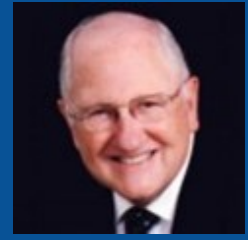


Wesleyan Wisdom

With Dr. Donald Haynes



***Editor's Note:** For many years Dr. Donald Haynes was a regular and popular commentator for *The United Methodist Reporter*. While Dr. Haynes retired from regular writing, we recently submitted the following reflection as he wrestles in his mind with the conversations ahead of *The United Methodist Church* at the 2016 General Conference in Portland. We share in our respect for what Dr. Haynes has offered the church through the years, and in the hope that some will find it helpful.*

In the January-February 2016 issue of "[Good News](#)" magazine, Thomas Lambrecht wrote a very helpful article in which he presents quite clearly four of the proposals being circulated prior to the 2016 General Conference regarding the ordination, the appointment or the marriage of persons of LGBTQ sexual orientation. Any reader should thank Tom for bringing these into focus for all elected delegates to preview. I respectfully present a response.

Prior to his excellent specificity about potential legislative proposals, Tom wrote, "The root issues are biblical authority— 'will we keep church teaching in line with what the Scriptures say....'? **This rather pejorative statement implies that the Scriptures speak with a unilaterally definitive voice on homosexuality.** That is a stretch! To my knowledge, there are only seven biblical references to homosexuality. The most frequently quoted is Leviticus 18:21-22 that is in the context of Mosaic cultic laws, most of which we ignore. Most likely, he joins this text with other interpretative voices in Romans 1:26-27, I Corinthians 6:9-10 or even I Timothy 1:8-10. At least these are the passages over which I have more deeply poured and whose interpretations I have researched from biblical commentaries.

For me, there are some major stumbling blocks in making the Bible a manual of jurisprudential specificity rather than holistic principles:

Leviticus

Leviticus 18:22 clearly states with reference to male sexual behavior, "You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination," In Leviticus 20:13 the same disobedience of the law is repeated provoking a certain sentence: "They shall surely be put to death." However, if we are to be biblically literalistic, let us put this cultic law into context.

- Leviticus 17 prohibits eating blood, leading to the longstanding practice of having rabbis come into every abattoir to slaughter animals so that the blood is drained out, in accordance with Mosaic law. *Christians do not abide by this law.*
- 18:22 is preceded by a long discourse on the prohibition for any family member to observe the naked body of another person, without reference to medical care. *That is understandable in the wilderness, but not in the emergency room today.*
- Farmers will take note of 19:19 that prohibits cross breeding of kinds of animals (*mules are a crossbreed!*). *Hybrid corn is forbidden in vs. 19b.*
- 19:19c forbid us to wear clothes with different materials: “...nor shall you put on a garment made of two different materials.” (*No more polyester wool!*)
- Verse 33 is interesting in today’s political climate: “When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself...” (*They had been aliens in Egypt; our ancestors were aliens, many of them before documentation was required.*)
- In Leviticus 20:10, the Bible is clear about adultery: “If a man commits adultery with the wife of his neighbor, both the adulterer and the adulteress shall be put to death. (NRSV)

Leviticus is mostly the behavior laws given by Moses to the Israelites as he prepared them for years of nomadic life wandering in the wilderness. In our radically different culture and morality code, why do we seem to pick and choose the Mosaic law texts that match our own conscience and use the Bible as a proof text, but ignore the Mosaic law that conflicts with our conscience or lifestyle today? By what logic do we insist that God still wills that homosexual conduct be punished if we merely wink at the others. In Christ’s death on the cross, I believe we are saved by grace through faith, “not of works lest anyone should boast.”

What did Jesus say?

What did Jesus say? First of all, he said to Philip, “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.” (John 14:9) Would we not all agree that Jesus knew Leviticus by memory in its entirety? He said he came to “fulfill the law,” yet he waded through all the myriad laws of Leviticus and cited only a portion of a single verse — 19:18 — “...you shall love your neighbor as yourself; I am the Lord...” in his great commandment.

When I was a 20 year old I was a biblical literalist who knew a lot of scripture verses that I would use as weapons to “send you to hell in a New York minute.” One day I was given the opportunity to hear Dr. E. Stanley Jones speak. He arguably was the most saintly Methodist of the 20th century, a graduate of Asbury Seminary who spent his life in India. That night, as he spoke, he carried his Bible in his hand. At one point he lifted it into the air and said, “The Bible did not become printer’s ink; it became ‘flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth.’” I did not sleep that night and by the next morning I had surrendered my Bible to God, vowing never to use it again as a weapon, but instead as a lifeline to “rescue the perishing” and to “tell

the poor wanderer a savior had died.” My evangelistic creed ceased to be a litmus test of belief, but instead a calling to approach every person as a child of God, knowing them as people “... down in the human heart, crushed by the tempter, feelings lie buried that grace can restore, touched by a loving heart, wakened by kindness, chords that were broken can vibrate once more.”

