

Feature Article: DP801

PRESIDENT BARTLET'S FALLACIOUS DIATRIBE

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The atmosphere was electric. The president of the United States was about to address a gathering of radio talk show hosts in the White House. As the president entered the hall, they all stood and applauded. All, that is, except one — a woman with strikingly blond hair, wearing a bright green suit. At first, her presence rattled the president. He lost his train of thought several times before he finally spoke directly to the sitting talk show host.

"Excuse me, doctor," the president said to her. "It's good to have you here. Are you an M.D.?"

"A Ph.D.," she retorted smartly.

"In psychology?" he pursued.

"No, sir," she said.

"Theology?"

"No."

"Social work?"

"I have a Ph.D. in English literature," she replied.

"I'm asking," continued the president, "because on your show people call in for advice and you go by the title 'doctor,' and I didn't know if maybe your listeners were confused by that and assumed you had advanced training in psychology, theology, or health care."

"I don't believe they are confused. No, sir," she responded.

"Good," said the president, raising his voice sarcastically. "I like your show. I like how you call homosexuality an abomination."

"I don't say homosexuality is an abomination, Mr. President," she replied haughtily. "The Bible does."

"Yes, it does!" he shouted. "Leviticus 18:22." The president was just warming up. "I wanted to ask you a couple of questions while I had you here. I'm interested in selling my youngest daughter into slavery as sanctioned in Exodus 21:7. She's a Georgetown sophomore, speaks fluent Italian, always cleared the table when it was her turn. What would a good price for her be?"

After a brief moment, he continued: "While thinking about that, can I ask another? My chief of staff, Leo McGarry, insists on working on the Sabbath. Exodus 35:2 clearly says he should be put to death. Am I morally obligated to kill him myself or is it OK to call the police?"

Now on a roll, the president steamed on triumphantly. "Here's one that's really important, 'cause we've got a lot of sports fans in this town. Touching the skin of a dead pig makes one unclean, Leviticus 11:7. If they promise to wear gloves, can the Washington Redskins still play football? Can Notre Dame? Can West Point?"

“Does the whole town really have to be together to stone my brother John for planting different crops side by side?

“Can I burn my mother in a small family gathering for wearing garments made from two different threads?

“Think about those questions, would you? One last thing. While you may be mistaking this for your monthly meeting of the ignorant tight-a** club, in this building when the president stands, nobody sits.”

The president paused to catch his breath. The silence that invaded the room was deafening. The once self-assured talk show host slowly rose to her feet, her face reddened with shame. Her quick come-backs and commanding presence wilted away. She had no response. The president of the United States had left her speechless. The very Bible that she had used to beat up on homosexuals had now beaten her into submissive silence.¹

Imagine the humiliation you would feel if you were standing in her shoes. What would you — what could you — have said? Had the president of the United States really demonstrated that the Bible was out of date and absurd? Should it indeed be relegated to the scrap heap of history? Do the very Scriptures that condemn homosexuality commend slavery? Should football be outlawed because touching pigskin makes one “unclean”? Should we kill those who work on the Sabbath as prescribed by Scripture? Should we stone men for planting different crops side by side or burn women for wearing clothing made of two different threads?²

WILL THE REAL DR. LAURA PLEASE STAND UP?

The impact of this encounter between Dr. Jenna Jacobs and President Josiah Bartlet can hardly be overstated. More than 11 million homes³ tuned in to watch the drama unfold as NBC’s Emmy award-winning *The West Wing* used Dr. Jacobs to caricature Dr. Laura Schlessinger as a rude and bigoted religious talk show host. The president (played by Martin Sheen) was hardly original. It seems his tirade was lifted in large part from a widely circulated e-mail that appears on a multitude of gay/lesbian Web sites, in which many of the same questions are posed to Dr. Laura.⁴ Millions of people sat in their living rooms and applauded. Right wing bigots such as Dr. Laura and, by extension, orthodox Jews and evangelical Christians had finally been put in their place. Millions more, no doubt, wavered in their faith. They wondered whether the Bible they had put their trust in had been exposed as antiquated and absurd. Does the very Bible that condemns homosexuality really commend slavery? Let’s take a closer look.

SLAVERY

When confronted with the issue of slavery, NBC’s version of Dr. Laura was left speechless. In real life, however, there is an answer.

First and foremost, it should be noted that the Bible does not commend slavery; rather, it recognizes the reality of slavery. In the ancient world where slavery flourished, the Mosaic Law thus stipulated stringent guidelines such as a year of Jubilee in which slaves were released (Lev. 25:40). In fact, it was the application of biblical principles that ultimately led to the overthrow of slavery, both in ancient Israel and in the United States of America. Israel’s liberation from slavery in Egypt became the model for the liberation of slaves in general. In America, many are beginning to wake up to the liberating biblical truth that all people are created innately equal (see Gen. 1:27; Acts 17:26–28; see also Gal. 3:28).

