

Being biblical?

Slavery, sexuality and the inclusive community*

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Current arguments over sexuality are an example of debates about the use of the Bible over internal church order and polity, or in external application to war and peace, conquest and colonization. Significantly, all sides claim to be 'biblical', accusing opponents of being hidebound by tradition or betraying it to the spirit of the age, as 'conservatives' or 'liberals'. Being 'scriptural' is to be holy, to preserve the community from error, heresy or sin, making 'biblical' positions exclusive and unable to hear others. All sides have a position, with pressure groups, websites and mailing lists: people of similar views meet to plan strategy, motions for synods, speakers to invite, with no opportunity for differing views to meet in debate, or even in the heat of battle. Yet all are Christians, concerned to read the Bible, understand God's revelation and interpret God's will for his Church and the world. There has to be a better way, to step back from current intense debates, where everybody thinks they already know what everybody else is trying to say, so that actually nobody is listening to anybody.

SLAVERY

Instead, consider another intense, past debate – now settled. During the two-hundredth anniversary of the abolition of the Atlantic slave trade, the debate was portrayed as the slavers' commercial power against abolitionist Christians, who wanted to be 'biblical', as in the film, *Amazing Grace*. Sadly, the caricature that slavers were selfish capitalists, and abolitionists the only biblical Christians, is not true. If anything, it was the other way round. Slavery was a 'biblical' doctrine, supported by the laws of God and man, while abolitionists were dangerous liberals, preaching revolution. The historical context was Thomas Paine's *The Rights of Man*, and the American and French Revolutions. Jefferson and the Founding Fathers of the Declaration of

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Independence believed 'these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness' – but they were all slave-owners, who did not apply these truths to their slaves.

Instead, slavery was justified biblically: Noah decrees that, as punishment for seeing him naked, Ham's descendants will be slaves for Shem and Japheth (Genesis 9.22–27); Abraham is blessed by God with 'male and female slaves' as a wealthy slave owner (Genesis 24.35; also 12.5; 14.14; 20.14). Slaves were part of his estate, passed on to his son Isaac (Genesis 26.12–14). Mosaic legislation provides for Israelites to buy and sell slaves, and instructs how to treat them (Exodus 21; Leviticus 25). Slavery was equally accepted in the New Testament, where slaves are told to 'obey their masters . . . with enthusiasm' as obeying Christ (Ephesians 6.5–9; Colossians 3.22–25; Titus 2.9–10; 1 Peter 2.18–19). Paul returns the runaway Onesimus to Philemon, and tells slaves to 'remain in the condition in which you were called' (Philemon 12; 1 Corinthians 7.20–24).¹ Particular attention was drawn to 1 Timothy 6.1–6, where Paul's instructions, 'let all who are under the yoke of slavery regard their masters as worthy of all honour', have additional dominical authority as 'the sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ'. Romans 13.1–7 undergirded it all, appealing to proper law and order.²

Leading interpreters in universities and churches taught the 'scriptural' doctrine of slavery. Even after abolition of the slave trade, slavery continued in the southern states, supported by biblical arguments from theologians.³ Meeks concludes that there is 'no knock-down argument against such uses of scripture as the apologists for slavery made'.⁴ Swartley agrees: the 'appeal to the Bible does not in itself guarantee correctness of position'.⁵ The 'biblical', pro-slavery camp saw the abolitionists as dangerous liberals, undermining the very law of God. As Bledsoe thundered,

The history of interpretation furnishes no examples of more willful and violent perversions of the sacred text than are to be found in the writings of the abolitionists. They seem to consider themselves above the scriptures: and when they put themselves above the law of God, it is not wonderful that they should disregard the laws of men.⁶

So the abolition controversy two hundred years ago parallels our current crisis between those who want to be biblical upholding the tradition and those who are 'inclusive'. Yet we are now clear that those who claimed to be biblical were wrong – and the then dangerous liberals are now seen as inspired by the Bible to bring freedom.

