

Whose Bible is it Anyway When We Talk About Sex and War?

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On September 11, 2001, we *all* became victims of the terrorist attacks. The horror and the moral revulsion at the consequences of hatred was something concrete, something palpable for believer and skeptic alike. The event was like a clap of thunder to the brain, a synchronizing event that displayed a partial readout of the nitty-gritty that we're made of. We felt as one; we mourned as one; we prayed as one; we spoke with one voice. This unity helped to salve the wounds of a distraught people, as we struggled through the interminable period of rescue and recovery. A very concrete faith arose, a primeval faith, a secular as much as a religious faith. God Bless America became our anthem. We lived without the checks and balances required of normal life. Our foxhole unity left no room for the dissent and individual conscience on which both our American democracy and our reformed tradition were founded.

Slowly, slowly, slowly, our normal social dynamics are returning.
Slowly, slowly, slowly, we're regaining the diversity that was suppressed.

As Americans and as Presbyterians, we've always prided ourselves in our diversity of thought and conscience. Yet we recognize that such diversity can be both a gift and a liability, even when scripturally based. What is American and what is *un*American? What is Christian and what is *un*Christian? Which behaviors are unpleasant or uncomfortable for our cultural traditions, and which are morally wrong? Just what *is* the Bible to Christians, and for Presbyterians in particular? How should it be approached as a resource for living in the 21st century? Is Christianity today divided into those who believe in and follow the truth of the Bible against those who follow the cultural conventions of the day? Or maybe into those who accept Jesus' commandment to love, against those who use legal technicalities to push away the sheep that we promised to feed? In a world full of sinners and Pharisees, who would Jesus minister to and who would he rebuke? What would Jesus *really* do?

People of faith differ markedly in their answers to *all* of these questions. We may be angered at some of these stereotypes and oversimplifications, yet still fail to recognize our *own equally* erroneous stereotypes and simplifications. These differences seem to indicate that Christianity is in a deadlock, yet it may just be part of a developmental process. Only through this tension among the faithful can we appropriately bring our faith to bear on a changing world.

As the debates resumed within Christianity as a whole and the Presbyterian Church (USA) in particular, the experiences of 9/11 were ever-present reminders that *our brothers and sisters in Christ are not enemies*. We need to try harder to hear and understand each other. And so it is that Our general Assembly's Theological Task Force on Peace Unity and Purity in the Church developed a format for discussion between those holding opposing views. This model integrates the effortful building of community and trust with the serious study of the Bible. Based on a foundation of *trust*, alternative approaches to scripture may be *respectfully explored* in an effort to bring discernment and peace to the denomination. Our event was intended to bring this approach to bear on what are arguably the most divisive and urgent issues confronting American Christianity today

The first speaker was Frances Taylor Gench. Frances is a member of the Theological Task Force, and a Professor of Christian Education at Union Theological Seminary and the Presbyterian School of Christian Education in Richmond, Virginia. Her topic was human sexuality, with specific reference to homosexuality and the controversy over ordination that has affected many Christian denominations.

There are precisely six places in the Bible that refer to homosexuality either directly or indirectly. They are:

Genesis 19:5	(1-11)
Leviticus 18:22	(19-23)
Leviticus 20:13	(7-16)
Romans 18:26-27	(18-32)
1 Corinthians 6: 9	(9-11; RSV vs NRSV)
1 Timothy 1: 10	(8-11; RSV vs NRSV)

For the next few minutes we will read and reflect on some of these passages. If you have a pew Bible handy, you may want to read along. My goal is *not* to posture, argue or debate, but provide *you* with a basis for understanding those who **disagree** with your own understanding of them.

Gen.19:1-11 in Revised Standard Version

This is the story of the destruction of Sodom. Sodom is a unique Judeo-Christian and Muslim symbol of God's judgment and wrath. It's important because it is the *archetype of depravity*, of a people and an offense so vile, so evil, that God was provoked to destroy them with fire and brimstone.

