

Deeper Issues Trouble United Methodists

By Rev. Rich Peck - April 9, 2018

While the 2019 special session of General Conference will focus on homosexuality, it is our differing views of Scripture that divide us.

Conservatives view scripture as a single entity. They believe every book in the Bible is the inspired Word of God. They quote Leviticus and the letters of Paul with equal certainty; they are likely to assert that the Word of God is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow.

No scientific claim and no change in social standards can alter the fact that no passage in Scripture supports homosexual practice, and every mention of homosexuality within that holy book is negative.

On the other hand, progressives view the Bible as a library of books with different levels of inspiration and truth. A quote from Leviticus carries almost no weight with progressives. They dismiss prohibitions against same-sex practices (Leviticus 20:13) as they dismiss passages that permit slavery (Leviticus 25:44-46) and rules about sacrificing a bull to atone for sin (Leviticus 4:3-12).

Progressives understand the Bible is a treasury of writings by scores of writers and oral traditions over a period of more than 700 years.

The Bible records a growth in the understanding of God:

- From an anthropomorphic deity (Moses saw the back of God — Exodus 33:23) to a spirit (“God is a spirit . . .” — John 4:24).
- From a geographically confined God (When Ruth moves territory, she will worship a different God— Ruth 1:16) to a universal God (“ . . . wither shall I flee from thy spirit” —Psalms 139).
- From a God that demands ritual and sacrifice (Rules for burnt offerings—Leviticus 1:1-7:38) to a God that only asks for moral conduct (“What doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?” —Micah:6-8).
- From an angry God who demands retribution (“An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.” —Exodus 21-24) to a God who wants us to love our enemies and forgive others (“You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also” (Matthew 5:38-39).

Jesus makes it clear that not every word of Scripture has the same value. Some passages reflect a mistaken view of God.

The Rev. Adam Hamilton, pastor of the Church of the Resurrection in Leawood, Kan., suggests Scripture can be placed in three baskets:

1. Scriptures that express God's heart, character and timeless will for human beings.
2. Scriptures that expressed God's will in a particular time, but are no longer binding.
3. Scriptures that never fully expressed the heart, character or will of God.

Hamilton suggests most anti-gay clobber passages belong in bucket three. He asks, “Did God ever really command that gay and lesbian children be put to death?” (Leviticus 20:13). It is our own fault, when we proclaim, “This is the Word of God for the people of God,” it is easy for worshippers to understand this as the “words” of God. If we had the words of God instead of the words of fallible humans, we would not have to use reason, tradition and experience to wrestle our way to a clear understanding of the Word.