

The Bible and our Ethics

A discussion with Ralph W. Klein, Christ Seminary-Seminex Professor of Old Testament

What role should/does the Bible play when Christians make ethical decisions?

Christians look to the Bible to see how our forebears in the faith made decisions, under God's guidance, in ethical matters. They realize at the same time that those decisions have often been revised or expanded as the centuries have rolled past, and that our experience, the growth in human knowledge, and our particular cultural contexts must be taken into consideration as we attempt to apply the Bible to our time. The real authority of the Bible lies in its unfailing ability to enunciate for us the graciousness of God, known finally for us in Jesus Christ. The Gospel gives the Scriptures their authority.

But cannot tradition, church councils, human knowledge, and especially our experience err?

Indeed. We learn from both the insights and mistakes of our predecessors in the faith, and we need to be self-conscious of our own limitations and blind spots. Krister Stendahl has also reminded us over the years that there is a distinction between "what the Bible meant" in its original context and "what it might mean" in today's world and in today's church.

Where does one look in the Bible for guidance on ethical questions?

In a wide variety of texts: the Decalogue, the Sermon on the Mount and other words of Jesus, the writings of the prophets, the exhortations of Paul, and the stories of how Israel and the early church lived out the faith in daily life, individually and communally. We should not neglect the ethical implications of the fact that the God of the Bible is known as one who freed slaves from Egypt, brings down the powerful from their thrones and raises up the lowly, and announces good news to the poor. Few have challenged our complacency as effectively as Amos who demanded that justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

What about the Ten Commandments? How do they help?

Christians, and especially Lutheran Christians, have relied heavily on these commandments to instruct young and old alike. These commandments are given by the one who established Israel as a community through the Exodus and whose work was continued in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. It is these saving acts that give the commandments their authority. The fact that the commandments deal with specific issues and are stated negatively should also not be overlooked. The Sixth Commandment forbids adultery, which in the Bible refers to a man sleeping with another man's wife. A holistic sexual ethic involves much more than avoiding such adultery!

I've heard you refer to the Ten Commandments as staking out a "playpen"? What do you mean by that?

At certain crucial points the commandments indicate the clear limits to the freedom enjoyed by the children of God. If someone serves other gods, commits murder, sleeps with another person's spouse, or tells a lie in court (the original meaning of the 8th commandment), that person has stepped outside the boundaries of the community, outside the "playpen." Inside the playpen, believers are expected to live righteously, with maximum love for God and the neighbor.

How about life inside the playpen, to use your metaphor? Doesn't the Bible supply additional guidance to believers?

Yes, often; no, also often. Jesus talked of those who lust after another person as already adulterers, and those who hate as already murderers. That is, he moved beyond actions to thoughts and desires. But there are a lot of ethical decisions we make daily for which there is only general, not specific guidance in the Bible. Consider the following ethical issues: how I use my talents in my life's work; whom I marry; how I spend my money; how I vote; what I do with my leisure time. All of these are issues that we face every day and they are issues on which the Bible's advice is often quite indirect, but that hardly lessens the imperative that we live righteously in these realms.

You spoke of a holistic sexual ethic. How might the Bible guide us here?

We need to recognize some of the great differences between the present and the past when it comes to marriage and sex. People in the Bible got married when they were fourteen or fifteen, and almost all marriages were "arranged" by the parents. Only recently have we understood how much the biblical world was affected by patriarchy. The laws on rape in Deuteronomy 22:23-27, for example, suggest that the court should doubt a woman's word if she claims that she was raped in the city, but believe her claim if the rape took place in the country. These laws presume that the city woman should have cried out and that someone would have heard her in a small biblical city. Since no one heard her cry, she must have been a willing participant. But if the man through superior strength or threat of violence kept her from shouting out, should we conclude she was a willing participant? The woman's point of view is undervalued and given grossly inadequate attention in these laws dealing with rape. Their patriarchal bias make them irrelevant for today.

That does sound bad. But are there not more positive helps the Bible offers when it comes to sex?

Indeed. The Bible often shows a profound understanding of sex. In marriage the man and woman become "one flesh." Has one ever described the majesty and mystery of marriage and sex better? What we describe clinically as coitus or what is colloquially known as "making love" is described this way in the Bible: "Now the man knew his wife Eve." That is a beautiful description. Ephesians exhorts: "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself for it." I wish Ephesians spoke a bit more clearly about the role of wives in marriage, but we men are surely challenged to a very high standard by this admonition.

The ELCA has decided to address the issue of homosexuality. What guidance does the Bible give on this question?

I'm glad you asked. The answer is complicated. First of all, the biblical passages that speak about this question are few in number. Jesus never mentions the subject, one way or another. And where the Bible does discuss it, there are always issues of interpretation or other extenuating circumstances. We are faced with many challenges in deciding what these passages meant and what they might mean today.

But does not the Bible condemn Sodom precisely because of homosexuality? That's why certain homosexual actions are called Sodomy.

