

Principles of Reformed Hermeneutics by Guenther (“Gene”) Haas

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The church in the West faces challenging times. Our secular society and culture puts tremendous pressure on Christians to conform to its ways of thinking and behavior. Notable principles to support all manner of thought and behavior are the themes of pluralism, tolerance, and inclusiveness. And this generally means that all behaviours must be, not merely tolerated, but accepted and even celebrated. The most obvious area in which this modern mentality is evident is in the sphere of human sexuality. All sexual orientations and lifestyles are to be accepted in the name of tolerance, inclusiveness and justice. The pressure on Christian churches is to modify their teachings and practice – which have formed the core of Christian sexual teaching for 2,000 years – to conform to modern. Progressive elements in the church have done so, and they urge other Christians to join with them.

It is imperative for Church leaders and teachers to rediscover the foundation of the Christian faith: that foundation is Jesus Christ – through whom all things were made, by whom all is redeemed, and toward whose Kingdom all history is moving.

- we only know Christ as he is revealed to us in Scripture by the illumination of the Holy Spirit
- so while Christ is the church’s one foundation, this foundation is integrally connected with the Bible
- many today speak of the Bible as the word of God, but mean something different than what church has meant historically–“having a form of godliness by denying its power” [2Tim 3:5]
- it’s important through our use of Scripture – our hermeneutics and exegesis – that we maintain the authority of the Bible as the vessel through which Christ is revealed to us.

Therefore, it is imperative that we clearly understand the hermeneutical principles that are consistent with the Bible as the verbal revelation from God to his people.

- this is what I want to do with you this morning.

I was asked to give a presentation on Reformed hermeneutics.

- my thought is: Reformed Hermeneutical principles are simply biblical hermeneutical principles
- I know that sounds arrogant – since every tradition believes that its principles are biblical
- so, I will attempt to have a degree of humility about this.
- what has been most helpful for me in deepening my humility is my reading and teaching courses in global theology and hermeneutics.
- I have become aware that, as much as I try, my culture does influence how I interpret and understand God’s word.
- so, even as I present Reformed hermeneutics as biblical, I do know that what I present to you this morning is not infallible or immune to challenge.
- having said that, I will still defend the principles as consistent with what Scripture teaches and models in interpretation.

I present nine general principles of Reformed hermeneutics.

- I engage with a variety of attempts to convince us that same-sex relations should be accepted by the church today.
- and I will argue that they violate these Reformed hermeneutical principles

My presentation refers frequently to James Brownson's book, *Bible, Gender, Sexuality: Reframing the Church's Debate on Same-Sex Relationships* (Eerdmans, 2013).

- Brownson claims that he has a high view of biblical authority, and that he is committed to taking the Bible with all the seriousness and fidelity that his Reformed tradition requires (xi).
- His issue is not with Scripture itself, but with the interpretations that traditionalists have made of certain passages that address SSR.

By way of introduction let me emphasize 2 things I'm deeply committed to:

- (1) Christians need to build positive relationships with people who experience same-sex attraction
- (2) Same-sex practice is contrary to the moral will of God

With this framework and background, let me now turn to the body of my presentation – the Principles of Reformed Hermeneutics that guide our interpretation and application of the Bible.

1) Bible is one grand narrative of Creation, Fall, Redemption and Renewal of all things.

- history reaches its fulfillment in the life, ministry and salvation accomplished by Jesus Christ

2. There is one covenant of grace revealed in the Bible – from the patriarchs, through Israel, reaching completion in Jesus Christ

- this one covenant is administered differently in the Old Testament era than in the New Testament era
- instructions to the people of God as the nation of Israel involved civil and ceremonial laws
- these no longer apply to the people of God after the fullness of revelation and redemption in Christ,
- now the redeemed people of God as members of the church living among all nations.
- but moral teachings still apply, e.g. as summarized in Ten Commandments (appealed to in NT)

Brownson (and William Countryman) argue that same-sex relations in OT violate purity codes; this involves the “mixing of kinds” and an emphasis on external purity

- Paul carries this over into NT
- but, they argue, when the gospel goes into Gentile world, these purity codes no longer apply.
- NT is concerned with internal sexual purity, not with external purity in sexual acts.

Response: All OT laws can't be dismissed as purity in the ceremonial sense.

- there are clearly moral laws, which carry on into NT
- there is a consistent teaching – in OT and NT – that same-sex behavior is sin.

3. God's moral law for humans is rooted in creation. There is a creational moral order

- the morality revealed in the Bible is this order.

James Brownson [*Bible, Gender, Sexuality*] uses the phrase “gender complementarity” to describe the mutuality of spouses, and he avoids the phrase “sexual complementarity.”

- *gender* always has social & cultural aspects to it, shaping what is considered as appropriate for the roles, behavior and vocations for males and females.

- *sexual* roles, however, are more closely tied to our creational natures as male and female.
- roles have considerable bearing on gender roles, even as we must allow for some degree of cultural diversity and relativity.
- Brownson avoids referring to sexual complementarity since it points to creationally established male-female roles.

