



Central Christian Church Bradenton

Where EveryONE is Welcome

LGBTQ+ Inclusion and Exclusion and the Church

Experience – Reason - Tradition

Part 7 – Loving Yet Challenging Conversations Series

cccBradenton 11/1/20

SLIDE 1: Sermon Intro

After Pentecost, the earliest followers of Jesus were of course Jews who assumed this was just a continuation of God's evolving journey with the people of Israel.

After all Jesus himself had revealed to them how his life, death and resurrection were all predicted by Moses and the Prophets.

It wasn't until Peter had a revelation in the house of the Gentile, Cornelius, did he realize that God was doing something entirely new.

You see Peter was not even supposed to be in Cornelius' house; since he was a Gentile it was against the Jewish purity laws.

Even though Jesus had also told them to bring the good news into the whole world, it wasn't until he saw with his own eyes, that the Holy Spirit was also poured out upon the Gentile believers.

That he exclaimed; *"I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears God and does what is right is acceptable to God."* (Acts 10:34 NRSV)

SLIDE 2: Acts 11:17b NIV

When Peter returned to Jerusalem and heard criticism about going into the house of a Gentile from his fellow Christ followers, he told them;

"if God gave them the same gift, he gave us who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could stand in God's way?" (Acts 11:17 NIV)

This episode in Peter's life experience, and the experience of the community in Cornelius's house, forced the early church to confront two truths they held that seemed to be in conflict.

Gentile people, they believed to be unclean sinners, were professing belief in Jesus as Lord and were showing the fruits of the Holy Spirit.

They believed they were unclean sinners because that's what the Hebrew Scriptures said.

This is the same type of tension today's church confronts as they encounter members of the LGBTQ+ community, **who some believe are unclean sinners**, yet they profess belief in Jesus Christ and their lives display the fruits of the Spirit.

This life experience forces today's church to consider that maybe the Bible has been misunderstood and misused to condemn this entire group of people.

SLIDE 3: Romans 1:26-27 NRSV

Our second reading contains two verses that have been used in this way by many good-hearted Bible believing Christians. These may be the most challenging verses to look at with new eyes.

“For this reason, God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error.” (Romans 1:26-27 NRSV)

SLIDE 4: Four Steps

To fully understand what Paul was trying to teach the church in Rome and what we can learn today from these passages, we will address them in four ways.

First, we will look at the historical context of the church in Rome which is necessary to understand what Paul was trying to accomplish with this letter.

Then we'll discuss the broader section in which they are contained. We'll talk a little about the Literary context, how Paul wrote, the techniques of persuasion he used in this section.

On our Monday and Wednesday Bible Studies, we'll dig into the meaning of a couple specific words and phrases used that may help us grasp, in their context, what was being described.

So, if you can't attend, be sure to join us online or watch the recordings later.

Finally, we'll address what this might mean for us today.

How Paul's teaching here may expand our minds and hearts to allow the good news of Jesus Christ to illuminate the new thing God continues to do in our world.

SLIDE 5: Historical Context

In the year 49, the Roman Emperor Claudius expelled all the Jews from Rome.

Between 49 and 54, when Claudius died, there were no Jews in Rome.

There were Christians however, Gentile Christians, the Jewish Christians had to leave but not the Roman Citizens.

This had a significant impact on the house churches in Rome, which had previously been a mix of Jewish and Gentile Christians.

For five years, it was only Gentiles, and as you can imagine, things changed.

When the Jewish Christians returned after Claudius' death, there would have been inevitable conflict with how the churches were run, who was in charge and so forth.

Paul was addressing this conflicted community, **fractured along ethnic lines**, as he wrote this letter.

In this massive letter, one of his goals appears to have been to remind the Church in Rome to see one another as equals at God's table.

The letter contains a reminder of **what the gospel of Jesus Christ is all about.**

With that solid foundation Paul could move forward toward fostering reconciliation between the Gentile and Jewish Christians in Rome.

It was not written so that Christianity for all time would have a theological explanation of the doctrine of justification by faith (even though the letter contains some of that).

Nor was it a universal letter designed to offer timeless truths about the gospel (even if the letter contains some of that, too).

Rather, it is a letter grounded in history, written by Paul to a particular faith community in Rome for a specific purpose.

In part, Paul wrote Romans to explain the gospel in a way that made sense of his mission to be the apostle to the Gentiles.

In his letter, Paul was **pushing, pulling, and at times kicking** the fractured community toward reconciliation, with repeated admonishments to not judge one another but to live in harmony (see Rom. 12:5).

Only when we hold this backdrop for Romans in our minds as we read the text will we ensure that we give ourselves the best opportunity to understand what Paul was saying and why.

Slide 6: The Literary Context

Paul used a common device of the time in discourse and rhetoric to lay a foundation to show that Jewish Christians were no better, or worse, than Gentile Christians.

Paul introduces the section revealing a simple way of understanding the gospel.

