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## History will be kinder to us if we develop a better theological imagination

by Bill Tammeus

A small c catholic

The editor of *Theology Today*, a quarterly from Princeton Theological Seminary, writes that he is appalled at his recent discovery that seminary faculty members, even well past the Civil War, were expressing racist ideas.

In the magazine's current issue, Gordon Mikoski writes that even though faculty members of this Presbyterian school "agreed that slavery as an institution was a blight upon humanity, not one of them could or would condemn it outright because of the way they read several texts in the Pauline corpus."

In fact, as late as 1877, one faculty member continued to advocate that freed slaves be "sent en masse to colonize Liberia," thus saving white Americans from having to live with or even near blacks (a not-uncommon idea at the time).

Mikoski used his discovery about this matter to make a plea for people today to develop a better theological imagination, to challenge traditional beliefs and to test the waters and the spirits continually so decades or even centuries from now, our generation won't be judged guilty of the kind of pinched, regressive theology evident among the Princeton Theological Seminary faculty in the 1800s.

Although Mikoski didn't mention in his essay the question of how Christians in America today think about homosexuality, I can think of no contemporary issue that so closely resembles the way in which Americans in past generations abused Scripture to justify or excuse slavery.

The pro-slavery crowd horribly twisted the liberating Gospel of Jesus Christ. Those who continue to condemn homosexuality as an abomination in God's eyes abuse it today.

Despite the reality that American society has moved a remarkable distance on the issue of same-sex relations in a relatively short period of time, some voices from the church universal continue the assault in obnoxious ways.

Consider, for example, the 2011 book *What's on God's Sin List for Today?* by the Rev. Tom Hobson, a Presbyterian pastor. Here's what he writes:

To argue that same-sex desire is part of God's good creation is a tragic mistake. Same-sex relations are a part of nature. But so are black widows and praying mantises who kill and eat their mates, and mackerel who kill purely for sport.

To equate my friends Kirk and Doug and their decades-old same-sex relationship (now finally blessed by the Episcopal church) with black widows and praying mantises is, in Mikoski's words, a massive failure of theological imagination, to say nothing of being astonishingly mean-spirited.

It is this kind of thinking that almost certainly will be looked at generations from now the way Mikoski and the rest of us now look at the racist attitudes found among the old Princeton faculty.

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I don't have space here to go into detail about why the Bible should not be used as a weapon against homosexuality. You may read my thinking about that on my daily "Faith Matters" blog. But the misuse of Scripture on this issue needs to stop.

And, yes, I know the Catholic church still officially declares the inclination toward homosexuality to be an "objective disorder." But it's not the first issue on which the church has been wrong, and one day I believe this view will change.

The clear lesson in Mikoski's writing is that even though "it is very difficult to see one's own limitations and taken-for-granted assumptions, we can at least make a good faith effort at critical reflectivity and self-criticism."

Perhaps that's an easier task for skeptical journalists, who learn early in their careers to question everything -- even, it is said, their own mother's love for them. But a questioning attitude seems more open to possibilities and more likely to find truth.

One of my former pastors once said if he saw Jesus walk on water today, he would respond this way: "Let me see that again."

That's the right attitude.

[Bill Tammeus, a Presbyterian elder and former award-winning Faith columnist for *The Kansas City Star*, writes the daily "Faith Matters" blog for the *Star's* website and a monthly column for *The Presbyterian Outlook*. His latest book, co-authored with Rabbi Jacques Cukierkorn, is *They Were Just People: Stories of Rescue in Poland During the Holocaust*

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