4. **Redemption consists in redemption and restoration of this good creation**

- this includes the redemption of humans in our creaturely existence in this age.
- redemption never enables us to negate or transcend creation and its norms for human life.

Redemptive-Movement Hermeneutic [Brownson, Webb, I. Howard Marshall, R. Longenecker]

Brownson, among others, appeals to a redemptive hermeneutic.

- the principle here is that the gospel of Christ, in transforming this present age, calls believers to embody a new transformational ethic that moves beyond the teachings of the NT to the new creation of the eschatological age.
- the central passage appealed to for this is Gal. 3:28 (68-71, 251-55).
- result is that the specific ethical teachings in Bible, and even in NT, are no longer authoritative, since Christians must move beyond them to live according to the future eschatological reality.
- Brownson applies this hermeneutic to same-sex relations, so that the biblical teachings are no longer applicable in our current “old age” historical context.

Response: Appeal to redemptive hermeneutic sounds plausible, but fails if we look closely at it. It is true that there is a progressive understanding by church of what God has revealed to us in the Bible, e.g. understanding of God as trinity of persons, of person of Christ as divine & human - but no biblical indication that in this age we go beyond biblical teaching.

Furthermore, we don't know what life in the new earth is like

- the specifics of Rev 21 and 22 are very symbolic, speaking of being in presence of God, and of a reality without sin, evil, injustice and death.
- the passage frequently appeal to: Matt. 22:30 where Jesus says, “At the resurrection people will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like and angels in heaven.”
- [No indication of relationship of married people in new age, nor how like the angels in heaven]
- no other passages that give any indication of nature of life in new age.

Response:

There is no biblical indication that we get beyond creational moral norms in this age.

- Oliver O'Donovan argues powerfully (in *Resurrection and Moral Order*) that passages such as these confirm that creational relations are transformed by the gospel so as to fulfill their original creational purposes without our transcending creational norms in this age.

To suggest otherwise is to use the redemptive hermeneutic as justification for behavior and institutions for which Scripture gives no support.

5. **All Scripture is God-breathed (2 Tim 3:16) or inspired by God, the Holy Spirit, and**

useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in good works.

- so, the Holy Spirit, is the ultimate author of Scripture.

6. The Spirit reveals the words of God in and through human authors:

“Men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” (2 Pet 1:21).

- the men wrote what the Holy Spirit wanted them to write.
- yet, the inspiration is not mechanical – some sort of rote dictation
- **inspiration is organic** – through the personalities, perspectives, & literary styles of the authors.
- the Spirit’s work caused the authors to write what is true, and kept them from error.

[Combine points 5 & 6]

Again, we see that progressive interpreters deny these two principles in their creative re-interpretations of biblical passages.

- Brownson: (1) argues that when Paul refers to “nature” in his epistles (such as in Rom. 1:26-27), he is simply reflecting the ancient pagan assumptions about gender (237, 248).
- (2) Brownson also claims that the Bible’s teachings on same-sex relations fail to take into account the experience of committed same-sex couples today in which there is a fruitful expression of committed love (277-78).
- similar argument is made by James Nelson and John Boswell – Paul didn’t realize that there were “natural” – innate – homosexuals.

- (3) James Nelson: Paul believed that male semen contained the whole of nascent life.
- thus, not to deposit seed in woman’s vagina is to commit murder.

Response: these arguments can be disputed, but note what Brownson and others do:

The meaning and application of the passages are reduced to the human author’s understanding

- they ignore the Spirit as the author of the biblical teaching of these passages for the church
- the biblical teaching is dismissed because it is culturally & historical conditioned by the authors’ ancient view of same-sex relations, or assumptions the human authors supposed hold.

7. All that Christians need to know for faith and practice is revealed in Scripture, or may be shown from Scripture by good and necessary logic.

8. The leading of the Spirit is always consistent with the teaching of the written word of God

If I had a dollar for every time I’ve heard a progressive Christian say, “What is the Spirit saying to the church today,” I could take my wife and me out to a very fancy restaurant for dinner.

- the meaning here is not what is the Spirit helping us to see in Scripture what we haven’t seen before, or an application that is relevant to our new context.
- what progressive mean by this leading of the Spirit is something beyond the Bible – not found in Scripture – and even something that is contrary to biblical teaching.
- here also, the assumption is that we can’t look to Scripture to hear the Spirit, but we must go beyond the biblical teaching.
- thus, the Bible ceases to be authoritative in speaking to contemporary issues.

Response: the Spirit as the ultimate author of the Bible never leads us to a belief or practice that is beyond Scripture or contrary to it. He never “says” that to the church today.

Another Liberal Argument:

Modern science and the personal experiences of same-sex attracted people lead us to different conclusions than the teaching of the biblical authors:

- David Bartlett (Divinity School, U of Chicago) argues that modern behavioral science research & the testimony of same-sex attracted people have led to the conclusion that same-sex orientation is innate, unchangeable, and fulfilled only in a same-sex relationship
- thus, the gospel allows for the acceptance of “permanent, committed relationship[s] of love between homosexuals, analogous to heterosexual marriage.” (Letha Scanzoni & Virginia Mollenkott)

Response:

This argument contends that the NT teaching is not sufficient to guide believers in matters of same-sex behaviour.

