

The Scriptural Basis For Condemning Homosexuality, by Andrew Morrison

“This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines. You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.” Mark chapter 7.

1. Not all passages that get cited in the debate are relevant: Sodom is about hospitality and rape.
2. Nevertheless, the Bible writers are both clear and consistent on this issue.
3. The real question then is what weight to give these condemnations in the light of modern mores and modern science?
4. The Bible permits (or Bible writers regard God as approving) much that we would not (genocide, slavery, bigamy), and condemns what we would allow (working on Saturday/Sunday, eating non-Kosher food). Jesus deliberately flouts the Sabbath laws, and elsewhere the NT (Paul) says it's OK to ignore things required in OT (circumcision), as we are a people of a new dispensation of faith not law. On the other hand he condemns women speaking in church, requiring them to obey their husbands, and slaves their masters, as the church does God.
5. We therefore conclude that some Biblical commandments are human precepts and some are doctrines. There is wide disagreement, inevitably, about which are which. To say that a law is 'Biblical' is the beginning, not the end, of the discussion.
6. “Why do you not judge for yourselves what is right?” Luke 12.57. We want somebody to make our minds up for us, for it all to be simple and clear-cut, but it's not going to be that way. Jesus left us not specific precepts but a perfect example and the divine commandment to love God and love one another. The rest follows from this: “on these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” These are really two aspects of the same commandment, the “Great Commandment” of John's Gospel. Note that “the commandment of God” in the passage of Mark above is singular, human precepts plural.
7. Bruce Bawer in ‘Stealing Jesus: How Fundamentalism Betrays Christianity’, makes the distinction between the ‘church of Love’ and the ‘church of Law’. The former, which tries to follow this commandment, is arguably typical of the best Anglican tradition, while the latter is more readily associated with someone like Rev. Hagee, who complained that there was too much love and not enough emphasis on wrath in modern religion. Laws have no value for Jesus independent of context and all laws, in fact all specific actions, are to be assessed with regard to how they measure up to the great commandment. (Jesus is a Platonist, not an Aristotelian in ethics.) He is so frustrated with the Pharisees, despite their apparent virtue, because they end up following laws, worshipping the pointing finger, not the love at which the finger is supposed, imperfectly, to point. Thus their virtue is hollow. Paul much of the time writes as a Pharisee.
8. OT morality crucially fails the basic test, as proposed by Prof. Hare, of ‘universalizability.’ Even the 10 commandments were regarded as applying only WITHIN the nation: it was OK to kill foreigners, rape their women and carry off their property. Jesus deliberately overturns this by extending the concept of ‘neighbor’ to one's enemies. Many of the OT laws were expressly designed by the priestly caste during the exile in Babylon in order to foster a sense of ethnic difference, separate identity, which was felt to be the only way they could avoid merging with other identities in captivity. They were successful in that, but it is reasonable to ask how this qualifies them to teach modern American Christians about ethics?
9. How do modern Episcopalians view the authority of the Bible, generally? Rev James Griffiss, in vol. 1 of the New Church's Teaching Series, *The Anglican Vision*, writes: “the Bible is not an absolute authority”. It is “a historical book written by fallible human beings.” Arguments from Scripture form one of the three legs of Hooker's stool, along with tradition and reason. Biblical writers' opinions matter, but they may not be right. We have a duty to ask why they held those opinions, to examine the

social and scientific context in which they wrote and their underlying theological assumptions.

10. They seem to have believed that homosexuality was ‘unnatural’, an aberrant and therefore sinful activity rather than a condition. Today we know that it is natural and occurs in every species. It is still a minority condition, but minority status has never been held for instance against the male sex by the church.
11. OT writers had a different view of salvation than we do. They did not believe in an afterlife and their notion of salvation had to do instead with the material success of their ethnic group, their nation. It was a collective not an individual salvation. Individual morality was helpful only in persuading God to bless the nation. In this context there was a repugnance for any sexual activity that did not produce more Israelites. It was a waste of good seed. Hence the condemnation of Onan in Genesis. In this tribal morality, as in tribal moralities today, homosexuals were a waste of good food. Today, however, we recognize that our material future depends on curtailing not encouraging population growth—and our view of salvation is that it is individual and will be realized in an afterlife. Very different theological, social and scientific assumptions make for divergent conclusions. We are not bound by theirs.

Other Arguments Against Bishop Robinson’s Election

Much less space needs to be given to the other main argument here. Some have pointed out that the election could have unfortunate political consequences for the Episcopal church in the US and for the Anglican family worldwide. Specifically it is pointed out that this will put African bishops under special pressure, since many of them live in societies where Christianity is a minority culture and the prevailing culture believes homosexuals should be put to death.

1. This election is not binding on them and they can denounce it if they feel that is the right thing for them to do, while remaining in the family.
2. The same argument applied to the election of a woman bishop. We all moved on, and today few Episcopalians in this country would regret the decision to ordain and consecrate women.
3. The weakness of the argument can be shown by asking what a Christian should do if he was in a country where cannibalism was the prevailing culture. Rev. Malcolm Ellis testified that he was especially proud to be an Anglican growing up in South Africa because of the way Desmond Tutu and others stood against the prevailing political wisdom and the culture of apartheid, even when it was considered dangerous to do so.
4. We call this courage, this defiance of prevailing ‘human precepts’, “prophetic”. Backing down from what one believes is right does, should and would not ultimately earn the respect of one’s fellow members of the Anglican communion. Sometimes it is hard to know what is right, especially for an Anglican, and we will always have divergent opinions on issues. But it is never right to suppress the conscience in pursuit of expediency.

Conclusion

Others may feel they know the answers: they have only to look them up in the Bible. That’s not the case for us as Anglicans. It’s up to us, as Jesus said, and to our God-given consciences. We can respect any and all who come to different conclusions, and we continue to love them unreservedly, admiring the way they stick to their guns.

Ultimately we move on. The election is not a disaster for the church. God is probably not as interested as we are in the niceties of human sexuality, and is waiting patiently for us to move on and put the whole issue behind us; for us to get back to his great commandment, back to loving each other, to feeding the hungry and visiting the sick. Back to the business of being Christians.