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Biblical Authority: Must We Accept the Words of Scripture?

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This is especially true when dealing with the issue of sexuality, and the question of homosexuality in particular. Those who argue for the acceptance of homosexual behavior and the blessing of homosexual relationships have to deal with the fact that the Bible straightforwardly condemns homosexual behavior. In light of this, some attempt to subvert the text by arguing that these texts have actually been horribly misunderstood for over two thousand years. Increasingly, however, some now concede that the Bible condemns homosexuality in every relevant text, but that Christians are no longer bound by the authority of these texts as we deal with the present moral crisis.

One scholar who takes this approach is Brian K. Blount, Richard J. Dearborn Professor of New Testament Interpretation at Princeton Theological Seminary. Professor Blount specializes in “cultural hermeneutics,” and he applies this approach to the issue of homosexuality and biblical authority in an essay entitled, “The Last Word in Biblical Authority.”

Blount’s essay is published in *Struggling with Scripture*, which Blount authored along with coauthors Walter Brueggemann and William C. Placher. The book emerged out of a symposium on the theological interpretation of Scripture in which the three were participants.

Blount begins his essay by suggesting that some persons simply must have *the last word* on any subject. “Many people treat the biblical words that way, believing that those words, all of them, must always be the last words standing. Now in matters of faith—in matters of understanding our human relationship before God and God’s moves to nurture, develop, restructure, and refine that relationship through the prophetic and incarnate Word—most of Christendom, I think, agrees that those inspired words are lasting words. But in matters of the proper way to appropriate those words of faith *ethically*, there is and has always been considerable discussion and debate.”

Well, give Professor Blount credit for honesty. When he looks to the Bible, he does not see eternal words that are to be received as fixed and determinate, but as a text that is to be divided between “matters of faith” and other, presumably negotiable issues.

In making his case, Blount points to the issues of slavery, gender, and sexuality as evidence that “even the inspired biblical authors, when they applied God’s prophetic and incarnate Word to their very human situations, allowed those situations to influence how they heard God and therefore how they talked to each other.”

Several clarifications must be inserted here. First, the Bible does not sanction race-based chattel slavery as practiced in many parts of the world, America included, throughout history. The Bible does seek to *regulate* slavery, but there is no

way that slavery, gender, and sexuality can be linked as equal issues in terms of biblical interpretation.

Nevertheless, Professor Blount argues that when confronting biblical texts that deal with these issues, the contemporary church must not allow these words to be the last word on the subject. Instead, he argues that “ethical biblical authority is *contextual* biblical authority.”

The interpretive key, according to Blount, is the human spirit. “The role of the spirit is a constant,” he explains. “Laced into the fabric of human beings is that part of us that reaches beyond the boundaries of our flesh and blood and touches the essential voice of God’s own Holy Spirit. Did you ever hear someone say a room is wired for sound? We’re wired for God, wired by God with a human spirit that despite its limitations can be touched by God’s Holy Spirit. In every time, in every place, in every moment of history, the spirit plays this interlocutory role.”

He argues that the church should hear God’s voice “like an inaudible whisper—sometimes gentle, sometimes fierce—that jangles the nerves of the human spirit until, tensed and alert, it attends to what it is that God wants to ‘say.’”

Nevertheless, what God says “will be different according to the variable conditions in which the human spirits who encounter it find themselves.”

Note his argument carefully. He is suggesting that human experience is the key to interpreting scripture, and that the words of Scripture may take on different meanings in different contexts. The ethical teachings of the Bible, he asserts, are limited to specific times and specific places, where the prejudices and realities of any given time may shape the biblical text in unethical ways. When such texts are encountered, they “ought to be challenged when we find that they were influenced by their contexts in such a way that they are damaging, and not life affirming, in a contemporary circumstance.”

Professor Blount understands that he has set himself up for some difficult questions. Which words of the Bible are to be seen as living and authoritative and which are to be seen as ethically substandard? He accuses the contemporary church of wanting to remain in an infantile state, unwilling to acknowledge the reality of these issues and instead desiring a stable and authoritative text. “We’re too often not ready for the meat of mature considerations about the words of texts that were often right for their own times twenty centuries ago but may well be wrong for our time.”

This raises a most interesting question. Is Professor Blount arguing that, assuming his interpretive scheme, slavery was at one time ethically right, but is now to be seen as ethically wrong? When did this transition in the morality of slavery take place? Similar questions could be addressed to the other controversial cases he raises.

