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# Homosexuality and the Bible — The Rejectionist Approach

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Luke Timothy Johnson thinks that the Christian crisis over homosexuality is not really about sex at all. Instead, it “has less to do with sex than with perceived threats to the authority of Scripture and the teaching authority of the church.” In reality the crisis is about both sex and biblical authority, as Johnson himself makes clear.

Johnson serves as Robert R. Woodruff Professor of New Testament at the Candler School of Theology at Emory University. He is one of the most influential Roman Catholic scholars in the field of biblical studies. In “Scripture & Experience,” published in Commonweal magazine, Professor Johnson presents what can only be described as a rejectionist approach to the Bible’s teachings on homosexuality.

This rejectionist approach means that Professor Johnson directly rejects what the Bible teaches on this issue, and does so with a boldness shared by few others in this debate. He accepts that “the Bible nowhere speaks positively or even neutrally about same-sex love.” Even as he argues that the church has “never lived in precise accord with the Scriptures,” he suggests that Christians pick and choose which biblical commands they will take seriously. Nevertheless, he straightforwardly acknowledges that the Bible condemns same-sex sexual acts.

He claims that the authority of Scripture and the tradition of the church are “scarcely trivial,” but criticizes those “who use the Bible as a buttress for rejecting forms of sexual love they fear or cannot understand.” In other words, he argues that those who believe that the Bible’s clear condemnations of homosexual behaviors are still authoritative for Christians do so only out of fear or a lack of understanding of homosexuality itself. As he explains later in his essay, he has grown by experience to overcome this fear and ignorance. He now believes that the Bible is simply wrong.

He demands intellectual honesty and says that he “has little patience with efforts to make Scripture say something other than what it says.” Thus, he dismisses “appeals to linguistic or cultural subtleties” as intellectually dishonest.

This is refreshing in itself, as we grow tired of seeing revisionist scholars and homosexual advocates try to explain, for example, that Romans 1 does not condemn homosexual acts committed by homosexual persons as “against nature,” but rather condemns homosexual acts undertaken by heterosexual persons. We should appreciate the fact that Professor Johnson, unlike so many others pushing for the normalization of homosexuality, does not suggest that the church has misread Scripture for two thousand years.

No, he directly rejects the Bible’s commands:

*I think it important to state clearly that we do, in fact, reject the straightforward commands of Scripture, and appeal instead to another authority when we declare that same-sex unions can be holy and good. And what exactly is that authority? We appeal explicitly to the weight of our own experience and the experience thousands of others have witnessed to, which tells us that to claim our own sexual orientation is in fact to accept the way in which God has created us. By so doing, we explicitly reject as well the premises of the scriptural statements condemning homosexuality—namely, that it is a vice freely chosen, a symptom of human corruption, and disobedience to God’s created order.*

Well, that is about as straightforward a rejection of biblical authority as can be found. Professor Johnson argues that

experience — his own experience and the experiences of others — represents an authority greater than that of the Scriptures.

He defends his position by arguing that opponents of slavery and the ordination of women found themselves in the same position. “We are fully aware of the weight of scriptural evidence pointing away from our position, yet place our trust in the power of the living God to reveal as powerfully through personal experience and testimony as through written texts.”

This is where Professor Johnson turns to evasive argument. He offers no sustained intellectual argument on the issues he mentions for moral support (the abolition of slavery and the acceptance of “women’s full and equal roles in church and society”) and he never even asks the most obvious question to be addressed to his argument: If we are to trust human experience as an authority superior to that of the Bible, whose experience are we to trust? He can only mean his own experience and that of others whose experience he chooses to privilege.

In his own words:

*By “experience” we do not mean every idiosyncratic or impulsive expression of human desire. We refer rather to those profound stories of bondage and freedom, longing and love, shared by thousands of persons over many centuries and across many cultures, that help define them as human.*

What are we to make of this? Professor Johnson will trust his ability to judge the Bible against “profound stories of bondage and freedom, longing and love, shared by thousands of persons over many centuries and across many cultures?” Which stories? Which cultures? Who defines bondage and who defines freedom?

He explains:

*For me this is no theoretical or academic position, but rather a passionate conviction. It is one many of us have come to through personal struggle, and for some, real suffering. In my case, I trusted that God was at work in the life of one of my four daughters, who struggled against bigotry to claim her sexual identity as a lesbian. I trusted God was at work in the life she shares with her partner—a long-lasting and fruitful marriage dedicated to the care of others, and one that has borne fruit in a wonderful little girl who is among my and my wife’s dear grandchildren. I also trusted the many stories of students and friends whose life witnessed to a deep faith in God but whose bodies moved sexually in ways different from the way my own did. And finally I began to appreciate the ways in which my own former attitudes and language had helped to create a world where family, friends, and students were treated cruelly.*

We should not doubt for a moment that Professor Johnson holds his position out of passionate conviction. That passion comes through every paragraph of his essay. There is no doubt that he is passionately and personally involved in this issue. There can also be no doubt where his argument leads.

His position is by no means unclear. He argues “if the letter of Scripture cannot find room for the activity of the living God in the transformation of human lives, then trust and obedience must be paid to the living God rather than to the words of Scripture.”

Thus, the Bible cannot be the Word of God if God must oppose His own Word. We are no longer to submit our experience to the authority of the Bible but instead are to submit the Bible to the authority of experience. The “living God” is juxtaposed to the (presumably dead) “words of Scripture.”

Professor Johnson’s argument leads to disaster. Indeed, it is a disaster in itself, justifying what the Bible condemns as sinful. Nevertheless, his rejectionist approach to the authority of the Bible’s commands is remarkably — even breathtakingly — honest. We could only wish that others would be equally honest.

