

Romans 1 and LGBTQ Inclusion

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[0 : 00] My name is Meg Clark, Director of Prayer, member of the Preaching Cohort. We are continuing our series on misunderstanding Paul. And today we are going to dive into some of the writings of Paul that are frequently used to discriminate against LGBTQ plus Christians.

I want to say up front that I am a member of the LGBTQ community. I fall somewhere among, thank you, I fall somewhere among the letters L, B, and Q.

And all that is to say that I use the word queer as an identifying word for myself. I know that that word has historically been used as a slur. So I will endeavor not to use it today. But should I say it at some point?

Please know that I do not mean it in any sort of derogatory sense. Diving in, it is no secret that Christianity has not been the most welcoming to the LGBTQ community.

From the writings of St. Augustine to modern day megachurches who refuse to let out members of their communities serve in leadership, it has been an unfriendly experience.

[1 : 01] And LGBTQ Christians who persist and continue struggling to follow Jesus in any way are looking to find themselves represented in the Bible. Men who seek relationships with men may look to the story of David and Jonathan.

Women seeking relationships with women may look to the covenant between Ruth and Naomi. And those who are trans or fall between or outside the gender binary may identify with Joseph and their amazing technicolor dream coat, which can also be translated as a princess dress.

Fun little queer Bible fact for you. But where members of this community should not look to see themselves is in the writings of Paul. The stories of Sodom and Gomorrah and the book of Leviticus.

The passages that I just referenced are referred to commonly as the quote unquote clobber passages that are frequently used by churches to keep LGBTQ Christians out of their communities. Today, we are going to dive into one of those passages, Paul's letter to the Romans, chapter one. But first, a story. In May of 2017, a slightly younger Meg graduated from college and moved to D.C.

[2 : 14] After being raised Catholic, I had found non-denominational Christianity in my senior year of college and was really seeking to find a community where I felt as close to God as I had in that church.

I went through five churches that either didn't feel right or conflicted with my Sunday morning work schedule. I thought that I had found a church in Arlington until after my third or fourth visit, the pastor explicitly stated that they were against same-sex relationships.

And then I went to a Hillsong family church in D.C. And some of you caught the red flag. Miss Meg, Hillsong is notoriously unaffirming.

However, pop back to me being raised Catholic. I didn't know that non-denominational Christianity even existed before halfway through high school, much less know about Hillsong's teachings on LGBTQ Christians.

The church also looked incredibly modern in the way that all trendy megachurches do. There were lots of leather jackets, tattoos, women with undercuts, men in skinny jeans.

[3 : 18] And their website didn't say anything about their beliefs on homosexuality. I felt like I truly belonged, and they all agreed. From October to February, I dove in.

I joined a small group. I served on a team. I even agreed to get baptized, even though that took some convincing on their end. And then in February, we did a series on relationships.

And an associate pastor said, as a throwaway aside, and since at this church we believe that marriage is between a man and a woman, I don't know what the end of the sentence was. It's like when those movies where static fills a character's head.

I couldn't process what I was hearing. I had just given months of my life to this community and was only now finding out that they didn't love all of me. And then the doubt crept.

Well, I did feel like I belonged here. I did have friends in the community, and I loved serving. I was learning a ton from the messages. So what if? What if I was supposed to be here?

[4 : 20] And what if God put me in this church so that these people could shake me and tell me that the way that I was living was wrong and sinful? So I dug my heels in.

I got more invested. I put in all the time and energy I had to spare for this church. I showed up at 7.30 to turn the lights on and unlock the doors, and I was frequently one of the last people in the building after second service.

I grew closer to my pastor's wife, who led my small group, and I read the Bible, and I prayed. If God had a plan for my life and that plan had led me to this church, didn't that clearly mean that they had something to teach me?

And I prayed, and I cried. I turned to vices to cope. I distanced myself from friends and family in subtle ways by only sharing the highlights of my life.