Sometimes, he argues that the Bible simply has to be put in its place. He cites Carlos Mesters to the effect that the poor and oppressed in Latin America have had to learn to put the Bible “in its proper place, the place where God intended it to be.” As Mesters affirmed, “They are putting it in second place. Life takes first place!”

“We’ve often made the biblical words the last word in the sense that none of them can ever change,” Blount argues. “Even if the words were on the mark for a first-century community but are no longer on target for ours, even when they have become like rickety, arthritic knees that don’t bend and twist so well in the new race we’re running for God, we treat them as if they just started competing yesterday. A last word can’t breathe; it can’t endure this marathon of living with the people of God who run in the presence of God’s ever-living, ever-sustaining Holy Spirit.”

Beyond this, Blount argues that treating the biblical words as fixed and enduring transforms them into literary artifacts. Over time, these words become fossilized and the faith becomes more like an exercise in archaeology than a living faith “that celebrates seeing God say and do new things in new times.”

To be clear about this, what Blount argues is that God is now doing and saying something different than he did and said in the past. Responding to new realities, new people, and new contexts, God is presented as leading His people in new directions, often in contradiction to where he presumably led His people previously.

For most mainline Protestant denominations, the issue of homosexuality is now where the question of biblical authority is most clearly encountered. When he gets to this issue, Blount makes some rather surprising concessions. “The New Testament’s words on homosexual behavior are also clear. They are words of condemnation; I don’t try to deny that.

I don't think anyone should," he asserts.

Nevertheless, these words are to be seen as coming out of a "particular context" that is significantly different than our own. Thus, "I don't think the words are any longer living, but are, rather, dead words if we try to read them without contextually understanding them today."

This is where "cultural hermeneutics" serves as a license to liberate the church from the undeniably clear words of Scripture. Applying his tools of cultural hermeneutics, Professor Blount argues that the Apostle Paul "was inspired by God's Word in a world where sexuality was understood in a radically different way from how it is understood today." For Paul, homosexual activity was tied to idolatry and the "unnatural" dimension of homosexual acts related to the fact that they were not related to procreation. Blount argues that the Apostle Paul derived his understanding of sexuality from the larger secular culture of the Greco-Roman civilization. "He tied his understanding of sexuality to an understanding of sex acts that were properly condoned only when done according to the natural order designed for procreation or as a remedy for the burning passions of lust that apparently threatened the eruption of human bonfires all over the ancient world."

Pushing further, Blount argues that Paul's thoughts should be divided between his creation theology and his Christ theology, and the two theological strains should be seen as competing with one another in the text of Paul's letters.

Brian K. Blount attempts to offer a hermeneutical rationale for denying the authority of biblical texts that condemn homosexual behavior. In the name of liberating humanity, he would liberate the church from the actual words of Scripture and look instead for an "inner dynamic within the biblical text that transcends the actual words." This is why a doctrine of verbal inspiration is indispensable to biblical authority. If the very words of Scripture, in the original languages, are not inspired of God, and thus precisely the right words for the church throughout all time, then we are left in a constant battle to negotiate the meaning of the biblical text. Its meaning in one generation might be very different from its meaning in another, and generations to come might actually reverse the interpretation settled upon by Christians living in our times. In other words, God seems to be leading His people in many different directions over time, and the biblical text becomes a fabric that can be stretched in any number of different directions, all claiming to be led by the Spirit of God.

Professor Blount's approach should be understood to be more honest than the arguments made by many others, who would seek to subvert the text by denying that the words actually mean what they appear to mean. Blount accepts that the Bible clearly condemns homosexual behavior, and he advises his colleagues that it is unwise for them to argue otherwise. Nevertheless, he then makes an astounding jump of theological imagination to suggest that the church should simply liberate itself from these words, and should do so in the name of God's own Spirit.

We are reminded all over again that debates over these contentious issues are, at their very base, debates over the nature of biblical authority. Professor Blount wants to affirm some understanding of biblical authority, but his methodology actually places the human spirit and the interpretive community in the roles of greater authority. The biblical text simply has to give way to the "living Word" that the church now experiences.

How long will it be before similar arguments begin to emerge within circles that think themselves solidly committed to biblical authority? We can only wonder—and watch with great care.