“For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, “The righteous shall live by faith.” (Rom. 1:16–17 ESV)

Then our section begins. In our reading I left out a couple of verses you’ve heard me use many times, about how God’s eternal power and divine nature is revealed in all of creation, so that, as verse 20 ends; *“people are without excuse”*

Then we hear about how these wicked and ungodly people who knew God but did not honor God exchanges the truth about God for a lie and worshiped created things rather than the Creator.

It was for this reason, Paul asserts; God gave them up to dishonorable passions and shameless acts.

The section ends with a whole list of every kind of wickedness; greed, envy, murder, strife, deceit, gossip, slander, insolence, arrogance, boastfulness, disobedience, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless, deserving to die.

Sounds like Old Testament wrath of God to me.

When taken at face value, and understood in the traditional perspective, it comes as no surprise that countless Christian leaders have blamed tragedies in our world like earthquakes, hurricanes, and mass shootings on the depravity of those engaged in same-sex sexual behavior.

I remember when Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans, there were many popular evangelical ministers saying that because of the culture within New Orleans, with the Mardi Gras depravity and large gay community, Katrina's devastation may well have been God's punishment.

Imagine what talk like that does to young men and women just coming out, how that thinking can drive them away from God rather than towards God.

This section from Romans 1 does not paint a great picture of what it looks like when God's wrath is poured out on wicked people.

And when you hear words condemning people who engage in same-sex sex acts right in the middle of this section, it can feel a bit unsettling if you are Christian who wants to support our LGBTQ+ sisters and brothers.

But should we take this section at face value?

Should these verses be understood as Paul's own thoughts, feelings, and beliefs about wicked people who turn their backs on God?

Should we therefore read this and take from it a definitive Paul opinion on how God feels about people with a same-sex sexual orientation?

I don't think so.

These verses are what is called a “self-contained discourse,” a sort of prefabricated argument if you will.

Paul leverages this discourse as a rhetorical device to make a larger point.

And that point, is not linked to Paul’s own thinking about wicked and ungodly people.

Do you recall how Jesus, in the Gospels, would sometimes say, “*you have heard it said, but I say to you ...?*”

Hold that concept in your mind as we move forward, because I believe Paul was making a similar move.

A quick word from Solomon should help explain.

Slide 7: Wisdom of Solomon

These verses were composed to persuade the readers and listeners to heap blame on the wicked and ungodly people that this passage was describing.

Why does that matter?

Because instead of isolating two verses (26 and 27) that appear to condemn homosexuality, we need to step back and grasp the context in a way that illuminates what was being communicated.

Understanding that these two verses are part of a larger section, composed with the goal of whipping up an emotional response in the original hearers, should change how we understand them.

This section is very similar to passages found in the Wisdom of Solomon, a valued spiritual book written sometime within a couple of hundred years before Jesus, which was honored by the Jews and read widely in Jewish communities.

It wasn’t Scripture but close to it and is included in what’s known as The Apocrypha.

One goal of the book was to solidify the division between Jews and Gentiles.

Reminding the Jewish people that God as “*for them*” and “*against*” the pagan nations.

One of the plot lines was depravity among Gentiles.

It went like this:

Gentiles failed to know God – turned to idolatry – engaged in immorality – and received due punishment.

The tone, language and arguments of Romans 1:18-32 are nearly identical to those found in Wisdom.

Paul did this on purpose, to evoke the prejudices of the Jewish Christians in Rome.

Today's readers wouldn't know this, unless they also happened to read the book of Wisdom.

Paul would have correctly assumed, the Jewish Christians, he was talking to in this section, would recognize it immediately.

So, if Paul was trying to bring harmony between the returning Jewish Christians and the Gentile Christians who had been running the house churches in their exile from Rome these past five years, why would he rile them up against the Gentiles?

The key to understanding why Paul used this rhetorical device is found in the very next verse after our passage ends, which today kicks off chapter two.

Of course, there were no chapters when he wrote it, someone hundreds of years later decided where to separate the chapters.

Slide 8: Springing the Trap

“Therefore, you have no excuse, whoever you are, when you judge others; for in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things.” (Romans 2:1 NRSV)

What's going on here?

Understanding the context, and the discourse Paul paraphrased from the book of Wisdom, you can see how he may have been using our passage to level the playing field between the Jewish and the Gentile Christians.

He needed to help them understand that neither group is superior to the other.

He unearthed long-held prejudices, exposed them, and brought everyone to an awareness of their sameness.

To do this he set a trap for the Jewish Christians.

You can imagine the energy in the room as the reader tells the story of the wicked people who turned from God, moved toward idolatry, engaged in immoral acts, and reaped God's judgement.

You can see in your minds eye, them looking at each other, congratulating themselves that Paul is on their side, the right side.

As Paul's opening words give Jewish Christians the ammo to re-establish their power and positions in the churches.

You can feel the Gentile Christians panic, wondering if maybe they had been confused about the "good" part of the good news.

Many people from the LGBTQ+ community are wondering the same thing.

But then, after luring his audience inside his snare, Paul flicks the trigger and reveals his purpose.

In passing judgement on their Gentile brothers and sisters, they have revealed they are in the same boat.

