



A Strategy for Preaching About Homosexuality in African American Churches *Pray, Exegete, Educate*

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Preaching to affirm homosexuality in African American churches that have traditionally condemned it is not a job for the faint of heart. After the preacher has determined, through prayer and meditation, that God is leading him to preach about homosexuality in an affirmative way, the preacher should *pray* for a strategy about how best to proceed. Though each congregation is different, it is advisable that the preacher inform key lay leaders through one-on-one meetings or bible studies before preaching to the congregation. Surprising lay leaders in the morning sermon could cause the preacher to be run out of her pulpit.

Next, since the bible's teachings on homosexuality are the reasons many African Americans give for their belief that homosexuality is a sin and thereby serving as justification for them to reject their gay brothers and sisters, the preacher must take time to *exegete* bible passages that pertain, or are thought to pertain, to homosexuality. Third, the preacher must *educate* the congregation. She must walk her members through the scriptures in great detail and teach them the importance of interpreting texts within their many contexts. Interpreting texts in contexts means not just understanding the bible literally, but exploring the circumstances and situations surrounding biblical passages. Detailed study of the bible means studying who wrote the texts, why they wrote them, what was happening in them, when they were written, and how the language the writers used in the texts conveys meaning. If the pastor prepares other sermons that exemplify deep study before preaching about homosexuality, members will at least understand how the pastor came to his theological position.

Exegesis

Since Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 are the only two verses in the Old Testament that explicitly address same sex relationships, they will be the focus of our exegetical efforts in this article. If we closely examine these verses we will begin to understand the complexities of

sexuality in the ancient Israel and how they influence the ways we view sexuality in our contemporary world.

In Leviticus, the Israelites were instructed by God about how they should live their daily lives as people who were holy and acceptable to God. The law contained admonitions about what to eat, what to wear, acceptable animal sacrifices and sexual behaviors, and priestly duties. Abominations or actions deemed detestable in the eyes of God included eating shellfish (i.e. crab, shrimp, and lobster, 11:10-12) and eating meat with blood in it (non kosher 17:14). In Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 we read that if a man lay with a man as with a woman (has sexual intercourse with another man) it was considered an abomination. Punishment of death for both people was the consequence meted out in 20:13. In that verse, both parties were guilty of an abomination. In 18:22 only the man who penetrated another man was considered to be committing an abomination. Why was the penetrator singled out in one text as one who was acting wickedly? Why were not both parties considered an abomination in both verses? When we read the law in its entirety, we find that sexual relations between women were not mentioned at all. If the scriptures condemned homosexuality in general, would not all acts of homosexuality be forbidden? What was really going on in these verses?

In order to understand these verses, one has to first understand the concept of gender in the Israelite community. For the Israelites, structured and well-defined gender roles and sexual customs were not simply a matter of social identity, but a matter of survival.¹ The nation of Israel made their living off the land through farming and herding. They were also continually under threat of war and conflict with other nations. Therefore, every person in the community had to fulfill her or his proscribed role. People were needed to: provide pre- and post- natal care; bear educate, and nurture the children; sow and gather the crops; make clothing; till the land; herd, feed, and slaughter the animals; store and preserve food; strategize and fight wars; and administer and adjudicate the law.² Continual reproduction was necessary to ensure that the nation would have human resources to fulfill all of its needs. Therefore, procreation was not simply the result of sexual pleasure, it was a duty.³

In addition, Israel was a patriarchal society in which men ruled in every social sphere including their homes, political, economic and religious arenas.⁴ Though women contributed in multifaceted ways to the well-being of the Israelite community, they were believed to be weaker and inferior to men. They were often treated as property of their fathers and husbands. Belief in the inherent inferiority of women necessitated that men comport themselves in manners as distinct from women as possible. Therefore, if a man behaved in ways that were deemed as womanly he disgraced his “manly honor.”⁵ Sexual relations between two men was believed to have been a confusion of gender roles. Not only were men not supposed to be penetrated, they were also only supposed to penetrate the weaker sex – the women. Also, in many ancient cultures, a man who penetrated another male brought upon himself degradation and humiliation because of what he did to another male – he “cast [him] into the realm of women” by penetrating him.⁶

Some biblical scholars believe that female homosexual relations was not prohibited in the bible because female same sex relations were not a challenge to “male domination.”⁷ Men of day could not conceive of women taking an active role in a sex act. A woman could not lose her “manly honor.” Sexual relations between women were unimportant and inconsequential.

