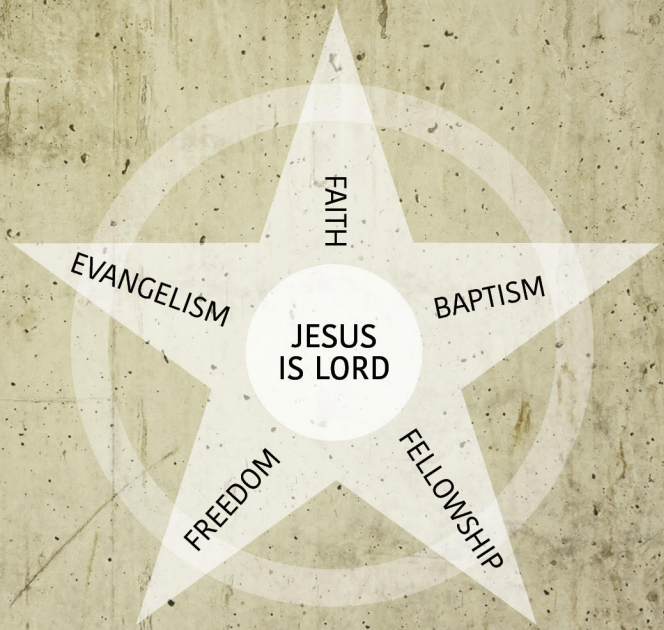


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Questioning our Commitments: Exploring Hermeneutical Practice in Discussions of Human Sexuality

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Introduction

Protestants have a problem; and non-Conformists perhaps the biggest problem of all. We have no magisterium. The Reformation stress on Sola Scriptura – Scripture as the final, although not the only, authority, often expressed in terms of infallibility – has intentionally downplayed tradition and the position of church authorities. This, of course, has led to some other very significant tensions: we have wanted the Bible to be clear; we have believed it to be sufficient; we have invested in the Bible significant authority. But historical study on virtually any issue shows huge diversity of interpretation and sometimes little consensus. For Baptists in Great Britain this has been exemplified in the Declaration of Principle, which asserts that Christ ‘is the sole and absolute authority in all matters pertaining to faith and practice, as revealed in the Holy Scriptures, and that each Church has liberty, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to interpret and administer His laws.’ Baptists, as other Protestants, have thus found themselves in the position of holding significant disagreements about how Scripture should be understood and interpreted on a variety of issues.

It seems clear that the most significant contemporary church issue where disagreement in biblical interpretation has created ongoing conflict is human sexuality. Having read quite widely on this issue, led seminars for students and engaged in numerous conversations, what strikes me is that the underlying challenge is not that we disagree on what the Bible teaches, which we obviously do, but that we are instinctively reading the Bible in different ways. We disagree because

our whole way of reading the Bible is different; we practise different hermeneutics. And, further still, these hermeneutical commitments which we all have, while sometimes explicitly owned, often are left implicit and unexpressed. This means it is difficult even to have a good conversation together because my presuppositions about the Bible are different to yours and when we try and talk about what we think the Bible means, our conversations keep missing each other. This of course is not just true of human sexuality, but the existential significance of this issue must push us to think more carefully and explicitly about our hermeneutics. My desire in this paper is not to offer one more perspective on what the Bible means, but to offer a contribution to the debate by exploring our deeper presuppositions about how the Bible is to be read and to use sexuality as a pressing case study.

What I offer, below, is a discussion of four authors who are all biblically trained scholars and who have written on sexuality. They represent a variety of theological positions on sexuality, but more importantly for this paper take different hermeneutical approaches to the biblical text, and in different ways look to discuss explicitly these hermeneutical issues. I am very aware that these four authors are all white and male, and this may be a reflection of my own implicit bias but may also reflect where the focus of attention in this issue lies. Much of the discussion I have read, for example from female authors, reflects broader theological and pastoral interests rather than more narrow exegetical ones.¹ An exception would be the very detailed

¹ There is material in Mona West, 'Coming Out and the Bible Interpretation', *A Journal of Bible and Theology* 74.3 (2020): 265–274; Robert Goss and Mona West, *Take Back the Word* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim, 2000); Megan de Franza, 'Journeying from the Bible to Christian Ethics: in Search of Common Ground' in Preston Sprinkle (ed.), *Two Views on Homosexuality, the Bible and the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016); Bernadette Brooten, *Love Between Women: Early Christian Responses to Female Homoeroticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1996) offers a very detailed discussion of Romans 1; Susannah

discussion of the Hebrew of Genesis 2:24 and its intertextuality in an article by Megan Warner.² I will briefly consider each author in turn and then offer some conclusions, mainly by way of questions that we need to ask about our own hermeneutical commitments. If we are going to try and have a good conversation about human sexuality there is a pressing need to understand, to own and at times to question our particular underlying hermeneutical commitments.

