

**Commentary**

**"It Ain't Necessarily So"**

What does the Bible say about homosexuality?

*Ed. note: The following are reflections of a church pastor on the abuse of the Bible to undergird the church's homophobia, and some theological arguments for an open and affirming community of faith. Rev. Halbe, who was in Asheville as a guest of Dr. and Mrs. Ben Streets and their sons, David and Ben, received a standing ovation after presenting this address to CLOSER last April. It should be of interest to any gay or lesbian, be they agnostic, Jew or Christian, who is, or has been, the target of those whom Rev. Halbe calls the "God squad."*

by Rev. Glen A. Halbe, Pilgrim United Church of Christ, Cincinnati, Ohio

It ain't necessarily so  
It ain't necessarily so  
The things you is liable  
To read in the Bible  
It ain't necessarily so.  
("Sportin' Life" from *Porgy and Bess*)

The Bible is many different things to many different people. I, myself, believe that the reason a person opens the Bible's cover is as important as anything that person may read between its covers. I want to set out what the Bible is to me—and what it is not.

First let me tell you what the Bible is NOT. It is not a scientifically correct

historical account of the creation of the world and the ensuing chronological account of humankind's existence on our planet. The first two accounts of the world's creation have a series of chronological inconsistencies that would belie the claim of any real scientific historicity. So to those who open its covers for a scientific or historic account, I say, "It ain't necessarily so."

Another way that I would never characterize the Bible is that of a book of rules. It is not an ancient Ann Landers column. It is not a book of invincible laws. There ARE rules and laws in the Bible, lots and lots of them. But I believe that the biblical faith should be inclusive and not exclusive, and it cannot be an embracing faith of God's love if you look at the Bible for rules and laws to hit people over the head with. I want to say more about this concept of the Bible as a rule book, but let me first tell you how I would characterize the Bible.

The great and contemporary theologian Walter Brueggemann, who teaches at Columbia Seminary just outside of Atlanta, characterizes the Bible as a family album. He says the Bible "is a shared memory of events that were important to our forebears. The Bible is the story of how our God has come at decisive moments and acted to make

things different. It is," he says, "a story about men and women who found life meaningful because of the presence and action of God in their lives. The Bible is not a book of rules," Brueggemann continues, "but a story."

It is that concept of the story that separates those of us in the ecumenical tradition of the Christian church from so many in the fundamentalist or Pentecostal branches of the faith. For all the rules and laws in the Bible must first be set in the context of the story. The story must not be subordinated to the rules and laws. Rules and laws are the tools of the establishment of any society to preserve the order; not just any order, but that order which is to the establishment's advantage. The Bible, on the other hand, is, and was from the outset, a story of the Hebrews or Jews who were outcasts of society or, at the most, very common people.

The Bible is consistently the story of the "rejected and despised." It is true that leaders of the faith community chronicled in the Bible often set forth rules so there would be some order within their community. In the great Exodus from Egypt, Moses found it necessary to hand the people ten codes of conduct to help lend some organization to an otherwise loosely knit group of slaves who were out in the wilderness fringe of society. Four of those commandments related God to people, while the other six were rules to help relate people to people so that they might get along better.

But let's put those laws into the

context of the story. One of the laws says that it is wrong to murder someone, but we all know that Moses had earlier murdered a man and fled from the royal court of Egypt to escape his punishment. God called a murderer to deliver God's chosen people out of the bondage of slavery.

It is wrong to covet your neighbor's property, and yet we know that Jacob cheated his own brother Esau out of his birthright. God proceeded to choose Jacob to lead God's people. Moses and Jacob are but two of many wrong-doers God called to be great leaders within the faith community. It is the story that is important, and not all the rules within the story.

Very early in the Bible story, as the nomadic Hebrews were evolving into an agricultural society with some permanence of habitation, their leaders listed the Hamurabic codes adapted to the particular needs of their fledgling community. For an evening of absolutely dull reading I heartily recommend the book of Leviticus, in which much of that adapted code of Hamurabi is set forth in exhausting detail. How sad that these laws and rules which, in the context of the story, played an important part in the transition from nomadic life to community life...how sad that these laws and rules are abused by some in the Christian community to hit people over the head. In the context of the society in which they were promulgated, they gave new life and new

*Continued on next page -*

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