

Dropping Our Stones

As a pastor, I am sometimes questioned about this topic: What does the Bible say about homosexuality? What's a proper Christian response? Of course, homosexuality is just one of many sexual behaviors about which the Bible speaks. Yet it is the hot-button sexual issue of our time and gets the bulk of our attention.

Two major groups of Baptists, the Southern Baptist Convention and the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, have openly opposed the homosexual lifestyle, citing scriptural inhibitions. Though the tone and rhetoric of these two Baptist bodies differ greatly toward homosexuals, neither embraces homosexual acts as being consistent with the teachings of the Bible.

The Bible does speak directly to this issue. Here are two biblical references among several. From the Old Testament book of Leviticus: "Do not lie with a man as one lies with a woman; that is detestable." From the New Testament are these words of Paul to the church at Rome about people who knew God but exchanged the truth of God for a lie. "Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones. In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed indecent acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their perversion" (Rom 1:26-27).

These are strong words. Unfortunately, some Christians feel that such biblical admonitions against those who practice homosexuality give them a license to treat homosexual people with hateful actions and great disdain. Such behavior toward homosexuals does not fit with the practice of Jesus, who was known for loving people unconditionally.

Though Jesus was silent on the subject of homosexuality, as far as we know, we do know that Jesus befriended those that the orthodox classified as unclean. His association with people who practiced unorthodox lifestyles was criticized by his opponents. In his own defense Jesus once said, "The Son of Man came eating and

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drinking, and they say, 'Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.' But wisdom is proved right by her actions" (Matt 11:18-19).

We don't have any record of Jesus meeting a homosexual. We don't have any direct words of Jesus on this subject. However, we do have a record of how Jesus responded to a story about a woman who was caught in the act of adultery. Of course the reader should notice that there was a double standard at work. Only the woman was brought to Jesus. Where was the man? After all, it takes two to commit adultery.

The law said that the woman should be stoned to death. The men who brought her to Jesus wanted to know what Jesus had to say about the law: "If a man commits adultery with another man's wife, with the wife of his neighbor, both adulterer and the adulteress must be put to death" (Leviticus 20:10).

This is a harsh law, isn't it? You and I would be appalled by any state or government that carried out such a law. But there it is in the Old Testament—a law that no Christian group that I'm aware of abides by today, thankfully. So it's safe to say that some laws of the Bible are no longer taken literally. How do Christians know which laws of the Old Testament to follow and which should no longer apply?

For many Christians, the criterion by which the Bible is to be interpreted is Jesus Christ. Jesus is the theological sieve through which our ethics, beliefs and practices must travel. Therefore, in seeking to understand how to relate to those who practice homosexuality, we can still look to Jesus. Even though he was silent on this issue, we do know how he responded to the woman caught in adultery. Both are sexual sins. Both need a Christian response.

Jesus told the crowd that the first among them who was without sin should cast the first stone. As the rocks fell to the ground, her accusers turned to leave. Jesus asked the woman, "Has no one condemned you?" "No one, sir," she said. "Then neither do I condemn you," Jesus declared. "Go now and leave your life of sin!"

(John 8:10-11).

What stance should the Christian community take regarding homosexuals? We have no better model than the stance Jesus took with the woman caught in the act of adultery. We need to drop our stones while calling people to leave their life of sin.

For many Christians, these words are not harsh enough. They have developed a double standard of wanting to stone the homosexual while offering grace to the adulterer or the fornicator. The words of Jesus to the adulterous woman were not harsh enough for the Pharisees who caught her, but at least they realized the presence of their own sin and dropped their stones.

How will anyone understand the love of Jesus if we lob stones-or if we lob words that have the weight of stones-at those who have crossed the line of acceptable behavior as defined by scripture? We need to challenge people to turn away from sin, as Jesus did with the woman caught in adultery. But he did not condemn her to be cast away. He accepted her. He loved her. We should do no less for those whose sexual ethic differs from the biblical standard.

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