

The Bible & Homosexuality - 15 Propositions – by James Howell, Pastor of Myers Park United Methodist Church, Charlotte, NC (with 5 more propositions in an addendum by Jody Welker, Pastor of Kirk of Kildaire in Cary, NC; and 5 more in a second addendum by Christopher Edmonston, Pastor of White Memorial Presbyterian Church, Raleigh)

Having heard much talk recently about the Bible and homosexuality, in our Methodist denominational conference, in my home state of North Carolina with its marriage amendment vote, and then President Obama's statement affirming gay marriage, I have pulled together fifteen propositions that I believe might help us moving forward.

(1) If we could travel back in time to interview the authors of the books of the Bible and the other leaders of God's people, all of them (Moses, Elijah, Jeremiah, Peter, Paul, James) would have regarded homosexuality as a bad idea. **There is no support for homosexuality from these writers.**

(2) No one in Bible times had the slightest familiarity with homosexuality as we know it today. Moses and Paul never met the kind of committed gay couple you might know from your neighborhood or the office. When they thought of homosexuality, they thought of an aged Roman senator who had a young boy for a sexual slave, or perhaps a sudden drunken encounter between two people who didn't know each other five minutes before. In elite Greco-Roman society, there were non-secretive gay and lesbian relationships, but those involved were still married to persons of the opposite sex. Bible writers were against these things, and so am I.

(3) Today, when anyone talks about the Bible being plain, and that they agree with the Bible, they are reading selectively, picking and choosing this or that from the Bible. No one today has any serious intentions of doing everything the Bible says, and certainly an entire state or country does not, or we'd shut down the NFL and the Pentagon, which are quite clearly out of order according to the Bible. Jesus very plainly said if you have a party, don't invite those who can invite you back, but invite the maimed; most who quote the Bible do precisely the opposite on both.

(4) Similarly, when we speak of the separation of church and state, this often is code language, translated roughly as "If it supports my viewpoint, the state should be involved; if it disagrees with me the state should keep its nose out of our business." Consistency on the church and state relationship would be helpful. Generally, Christians are foolish if they count on government to enforce what the Church believes.

(5) The Bible's writers were inspired by God, but clearly they were not taking dictation from God. And they did not anticipate every situation we would deal with in the modern world. They spoke to ancient people, largely about ancient issues, many of which continue today, but in very different forms. So the Bible requires interpretation.

(6) All of us in various ways take the Bible's core truths and engage in some updating so the heart of the Bible might make sense today. Some of this we do quite faithfully: we are glad women speak in church, and we happily wear blended fabrics. At other times we update the Bible simply to suit our own prejudices: we justify unholy wars, and we are greedy consumers and then say we are "blessed."

(7) No single Bible verse, or handful of verses, can reveal the fullness of God's mind. If you retrieved four sentences of various things I have said over my adult life, you would have a skewed image of who I am and what I think. It is the whole body of work, all of God's Word not just a few words from God's Word, that tells us what we need to know.

(8) Human beings are fallen, prone to self-justification and pasting God on whatever we happen to prefer or enjoy – and we are probably most likely to be confused about God’s way in areas of sexuality, given the virtually irresistible lure. How we feel, think and act regarding sex (no matter the orientation) should be subjected always to rigorous scrutiny and prayer.

(9) Generally when Christians talk about holiness nowadays, they point the finger at somebody else for not being holy instead of rising up to be holy. When Christians talk about “standards,” they mean religious rules that come quite easily for them or don’t affect them. We could readily focus on “standards” regarding how we spend or make money, or what we thoughtlessly watch on TV, or the rancor we harbor in our hearts against people who disagree with us – but instead the idea of “standards” becomes a weapon against those who aren’t like us.

(10) Christians who seek change on homosexuality are not wise to make “love” their primary argument. “God loves everyone” – but that doesn’t solve anything, since a non-inclusive Christian can quite easily point out that God loves child abusers or alcoholics. God does love, and then the Bible and all of Christian tradition has yearned for us to move past merely being loved by God toward a life of holiness before God. Similarly, to point to “this is the way I was made” helps a lot, but doesn’t entirely solve things, since I might be made with a proclivity toward alcoholism, or a likelihood of lethal disease.