APARTHEID

The abolition of the slave trade affected other colonies. In South Africa, the British authorities in the Cape moved towards the abolition of slavery. However, Boers saw this as oppression, so they started the Great Trek into the interior, eventually defeating the Zulus at Blood River in 1838. Apartheid is thus a descendant of the controversy about abolition. However, it is also a recent example of debate between being biblical and being inclusive. Today, we assume that apartheid was unchristian, evil and repressive: the Afrikaners were 'hypocrites', pretending to 'be biblical' to cover their exploitation of black people. Yet the Dutch Reformed Church was, and is, a reformed Protestant church, rooted in Scripture, backed by excellent faculties of biblical studies in major universities like Pretoria or Stellenbosch. The theological basis for apartheid, or 'separate development', is the Dutch Reformed Church Report, significantly entitled *Human Relations and the South African Scene in the Light of Scripture*.⁷ Those who wanted black people included were dismissed as dangerous liberals, radicals, or Communist atheists. Even Desmond Tutu as General Secretary of the South African Council of Churches suffered detailed legal scrutiny by the Eloff Commission in 1982.⁸

This presents a challenge: it is easy to dismiss the Afrikaners as hypocrites using a biblical justification. It is more difficult to recognize that a biblical church, of prayerful people, guided by the Spirit, could have come up with a biblical doctrine that we find so abhorrent. How can we be so sure about our claims to be biblical? Will future generations think that current 'biblical' views are as misguided as slavery or apartheid? Accordingly, I analysed how the Bible was used to support apartheid, and the part it played in the liberation struggle as a test case for New Testament ethics.⁹ I will consider the four main literary genres of ethical material in turn.¹⁰

Rules

Treating the Bible as a moral handbook with prescriptive commands fits into the deontological approaches of Kant, Bonhoeffer or Barth. There are direct instructions like the Ten Commandments or the Sermon on the Mount, but we must decide which commands are still binding. The DRC Report interpreted God's command to 'be fruitful and multiply' (Genesis 1.28) to include the separate diversity of peoples, confirmed in Deuteronomy 32.8–9 and Acts 17.26–27 with 'the boundaries of their territories'.¹¹ Critiquing the Report's approach, Willem Vorster, Professor of New Testament at UNISA, argued that 'the Bible simply becomes an "oracle book" of "proof texts"'; further-

more 'both apartheid and anti-apartheid theologians . . . undoubtedly operate with exactly the same view of Scripture. The main difference is the (political) grid through which the Bible is read.'¹²

Principles

Stepping back from commands requires seeking principles underlying the texts, such as the love principle in situation ethics, or the liberation principle in South America. The problems are which principle to apply and whether it really arises from the text. Differing exegeses of Genesis 1.28 produce contrasting 'principles': either 'separate development' (God made us all different), as argued by the DRC Report,¹³ or the principle of 'unity' (God made us one in our diversity), as argued by liberationists. Equally, the Report's handling of Pentecost in Acts 2.6–11 produced the principle of everyone hearing 'God's great deeds in our own language' – justifying separate racial churches, speaking Afrikaans, English, Xhosa, Zulu and so forth. The other side produced the opposite principle of the Spirit at Pentecost 'breaking down the barriers that separate humanity'.¹⁴ Thus the same interpretative method of looking for a principle is applied to the same texts – yet produces contrasting principles for the pro-apartheid government and for the liberation struggle. Which one is really 'biblical'?

