

By 2005 I noticed it, like a mild stomach bug—a queasy feeling my evangelical views on LGBTQ were wrong. Most pastors, even privately-affirming ones, don't hear candid accounts of the suffering of gender and sexual minorities in their church. They don't hear from the kids, not yet out, who internalize the stigma of a church culture that reserves affirmation—by conviction or fear. I had to study Scripture myself, in depth, to do anything about it. But pastors are practitioners, not scholars, occupied with capital campaigns, supervising staff, putting out fires. Little time for study, especially if it rocks the boat. Still, I couldn't shake it until it doubled me over: These policies are harmful: shaming, consigning LGBTQ people to lifelong, religiously-imposed celibacy. If true, *Oh God!* enforcing them would be a violation of my pastoral vow.

Most pastors rely on trusted authorities within their religious comfort zone. The study required to swim against that current is daunting. We learn that every text derives its meaning from its linguistic, cultural, historical context. Plucking texts out of context and applying them to concerns the writers were not addressing is interpretive malpractice. Key questions about context are contested. How daunting is all this? Think, telling your grandma who has never owned a laptop or a smartphone to figure out how to get on Zoom: Google IT grandma.

Few put in the effort required, and only after their conscience is screaming at them. Years ago the evidence was hidden. Now it's obvious: Exodus Intl, the ex-gay ministry, disbanded in 2013 because they saw the harm; studies show an LGBTQ child raised in a non-affirming church incurs several mental health risks as result—even though for straight, cis-gendered people church is a mental health benefit. But we only need to hear our LGBTQ loved ones tell of the psychological torture caused by church teachings, now a rising tide of witness. However, it's easy to buffer oneself from their witness if the social cost is high. So, allies in the religious realm need to grow some ovaries. We hope to help you, not by avoiding Scripture but by diving into it

Today we're dealing with the one thing we all share: an awareness of harm. You're here because you know in your gut the traditional reading is harmful to yourself or your loved ones. Paying attention to the problem of harm is not a soft-hearted intuition to be balanced by "the clear teaching of Scripture." As if to say, "on the one hand love, on the other hand Scripture." Scripture itself urges us to be alert to the problem of harm.

We're not dumbing it down, because there's too much at stake and you are more highly motivated than most pastors are. You'll have to be patient with the learning as we take one piece at a time. You don't have to master all the details. The notes and recordings will be available for review. Once you get all the pieces, things will fall into place. You will have strengthened conviction and new confidence, I promise. Let's go with today's piece: First, Do No Harm, the Foundation of an Affirming Theology.

Most Christians are only aware of a few NT proof texts trotted out by liberal Christians to address the problem of harm. Some version of **“love your neighbor as yourself”** [the love that requires empathy and attention to harm] is cited 8X...often as a key principle for interpreting Scripture. How so? Jesus summarizes the Sermon on the Mount (his exposition of biblical ethics) saying **“In everything do to others as you would have them do to you: this is the Law and the prophets [the Bible]”** (Mt. 7:12) Paul echoes this: **“the entire law is fulfilled in this one command: love your neighbor as yourself”** (Gal. 5:14); James echoes this (James 2:8). Just in case we needed reminding that harming people is not loving them Paul in Romans adds, **“Love doesn’t harm the neighbor, therefore love is the fulfilling of the law” (Ro. 13:10.)** Jesus followers experienced being harmed by those misusing Scripture. Paul himself did this before his revelation on the road to Damascus. So they were attuned to this problem and addressed it.

These are not isolated verses but the tip of an iceberg. Beneath the surface of the NT is what? The Hebrew Bible (what Christians call Old Testament)—the only Bible Jesus and the NT writers had. These writings undergird a robust “do no harm” ethic—the mass below tip of the iceberg.

At height of the Cold War, when Khrushchev pounded his shoe at the UN, he said something in Russian that was translated on the spot as “We will bury you!” it sounded like a threat of nuclear attack! But the UN translator, raised in London, missed the nuance of Khrushchev’s words. It was an idiom that meant **“We will outlast you.”**

Many things get lost or mangled in the act of translating, interpreting, and teaching Scripture. Why? Because these are ancient *Jewish* writings, including the New Testament [Show] And non-Jewish pastors pay too little attention to the Hebrew Bible, the Bible of Jesus and Paul. Even the Christian scholars only know the Hebrew scriptures as a second language not a native tongue.

