

Holy Scripture and the consecration of Gene Robinson

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One of the requests of the Windsor Report is that the American Church explain how it is that a person in a same-gendered relationship could be considered eligible for election to the office of Bishop. It insists that this explanation deal with the issues of Scripture.

To date, there has been a dearth of coherent argument on this side of the issue. Frankly, the arguments put forward, with rare exception, smack of the kind of “fuzzy thinking” that makes our conservative brothers and sisters so frustrated. It need not be so. A clear, concise argument can be built from the Holy Scriptures for the consecration of Gene Robinson, or any other homosexual person, assuming no other “impediments.” I propose to offer that argument here.

Which texts?

From the Hebrew Scriptures

A variety of texts are put forward as problematic for those who support Bishop Robinson’s consecration. Many of them are from the Hebrew Scriptures. They have been dealt with in greater detail elsewhere, but need to be briefly addressed before moving to the more difficult readings of Paul.

Genesis 19:1-29

Two angels are persuaded to accept Lot’s hospitality. When the residents of the city learn that they are there, they come to Lot’s door and insist that the strangers be “brought out” that they might “know them.” What is at issue here is not sexual identity or homosexuality, but brutality toward strangers, expressed as sexual domination. It is this brutality that is condemned, not the genders of those involved.

Judges 19-21

The similarity of the story above to this from Judges gives us a clear indication that the gender of the victim is not at issue. A man of Ephraim is given hospitality in Gibeah by an old man living there. When the residents of that city discover his presence, they descend on the house demanding that he be put outside. The host offers his own virgin daughter, along with the traveler’s concubine. Initially the crowd refuses, but when the stranger puts his concubine out the door, she is repeatedly raped until she dies.

Quite apart from the repugnance we might reasonably have toward the behavior of the man with regard to his concubine, the crowd here clearly seeks to vent its rage on a

stranger, without regard to gender. There is no argument for or against homosexuality here, only against violence toward the stranger. Indeed, this text must influence our reading of the Genesis text.

Deuteronomy 23:17-18

These verses are concerned not with the gender of the prostitute, but with the act of prostitution, particularly that which is done in the name of the gods. The wages of such activity are unclean. The text's silence on the treatment of the prostitutes themselves suggests that the "abomination" of Leviticus is nowhere in sight.

Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13

You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination. (18:22, NRSV)

If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death; their blood is upon them. (20:13, NRSV)

The thinking that lies behind these passages has been discussed elsewhere.¹ Finally, though, as Dr. Wink suggests, these texts leave no "wiggle room." If you accept the

¹ The summary by Walter Wink is valuable, here, so I quote it at length. From "Homosexuality and the Bible,"

Such an act was regarded as an "abomination" for several reasons. The Hebrew prescientific understanding was that male semen contained the whole of nascent life. With no knowledge of eggs and ovulation, it was assumed that the woman provided only the incubating space. Hence the spilling of semen for any nonprocreative purpose--in coitus interruptus (Gen. 38:1-11), male homosexual acts, or male masturbation--was considered tantamount to abortion or murder. (Female homosexual acts were consequently not so seriously regarded, and are not mentioned at all in the Old Testament (but see Rom. 1:26). One can appreciate how a tribe struggling to populate a country in which its people were outnumbered would value procreation highly, but such values are rendered questionable in a world facing uncontrolled overpopulation.

In addition, when a man acted like a woman sexually, male dignity was compromised. It was a degradation, not only in regard to himself, but for every other male. The patriarchalism of Hebrew culture shows its hand in the very formulation of the commandment, since no similar stricture was formulated to forbid homosexual acts between females. And the repugnance felt toward homosexuality was not just that it was deemed unnatural but also that it was considered unJewish, representing yet one more incursion of pagan civilization into Jewish life. On top of that is the more universal repugnance heterosexuals tend to feel for acts and orientations foreign to them. (Left-handedness has evoked something of the same response in many cultures.)