[1] The two angels came to Sodom in the evening; and Lot was sitting in the gate of Sodom. When Lot saw them, he rose to meet them, and bowed himself with his face to the earth,

[2] and said, "My lords, turn aside, I pray you, to your servant's house and spend the night, and wash your feet; then you may rise up early and go on your way." They said, "No; we will spend the night in the street."

[3] But he urged them strongly; so they turned aside to him and entered his house; and he made them a feast, and baked unleavened bread, and they ate.

[4] But before they lay down, the men of the city, the men of Sodom, both young and old, all the people to the last man, surrounded the house;

[5] and they called to Lot, "Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us, that we may know them."

[6] Lot went out of the door to the men, shut the door after him,

[7] and said, "I beg you, my brothers, do not act so wickedly.

[8] Behold, I have two daughters who have not known man; let me bring them out to you, and do to them as you please; only do nothing to these men, for they have come under the shelter of my roof."

[9] But they said, "Stand back!" And they said, "This fellow came to sojourn, and he would play the judge! Now we will deal worse with you than with them." Then they pressed hard against the man Lot, and drew near to break the door.

[10] But the men put forth their hands and brought Lot into the house to them, and shut the door.

[11] And they struck with blindness the men who were at the door of the house, both small and great, so that they wearied themselves groping for the door.

The fundamental question: “What *was* the sin of Sodom?” What is intended in the request to “*know*” the strangers? The traditional answer is “sex,” and specifically homosexual sex.” In fact, this has traditionally been *the* most quoted passage in condemnation of homosexuality! The very word “Sodomy” comes from this story. The problem with this answer it’s not particularly accurate or complete. A gay conference attendee went as far as to suggest that it wasn’t even physically possible.

If you try to illuminate this reading through other passages of scripture, you hit a dead end: Sodom is unique, and is itself cited throughout the Bible. There is one story that precisely parallels this one, though: Judges 19. If you’re not familiar with it, read this carefully, but again, use parental discretion - It’s a horrible story about moral depravity, even though the sexual component is heterosexual.

The destruction of Sodom is itself a symbol of God’s judgement. If the lesson *is* related to homosexuality, it’s violent homosexual *rape*, rather than loving relationships. Furthermore, if it is intended to instruct about proper sexual conduct, how are we to understand Lot’s offer of his *own daughters*? Is this story really the basis for a biblical understanding of *sexual* ethics at all?

Most later biblical references to Sodom don’t seem to focus on the sexual aspect of the story. In fact, Jesus himself refers to it in the context of inhospitality and judgment:

[Luke.10: 10-12]

[10] But whenever you enter a town and they do not receive you, go into its streets and say,

[11] `Even the dust of your town that clings to our feet, we wipe off against you; nevertheless know this, that the kingdom of God has come near.'

[12] I tell you, it shall be more tolerable on that day for Sodom than for that town.

The other two Old Testament readings are from Leviticus. Most readers do *not* find these words to be ambiguous. Again, I'll read the surrounding verses to provide a context:

Lev.18: 19-23

[19] "You shall not approach a woman to uncover her nakedness while she is in her menstrual uncleanness.

[20] And you shall not lie carnally with your neighbor's wife, and defile yourself with her.

[21] You shall not give any of your children to devote them by fire to Molech, and so profane the name of your God: I am the LORD.

[22] You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination.

[23] And you shall not lie with any beast and defile yourself with it, neither shall any woman give herself to a beast to lie with it: it is perversion.

Lev.20: 7-16

[7] Consecrate yourselves therefore, and be holy; for I am the LORD your God.

[8] Keep my statutes, and do them; I am the LORD who sanctify you.

[9] For every one who curses his father or his mother shall be put to death; he has cursed his father or his mother, his blood is upon him.

[10] "If a man commits adultery with the wife of his neighbor, both the adulterer and the adulteress shall be put to death.