If the Gentiles, according to popular Jewish prejudice (not according to Paul) suppressed the truth of God by their unrighteousness, then the Jews (now according to Paul) must acknowledge that they suppress the truth of God by judging the Gentiles.

Throughout the rest of the letter Paul emphasizes that fractured communities need to stop judging each other, because **judgement is God's and God's alone.**

So, when we step back and consider that the Clobber Passage resides inside this discourse, we can no longer say with certainty that the words do, in fact, reflect Paul's personal beliefs about same-sex sex acts.

Instead, what we can say is that they reflect the larger attitude and belief of first-century Jews about pagan Gentiles.

It's a nasty, judgmental attitude, **which Paul adamantly proclaims does not reflect the truth** of God or the fullness of the good news.

SLIDE 9: Four Key Words

On Monday and Wednesday we'll dig deeper into two words.

"atima" in verse 26 which has been translated: vile affections, shameful lusts, degrading or dishonorable passions, just to name a few.

And "aschomosune", which has been translated as unseemly, and shameless acts

And we'll discuss what was meant at the time as natural and unnatural sexual relations; kata phusis and para phusis.

We'll explore what those words may have meant to Paul's readers and listeners. How they were used back then.

Some of what we'll learn may surprise you, it did me.

Slide 10: Conclusion

One final thought about this Clobber Passage.

In the Roman world were numerous temples dedicated to countless gods and goddesses.

Archaeology has helped us assemble a decent picture of what life looked like in and around these temples, and sexual rituals and activity were central components.

In any given temple, you could find both male and female prostitutes engaged in cultic rituals involving orgies and idol worship.

The "*unnatural*" sex acts practiced by idol-worshiping pagans were viewed as culturally offensive to the Jewish people and were engaged in shameless and indecent ways.

They were a result of men and women refusing to honor God, and they were a result of people gorging on excess and yielding to their selfish passions and lust.

That is the environment and activity that books like the Wisdom of Solomon, and discourses like Romans 1:18–32, aimed at in their condemnation of the pagan world.

What we need to ask ourselves now, is if the above description matches any people you know who identify as Christian and also happen to be gay or transgender?

I believe everyone in this room, perhaps including everyone listening online, knows people who grew up as Christians, living by the love and grace of God through Jesus, and, like most Christians, trying their best to live their lives to bringing glory and honor to God.

They serve in the church, they love the least of these, they give to the poor and needy.

They practice ancient disciplines like prayer, Bible reading, fasting, and meditation.

They are patient, kind, generous, and compassionate.

They are in loving, committed same-sex relationships.

I ask you, what do a few verses about people accused of turning their backs on God, worshiping idols, and giving in to their lusts, have to say to them?

I believe the answer is “nothing.”

The Roman’s Clobber Passage — though on the surface, admittedly the toughest of all — simply does not stand up to scrutiny.

It does not supply the church with grounds for shaming men and women who are attracted to the same sex.

It does not arm the church with ammo for launching campaigns of hate and discrimination against the LGBTQ community.

And **it does not** hold the key to keep the doors of our churches locked, excluding our gay brothers and sisters from full membership and participation in the Kingdom of God.

You may remember the story I told you of when some of the very men in this room went to the Florida Disciples Men’s retreat last year, when a leader stood up and said “Oh yes, we welcome gays, but they can’t be Elders or teach our children.

Can you imagine how the gay men in that room felt.

There were some.

I know of at least one who still had not come out of the closet for fear of just such a rejection from his church.

I long for a day when young men and women don’t have to hide who they are or give up on their dreams because they are gay.

I long for a day when men and women don’t marry the wrong gendered person, because they think they have to or because they think it will fix them, and then years later have to navigate how to (or if to) slowly dismantle a family.

I long for a day when gay Christians are not seen as godless pagans who have turned their backs on their faith, their Lord, and their church.

Paul wrote a letter to a church in Rome almost two thousand years ago.

The church was struggling because the Jewish Christians and the Gentile Christians couldn’t find harmony.

They were constantly judging one another.

So Paul, leveraging his skill in the art of rhetoric, exposed the prejudices of the Jewish Christians, and argued that their inflammatory and judgmental posture toward Gentiles was working against his very mission, and indeed was working against the foundation of the gospel.

Confusion has since come because the church decided to interpret two verses in this letter as being Paul's condemnation of any and all same-sex sex acts, instead of seeing them as part of a larger discourse typical of how Jews saw their Gentile neighbors.

And, in a tragic twist, these verses have been used to judge and condemn our gay brothers and sisters, and as a result cause a fracture in churches around the world — not around ethnic lines this time — but around sexual orientation.

Back in AD 60, I choose to believe that Paul's letter to the church in Rome worked — that it had the intended impact and harmonized the believers who were divided on issues of conscience and conviction.

How much more beautiful, then, would it be if his words from two thousand years ago were similarly used today to help reconcile the church with the LGBTQ community.

What a powerful reversal that would be of how his words have been used in the past.

May we one day be able to reimagine Paul's opening words in Romans 1:16: *For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes ... to the straight, the gay, the lesbian, the bisexual, transgender, and queer.*

Let's Pray

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