Furthermore, slavery within an Old Testament context was sanctioned due to economic realities rather than racial or sexual prejudices.⁵ Because bankruptcy laws did not exist, people would voluntarily sell themselves into slavery. A craftsman could, thus, use his skills in servitude to discharge a debt. Even a convicted thief could make restitution by serving as a slave (Exod. 23:3).

Finally, we should note that far from extolling the virtues of slavery, the Bible denounces slavery as sin. The apostle Paul goes so far as to put slave traders in the same category as murderers, adulterers,

perverts, and liars (1 Tim.1:10). Indeed, slavery is so abhorrent to God that in the final book of the Bible, He condemns the evil systems that perpetuate it.⁶

SABBATH

Using hyperbole, the president suggests that the very Bible that condemns homosexuality mandates that he kill his own chief of staff for violating the Sabbath. Answering this question may pose somewhat of a challenge for orthodox Jews such as Dr. Laura or Senator Joseph Lieberman, but it poses no problem whatsoever for Christians who recognize that Christ is the substance that fulfills the symbol of the Sabbath.

To begin with, as the president of the United States would surely know, America is a democratic republic and not a theocratic form of government; thus, Sabbath-breaking may have had serious ramifications within ancient Israel, but it is not a warrant for executing people today. Not even Joseph Lieberman, who is still looking forward to the first coming of Messiah, would suggest killing the President's chief of staff for violating the Jewish Sabbath.

Furthermore, there is no more warrant for killing a homosexual today than there is for killing a Sabbath breaker. In fact, the mechanisms required to carry out the death penalty under Mosaic Law are no longer extant. Ironically, the very Jews who believed that Christ was worthy of death for violating the laws of Moses had to convince the Roman authorities to crucify Him.

Finally, while Schlessinger and Lieberman have a hard time explaining why Mosaic penalties no longer apply (at least in spirit), the answer for Christians is found in Christ. As the apostle Paul explains, "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: 'Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree.' He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit" (Gal. 3:13–14). This redemption from the curse of the law is available to all regardless of ethnicity or gender. Paul continues:

So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith. Now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law. You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise (Gal. 3:24–29).⁷

SWINE

The president makes his biggest blunder by addressing the subject of swine. Sarcastically, he suggests that players for the Washington Redskins, Notre Dame, or West Point may become ceremonially unclean by touching a football made of "the skin of a dead pig." Ironically, the president has just dressed down "Dr. Laura" for not having a Ph.D. in psychology, theology, or medicine. By implication she therefore is not qualified to speak on matters of personal faith and morals. It appears, however, that the president has not been properly briefed; and, thus, despite his Ph.D. in economics, he appears less than qualified to pontificate on this subject.

To begin with, the fact that Dr. Laura's Ph.D. is in physiology rather than psychology is no warrant for intimating that she is ill equipped to properly interpret literary documents such as the Bible. It appears she has a better grasp of biblical hermeneutics than that displayed by the president. If, indeed, the president had an adequate understanding of the rich tradition of biblical Judaism, he would no doubt have been far more restrained in his diatribe against the Scriptures. At best, he proved himself a master at rhetoric and emotive stereotypes rather than reason and evidence.

Furthermore, we should note that the footballs used in college and the professional ranks are not even made of pigskin. Rather, they are made of cowhide⁸ — the skin of a kosher animal. The president of the

United States should blush with embarrassment for overliteralizing “pigskin” and for using an out-to-lunch appeal to demonstrate that the Bible is out of date.

Finally, there is a quantum difference between enduring moral principles such as those regarding homosexuality and temporary ceremonial practices relegated to a particular historical context. The distinction between clean and unclean animals symbolized the distinction between that which was holy and that which was unholy within the context of a theocracy. As we have already noted, however, the ceremonial symbolism of the law was fulfilled in Christ, who makes the unclean clean. As Scripture thus declares, we are not to “call anything impure that God has made clean” (Acts 10:15).⁹

SEEDING AND SEWING

The president’s final attempt to invalidate Dr. Laura’s appeal to Scripture as an authority on the moral status of homosexuality involves the biblical injunction against seeding “different crops side by side” and sewing garments together “from two different threads.” The president succeeds in raising the emotional level of his argument by relating these Levitical laws to his brother and his mother. Once again he attempts to seduce an audience of more than 11 million with emotive rhetoric.¹⁰ Given today’s widespread biblical ignorance, including among supposed intellectuals, his arguments probably have tremendous impact. Yet, once again, he is wrong.