[11] The man who lies with his father's wife has uncovered his father's nakedness; both of them shall be put to death, their blood is upon them.

[12] If a man lies with his daughter-in-law, both of them shall be put to death; they have committed incest, their blood is upon them.

[13] If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death, their blood is upon them.

[14] If a man takes a wife and her mother also, it is wickedness; they shall be burned with fire, both he and they, that there may be no wickedness among you.

[15] If a man lies with a beast, he shall be put to death; and you shall kill the beast.

[16] If a woman approaches any beast and lies with it, you shall kill the woman and the beast; they shall be put to death, their blood is upon them.

If these are so simple and direct, then where is the debate? Well, to start off, *all* homosexual activity is not “as with a woman.” Again, the question is, “What exactly is it that is condemned?” The second problem is that these texts are part of the “Holiness Code.” These codes distinguished the Israelites over and against all foreign cults. If there is a *single, overarching theme*, it’s the fundamental issue of the *fidelity to God* and the *avoidance of idolatry* - precisely what is implied by Jesus’ “greatest commandment.”

The problem for us as Christians is how to decide which of the laws of the Torah apply to Christian gentiles. What method should we use to select those laws that we *must* obey from the ones that are just archaic rules to define the uniqueness of the Israelites? After all, ritual circumcision and the food laws were specifically overruled in the New Testament. However, from a reformed perspective, we can’t *arbitrarily* pick and choose our laws and commandments. One frequently espoused view is that we must separate moral laws, presumably including those related to sex, from ceremonial laws. Others find this view to be equally arbitrary.

A final point about Leviticus: reformed Jews share the same concerns and ask the same questions, but what is *more* illuminating is the very *discussion* of homosexuality within the Jewish Orthodoxy - I’d suggest that anyone interested in this point rent the documentary, “Trembling Before G_d”.

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What do the Gospels say? The ministry of Jesus was dominated by the disenfranchised, and he routinely condemned the legalism of religious authorities. However, he also insisted that he had come to *fulfill* the law, not to destroy it. Then again, there was the healing on the Sabbath, and that cornfield incident. Remember, the law given in the Ten Commandments is clear and harsh: “Whoever does any work on the sabbath day shall be put to death.” [Exodus 31:15].

Jesus had *lots* to say about the broad issues of *our relationships with God and each other*. Jesus *also* spoke at great length *against divorce*, which our denomination finds acceptable. There’s the story of the adulteress who he didn’t condemn, and the warning that if you even *look* at someone with lust you’ve *already* committed adultery in your heart. Jesus said nothing *specifically* about homosexuality.

Later New Testament writers *do* refer to homosexual acts. I'll go over Romans I with you now in detail.

Romans 1: 18-32:

[18] For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of men who by their wickedness suppress the truth.

[19] For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them.

[20] Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse;

[21] for although they knew God they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking and their senseless minds were darkened.

[22] Claiming to be wise, they became fools,

[23] and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man or birds or animals or reptiles.

[24] Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves,

[25] because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed for ever! Amen.

[26] For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. Their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural,

[27] and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in their own persons the due penalty for their error.

[28] And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a base mind and to improper conduct.

[29] They were filled with all manner of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice. Full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, malignity, they are gossips,

[30] slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents,

[31] foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless.

[32] Though they know God's decree that those who do such things deserve to die, they not only do them but approve those who practice them.

Nowadays it's popular to explain how Paul was genuinely *against slavery*, or that he was actually a feminist *for his time*. However, our Frances sees nothing to indicate that Paul would *ever* have been swayed to consider *any* form of homosexual behavior as anything other than *sinful*. That said, she also made some interesting and important points about the context of Paul's statements.

We can ask, just as we did with Genesis 19, what is it that is *really* the fundamental sin, the most obvious sin that transcends time and culture. Frances suggests that it's idolatry, and moreover that the verses in question are a *result* of the idolatrous elevation of the flesh above God, and *not* the cause. I'm not a theologian, but I must confess that in my reading, idolatry *is* a profound, overarching concern throughout the Old Testament.