(11) It is a false dichotomy when conservatives declare that liberals want love without holiness. Some liberals are not very holy, but then again quite a few conservatives are not so holy either. Many liberals I know are tremendously holy, exhibiting the fruit of the Spirit, with hearts and lifestyles very much dedicated to God.

(12) It is also false to say that conservatives have the Bible on their side and the inclusivity folks ignore the Bible. Serious cases have been made in interpreting the Scriptures for openness to homosexuality, thinking of God’s creation of us as the beings we are, the centrality of faithful, monogamous relationships, etc.

(13) If we could travel back in time and take a close look at marriage in Bible times, we’d say “No thank you.” Life was grinding and utterly unromantic. Many marriages were arranged. Women had no rights, could be and were abused without any recourse, dispensable on a whim; with no antibiotics women routinely died in childbirth.

(14) God does love everyone, and holiness is God’s desire. But we cannot make anybody else holy. We cannot even make ourselves holy. This is God’s work in us. Our job isn’t to judge others, and our job isn’t to enforce rules on God’s behalf. God is God. What God asks of us is hospitality, love for everyone, openness to everyone, and even an openness to what God might do that we don’t understand, or that makes us uncomfortable. The first people who knew Jesus were so uncomfortable with him, and his way was so out of their holiness box, [that they criticized him for eating and drinking with sinners and for failing to observe the commandments. They kept asking him, “By what authority do you do these things?”]¹

(15) Immense humility, and tender care and gratitude are always fitting for Christians. Being right is interesting, but love for those Christ loves is always one step higher in Jesus’ scale of values. To be a listener – and we’ve had far too little listening on both sides – is holy. And we can be grateful for each other, even in our disagreement. Methodists have said for decades that they don’t condone homosexuality; but gays and lesbians keep coming to our churches, they preach, teach, pray, sing, serve,

and love – and I for one give endless thanks to God for this miracle of grace that they are still here. And of course, the total inclusivity people need to find ways to include those who disagree, who genuinely are striving to know and serve God with where they are on things. Proverbs 16:7 says “When a man’s ways please the Lord, he makes even his enemies to be at peace with him.”

+++++

OTHER PROPOSITIONS TO CONSIDER BY JODY WELKER

16) We agree on more than we disagree in matters of faith and ethics. In the Presbyterian Church we still affirm the Apostle’s creed, we affirm Jesus as Lord and Savior, we desire to learn from him and follow him. Regarding sexual ethics as it pertains to Scriptures we agree that the following is to be condemned: temple prostitution, homosexual orgiastic practices associated with pagan worship, pornography, casual or recreational sex, promiscuity, acts exerting dominance over others, requiring homosexual services from slaves or others, adults engaged in pederasty (relationship between an adult male and adolescent), gang rape. We can agree that the Bible uplifts covenantal, steadfast love as the goal for our married relationships.

17) For many Christians this is what is called a “disputable matter” – something we can agree to disagree on. Paul lifted up this concept in Romans 14-15 when the church was arguing over whether or not circumcision laws and dietary laws were required. (laws that dated back centuries) If it is a disputable matter, then the members of a church community are not required agree regarding gay relationships in order to be a part of the community. The essential thing to remember is that we belong to the Lord.

Some believe in eating anything, while the weak eat only vegetables. ³ Those who eat must not despise those who abstain, and those who abstain must not pass judgment on those who eat; for God has welcomed them. ⁴ Who are you to pass judgment on servants of another? It is before their own lord that they stand or fall. And they will be upheld, for the Lord^{bl} is able to make them stand.

⁵ Some judge one day to be better than another, while others judge all days to be alike. Let all be fully convinced in their own minds. ⁶ Those who observe the day, observe it in honor of the Lord. Also those who eat, eat in honor of the Lord, since they give thanks to God; while those who abstain, abstain in honor of the Lord and give thanks to God.

⁷ We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. ⁸ If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s. ⁹ For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living.

¹⁰ Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister?^{ld} For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God.

Romans 14:2-10

18) While we may debate whether or not this is a disputable matter, how about these criteria based on Paul’s “disputable matters” (taken from Ken Wilson, *A Letter to My Congregation*)

- a) **When it doesn’t involve a matter of basic Christian dogma such as we find in the great ecumenical creeds** (Apostles, Nicene, Chalcedonian, etc...)
- b) **When the debate brings two or more biblical truths into dynamic tension** (e.g. mercy-judgment, law-grace, free will-predestination) **so that both parties make reasonable appeals to Scripture**
- c. **When faithful Christians take different views on the issues.** The Spirit, and not just the devil, is at work in the church when disturbances over truth arise. If we look to the controversies of the past that have now been settled, we can appreciate this. Church history reveals that previous generations, often our betters in Christ, had significant blind spots. We might have them too. Humility is key in handling these issues.