Paradigms/examples

Bible narratives are often applied to us, despite the culture gap between the biblical world and our own day. When the early settlers came into the fertile fields of the Cape, 'flowing with milk and honey', not surprisingly they compared themselves to Israelites coming into the Promised Land. However, this also led them to treat the natives like Canaanites as 'hewers of wood and drawers of water', applying Joshua and Judges to the Bantu; from such biblical narratives, they derived prohibitions against mixed marriages, and justified oppression and slavery.¹⁵ After the Boers escaped from the British authorities' move towards the abolition of slavery and defeated the Zulus at Blood River, they ceremonially enacted a Covenant with God every year on 16 December at the Vortrekker monument in Pretoria.¹⁶ Ironically, the same Exodus paradigm lies at the heart of liberation theology, in South Africa as in South America. Again, the same biblical story is used with the same method of interpretation by both sides, with the Afrikaners seen as the victims in their own reading, but as the oppressors by the black churches: 'For the one, God is a God of deliverance. For the other, he is a conquering god. Same texts, two views, two experiences.'¹⁷

World-view

Last, we come to the overall world-view of the Bible, leading to a biblical theology, like the Barthian approach of ethicists such as Oliver O'Donovan and Michael Banner. However, the Bible is not a single book, but a collection of many genres and languages and cultures over many centuries. Fusing it into a single vision is difficult – the DRC viewed their understanding of 'human relations in the light of scripture' as biblical, based upon the whole scheme of creation-fall-incarnation-redemption, while the liberationists followed exactly the same line of argument.

This brief study leads to a disturbing conclusion. We must recognize that both sides in South Africa believed in the Bible, based their view upon it and used the same methods of biblical interpretation upon the same biblical passages – yet they came to startlingly different conclusions. It is worrying for current claims of 'being biblical'.

A BIOGRAPHICAL APPROACH TO THE NEW TESTAMENT ETHICS

My earlier work compared the Gospels with Graeco-Roman biography and demonstrated that they are written in the same genre and therefore must be interpreted similarly.¹⁸ Graeco-Roman biography is very different from modern biography, with the post-Freudian concern for personality, and current interest in 'celebrity'. The ancients depicted the subject's character through his or her deeds and words, anecdotes and sayings, leading up to the person's death, recounted in extensive detail, to bring the major themes to a climax.

To be truly biblical, we must consider Jesus' ethical teaching *and* his actual practice. As Luke says, 'In the first book, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach' (Acts 1.1). Therefore, we have to look at Jesus' sayings, and his actions, to grasp the evangelists' portraits of how Jesus' ethics fit into this. Those who claim to be biblical appeal to his words, for example in the Sermon on the Mount. But this is to ignore the biographical genre of the Gospels and treat them as just ethical teachings. Meanwhile, the desire to be inclusive appeals to his deeds and relationships – but it should not neglect his teachings. Therefore I have analysed New Testament ethics through a biographical approach to the Gospels' portraits of Jesus' deeds and words, his teachings and his ministry, and followed this through Paul and the rest of the New Testament.¹⁹

Jesus' teaching

Despite today's view of Jesus as a moral teacher, the Gospels do not

portray him like this. To read them as ethical treatises is a genre mistake. In their biographical portraits, Jesus' ethics is not a separate set of moral maxims, but part of his proclamation of the Kingdom of God, which aims to elicit a whole-hearted response from disciples living within the community of others who also follow, rather than to provide moral instructions. As for human moral experiences, like money, sex, power and violence, Jesus intensified the demands of the Law with his rigorous ethic of self-denial. However, his stress on love and forgiveness opened the community to those who had moral difficulties in these areas.

Jesus' example

Jesus' demanding ethical teaching requires high standards – but in the biographical narrative, the religious leaders and guardians of morality find him uncomfortable, while he keeps company with those who do *not* keep his ethic. He is criticized as 'a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners' (Matthew 11.19; Luke 7.34). He accepts people as they are and proclaims that they are forgiven without going to the temple or offering sacrifice. He heals them, and the eucharistic words suggest that he saw his coming death as 'for' them. A biographical approach means that we cannot simply look at Jesus' moral words; to be biblical involves the paradox that Jesus delivers his ethical teaching among sinners whom he accepts, loves and heals. Furthermore, a major purpose of ancient biography was *mimesis*, the imitation of the subject. Equally, *ma'aseh*, Jewish 'precedence', expected disciples to imitate their rabbi as a way of imitating Torah, to become holy as God is holy. To imitate Jesus, we cannot simply extract ethical teachings from the Sermon on the Mount; we must also imitate his loving acceptance of others within an inclusive community.