It *could also* be reasonably argued that Paul was denouncing a specific, lustful, dishonorable passion that is itself an example of idolatry. More to the point, while the actions that Paul describes are clearly less brutal, degrading and inhuman than those of Sodom, they likewise are not based on love and respect. Lust is not love.

Frances Gench notes that these verses are actually part of a very complex introductory argument, the theme of which is the universality of sin, of condemnation, followed by "don't judge others." All are in need of justification - all fall short of the glory of God and need justification by God.

Another interesting point from the other side: Why is Paul the *only one in the whole Bible* to specifically allude to *female* homosexuality? Curiously, it may be that he's the only one who cared enough to *equate* women and men, to say that not only are women much more than just property, but that women, too, can find themselves living in idolatrous sin - all need God's salvation.

Possibly the *most controversial* part of these verses is the distinction of *natural vs. unnatural*. In a single culture, these terms can have a very specific meaning. However, in the clash of Mediterranean cultures that the early church was a part of, the cultural significance of a "natural" act were far from obvious to gentile Christians. Clearly, this was part of the reason for Paul's letters. However, today we understand that the term implies much more than culture, including complex biological factors over which the individual has no choice. It implies "nature vs. nurture," "normal vs. pathological," or even "genetic vs. chosen."

It would take much too long to go into what is know and unknown about the science of human sexuality. I'll simply note that, drawing from a wealth of biological and psychological data, some insist that God did not err when He made homosexuals. The counterpoint is that the "natural world" is a fallen world, and that even if sexual orientation *is* largely innate, lifestyles are subject to choice. From the latter perspective, it's the story of Adam and Eve that *defines* what is "normal."

Some view Paul's writings as a condemnation of idolatrous *promiscuity*, which is *precisely* what the media portrays as "the gay lifestyle." However, it can easily be argued that we sin against those faithful Christians who happen to be homosexuals when we *assume* that they must fit this stereotype. Proponents of this view claim that Paul's argument from nature is *appropriately* directed against homosexual behavior, but not *all* homosexual behavior. Rather, the condemnation is based on, and applies equally to, out-of-control heterosexuals. These points are particularly important for those who consider the issue of gay marriage.

The last passages two are I Corinthians 6: 9-11 and I Timothy 1:8-10. I don't have time to go over these, other than to note that both of them contain lists of specific sins, and that the homosexuality references vary across translations. They may refer to sexual perverts, homosexual perverts, male prostitutes, sodomites, the sexually immoral, the effeminate, or *both* parties in *a very specific form* of child sex abuse.

Please note that *all* of these readings refer to *behavior*, and not to what we now call sexual *orientation*. Regardless of our understanding of God's will regarding sexual behavior, we still have to ask ourselves: Have we marginized, denigrated and excluded our homosexual brothers and sisters by our traditions, even in direct opposition to Jesus' mandate to us? Conversely, do fail them more if we don't correct them if they're wrong? What *would* Jesus do?

If you're a bit distressed with me for muddying the waters surrounding what you had believed to be a very simple problem, good! Remember, I'm following Frances Gench by exploring and contrasting perspectives to help us think things through, rather than to give answers. The goal is to help us start *listening to* and *understanding* each other.

So much for sex - now on to war!

Ron Stone was a Professor of Social Ethics at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, and is a member of the General Assembly's Committees on Terrorism and Mission Through Responsible Investment, as well as the Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy. Ron's talk and the resulting discussion were considerably less confined to individual passages of scripture. Unlike the homosexuality debate, references to war are everywhere in the Bible.

The Bible *begins* with an image of peace in the book of Genesis,
in the Garden of Eden.

The Bible *ends* with a vision of peace to come
in the Book of Revelation.

Between them, there has been *war*.

From a biblical perspective, man was created a little less than angels, yet original sin is in *all* of us. Likewise, good and evil are not ultimately between nations or parties, but in each of us, in each decision.