Whatever the rationale for their formulation, however, the texts leave no room for maneuvering. Persons committing homosexual acts are to be executed. This is the unambiguous command of Scripture. The meaning is clear: anyone who wishes to base his or her beliefs on the witness of the Old Testament must be completely consistent and demand the death penalty for everyone who performs homosexual acts. (That

purity code of which they are a part, you must not only reject all (male) homosexual behavior, but you must stone anyone known to have participated in such an act to death.

The moment we reject the latter portion, the command to execute the homosexual (male) is the moment we declare that we are not bound by any of the law. It would be hard to imagine that any but the most virulent opponents of the inclusion of gay and lesbian persons would argue for the full application of the law. Still, if we are Christians, we read Paul in Galatians saying, “For all who rely on the works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who does not observe and obey all the things written in the book of the law,” (Galatians 3:10) and again, “Once again I testify to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obliged to obey the entire law.” (Galatians 5:3) If we are obligated to any of it, we are obligated to the whole of it.

But we, as Christians, know that we are not made righteous by the Law, but by Faith. For followers of Jesus Christ, “All things are lawful.” (I Corinthians 6:12 and 10:23) Paul also argues that “not all things build up.” (Same verses) I will deal with that concern below, because I believe that it is very pertinent to the discussion.

Finally, we cannot, as Christians, argue from the lawfulness or unlawfulness of activities according to the Jewish purity code. We must find our guidelines in our own texts.

From the Christian Scriptures

I Corinthians 6:9-10

Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived! Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, sodomites, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers—none of these will inherit the kingdom of God. (NRSV)

I Timothy 1:8-11

Now we know that the law is good, if one uses it legitimately. This means understanding that the law is laid down not for the innocent but for the lawless and disobedient, for the godless and sinful, for the unholy and profane, for those who kill their father or mother, for murderers, fornicators, sodomites, slave traders, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to the sound teaching that conforms to the glorious gospel of the blessed God, which he entrusted to me. (NRSV)

may seem extreme, but there actually are some Christians urging this very thing today.) It is unlikely that any American court will ever again condemn a homosexual to death, even though Scripture clearly commands it.

A good deal of ink has already been spilled on the identity of the persons referred to in these passages. That it is unclear is sure. It is likely that the words translated here “sodomites” and “male prostitutes” both refer to men engaged in sexual acts that are fundamentally injurious to one or both of the parties involved. The “use” of one person by another for sexual satisfaction is condemned for its dehumanization of both.

Regardless of the identity of those so-called, it is clear that both passages refer to persons outside the Body of Christ. Paul asks the believers in Corinth not to behave like unbelievers (a strong theme in I Corinthians). He likens the use of the courts (6:7-8) as the believers sue one another to the crimes in which the non-believers “defraud” and “wrong” one another. In this context, the sexual behaviors he cites must be seen to be those that parallel his complaint against the Corinthians. They are then relationships in which one person “defrauds” or “wrongs” the other. They bear no relationship to the monogamous same-gendered relationships about which we speak today.

The author of I Timothy picks up the word “arsenokoitais,” translated “sodomites” by the NRSV. This translation is not so obvious in meaning as we might think, as we have discovered that the sin of Sodom was not single-gender related, but about the use of sex by one to abuse another. As the word appears only these two times in the entire Bible, no other reading can be argued to be any stronger. Given that it is included among a list of acts that are equally devoted to the abuse of one person by another, we can only conclude that the author’s intention is to describe similarly abusive sexual behavior. Once again, the text falls silent with regard to the monogamous relationships with which we concern ourselves now.

Romans 1:26-27

Finally we are brought to the only text that still troubles most commentators. Walter Wink includes this among his list of “unequivocal condemnations.” I beg to differ.

For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error. (Romans 1:26-27, NRSV)

First, the context of the sentence must be given attention. Paul speaks of this act of God in the context of a condemnation of the Gentiles, who have “exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles.” (1:23) and “exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator.” (1:25) These people have “become futile in their thinking,” and their senses are “darkened.”

And because these persons have mistaken the nature of all things, as being reflections of their Creator, they act *against nature*.² That is to say, they “exchange” the natural for the unnatural. Now, Paul speaks here of a person acting against his or her own nature. Indeed, we can be sure that anyone who fails to see God at work in all things will also fail to understand her own nature and thereby act against it.