God told Abraham that the sin of Sodom was very grave, without going into details (Gen 18:20), and much later the prophet Ezekiel accused Sodom of pride, excess of food, prosperous ease, and failure to take care of the poor and needy (16:49). When the two angels visited Lot in Sodom, all the men of the city threatened them with homosexual rape. That's why God struck them with blindness. Clearly, homosexual and heterosexual rape are wrong and sinful, perhaps expressing violence as much as lust. No one ever claimed that heterosexual rape made heterosexual sex wrong. That's why this story doesn't address modern homosexuality, which we assume is participated in by consenting adults.

I know Leviticus deals with details of the sacrificial system and a kosher diet that don't apply to Gentile Christians, but doesn't it discuss homosexuality and aren't its ethical words normative even for us?

Leviticus 18 deals with forbidden sexual relations, such as with one's father's wife, one's sister, daughter-in-law, or with both a woman and her daughter. And then, within a paragraph consisting of vv. 19-23, it exhorts: "You shall not lie with a male as with a woman."

Isn't that clear enough?

The trouble is, that paragraph mentions two other issues. First, it says that a husband and wife should not sleep together during a woman's menstrual period. While that is understandable in antiquity, when both semen and blood made a person ritually unclean, few modern couples consider this an ethical question. We recognize it as a culturally conditioned, time-bound prohibition. Couples today decide on esthetic or other considerations whether to make love during a woman's period. Secondly, the paragraph also rules out sexual relations between a human being and an animal. Here the believing community and the wider society are in absolute agreement. We recognize such sex as ultimately selfish and exploitative. People who do such actions are wrong—we would probably either arrest them or require extensive counseling.

But what does this have to do with homosexuality?

I mentioned two other actions were discussed in this paragraph from Leviticus: the prohibition about a couple sleeping together during a woman's period is now considered by us as time-bound, almost irrelevant; the prohibition about sleeping with an animal is totally endorsed by us. My question: is the prohibition against homosexuality more like the first case (sex during menstruation), or more like the second case (sex with an animal)? If a person is free to disregard the first prohibition, could not a person in principle consider the prohibition against homosexual actions similarly outdated.

But doesn't Paul forbid both male and female homosexual actions in Romans 1?

Yes, but.... Once again, it's a complicated issue and deserves more space than I have here. In Romans 1-3 Paul argues that both the Gentiles and the Jews have rejected God and need the salvation offered by Christ. He finds the sin of the Gentiles to lie in their idolatry, for which God has consigned them to the lusts of their hearts, to the degrading of their bodies....

That is, to homosexual actions?

Yes, but.... There are at least three extenuating circumstances that call the direct applicability of this passage into some question. First, Paul speaks of people's "passions." Some scholars have proposed that Paul and many ancients thought that everything, sex included, should be done within limits, without excessive passion. Paul infers that homosexual persons surrender to their excessive passions. We might call them sexual addicts today. Did not Luther himself say that whatever we fear, love, and trust is our god? All of us, gay and straight, could turn sex into our god.

O.K. That's one point. But doesn't Paul consider homosexual actions "unnatural"?

Yes, but.... What does he mean by unnatural? Does he mean that male and female genital organs just naturally fit together? Does he mean that natural sex is about reproduction? Paul's understanding of what is natural and our understanding of what is natural are not necessarily the same thing. In 1 Cor 11:14, Paul argues that nature itself teaches that if a man wears long hair it is degrading and if a woman wears long hair it is her glory. Look around your congregation. There are a lot of long-haired men and a lot of short-haired women. We don't consider that unnatural at all; "nature" teaches us something different. Could Paul's observations about nature and homosexuality also be time-bound?

O. K., again. But doesn't he condemn people for choosing to be homosexual? Paul says they "exchanged" one form of intercourse for another.

Yes, but.... Since the late 19th century, Western science has observed that some people are primarily or even exclusively attracted sexually only to people of their same gender. We call this "sexual orientation." No one fully understands the reasons for this: Is orientation the result of "nature" (genetics) or "nurture" (upbringing) or a combination of both nature and nurture and "other things"? Whatever the reason for their orientation, people do not choose to be gay or lesbian; they simply are that.

O. K. again. But shouldn't such people just be celibate?

Some of them will no doubt choose to be so, just as some heterosexual people never have sexual relations with another person. Long-term sexual abstinence for religious reasons is called celibacy. But Lutherans have long observed that celibacy is a gift received only by a few and should not be required of clergy or of others. Is it not logical that the majority of homosexual people would not have the gift of celibacy?

Granted that we haven't looked at every passage, but you seem to be saying that with every passage in Scripture relating to homosexuality, there are extenuating circumstances or contextual reasons to question its applicability to the modern discussion?

Indeed. I'm still very much learning in this area. But that is my provisional judgment.

Let's assume for the sake of argument—and only for that!—that you're right. How would one construct an ethic of homosexuality?

Very carefully, with much prayer and discussion, and in dialogue with Christians who identify themselves as gay or lesbian. There are no hard and fast rules for hetero- or homosexuals. We're all struggling to establish workable and faithful guidelines for sexual practice. I assume we are all against casual or promiscuous sex. I would propose a one-sentence guideline for heterosexuals and for homosexuals: Couples who engage in intimate sexual behavior should do so only in deeply committed, long-term, monogamous relationships, that are non abusive and non exploitative. I suspect that almost every word in that sentence needs a footnote or at least some discussion.

I need to think more about all this.

So do I.