Appeals to experience – found in liberationist forms of progressive Christianity, such as feminism or Marxism – become the means of overriding the clear teachings of the Bible

The appeal to *experience* is often assumed to be self-validating, as if homosexuals’ experiences of oppression and liberation are the final say on what is right and wrong.

- Charles Taylor (*A Secular Age*) shows that appeals to *authenticity* in modern secular culture indicates that with the rejection of any transcendent reality for truth and ethics, the only standard remaining is internal – what feels right or is innate to “who I am.”

Response:

Appeals to sinful human experience is unreliable, especially when personal issues are at stake

- think of a man who leaves his troubled marriage with wife, and finds a spiritual bond with a new Christian wife. (I’m sure some of you pastors have heard such an argument). The new marriage is simply much more *authentic* than the old one.

- here, appeal to authenticity effectively trumps any appeal to divine moral standards and laws.
- but God, who knows human nature much more than we know ourselves, has established his norms and laws precisely for our good and our flourishing.
- besides, the ultimate standard of moral life is not what feels authentic, but what God has established as normative for our lives.
- so, the appeal to experience alone is not the ultimate arbiter of same-sex attraction and behaviour as sinful oppression or as liberation, since these both evaluations are expressed by those who have lived the same-sex lifestyle.

A parallel attraction, found predominately in men, is paedophilia

- it is innate to the constitution of certain men, and change is very difficult
- yet society condemns acting on this desire as wrong – even criminal – activity

Thomas E. Schmidt rightly argues that the biblical narrative of Israel’s experiences is always related to the divine standards of righteousness and justice.

- the same can be said for references to experiences in the New Testament
- "The Bible does not liberate people *from* righteousness, it liberates them *to* righteousness."

9. Scripture interprets Scripture

More clear passages on a topic should always be used to interpret those biblical passages that are less clear on the same topic.

- The New Testament must be the framework through which we interpret Old Testament passages on a topic

Progressive Christians violate this principle in at least 2 ways:

1) The restrict application of biblical passages to narrow behaviour:

Some examples :

- Lev 18:22, 20:13 to sexual practices associated with idolatrous worship; same for Rom 1:26-27 [Nelson, Coleman, McNeil, Boswell]

- Rom 1:26-27, 1 Cor 6:9 & 1 Tim 1:10 are restricted to pederasty and male prostitutes (Robin Scroggs)

- Brownson: the language Paul uses in Rom 1:24-27 – referring to lusts, people driven by passions, and burning with passion – refers to excessive, and self-centred sexual desires of heterosexuals that are out of control.

- he claims that this cannot refer to those who experience same-sex attraction if they are not carried away by their lusts and passions

The problem in all such examples is that the passages simply condemn same-sex **behavior**

- if Paul wanted to restrict his condemnation to pederasty he could have used one of the several Greek words for pederasty current in Hellenistic Jewish writings, e.g., *paidoph* or *thorseis*

- attempts to find restrictive applications in passages do not follow biblical words

- consistent pattern in whole of Bible is to condemn same -sex **practice**

2) Progressive Christians also violate this hermeneutical principle by appealing to general moral principles that support a rejection or overriding of biblical teachings on same-sex relations:

- Brownson appeals to the general “moral logic” of scripture involving self-giving love, equality and mutuality of relationships.

- but as he himself admits (14), the moral logic that he finds in Scripture is frequently opposed to the teachings of specific biblical passages, especially the texts concerning same-sex practice.

- the biblical authors never imagine same-sex relations of a life-long bond similar to marriage,

- in Scripture there is a consistent reference to one-flesh unions only between male and female

Response: General moral principles found in Bible – love, justice, equality, etc. – are embodied in everyday human life via the specific applications taught in Bible.

- we know what **love** is by doing to others as we would have them do to us.

- **justice** means the fair application of the law to rich and poor; no bribes or favouritism, etc.

Arguing that general biblical principles override specific applications violates this herm principle

Conclusion

Against the framework of the hermeneutical principles characteristic of the Reformed approach to Scripture, we see, again and again, that the new progressive attempts to provide “creative” exegeses of the passages that address same-sex behavior violate these Reformed principles.

Moreover, the specific arguments in these revisionist interpretations – linguistic, socio-cultural perspectives, authorial misunderstandings, and appeals to modern science and personal experience – all fail to be convincing. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the various revisionist authors come to the biblical texts with preconceived notions of what the texts should say, and that they exegete these texts to fit their preconceived notions. In other words, they are guilty of eisegesis. This seems to make them blind to the context, the natural meaning of terms, the biblical teaching on sexual acts in general, the clear flow of Paul's argument in Rom. 1, and the unqualified manner in which homosexual practice is condemned throughout Scripture. They attempt to read into the biblical texts, and especially Paul's teachings, distinctions, qualifications and misunderstandings that are not there.

I think the clear conclusion that is warranted after a careful examination of these new exegeses, when evaluated against the Protestant and Reformed principles of biblical hermeneutics, is that there is no compelling reason for committed Christians to depart from the consistent biblical teaching and from the traditional teaching of the church which is based on it that SSR are sinful.