Wesley Hill

Wesley Hill, in his contribution to the book *Two Views on Homosexuality, the Bible and the Church*, suggests that since the early patristic period (he references Irenaeus) there has been a shared understanding that the Bible has a *centre* and that this should be understood Christologically.³ For Hill there seem to be two fundamental components to this hermeneutical approach: first that the Bible is an essential unity and Hill will look to play down diverse voices within Scripture in order to concentrate on unity, and second that this unified reading is found through Christ. So Hill writes ‘... the properly Christian way to read the Bible was as a two-testament canon whose various parts were not to be played off against each other but read synthetically with Jesus Christ as their orientating center.’⁴ What is particularly helpful about

Cornwall, discusses same sex relationships and the Bible in *Theology and Sexuality* (London: SCM, 2013) but mainly reporting what others think.

² Megan Warner, “‘Therefore a Man Leaves His Father and His Mother and Clings to His Wife’: Marriage and Intermarriage in Genesis 2:24”, *Journal of Biblical Literature* 136.2 (2017): 269-88. Warner does not here argue as such for same-sex relationships, but rather that the historical context of Genesis 2:24 is about the intermarriage of Jewish men with non-Jewish women and that it is meant to function in a descriptive and not normative way. Thus it does not rule out same-sex marriage.

³ For Hill’s further work see *Washed and Waiting: Reflections on Christian Faithfulness and Homosexuality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010) which is something of a theological memoir, and ‘Washed and Still Waiting: An Evangelical Approach to Homosexuality’, *JETS* 59.1 (2016): 323-38.

⁴ Wesley Hill, ‘Christ, Scripture and Spiritual Friendship’ in Sprinkle (ed.), *Two Views on Homosexuality*, 127.

Hill's account is his explicit desire to ground his contribution in a clear hermeneutical principle – a Christological centre that shapes our reading of the whole; but there are a number of reasons why the hermeneutical approach of the chapter as a whole is in fact not so straight forward.

First, there seems to be another, more implicit hermeneutical principle at play which while sympathetic to a Christological centre, at times stands in tension with it. Hill refers a number of times to something like a canonical shape of Scripture and is using what might be best described as a kind of canonical criticism. So the Genesis narratives retain pride of place because of their canonical placement as well as their subsequent prominence in the Gospels;⁵ the canonical primacy of the Genesis account means that Leviticus 18 and 20 read in this light must proscribe all same sex relationships because they do not have a place in male and female marriage;⁶ and Augustine's theological vision of marriage is formed from the New Testament's final canonical shape.⁷ But what is missing from Hill's account of canonical primacy is, for example, any historical-critical discussion of the way that Genesis and Leviticus may relate together, with the possibility that Genesis may indeed have been written later. Now such historical-critical considerations need not be definitive – after all they are a commitment themselves – and there are some reasoned arguments for canonical criticism. But it is a committed position that is assumed not argued for.

What is also missing from Hill's account is any sense on how the canonical primacy of Genesis relates to the Christological centre of Scripture, and so how reading Scripture with this *centre* might relate to this canonical approach. These Christological and canonical hermeneutics both reject any 'flat' approach to Scripture but instead

⁵ Hill, 'Christ, Scripture and Spiritual Friendship', 128.

⁶ Hill, 'Christ, Scripture and Spiritual Friendship', 133.

⁷ Hill, 'Christ, Scripture and Spiritual Friendship', 131.

Hill insists that the shape of the Bible as a whole affects our interpretation, but might there be a tension between affirming the primacy of Genesis in a canonical reading and looking for a Christological centre? Should Genesis 1 shape what follows in the canonical shape or is it reshaped by the life and ministry of Christ? For Hill, with his stress on the unity rather than diversity of Scripture, there seems a clear tendency to play down any such tension, with an implied expectation that his canonical and Christological approaches will agree.