Until after a year of trying to pray the gay away, I realized that I wasn't changing. And instead of digging in on my church, I dug my heels in on myself.

[5 : 23] I purchased God and the Gay Christian by Matthew Bynes. I called off the thing with the guy I'd been trying to convince myself I could be interested in. And one night after small group, I came out to my pastor's wife.

To quote many a coming out story that does not go well, it went as well as it could have. She didn't throw me out. She said that they would walk alongside me.

I could continue to serve. What I didn't know was that that was conditional on me staying in the closet. So in June, when I posted for Pride Month, I received a text message from that same pastor's wife instructing me to take the posts down.

We had a three-hour conversation the next day, and ultimately I did take it down. With a new reason. If I was going to stay in this church and if God had called me there, maybe there was a different reason I hadn't noticed.

Maybe I, Little Meg, was the one to change the global Hillsong organization from the inside. Yes, the laughter is appropriate. It was a little much.

[6 : 26] Work on Pride with me. I was there to show that I was just as Christian and as good and as loved by God as everyone else in that church.

I was serving, but I was serving out of spite and anger and resentment. We're going to pause my story for a minute to look at one of the passages in Paul that this church used to justify their treatment of me and LGBTQ people.

We are going to look at Romans chapter 1. Paul is writing to the church of early Christians in Rome while he is off continuing to spread the gospel. It starts with sort of a, hey, hope I get to see you soon.

You can read 1 through 16. That's the gist. Saved you some time. And then Paul goes off. Paul talks about how people know God and yet have not glorified or given thanks to him.

In verses 22 and 23, he says, Verse 24, he continues, Therefore God gave them over to the sinful desires of their hearts, to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another.

[7 : 42] They exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshipped, created things rather than the creator, who is forever praised. Amen. He goes on, verse 26, Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts.

Even their women exchanged natural sexual 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 shameful acts with other men and received in themselves due penalty for their error. Woof, right? Not super affirming, right? Sexual impurity. Sexual impurity.

Women exchanging natural sexual relations. Men inflamed with lust for one another. It's easy to see why these verses are convenient for those who would seek to keep LGBTQ plus people out of their communities.

Before we dive in too deep, let's get some context for this letter. Remember that Paul is writing this to a specific group of people at a specific time.

[8 : 41] So we need to understand the context of that people and this letter. Paul is writing to the church in Rome made up of mainly of Jews who believe that Jesus is the Messiah.

As Pastor Anthony talked about in our last series, some in this group sought to make the rules of who could be a follower of Christ regarding dietary laws, circumcision, and other markers of Jewish identity.

Another important idea here is what is Paul trying to teach the church in this letter? Scholars, including notably Martin Luther, thought of Romans as a letter about individual salvation. What do I as one person have to do to get into heaven? There's a new theory that's called the new perspective on Paul, very clever name, that thinks that Paul is more focused on the group. What does it mean to be God's people together as a community and how do the Gentiles fit in? So with that context, let's look at the verses again. Verses 22 and 23, he says, Then he talks about sexual impurity.

[9 : 58] Let's remember that Paul is writing to a church in Rome surrounded by Roman religion and culture. The temple prostitution and public sex acts were part of Roman ritual.

Following the order of the text, it's clear that the impurity Paul is referring to has more to do with abandoning the worship of God and turning to Roman practices. More to do with idolatry than with sexuality.

Those who Paul is referring to aren't sexually impure because of the gender of the person they're sleeping with. The issue is that they're participating in Roman religious practice. In verse 26, Paul says, You may hear that and think unnatural is a weird word.

We can tease that out a little bit more. Early Jewish philosopher Philo used the same word that we translate as unnatural to mean heterosexual sex acts that wouldn't result in pregnancy or sex with the use of birth control.

So this isn't explicitly or implicitly about LGBTQ plus women. And even if it is, it certainly isn't about the types of relationships we see between women today.

[11 : 09] Paul would have no context for modern relationships. Remember that Paul is writing in a time where marriage is more about a contract between families than it is the love that two people have for each other.

