, and one thing I think is worth pointing out is that in the whole of the 66 books of the Protestant Bible, there are only a few stories and verses that people refer to when they claim that “The Bible clearly says…” this or that.

And that’s the first thing I want to say here today, is that we should be wary of anyone who uses that phrase, “The Bible clearly says.” There are a few things, yes, that fit the meaning of that phrase, for instance one of the things that the Bible consistently says, both in the Hebrew Bible and in the Christian Testament, is that the most important commandments are “to love God (with one’s entire being), and to love our neighbor as ourselves.” These things are emphasized consistently and thoroughly throughout much of the Bible, from the earliest law in Exodus and Leviticus, and Jesus repeats this teaching in all four of the Gospels. So, this is a major theme in Scripture, something we ought not take lightly.

However, it is commonly said in some more conservative Christian corners that “The Bible clearly says, that marriage is between one man and one woman.” Or, it is claimed that the Bible offers a clear sexual ethic by which all human relationships should be judged, and only one acceptable model describing “Christian family values,” and that model is always about one

man + one woman, plus children, usually with a patriarchal need for the male to be the boss, etc.

The first real problem with that thinking is all the places in the Bible where that is not how the story goes. How's this for "Christian family values," what are we supposed to do with the story of Jacob, who becomes the "father of Israel," producing the 12 sons, that give us the 12 tribes of Israel. So, how does God "bless" Jacob with those 12 sons? Well, we know the story, Jacob ended up with two wives, you'll remember he had to work 7 years to marry the desire of his heart, Rachel, but her father tricked him into marrying her sister Leah. Well, the point of the story is that Jacob indeed is blessed with 12 children, from his two wives, yes, but then he also has children with his wives two handmaidens. One man, yes, but two wives and two more... um, helpers.

Curiously, the Bible never gets around to condemning polygamy. Many of the Biblical heroes had more than one wife, and that's never seen as a problem in the Bible. And when David is accused of adultery, it's not because he had sex with someone other than his wife, he had a whole harem for that. Adultery in the Hebrew Bible is never about the man having sex outside of his marriage, only about a woman who is married to one man but connects with another. In other words, in the Patriarchal world of the Bible, many of the rules about marriage were about controlling women, and not about the actions of men.

When people point to the verse where Jesus condemns divorce as a proof that he thought marriage was only between one man and one woman, they see that in Mark 10 that Jesus quotes Genesis, "saying, 'God made them male and female.' 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two become one flesh,'" they forget that Genesis goes on to include Jacob's marriage to his two wives. Those verses in the Creation story of Genesis 1, were never seen by the Jews as exclusive, in that they allowed men more than one wife, and Jesus never condemns polygamy, but does condemn divorce.

In his article, Walter Wink points out that many modern day Christians that pass judgement on our LGBTQ sisters and brothers have found it in their

hearts to forgive and over-look divorce as a fact of life, especially when it's in their own family. It's worth pointing out that in the four Gospels of our New Testament, that not only does Jesus never condemn polygamy, he has nothing to say about homosexuality either, but he very clearly condemns divorce, which many have come to gracefully accept as a necessary evil.

Now, I'm not making this point to advocate for polygamy. I've watched Big Love, and I know how hard it is to love one person in an intimate covenant, so I'm more than happy that modern day Christians have concluded that polygamy is a bad idea. My point is, you can't say that the Bible only sees marriage as possible for one man + one woman. Remember Jacob. And don't forget Solomon, who had a harem with a thousand women... and the Bible says we was the wisest man... really? Cause, I'm not so sure.

These folk also claim that the story of God's destruction of Sodom had something to do with the threat made to the angelic guests who visit Lot and his family, that the men of the city want to rape them to show how they feel about out of towners. But the Bible teaches a different lesson that has nothing to do with homosexuality. In the prophet Ezekiel 16:49 it says, "This was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not take aid the poor and the needy." That kind of changes the meaning of "sodomite," don't you think?

Wink's article points out that there are many things, not just Jesus' command on divorce, that we find spelled out in the Bible that we as modern people have chosen to ignore, or at least not give very much weight in how we live our real lives. For instance some quote those verses we read this morning from Leviticus, which describes homosexual acts between men as an abomination to God. You can take comfort my lesbian sisters, the writers of Leviticus are not at all interested in your sex lives. But, it not only condemns any man who "lies with a male as with a woman," but says the punishment is death. It's funny, lots of conservative Christians want to claim that you should take the Bible literally, but they know it sounds too harsh to call for LGBTQ folk to be killed, so they only say that out loud if you catch them in an unguarded moment. But it really

doesn't leave any options, but it also calls for the death penalty for a child that curses their parents, and for adulterers, and for lots of other "sins."

But the problem with turning to Leviticus as one's authority on this subject, is that the Apostle Paul says, if you're going to hold to one precept of the law you're required to keep the whole of the law, which includes a whole bunch of things that modern Christians can't be bothered with, like all those kosher eating requirements, no pork, no shrimp or lobster. There are also a lot of rules about not looking at anyone who's naked, which means no trips to the showers at school or the gym. Plus there are all kinds of rules in there about bodily fluids, whether it be semen or menstrual blood that reflect a less scientific, nearly superstitious understanding of the world, and that may just be the point when you're dealing with an ancient book like our Bible. In the 2800 years since Leviticus was written, and the 1900 years since most of the New Testament was pulled together, we have a fuller understanding of earth sciences, biology and the universe, so that we take the Bible seriously by not pretending that things our ancestors in the faith thought and believed about the world apply today. In many areas, we know more and we know better.