Second, while drawing on Augustine as a positive source Hill then engages with the work of Robert Song as a critical dialogue partner.⁸ Hill is very respectful of Song's work and the dense, rich and coherent exegesis he offers; but ultimately Hill profoundly disagrees with him. What is interesting for our purpose is that Song offers a reading of Scripture that also has a deep Christological centre, perhaps more so than Hill himself, and this leads Song to significantly relativise marriage in the light of the resurrection of Christ. Hill recognises this, that Song's account is Christologically shaped – 'sex BC is not the same as sex AD' – and there highlights two important aspects of Hill's contribution to the debate.

While summarising Song's argument, Hill makes no comment on the fact that they still come to very different conclusions despite the fact that they share a similar hermeneutical commitment; even a significant degree of a shared hermeneutics does not guarantee similar conclusions. But Hill is able to have a clear and respectful discussion with Song, and the fact that they share a commitment to a Christological centre may mean they can engage in better theological discussion. Hill critiques Song for the particular shape that he sees in Scripture and the way that he feels Song therefore prioritises one particular strand of New Testament teaching – the diminished place of

⁸ Robert Song, *Covenant and Calling: Towards a Theology of Same-Sex Relationships* (London: SCM, 2014).

procreation and the new place for celibacy. Thus Hill concludes that ‘Song loses the linkage between the three Augustinian goods of marriage’.⁹ So while Hill and Song agree about seeing a particular shape in Scripture that must therefore shape our reading in turn, they disagree what this shape is: Hill prioritising Genesis and Song the teaching of Jesus that casts a new light over Genesis. They also disagree as to the amount of diversity that can be seen in Scripture, with Hill committed to the principle of a unified theology and Song open to diverse, even conflicting, approaches. In terms of hermeneutical approach, Hill then criticises Song both for prioritising diversity over the unity of Scripture and also prioritising the wrong shape and not beginning with Genesis 1 and 2.

Preston Sprinkle

Preston Sprinkle, as well as editing *Two Views on Homosexuality, the Bible and the Church* has also written a more popular book, *People to be Loved: Why Homosexuality is not Just an Issue*. Sprinkle seeks to write sympathetically and pastorally, concerned for the pain of the LGBTQ community, but ultimately comes down very clearly on a traditional interpretation of Scripture on the issue of sexuality. Sprinkle offers less explicit hermeneutical commentary, although some discussion continues in the notes. He takes a critical realist approach, referencing both N T Wright and Kevin Vanhoozer, arguing that while the Bible is not the only authority, it is the highest authority. It is absolute truth, but human interpretation of that truth is fallible.

But despite affirming a critical realist position he still insists ‘that a human interpretation, which is performed in community, in dialogue with tradition and under the guidance of God’s Spirit can discover and

⁹ Hill, ‘Christ, Scripture and Spiritual Friendship’, 141. Augustine describes these as *proles* (children or openness to children), *fides* (faithfulness) and *sacramentum* (sacrament).

understand absolute truth'.¹⁰ With such a statement Sprinkle appears to stress the realism much more than the critical engagement, and it is questionable whether his position is in fact of critical realism. He certainly comes to a different conclusion to Wright, particularly with his assertion that human interpretation can understand 'absolute' truth. Wright suggests that 'story telling humans... can find ways of speaking truly about the world'¹¹ but there is no suggestion here of absolute truth. Wright instead argues for a more narrative based approach in which 'knowledge takes place ... when people *find things that fit* with the particular story or (more likely) stories to which they are accustomed to give allegiance.'¹² There is no real place in Sprinkle's book for this discussion of the place of narrative, but a strong reliance on the use of a historical critical method, and linguistic explorations as the basis for this understanding of 'absolute truth'.

There are a number of other hermeneutic assumptions in the book which are not explored, even in the notes, but which raise significant questions. First, like Hill, there is a deep commitment to a unified voice in Scripture based on a very strong view of divine authorship and so the a priori rejection of tension between texts. In discussing the Leviticus texts, he comments rhetorically: 'Did the same God who breathed out Genesis 1 also breathe out Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13? Was he confused?'¹³ Sprinkle, for example, rejects any patriarchal reading of the Leviticus texts, because in Wright's language this fits with the particular story to which he gives allegiance. So, while Sprinkle admits that some passages in the Old Testament appear to demean women, he argues that further study suggests it is not clear

¹⁰ Sprinkle, *People to be Loved: Why Homosexuality is not Just an Issue* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015), n. 6, 193-4. Sprinkle references NT Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (London: SPCK, 1992), 50-64 and Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There Meaning in this Text? The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009).

