

Religion Today
March 25-31, 2007
Episcopalians, Christians, and Scripture
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At their recent meeting in Tangiers, the Anglican Communion delivered its American member, officially called The Episcopal Church, an ultimatum. Stop blessing homosexual unions and ordaining gay clergy, or else! The official reason for this position is the argument that the American church has forsaken the Bible and its instructions about homosexuality. The ultimatum by the other Anglican provinces calls for the Episcopalians to return to their biblical roots.

This international squabble over Scripture and its applicability is only the most recent instance of the problems Christians face when they try to hold the Bible and modernity together. All Scripture is sacred, but it is not all relevant. All forms of Christianity pick and choose, in a reverent manner to be sure, which biblical guidelines apply to them and which do not.

Why is this? The Bible is a large book; it is a library of books written at different times, by different people, in different languages, for different purposes. As in any library, its contents often provide contradictory rules. Take divorce, for example. Some Bible passages permit it, some do not. The Episcopalian, Methodist, and many other Protestant churches follow the former, while the Catholic Church follows the latter.

But Scriptural rules are often rejected for other reasons. Sometimes rejection comes when biblical principles are applied in new ways. Take slavery for example. The Bible lays out rules for the practice of slavery in the Old Testament. In the New Testament, slavery is not only sanctioned, but Paul tells slaves to remain satisfied with their condition and to accept as sufficient their spiritual freedom in Christ. Despite the clear biblical passages that accept slavery, the Christian world turned against slavery and ultimately outlawed it, believing that it violated the principle of loving one's neighbor as oneself.

William Wilberforce, an evangelical Anglican whose drive to outlaw slavery in Britain is portrayed in the recent film "Amazing Grace," denied the relevance of explicit biblical statements about slavery. The same is true of the American anti-slavery movement of the 19th century. Today nearly all American Christians agree that the biblical passages about slavery are not only wrong, they are immoral.

Other times, scriptural rules are rejected because society has changed. Sometimes these changes are even led by Christians. In the 19th century, American Christian women were ardent supporters of evangelizing the world for Christianity. They successfully created and ran large organizations to send out missionaries and support them.

In the United States itself, women formed organizations pursuing temperance, legal rights, and the vote. Through these activities, women discovered that they could have a successful life outside the home. This transformed American society. By the second half of the 20th century, women were active in all levels of society. From the company boardroom to the university classroom, from blue collar to white collar, from business to medicine to science, women are now seen as having the same rights and same abilities as men.

In this world, many Christian denominations left behind the biblical strictures against women talking in church and becoming religious leaders. Many churches ordained women as pastors and clergy, and even made them bishops. Even in evangelical denominations where ordination did not take place, women became teachers. They lead not only missions and Sunday schools but large meetings, camps, and retreats, as the Oscar-nominated documentary "Jesus Camp" makes clear. Again, this has all taken place against the explicit rules of the Bible.

Since it is clear that the Bible can be set aside if people so choose, the question is whether or not they choose to do so. To return to the Anglicans and Episcopalians, it is obvious that the American Episcopalian church has transformed itself in ways that side with equal treatment of all humans but go against explicit scriptural statements.

In the dispute with the worldwide Anglican Communion, the countries whose church is most angry against the Americans are those that have not set aside the biblical rules against female participation in public worship; they have no female priests. Ironically, this includes all the African churches who agree that slavery is immoral and have rejected the biblical passages supporting it. In their calls for adherence to the Bible, they overlook their own rejection of Scripture. The debate over gays in the Anglican church is thus primarily about how Christians should treat their fellow human beings and only then about whether Scripture is relevant to that question.