

To Sylvia Rhue

Dear Sylvia,

It was such a joy to see you last week, when you spoke to the LGBT student assembly at USC. You left the copy of the book **CRISIS: 40 STORIES REVEALING THE PERSONAL, SOCIAL, AND RELIGIOUS PAIN AND TRAUMA OF GROWING UP GAY IN AMERICA**, edited by Mitchell Gold, so I took it home and started reading it. I liked the short statement of Jimmy Creech the best, when at least he did not try to deny the Bible's homophobia. Though he does not mention the Bible, he says "religion has lagged behind science... Once, religion deemed women inferior to me. Once, religion deemed interracial marriage sinful. Human experience and scientific understanding over time changed cultural attitudes... religion then followed suit." (p.323).

While it is evident that Mitchell Gold and the many contributors mean well, I do not think the approach of this book is an effective approach to reducing homophobia. The more I read in the book, the more discouraged I became. Maybe I did not see some of the chapters that expressed a different view, but of those that I read only this very brief statement by Jimmy Creech even slightly questioned the rightness of religion. Maybe that willingness to question is why the Methodist Church defrocked Rev. Creech. But even he never directly says the Bible itself is wrong.

Except for Rev. Creech (a heterosexual) not one of the many gay writers question the Bible's rightness. Instead, they all have the same message: fundamentalists misinterpret the Bible and a true faith in God will solve everything.

In his own essay, Mitchell Gold's critique of fundamentalists is that they have "misinterpreted and misused the Bible." Later, he says "I believe the world's great religious traditions emphasize loving thy neighbor as well as loving God. There is no room in such great traditions for the kind of small-mindedness that would incite violence against anyone." (p.115-116).

To make such a statement is a blatant disregard for over two thousand years of Biblically incited violence against gay people. If he does not know the Bible verses themselves well enough to see this, then he should read Professor Louis Crompton's book **HOMOSEXUALITY AND CIVILIZATION** and Randy Conner's book **BLOSSOM OF BONE** as just two examples of this scholarship. Presumably Gold is talking about Judaism, Christianity and Islam in his reference to "the world's great religious traditions" and again calls them "great traditions." Yet, it could be argued that of all the world's many religions, these three are almost totally responsible for the oppression that LGBT people face in the world today. In their quest to take over the lands and slaughter or enslave the Canaanites and other local cultures, the ancient Hebrews used their notion of God to claim that those lands did NOT belong to the peoples who actually lived there, but were in fact God's and God had given those lands to the Hebrews because they were God's chosen people. It is exactly the same argument that English colonists used to justify stealing the lands of the American Indians and to kill them. Read the book of Kings, and the book of Judges, and tell me that the Bible does not justify violence! Read just the one

chapter 10 of the book of Joshua, which is a litany of peoples that the Hebrews slaughtered, one after another.

Read what the Bible says about the right of the Hebrews to capture and enslave their enemies, and to hold them and their descendents as bondsmen forever, and tell me that the Bible does not justify slavery! Read Joshua 9 for another justification of slavery.

It could not be more plain that the Bible condemns cross-dressing and transgender people. Deuteronomy 22: 5 “The woman shall not wear that which pertaineth unto a man, neither shall a man put on a woman's garment: for all that do so are abomination unto the LORD thy God. “

Likewise, it is just simply untrue to say that the Bible does not condemn homosexuality. The words of Leviticus could not be more clear, and the words of Paul are equally frank. The attempts of “liberal” Christians to deny this condemnation is nothing more than sophistry, and not credible by anyone who can turn to Paul’s writings in the book of Romans.

Anyone who can look up these verses can read this clearly, and so the pleadings of liberal Christians are shown to be inaccurate. The most blatant example of this kind of false interpretation is the sermon by the Rev. Dr. H. Stephen Shoemaker, who has a Ph.D. from the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. Gold chose this to be the final essay in the book, indicating that this essay is the most important. In his essay, Rev. Dr. Shoemaker takes an extreme Foucaultian stance, saying on page 329: “The biblical writers could have had no conception of homosexuality as an orientation, or of a lifelong committed and monogamous same-sex relationship.” How does he know this? The existence of many words of that time suggest just the opposite. See Crompton and Conner books cited above as just two examples. One does not have to be familiar with the history of the Greco-Roman world to reason that anyone could come to the conclusion that two people of the same-sex who were living together as a couple, and only having sex with the same sex, were in a relationship.

Even more damaging is Rev. Dr. Shoemaker’s attempt on page 329 to explain away Paul’s condemnations. His tortured interpretation of I Corinthians 6:9-10 attempts to let homosexuals off the hook by saying that what Paul is really condemning is *malakoi* “soft men” and *arsenokoitai* “joins two words: men and bed”. “They are most accurately translated as “male prostitutes and homosexual offenders.” Right here we notice inconsistencies. First he tells us the definitions of those words are condemning soft or effeminate men, and men who share a bed. Then he later says no, this is not the meaning, the real meaning is prostitutes. Where does he get prostitution from being soft and sharing a bed? Then, in a line of reasoning I do not follow in the least, he says what these words condemn is “the older man—younger boy form of sexual behavior called pederasty. We are talking here of exploitative, abusive, and promiscuous forms of sexual conduct.” Don’t you think that if Paul wanted to distinguish man-boy love only, he would have made that clear? There were plenty of words Paul could have used to describe these

man-boy relationships. But instead, Paul condemns effeminate men and men who share their bed with another man, across the board.