Paul

The Pauline letters contain much ethical material which is still an ethic of response, even if Jesus' preaching of the Kingdom has become proclaiming Jesus as king. Paul's demand for a response to God is the same, with the same centrality of the love command, to fulfil the law, lived out within the community of the body of Christ. On particular ethical issues (such as the state, sex, marriage and divorce, money, property and poverty), Paul makes demands, yet also refers to the mixed nature of his early communities. He appeals to readers to 'be imitators of me, as I am of Christ' (1 Corinthians 11.1; compare Galatians 4.12; 1 Thessalonians 1.6). He instructs early Christians to 'bear with the failings of the weak' and not to please themselves 'as

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Christ did not please himself'. They are to welcome others 'just as Christ has welcomed you' (Romans 15.1–7). Our biographical approach suggests that Paul follows the creative complementarity of Jesus' rigorous ethics together with his acceptance of sinners within his community. As Jesus' pastoral acceptance of 'sinners' means that his demanding teaching cannot be applied exclusively, so Paul's ethical teaching is balanced by his appeal to imitate Christ, accepting others as we have been accepted.

The four Gospels

This same combination of Jesus' words and deeds is found in each evangelist's ethical slant: Mark stresses discipleship in the context of eschatological suffering; Matthew demonstrates how Jesus is the truly righteous interpreter of the law; Luke depicts his universal concern especially for the marginalized, while John portrays Jesus as the divine love who brings truth into our world. Christology is central, but each portrait combines words and deeds, as Jesus' moral teaching takes place in the narrative context of accepting people within an inclusive community. This is all set forth in their biographical narrative for us to imitate Jesus' ethical concern and loving acceptance.

HOW DID THE DEBATE ABOUT SLAVERY CHANGE?

Wilberforce and the Clapham sect were concerned to make the British people and Parliament see slaves as fellow human beings, as in the Wedgwood medallions, saying, 'Am I not a man and a brother?' The story of Olaudah Equiano, a former slave from Ghana, rapidly became a best-seller in 1789. Although John Newton was converted in 1748, he continued in the slave trade until 1754 and only wrote his *Thoughts upon the African Slave Trade* in 1787. The abolitionists read and reread their Bibles in the light of this experience of slaves and slave-traders. Thus they imitated Jesus' example of doing ethics within an inclusive community – and the change resulted from admitting the excluded group into the discussion.

HOW DID THE UNDERSTANDING OF APARTHEID AS 'BIBLICAL' CHANGE?

Biblical interpretation is validated by the believing community, but the pro-apartheid account of 'human relations in the light of scripture' came out of a Bible-reading, prayerful Christian church,

supported by excellent biblical scholars. A professor at Stellenbosch University explained to me how the DRC got it so wrong, by not listening to the voices of 'outsiders' such as other churches, and stifling the protests 'inside'. As biblical interpretation was related to its political and social context, things changed. Gerald West, from the University of Kwa-Zulu Natal, introduced the voices of 'ordinary readers' alongside those of biblical scholars and church authorities. Again, admitting the excluded group into the community interpreting the Bible led to change.²⁰

Similarly, Archbishop Tutu chaired the Truth and Reconciliation Commission to hear the experiences of all sides, black, white and coloured, oppressors and oppressed, victims and torturers alike. Freek Swanepoel from the DRC admitted that 'the church had erred seriously with the Biblical foundation of the forced segregation of people . . . We have indeed taught our people wrongly with regard to apartheid as a Biblical instruction.'²¹ This is just one example of many others who confessed that previous claims to be biblical were wrong. Once more, admitting the excluded group changed how the Bible was understood.

