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Interpretive Prose Piece
April 3, 2020
Blog Post: Romans 1

Intended Audience: In real life, I write a blog that focuses on sustainable fashion and social justice topics, including progressive Christianity. I do not cater specifically to Christians, but my reader is generally a woman in her 20s or 30s with progressive political leanings, an interest in integrated ethical living (such as consumer ethics), and a passing interest in spirituality. Many of my readers are also skeptical of Christianity in light of what they see as the callousness and immorality of American Evangelical leaders. I write this with them in mind.

A Note on Structure and Format:

Blog posts do not typically use traditional thesis statements to organize themes. Instead, they rely on nesting headings and subheadings to introduce relevant topics. I am doing my best in this piece to write conversationally and with appropriate blog structure rather than create a hybrid between academic writing and blog writing, which in the end would feel muddled. I hope that headings will serve to create flow while you're reading. (I also included an image, because it's better for SEO.)

What Does the Bible Say About “Homosexuality”?



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Whether you grew up in the church or not, there's a strong likelihood that you have heard a Christian express that being gay is a sin. And, while I am an inclusive, practicing Christian in a church denomination that affirms gay marriage and ordains gay, transgender, and non-binary clergy, I must admit that even I am afraid of "coming out" on my view regarding what we've historically termed "homosexuality."

The fact is that, while I think I've shown my true colors on this blog (no pun intended), I am afraid of readers and would-be readers coming out of the woodwork to tell me that I have overstepped a line. I am deeply sensitive to the work of keeping people of disparate beliefs in community, but there's always a point in which my stances *themselves* will be the deciding factor between staying or leaving. And I respect that, even as I lament it. If you fear a "clobbering" from the primarily religious folks in this country who believe that being gay is fundamentally incompatible with being a Christian, this post is for you. If, alternatively, you are unsure how to reconcile your Christian faith with gay rights and inclusion, hopefully this piece will serve as a jumping-off point to explore Christian doctrinal statements with more nuance.

The "Clobber Verses"

Commonly called "clobber verses" for reasons that will momentarily become clear, there are a tidy set of texts in both the Old and New Testaments of the Christian Bible that have been used historically to argue against same-sex attraction and relationships.

The word "sodomy," for instance, derives from the story of Sodom in Genesis 19, in which men from all over the town demand to gang rape "angels" (messengers of God) that Lot is hosting in his home. Lot offers them his own daughters instead, saying that the men do not

deserve such treatment because “they have come under the shelter of my roof” (Gen 9:8).¹ While the story is disturbing in terms of its apparent nonchalance regarding these would-be rapists, it also highlights the heightened expectation of hospitality in the ancient near east, a tradition that continues today.² In case you’re wondering how the story ends, the messengers blind the roving townsmen to prevent them from entering the house, and in the next section, God destroys Sodom and Gomorrah.³

Clobber verses are not exclusively found in the Old Testament. For most Christians, Old Testament passages hold doctrinal weight only insofar as they reaffirm New Testament writings. Where are the New Testament “clobber verses” found? We have the Apostle Paul to thank for most of them.⁴ Paul is responsible for a number of the letters – or epistles – contained in the New Testament. In 1 Corinthians, Paul suggests that “male prostitutes” and “sodomites” will not inherit the Kingdom of God, roping them into a list that also includes thieves, drunkards, and idolaters, to name a few.⁵ Later, in Jude, the writer condemns the “unnatural lust” of the people of Sodom and Gomorrah.⁶

Romans and the “Degrading Passions”

For our purposes today, however, I want to focus on what is perhaps the largest and loudest clobberer of them all: Romans 1:24-27. Here is the full text (you may be familiar with it):

Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the degrading of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.

¹ Curiously, while this story has been held up as an admonition against homosexuality, it very rarely comes up – at least in the context of sermons and Bible studies – as an admonition against sexual violence, or against the marginalized position of women in ancient culture.

² I suggest reading *The Places In Between* by Rory Stewart for some contemporary context.

³ Other clobber verses in the Old Testament include Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13.

⁴ Some of the epistles are considered Deutero-Pauline, or written in the style of Paul rather than by his own hand. For historical and doctrinal purposes, however, these Deutero-Pauline letters are still considered authoritative.

⁵ 1 Cor 6:9-11

⁶ Jude 6-7

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.

Reared, as most of us have been whether “churched” or not, with a specific interpretation of this text, this section may seem straightforward. Especially in our 21st century context, we can imagine a megachurch TV pastor reading this aloud and then reminding us that “homosexuality” is condemned by “the Bible,” as if the Bible is a monolithic, fully understandable, ideologically consistent source. But it gives those of us in theologically or politically progressive churches a lot to wrestle with, too.

Let me be clear that my analysis of this section will not produce easy answers. However, with a better understanding of the surrounding verses and the context of the church community in Rome, we can see that this section is theologically dense, and not just a guideline for so-called appropriate sexual behavior.

