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Most Christians today who continue to condemn homosexuality, whether in publicly opposing the LGBTQ community or privately assigning people of various sexual identities or non-heterosexual actions to eternal damnation, or at least to God's bad side, do so on the basis of the New Testament. Yes, they know about the book of Leviticus and its condemnation of men having sex with men; but most of the time that is a kind of back-up argument. Since they realize and openly admit that so much else in the book of Leviticus is no longer applicable to Christians (for example, kosher food laws), they realize that the case against same-sex relations, let alone sexual orientation, cannot be water-tight with just Mosaic legislation behind it.

No, they need Jesus or the writers of the New Testament to utter their condemnations: then there can no longer be any question about the matter. And so they forcefully point out that this is one aspect of the Jewish law that continues to be embraced in the Christian dispensation from its very beginning. Opposition to "homosexuality." It's in the New Testament, right? Well, that is certainly worth talking about.

I start with Jesus. And here the conversation is quite easy. In our surviving records Jesus says nothing about same-sex acts or sexual orientation. Nothing. Nada.

You can't say that, well, he would have condemned it if someone had asked him. Once you start using that logic, look out. On those grounds, you too are almost certainly going to be denied entrance to the Kingdom. Jesus would have condemned most of what we think of as culturally and morally neutral or even superior. For one thing - I'll be accused of blasphemy for this one, but it's absolutely true - he would have forcefully condemned capitalism. Oh boy would he have condemned it. And in this case we actually have reasons for thinking/knowing so - unlike "homosexuality" for which he provides no verbal clues.

Jesus is quite explicit about who gets to enter into the glorious kingdom of God and who is doomed to the fires of annihilation. There is not a lot to debate about this point among those who actually read what he teaches. But for some reason, what he explicitly and emphatically says runs at odds with what his most outspoken and renowned spokespeople in modern America today say.

Think about the moral and cultural issues that are hammered home time and again among conservative Christians: extreme opposition to abortion and gay rights, opposition to governmental support of programs helping the poor, stress on individualism and therefore on the importance of second-amendment rights to the divinely sanctioned acquisition of personal wealth. Let me stress, I am NOT saying I'm either against or for any of these things. We all have our preferences, and reasons for holding them. What I'm saying it that the Christian right appeals to Jesus for these things.

And Jesus says not a **word** about any of them. NOTHING about abortion for example. It's not good enough to say that Jesus opposed murder; that abortion is murder; therefore that Jesus opposed abortion. That's the common line. And it's nonsense. Jesus never says that abortion is murder, and the vast majority of people in the ancient world (or in the world throughout history) did **not** consider it murder. So Jesus' opposition to murder has no bearing on the question of abortion. Again, I'm not taking a stand on abortion (or on why

people try to try to make it a simple issue instead of recognizing the massive and often heart-wrenching complexities) for the purposes of this argument here. I'm simply saying that it's neither correct nor helpful to appeal to Jesus for support on the issue. He is silent about it.

It is amazing how conservative Christians can appeal to Jesus for views they themselves so heartily endorse. You may not know what the best-selling book on Jesus all time was. Was it a book by Albert Schweitzer? By one of the popes? By one of the famous late-twentieth-century biblical scholars? No, it was by Bill O'Reilly. Killing Jesus was the #1 book on the New York Time list in its very first week, and it remained on the list for a whopping 52 weeks. Nothing like this had ever happened with a Jesus book. (It completely overwhelmed in sales Reza Aslan's Zealot released earlier that year.)

It's an awful book, with no serious research or scholarship behind it, or evidence even of trying to do any. But my point here is about one of its central themes. O'Reilly (and his fellow author Martin Dugard; not hard to say who did most of the "work") maintained that Jesus' mission was largely directed against the Roman occupiers of the Promised Land. The Jews hated the occupation, and Jesus was completely opposed to it. The Empire had no business asserting its administrative, military, and cultural power over Judea and Galilee; and they certainly had no right to demand annual tribute to flow into the imperial coffers.

This was at the core of Jesus' message. He wanted smaller government and lower taxes.

Sigh...

So back to Jesus himself. Jesus does talk about government and taxes. (By the way: he says to pay them). But they are not his central message. His central message is not about the current kingdom but the coming one. God is soon to intervene in this evil age to destroy the forces of evil and everyone who sides with them. He will then set up a new world, a new realm of peace, justice, and love; there will be enough for everyone; it will be all happiness, no hate; all joy, no pain. It will be a utopian world for all God's people. Those not among God's people will be left outside the kingdom in the darkness, and when they realize the very big error of their ways, they will be annihilated for all time.

OK, that's an important message. And the key is obviously to be among the chosen few, the people of God. Who is in this elite corps?

Jesus is crystal clear on this point. He addresses the matter directly and he states his message explicitly. Just read Matthew 25:31-46. Inheriting the Kingdom has NOTHING to do with small government or taxes, NOTHING to do with views about or abortion or having an abortion or supporting abortion; NOTHING to do with same-sex relations or sexual orientation. NOTHING.

Those who enter the kingdom will be those who help people in need - EVEN (especially) people one doesn't even actually know. It comes to those who feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the sick and imprisoned, and help the foreigner. The foreigner! That's how to enter the kingdom. And who is sent for destruction to the eternal flames? Those who refuse to do these things. Who don't care about the hungry, naked, sick, imprisoned, and foreigner. The issue for him is active love for others. Not just for a spouse, children, and best friends. But also and especially for those you don't know but have heard about.

These were Jesus' deep and abiding concerns. They are attested not just in this passage,

but time and time and time again in the Gospels. And so why is it that the strongest Christian voices in our world (I mean our 21st century American world), the people who proudly boast to be Jesus' true followers, why is it that these are not *their* deepest concerns? Why are they more interested in talking about individualism, smaller government, lower taxes, second-amendment rights, and, especially, fervent opposition to abortion and "homosexuality"?

I guess I know the answer to that, but I find it highly aggravating. I myself am not a Christian. But I can read. Every Christian I know can also read. But they either don't read or they don't believe what they read. That's upsetting.

But to return to my initial point. What does Jesus say about people who engage in same-sex relations? Or about people who identify with as something other than heterosexual, who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transsexual, queer, pansexual or any other "orientation"? Nothing. Absolutely nothing.

And so opponents of same-sex relations appeal to other passages of the New Testament. But in all twenty-seven books, there are only a couple that are relevant. And they do not actually say or mean what people normally assume they do. I'll deal with that in the next couple of posts in the thread.



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