Homosexuality Today

In addition to concerns about procreation, the law forbidding male sexual relations was rooted in the belief that men were superior to women. If men emulated women in any of their behavior, they would lose their “manly honor” or be considered weak in the eyes of the community. Though women in the United States have made tremendous advances in achieving equality in the past century, the attitudes of male superiority and female inferiority still influence male/female interaction. Some males still believe that one of the worst insults they can receive is being called a girl or woman. Therefore, men who have sex with other men are considered to be womanly or devoid of their “manly honor.”

The day-to-day needs of men and women in contemporary North American societies are vastly different from the day-to-day needs of people in the ancient world. For example, most of us buy our food at a grocery store instead of raising and slaughtering our own animals or plowing and tilling our own land. Women are able to receive an education and earn their own living rather than being forced by societal mores to stay at home. Military service for young men (and women) is an option rather than a mandate. We purchase our clothes ready-made at malls and shopping centers instead of weaving, dying, designing, and sowing them ourselves. The bible is meant to lead us to God rather than be God. Therefore, to uncritically reject our brothers and sisters based on ancient beliefs and practices is to make an idol out of the bible which instructs us not to make an idol of anything above or on the earth (Ex. 20:4).

Some say that the word of God does not change and therefore, we should interpret all texts literally. If this were the case we would not eat crab or lobster (Lev. 11:10-12), wear clothing made out of blended fabrics (Lev. 19:19), cut or trim our hair or beards (Lev. 19:27), or forgive children who curse us (Lev. 20:9). We would kill them instead. Detailed study of these texts provides us the opportunity to revisit our assumptions and conceptions of gender. Since the world in which we live is so different than the ancient world, it is necessary that we, through the power and wisdom of the Holy Spirit, seek God’s will for our lives today.

Resources for African American Churches on Homosexuality

Books:

Comstock, Gary David. *A Whosoever Church: Welcoming Lesbians and Gay Men into African American Congregations*. 1st ed. Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001.

Douglas, Kelly Brown. *Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999.

Helminiak, Daniel A. *What the Bible Really Says About Homosexuality: Millennium Edition, Updated and Expanded*. Millennium ed. Tajiue, NM: Alamo Square Press, 2000.

Greenberg, Steven, and ebrary Inc. *Wrestling with God and Men Homosexuality in the Jewish Tradition*. Madison, WI. University of Wisconsin Press, 2004.

Griffin, Horace L. *Their Own Receive Them Not: African American Lesbians and Gays in Black Churches*. Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2006.

Mutua, Athena D. *Progressive Black Masculinities*. New York, NY: Routledge, 2006.

Nissinen, Martti. *Homoeroticism in the Biblical World: A Historical Perspective*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1998.

Rogers, Jack Bartlett. *Jesus, the Bible, and Homosexuality: Explode the Myths, Heal the Church*. 1st ed. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006.

Websites:

<http://www.womanvision.org/index.html>

Woman Vision has produced a video (including *All God's Children*) and other resources that can be very helpful for African American churches.

<http://community.pflag.org/Page.aspx?pid=594>

PFLAG (Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) has an abundance of books and articles that can help members answer some of their questions about gay people in general.

Notes

1. Martti Nissinen. *Homoeroticism in the Biblical World: A Historical Perspective* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1998), 42.
2. Victor Harold Matthews. *Social World of the Hebrew Prophets* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2001). Throughout this book, Matthews provides details about the daily lives of people of ancient Israel.
3. Steven, Greenberg. *Wrestling with God and Men Homosexuality in the Jewish Tradition* (Madison, WI. University of Wisconsin Press, 2004), 149.
4. Calvin Mercer. "Sexual Violence and the Male Warrior God." *Lexington Theological Quarterly* 41, no. 1 (2006): 23-37.
5. Nissinen, 43.
6. Greenberg, 192.

7. Robert A. J. Gagnon. *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001), 145.