But this is not the situation in which we find ourselves. In Gene Robinson and in many, many other faithful homosexual persons, we experience people who *do* know the difference between Creator and creation, who do not worship the wrong god. Paul argues from the cause to the result (sexual behavior against one’s nature). He does not argue that all such behaviors are marks of the first error.

What is doubly important here, though, is that Paul sees people acting *against their own natures*. This is the mark of having worshipped wrongly. Granted, we have no indication that Paul ever imagined that a man or woman could have a nature that might include this behavior, but that is not the issue. Paul speaks of actions *against one’s nature*.

Who Decides?

Finally, only the person concerned can be trusted to see through to his or her own nature. It is surely true that some (largely) heterosexual persons have decided for a variety of reasons to act against that nature. But it is even more certain that social pressures have forced many homosexual persons to act against theirs.

We can only come to that place of listening when we trust that the person living her or his own life is the best judge (in prayerful consultation with others) of what is “natural.” To assume that we who stand outside that life can better determine this is grossly disrespectful of the image of God imprinted on that person.³

Consider for a moment the response of the Southern Hemisphere to the (admittedly) condescending language of some of the pronouncements by North Americans. We speak as if we know what is best for everyone. We are imperialistic, we know best. Everyone who disagrees is “primitive.” What grotesque language!

² Paul’s word for “nature” here, *physikos*, is the source for our word “physical.” That might seem that he intends that we just what is “natural” by what is “physical,” as though one’s genitalia ought to determine one’s behavior. This, however, is insufficiently nuanced. Even if we were to ignore recent genetic research into the physical sources of sexual identity, “natural” still goes beyond physical configurations. What must be kept in mind is that the opposite of *physikos* in this semantic realm is *didaktos*, or “learned.” In other words, Paul’s word for “natural” includes all that is not learned. If we listen honestly to the voices of gay and lesbian persons, we learn quickly that this identity is not “taught” to them by anyone, it is discovered, often to the initial dismay of the discoverer. Homosexual identity definitely falls within the semantic realm of Paul’s word “natural.”

³ For a wonderful discussion of the way that we (heterosexuals) predetermine the correct answers by the very way we ask the questions, I recommend Heterosexism by Patricia Beatty Jung, and Ralph F. Smith, SUNY Press, 1993.

And yet, it is the very thing the heterosexual community does with regard to our gay and lesbian sisters and brothers. We know what is best for them. We know what is natural. We know what behavior goes against *their natures*. I am not suggesting that we listen to the psychological community, whose voices may be suspect in some parts of the world. Rather, we must listen to the voices of those who have prayerfully asked the question of themselves. “What is my nature?”

To act against this, whatever the answer, is the activity Paul cites as the *result* (not cause) of misplaced worship.

For this reason, even Romans 1 does not argue against the consecration of Bishop Robinson.

The Scriptures That Do Speak

I believe that there are no credible texts precluding the consecration of Bishop Gene Robinson. But for me, this is inadequate. I need the Scriptures to push me forward into a decision that is likely to cause so much pain in the Anglican Communion. And they do.

More Than Forgiveness

Many times, when I listen to Christians discussing this issue, Jesus’ forgiveness of sinners is the argument of first resort. Since Jesus is utterly silent with regard to homosexuality, Christians tend to assume the sinfulness of the act (it does violate the purity code) and deal with that sinfulness as something Jesus would forgive. This is wholly inadequate. This argument fails to deal with Jesus’ utter lack of concern for the abrogation of purity or ritual law for the sake of compassion. Jesus does not forgive his disciples for harvesting grain on the Sabbath. (Matthew 12:1) Neither does he forgive the woman with the flow of blood who touches him. (Mark 5:25 ff) No, in these cases, the law simply ceases to apply.

It is important to move beyond this issue of forgiveness, because one of the frequent arguments against the consecration of Bishop Robinson is that he and others like him are “unrepentant.” If only they would turn from this wickedness and live! But this law surely falls within the bounds of the purity codes Jesus and his disciples abrogate without any concern for repentance.