¹¹ Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, 58.

¹² Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, 52.

¹³ Sprinkle, *People to be Loved*, 48.

that the Biblical writers considered women to be inferior. His commitment to the one unified voice of Scripture allows no room to see any patriarchy in the text. We find a similar approach in his reading of Ephesians 5 and 1 Corinthians 11, in which he argues for equality, explicitly rejecting any chauvinistic interpretations and reads the texts through a non-hierarchical trinitarian lens.¹⁴ A clear unified voice in Scripture, egalitarian rather than patriarchal readings and trinitarian approach clearly shaped by later development seem to be hermeneutical commitments that Sprinkle brings to the text.

Sprinkle also wrestles with the Leviticus texts and in particular how Old Testament laws might or might not have contemporary relevance. Again, while there is no explicitly stated hermeneutic, there are some clear working assumptions. Overall Sprinkle takes what Adrian Thatcher would describe as a 'guidebook' approach to the Old Testament in which texts have a fixed meaning and provide a timeless ethical framework.¹⁵ Sprinkle is of course aware that not all Old Testament laws will be treated the same, and insists that those, like himself, from a non-affirming position must offer evidence as to why these laws *are* binding and not simply assume this to be the case. Sprinkle then seeks to make such a case. He works on the basis that the most fail proof method is to look for those laws that are repeated in the New Testament.

He then argues further that because the majority (although not all) of Leviticus 18-20 is binding – he gets himself slightly tied up in knots about the law on intercourse during menstruation suggesting there is no evidence that this is not binding on believers – there would need to be good argument to the contrary for the texts on same sex relationships not to be applicable too. Such a position raises a number of hermeneutical questions. First, there is the underlying question about the value of Old Testament law in its entirety in the discussion

¹⁴ Sprinkle, *People to be Loved*, 37-8.

¹⁵ See Adrian Thatcher, *The Savage Text* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008), 10.

of Christian ethics. In Sprinkle's account there seems to be simply an assumption that it is highly relevant with little reflection on its contextual setting. Second, Sprinkle recognises that there are some laws, including some of those in Leviticus 18-20, that are specifically culturally bound: not wearing different types of fabric and not shaving the edges of your beard. But on what basis are these deemed culturally bound and so not relevant while the majority are deemed 'applicable either in their full literal meaning or in the principle that drives them? Sprinkle offers no answer to this; it seems to be obvious as common sense, but is a significant hermeneutical commitment.

Dale Martin

Dale Martin gathers his collection of essays, *Sex and the Single Savior*, specifically to discuss hermeneutics. Martin is best described as a post-foundationalist who adopts a reader response approach to texts. Meaning, he insists, does not simply reside in a text; it is not 'there' already waiting to be found and applied to our context. Texts do not have agency, and when we talk about texts 'speaking' we are using highly metaphorical language. The onus is on the reader and meaning is made when we read and interpret.¹⁶ Martin is concerned to undermine and ultimately reject the privileging of both authorial intent as something secure and knowable, and the historical-critical method as the foundational hermeneutical approach. 'Neither a simple reading of 'what the Bible says' nor a professional historical-critical reconstruction of the ancient meaning of the texts will provide a prescription for contemporary ethics.'¹⁷

This does not mean, though, that there is complete textual anarchy. Martin himself offers two hermeneutical foundations. The first is that the meaning of a text is not controlled by the text itself but by the community of interpretation. Here he is drawing on work by Stanley

¹⁶ Dale Martin, *Sex and the Single Savior* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2006), 2-4.

¹⁷ Martin, *Sex and the Single Savior*, 38.

Fish, Hans Frei, George Lindbeck, and Kathryn Tanner the latter arguing that historically the ‘plain sense’ of a text was not something inherent in the text but was established by the community and was a function of communal use.¹⁸ People, Martin insists, do not interpret texts ‘any old way’ but do so because of the way they have been socialised to interpret, which can be challenged and changed. What is needed is not more careful attention to the text through historical critical study, but a more careful discussion as an interpretive community about the way we have been socialised to read texts; or to draw on N T Wright again, the way we have been socialised to narrate a particular story.