In a sense, the issue isn't war, but peace.

Isaiah 2 v 4 says

He shall judge between the nations,
and shall decide for many peoples;
and they shall beat their swords into plowshares,
and their spears into pruning hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war any more.

A portion of this verse is prominently displayed across the street from the UN.

Ron emphasizes that the context of this quote is an eschatological vision of a common law and a common worship. If we use this to guide our worldview, it implies a global ethic, submission to God's will and an end to the haughtiness that causes war. We must trust in God, not in government or party. Likewise, the Law of Love is a fundamental and pervasive Christian ethic. Ron points out that "Only God is absolute. The rest is negotiable."

If peace is so important, why do Christians in general, and Presbyterians in particular, participate in war?

Ron told a story about a Presbyterian who went to the draft board during the Vietnam War era and affirmed that he was a conscientious objector. His examiner happened to be a Presbyterian elder. “You can’t be a CO!” he was told. “The Presbyterian Church isn’t a peace church, it’s a war church!”

There’s a ring of truth to this remark. Our church grew in and through the American Revolution, and Presbyterians were key players in the war.

Lest you become overly concerned, in 1969 the General Assembly declared that we do not “teach a single response to war which all members must accept, for God alone is Lord of the conscience, and not the state or church.”

With that as a disclaimer, I want to abruptly shift the discussion from the Bible to the so-called “Just War” doctrine. A Just War has the following requirements:

- 1) Only a ***legitimate authority*** can wage a just war
- 2) there must be a ***just cause*** for waging war
 - this includes self defense, protecting innocents or regaining something wrongfully taken, but ***not*** revenge, glory or to impose tyrannical rule
- 3) there must be a ***right intention***.
 - The reason must be to pursue peace, rather than some other hidden gain
- 4) war must be the ***last resort***, to be pursued ***only*** after all other means have failed
- 5) It must be ***proportionate***. The ***damage*** caused by the war must ***not*** be greater than what was being defended against
- 6) There must be a ***reasonable chance of success***. “Hopeless causes” are ***not*** just wars.

In the conduct of war, there’s also a moral obligation to discriminate between ***civilians and combatants*** during warfare

Ron Stone points out that Iraq was added to the agenda of his General Assembly Task Force on Terrorism after the fact. The Task Force was already in agreement about the appropriateness of our national efforts to defend against, and take military action against, al Queda and the Taliban, as well as the ensuing pursuit into Afghanistan. However, he wanted to emphasize that the Afghanistan war was not the same as “all Terrorism.” Likewise, Iraq is not Afghanistan.

By the time Ron gave his talk, world events were already making the well-considered concerns of the Task Force irrelevant; the situation was changing day-by-day. Their original concern had been for the rapid and efficient establishment of a just and stable government - whether democratic or not. At the General Assembly meeting a few weeks ago, the criticism became considerably stronger, when the Iraq war was characterized as "unwise, immoral and illegal" according to "Just War" criteria.

“Just War” doctrine is only a part of the story. Even when war is necessary to preserve the safety of the people, we must always seek peace first, and by all means possible. The result is a “Just Peacemaking” initiative that has, over the last few decades, shifted the question to: “How can Christians help establish a ‘just peace?’”

- 1) We must avoid War, when possible
- 2) Recognize that Peace is *itself* valuable, and should be pursued with justice!
- 3) We should pursue what Ron calls *practical forgiveness*

As an example, Ron claims that our World War II peace treaties worked because we helped to rebuild, then went beyond that to *forgive* our enemies in a very concrete way. Punishment gave way to renewal and hope, and the whole world benefitted from it.

Justice and peacemaking are *not* like human sexuality. They are not *obscure details* buried in scripture, but something that *all* of us know about. We're all aware of the difficulty of translating Christ's commandment to love our neighbor as ourselves into action in a wartorn world. Yet I think the discipline required to understand both sides of the sexuality debate can also help us to understand what we must do and what we must not do about war - internationally... politically... personally.

