

What the Bible really says about gays

Liberal Christians can wield two weapons against conservatives on the issue of homosexuality.

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Justin R. Cannon, a student at Earlham College in Richmond, Ind., is one of the youngest combatants in the Christian culture wars. But he's a happy warrior because his contribution to the debate — an illuminating online analysis that argues the Bible doesn't condemn faithful gay relationships — has piqued the interest of clergy and laypeople across the country.

"I have received all sorts of positive letters and e-mail from pastors, bishops, Bible study teachers, seminary professors, gays and lesbians, as well as a few straight allies," the seminary-bound Cannon told me, referring to his study, "The Bible, Christianity and Homosexuality" (www.truthsetsfree.net). (Some responses, he conceded, "weren't so friendly [but] I have tried to ... be loving and gracious in my replies.")

Cannon's website makes use of etymology and history to cast doubt on the prevailing antigay interpretations of several Bible verses. It is only one front in a robust theological counterattack against Christian conservatives who insist — as a 1998 statement from Anglican bishops puts it — that same-sex relationships of any kind are incompatible with Scripture.

Revisionists such as Cannon are ingenious and often persuasive in arguing that strictures in both the Old and New Testaments that have been read to broadly condemn homosexuality were actually directed at particular offenses — male prostitution, a breach of hospitality (the real "sin of Sodom") or the insult to patriarchy represented by a male lying "with a man as one lies with a woman" (Leviticus 18:22).

In seeking to have antigay Christians reexamine their prejudices, the revisionists are doing the Lord's work — literally, because Jesus said a great deal about love and nothing at all about homosexuality. But arguing about whether particular passages in the Bible condemn homosexuality — "proof-texting," in the jargon of biblical scholars — may not be the best way to counter conservatives.

For example, the gay British theologian Jeffrey John says that in St. Paul's time, "prostitution and pederasty (in the sense of the Greek practice of a temporary pupil-tutor relationship between a teenager and an older man) were the standard forms of homosexual practice, and those are the forms which were likely to be uppermost" in his references to homosexuality.

But suppose they weren't? Suppose Paul also would have condemned permanent, faithful, stable same-sex relationships? After all, Paul, a religious genius but a man of his time, professed more than a few

beliefs that are anathema to many contemporary Christians.

Sophisticated Christians have long recognized that, as a colleague of mine put it after launching his own Scripture study, "there's a lot of wacky stuff in the Bible." For example, Cannon points out that the same holiness code in Leviticus that prohibits men from lying with each other "as with a woman" also forbids the shaving of beards and the sowing of two kinds of seeds in the same field.

Conservatives argue that this doesn't mean that we're not to take Scripture literally, but only that some Old Testament rules are superseded by the Christian Gospel. But that thinking runs aground because the New Testament itself contains its own literal conundrums. In the Epistle to the Romans, St. Paul asserts that "a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law." But in the Epistle of James, he says: "A man is justified by works and not by faith alone."

There is an alternative to passage-by-passage literal arguments — one that calls for the courageous assertion that Scripture can be reinterpreted, and sometimes repudiated, on the basis of the lived experience of Christians, guided by the Holy Spirit.

This is the approach taken by the Episcopal Church, which decided to ordain the Rev. V. Gene Robinson, a priest in a committed same-sex relationship, as bishop of New Hampshire.

The Episcopal Church's report on this decision, submitted to its fellow "communicants" in the international Anglican Community (some of whom are none too happy with Robinson's ordination), tellingly quotes Jesus' words as reported in the Gospel of John: "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you..."

The report notes that the Bible records how St. Peter was guided to the truth that Gentiles could become Christians without becoming Jews and compares it to the Episcopal Church's "discernment" that same-sex relationships can be holy. The Book of Acts recounts how the church (Peter and friends) are prompted by the Holy Spirit "to question and reinterpret what they would previously have seen as a clear commandment ... not to associate with a particular group of people who were considered unclean."

The fact is, liberal Christians can wield both approaches against the hard-line right. The "clobber passages" cited by John and Cannon can be shown to be less than weighty when read in their proper cultural context. But however you read them, they were never meant to be the end of the lesson.