John Wesley said that we must not “fragmentize” our study of scripture. When a verse seems contrary to the overarching biblical message, we must look at the verse in question macrocosmically rather than microcosmically. If any passage of scripture summarized the ethos of Christian ethics, it is Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5, 6, 7) In chapter 7:1-5 Jesus warns us against judging others, asking, “Why do you see the speck in your neighbor’s eye but do not notice the log in your own eye?” He then calls such a person a hypocrite.

In Matthew 22:34-40, a lawyer who knew the law of Moses asked Jesus which of all the commandments is the greatest. He first told the man a verse that every Jewish child learned—the Shema from Deuteronomy 6:4-9. He called this the “greatest and first commandment,” but then he quoted Leviticus 19:18 and said, “the second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’” Jesus concluded, “On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” So what if our neighbor is LGBTQ? To that we must ask, “WWJD”?

I am grateful for our prayer of confession before we approach the Lord’s Table: “...we have broken your law, we have not loved our neighbor....” My own “daily office” is a prayer that always leaves me coming up short at the end of the day: “**Almighty God, unto whom all hearts are open (*ugh oh*), all desires known (*oh no!*), and from whom no secrets are hid (*wham!*); Cleanse the thoughts of my heart by the inspiration of Thy Holy Spirit that we may perfectly love Thee, and worthily magnify Thy Holy Name through Christ Our Lord.**” This Collect for Purity makes judgment come hard!

Romans

The passage in Romans seems more apropos to our situation, but of course we must consider the context. Paul is raging against the Roman culture of idolatry. “They exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles,” he writes in Romans 1:23. “They exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator who is blessed forever. Amen!” (vs. 25) Paul then introduces the reference to homosexual intercourse with the phrase, “**for this reason**” based in his belief of homosexuality as a form of idolatry. Given that he’s writing from Corinth — a city known as the “sin city” of the Mediterranean world — Paul was likely referring to both the male and female prostitutes that were the norm in pagan temples.

Paul is clear here; he considers homosexual conduct as being “consumed with passion.” However, we need to be equally assured that he is referring to conduct, not personhood. Of course, we are just as selective about what we listen to in Paul’s writings as we are with Leviticus. After all, Paul suggested that marriage is not the ideal state for believers, but most of us have rationalized our way out of that as law.

For Paul, it seems to me, the major message of his writing is grace. “God’s Spirit witnesses with our spirit that we are children of God” he writes in Romans 8:16. Later, in chapter 10 he wrote, “No one who believes in Him will he put to shame....Everyone who calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved.”

Now, does not “everyone” mean “everyone”? In 10:20, he even quotes Isaiah 65:1, “I have shown myself to those who did not ask for me.” Before WE begin to decide who is saved and who is lost, we need to remember Romans 11:33: “O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable are his ways!”

Other References

While the Bible makes seven references to homosexual conduct, it never mentions homosexuality as a genetic sexual orientation. The “nature or nurture” debate cannot be resolved with a biblical text. We are not segregated in Genesis 1:31: “God saw everything that God had created and indeed it was very good.” What if a genetically homosexual person **cannot** wish or pray or choose one’s way out of their same sex attraction? Would it not be cruel of God to bring someone into the human family only for the purpose of condemning them? Would God create an LGBTQ child and leave him or her no path to grace? Is gender change the “unpardonable sin”? (I have never heard it defined as such.)

Some of the biblical references condemning homosexuality use the Greek or Hebrew word that means “catamite” (a boy kept by a man for the man’s sexual pleasure). Other biblical references mean “homosexual rape” as in Genesis 19:1-13 and Judges 19:22. In I Corinthians 6:9-10, the reference is to sodomy and male prostitution in addition to “thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers....” Adultery is condemned fifty-two times in the Bible, self-righteousness seventy-nine times, covetousness forty times, and idolatry 169 times! Are we seeking to bar all these behavioral sinners from marriage, ordination, and membership? Or do we, as we should, remember that Jesus said, “Anyone who comes to me I will never drive away?” (John 6:37b) Did he not say, “It is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost”? (Matthew 18:14)

Holy Scripture never refers to homosexuality in the context of a loving relationship between two consenting adults whose sexual orientation might be naturally homosexual, and who have a committed, monogamous relationship or marriage. Is our condemnation of such relationships on the basis of rather scant scriptural references somewhat like the justification of slavery until the 19th century? Is it like the subordination of women until the 1960's and, in some instances, still today? Are all of these remnants of anthropological culture that we must address with biblical principles rather than random biblical prooftexts? As with many biblical commandments, just as there are many opinions about their meaning so are there many uncertainties about their meaning. Many of our convictions about homosexuality are rooted in our own culture more than in the overarching biblical message.

I stand with John the Elder who wrote one of the last books of the New Covenant; I can do nothing else; God help me:

“Beloved, let us love one another because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.” (I John 4:7-8)

“God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God and God abides in them.....There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. We love because God first loved us. Those who say, ‘I love God,’ and hate their brothers or sisters are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from Him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.” (I John 4:16b-21)



Donald Haynes

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