

Looking for an argument: Debating by the Book

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Media reports, ministerial gossip and congregational hand-wringing suggest that Christian denominations are constantly arguing over homosexuality. That is not the case. Roman Catholic theologian John Courtney Murray once said that a genuine argument is a moral achievement—it's rare that people lay out arguments, listen to critiques and identify points of disagreement. In most church settings, that kind of argument over homosexuality is not happening.

Rather, in most settings one side of the homosexuality debate has already “won” and is busy pummeling the other side (usually not visibly present) into submission. For example, when a recent gathering of ministers was discussing signs of hope each had recently seen, one minister told of seeing a gay couple with their adopted child sitting between them in the pew. “Then I knew God was alive and well in that church,” she proclaimed. One could easily infer from that remark that God is dead or sick in the churches that do not fully welcome gays—which is the vast bulk of Christian churches.

On the other hand, recent moves by the Anglican Mission in America to set up an alternative network of Anglicans suggest that for these people opposition to homosexuality is the sine qua non of authentic Christianity. The ordination of a gay bishop apparently signals an irretrievably lapsed church from which one should flee.

In liberal circles, opposition to the inclusion of gays is often lumped with racism and sexism as unpardonable sins. In conservative settings, such as in the Roman Catholic hierarchy—which is moving to purge “gay culture” from seminaries and dioceses—and among evangelical Christians, the inclusion of gays is assumed to be a mindless baptism of liberalism and secularism.

Neither side has room for middle ground or space for argument. Shouldn't those in favor of inclusion acknowledge that all their opponents are not mindless troglodytes? Shouldn't the conservative side grant that one can make a genuinely biblical

argument for inclusion based on Jesus' radical love that transgresses boundaries and on the gospel's preference for the oppressed?

When Peter Storey, former Methodist bishop in South Africa, was called to moderate a church in crisis, he would come before the church with two books. In one hand he would hold the Bible; in the other, the Methodist Book of Discipline. "We can solve this crisis with either of these two books," he would say. Usually the congregation would choose the Discipline. Each side in the dispute thought its rights would be better honored by the church's book of laws than by scripture's insistence on love of enemies and preference for repentance over claims of victory.

Denominational fights over homosexuality necessarily place strain on polities and rules of order. Recourse to that other book would keep us from wiggling off the hook as we score points against our enemy, and would call us to the difficult path of argument and reconciliation.