First, nowhere in Scripture is there any suggestion that we should kill family members for failing to heed Levitical laws regarding seeding and sewing. Furthermore, Scripture simply uses the object lessons of seeding crops and sewing clothes to illustrate the spiritual and social distinctions between the kingdom of darkness and the kingdom of light. The mixing of different things was associated with the syncretistic pagan practices that Israel was to avoid. Scripture thus provides myriad illustrations to underscore the principle of undivided loyalty. In Deuteronomy, for example, the Israelites were commanded not to plow with an ox and a donkey yoked together (22:10). Paul, writing to the Corinthians, uses this common sense principle to underscore the fact that as a donkey and an ox do not work together synergistically in the process of plowing, so too a believer and an unbeliever do not harmonize well in the process of living. Paul thus says, “Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? What harmony is there between Christ and Belial? What does a believer have in common with an unbeliever?” (2 Cor. 6:14–15).

Finally, the highly complex nature of the civil, ceremonial, and moral aspects of Mosaic laws can hardly be relegated to simplistic, superficial sound bites. Devoid of context, the twenty-first-century mind can only with great difficulty grasp the significance of biblical illustrations, metaphors, or figures of speech. A golfer living in the twenty-first century knows precisely what I mean by the common golf expression: “I drained a snake on the eighteenth hole.”¹¹ To someone living in a context or culture in which golf is not played, it probably makes no sense. Similarly, the ceremonial significance of Mosaic laws makes little sense to someone who has never read and studied the Bible in context.

SCRIPTURE AND SCIENCE

Once again, from the perspective of Scripture and science, there is a vast difference between civil and ceremonial laws that governed an ancient Jewish theocracy and enduring moral laws, which have a universal application. As we have seen, the president in NBC’s *The West Wing* television series not only confuses his facts with respect to ceremonial laws but also seems unwilling to be confused by the facts regarding homosexuality.

From the perspective of Scripture, Christ made it crystal clear that the ceremonial aspects of the law would be fulfilled through His life, death, and resurrection. He made it equally clear that the scriptural injunctions against sexual perversions — including homosexuality — were universal and enduring. Likewise, the apostle Paul uses language reminiscent of Leviticus when he describes what he refers to as “degrading” sexual perversions. Paul says that “women exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones.

In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed indecent acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their perversion" (Rom. 1:26–27). As Thomas Schmidt notes:

It is not clear what he meant by "penalty" in his time, but it is hard not to make a connection between his words and the health crisis we observe in our time. Sexual liberation has brought homosexuals out of the closet into a shadow of physical affliction where a score of diseases lurk. And as if this were not gloomy enough, the more deadly specter of HIV infection deepens the shadow, not only for the ever-growing number who die but also for those who are left behind to grieve and to wonder who will die next.¹²

We would do well to recognize that the God of the Bible does not condemn homosexuality in an arbitrary and capricious fashion. Rather, He carefully defines the borders of human sexuality so that our joy may be complete. It does not require an advanced degree in physiology to appreciate the fact that the human body is not designed for homosexual relationships. Spurious slogans and sound bites do not change the scientific reality that homosexual relationships are devastating not only from a psychological but also from a physiological perspective: "Irritation of the sensitive rectal mucus layer causes a host of reactions, including diarrhea, cramps, hemorrhoids, prostate damage, and ulcers or fissures which in turn invite infection. The thin cell layer of the rectum is easily perforated, and its insensitivity to pain can lead to serious complications before a person is aware of any harm."¹³

This is just the tip of an insidious iceberg. Common nonviral infections transmitted through homosexual activity are "amebiasis, giardiasis, gonorrhea, shigellosis, chlamydia, syphilis and ectoparasites."¹⁴ Viral infections include "condylomata, herpes, hepatitis B and hepatitis A. Like bacterial infections, these diseases are easily transmitted by oral-genital contact, genital-anal contact and oral-anal contact."¹⁵ Suffice it to say that while there are attendant moral and medical problems with sexual promiscuity in general, it would be homophobic in the extreme to obscure the scientific realities concerning homosexuality. It is a hate crime of unparalleled proportions to attempt to keep a whole segment of the population in the dark concerning such issues.

While at first blush, it may appear that the president portrayed on *The West Wing* is a benevolent intellectual and Dr. Laura is a bigoted ignoramus, we have seen that the opposite is the case. Rather than fall for the rhetoric and emotive stereotypes such as those presented by NBC, we must commit ourselves to becoming so familiar with the truth that when such counterfeits loom on the horizon, we recognize them instantaneously. At worst, even when we do not have an immediate answer, we should be aware that answers exist. At best, we should be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks us to give the reason for the hope that we have — and to do this with gentleness and respect.

