Biblical Interpretation

Earlier this month at the meeting of the International Society of Christian Apologetics there was a robust discussion of inerrancy and hermeneutics. Those are scholarly words for the belief that the Bible is without error and needs to be interpreted according to sound practices of biblical interpretation.

There is a practical aspect of this debate that affects you and the way you read and interpret the Bible. If you have been a Christian for any length of time, you have probably had someone ask: Do you take the Bible literally? Before you answer, I would recommend you ask that person what they mean by literally.

Here is a helpful sentence: “When the literal sense makes good sense, seek no other sense lest it result in nonsense.” Obviously the context helps in understanding how to interpret a passage.

After all, the Bible uses various figures of speech. Jesus told parables. Jesus used metaphors and proclaimed that He is the vine, the door, and the light of the world. There are types and symbols and allegories. If you are reading a section in the Bible that describes historical events, you expect the historical record to be accurate. If you are reading poetic literature like the Psalms, you should not be surprised that God is described as a shepherd, a sun and a shield.

Here is another helpful sentence: “When the literal sense does not make good sense, we should seek some other sense lest it lead to nonsense.” We should reject a literal sense when it contradicts the moral law, physical law, or supernatural law.

When Jesus says in Matthew 5:30 to cut off your hand, that is not to be taken literally because if violates moral law. When Jesus talks about those who swallow a camel in Matthew 23:24,

that violates a physical law. When we read in Jonah 3:10 that God repented or changed His mind, we know that violates a supernatural law, because God does not change His mind (Numbers 23:19).

But in most cases, we are to read the Bible in the literal sense because seeking some other sense will result in nonsense. That's just common sense.

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"How Do You Answer a Person Who Says You Can't Take the Bible Literally Because It Promotes Killing Homosexuals?"

How would you answer a person who says, "You can't take the Bible literally because it promotes killing homosexuals" (Lev 20:13)?

There are a number of things that one might say to this, but I will mention just a few. In addition, I will not only speak to the issue of interpretation, but will also address some of the issues which give rise to a statement like this. Of course, we must also remember that there is oftentimes a lot of anger behind a statement like this. Hence, it is important to remember that while we always want to speak the truth, we want to be careful to do it in love. This is the most important thing to bear in mind in responding to someone making such a

claim. We want to be kind, gentle, and patient in our response. But concerning the response itself, here are a few things that occur to me as I think about this issue.

First, this particular law was only given to ancient Israel under the terms of the Old Covenant. But God is not relating to anyone under the terms of this covenant today. Rather, God is now relating to all men under the terms of the New Covenant (Hebrews 8). Hence, this is not a law which should be implemented today. In addition, I think it is also important to point out that this passage does not PROMOTE killing homosexuals. This is simply false—and it is important to say so. This particular law requires that those who engage in homosexual activity be put to death. Even under the Old Covenant, a person with homosexual inclinations or attractions, who refused to act on them, would NOT be put to death. What is at issue here is homosexual *activity*—not homosexual attraction. Hence, even interpreted literally, this law does NOT promote killing homosexuals. Rather, it stipulates that those who engage in homosexual *activity* are to be put to death. But again, it is important to remember that God is no longer relating to mankind under the terms of this covenant.

Second, the law reveals the awful truth about human sinfulness and the holiness of God. God takes sin very seriously and his holiness and moral perfection require that He deal with it as it deserves. Under the terms of the Old Covenant, homosexual behavior was not unique in meriting the sentence of death. Adultery (Lev. 20:10), blasphemy (Lev. 24:16), murder (Exod. 21:12), striking one's father or mother (Exod. 21:15), kidnapping (Exod. 21:16), cursing one's father or mother (Exod. 21:17), and other acts as well, all merited the death sentence under the Old Covenant. Even Sabbath violations received the death sentence (Exod. 31:14). Hence, homosexual activity was not unique in meriting the death sentence under the terms of the Old Covenant.

Third, God disapproves of ALL sexual sin—not just homosexual activity. God disapproves of adultery, fornication, rape, incest, bestiality, as well as homosexual sin. Again, homosexual sin is not unique in being prohibited by God. All sexual sin is prohibited. The Bible allows for sexual activity only within the confines of one man/one woman heterosexual marriage. Any kind of sexual activity outside of this is sin—whether that sexual activity be homosexual, heterosexual, sex with animals, etc.

Fourth, the moral law is based upon the morally pure and morally perfect character of God. If the Bible really is the word of God, then homosexual behavior (along with all other sexual sin) is sin. All such activity, then, would constitute a violation of God's moral law.

Finally, I think we can agree that we should not ALWAYS interpret the Bible "literally." The Bible, after all, does contain a wealth of figurative and metaphorical language, and it would be inappropriate to interpret such metaphorical expressions literally. The problem in this case, however, is that the verse in question is not making use of such figurative or metaphorical language. Indeed, the writer is quite explicit in spelling things out for us. It would strike me as dishonest to suggest that this passage should be interpreted non-literally or metaphorically. What would it be a metaphor of? What would be the literal truth behind (or underneath) the metaphor? In addition, why should anyone think that God does not disapprove of sexual sin? What sort of argument or evidence is there for believing that God's attitude toward sexual activity is essentially the same as that of a modern secular American? Why should we think that sin (all sin) is not a deadly serious issue to an utterly holy God? It seems to me that the statement you mentioned simply makes some unwarranted assumptions about God's attitude toward human sin.

Of course, the good news is that God has provided atonement

for sin through the substitutionary death of His Son, and His resurrection for our justification. Anyone who is willing to turn from their sin, and trust Christ for salvation, can and will be forgiven and saved. No one needs to die for their sins (since Christ has already done so). But everyone who rejects Him and His sacrifice will have to pay for their sin themselves. Hence, we want to communicate, I think, that God takes sin very seriously. But He has also provided for our forgiveness through the sacrifice of His Son on the cross.

Hopefully some of this will be helpful to you as you continue to wrestle with an appropriate response to claims of this sort.

Shalom in Christ,

Michael Gleghorn

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