

A LINE ON LIFE

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The Bible and Science on Sexuality *

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Rev. Sandra Dager – an ordained Evangelical Lutheran minister working on the campus of California Lutheran University – recently explored the complications that occur when science or experience contradict religious beliefs, especially in the area of human sexuality.

Some people believe that "*...the Bible is the literal word of God and the final authority on all matters.*" With them, problems occur if scientific evidence or personal experience contradict the Bible. However, most of us don't literally follow the Bible in many ways. For example, the Bible indicates that the earth is flat. According to the Bible, men are ritually unclean if they touch women during their menstrual periods. In addition, science and the Bible differ in their beliefs about birth control, artificial insemination, sex-change operations, homosexuality and masturbation.

It takes much thought and effort to develop a mature understanding of human sexuality. When scientific evidence and religious beliefs conflict, developing an understanding becomes even more difficult. Rev. Dager examines at least three ways of dealing with these conflicts.

The "*cafeteria approach*" is a very eclectic view. "*We pick only what suits our tastes and ignore the rest...*" – very much like picking foods in a cafeteria. For literal interpreters of the Bible, any rejection of even a small point leaves the rest open to question. For example, if we assume the Bible mentions everything we need to understand about homosexuality, we would view it as a "*curable*" sin. However, current scientific evidence of genetic or hormonal causes of homosexuality casts doubts on the biblical view – not only for homosexuality but for other topics as well.

In the "*fortress approach*," we build a fortress around our beliefs and guard them well – only associating with others who share our beliefs. We only attend institutions that "*...reinforce our homogeneity of belief.*" Those who express different views become the enemy – people to be kept at a safe distance. There must be no exchange of ideas.

Each of us develops our own beliefs, but does this mean we have to reject others who espouse different views?

There are some problems with the fortress approach. First, it takes a great deal of effort to build its high walls and maintain them. Second, we suffer more by isolating ourselves. According to Rev. Dager, "*We end up being prisoners in our own fortress, walled in by our fears.*"

Even the highest walls can be breached by an undeniable truth. This happened when Galileo contradicted the Church by stating that the earth revolved around the sun. (The Church did not officially withdraw its condemnation of Galileo and his ideas until 1992.) Previously "*indisputable*" facts have changed. For example, we no longer believe – as the early Christians did – that sex is evil even within a marriage. With the fortress approach, how will we react when one of our "*indisputable facts*" is challenged?

There is a third way – **integration** of religious and scientific knowledge, a very demanding approach. We need to examine and reexamine our religious beliefs and their assumptions openly and honestly. Because the results cannot be predicted, it takes a great deal of courage to adopt this approach. For example, do you

believe that God created the world in six 24-hour days? Or does it seem a little egotistical to assume that God used the rotation time of an insignificant planet to schedule his creation of the whole universe? The second view allows you to accept the development of the earth in billions of our years.

To do this examining, we need to "*...separate core religious beliefs from peripheral ones; it can help us separate ignorance or prejudice from genuine religious beliefs.*" However, this requires a more thorough understanding of the sources of our beliefs. We need to understand the social and historical context in which religious laws were developed. For example, in the Bible, the rule to "*be fruitful and multiply*" was originated in a culture that needed to expand rather than in a world straining with overpopulation. In Rev. Dager's words –

"Some (beliefs) are based on sound, faithful thinking, whereas others are rooted in prejudice or ignorance. Each of us must seek answers to these complex questions with as much personal integrity and openness to the truth as we can."

* Adapted from Rev. Sandra Dager's "Sexuality, Science and the Bible: When Religious Beliefs Are Challenged," *Human Sexuality: The Strong and DeVault Newsletter*, Mayfield Publishing, February 1994, pages 6-8.