I do not think it is a moral position to say, “let’s gain acceptance for homosexuals by condemning pederasts and those who are promiscuous.” This merely continues the same old condemnations, but shifting them only to two particular subsets of homosexuals.

Instead, I think our position has to be a fundamental challenge of the Jewish-Christian-Muslim idea that sex is sinful. What is sinful is greed, theft, murder, exploitation, injustice, prejudice, discrimination.... The list can go on and on. What in the name of heaven is sinful when people want to enjoy their bodily pleasure, alone or with others? Other than forced sex, rape, or imposing oneself on another person against their will (the sin here is not the sexual act per se, but assault on another person), for people who are freely engaging in erotic pleasure, why should causing an orgasm have anything in the least to do with sin? This is the basic question we need to focus upon, to say that the fundamental mistake of these religions is to look on sex as sinful.

To try to shift the blame onto people who are promiscuous is not only an inaccurate translation, but it ignores the reality that there may be many reasons why a person is promiscuous. How about a person who moves around a lot, from city to city, in their job? Are they to be condemned just because they may seek out someone else to enjoy sex with in the place where they happen to be at the time? How about a person who may have very particular physical problems and needs to find a partner who is adaptive to that reality? Are they to be condemned because they keep searching for a compatible partner? If so, doesn’t that tell us that such a moral code is itself inflexible and unrealistic?

On page 329 he says “We have tended through the years to translate these words in line with our current prejudices.” And then in the very next sentence the Rev. Dr. Shoemaker does precisely that when he says that all man-boy relationships are “exploitative, abusive, and promiscuous.” Anthropologists and historians have found many, many societies around the world which accept the goodness of relationships that are loving and supportive, no matter what the age of the partners are. In fact, there are probably more examples of intergenerational same-sex relationships, in which the sexual closeness is only a part of a mentor-disciple relationship involving education and support for the younger partner, than there are same-age same-sex relationships.

I think we need to be extremely careful before we fall into the trap of reinterpretation of bible verses by shifting all the blame off ourselves by putting it onto only a portion of homosexuals.

You know from reading my book **OVERCOMING HETEROSEXISM AND HOMOPHOBIA: STRATEGIES THAT WORK**, in which you wrote a wonderful chapter, that there is no one single line of argument that will be effective with everyone. Some people need to be approached one way, and some need to be approached another way. But what my research shows is that appealing to peoples’ sympathy is not a very effective way to get them to accept homosexuals. “Oh, poor me, look how I have

suffered” is the overriding message of Gold’s book. I will bet if you did a survey of Christian homophobes and asked them if homosexuals suffer, they would all agree that is true. So, giving evidence of suffering does not prompt the homophobe to change their opinions. The simple answer that many homophobes would say is, “well if you don’t like all the suffering that comes with being a homosexual, then you should change.” Gold’s book says that this change is impossible, but the homophobic response would reply “then just do not have sex. Homosexual behavior is a sin, prohibited by God, so you have to stop.” No further appeals can be made from this line of reasoning.

Instead, I think a much more effective strategy is to get the homophobes to question this whole notion that sex is sin. Why do they think it is sinful? Because the Bible says that is true. The only way to challenge this idea is to get them to question whether everything the Bible says is true. In other words, if the Bible is the innerant word of God, are there any mistakes in its pages? If they say no, then that is the line of attack, to show that the Bible is full of mistakes.

When I have debated Christian homophobes, I ask them if they believe that the sun revolves around the earth, or the earth revolves around the sun. Even the most conservative fundamentalist will accept that the earth revolves around the sun. Well then, I point out, the Christian Church condemned Galileo for hundreds of years, just for saying precisely that, because the Bible says the sun revolves around the earth. How can they believe the bible and also believe that the earth revolves around the sun?

As you know, psychological research on attitude change shows that an effective strategy to get people to change their mind on an issue is to create cognitive dissonance. First it is necessary to get people to question the bible. If the bible is not correct on one thing, then how do we know it is correct on this?

You are absolutely right when you say that an effective way to get people to change their attitude is to convince them that homosexual or heterosexual orientation is something that is inborn. If you can show them this scientific evidence, they will accept it but only if they can be brought to see that the Bible is wrong on this subject. Ask them if they think the writers of the Bible were trained sexologists who had done much research and study on human sexuality. Who should they believe, the Bible or the scientific researchers?

