

To my brothers and sisters who love the sinner but hate the sin,

I really want to give you the benefit of the doubt on this one; I want to but I am struggling. I get that you feel strongly about this, so strongly that you are okay about judging others in public, embarrassing and, even, humiliating others. I think you might think that when you tell us how hard it is for you to do this, you expect sympathy and understanding; I think you want us to think that you are reluctantly following through on this question; I think that statement might also be one way you understand what it means to speak the truth in love—even though I find it mean spirited, lacking in compassion, and not really how brothers and sisters are enjoined in scripture to speak with each other.

But I still want to give you the benefit of the doubt. The way I want to do that is by asking about your hermeneutic. I think this is really important; I think our understanding of scripture and its authority in the life of the church, pastors, and laity is foundational to every moral issue we are confronted by. You go out of the way to make sure that we all understand that what you are doing and saying is only out of your conviction that the Bible agrees with you—that your understanding of the biblical view of homosexuality is, in fact and in truth, what the Bible teaches; you are eager to use and explain scripture as justification of your position. That is clear and, certainly, it is what we all should do. The problem is when our hermeneutic is developed to support an idea rather than to discover it. We all like to say with Paul that the word of God is a two-edged sword rightly dividing the truth; usually when we say that, of course, we mean the Bible—although it will be many centuries after Paul before what you and I call the Bible appears—and only after centuries of wrangling and fighting and excommunicating and, well, yes, voting—so that the book you and I work with today might be subtitled “The ayes have it.” But clearly Paul is not talking about the Bible when he says the word of God, so my first question is how do you understand that phrase, “the word of God,” and, following closely on it, what is your view of “the authority of scripture”? And, since your whole argument seems to be based on the epistles and the Old Testament, I also want to ask what is the role of the Gospels in your hermeneutic? I have never heard you talk about that so I think it is a legitimate question.

Personally, the Gospels are central to my own hermeneutic, and I feel pretty seriously that they are *the* primary texts and that our reading of the rest of scripture as well as our cultural context should be seen through those lenses. I think this is a really important question because I don't see or hear Jesus talking about homosexuality. I've looked and I've read the commentators who say he did, but no one is able to find scripture that condemns or condones—they all appear to make their arguments from outside of the gospels and read back into them on the basis of a most often stated argument that the whole Bible is from Jesus who was, after all, the logos from the beginning of time. That, of course, is problematic and puts things in Jesus' mouth, so to speak, that I think he would find distasteful. (Perhaps did find distasteful; see his conversations with the Pharisees.)

In our believing world, everything rests on the understanding of the authority of scripture and how that authority functions in the life of the church. I think most of our arguments evolve around that question and, consequently, when we talk together it sometimes feels that each of us is talking about a different book. Perhaps your sense of whether or not the canon is closed is another question I'd like to hear you address.

I wonder as well how you feel about continued revelation and the role of the Spirit in our ongoing understanding and development of teachings based on scripture. Do you believe that scripture is closed? Do you believe that the Spirit no longer opens us up to new truth and understanding? How can you—or we—be certain that we are not among the scribes and Pharisees that Jesus condemned because of their understanding and practice of holy text? That is such a deep concern of mine. I used to be quick to judge and quick to condemn; I discovered in the process that I was doing damage to friends, to the church—and to myself. I began to read the gospels and noted how often Jesus asked questions and cared for others and forgave them and sent them on their way. I'm impressed that all of the time the apostles were with him and getting all kinds of things really wrong that he never sent them away. "Neither do I condemn you...". Even Judas, certainly by nearly anyone's standards not a good guy, was in the upper room and, I think, ate and drank with Jesus and had his feet washed by Jesus, even as he was conspiring to betray him.

The Church of God reformation movement is borne out of a different understanding of how to read scripture—specific scripture references that, until the time of Warner and others in the holiness world, were read in very different ways. So, I think, we must be careful when we read scripture and draw judgments from scripture to understand. D. S. Warner was kicked out of a church over these teachings. Every year—at least every season in the history of the church—it seems a new lens emerges. Sometimes that lens helps us to see what we didn't see—and sometimes helps us to see what we did see in a new light.

That is also true of the seasons of our lives. The parable of the prodigal son has been a huge factor in my life in understanding who I am and who God is and what the relationship between God and me should look and sound like. Of course, like many people, I saw the prodigal son as a clear picture of me during one season of my life (and, to a certain extent, still a portrait of me); I have endeavored to grow into the role of the waiting Father, clearly a picture of God as loving, compassionate and nonjudgmental, but that didn't become important to me until I was the father of children and trying to frame what my faithful relationship to them should be—and, of course, I'm still working on that.

But the elder brother never impacted me at all, until a few years ago when I began to see my own resentments through that witness. What resentments? Frankly, the resentment I held toward parents who appear to have had none of the struggles with their children that I had with mine. That was a deeply unpleasant confrontation but also a liberating insight that still drives me toward forgiveness and letting go of those resentments.

The point of all this is that the Bible is not, never has been, and, I believe, never will be a closed or settled book. It is a book that comments on culture even as it lifts up the ideal of the kingdom, inviting each of us to live more and more closely as citizens under the reign of God. But it is also commented on by culture and life—life in the world, in the family, and in the church. I could raise the history of slavery as an illustration of how this works in both directions, so to speak: The church once understood slavery as a good thing sanctioned by God; Blacks as the descendants of Ham who were cursed and unable to live as thoughtful, intelligent, worthy human beings (a position once understood to be biblical). While there are those who would still,

tragically, set this forward as biblical teaching, it isn't in the light of the more inclusive language, teaching, and lives of both Jesus and Paul. Now it is seen as a serious and sad blot on the history of the church. We could also discuss the role of women in nearly every regard as clear illustration of where the church got it wrong—some of us still get it wrong. (Nearly anyone could point to specific and horrific events in history most [all?] of which were justified by how they read the biblical text.) I wonder how such historical misunderstandings and deep biblical convictions inform your own approach to those texts that seem to condemn homosexuality?

I could go on, but I doubt there is reason to, so I will leave off with these questions for my brothers and sisters who love the sinner but hate the sin:

I wonder how the Bible is a living book to you?

You see, what I want to know about the position you hold and how you think and speak as you do is why? In this brief piece, I have tried to share with you about where I am and how I think and speak as I do. I would like to invite you to do the same. And I would like to invite all of us to do this with an open and teachable spirit. As I think about it and as I read the biblical text, I think it is how we are to be with each other.

I think of our faith as more open, dynamic, flexible, and inquiring. I think that we do too much in the way of blame and finger pointing than welcoming and listening. I think we spend too little time thinking about Jesus and how he lived and taught and far too much time defending our territories against encroachment. So, I also want to know how you think about Jesus in relationship to the concerns on your hearts.

- Where does Jesus fit into your teaching?
- How do you understand Jesus in relationship to sinners?
- How do you love the sinner? How do you hate the sin? And how do you distinguish between the two?
- Where does the traditional teaching of the church about the Holy Spirit and the dynamic nature truth and revelation come into your teaching?

And I close praying that the Holy Spirit will continue to lead us all into great truth and the practices that show the world the loving, sacred heart of God as displayed in Jesus on the Cross.