

At Ground Zero: Homosexuality and the message of Isaiah

by [Frederick J. Gaiser](#) in the [May 2, 2006](#) issue

If those in the church who are in favor of changing long-held attitudes and ordinances relating to homosexuals were merely cultural relativists with no regard for the Bible or tradition, the debate would be easier. The same would be true, of course, if those wishing to retain those attitudes and ordinances were merely diehard homophobes who used the Bible selectively to their own ends. But neither is the case. Though there may be some people who more or less fit those categories, the hard truth is that Christians of good will—more, Christians of good faith—for whom the Bible remains the source and norm of faith and life sincerely disagree about whether or how biblical passages regarding homosexual behavior relate to the current situation. In other words, exegesis—important as it is—will not solve the problem.

What then to do? There are many responsible ways to carry on this discussion. One way is to seek help from a somewhat parallel situation in the Bible itself.

The situation I have in mind is the one Israel faced following the exile. The question for Israel was how it should reconstitute itself. With all preexilic institutions shattered, what would mark the way forward? Was this the time to circle the wagons and defend past traditions in the face of the chaotic conditions that came with being a province of Persia, subject to dangerous foreign influences? Some said yes, and found solid biblical warrant for their stance in the many parts of God's law that call for purity, holiness and separation from the world. Others thought this might be a time to welcome the stranger and open the doors to new possibilities. Those who made this argument pointed to God's call to be a city on the hill and a blessing to the nations. Both sides could claim fidelity and find good biblical support.

Enter the prophet of Isaiah 56. Speaking for God, he announced: "Do not let the foreigner joined to the Lord say, 'The Lord will surely separate me from his people'; and do not let the eunuch say, 'I am just a dry tree.' For thus says the Lord: To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths . . . I will give, in my house and within my walls, a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off. And the foreigners who . . . hold fast my

covenant—these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer . . . for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples” (56:1-7).

Throw open the doors, said the prophet. In saying this, he set himself against biblical legislation that clearly argued otherwise. It says in the book of Deuteronomy, “No one whose testicles are crushed or whose penis is cut off shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord” (23:1). A similar passage in Leviticus declares that “no one who has a blemish shall draw near” the sanctuary, including one with “crushed testicles” (21:18-20).

Some biblical scholars see this development in Isaiah as an Old Testament instance of the sort of radical reinterpretation or even abrogation of a previous divine word that marks Jesus’ own ministry (“You have heard . . . but I say to you . . .”). How is such a thing possible?

The prophet, like Jesus, claims to speak as “one with authority”—that is, precisely as a prophet, one who brings from God a new and life-giving word. But the old words, barring eunuchs from the assembly and limiting the access of foreigners, claimed authority too. Does the prophet simply promote chaos by urging folks to do their own thing? By no means. The promise, in its radicality, remains fully within God’s established covenant with Israel.

“Maintain justice, and do what is right,” says Isaiah (56:1)—keep the sabbath and hold fast the covenant. Foreigners and eunuchs are called to observe Torah and confess their faith just as do other Israelites. The inclusivity proclaimed in Isaiah 56:1-8 is not an ideology that simply proclaims acceptance, disallowing claims to truth and differentiation. Those eunuchs and foreigners are welcomed who confess Yahweh and give themselves to the demands of the covenant.

Further, the promise comes not by right but as gift. A conversation about human rights is always in order, to be sure—particularly in regard to issues of human sexuality—but Isaiah is speaking of the remarkable generosity of God, who “will give an everlasting name” to the eunuchs, precisely those who could establish no name for themselves by the normal processes of procreation.

The text moves beyond legalities and orders and speaks from the perspective of a divine grace that changes everything. It does so, in part, by seeing the present in the light of God’s future. A new salvation is on the horizon, one that, like the old, will be “good news to the oppressed” and “liberty to the captives” (61:1). New life will

be possible even in the midst of unfulfilled political hopes. In Isaiah's language, God is "about to do a new thing" (43:19)—or, in more modern parlance, God is going where no one has gone before.

Finally, in the eyes of the prophet, it is not a matter of eunuchs and foreigners being "allowed" into a community that is whole in itself and that now condescends to let in some who, alas, are not like them. Rather, God is gathering "others" to "the outcasts of Israel" that God has "already gathered" (56:8). The people of Israel can accept the inclusion of others because they know themselves to be outcasts and sinners, welcome in God's house because of who God is and what God has done, not because of their own righteousness. There is no "we" who magnanimously admit "them"; there is a community of outcasts who together recognize their common need of undeserved grace.

What might this mean for the present discussion about the place in the church of homosexually oriented believers? Might the contemporary church hear itself and its situation addressed by a surprising prophetic word that, in the name of God, calls previous words of God into question? That is to say, might God be calling the church to a "new thing" in which not even earlier words of God—good and proper for their own time—can stand in the way of the broader community God now has in mind?

An assenting response will not be universal, of course, just as it was not in the time of the prophet. Was the prophet's new word canonical? Will the people of God now understand God to be up to something new? Time (and the Spirit) will tell, and prayer will be in order.

At the same time, the conversation about the inclusion of "others" might find a way to uphold the prophet's insistence that all—insiders and former outsiders alike—are called to "maintain justice and do what is right," to "keep the sabbath" and "hold fast to the covenant." Again, "anything goes" is not the prophet's theme.

What will it mean for homosexual unions (or heterosexual ones, in our difficult times) to "keep the sabbath"? What will it mean for both sides in this debate—at least as it takes place among believers, in and for the church—to move beyond political ideologies and culture wars and stand together under God's word of law and gospel? Once more, the conclusion of such a process will hardly be foregone, but God might again do surprising things among people who give themselves to God's living word.

Standing under the word in prayer while waiting for the clarification of the Spirit will satisfy neither those who argue for “justice now” nor those for whom the faith itself is at stake in this issue—and those people will necessarily continue their professions and protestations. But such waiting might prevent rending of the body of Christ and might finally allow a contemporary understanding that, like the biblical canon, retains a place for both tradition and renewal, the old and the new.

An expanded version of this article, "A New Word on Homosexuality? Isaiah 56:1-8 as Case Study," appeared in Word & World (available online at www.luthersem.edu/word&world).