Before we dive in, remember what evangelical seminaries teach but pastors rarely stress: Scripture doesn’t interpret itself. It’s a collection of written documents. All written documents require a reader who interprets what is written. Take the sayings of Jesus, written in the gospels. We know tone of voice greatly affects meaning. With written words, we can only guess at tone of voice. So all reading is an act of interpretation. Jesus knew this. When asked ‘What’s needed to inherit life?’ He answered, **“What has been written. How do you read it?”** (Lk 10:26)

We read our Bibles through lenses of our culture, our religious group, our experience, our knowledge and our ignorance. We need the lens of first importance offered by Scripture itself: First do no harm. [Acknowledge debt scholars: Jacob Milgrom, Richard Friedman, Shawna Dolansky, Mary Douglas, and my friends Don Schiewer, David Gushee, and Caroline Kittle.]

Harming people in this life is the primary ethical concern of Scripture, starting with Genesis.

The fruit of disconnection from the divine presence is evident in the murder of Abel followed by the spread of violence among Cain’s descendants. By Genesis 6, the earth is filled with violence. And crucially, God is portrayed as *affected* by this harm—against humans, other creatures, and creation.

This harm, it is written, “fills God’s heart with pain” (6:6) When we suffer God suffers. Genesis is especially concerned with family members ganging up on innocent victims—we call it scapegoating—it happens to Abel, Hagar, Ishmael, and it’s the drama of the longest narrative, the story of Joseph, an innocent victim ganged up on by his own brothers.

Concern for harm in this life intensifies in Exodus, where the Hebrews suffer crushing harm (vividly depicted) at the hands of their Egyptian overlords. YHWH is introduced as the God who is *affected* by the cries of afflicted people. God’s deliverance is deliverance from a situation of harm to one of safety (Shalom). Exodus ends with construction of a tabernacle in which divine presence dwells and humans can learn to approach God as a nearby neighbor

The “do no harm” ethic is expanded in Leviticus ... a book more important than we think. Many resolutions to read straight thru Bible run aground on Leviticus. There we find: priestly instruction for temple worship, sacrifices, kosher food laws, purity rules—such foreign ways of thinking for modern people! But Ancient Near East had priests, temples, food laws, and purity codes. These weren’t invented by Israel. Israel *adapted* them to their purposes, often radically reforming them in the direction of do no harm. So yes, our eyes glaze over when we encounter these rituals, but rituals convey an ethic. Our modern rituals do. Baseball is set of rituals that convey an ethic: unbiased umpires make the calls, not players; “3 strikes, you’re out” conveys an ethic: 1st time someone does you wrong? Bygones. 2nd time? Warning lights. 3rd time? They’re out. Leviticus conveys an ethic through its rituals—a do no harm ethic.

Irony alert! Leviticus also contains the only 2 verses in the OT that address same-gender sex. The *only* other writer who does so is Paul, so when we cover Paul on this question, this background is important, because Paul was informed by Leviticus. Before we briefly cover the Leviticus clobber verses, let’s consider the underlying harm alleviation ethic imbedded in the rituals of Leviticus. This may be more fun than you think (he said, hopefully.)

First, the book of Leviticus explicitly frames its instructions as life-giving, not harmful. Since God’s instructions, properly understood, are intended as a blessing in this life; harmful effects in this life indicate improper understanding of any instruction.

Did you know the ancient sages of Israel taught, “**all the laws of Torah (except idolatry, incest, and bloodshed) are set aside if their observance will endanger the preservation of human life**” (see b. Sanh. 74a). Thus, when harm is noticed as an outcome of observing any divine instruction, the continued observance must be suspended. This is a powerful principle for approaching interpretations of texts that result in evident harm to LGBTQ+ people today.