In verses 26 and 27, Paul uses the word lust. First, let's talk about what you all came to church this evening to talk about Roman sexual ethics. There is no identity or concept of sexual orientation in Rome.

Men were expected to be interested in having sex with both men and women. A little bisexual representation for the crowd. So long as they were in the active or masculine role in the act.

Men could, in a socially acceptable way, have sex with his wife, duh, who were not yet Roman citizens. So there's certainly some pedophilia and consent issues happening there.

Slaves, prostitutes, bar staff, and actors. I didn't think my fingers through. The last four have no honor in the Roman culture. So long as the person in the passive role wasn't an adult Roman citizen and only men were citizens, there was no issue for the Romans.

[12 : 15] The problem arose when there was a man who wanted to be in the passive role. Because they viewed that as being so sex-crazed and filled with lust to want to be like a woman.

Which was the most shameful thing you could do in Roman society. A man who wanted to be the passive sexual partner was seen as unable to control his desires. Or, to go back to Paul, acting out of lust.

So Paul isn't saying anything that contradicts the Roman ethics that existed around his church. As I said before, there's no concept of sexual orientation at the time. Paul couldn't have been talking about LGBTQ Christians.

For the same reason, Paul doesn't have any verses on social media websites mining user data. The concept didn't exist at the time. He doesn't have verses about email. He doesn't have verses about fights on Twitter.

Because he existed in a context. And his context did not include any of those things. And certainly not LGBTQ relationships. So, if Paul isn't talking about LGBTQ people, what is he talking about?

[13 : 18] Surely, this is still in the Bible. So there is still something for us to take from it. As I talked about before, the first few verses are about idolatry. Replacing the worship of God with the worship of pagan Roman practices.

Which happen to involve quite a bit of sex. In verse 25, Paul says, What truths about God have you been exchanging for a lie?

Is the God you think of angry, vengeful, and out to get you? Or is it the kind and loving God that we come to know through Jesus? A lot of us were taught the specific lie that God was angry. Specifically, LGBTQ Christians. We were taught that God didn't want anything to do with us. That we were separate from God because, ironically, of how God did us. But God is always there loving you.

Nothing you can do can separate you from their love. Potential LGBTQ Bible character David writes in Psalm 139, If anyone has told you that God does not love you because of how you were made, that was a lie.

[14 : 38] And I invite you to exchange that lie for the truth of God's love. The ever-present, gentle, and reliable love of God. The second half of that verse brings us a challenge.

They worshipped and served created things rather than the creator. We all deal with some level of idolatry by the fact that we are constantly focused on God and doing God's will in the world. What's come up for you lately? Where are you spending your time? Is there an image that you're worshipping? Is there an image of yourself that you're worshipping? If you're on social media, we all have some sort of curated presence, merely by the fact that we're not constantly Instagramming live every second of our days.

We pick and choose the moments to share that paint us the way we want to be seen in these perfect lights. But that often goes beyond social media and into how we present ourselves to those around us.

This past week, I was blown away when a friend shared that they were having a tough time with their mental health. and asked for some prayer. I was so honored that they welcomed me into their life in that way, and I recognized the strength they had to let go of that perfect image.

[15 : 54] Are you letting go of the perfect image with those around you who love you? But Meg, what about the sex stuff? Okay, what about the sex stuff?

We are part of a religion that does not have a transactional God. Remember, God loves you no matter what. Covered it. The Romans were all about give to get.

You want the gods to listen to you? Have to have sex with the temple prostitutes, even if they're the same gender as you. You don't want to? I guess your crops are going to fail this year. That sounds crazy to us.

But think about what the church has done to LGBTQ people. You want God to love you? Well, you either have to remain celibate or be in a relationship with someone you're not attracted to.

Oh, you don't want to? Get out of our church. I think Paul would be furious to find that his words were being used to keep people out of church since he spent so much of his life trying to make the church more inclusive.

