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Gay debate mirrors church split on slavery

Daniel Burke Religion News Service | Aug. 4, 2010

Analysis

One group of Christians confidently proclaims that a plain reading of the Bible is a slam-dunk in their favor. The other side appeals to scripture?s grand narrative toward freedom and inclusive love. The argument boils over and ripples through the wider culture. The search for middle ground proves futile. Denominations break apart.

Sound familiar? It could be 2010 -- or the mid 19th century.

As U.S. churches and denominations slog through divisive and long-running arguments over homosexuality, many Protestant progressives have sought to claim the historical and moral high ground by aligning their cause with abolitionism.

?I think almost everybody who makes the liberal argument about homosexuality makes the connection with abolition and slavery,? said the Rev. Jeffrey Krehbiel, a Washington, D.C., pastor in the Presbyterian Church (USA) who supports gay rights.

Abolitionists, he said, ?were the first to make the argument that the plain reading of the text maybe isn?t the most fruitful way to read the Bible.?

But while there are striking parallels between the slavery and homosexuality debates, historians caution that important differences emerge upon close examination.

In both eras, cultural trends forced Christians to question practices that had long been taken for granted, said Mark Noll, a professor of American religious history at the University of Notre Dame and author of The Civil War as a Theological Crisis.

Likewise, the Bible, and how to interpret it, has played a central role both then and now, Noll said.

In the 19th century, even some Northern abolitionists admitted that the Bible clearly condones slavery. Many, therefore, sought other sources of morality and methods of biblical interpretation; conservatives countered that such appeals undermine the power of the sacred text.

As conflict heated up, Noll writes in his book, slavery?s defenders increasingly saw ?doubts about biblical defense of slavery as doubts about the authority of the Bible itself.?

At the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA) earlier this month, James Joseph, a youth advisory delegate from Allentown, Pa., argued against allowing sexually active gay clergy. ?We cannot defend the lowering of our ordination standards in contradiction to so many explicit passages in the Bible,? he said.

The resolution to allow gay clergy passed by a slim margin, but the contentious debate will continue as 173

regional presbyteries decide whether to ratify it.

As with slavery, few Christians are neutral on homosexuality. ?Like the situation in the 1830s and ?40s, once a certain kind of heat is generated it becomes really hard to talk through these various kinds of debating strategies and implications,? Noll said.

Methodists, Presbyterians and Baptists (and, to some extent, Episcopalians) all split over slavery, mainly along the Mason-Dixon Line. Some reunited centuries later. Baptists remain apart to this day.

Likewise, in the last few years, a number of mainline Protestant congregations have parted with their denominations over homosexuality, though in far fewer numbers than during mid-19th century splits.

But the exodus may not be over, as conservative Presbyterians and United Methodists have threatened to leave en masse if their denomination decides to allow gay clergy and same-sex marriages.

?The parallels to the contemporary debate are fairly striking,? said Mark Valeri, a professor of church history at Union Presbyterian Seminary in Richmond, Va.

?You have a long-simmering moral dispute that heats up an ecclesiastical and political question, which results in a division. And the question is, when the division creates branches, how courts adjudicate those disputes.?

Valeri was an expert witness in one such court case, concerning nine congregations in northern Virginia that voted to split from the Episcopal church.

The churches, which argued that the 2003 consecration of an openly gay bishop in New Hampshire undercut biblical injunctions against homosexuality, appealed to an 1867 law in asking to keep parish property. That law was put in place to protect parishes that divided during and after the Civil War, said Valeri. This spring, the Virginia Supreme Court ruled against the congregations.

But there are key differences between the disputes over slavery and homosexuality, historians say. For instance, many conservatives say that it is not simply the gay issue that is driving them out the door, but a long liberal trend in mainline denominations that stretches back 30 years or more.

Secondly, scripture shows only a grudging tolerance of slavery, a far cry from its ringing endorsement of heterosexual unions, argues Robert Gagnon, an associate professor of New Testament at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. ?What kind of legitimate analogy can be made between the two? In my opinion, absolutely none. It?s just night and day,? he said.

Moreover, what seem like clashes over biblical interpretation can mask the role of self-interest in the debates. Southern plantation owners -- and the pastors they built churches for -- had a huge financial stake in the slavery debate, said Charles Irons, an assistant professor of church history at North Carolina?s Elon University.

Today, it is not easy to see where the financial -- or political -- advantage lies in supporting or opposing gay rights, he said.

Finally, Noll notes that the theological crisis over slavery was ultimately decided politically by generals and armies. Almost everyone agrees that the homosexuality debate will more likely be settled by judges and lawmakers.

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