HOW MIGHT THE CURRENT DEBATE OVER SEXUALITY CHANGE?

In the current controversy, one side argues that they are biblical, while the other claims to be inclusive. Some suggest that as the Church overcame biblical claims about slavery two centuries ago, it must do the same now about sexuality. Such arguments are too simplistic. Equally, others argue that biblical claims for apartheid were a cover for racism, and we must resist prejudice about sexual orientation similarly. In fact, biblical arguments for apartheid were more than prejudice and needed reconsideration in an inclusive community. Similarly, the scriptural material on human sexuality is complex, and easy claims to be biblical should not be accepted.

Homosexuality is forbidden in Leviticus 18.22, but so is heterosexual intercourse during menstruation (18.19); similarly the death penalty is prescribed for homosexuality in Leviticus 20.13, but also for speaking badly about parents in 20.9. Homosexuality appears in some of Paul's vice lists (e.g. 1 Corinthians 6.9–10); equally, Romans 1.24–27 also leads into another list in 1.28–32, that 'gossips, slanderers, the insolent . . . and those who are rebellious towards parents . . . deserve to die'. Such material requires careful analysis if sexuality is singled out today but not the others. Jesus says nothing about homosexuality, but stresses one flesh in forbidding divorce (Mark 10.1–12); a church which permits divorce cannot use such passages to

forbid homosexuality. Therefore, both sides' claims to be biblical cannot be easily accepted. Careful scriptural study is needed, as with slavery and apartheid, within an inclusive community where the marginalized are heard. Words must be held together with deeds: if the biblical teaching about sexuality is not conclusive, Jesus' example of accepting the marginalized is clear. Paul's regard for weaker brothers and sisters and his call to imitate Jesus is reinforced by the biographical genre of the Gospels. Those who want to be biblical must maintain an inclusive community of interpretation to discover God's will.

The 1998 Lambeth Conference resolution 1.10 that 'homosexual practice is incompatible with Scripture' also commits the church 'to listen to the experience of homosexual persons' who 'regardless of sexual orientation, are full members of the Body of Christ', hence the 'listening process' around the Anglican Communion. Private Member debates in General Synod last year were amended to 'acknowledge the importance of lesbian and gay members of the Church of England participating . . . in an open, full and Godly dialogue about human sexuality'. Such listening is needed to imitate the example of Jesus.

CONCLUSION

To be truly biblical is to imitate Jesus' teaching and his example: his demanding ethics cannot be separated from his activity. The biographical genre of the Gospels, the ancient idea of imitation and Jewish rabbinic precedent all suggest that Jesus' teaching must be earthed in his example of calling people to discipleship and acceptance of sinners. Unfortunately, New Testament ethics today either produces a condemnatory ethic – or an open acceptance, which seems to have no morality. Seeking to follow Jesus in becoming 'perfect' and 'merciful' as God is perfect and merciful (compare Matthew 5.48 with Luke 6.36) is not easy, but is vital to be properly biblical.

Biblical study requires an inclusive community of interpretation which listens to the experiences of those who are marginalized, as with slaves and apartheid. Only an open and inclusive community which includes listening to homosexuals' experience can grapple with the biblical teaching on sexuality. A biographical approach to New Testament ethics requires imitating Jesus' words and deeds within the context of an inclusive community. Such an open debate is the only way forward today if we really want to be 'biblical'.

