

The amazing Bible: studied

by Erik Van Appledorn

I would like to reply to Edward Borges-Silva's letter concerning Christianity and homosexuality. I hope you will excuse the length. I felt it important to include concrete examples rather than offering a superficial response.

Edward makes the common Fundamentalist mistake of referring questions such as homosexuality to "the Word of God," by which he means that group of varied compositions which have, by historical accident and official decree, been assembled into what is now known as the Bible.

Contrary to Edward's belief, the New Testament Canon, those books considered authoritative by the Church, was not divinely determined. The first listing of the twenty-seven books we know as the New Testament was not made until the Easter letter of Athanasius of Alexandria in 367 A.D. declared them canonical. Prior to that time there was much disagreement as to what was authoritative and what was not. Keep in mind that there were other Christian documents in circulation which the Church finally suppressed. Early church fathers quote sayings of Jesus which are found nowhere in the present New Testament. There were also reservations about some of the books later accepted as canonical. Eusebius, a famous church historian (ca. 260-340) mentioned that Revelation was not accepted universally, a view shared by the great reformer, Martin Luther, in the 16th century. Luther relegated Hebrews, James, Jude, and the Revelation to an appendix to his German translation of the Bible. Even in modern times some churchmen have felt that the New Testament Canon should be revised. So it is obvious that the New Testament books were selected by men, not God.

If everything in the Bible were "Divinely inspired," it is impossible to account for quotations from non-canonical books in the New Testament, itself. Jude quotes the Apocalypse of Moses (Jude 8-9) and 1 Enoch (Jude 14-15), both extra-canonical works. Even the Old Testament canon was not fixed until about A.D. 90.

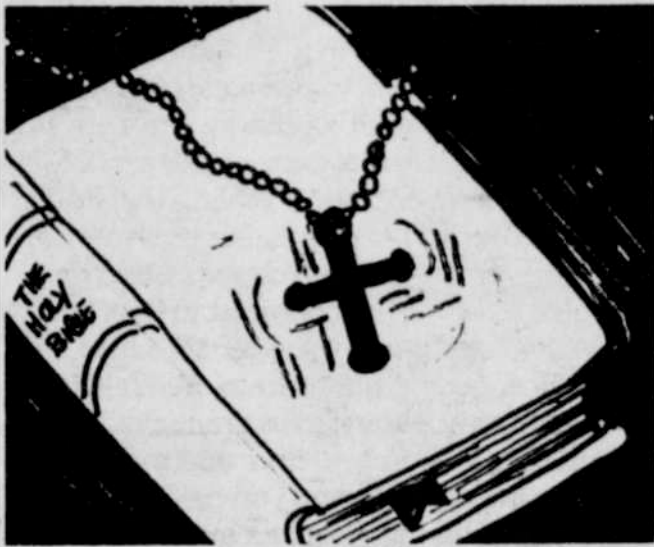
Edward states "Modern Greek as a language is not very much different from Classical Greek, and neither are difficult to translate for the trained linguist." This is very misleading. While it is true that Modern Greek is descended from Classical Greek, the New Testament is written neither in Classical nor Modern Greek, and has its own grammatical peculiarities. Translation is sometimes difficult due to obscure terms and unclear grammar. Words can change meaning drastically over a long period of time, and some fall out of use and are forgotten. For example, even in English, "gay" does not mean the same to me as it did to my great grandfather. There are substantial differences even between Classical and New Testament Greek. The Greek word *laleo* meant "to babble" (like a child) in Classical Greek. In the New Testament it just means "to speak," and can be used even of divine discourse.

The words used by Paul in 1 Corinthians 6:9-10, a well-known "homosexual" statement, are peculiar, and their precise meaning can only be determined by careful

study both of the language and of the original cultural environment.

As for grammatical difficulties, there are very tricky problems. One text popular among Fundamentalists to "prove" Biblical infallibility is an example: 2 Timothy 3:16 says "All scripture is given by inspiration of God — ." The word translated "inspiration of God" (*theopneustos* in Greek) is not found elsewhere in the New Testament, and can mean either "inspired" or "inspiring." There are only four words in the Greek (*pasa graphe theopneustos kai* —), and the Greek text has no equivalent of our word "is." So the words can also mean "Every inspired scripture — " which is a far different thing from "All scripture is inspired by God — ."

Returning to the subject of infallibility, it is fairly simple to demonstrate that the New Testament is often confused, discordant and contradictory, and can hardly be looked to as some sort of inerrant oracle which tells us how to treat (or mistreat) our fellow humans.



Take, for example, the accounts in the four gospels of the first Easter morning — the resurrection, the pivotal moment in Christian history. Are they eminently clear and in total agreement, as one would expect of a divine document treating such an eminently important subject? Let's see:

Matthew says that early in the morning Mary Magdalene and "the other Mary" came "to see" the sepulchre where Jesus' body had been placed; and there was a "Great earthquake," and an angel descended from heaven, rolled back the stone from the door, and sat on it, frightening the guards. He told the women not to fear, that Jesus was risen. Then he told them to go quickly and tell the disciples the news, and that Jesus would go before them into Galilee, where they would see him. The women left and ran to bring word to the disciples. On the way Jesus met them, and they "came and held him by the feet and worshiped him."