NOTES

1. All dialogue adapted from *The West Wing*, episode no. 25: "The Midterms" (NBC), originally aired 18 October 2000 and rebroadcast 13 December 2000.
2. In his diatribe, President Bartlett tries to show that if we accept the Scriptures as the authority on the moral invalidity of homosexuality, we must also apply to ourselves in contemporary America everything Moses required of ancient Israel; but upholding every one of Moses' laws, when fleshed out with particular examples, seems absurd. The tacit but obvious conclusion is that the outdated Scriptures provide no authoritative or relevant guidance for our lives today in the post-Christian, postmodern world. The TV president's reasoning, however, is fallacious in two main ways. First, he fails to read the Mosaic texts in light of their proper historical context, especially in relation to their fulfillment in Jesus Christ, so as to miss a fundamental teaching of Scripture that some biblical laws are enduring universal moral principles while others are injunctions reserved for application within a particular historical context. Second, he commits one or more fatal factual errors in every premise of his argument.
3. The Associated Press (AP Online), "Prime-Time Nielson Ratings," 25 October 2000.
4. "A Letter to Dr. Laura," anonymous, n.d. One gay/lesbian Web site posts a note about this episode of *The West Wing*: "On October 18, 2000, NBC aired an episode of...*The West Wing* in which the character President Josiah Bartlett...absolutely skewers a character named 'Dr. Jenna Jacobs,' who bears striking similarities to our very own, dear, Laura Schlessinger, in a dialogue very similar in theme to the 'Dear Dr. Laura' letter which was wending its way about the net not that many months ago." ("West Wing Skewers Laura Schlessinger," at www.gaylesissues.about.com, retrieved 21 October 2000.) The anonymous "A Letter to Dr. Laura" contains the following quips, which were reiterated almost verbatim by the character Bartlett: "I would like to sell my daughter into slavery, as it suggests in Exodus 21:7. In this day and age, what do you think would be a good price for her?" and "I have a neighbor who insists on working on the Sabbath. Exodus 35:2 clearly states he should be put to

death. Am I morally obligated to kill him myself?" Lest any doubt remain that the character of Dr. Jenna Jacobs is modeled after Dr. Laura Schlessinger, consider also that Dr. Jacobs is portrayed as a very well-known, controversial, religious talk radio personality who is vocal about her belief that homosexuality is an abomination based on sacred Scripture; whose Ph.D. is in neither psychology, theology, social work, nor medicine, but whose doctoral degree (contrary to Bartlet's implications) is not altogether inappropriate for what she does on the radio; and who had recently changed her hair style! All of this is uniquely true of Dr. Laura. (Dr. Laura's Ph.D. is in physiology from Columbia University [College of Physicians and Surgeons], New York; and she holds a postdoctoral certification in Marriage, Family, and Child Counseling from the University of Southern California, Los Angeles.) Dr. Jacobs is clearly a caricature, however, as Dr. Laura certainly would not have disrespected the president by remaining seated in his presence nor would she have been unable to expose the out-of-context Scripture twisting of President Bartlet, responding from within her rich religious tradition of orthodox rabbinic Judaism.

5. This point is particularly relevant to *The West Wing's* presentation of the Bible's relation to slavery. The show has been addressing racial prejudice in the context of President Bartlet's personal aide, Charlie Young (played by Dulé Hill), who has been dating the president's daughter and was the intended victim, it turns out, in what originally seemed to be an assassination attempt on President Bartlet by a white supremacist group.
6. See Rev. 17–18. Discussion adapted from Norman Geisler and Thomas Howe, *When Critics Ask* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1992), 509–10.
7. In Colossians 2:16–17, Paul underscores the Christian's freedom from Old Testament ceremonial laws: "Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ."
8. Per a spokesperson at Wilson, which manufactures the official football of the NFL (since 1941) and also of the NCAA football championships (phone conversation, 20 October 2000).
9. See also Matt. 15:11; Mark 7:15, 19; 1 Tim. 4:3–5.
10. Obviously, it is actually *West Wing* creator and executive producer Aaron Sorkin who is responsible for all this.
11. In other words, making an extraordinarily long putt.
12. Thomas E. Schmidt, *Straight and Narrow? Compassion and Clarity in the Homosexuality Debate* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 122.
13. *Ibid.*, 118.
14. *Ibid.*, 119.
15. *Ibid.*, 120.