As Christians, we are held to a higher standard. When it comes to peacemaking, the buck stops with us.

Gen.4: 1-11

[1] Now Adam knew Eve his wife, and she conceived and bore Cain, saying, "I have gotten a man with the help of the LORD."

[2] And again, she bore his brother Abel. Now Abel was a keeper of sheep, and Cain a tiller of the ground.

[3] In the course of time Cain brought to the LORD an offering of the fruit of the ground,

[4] and Abel brought of the firstlings of his flock and of their fat portions. And the LORD had regard for Abel and his offering,

[5] but for Cain and his offering he had no regard. So Cain was very angry, and his countenance fell.

[6] The LORD said to Cain, "Why are you angry, and why has your countenance fallen?"

[7] If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is couching at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it."

[8] Cain said to Abel his brother, "Let us go out to the field." And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel, and killed him.

[9] Then the LORD said to Cain, "Where is Abel your brother?" He said, "I do not know; am I my brother's keeper?"

[10] And the LORD said, "What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood is crying to me from the ground.

[11] And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand.

John 8: 1-11; 34-59

[1] but Jesus went to the Mount of Olives.

[2] Early in the morning he came again to the temple; all the people came to him, and he sat down and taught them.

[3] The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery, and placing her in the midst

[4] they said to him, "Teacher, this woman has been caught in the act of adultery.

[5] Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such. What do you say about her?"

[6] This they said to test him, that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground.

[7] And as they continued to ask him, he stood up and said to them, "Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her."

[8] And once more he bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground.

[9] But when they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the eldest, and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him.

[10] Jesus looked up and said to her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?"

[11] She said, "No one, Lord." And Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you; go, and do not sin again."

John 8: 34-59

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[34] Jesus answered them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, every one who commits sin is a slave to sin.

[35] The slave does not continue in the house for ever; the son continues for ever.

[36] So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.

[37] I know that you are descendants of Abraham; yet you seek to kill me, because my word finds no place in you.

[38] I speak of what I have seen with my Father, and you do what you have heard from your father."

[39] They answered him, "Abraham is our father." Jesus said to them, "If you were Abraham's children, you would do what Abraham did,

[40] but now you seek to kill me, a man who has told you the truth which I heard from God; this is not what Abraham did.

[41] You do what your father did." They said to him, "We were not born of fornication; we have one Father, even God."

[42] Jesus said to them, "If God were your Father, you would love me, for I proceeded and came forth from God; I came not of my own accord, but he sent me.

[43] Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot bear to hear

my word.

[44] You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and has nothing to do with the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks according to his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies.

[45] But, because I tell the truth, you do not believe me.

[46] Which of you convicts me of sin? If I tell the truth, why do you not believe me?

[47] He who is of God hears the words of God; the reason why you do not hear them is that you are not of God."

[48] The Jews answered him, "Are we not right in saying that you are a Samaritan and have a demon?"

[49] Jesus answered, "I have not a demon; but I honor my Father, and you dishonor me.

[50] Yet I do not seek my own glory; there is One who seeks it and he will be the judge.

[51] Truly, truly, I say to you, if any one keeps my word, he will never see death."

[52] The Jews said to him, "Now we know that you have a demon. Abraham died, as did the prophets; and you say, 'If any one keeps my word, he will never taste death.'

[53] Are you greater than our father Abraham, who died? And the prophets died! Who do you claim to be?"

[54] Jesus answered, "If I glorify myself, my glory is nothing; it is my Father who glorifies me, of whom you say that he is your God.

[55] But you have not known him; I know him. If I said, I do not know him, I should be a liar like you; but I do know him and I keep his word.

[56] Your father Abraham rejoiced that he was to see my day; he saw it and was glad."

[57] The Jews then said to him, "You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?"

[58] Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am."

[59] So they took up stones to throw at him; but Jesus hid himself, and went out of the temple.