Second, compared to the temple rituals of the surrounding nations, the temple rituals focus on human agency to cause harm. In the nearby nations, sacrifices and incantations are offered to protect humans from harmful effects of demonic realm. Leviticus pays no attention to the demonic realm.

Humans are the agents of harm. This is the basis for modern ethics. (Paul has little to say about demons as well; he too is focused on human agency.)

Third, the kosher food laws of Leviticus seem arcane to us, but they severely limit harm caused by the human appetite for food. Only three species of quadrupeds—cattle, sheep, and goats—are permitted for food (plus a few species of fowl.) Deuteronomy adds a short list of wild quadrupeds allowed for hunting. In Genesis, it's plant food only at first. Leviticus imposes this is severe limitation on meat eating (the earliest tradition says only animals slaughtered in the temple can provide food!) The animal couldn't be clubbed, strangled or drowned—It had to be slaughtered painlessly. The blood of any creature is forbidden as a food source, because ***“the life is in the blood.”*** This ethic far exceeds our modern protections of animal life!

Fourth, the temple sacrifices, contrary to popular belief, convey a kinder and gentler approach to sin than many Christians promote. Temple sacrifices were not about protecting humans from God's wrath by slaughtering an animal. That was a pagan idea—one that reappears in the evangelical doctrine of “penal substitutionary atonement” (the theory that God's wrath at all humans for any sin requires the bloody sacrifice of Jesus).

In Hebrew, “sacrifice” is derived from the verb “come near.” There were five categories of sacrifice; some involved grain and oil, not animals; sacrifices could express thanksgiving, fellowship with God, fulfillment of a vow; those dealing with sin focused on **inadvertent** sins. This teaches that most of our misdeeds are inadvertent, unintentional, done in ignorance. Sacrifice for intentional sin happened once a year (Yom Kippur) and covered the intentional sins of the whole community. This is the opposite of ginning up guilt and shame over sin. Most of our wrongs are inadvertent (we don't know what we're doing). We don't have to gin up feelings of guilt and shame. We need to do better once we know better. See how different this ethic is from the hyper-focused, alarmist, neurotic preoccupation with sin in much of Christianity?

We don't have time for the purity laws of Leviticus, except to say they too are a radical reform of the purity codes of neighboring nations. The preeminent Jewish scholar of Leviticus, Jacob Milgrom, demonstrates this. Most impurity rules had to do with temple worship and nothing to do with sin. A person contracted impurity in natural course of living—by contact with corpses, genital discharge, and a couple of other things. It was easily resolved: by waiting till nightfall or a week or two, or a ritual bath. A much kinder-gentler approach than the neighboring nations. [The Evangelical application of purity language to everything but sex between a man and his one wife goes way beyond Leviticus, but this is a topic in its own right. Back to our theme.]

Finally, anti-harm ethic of Leviticus occurs in Its pinnacle chapter, Chapter 19. This is where we find, ***“you shall love your neighbor as yourself”***—which applied not only to Israel, but to the foreigners living in the land. It is fleshed out as well: *don't hate your neighbor in your heart, don't take revenge or nurse a grudge, don't cheat in business, treat immigrants and the handicapped well.* Or this, which is

applies to our advocacy for LGBTQ people: ***“You shall not stand aloof over the blood of your fellow”*** [don’t stand by while others are being harmed]

“Love your neighbor as yourself” is the love that requires empathy and attentiveness to harm (both to ourselves and others) Jacob Milgrom says of it: ***This, arguably, is the ethical summit not only in this chapter but in all of Scripture*** Jesus, Paul, and James agree with Milgrom. Because they too were informed by the ethic enacted in the Leviticus rituals. And like baseball rituals have primed Americans to write “3 strikes, you’re out” laws, the ancient rituals of Israel, sensitized Israel to the problem of harm in the religious sphere.

Now we take 5 minutes to cover those two clobber verses: 18:22 & 20:13. Then back to our do-no-harm tour. Chapters 18 & 20 cover prohibited sexual relations; Leviticus 20 repeats much of Leviticus 18 with a slightly different focus. The main focus is various forms of incest—the male head of household can’t have sex with certain relatives living in his extended family compound. Oddly, daughters are not included in the list. This illustrates that ancient law codes are not precise, often opaque, not comprehensive. Sex with a menstruating woman is prohibited (reason not given) as is having sex with another man’s wife.