They “worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator”

Romans was written in the first century CE, addressed to a congregation located in the capital of the Empire, a cosmopolitan city that represented much of what it meant to be a Roman citizen, particularly as it pertained to civic participation and religious life.⁷ In Romans, Paul is addressing a mixed-ethnicity church of Jewish and Roman (“Gentile”) converts struggling to reconcile disparate cultural and religious assumptions while simultaneously doing the work of “lived theology.”⁸ Paul begins the letter with an admonition against idolatry, which feels

⁷ All historical and cultural commentary throughout the remainder of this “post” come from class notes and slideshows.

⁸ Keep in mind that the New Testament as it stands today was not yet available as a written document. Early Christians had to rely on piecemeal oral lessons, newly-formed tradition, and the authority of preacher like Paul.

decontextualized because it is! – we don't know what instigated this conversation. Remember that Paul's letters serve the purpose of instructing a particular congregation toward a more consistent life of faith in *community*. While they may very well be instructive to contemporary Christians (and, conversely, may not be), we can know for certain they were intended to solve a problem in its original context.

But about Paul's argument. First, Paul employs a Judaism-specific definition of idolatry: "they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles."⁹ Idolatry, in this sense, is always oriented toward the image of a living thing. In the verse that follows, Paul connects this kind of idolatry to Roman sexual practices, which he will expand upon in the "clobber verses": "they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator..."¹⁰ This matters because, ultimately, it traces a line between Jewish and Gentile sin. Paul, therefore, suggests that both Jewish and Gentile converts to the Jesus movement have the same expectations placed upon them and are therefore equally culpable: "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."¹¹

Through this interpretive lens, homosexual acts may be a sin, but they are a sin among many sins, not to be singled out by self-righteous members of the church.

Sex and Power in the Ancient World

Before we wrap things up in a tidy bow, however, we still have to consider what Paul means by "unnatural acts." The Greco-Roman world did not have a conception of homosexuality

⁹ Rom 1:23

¹⁰ Rom 1:24

¹¹ Rom 2:1

or “same-sex attraction” in the way we do today. Instead, sexual penetration was largely thought of in terms of power. For instance, men higher up the social ladder – like teachers or politicians – were socially allowed to penetrate lower-privileged people like students or slaves, and would not have conceived of this as homosexuality.¹² Women, who were still largely considered the property of their fathers or husbands during this period, were always lacking power in the sexual dynamic. Thus, women who engaged in sexual acts with one another were considered “unnatural” because of the way they claimed agency in opposition to their social disenfranchisement.

In both Jewish and Greco-Roman sexual ethics, sex between a man and a woman within marriage was deemed natural, but what constituted “unnatural” acts varied considerably between these two philosophical camps, with Jewish practice generally being more restrictive (i.e., as discussed above, cultic sexual practices and sex with slaves, prostitutes, or underlings was considered illicit).¹³ The effect of Paul’s specific condemnation is that those sexual acts are condemned that either: 1. create power differentials between men in the community (men having sex with men) or, 2. trouble the waters of male “property” lines by allowing men and women to have sex with people outside of marriage (adultery, fornication, female same-sex relations, etc.). In both cases, it seems clear that Paul is pragmatically preoccupied with maintaining social order for the unity of community.

The Body of Christ

By today’s standards, Paul’s teaching is not revolutionary, even if telling the community that “everyone sins” levels the playing field to some extent. But it’s undeniable that Paul was preoccupied with a *kind* of equity in the Body of Christ throughout his letters: “For just as the

¹² This does not mean that same-sex attraction didn’t exist, only that it was not framed in the same terms.

¹³ Section Notes, Feb 20, 2020

body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.”¹⁴ Is it possible that these verses so often taken as a cut-and-dried restriction on homosexual acts, are intended primarily to negotiate power in not only a mixed-ethnicity but mixed-income church? After all, maintaining Roman practices of penetration in a community that is intended to transform difference into unity would only heighten class difference – it would be a Body (of Christ) at war with itself, which would certainly be “unnatural.” Paul’s admonition of particular sex acts does not, in reality, remove hierarchy, but it does point toward an explicit concern with at least some practices that are barriers to equity.

So, what does Paul really mean?

The fact of the matter is that Paul does not condone homosexuality. He does not wave the rainbow flag at the Pride parade. But it’s important to say, in equal measure, that Paul, by nature of his historical and philosophical context, could not possibly have condemned it either. The construct simply didn’t exist. Whether you consider yourself a practicing Christian or not, whether you are LGBTQ-inclusive or not, it is valuable to do the work of contextualizing the Bible, especially when the passage in question has historically caused a great deal of confusion and strife.

So much of Paul’s context is lost to history. We don’t know what, specifically, he was responding to. We don’t know much about the individuals who made up the body of the Roman church. But I think it should be said that Paul was not a clobberer. Paul was a person in dialogue, a church leader, a human being. In interpreting his writings with sensitivity and thoroughness –

¹⁴ 1 Cor 12:12-13

in essence, in granting Paul basic human dignity – we can learn what it means to respect all people. Paul would remind us that seeking the wellbeing of *all* in the Body of Christ is central to Christian faith. And, with that in mind, it would benefit us to set down our idols – and, in case you were wondering, decontextualized Bible passages can be idols, too – and seek the larger Truth, even if it leaves us with more questions than answers.