Ask them if they would rather entrust their life savings to an experienced financial investor who has studied the stock market for years, or would they trust a bookseller who has no training in financial investments but who came to them with one book to say they should invest all of their hard-earned money into a program to sell copies of that book in Russia. “How do I know that people in Russia will want to buy this book?” I ask. And the person opens that book and says, “See, right here on page 47 it says in this book that everyone in Russia will want to buy this book.” Would I accept such evidence as proof that this assertion is true? Do I know that people in Russia would want to buy this book, merely because the book itself tells me this is true? Ask them if they would really rather trust their life savings to this book seller, rather than the trained financial investor who has years of experience in making investments in the stock market.

If they say no, then point out that this is exactly what many Christians say about the Bible. They will believe that the earth is only 6,000 years old, just because the Bible says that, rather than accepting the evidence gained by professional geologists who are trained and have much experience in studying the earth's long billions of years of existence. They will believe the Bible bookseller, rather than the trained and experienced expert. Does this make sense?

The Buddha did not really talk about "sin," but he taught that there were three things which people should try to avoid in life: greed, anger, and delusion. He said that the last of these, to believe in delusion, that is to follow an idea that evidence shows not to be true, is stupidity of the highest order. As a consequence, the Buddha emphasized learning and education, so that people can make decisions on their life based on the evidence and not on some delusion.

So, when a parent throws their teenage child out onto the street when they find out their child is homosexual, solely because they read a few quotes from the Bible saying homosexual behavior is sinful, it is necessary to get that parent to question whether those Bible quotes are correct. Or are those quotes simply a delusion?

Scholars of religion have documented over 3,800 gods and goddesses that have been believed in by people. Each one of those 3,800 deities had sacred writings dedicated to their worship. How do we know that, out of those 3,800 bibles, only the bible of the Hebrews is correct? And don't let them say, "well the Bible itself says it is the innerent word of God." So do those other bibles. So how do we know which one is true? Many of those other sacred books do NOT say that homosexuality is a sin. So how do we know which bible to believe? The one book that says it is a sin, or the many other bibles that say it is not a sin?

These are the kind of questions that need to be asked of fundamentalist Bible-thumpers. The rightness of the Bible itself needs to be challenged. Ask them if they believe in slavery. If they say no, then point out the many verses in the Bible where slavery is justified. Ask them if they believe that women should be subordinate to men. If they say no, quote the verses of Paul telling women to be submissive. Ask them if they believe that one nation has the right to invade another nation, take its land, attack and destroy its cities, and slaughter all its people including women and children. If they say no, quote them Joshua chapter 6, plus many other verses where god offered to smite the native peoples of the land of Canaan and give over their lands to the Hebrews.

If the Old Testament can be analyzed as one people's justification for their invasion of a land and their slaughter of the native peoples of that land, then that places in question many of that book's moral pronouncements. If the New Testament can be analyzed primarily as the thoughts of Paul, and then to show Paul's own insecurities (using Paul's own words to show "Oh wretched man that I am!" Romans 7-8)

In my book GAY AND LESBIAN RIGHTS IN THE UNITED STATES: A DOCUMENTARY HISTORY (Greenwood Press 2003), I selected the condemnatory quotes by Leviticus and Paul, and then contrasted them to the teachings of Jesus. I try to show the inconsistencies in what Jesus was saying, with what Paul later said. For your benefit, I attach those quotes here, along with my commentary.

Instead of appealing to the Bible, I agree wholeheartedly with your approach that our appeal must be to the Constitution. The purpose of government is not to institute God's laws on earth, which was the emphasis of European history. Instead, as Jefferson so clearly articulated in the Declaration of Independence, the fundamental purpose of government is to guarantee the rights of "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." Whatever government and society can do to maximize the happiness of the people, is at the base of good governance.

But, for those people who do not want to jettison their religion, there is a way out. And the way out is to focus on the teachings of Jesus. Not to use Jesus as a symbol of death, as the Christian churches do in their obsession with Jesus on the cross, but to actually understand closely what Jesus is saying in his teachings. A close reading of Jesus' teachings suggest that he himself questioned all those idiotic rules in the bible. And he certainly never said anything approaching the guilt-ridden condemnations that Paul articulated in his letters.

What I would like to talk further with you, during the time that I am here in Los Angeles until late December, when I will return to live in Thailand for another seven months, is a book manuscript that I am writing THE TEACHINGS OF JESUS. Part of this manuscript is posted on the internet at <http://jesusandmary.info> After you have had a chance to read this part, if you want I can send you the other parts, and we can discuss them further.

In summery, after thinking about this issue for many years, I have come to the conclusion that what is needed is an explicit questioning of the Hebrew Bible, a rejection of the writings of Paul, and a focus solely upon Jesus. This, I think, would be a more effective way to challenge Christian homophobia than the sort of appeals contained in Gold's book. He will be able to reach some people and change their attitudes, but not the majority. My strategy should be tried as well. I hope you can try to incorporate these perspectives into your anti-homophobia training. I will be anxious to meet with you to discuss these ideas further.

All my best to you and your mother and brother,
Walter