

How to Use the Bible

Everybody Does It. Everybody – liberals and conservatives – uses the Bible in the controversy on gay sex. Liberals cite certain favored texts. Conservatives cite others. The real question is: How *should* the Bible be used? What's the proper use? Are all ways equal?

How Conservatives Err. The problem with Christian conservatives is that they are tempted to use the Bible as if it's a divine "Book," in all its parts equally valid. In this view "the Book" as a whole is "revelation."

The chief problem with this view is that one has to be so selective about which texts are divine revelation and which aren't. For example, since the New Testament allows slavery (I Cor 7:20-24; Eph 6:5), should we allow it today? Since the New Testament *forbids* divorce (Matt 5:31-32; 19:9; Mk 10:11-12; Lk 16:18; I Cor 7:10-11), should we *forbid* it today? Since the Bible says that women will be saved through childbirth (I Tim 2:15), should we preach it today?

Conservatives try to get out of these difficulties by appealing to "the whole counsel of God" or "the trajectory of the New Testament witness," etc. But these appeals are little more than pious fudging. Using the Bible *literally* on some ethical issues but not others is a problem. Who decides which issues are merely cultural and which divine? There is no divine list of such issues. And conservatives do not agree among themselves on such a list.

How Liberals Err. Liberals say the gospel of "love" trumps old laws, even those found in Scripture. They note that Christians today don't follow the Bible literally on many social questions, such as slavery, the role of women in society, and the prohibition against divorce. So why not disregard what the Bible says about homosexuality too? Don't we in the 21st century have more enlightened notions of love and justice than our 1st century ancestors in the faith?

Two false assumptions about Scripture undergird the liberal appeal for change: the New Testament writers knew 1) nothing about homosexual "orientation," and 2) nothing about "loving, committed" same-sex unions.

The truth is: St. Paul knew about "orientation" and "loving unions" and nevertheless rejected same-sex unions. As Robert Gagnon has so cogently documented New Testament writers rejected "loving, committed" same-sex unions for the same reason they rejected incest.

Both types of unions are structurally incompatible because of their sameness: Having sex within one's own family or within one's own gender.

Both kinds of unions have harmful consequences: Incestuously conceived children suffer higher rates of multiple disorders. Same sex behavior is a conduit of disease. As Paul says of gay sex: They "received *in their own persons* the due penalty for their error" (Rom 1:27).

What Paul says about gay sex is useful today not because it's an eternal law, but because it shows us how Paul applied the ethic of love (Rom 13:10: Do no harm....) to the concrete problem of gay sex.

How to Use the Bible Properly. Luther is famous for rediscovering the authority of Scripture, but he did not use the Bible as a paper pope. He knew Paul and James were in conflict. He judged four New Testament books – Hebrews, James, Jude, and Revelation – as subordinate to the rest. The basis on which he judged:

What does not teach Christ is not apostolic, even though St. Peter or Paul taught it; again, what preaches Christ is apostolic, even though Judas, Annas, Pilate, and Herod did it (LW 35:396).

Thus, how is the Bible properly used? To show us our need of a savior and the Savior we need. The cross reveals our sin and our redemption. Through the Word of the cross today, proclaimed and in the sacraments, Christ comes to take our guilt on himself and gives us his kingdom of life and perfect righteousness.

Because he did all that was needed, we are free in this fallen world to be human – **nothing more and nothing less**. We are free to use the law, that is, common reason and the sword, to care for the neighbor.

Care of the neighbor means always asking: What are the damages? How can harm be minimized? How can evil be restrained in a fallen world?

What are the damages of gay sex? What harm does it do to those who practice it? What diseases are common to those who engage in gay sex? What message about sexuality should be sent to wavering teenagers? Why the high rate of man-boy sex in the gay community? Since gay marriages are rarely (1-5%) monogamous, what are the consequences for breaking the connection between monogamy and marriage? Loving the neighbor means asking the loving question: What are the damages?