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The recent debates in Australia over same-sex marriage have followed the same wearisome pattern seen in so many other countries. Politicians try to manage their constituents, churches mount their vigorous defence of the definition of "marriage," and the Bible, once again, is caught up in the determination of public policy.

Religious conservatives cite the clutch of texts usually understood as condemning same-sex relations: Leviticus 18:22 and 20:1, Romans 1:26-27, 1 Corinthians 6:9-10, 1 Timothy 1:9-10, and, of course, Genesis 19, the story of Sodom and Gomorrah.

Liberals, in turn, point out that Jesus said nothing about homosexuality - a word not coined until the mid-nineteenth century - although he did have much to say about love of neighbour and care for the poor.

Most people in increasingly biblically illiterate societies - like the United States and Australia - presume the Bible repeatedly condemns homosexuality because they've heard the condemnation so often from pastors and priests.

This conversation is old, and is certainly not helped by the participants are talking *past*, not *to*, each other. The conversation is also nasty.

Liberals label conservatives as insensitive bigots, and conservatives see the liberals as immoral relativists. But if we are to achieve any light on the debates, such demonization has to stop. Conservative readers regard Scripture as having authority over their lives, and they attempt to be faithful to texts they see as divinely revealed. They are not reading erroneously when it comes to same-sex relations: the Bible does not condone such relationships.

Further, many of these same conservative readers would also forbid women's ordination, but they are by no means bigoted against mothers, wives, or daughters. Indeed, they may struggle to follow the divine word over their personal preference regarding women's ecclesial roles.

Similarly, they may believe that individuals who are not baptized are bound for hell, but that view does not necessarily make them haters of individual Jews, Hindus, Buddhists or Muslims. Rather, they are deeply concerned for their neighbours' souls. They do not hate gay people, any more than they hate women, or non-Christians. Liberals should at least recognize these individuals as acting according to their convictions in granting certain Scriptures precedence over secular culture.

Liberal readers also seek biblical instruction on sexual behaviour, and they find biblical warrant for enfranchising gays and lesbians or, at least, do not find a compelling biblical prohibition. Therefore, they too should be recognized as living in the way they hear the divine call. Liberal readers correctly note that the Bible does not discuss committed gay relationships, that the ancient world had no concept of sexual orientation, that the Bible condemns numerous activities that today have social sanction, such as divorce, while it speaks in favour of slavery.

Some cite the story of Ruth and her mother-in-law Naomi, who are never described as sexual partners, but who form a household. The Book of Ruth describes its titular heroine as "cleaving" to Naomi - the Hebrew for "cleave" is the same term Genesis 2:24 uses to describe how a man leaves his father and mother and "cleaves" to his wife. The point of this "cleaving" is not to have sex, it is to form a new family.

Others argue that just as Christians need not abstain from pork or prawns, so they need not abstain from same-sex sexual encounters - in other words, the Levitical codes are utterly irrelevant. The story of Sodom in Genesis 19 condemns lack of hospitality and the threat of rape, not homosexual love (see Ezekiel 16:49).

Scholars still debate exactly what Paul intended by "unnatural" relations in Romans 1, and what the Greek term *arsenokotai* in 1 Corinthians 6 and 1 Timothy 1 actually means. Literally, the term (which first appears in the New Testament) means "male-bedders," it is variously translated as "sodomites" or "sexual perverts," but it appears in the context of crimes against others: adultery, kidnapping, murder, greed. Clearly the loving gay couple does not fit into this context.

How, then, can these groups begin to talk *to*, rather than *past*, each other on the matter of biblical interpretation and sexuality? A little history coupled with both hermeneutics and humility might break the impasse. Here are four factors to consider.

All readers interpret

Nobody takes *everything* in the Bible literally. When Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount, "If your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off" (Matthew 5:30), most readers, appropriately, conclude that he is not advocating self-mutilation. We decide what to interpret literally and what figuratively. Similarly, we determine what to practice and what to ignore; we decide what is time bound and what is universal. Many churches that do not ordain women on the basis of 1 Timothy 2:12 ("I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man") have no problem with women wearing "gold, pearls, or expensive clothes," which is decried three verses earlier. Likewise, the Bible condones slavery; today we do not.

We read biblical texts on sexual practices selectively

Take another example from the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus begins by citing Deuteronomy 24:1-3: "Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce." He then continues, "But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity (the Greek is *porneia*), causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery" (Matthew 5:31-32). Offering no such loophole for unchastity, Mark 10:11-12 makes the statement harsher. And yet the divorce rate in industrialized countries hovers near 50%. But there is no plebiscite over whether divorced people can remarry, and no one is considering prohibiting divorce except in cases of unchastity.

Pay attention to the cultural context in which the Bible was written

In order fully to understand the Bible, we need to interrogate the Greek and the Hebrew, the narrative contexts, the popular translations. For example, when Paul describes same-sex relations as "unnatural," we need to determine how he understands *nature*. It turns out that arguments regarding "nature" are often arguments about culture. In 1 Corinthians 11:14, Paul states that long hair on a man is unnatural (one wonders about the traditional pictures of Jesus, who looks like he needs a haircut). Long hair on male animals - such as the lion's mane - is hardly unnatural. Not so long ago, society considered it unnatural for women to pursue higher education: our constitutions were too weak, our intellects too tiny. It was unnatural, even "sinister" (Latin for "left") for people to be left-handed, and so primary teachers once prevented left-handed children from doing what was natural for them. On the other hand, today "unnatural" medical procedures - from radiation treatment to chemotherapy to *in utero* surgery - save lives.

It is also worth pointing out that not every biblical text defines the "unnatural" as bad. In that same Epistle to the Romans, Paul explains how pagans are like wild branches grafted on to cultivated olive tree, the root of Israel: these shoots are grafted on "contrary to nature" (11:24). What is "contrary to nature" is thus required for salvation.

The love of neighbour is central

The biblical discussion is ultimately one of how we manifest love of neighbour: just see Leviticus 19:18, which is cited by Jesus in Matthew 22:39 and Mark 12:31, cited by Paul in Romans 13:9 and Galatians 5:14, cited by James in James 2:8, and even cited by a lawyer in Luke 10:27 - thus giving the "love of neighbour" the quantitative edge over passages possibly concerned with same-sex relations. This love means we cannot demonize people. It means we have to address all humanity as in the image and likeness of the divine, with the same needs for a helper and the same hopes for a welcoming community. It means, for those of us who find the Bible to be important in our lives, we stand before it in some humility, as we try to figure out how to interpret it in our own lives.

Perhaps, as a thought experiment, we might draw upon a lesson Jesus uses in biblical interpretation. Deuteronomy permits divorce, but he uses Genesis to trump Deuteronomy. His words should be familiar even to the most ardent secularist: "But from the beginning of creation, God made them male and female. For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh ... Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate" (Mark 10:5-9). Perhaps Genesis also trumps Leviticus and Romans. Throughout Genesis 1, God declares everything "good." However, in Genesis 2:18, something is "not good": "It is not good that the human being should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner." This helper is the one to whom the human being will cleave, who mirrors the human image, who challenges, inspires and loves, who helps create a new family. If God declares that it is not good for the human being to be alone, if God says we should have a partner who fulfils us, then surely condemning gay people to lives of singleness and celibacy opposes divine will.

The conservative probably will not be convinced by my suggestions. The liberal might find such readings helpful. But at least both can read together, and both can recognize that the Bible should be a rock on which we stand, rather than a rock thrown at others.

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