For instance, in Romans Paul is writing based on his own experience of the world; so when Paul writes about what is "natural" what he actually means is the cultural expectations he experiences as a Jew living in the ancient world. Paul doesn't understand or even have a word for "homosexual" as we know and understand that word today. So when he describes men having sex with men, and women with women, he thinks they are "straight" people who are going against their nature, giving up natural intercourse for what he calls "unnatural."

There's an example of Paul mixing up nature with culture in 1 Corinthians 11:14-16. He writes, "Does not nature itself teach you that if a man wears long hair, it is degrading to him, but if a woman has long hair, it is her glory? For her hair is given to her for a covering." So there you have it, Pastor Michelle and I are both disqualified, because she wears her hair short, and I wear what's left of mine long. Ha! You know what nature teaches me about hair... if you leave it alone it will grow. So, I will dismiss Paul as an authority on hairstyles, and likewise not rely on his

understanding of human sexuality, because he couldn't know what people of his time didn't know about human sexuality.

Which brings me to the bigger point. Conservative critics of what I've been saying to you this morning, will say you can't pick and choose, you can't draw inspiration and helpful guidance out of one part of the Bible, and then not take seriously this verse or that verse that you don't like. Well, if we're going to be truthful, of course we pick and choose, there's a lot of things that get said in the Bible that are not only unhelpful, but are downright hurtful. There's a verse in the Psalms that suggests it's cool to smash the heads of your enemies baby's against a rock (137:9). In Exodus, we're told that God sent the Angel of Death to kill the first born child of all the Egyptians, even their livestock and pets. And when God sends the children of Israel to claim the land from the Canaanites, God orders them to kill them all, the men, the women, the children, all the animals, everything. Complete genocide. So, yes, I choose to believe that the authors of our ancient Scriptures got some things wrong.

Rachel Held Evans once wisely wrote, "I have come to regard with some suspicion those who claim the Bible never troubles them. I can only assume this means then they haven't actually read it."

There are many troubling things in the Bible, which Peter Enns reminds us is an "ancient, ambiguous, and diverse" book, which he says is designed so that we learn from it how to pursue wisdom. Which means we are fully expected to engage our minds, and practice critical thinking. And when we do that, we can begin to see how understanding the nature and concerns of God tend to evolve in the hearts and minds of the faithful, how revelation tends to move in a progressive direction.

For instance, in Leviticus and in Deuteronomy (23:1-3), the law says that no man who has crushed testicles or has had their penis cut off is to even be allowed into the Assembly of the Lord. They are to be cast off and sent away. But we read this morning from Isaiah, the prophet offers a new and more accepting vision. It says very clearly, "do not let the eunuch say, 'I am just a dry tree'... To the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths and hold fast

my covenants, I will give a monument, and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off."

Friends, if that's not an unqualified blessing on someone who today we might call transgender, I don't know what is. And the New Testament takes that blessing further, when Phillip encounters the Ethiopian eunuch on the road, reading the prophet Isaiah. And the story ends with the baptism of the one who Leviticus tells us is less than worthy, a movement in understanding that all people are welcome at the banquet table of our God.

An important revelation for Progressive Christians was coming to see that the best image we have of God is seen in Jesus Christ. This has a long tradition among us. 500 years ago, Martin Luther, the father of the Protestant Reformation who preached that all teaching should be grounded in "sola scriptura," also said, "The Bible is the manger in which Christ is found. Without the manger you may not find Christ, but you dare not confuse Christ with the manger. We love the Bible because through it we encounter Jesus, but we do not have a relationship with a book, but with the Living Word, Jesus Christ."

You've likely heard that joke meme, "I can do all things through a verse of scripture taken out of context." Well, we've learned that the Bible is at its best when it points us toward the God of Love, which we Christians see embodied in the person of Jesus Christ.

We have seen this progressive revelation in our world take shape and change our thinking on issues over and over again. The Bible never condemns slavery, but seems to accept it as a fact of life, yet many American Christians became abolitionists and sought to end slavery in our country because they came to fuller and better understanding of Jesus' love commandment. When Paul writes in Gal. 3:28, that in Christ, "there is no longer Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, there is no longer male and female," abolitionists saw that these people of color were full human beings, made in the image of God, with a right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, so they sought an end to the institution of slavery.

Because of superstition and some weird verses in the Bible, some Christians believed it was evil to be left-handed, they saw it as something devilish. They cruelly tied children's left hands behind their back to force them to act as if they were right handed. It was cruel, unhelpful and stupid, but we learned more and better and came to realize some people are just born left-handed.

And, many of us have learned from the sciences of sexuality and psychology that some of us are born gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender. And when we are at our best, we apply the commandment of Jesus to love God, and love our neighbors as ourselves, and realize we should treat our LGBTQ neighbors the way we desire to be treated. That we should respect the stories they tell us about their lives and experiences, that we should recognize that they are made in the image of God and worthy of God's love, acceptance, forgiveness and grace, and invite them to walk with us as we seek together to follow Jesus.

Because, love is love, and all God's children are welcome. Thanks be to God. Amen.