The second is that Martin, like some others, does in fact offer a biblical interpretive ‘centre’. In a chapter that discusses the meaning of *malakos* and *arsenakoitos*, mainly in a historical critical style, Martin proposes the double love command of Jesus as this centre: ‘Whoever, therefore, thinks that he understands the divine scriptures or any part of them so that it does not build the double love of God and of our neighbor does not understand it at all.’¹⁹ Martin draws on Augustine but in a way that makes some change to Augustine’s point. Augustine’s focus was on which texts should be interpreted literally and which needed to be interpreted more allegorically because the literal meaning would violate this double law. Martin seeks to apply this to how *all* texts should be interpreted.

But we need to explore further, indeed question, Martin’s fundamental claims. Martin rejects the idea that texts can have any agency and the privileging of authorial intent. But there is always something quite ironic about a very carefully and rhetorically presented piece of work that argues against knowing authorial intent! I would certainly want to take a critical realist approach to such knowledge, but Martin’s book seems to offer quite a clear insight into his authorial intent. His

¹⁸ Martin, *Sex and the Single Savior*, 13.

¹⁹ Martin, *Sex and the Single Savior*, 49.

rejecting of any textual agency has the feel of the full pendulum swing insisting on one view so strongly as to counter its opposite position, of a much more positivist approach that claims certainty in meaning. While it is of course true that the language of a text ‘speaking’ or ‘acting’ is metaphorical, this does not rule out agency. Texts ‘do’ things to us – they can, move, inspire, comfort, repel. This is not to suggest they do this without any reader involvement, but in the interplay between text and reader the text is not simply passive. Hearing Psalm 23, whatever its historical critical background, might comfort me in a moment of despair. This may happen because of the way I read the text shaped by long community interpretation, and may or may not be in line with any authorial intent, but this does not mitigate against the text’s agency at that moment.

Martin himself offers such a more balanced view of how texts and readers come together when he privileges the double love command of the Gospel. My engagement with this is shaped by communal interpretation and tradition, but there seems to be more than this happening, which Martin explicitly acknowledges. There is, then, a Christological centre to Martin’s hermeneutical strategy, which is rooted more firmly in the text than simply in the interpretive community. It is a more radical Christological centre than, for example, Hill adopts, in that the double love command becomes the basis for understanding the whole of the Gospels, within an overall hermeneutical strategy that gives much more place to the reader than Hill or Sprinkle, but still for Martin this text has agency. The reason that it is this text that has agency and therefore controls interpretation of the rest of Scripture is the complex interplay between it being Jesus’ own summary of divine revelation, thus rooted in the text, and the way it resonates with Martin’s own traditioned understanding, thus rooted in the reader. But this is as much a hermeneutical commitment as any other approach.

William Webb

William Webb is well known for developing what he describes as a ‘redemptive-movement’ hermeneutic, although he considers that this works in different ways for slaves, women and those in same sex relationships. His book pays explicit attention to hermeneutic issues and his redemptive-movement hermeneutic has a number of significant features, being built on two explicit commitments: that there is in the Bible cultural and transcultural material and it is possible to distinguish between these; that the Bible might not have the last word or offer a ‘finalized ethic’²⁰ on any given issue but there is evidence in some areas of a progressive trajectory.

In the first area, Webb is very aware that this ‘cultural analysis’, as he calls it, is not straightforward and it has no clearly established rules.²¹ Webb offers first some extensive and carefully thought through criteria for trying to distinguish between the cultural and the transcultural, which he then applies to these three areas. One foundation on which Webb’s work is based is a recognition of multiple voices in Scripture because these are culturally shaped. There are he owns, examples of oppressive patriarchy in Scripture that need to be redeemed by Scripture’s own trajectory. But there are some other assumptions at play too. Webb begins by asserting that ‘our mandate is to figure out which statements from the Bible in their ‘on the page wording’ you and I should continue to follow in our contemporary setting’ because some instructions are only in force in part or in a modified way.²² This already contains the assumptions that understand Scripture primarily as instruction rather than as narrative, and assumes everything is in force at least in a modified fashion – some aspects of Scripture might need to be redeemed, but ultimately there is here no reading against the text. Webb seems to see Scripture more as a ‘guide-book’, but one which requires significant translation to a different context.

²⁰ William Webb, *Slaves, Women and Homosexuals: Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2001), 247.

²¹ Webb, *Slaves, Women and Homosexuals*, 67.

²² Webb, *Slaves, Women and Homosexuals*, 13.

