

SCHOLAR'S CORNER

I have to take issue with your December column. It is not the homosexual orientation or homosexuals but the sexual act itself that the Bible clearly prohibits. I accept gays as children of God, but I cannot approve of their sexual acts. Even more disconcerting was your contention that a “life experience” should change one’s theology away from Holy Scripture and the clear teaching of the Church for thousands of years.

— Tom Hammer, St. John’s, Lancaster

You were right to recognize that my starting from experience was the most significant feature of my approach to the homosexuality issue. It seems to me that if you start from texts (whether biblical texts or later Christian writings), you can never get to an accepting attitude to homosexuality. The tradition is too strong in its abhorrence of same-sex relations for any pro-homosexual position to find significant support there. (There are in the Bible and later Jewish and Christian tradition more general ideas about equality, love, kindness, and so on, but it seems to me that the condemnation of homosexuality is too unambiguous and forceful in the Bible and Church Tradition to be significantly altered by such general principles.)

In my opinion, the homosexuality issue is one therefore that comes down to a sharp choice between

starting from texts or starting from somewhere else. It involves some people consciously disagreeing with the biblical text and others being unwilling to disagree with the text. The disagreement boils down to conservatives holding that homosexual behavior is sinful because the Bible says so, and others saying homosexual behavior is not sinful, despite the Bible saying it is.

As I wrote in an earlier column (September 2005), the difference between theological conservatives and liberals can be boiled down to what is your ultimate authority, what has more weight with you, and what is more convincing to you. More conservative people are loathe to say that the Bible contains anything not of Divine origin and therefore that can be faulted. Those who are not so conservative are willing to say that there may be

things in the Bible that are not “from heaven” but from the human beings who wrote the biblical books and therefore are open to being dissented from or disagreed with.

I don’t see any solution to the difference in opinion and approach or foresee either side persuading the other to abandon its position, anymore than I think those behind the Creation Museum will ever be persuaded that the universe is billions of years old and that there has been evolution, or than all Roman Catholics will be persuaded to become Baptists or all Baptists Roman Catholics. The best that can be hoped for is understanding and respect across the gap between irreconcilable positions.

I wish we Christians could disagree in good faith about this issue as we do about other issues and treat the issue of homosexuality

like we treat women’s ordination. What I mean is that everyone knows which denominations or sub-sets of a particular denomination ordain women and which ones do not. Southern Baptists don’t, United Methodists do. When you visit a Roman Catholic church, you know you will find no women priests or deacons. Certain dioceses of the Episcopal Church have no women priests. It’s the same in all of Africa, except South Africa, as far as I can tell. These differences are just to be accepted as facts. It shouldn’t mean that we cannot work together, support each other and worship together. I wish we could do the same on this issue.

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