The Gospel of Mark, however, relates that early in the morning three women went to the tomb, not just two as in Matthew. The women did not come just to "see" the sepulchre, as Matthew said, but came to anoint the body with spices. They did not experience an earthquake, and no lightning-faced angel descended from heaven, and no guards are mentioned at all. So the women just find the stone inexplicably rolled away. They enter the sepulchre and see a "young man" sitting clothed in a white garment. He tells them Jesus is risen, and instructs them to go and tell "the disciples and Peter", not just the disciples as in Matthew, that Jesus would go before them into Galilee, and there they would see him. The women then flee the sepulchre, trembling and amazed, and because of their fear they don't say anything to

anyone. The Gospel continues, relating three appearances of Jesus and his ascension, but all of this latter section has been added later, and is not found in the earliest and best manuscripts which end with the women fleeing the tomb and keeping quiet (Mark 16:8) (this is just one example of how the Gospels have been altered).

Luke's Gospel tells us that the number of women who went to the tomb that morning was not two, as in Matthew, or three, as in Mark, but at least five, perhaps more. They didn't feel an earthquake or see an angel sitting on the stone, or notice any guards, either. They just found the stone rolled away, went in, saw the body was missing, and were perplexed. Then "two men stood by them in shining garments." Not an angel outside, as in Matthew, or a young man inside, as in Mark. The two men told the women Jesus was risen and asked them to remember a prediction Jesus made to them "when he was yet in Galilee." The women returned from the sepulchre, and didn't keep quiet as in Mark, but "told all these things to the eleven and to all the rest." Notice that what in Matthew and Mark was a prediction that Jesus would meet them in Galilee becomes in Luke a prediction that Jesus made in Galilee before His death. And though we are told the apostles didn't believe the Lukan women, nonetheless, Peter goes to investigate, sees the empty graveclothes, and goes away, an event which neither Matthew nor Mark relate.

The Fourth Gospel adds to the confusion by stating that on Easter morning not two women (Matthew), or three women (Mark), or five or more women (Luke) showed up at the sepulchre, but just one, Mary Magdalene, the only person mentioned in all four accounts. She didn't see any angels, or young men, or guards, and felt no earthquake. She just noted (on her first visit; John lists more than one!) that the stone was taken away, and ran to tell Peter and the "beloved disciple." She told them someone had taken the body, and she didn't know where it was. Peter and the other disciple ran to the tomb and confirmed that the body was gone, and went home. Mary Magdalene, however, came back to the tomb also. She wept outside, then peeked in and saw two angels in white sitting where the body had been. Then she turned around and saw someone she thought was the gardener, but who turned out to be Jesus. He ordered her not to touch Him because he had not yet ascended. This is in direct contradiction with Matthew, who states that his women, one of whom was Mary Magdalene, met Jesus and "came and held him by the feet," without any protest from Jesus. Jesus (in John) then told Mary to go to His brethren and tell them He was ascending. She did so.

One could continue the narratives and pile contradiction on contradiction, but the reader by now should be aware that consistency and accuracy are not Biblical characteristics. I would just like to add one more: Paul, who did not know Jesus before the

crucifixion, also mentioned the resurrection. He writes in 1 Corinthians 15 that Jesus was "seen of Cephas, then of the twelve." No mention at all of any women.

So you see, Edward, it doesn't really matter how one translates what Paul is asserted to have said about homosexuality. To any thinking person who bothers to do a little research, it will become obvious that anything Paul has to say is simply his opinion, not an infallible decree in an infallible book. It might be interesting to, as Edward advises, "get a Bible, study it, be open to it — it will amaze you." It will amaze you that anyone could idolize such a document and use it to condemn and hurt other human beings, using it as a pious excuse for narrowmindedness and bigotry.

Leaving Biblical matters, Edward's contention that advocates for freedom "could not honestly oppose" a group which has as its goal the changing of sexual orientation" in "individuals who are troubled, or have doubts, or desire to re-polarize their sexuality in order to return to the straight community" totally overlooks the motivation of such groups as "Homosexuals Anonymous" and the potential psychological damage to their "patients." Such organizations use faulty theology and the shame and guilt it engenders to psychologically pressure those for whom homosexuality is a natural, healthy way of life to contort their sexuality into the Fundamentalist mold. There is no estimating the mental anguish and damage and loss of life that has been wreaked on gay people by Fundamentalism and its theology of guilt and repression.

As the Swiss psychoanalyst Carl Jung pointed out, many people repress those qualities they believe are unacceptable in themselves, but they also project them onto others used as scapegoats for their own psychological fears. Thus it is not uncommon for men who, due to Fundamentalist indoctrination or for other reasons are terrified of their own repressed gay sexuality, to project their negative feelings about themselves onto other gay people and to attempt to punish these others for what they have been taught to hate in themselves.

I would not devote so much time to responding to Edward's letter were it not for the current unholy wedding between Fundamentalism and politics which once more is threatening the freedom of gays and others who don't fit Fundamentalist preconceptions. I have no doubt that if Fundamentalism somehow gained political control in this country, gays would be persecuted, imprisoned, and perhaps executed under the Nazi mentality of political Fundamentalism. I only hope that Fundamentalists can eventually learn from real Christians, such as the Quakers, that book worship stands in the way of true spirituality and leads to hatred and disension rather than to a genuine experience of the "inner light" and the ability to see "that of God in every man" (and woman!); how unimportant in this light is the small matter of sexual preference.

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