The only other sexual prohibition is Lev. 18:22 (20: 13): ***“A man shall not lay with a man, as the layings of a woman.”*** No reason is given. The Hebrew wording is narrow: the phrase used only applies to intercourse—so anal sex. (Studies show a significant percentage of gay couples who are men, do not engage in anal sex for a variety of reasons.)

When the reason for a prohibition isn’t given, we look to the context for clues. Leviticus 18 and 20 open with warnings against the ways of surrounding nations, especially idol worship—the source of all sin in Jewish thinking. It’s possible the offense of anal intercourse had to do with its connection to pagan worship practices. Deuteronomy includes a ban on male shrine prostitutes—remember men did the temple worship in Ancient Near East. That’s possible. There may be other pagan worship practices we don’t know of that involve anal sex. Roman men practiced anal sex with male temple prostitutes in temples dedicated to Zeus, who showed phallic dominance his young male consort, Ganymede. In the Ancient Near East, penetrating another male was a form of domination that shamed him. In which case, it not about loving intimacy, but about domination and violence.

It’s extremely unlikely homosexuality *per se* was in view. It wasn’t until 1859 that a word was coined to refer to those with a primary sexual attraction to members of the same gender—just as marriage between equals was unknown until later modern times.

There’s an even more compelling piece of evidence that homosexuality *per se* is not in view: lesbian sex isn’t prohibited here, where it would be expected if same-gender sex *per se* were the concern addressed by the writer (Scripture cannot address all possible concerns.)

This next part is R-rated, so cover your ears kids: Jewish scholars Friedman and Dolansky say polygamy was common in ancient Israel—no law against a man having several wives (even concubines) as

Solomon and David did. They point out that in polygamy, group sex happens—a man has sexual contact with more than one wife at the same time in a group setting. In such a setting, it's likely the wives, while not attended to by the one male in the room, may have fooled around with each other. So the ancients were not ignorant of sexual contact between females. And this was a traditional society concerned to control female sexuality. The absence of a prohibition on lesbian sex is all the more telling. A female sexual practice *is* forbidden in the verse following 18:22 (where you would expect lesbian sex to be prohibited if homosexuality were the concern) but this verse prohibits female bestiality (also prohibited for men in Lev. 20)

Friedman/Dolansky provide another compelling reason not to apply this to gay people today (remember marriage bans affect trans people, too, since the church disputes their gender)

Leviticus 18:22 and 20:3 prohibit “***a man laying with a man as the layings of a woman***” adding, “***it is toe'vah.***” Older Bibles translate *toe'vah* as “abomination.” But Hebrew scholars agree this is a poor translation since *abomination* means the worst conceivable sin against God. A better translation is “offensive”: *it is offensive.*

Now Friedman/Dolansky demonstrate *toevah-offensive* is not used as a moral absolute in the Bible. What is considered *toevah-offensive* is different in different times/cultures. Moses tells Pharaoh the Hebrews need to leave Egypt to worship God because it would be *toevah* to do so in Egypt. Joseph says shepherds are *toevah-offensive* to Egyptians. The founders of Israel do things (marry half-sister) considered *toevah-offensive* in Leviticus, but not in their time. We find a 30 year-old man “marrying” a 13-year-old girl offensive. Not in the time of the NT.

Here's the kicker, though: Friedman/Dolansky say “**the Bible specifically identifies laws about things that are divine offenses (offensive to God)—'toevah YHWH' but that phrase is not used in Leviticus 18:22 or 20: 13.** These verses do not say anal sex is offensive *to God*.”

The traditional certainty is hanging by a very thin thread, indeed. This is grossly insufficient justification to apply these verses to the gay people we know and love today, ***in view of the harm we know this causes.*** In other words, *your* gut feeling, *your* observation, *your* awareness of the harm these interpretations cause LGBTQ people—harm vividly *experienced* if you are a gender or sexual minority—is buttressed by Scripture itself. Let's finish our tour on this theme.

