Argument from Silence: Jesus didn't Say Anything about Homosexuality **[1]**

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It seems like debates regarding homosexuality has flared up again recently. Fueled by news regarding (proposed) same-sexed marriage legislation in the USA [2], UK [3] and France [4], as well as bans on "homosexual propaganda" in Russia [5], everyone is weighing in their two cents. And one of the arguments which I am seeing for Christians to "get with it", is that Jesus never said anything (about/against) homosexuality.

Having recently written [6] about the prevalence of these debates and the consequences which it would one day lead to, I was hoping to not return to this topic for a while. I also do not want to give the impression that I am some militant crusader focusing all this energy on this topic. But the oft touted argument from silence (from Stephen Colbert [7] to every second opinion holder on the Internet) is so bad that I wanted to set the record straight.

The Argument from Silence

The argument is as follows: Jesus did not said anything about homosexuality. This means that Jesus did not say anything negatively about homosexuality. If homosexuality is such a bad thing like Christians make it out to be, Jesus would have said something about it. Therefore Christians do not have a basis for make judgements or pronouncements against homosexuality. Like the Old Testament laws prohibiting the eating of shellfish, Christians should ignore the topic and let our modern, enlightened society take care of the matter without objecting or otherwise interfering1. While it is true that other figures in the New Testament speak about homosexuality, the obviously got it wrong [8] and twisted Christianity into something which it was not meant to be2.

A Response

This argument seems to me to be quite generous. While it rejects most of the New Testament, it accepts the gospels as truthful, or at least allows Christians to accept it as truthful. This is far more than what most opponents of religion are willing to grant.

While Jesus had a universal message, He came into this world at a specific point in time to a specific people group. He dealt with their situations, in their language, but in a way which transcended their time and situation and echoes down until this day (although some rudimentary knowledge of ancient Israel does help a lot when reading the gospels, because then we are better able to understand the point that Jesus was making). First century Jewish culture was very conservative, to say the least. They strictly kept the Law as laid down by Moses, with a bunch of others thrown into the mix just to be extra safe of not accidentally committing a sin. Heterosexual adultery was enough to get you

killed, let alone homosexual acts (which carried the same penalty). Within that culture, homosexuality was a non-issue, being ranked alongside beastiality and other abominable practises. Now, I am not saying that homosexuality did not exist at all in first century Israel: who can say what happened inside closed barns and out in the fields when the shepherds were tending their flocks far away from home? But while it may have been present in secret, I believe that it was not more prevalent than beastiality would have been. And it was certainly never spoken about because, as mentioned, it carried the death penalty. So as far as the culture as a whole was concerned, homosexuality was a non-issue. People did not see it on the street, they did not have their children coming out of the closet, the leaders of the nation did not mull over legalising same-sex unions. All these things (which are so common to us today), was a non-issue, not only in ancient Israel, but across most of the world for centuries after Jesus, until about a hundred or so years ago. The point which I am trying to make is that it would have been weird for Jesus to say anything about homosexuality within that context. To be quite frank, it would have been as anachronistic for Jesus to say something about homosexuality as it would have been for Him to speak about embryonic stem cell research and intellectual property law.

So if Jesus did not have a reason to talk about homosexuality, why is it mentioned later in the New Testament? The reason is context. I have already laboured the point that Jesus lived and ministered in the conservative setting of ancient Israel. But the Christians who went out to evangelise the more liberal nations (specifically the Greco-Roman world) were confronted with open, unashamed homosexual practises. Paul's encounter with lesbianism (Romans 1:26) is a poignant reminder of how conservative and sheltered the Jews were and unfathomable the concept had been up until the point where they witnessed it for the first time (Paul was of course previously a Pharisee, a learned Jewish scholar). As all Christians do, the apostles and early evangelists were confronted with real world situations and they had to look to the core teachings of Jesus to discern how to approach those situations. And *how* they did that is a big part of why their writings are included in the biblical canon.

What Jesus did Say

There is something which Jesus did say, however, which is often glossed over. I know that I shall not be making many friends by pointing this out, but here goes. Relating indirectly to homosexuality (as well as many other thing which He did not speak about explicitly), Jesus did make a pronouncement in John 8:58. Reading it for the first time, it may not seem like it. It is a strange passage, with some bad grammar. But the grammar was chosen very carefully, in both the original Greek and our modern English translations. That pronouncement by Jesus was meant to echo the one in Exodus 3:13–14. In that passage, God is speaking to Moses from the burning bush. God identifies Himself to Moses using the name by which the Israelites were to know God. Jesus alludes to those words, making a direct claim to be God Himself. It is a thin thread how it relates to homosexuality, but the reader should continue reading after the Exodus passage right until the end of the Torah (that is, the first five books of the Bible, known in Judaism as the Law). The reader will notice that everything from the burning bush to the death of Moses forms a single, coherent narrative. It is the same story. Along the way, God mentioned the prohibition of homosexuality, listed next to other abominations such as incest and beastiality. Jesus knew His Bible very well and knew exactly what that claim would imply about His views about right and wrong. So we see that to make use of the argument of silence would be to *condemn* homosexuality, because Jesus would have to make special mention about it to *exempt* it from to what He was ascribing.

What Jesus would have Said about Homosexuality

I really do not like playing the "What Would Jesus Do" game, for reasons I hope to clarify in a future article. But in this case I want to make an exception. Let us imagine that Jesus was going about His business of instructing people and healing the sick, when all of a sudden some Jews bring before him a man who was caught in the act of sodomy with another man. The Jews have fire in their eyes and are ready to stone the man to death. But some of the more wily Jews have seized upon the opportunity to turn this situation into a trap for Jesus (as they often tended to do). Knowing that Jesus preaches love and forgiveness, they want to see whether He will go against the Law of Moses, thus proving that He is not the Messiah, or agree with the Jewish leaders and therefore would have

to renounce some of His own earlier teachings. Sure that their plan cannot fail, they ask Jesus what should happen to this man. Jesus quietly looks at them, and tells them that whoever amongst them is without sin, should throw the first stone at the accused. Slowly, the angry crowd begins to disperse; acknowledging that they are not without even the slightest of sins, no-one is willing to pick up the first stone to pass judgement. When everyone else has left, the man looks at Jesus and asks what should now happen to him. Jesus looks at him, and tells him that if the others did not condemn him to death, then neither will He. He tells him that he may go on his way, *and that he should no longer continue to sin*.

Sounds about right? [9]

Conclusion

The argument from silence about Jesus and homosexuality is a bad one. Please do not use it. And before you jump on the next "obvious Christian defeater" bandwagon, please take some time, pick up a Bible and read it for yourself. I am willing to bet that the person who makes that next clever comment do not know his or her Bible very well, so make sure you do, at least.

- 1. For why this is not the case, please see this [10] previous article which I wrote.
- 2. Interesting how an all powerful God would allow His own message to become corrupted within the first generation from Jesus and they have those corruptions be ascribed to as "His divinely inspired word"...

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