Webb begins the discussion of cultural and transcultural material by establishing eighteen criteria to use when considering what might be cultural aspects of a biblical text. While being carefully argued it has the, perhaps unintended, consequence of immediately establishing biblical hermeneutics, especially in contested areas, as requiring something of a specialist approach. Webb's desire, no doubt, is to help others understand the issues, but the hermeneutical criteria he uses means significantly on the detailed knowledge of experts. Having established these criteria, Webb then explores them with what he describes as a 'neutral' example²³ – slavery – by which he means one that is largely settled, before exploring contested issues. But his use of 'neutral' is interesting, for in contrast to Martin, this approach offers little appreciation of the cultural assumptions any reader of the Bible will bring. Given the way that those from different racial backgrounds and with different cultural histories will respond to slavery, this can be no neutral issue. Webb arguably pays too little attention to the role of the reader. Therefore it remains debatable as to whether, for example, the aspects of the creation account that Webb thinks are culturally bound – farming, six day working week, veganism, even the procreation command²⁴ – are significantly shaped by our own cultural assumptions and what we bring to the text, rather than cultural or transcultural aspects inherent in the text itself. Despite the real care given to the texts, there are assumptions from the reader that are not owned.

The second foundation of the book, a trajectory reading of Scripture is one that challenges Webb's own background and he acknowledges that this is an area where he has changed his mind on the right hermeneutical approach.²⁵ This commitment to a movement within Scripture and, in places, a final ethic beyond Scripture, allows Webb to take seriously those 'troublesome texts' rather than ignore them, but to

²³ Webb, *Slaves, Women and Homosexuals*, 68.

²⁴ Webb, *Slaves, Women and Homosexuals*, 126-7.

²⁵ Webb, *Slaves, Women and Homosexuals*, 56.

suggest they are culturally shaped and so not the final word. For Webb the basis of this hermeneutical approach is in the text itself, and is based on the spirit of the text.²⁶ This is mainly achieved by looking at individual texts and considering, through historical critical study, how they compare with their original context. Webb is looking for signs in this comparison that there is some redemptive spirit that distinguishes the biblical narrative for its contemporary counterparts which then points towards a fuller redemptive pattern in our own culture. Webb does allow for a broader trajectory within Scripture but this is less developed; the emphasis is on the close reading of individual texts to see what might be distinctive about Judaeo-Christian tradition. For Webb the redemptive movement for slaves and women are important examples and the model could be applied to many other areas, although for him the individual texts on same sex relationships have no redemptive spirit. We notice, again, that such work requires significant knowledge of the ancient Near East and Graeco-Roman culture; Webb has a hermeneutical commitment to clarity on what is cultural and transcultural but based strongly on the work of scholarship and expertise.

Questions for our Own Commitments:

I have suggested that in these four authors, who are a representative sample rather than an exhaustive list, we see a variety of hermeneutical convictions, which in turn significantly shape the authors' approaches to same-sex relationships. Some of these convictions are owned, while some seem more assumed; sometimes these convictions are discussed with the specific hermeneutical approach of other writers, as well as their conclusions on same-sex relationships, being analysed and critiqued. As Baptists continue to discuss the status of same-sex relationships it is vital that we are able to and deeply about our own hermeneutical approaches and convictions and not assume our approach is either universal or simply correct.

²⁶ Webb, *Slaves, Women and Homosexuals*, 53-4.

Based on the above reflections I offer, below, twelve questions we need to ask ourselves as we consider our own commitments, gathered in four areas. There could be more questions, and they could be arranged differently; this is not an attempt to be exhaustive, but to reflect on areas that seem to be both important and contested. These questions all raise major theological issues that would need much longer to discuss in detail. But to describe them in this way as questions forces us to reflect on why we might take a particular view. My own belief is that in all these areas we have implicit commitments which we bring to the text as part of our hermeneutical strategy when we read the Bible (even if we then try and read it in the text) rather than approaches that Bible in anyway teaches. Thus, these questions ask us to reflect on the way we have been socialised in an interpretive community already and to ponder the operant if implicit commitments which shape us.

The nature of the Bible:

Is the Bible a witness or guide book?