On to the Wisdom writings. In Psalms the major threat addressed is an innocent victim surrounded by a mob. “***They have spoken against me with a lying tongue. They have also surrounded me with words of hatred, and fought against me without a cause. In return for my love they are my accusers***” (109) Or, “***They have tracked me down, they now surround me, with eyes alert, to throw me to the ground. They are like a lion hungry for prey, like a fierce lion crouching in cover***” (17) Psalms are best loved portions of Scripture and many concern innocent victims thought to be guilty, surrounded by a hostile mob (often composed of former friends not foreign foes.) This is what at LGBTQ people experience in many churches.

In 2014 my colleague Emily fell in love with Rachel. My book had been published. VUSA officials mounted a campaign against her, ignoring due process. They effectively outed her when her relationship was just starting. Emily had a choice: either get out of Dodge or tell her story to our church. She told her story to 1000 congregants, who gave her a standing ovation. But behind the scenes a mob formed—powerful donors, a vocal minority who opposed gay marriage, key leaders who went along, though they claimed to support Emily, working with denominational officials. Net effect: Emily was forced out and I went with her, to found Blue Ocean Church, Ann Arbor. Mobs are formed by a few ringleaders launching accusations, enabled by silent bystanders who violate Lev. 19:16: ***“You shall not stand aloof from the blood of your fellow.”***

This theme in Psalms is powerfully reinforced in Job—another innocent victim whose closest friends turn on him and gaslight him with God-talk, as if his sins brought on his misfortune.

Psalms & Job model the right of howling protest, a right our LGBTQ loved ones possess. Nora Heal Hurston (African American memoirist), ***“If you’re silent about your pain, they’ll kill you and say you enjoyed it.”***

Of course, the prophets are attuned to the harm done to the vulnerable by the powerful —it’s the overriding ethical concern of the prophets (and Jesus) Ezekiel has several chapters devoted to shepherds of Israel harming the people they are meant to care for. God himself, who is affected by the harm, “I myself will come down and shepherd my people and save them from these shepherds who harm them for personal gain!”

CONCLUSION

There is a theme woven throughout the Bible—missed by our bias against writings we don’t understand using foreign-to-us concepts we misrepresent. This theme is reinforcing the obvious: hurting people is not OK, no matter how many Bible texts you marshal in your defense of cruelty. We have the Spirit in us, and we are bearers of the divine image. We don’t need the Bible to tell us this. We don’t need the Bible to tell us to brush out teeth or to warn us against driving without a seat belt or to wear our sunscreen. But ... because the ancient world was filled with people harming each other in the name of their God, this is an important part of the teaching of Israel passed on to us. Messiah’s sufferings depicted when we gather at the communion table remind us. His rising from the dead vindicates everyone scapegoated over all the sad history of the world, and his face shines all those who join their suffering to his, because he joins his suffering to ours—this particular form of suffering caused by humans in God’s name, an egregious violation of God’s holy name.

Perhaps there was a time when the harm done to LGBTQ people by these teachings was hidden to us. But it is hidden no longer. Now that we know better, we must do better.

This idea that love has to be balanced with Scripture is a slander of Scripture. Scripture urges us to listen to our hearts telling us what we already know, what you already know.

If you have a Bible handy, I have a suggestion as we close. Take some time to hold a Bible in your hands and bring it to your heart. (If it's triggering because this book has been used against you, skip it.) And focus your attention on the concerns that your heart has been whispering to you, this sense of distress your heart feels over the suffering of LGBTQ people. By the time you come to a class like this you've been feeling it for a long time, and it is strong. Attend to what your hearts knows. And then as you hold that Bible to your heart, understand that you do not have to balance your awareness of harm with what this book has to say. Consider instead that this book contains an ethic running through it, one that resonates with your heart and amplifies what your heart has been telling you for a long time.

God be in my head and in my understanding

God be in my eyes and in my looking

God be in my mouth and in my speaking

God be in my heart and in my thinking

God be at my end and at my departing.

In the days ahead, let us strengthen our hearts with better heart thinking. Amen.