



Jesus, the Bible, and Homosexuality

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Chapter 3: A Breakthrough in Understanding the Word of God

Much of the material in this presentation was taken verbatim or almost verbatim from “Jesus, the Bible, and Homosexuality” by Jack Rogers.

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Chapter 3: A Breakthrough in Understanding the Word of God - How the Church Changed Its Mind

- How was the church able to change its mind on racial segregation and women’s rights? White men in the mainstream churches had great power to claim that their experience was normative for all.
- They held all the positions of power in church and in state.
- That gave them the freedom to label others as inferior. Through their complete domination of society, they were able to pass off their biases as “common sense.”

2

- By the middle of the nineteenth century, the mainstream U.S. Protestant consensus on interpretation of the Bible fragmented.
- Two events were crucial.
- One was the Civil War, in which Christians were divided north and south on biblical interpretation regarding slavery.
- The other was the publication of Darwin's *The Origin of Species* in 1859. Responses to Darwin's theory of evolution tended to separate protestants into two camps – modernists (humanists) and fundamentalists

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- Modernists and fundamentalists in these churches fought each other for decades over the meaning of Scripture. Modernists denied the authenticity of certain parts of the Bible, while fundamentalists insisted that the entire Bible, in the original manuscripts, was inerrant.
- Fundamentalists meant that God was the author of Scripture, and therefore whatever the Bible said could be applied to present-day, overriding science if science conflicted with their views of what was considered biblical.
- Modernists, in frustration, appealed to the scientific method of observation and experimentation as having greater authority for modern people.

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- The fundamentalist-modernist controversy came to a crisis in the Presbyterian Church in the 1925 General Assembly
- Fundamentalists had developed, and the denomination adopted, a list of five “essential and necessary doctrines” that candidates for ministry must accept: (1) the inerrancy of Scripture, (2) Jesus’ virgin birth, (3) his vicarious substitutionary atonement on the cross, (4) his bodily resurrection, and (5) the power of Jesus’ mighty miracles.
- When it appeared that the church might split, the Moderator, Charles Erdman, left the chair and moved that a special commission be formed to discern the “causes of unrest”. Both sides agreed.

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- In 1927, this powerful commission proposed that no one, including the General Assembly, could create a short list of essential doctrines and demand adherence to them. The church’s doctrine, the committee said, was to be found in its confessional statements, the Westminster Confession of Faith and the Larger and Shorter Catechisms. If a person had a “scruple,” or disagreement, it was up to the regional governing body, the presbytery, to adjudicate that conflict through the judicial process.
- The 1927 General Assembly overwhelmingly accepted the report of its commission. Affirming the five “essentials,” including the inerrancy of the Bible, was no longer required for ordination. But they weren’t discredited, either.

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Theology Guides Biblical Interpretation

- In the 1930s, a fresh theological breeze blew in from Europe. This theological movement broke the stalemate of the fundamentalist-modernist controversy and enabled the church to move forward in a renewed commitment to Christ.
- Variousy called Neo-Calvinism, Neo-Protestantism, and Neo-Reformation theology, most often was Neo-orthodoxy.
- It was “neo” because it was a new approach that was not dependent on either fundamentalism or modernism.
- It was “orthodox” in that it turned people’s attention to Jesus Christ as revealed in Scripture and depended on the work of the Holy Spirit to make the biblical message alive through preaching.

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- The names of Swiss neo-orthodox theologians Karl Barth and Emil Brunner became common in American theological schools in the 1940s and 1950s.
- Neo-Reformation theologians encouraged people to study sources of the Protestant movement (esp. Calvin, Luther).
- This produced a new kind of theology that had reverence for the Bible and used all the tools of contemporary scholarship to understand it.
- Civil war showed fundamentalism wasn’t enough
- WWI had proved humanism (modernism) wasn’t enough

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- Neo-orthodoxy's defining insight, taken from the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, was that people and God are known by personal encounter, not by rational analysis.
- The revelation of God comes not in an inspired book, but in the person of Jesus Christ, who is God incarnate.
- The Bible is a witness to Christ. Thus, this approach to biblical interpretation was called "christological."
- A print of Mattheus Grünewald's Isenheim painting hung over Barth's desk in Basel, Switzerland. In it, John the Baptist, symbolizing the role of the Bible, stands pointing a long, bony finger at Christ on the cross. Because the Bible, like John the Baptist, points away from itself to Christ, the issue of possible mistakes in the Bible was irrelevant to Barth.
- By the Holy Spirit, through preaching, the Bible becomes the word of God to people of faith.

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- Biblical scholars influenced by Neo-orthodoxy no longer debated reliable authority versus human authorship, as had been the case in the fundamentalist-modernist controversy.
- They did not view the Bible as a collection of inerrant facts, but as a very human document that reliably recorded a very real encounter of real people with a real God.
- The main concern among biblical theologians of the '40s and '50s was to declare the validity of biblical authority in such a way as to steer clear of the mistakes of both Liberalism and Fundamentalism."

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SOCIAL CHANGE

- The influence of Neo-orthodoxy and the biblical theology movement enabled the Presbyterian church to take a fresh look at oppressive social institutions. Theologians, and the pastors whom they had taught, no longer were bound by Turretin's theology or Scottish Common Sense philosophy.
- Instead of proof-texting, that is, taking particular verses out of their context and treating them as universal laws, they looked at the totality of the Bible in its cultural context. They began with Jesus Christ.
- When desegregation came, they were ready. When ordination of women came, they were ready.

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A New Look at Divorce and Remarriage

- The PCUSA and the PCUS reflected the ambivalence of both church members and ministers by, beginning in 1926, alternately (1) attempting to rigidify church law by prohibiting any divorce and then (2) expanding the exception clauses that allowed for divorce and remarriage.
- They felt their way toward a new understanding of the meaning of marriage, which involved applying the new christological interpretation of Scripture that had taken hold after World War II.
- Strict legalism would "not solve the problem, but may cause hardship and injustice."

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- Presbyterian existing standards recognized only two grounds for divorce—adultery or irremediable desertion—and allowed remarriage after divorce only for the innocent party in either case.
- “Beyond the fact that the marriage relation is terminated by death, is the further fact that it may be destroyed by either party to the agreement proving unfaithful to the vows taken.” The commission concluded: “Anything that kills love and deals death to the spirit of the union is infidelity,” citing, “The letter killeth; but the spirit giveth life.”
- A moral equivalent of death to justify divorce.

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- One attempt to eliminate desertion: “We recognize the violation of the Seventh Commandment or its moral equivalent as the only ground for divorce,” and he suggested that desertion, “and perhaps some other causes, constitute what may be termed ‘moral equivalent.’”
- “Any attempt to build a Christian doctrine of marriage and divorce on a few isolated ‘proof-texts’ will always fail for at least two reasons: (a) the usual proof-texts are open to more than one interpretation, and (b) they fail to give due weight to the implications of Jesus’ total teaching with respect to man’s [sic] personal responsibilities and social relationships.”

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