A Model For Bishop Robinson’s Evangelical Task

I turn to the Jesus’ encounter with the Woman of Samaria (John 4:1 ff) for an applicable model. Both she and Bishop Robinson are in relationships that are not widely recognized

as “valid.” It is regrettable that the Episcopal Church lacked the courage or wisdom to validate his relationship with his partner before electing him bishop, but such is the way of God. Jesus did not wait for the woman’s community to accept her relationship before he revealed himself to her so powerfully that she ran back to her village. He did not tell her to wait until she was married before witnessing to his identity, his power. Jesus shows no concern at all for the validity of her social status or status before the law when he reveals himself in a way that could only produce an evangelical result.

Bishop Robinson has, according to those who know him best, met the same Jesus who spoke to the woman at the well. He speaks to others of a God who claims him, and who knows him, and who desires to claim us all. Jesus did not concern himself with the Bishop’s status before the law in selecting him for that revelation. Like the woman, Bishop Robinson is to be commended for accepting the task, given the likelihood that he will be ridiculed for suggesting that he has been entrusted with such a precious revelation, given his marginal social status.

Paul Argues for Bishop Robinson’s Witness

This is perhaps the most important argument to make, as in Paul we have not only the example of Jesus to ponder, but the impact of that example on the communities that claim him as Lord. I believe that we can find, in Paul, an advocate for Bishop Robinson’s consecration, despite the way that Romans has often been read.

Freedom Sacrificed for the Weak

First, we must consider one pattern of admonition in Paul. Time and again, the Apostle to the Gentiles argues that what is permitted is not always best for the community. This is most explicit in I Corinthians 6:23 and 10:23, cited above, but the same pattern pertains in Romans 14 and 15, where Paul argues that the strong should not criticize the “weak” for their scrupulousness. Mark Nanos, author of [The Mystery of Romans](#) has argued in fact, that this concern goes so far as to compel some Torah observance among Gentile believers so as to avoid scandalizing (and thereby reducing the likelihood of conversion) of their Jewish brothers and sisters.

Whether you accept Nanos’ premise or not (I do), the concern of the strong for the weak, the refusal to act in a way so as to make them stumble (the issue in I Corinthians is meat sacrificed to idols) makes it clear that Paul places voluntary limits on our freedom in Christ for the sake of love.

I think that this is the very strongest scriptural argument against the actions of the 2003 General Convention. Because it has been the cause of stumbling by so many who have been moved to division, even schism over this, I believe that one could make a

reasonable claim that this freedom which is certainly ours in Christ might have been foregone for the sake of love.

However, this is not Paul's last word.

Our Identity in Christ Is More Important

Paul surely desires to see his churches limit the exercise of their freedom for the sake of those who do not yet appreciate the extent of that freedom. But there is a value that is greater still, the identity of all believers in Christ.

As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. (Galatians 3:27-28, NRSV)

For Paul, the believer in Christ has been made like the first Adam. He takes his reader backward through Salvation History from his present day (Jew or Greek) through the Passover experience (slave or free) all the way back to the moment of human creation before God divided the first Adam in "male and female." (The shift from "or" as the conjunction to "and" here indicates that Paul has the Septuagintal creation narrative in mind, which he quotes exactly.)

For Paul, one's identity in Christ obliterated all other identity markers. He did not differentiate according to gender or any other part of identity that might divide us one from another.

Assertion of This Identity More Important Than Potential Scandal

Finally, in I Corinthians we have Paul's answer to the present dilemma. Though he speaks of another scandal (the inclusion of women in worship) he sets for us a pattern that doesn't just permit us to consecrate Gene Robinson a bishop, but practically demands it.

I Corinthians 14:33b-36

As in all the churches of the saints, women should be silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as the law also says. If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church. Or did the word of God originate with you? Or are you the only ones it has reached?