These descriptions are used by a number of people, particularly in the context of discussion of same-sex relationships by Adrian Thatcher, who considers them to be antithetical and not combined together.²⁷ The Bible as witness approach recognises Jesus as the Word of God and the Bible only in a secondary sense, and is very much based on the earlier work of Karl Bath; the Bible as a guide book sees the Bible

²⁷ Thatcher, *The Savage Text*, 10-12. Thatcher considers the 2003 report of the Anglican House of Bishops, *Some Issues in Human Sexuality: A Guide to the Debate*, and is critical of it for distinguishing these two and then trying to synthesis them, 26-7. Humberto Maiztegui, 'Homosexuality and the Bible in the Anglican Church of the Southern Cone of America' in Terry Brown (ed), *Other Voices, Other Worlds: The Global Church Speaks out on Homosexuality* (London: DLT: 2006), 236-48 also stresses the Bible as witness approach. For further reflections on the nature of the Bible as a source for ethical decision see John E. Colwell, *Living the Christian Story: The Distinctiveness of Christian Ethics* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2001), 69-128.

simply as the Word of God and stresses its nature as a commandment. Thatcher argues that the Bible as witness is the historical, classic and Reformed position. To express the issue so sharply uses a more binary description than is necessary, and it may be better to see these are two tendencies or directions of travel. This raises one of the most fundamental questions about the nature of the Bible and so one of the most fundamental commitments. It touches on issues such as inspiration, inerrancy, progressive revelation.

Is Scripture manifold or one?

To what extent is there a diversity of voices in Scripture that stand in tension with each other and offer different views on an issue, or to what extent does Scripture present a common witness on all issues? We have noticed earlier, for example, that Sprinkle has a very clear commitment to the unified message of Scripture on an issue, with Hill expressing a similar view though less strongly. By contrast, Bernadette Brooten, for example, sees significant tensions, even in the writings of Paul, with gender issues being essential to the argument of Romans 1 while they are of no significance in Galatians 3:28.²⁸

Is the meaning of Scripture 'plain'?

The doctrine of the perspicuity of Scripture was an important Reformation stress, expressed, for example, in Luther's *The Bondage of the Will* and in the Westminster Confession. These writings contain some caveats, that it is those things necessary for salvation and not necessarily everything in the Bible that is clear, that the use of 'ordinary means' is necessary for understanding, that there may be some ignorance of 'certain terms and grammatical particulars' and that fallen human nature may mean we struggle to understand; but Scripture is fundamentally clear. What is clear from the current literature on same sex relationships is that there is no agreed 'plain' reading of the contested texts, even if some claim their reading is plain. We have also

²⁸ Brooten, *Love Between Women*, 265.

seen in Webb a commitment to significant scholarship to distinguish cultural and transcultural issues, although again scholars disagree on the details.²⁹

The shape of the Bible:

Does the Bible have a canonical shape?

This is another question about the intrinsic nature of Scripture and its composition over time, but also prompts reflection on our reading strategies. It asks, for example, about the nature of the relationship between the Old Testament and the New Testament, and the value of the Old Testament in Christian theology and ethics. Do we have any coherent and consistent approach to draw on specific Old Testament laws? It also teases out the assumptions we have about the way that the Christian Bible is ordered and the theological significance of this. There is an understandable inclination to read passages that now appear later in the Old Testament in the light of those that appear earlier, without questioning the assumptions this might have about composition.

Does the Bible have a Christological centre?

Within the overall shaping of Scripture we have noticed that two of our four authors, Hill and Martin are working with some kind of explicit Christological centre which then shapes how the rest of Scripture is read. Yes they still differ on what this looks like and Hill engages with a third author, Song, who argues differently again. That there is *a* Christological centre to Scripture does not seem so controversial, which then offers a Christological reading of Scripture as

²⁹ Stephen Holmes, 'Kings, Professors and Ploughboys: On the Accessibility of Scripture', *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 13.4 (October, 2011): 403-15, suggests that such a reliance, indeed overreliance, on scholarship has been dominant in modern accounts of biblical interpretation and argues for a return to something more akin to an older understanding of the accessibility of Scripture as part of ecclesial liturgical practice.

whole. But how this Christological centre is decided – it includes how the whole ministry of Jesus is understood and what is prioritised as well how the life and teaching of Jesus is seen to relate to the Old Testament and then employed – is much more debated.

Does the Bible have a trajectory?

Webb is convinced that the Bible must have some kind of trajectory and few I suspect would disagree with this entirely. That the Bible seems to accept slavery, even if it does not require slavery, without offering a clear and complete condemnation would not seem to be enough and thus there is a requirement for a contemporary theological statement that is nowhere found in Scripture. On Webb's analysis such a complete condemnation of slavery is consistent with the approach and trajectory of Scripture even it is says something beyond what Scripture itself says. But if the Bible does not have the final word on one thing, for example, slavery, does it have the final word on anything? And if there are some areas where Scripture has the final word and some where there is a trajectory which as readers of Scripture we are compelled to follow and complete, how are these distinguished?

