

# **Speaking the Truth in Love concerning the Scriptures and Homosexuality:**

*A Letter to the Editor Exchange*

## **Challenge**

In the midst of the discussion of the vote of the American Episcopal church to elect as a bishop, a practicing homosexual priest, the following letter to the editor appeared in a local Columbia, SC, newspaper (some particular details have been changed to create anonymity).

### **Let spirit guide church policy on gays**

Unlike retired Bishop John Spong of Newark, who would adjust Christianity to make it easier for the skeptical to believe, Bishop Gene Robinson of New Hampshire is, by all reports, a defender of the traditional faith as well as a superb pastoral administrator.

The entanglement of sexual anxieties with religious belief is understandable. In both areas, our reason yields command of the self to non-reason. Aware of this problematic entanglement, Christians who would love God with mind as well as heart should think again how to discover God's will. Not through hasty, prejudice-confirming "prayer," but through discernment of the spirit approaching us through the words of Scripture.

The house of Christian theology has many rooms, even one for know-it-all conservatives like Kendall Harmon, communications director of the Episcopal Diocese of South Carolina. Claiming that to confirm Bishop Robinson in the church's House of Deputies is "to do something that God says is against his will" (news report, Aug. 4) places Harmon with the heavy-handed Christian "Judaizers," preferring Old Testament earthen vessels to the radical good-news treasure of the New.

May the Episcopal Church be ruled not by heterosexuals (and the closeted gays) who, in bondage to their anxieties, exploit the murkiness of the biblical passages to the disadvantage of homosexuals in the open. But by God, its head, who judges us only by the quality of our behavior and who creates no junk.

Karl Clark (not his real name)

As a Christian and a Minister of the Word, with particular responsibility for teaching persons Scripture and how to interpret Scripture, I am always especially sensitive whenever I read something in the media that presents a wrong understanding of the Bible. Is there really a "murkiness" to the Biblical passages that address homosexuality? I decided to write a reply which would seek both to say the Scriptures were not murky but clear on the issue and to give the "good news" God's Word has for the homosexual.

## **Strategy**

I began by seeking to get my own facts right. I used Pim Pronk (*Against Nature? Types of Moral Argumentation regarding Homosexuality* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993]) to identify a comprehensive list of Biblical passages on homosexuality (Genesis 19 and Judges 19; Leviticus 18:22; 20:13; Romans 1:26-27; 1 Corinthians 6:9; 1 Timothy 1:10). None of the passage's had a "murkiness" to them, but I needed to see which passage might help me address the approach the

letter writer had taken. He had set the Old Testament teaching over against the “radical, good-news treasure of the New.” Did any of the New Testament references occur in passages where the writer was talking about the gospel? 1 Corinthians 6:9 within its context did just this. It seemed most serviceable as a basis for response.

As I thought through a way to frame a response, I looked at the issue from three angles for viewing the relation of Scripture to culture: 1) communication with culture; 2) correction of the culture; 3) capture the significance of good news for the culture (see William J. Larkin, Jr., *Culture and Biblical Hermeneutics: Interpreting and Applying the Authoritative Word in a Relativistic Age* [reprint; Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2003] chaps 18 and 20). Was there anything in the letter writer’s sentiments with which Scripture agrees and I could use as a positive point of contact to communicate with him? Yes, his call to love God with our minds is certainly biblical (Matthew 22:37). His call for a “discernment of the spirit approaching us through the words of Scripture,” understood as the illumination of the Holy Spirit as we seek to understand divinely inspired Scripture, is a point of contact (2 Timothy 3:16-17; 1 John 2:27). His valuing of the “radical good-news treasure of the New” is certainly something Scripture values (Romans 1:16–17). As I employed 1 Corinthians 6:9-11, I would need to make sure my expression was clear and relevant. “Being washed, sanctified, justified in the name of Jesus” needs translation for a public untutored in Christian vocabulary.

The “Correction–bad news” angle was quite easy to pursue. The 1 Corinthians passage presented its content clearly. In fact, in the midst of the moral decline of North American culture, this relationship seems the easiest to trace. The difficulty is finding ways to firmly present the truth, but do it in love, seeking to make it winsome to the reader. The tone of my response must be civil; it must be according to the “golden rule.” The two litmus tests I use here are 1) Have I avoided attacking a person’s motives? They are known only to himself and God unless the person chooses to reveal them. 2) Have I avoided questioning the person’s intelligence?

The “Capture the Significance of the Good News for the culture” angle is often more difficult. In our preoccupation with correction and in the face of our opponent’s resistance, it is hard to change focus and ask what is the Scripture’s good news for them. Thankfully, 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 makes it easy for it describes the radical transformation and saving benefits which had come to Corinthian homosexuals who had repented.

## **Response**

Here is the text of the letter that resulted from this process:

Dear Editor

Karl Clark (not his real name) is right that when it comes to identifying the will of God concerning homosexual behavior we need to “love God with our minds” and come to a proper understanding “through discernment of the spirit (Spirit) approaching us through the words of Scripture.” Contrary to Clark’s contention, however, there is no “murkiness” in Scripture’s words on this matter. The Apostle Paul, in 1 Corinthians 6:9-11, explicitly

relates homosexual behavior to what Clark rightly calls “the radical good-news treasure of the New (Testament).” Paul first proclaims the “bad news”: God’s condemnation of homosexual behavior. One who unrepentantly engages in such a lifestyle “will not inherit the kingdom of God.” Then he gives the “good news.” “Such were some of you.” The Corinthians had experienced the “good news” and its liberating possibility of “being cleansed, being made wholly God’s, being set right with him on the authority of Jesus and by the power of the Spirit of God.” That is the “radical good-news treasure” the Christian offers the homosexual.

## **Reaction**

The reaction to my published letter occurred across a continuum. On one end, another letter to the editor by a homosexual, who has a self-confessed “lifelong struggle” to reconcile his homosexuality with Scripture, found my letter to be a condemnation by a self-righteous person. A caller found my understanding of Scripture to be wrong, though he found my demeanor kind. A self-styled liberal theologian admitted, that, according to my conservative reading, Paul’s teaching is not “murky” but clear, but observed that his “liberal hermeneutic” which I would probably find so much liberal “dancing and shuffling,” would still come out at a different place. An Episcopalian healthcare provider of mine was emboldened to comment that the national church did not speak for him. And Christians, in general, were encouraged when they read the truth spoken in love.

## **Summary of Process**

1) Be correct on the facts. 2) Communication with the culture. 3) Correct the culture. 4) Capture the significance of the Gospel for the culture. These steps can be used to build effective bridges from the Gospel in Christ-like dialogue with many of the moral issues surrounding us.

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