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Notes

- 1 Dale B. Martin, *Slavery as Salvation: the metaphor of slavery in Pauline Christianity* (Yale University Press 1990); Richard A. Horsley, 'Paul and slavery: a critical alternative to recent readings', *Slavery in Text and Interpretation, Semeia* 83 / 84 (SBL 1988), pp. 153–200.
- 2 See Iveson L. Brookes, *A Defence of the South Against the Reproaches and Incroachments of the North: in which slavery is shown to be an institution of God intended to form the basis of the best social state and the only safeguard to the permanence of a Republican Government* (Hamburg SC: Republican Office, 1850).
- 3 E. N. Elliot (ed.), *Cotton is King, and Pro-Slavery Arguments Comprising the Writings of Hammond, Harper, Christy, Stringfellow, Hodge, Bledsoe, and Cartwright on This Important Subject* (1860 original; reprint, New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969).
- 4 Wayne A. Meeks, 'The "Haustafeln" and American slavery: a hermeneutical challenge' in E. H. Lovering and J. L. Sumney, *Theology and Ethics in Paul and His Interpreters* (Abingdon: Nashville, 1996), pp. 232–53, quotation p. 245.
- 5 Willard M. Swartley, *Slavery, Sabbath, War and Women: case issues in biblical interpretation* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1983), pp. 58–9.
- 6 Bledsoe's original is capitalized in 'The argument from the Scriptures' in Elliot (ed.), *Cotton is King*, pp. 379–80.
- 7 *Human Relations and the South African Scene in the Light of Scripture* (Cape Town-Pretoria: Dutch Reformed Church, 1976); approved by the General Synod October 1974.
- 8 Desmond Tutu, *The Rainbow People of God: South Africa's victory over apartheid*, ed. John Allen (London: Bantam, 1995), pp. 53–78; John Allen, *Rabble-Rouser for Peace: the authorised biography of Desmond Tutu* (London: Rider, 2006), pp. 197–8.
- 9 Richard A. Burridge, *Imitating Jesus: an inclusive approach to New Testament ethics* (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 2007), ch. 8, pp. 347–410.
- 10 James M. Gustafson, 'The place of Scripture in Christian ethics: a methodological study', *Interpretation* 24 (1970), pp. 430–55; Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), p. 209.
- 11 *Human Relations and the South African Scene*, pp. 14–15.
- 12 Willem S. Vorster, 'The use of Scripture and the NG Kerk: a shift of paradigm or of values?' in *New Faces of Africa: essays in honour of Ben (Barend Jacobus) Marais*, ed. J. W. Hofmeyr and W. S. Vorster (Pretoria: UNISA, 1984), pp. 204–19, quotations pp. 210–12; D. J. Smit, 'The ethics of interpretation – and South Africa', *Scriptura* 33 (1990), pp. 29–43.
- 13 *Human Relations and the South African Scene*, pp. 14–15.
- 14 Douglas Bax, 'The Bible and apartheid 2', ch. 9 in *Apartheid is a Heresy*, ed. J. de Gruchy and C. Villa Vicencio (Cape Town: David Philip, 1983), pp. 112–43.
- 15 John W. de Gruchy, *The Church Struggle in South Africa: twenty-fifth anniversary edition* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), pp. 171–4; Michael Battle, *Reconciliation: the ubuntu theology of Desmond Tutu* (Cleveland OH: Pilgrim Press, 1997), pp. 31–2.
- 16 Zolile Mbali, *The Churches and Racism: a Black South African perspective* (London: SCM Press, 1987), pp. 191–3.
- 17 Gerrie Snyman, 'Social identity and South African biblical hermeneutics: a struggle against prejudice?', *JTSA* 121 (March 2005), pp. 34–55; quotation p. 39.
- 18 Richard A. Burridge, *What Are the Gospels? a comparison with Graeco-Roman biography*, second edition (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 2004).
- 19 See Burridge, *Imitating Jesus*, chs 2–7, pp. 33–346.
- 20 Professor West has been invited to co-ordinate all the biblical material for the 2008 Lambeth Conference.
- 21 RICS transcripts of the TRC hearings in East London, 17–19 November 1997, pp. 246–65; see also in *Facing the Truth: South African faith communities and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission*, ed. James Cochrane, John de Gruchy and Stephen Martin (Cape Town: David Philip, 1998).