The Bible and the reader:

What is the relationship between author, text and reader?

This is, of course, a fundamental question in hermeneutics, and although other classifications are possible, to reflect on the nature of author-centred, text, centred and reader-centred approaches, and the way these three interact, remains helpful.³⁰ In the authors we have considered Sprinkle offers the clearest authored centred approach and Martin the strongest reader-centred one. But this is also an area in which we will have been deeply socialised and formed by the

³⁰ See, for example, Ian Boxall, *SCM Studyguide to New Testament Interpretation*, (London: SCM, 2007), 24-38.

communities in which we first read the Bible offering us probably unreflective patterns which we then adopted.

What agency does Scripture have?

Martin seems concerned that the general Christian tradition has made too much of the agency of Scripture and has not given enough consideration to the metaphorical language used in such expressions. My own sense is that he reacts too strongly to what he perceives as entirely author and text based approaches, because a whole range of texts have agency. It may well be that in considering that they have agency we are in fact giving them agency for us, but that does make the relationships between text and reader more complex. So an individual might go back to a favourite song or recording artist and find the words particularly powerful in such a way that they are moved and challenged in their practice. Does such a song have agency? Surely it does for this individual. This is not to deny of course the way the listener has been involved in constructing meaning but it does suggest that we can rightly speak of texts saying things and doing things. A further matter is one of authority; that is, which texts, with their agency, are given particular weight. But this is built on a prior sense that texts can say and do things. One of the complicated factors in biblical interpretation is that the same text might say or do something different to different individuals. The problem it would appear is not that Scripture as a text does not have any agency, but that the agency it has is complex.

Can the reader ask critical questions about the text?

Here we return to similar ground to our opening question about the Bible as witness or guidebook but from the perspective of the reader. Is the role of the reader simply to 'sit under the text?' Sprinkle, for example, stressing the unity of content and the Bible's nature as like a guidebook, would appear to give little place for critical questions. As

someone who clearly supports an egalitarian approach to gender relationships, he looks to find this approach in all Biblical texts rather than in any way read against the grain of a text. For others, especially from a feminist or other liberationist approach such reading against the grain is essential in exposing what may be cultural aspects and assumptions that need to be questioned.

The Bible and the Church:

What is the relationship between the Bible and the Church?

This is a complex historical question around the formation of the canon, but also an existential one, as the relationship between the Bible and the church remains a complex one. There is clearly a necessity for the Bible to critique the church and for the *semper reformanda* of the church based on new insight from the text. Yet even if there is a formal rejection of a magisterium among Protestants, voices within the church, whether key historical figures or significant contemporary leaders, are afforded greater authority in the interpretation of the text. The freedom that comes without a magisterium is the freedom to choose our own guides.

How does the Church act as a community (or communities) of interpretation?

For Baptist churches in particular this is an essential element of their ecclesiology; it is the local church, as the gathered community that has the liberty, and we might add the responsibility, to interpret Scripture. This means being willing to hear differences but also to engage in this very process of reflection that might then name some of the socialising aspects of that church tradition, or hearing alternative voices from the

margins, and working out an explicit and owned community hermeneutic.³¹

Whose voice is given priority in reading Scripture?

Building on the discussion about being a community of interpretation, the reality is that both in these communities and in the broader community of the wider church some voices have been heard much more loudly and others have been silenced. The challenge of liberation theology, for example, about the way a privileged group may have controlled the interpretation of the community is important to hear.

Conclusion

Reflection on these questions will not of course bring unity of theology or practice; in fact it might reveal greater differences. But in conversations that so often simply go past each other, there is a pressing need to reflect on our own hermeneutical commitments, and be able to name them and own them. I am convinced – and this is naming my commitment – that generally our answers to these questions are prior commitments and pre-understanding we bring to the Biblical text rather than derive from it, and come from the way we as individuals have been socialised and formed in a variety of communities. If we are going to talk well together as individuals and as churches on this or other contested issues then some reflection on our hermeneutics is necessary.

Notes on Contributor

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³¹ For a series of reflections on how Baptist Churches might reflect on the Gospel in a variety of contexts see Amy Chilton and Steven Harmon (eds), *Sources of Light: Resources for Baptist Churches Practicing Theology* (Mercer, GA: Mercer University Press, 2020).