[16 : 53] In the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, Jesus tells us that we can know the tree by the fruit it bears. He says that a good tree cannot bear bad fruit. What he's talking about here is that you can tell if something is good by what comes of it.

Let's apply this concept to non-affirming theology. What is the fruit of telling LGBTQ people that they are not loved by God as they are? I'm not going to quote you statistics about the number of kids kicked out of homes or the number of LGBTQ people who struggle with their mental health. But I told you at the start of this sermon that I lived as part of a bad tree. Picking up where we left off, I have just been asked to take down a post about pride from my personal Instagram, and I decided to cover Hillsong from the inside.

After a few weeks of trying this method, no surprise, I was a little worn out. I was bitter at everyone I interacted with. I wasn't feeling God in the messages or in the worship.

And one of my friends gave me the tough love I needed by saying, Hey, I don't think that you can handle this on your own. So with that loving nudge in the right direction, I started looking for a new church.

[18 : 07] Coming to the table changed everything. I was definitely wary of falling in love with a new church community. I even met with Allie Robinson from the LGBTQ affinity group before I set foot in the church so that I knew what we were about.

But I was so longing for a place to be loved as God made me. A place where I didn't have to censor myself or my social media opinions. I don't tell you that story to say that you have to immediately change all of your opinions about what you think God feels about LGBTQ Christians.

I share it to give you a peek into what that theology did to a 21-year-old woman who had previously been confident in God's love for her. I am still working through the damage that it did to me. And it only happened for two years while I was an adult. Imagine being taught that your entire life by your pastor, your parents, your friends.

Some of us here don't have to imagine. That is bad fruit. So we know that it's a bad tree. Let's talk about knowing a tree by its good fruit.

[19 : 14] Not to toot my own horn, but hello, I am good fruit. I am in the healthiest relationship with God I've ever been in.

I'm the director of prayer somehow. I'm preaching in front of all of you. Because I found a church that doesn't think that who I love dictates God's calling on my life.

I'm not practicing idolatry living as the person God made me. So the verses in Romans 1 aren't about me. If I were being idolatrous, Paul thinks that God would have abandoned me.

And spoiler alert, God has not. We are best buds. Romans 1 is not about who you're attracted to or whether your gender matches what was on your birth certificate.

Romans 1 is about idolatry and giving in to a transactional society that turns you away from God. This church, this room tonight is filled with members of the LGBTQ community who are living into the love that God has for them.

[20 : 15] Because there is a church that said, we love you. And we're happy that you're here fully as you are. A lot of us are still working through that old bad fruit. I would not be here without our LGBTQ affinity group where we all sit and share the damage that we've dealt.

And the good that God is doing in spite of it. We are the good fruit of affirming theology. By showing up and sharing our stories, digging into our relationships with God, and serving out of love for God and God's community, we are watering the good tree and waiting expectantly to see more good fruit.

If you or someone you know is looking to dig more into what the Bible says, or rather does not say, about LGBTQ Christians, I have three book recommendations. The first, God and the Gay Christian, that's my gateway drug.

Changing Our Minds by David Gushy. And The Bible, Gender, and Sexuality by James Brownson. There are also a million and a half LGBTQ Christian podcasts.

I have a whole list of suggestions if you are interested in that. If you'd like to talk one-on-one with someone to end the process, feel free to reach out to me or any of the members of our pastoral team, and we will be more than happy to talk with you.

[21 : 32] Let's go ahead and close in prayer. God, I thank you so much for this opportunity to share some of the good that you've done in my life with this community. God, I thank you that there is a community like this that knows that your love is regardless of sexuality, of gender, of any other markers that the world puts on us, but that you love us each because we are your children.

God, I thank you for everyone who is in this room or watching online tonight or watching back a recording of this. I pray that you would fill us and fill them with confidence in your love for us, and that we would be able to go from this place feeling more sure than ever that you love us exactly as we were made.

Amen. Let's give it up for Meg. Thank you.