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David Booth: We can learn from debate over slavery

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What should good Christians think about "gay marriage"?

To many, it feels wrong to stop people who love each other from publicly sanctifying their commitments. Yet Christians base their beliefs on the Bible, and doesn't the Bible condemn homosexuality? So how could a Christian who regards the Bible as a revelation of God's purposes support a gay right to marry?

These questions may not be so hard to answer. They are similar to questions raised in debates about the Bible and slavery that divided white Christians at the time of the Civil War. And the way Christians argued about the Bible and slavery then might be a model for how we deal with the Bible and gay rights now.

Why is debate about gay rights and the Bible like the debate about slavery and the Bible? Both abolitionists and defenders of slavery appealed to the Bible.

Defenders of slavery regarded slavery as divinely ordained, morally just, even benevolent -- the Bible told them so.

On a literal reading, this basic claim was and is hard to refute, for slavery is woven deeply into the fabric of the Bible. Noah established slavery at the moment he cursed his offspring Ham and Canaan; Abraham and the other patriarchs held slaves; the Decalogue specifically acknowledges and regulates slaveholding; and Jesus never explicitly condemned slavery.

To counter the Bible's direct support for slavery, abolitionists relied chiefly on the great commandment: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

For them, Jesus' admonition to love your neighbor trumped the more explicit statements on which the slaveholders relied. If God commands us to love our neighbors, they argued, we certainly can't enslave them.

Abolitionists admitted that the Bible's pro-slavery texts are very explicit. But they regarded their meaning and relevance as strictly limited to the place and time of their authorship.

By contrast, abolitionists found in the great commandment a timeless expression of God's will, which required them to reject slavery. Slaveholders, focused on literal meaning, ridiculed abolitionists for "torturing" the scripture.

Still, in the generations after the Civil War, Christians by and large came to regard slavery as morally repugnant and inconsistent with God's plan for humanity.

Surely the gut-level, moral intuition that it is wrong to exploit the labor of another under threat of violence converted many hearts about the matter. But to reject slavery, and still regard the Bible as

divine revelation, believers had to subordinate the Bible's unambiguous and explicit statements about slavery to less specific and more universal biblical principles, like neighbor love.

There is nothing unusual about interpreting the Bible this way: Whenever modern readers apply ancient scripture to moral problems, some passages and some principles show us how to regard other passages.

Christians today have no difficulty whatsoever following the abolitionists' example and looking past the Bible's endorsement of slavery. We regard slavery as an obvious moral evil, no matter what the Bible says about it.

Proponents and opponents of gay rights also appeal to the Bible. Like the slaveholders, opponents of gay rights appeal to the literal meaning of a few key texts. Interestingly, they have a lot less to work with than slaveholders did, since the biblical condemnations of homosexuality are sparse compared with the biblical supports for slavery.

Three texts Christians cite when they oppose gay rights and gay marriage (Genesis 19, Leviticus 18, Romans 1) have little to do with the contemporary debate about solemnizing committed relationships between loving partners.

For example, the shocking behavior of the people of Sodom (Gen. 19), from which the "crime" of sodomy derived its name, consists in an attack on vulnerable travelers, not homosexuality. "Angels" seek shelter in the home of Abraham's nephew Lot. The townspeople of Sodom gather at Lot's door, apparently intending to rape the guests. Lot protests "do not act so wickedly." The Lord destroys the town as a punishment and a warning. The text condemns sexual violence that targets the vulnerable -- a failure of neighbor love. It has little bearing on modern issues of gay rights.

But even supposing these passages did condemn homosexuality: Following the example of the abolitionists, we should still judge them relevant only insofar as they are consistent with the demand for neighbor love.

In the 19th century Christians decisively recalibrated their reading of the Bible with regard to slavery. They rejected slavery as a very human error, even though it is richly and explicitly established in the Bible.

Today we can make a similar recalibration with respect to gay rights. Even though there are a few (very ambiguous) condemnations of homosexuality in the Bible, excluding gays from fundamental institutions like marriage is another very human error.

The love commandment requires faithful people to move past such exclusions, in the same way we have moved past slavery.

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