The Episcopal Church of the last few decades, along with most of “liberal” scholarship has been quick to use the peculiar textual history of this troublesome passage as an excuse to dismiss it as a “gloss,” and editorial addition, perhaps by the collector of the letters, perhaps by the author of the deutero-Pauline epistles, perhaps even the author of Luke. (There are ancient editions of I Corinthians in which this passage is moved to the end of chapter 14, and one where this passage is in the margin.) These arguments, however fail to convince, because there is no manuscript of the letter that lacks the text altogether.

Most modern scholars, though, confronted with Paul’s instructions to the women prophets in chapter 11, see an apparent contradiction. In addition, if one excises this passage, chapter 14 appears to read more smoothly. (Though I do not find this passage jarring if read properly.)

Because of the habit of saying, “Scholars say it’s an addition,” without examining the evidence, especially the text itself, modern scholarship has excluded from authoritative witness a text it desperately needs in these days. In fact, if read appropriately, these texts not only *do not* say that Paul wanted women to be quiet in church, they argue for the scandalous inclusion of women in worship over the objections of those who would silence them!

“Let the Women Speak in Church”

Two different scholars, using two different methodologies, have come to the same conclusion. Paul wrote this passage, but in it he is quoting back to the Corinthians from their letter to him. It is unfortunate that their work has not received greater notice, but our rush to protect Paul from the misogynist label that this passage has given him for so long has, I think, made us unwilling to reconsider the widely accepted “interpolation” theories.

David Odell-Scott, in his article “Let the Women Speak in Church: An Egalitarian Interpretation of 1 Cor 14:33b-36” (Biblical Theology Bulletin, 13 (1983): 90-93) builds his argument from a grammatical beginning point. The word rendered “Or” in the penultimate sentence actually translates an “untranslatable particle,” a single letter conjunction, “ē,” which signifies a *negative* conjunction between that which precedes and that which follows it. It tells the reader that the sentence that follows *contradicts* that which precedes it in some fashion.

Odell-Scott points out that this is not the only place in I Corinthians where Paul uses this conjunction in this way. 11:20-21 is followed by the same word, as Paul opposes his teaching to the behavior of the Corinthians.

Given this meaning in the conjunction, the traditional “inclusive of all” reading given to the masculine plural “you” in v. 36 needs to be re-read. What Paul is doing here is

quoting the letter from the Corinthians, in which they cite their reasons for silencing the women, “As is done in all the churches...” and then contradicts the *men* (masculine plural) as he cries, “What? Did the word of God originate with you? Are you [men] the only ones it has reached?” He argues against the Corinthians for the full participation of the women.

Similarly, Charles Talbert, of Wake Forest University has written on the passage, but using a slightly different approach. In his article “Paul’s Understanding of the Holy Spirit: The Evidence of 1 Corinthians 12-14,” Talbert reads this passage in the context of Paul’s larger argument regarding the value of different spiritual gifts. Within this context, Talbert also concludes that the contributions of the women are to be valued, against the suggestions of the Corinthian men.

Once we understand that these verses are not Paul’s (only he and the Corinthians would have known) it is much easier to understand the variations in the manuscript traditions. They are not the result of “interpolations” but of the scribe’s honest discomfort with words that are obviously at odds with what the scribe knew to be true of Pauline Christianity. The text is moved around to try to make sense of the fact that it was commonly known that women played a large role in Paul’s churches, and yet we have this peculiar command!

From this new understanding of I Corinthians we glean an important principle in Paul’s understanding of the Body of Christ.

When the Spirit is given, when one’s identity is the gift given as a result of being in Christ, even if it be scandalous, that one’s voice is to be heard. Paul insists that the recognition of every person’s contribution, regardless of identity markers, is more important than even the potential for scandal.

Conclusion

Given this understanding of Paul’s, even the last argument, that it might scandalize other Christians, as surely the participation of women did in Corinth, crumbles before the magnificence of the Gospel that holds up the outsider as the best carrier of the message.

There is not only an absence of prohibition, but we are scripturally enjoined to hear the voices of those who do not appear to fit, whose presence in our midst may be considered scandalous. The experience of the people who elected Gene Robinson, that he is indeed a bearer of the true message of the Gospel, left the General Convention with no biblical alternative but to “Let this Gay Man speak in Church.”