19) We are all tempted to the sin of pride in these kinds of conversations.

Reinhold Niebuhr reminded us danger when he said that pride is the basic sin which leads to other sins. Niebuhr skillfully explained how the sin of pride develops into **the pride of power** (lust for power: leads problem of power over people and nature. "Our way or the highway!"), **pride of intellect** (to pretend to know more than we do leading to the problem of ideology) , **moral pride** (to pretend to be more moral than we are, leading to the problem of Pharisaicism) and **spiritual pride** (to pretend to be more spiritual than others, expressed in spiritual arrogance leading to forms of idolatry). Niebuhr believes humility and grace are key to the Christian life as a way to battle pride. A key passage for Niebuhr: Isaiah 55:8-9)

For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD.

⁹ For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.

20) While we are not all called to agree, we are all called to love. "This is my commandment, that you love one another, as I have loved you." (John 15:12) This was true for the first disciples who were very diverse (tax collectors and fishermen)... We can live in community with one another and care for one another even in the midst of disagreement.

21) Even though the issues we confront are important ones, we must always keep our focus on the center of our faith, "Jesus Christ and Him crucified". It is very easy for any of us who care about any of the issues of our time to lose touch with that center. Christ is the center of our faith, the source of our unity, the one that binds us together in spite of all our differences.

For Christ is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. (Ephesians 2:14)

+++++

Still other propositions to consider by Christopher Edmonston

22) For Presbyterians the Bible is unique and authoritative. It is also an infallible – meaning it does not mislead us – witness to God and God's activity in the life of faith and in the world. This

does not mean that the Bible is not sometimes "saying" two things at once which appear to be different. For example, the Book of Nahum pronounces a great judgment of desolation upon Nineveh and then celebrates the very destruction of Nineveh itself. Compare this with the Book of Jonah, which is about the salvation of Nineveh through repentance. Should Nineveh be destroyed or should it be saved? The prophets' answer is "both." These places of scriptural diversion are opportunities to explore more deeply the scriptural richness of our heritage. At these intersections we are called to delve deeper into the scriptures, perhaps deeper than we ever have been before until we reach consensus answers as to how God's word is speaking to us today through the Holy Spirit. In this light, the various scriptural challenges before us as to the nature of homosexuality might be an opportunity. We might be the people who have been prepared for "such a time as this" (see the Book of Esther).

23) **Pastoral concerns are crucially important when setting church policies.** It would be difficult to overstate this claim. How we live into whatever it is that we decide will be at least as important as what we actually decide. This is a precedent echoed in scripture over and over again. It was one thing for the disciples to decide – a decision!—to follow Jesus. It was quite another to live with the decision and live as disciples with all the complexity which comes with authentic Christian discipleship.

24) **It is worth noting in the Presbyterian Church marriage is very important. But it is neither a sacrament nor a core confessional issue.** Sacraments are means of grace. Which means that they should not only be open to all people of faith, but that they are, in a sense, also required of people of faith. Marriage is not required for faithfulness – one does not have to be married at all to be a Christian (whereas, one should be baptized). Raising marriage to the status of *status confessionis* is a theological misstep because it sets marriage in a place it cannot hold. As Bill Duff, a member of St. Michael's Episcopal (Raleigh, NC) said in a letter to his church before his death, marriage is part of the body of Christ, but it is a “rib issue and not a spine issue.”

25) **Unity is a profound concern of the Biblical record.** (See Psalm 133; John 17; Romans 15:5; Ephesians 4:3, 4:13; Colossians 3:14). There is little doubt that divisions of the Body of Christ are held in suspicion by the biblical record. The calls to oneness and wholeness are myriad, and always greeted with celebration. Is it not better when people work out their differences than when they divide apart? Thus the thrust of the pastoral effort is to provide ministry for the whole, which is the fullest way to live into the calling to be church together (see 23 above).

ⁱ The comment inside the bracket is from Jody Welker, adapting a quote from James Howell.