

Beyond Condemnation or Agreement  
Romans 1:18-2:4

The Gay issue. It would be easy simply to condemn gays and be done with it. It would be easy to accept the lifestyle and be done with it. My perspective is that neither decision would be in keeping with what Christ expects from Christians, and his church. Yet within Christendom we see an emerging polarization at both ends of this spectrum.

The "simply condemn" group points to the clear words of Leviticus: LEV 20:13 " *If a man lies with a man as one lies with a woman, both of them have done what is detestable. They must be put to death.*" But if we know nothing else of Jesus Christ, we know that God's word to humanity, to sinful humanity, is not just condemnation, but the offer of new life. Jesus himself implicitly overturns the capital sentence upon all sexual offenses by defending the woman caught in adultery. She was under sentence of death, but Jesus said, "Let the one without sin cast the first stone." "Is no one left here to condemn you? Neither do I."

And, if we're going to follow Old Testament capital law, we must account for this: LEV 20:9 " *If anyone curses his father or mother, he must be put to death.*" I daresay we would want more leniency than this.

So, if we are Christian, I don't think that simple condemnation is the answer.

Now, those Christians today who believe in simple agreement with committed gay relationships make the following arguments.

Homosexual behavior is explicitly condemned only four times or so in the Bible, and never by Jesus himself. And, in Leviticus, the prohibition of homosexual practice is included in a list of many other sexual practices, many of which we still disapprove today, but some of which we find tolerable.

And elsewhere in the Old Testament birth control is regarded as evil, (the story of Onan in Genesis) but now is considered almost a necessity as our world's population skyrockets. So, there is room for not following the letter of the Old Testament law.

Jesus himself, as noted, did not condemn the woman caught in adultery. *However, against this point of view of absolute acceptance of gay relationships*, we need to note that nowhere does Scripture approve of such relationships, and, in the case of the woman caught in adultery, it is not just that Jesus refuses to condemn her; he also explicitly tells her to live a transformed life: "*Go and sin no more.*"

So, where does this leave us? I will deal with our passage from Romans in due course. But before we go there, let me point out that in the Bible, there are many people who commit sexual sins, and these sins, both those repented and unrepented, do not necessarily render one unfit to offer

service to God.

Abraham passed his wife off as his sister and gave her to a king, so he could have safe passage. King David, the beloved King David, honored as the ideal king, basically stole Bathsheba from a brave and honorable army general, because he lusted after her because she looked cute when he saw her taking a bath.

Read Ruth carefully, and you realize that she and Boaz spent the night together before they were married.

Rahab was a prostitute, both before and after an Israelite scouting party came into the land. She helped them. Was honored for it. In fact is mentioned in Jesus' genealogy. And is honored as one who helped God's people. The Woman at the Well proclaimed the truth of Jesus, and wasn't married to the man she lived with.

God managed to use all these folks for his purposes, despite their sins, sexual and otherwise.

And we know that other people have fallen short in the area of sexual morals, yet have left this world a better place. Tchaikovsky was gay, yet left us a magnificent legacy. His 1812 Overture adds sparkle to 4th of July celebrations, and his Nutcracker Suite adds enchantment to every Christmas. And Mozart, Mozart left us some of the most magnificent music, both sacred and secular that the human mind can imagine. He wasn't gay, far from it, but he had quite a

reputation with the ladies before he finally settled down and got married.

You might have noticed that I am lumping all sexual sins together, but I think this is appropriate. Nowhere does the Bible place gay sexuality in a special category as being especially heinous, nor in fact that sexual sins are worse than others.

And I dare say there might be more than a little hypocrisy among those who in God's name so eagerly and vehemently would cast gay people into the outer darkness. Bless his heart, Pat Robertson finds gay people to blame for all sorts of things: "Evangelist Robertson says gays bring about terrorist bombs, earthquakes, and tornadoes" is how one newspaper (Virginian Pilot June 10 1998)described a speech he made. [That's a lot for one group to do!]

Yet on the day Pat Robertson got married, his wife was already pregnant. Now, this is no problem for most Christians: we understand about sin and redemption and giving in to desire, but when we seek grace for ourselves and demand fire and brimstone upon others, we are in a bit of a Christian predicament.

So, then what might we learn from our passage in Romans, where homosexual activity is specifically regarded as ungodly? Let me set the context. Paul is arguing with two different groups about salvation, reminding them both of their need for the transforming love of Jesus Christ. The first group is the Gentiles, whose wild and carnal and secular ways left them no time to think about the spiritual.

And the second group is the Jewish people, the leaders of whom were so self-absorbed in their own self-righteousness, that they failed to see that they too fell short of God's expectations for them.

Paul confronts the Gentiles: God's power and expectations are clearly seen, so we are without excuse. But folks neither glorified God or thanked God, and as a result their foolish hearts were darkened.

Now follows a litany of moral failings of the gentiles who instead of following God, worshiped created things, and even themselves instead of God.

Among these were men who committed indecent acts with other men, and women with other women.

But then having mentioned homosexual behavior as an example of sin, Paul now lists many more examples of the depraved life: gossip, slander, arrogance, boasting, disobedience of parents, being heartless, being ruthless, and doing all sorts of evil.

*It's all written, not to condemn gays specifically , but to make us all realize our need for redemption in Jesus Christ. Gays are not a special category, but an example among many of those who live God-denying lives. Cast out the gays? Well, OK. Along with those who gossip, those who are sometimes ruthless in dealings with others, and those who are arrogant, and those*

who disobey their parents. . .

Pretty soon, who would be left in the Kingdom? And that's Paul's point. None of us, except for the grace of Jesus Christ.

Now the objection to this thinking is: but aren't Christians, once saved, supposed to put their sin aside? A good point, and we will return to it in due course.

Now, a Jewish person back then, especially a Pharisee who meticulously kept all laws, might read the diatribe against the Gentiles and, in the words of the '60s say, "Right on. Paul, you tell those sinners all about their sins." But then, in this second chapter, Paul turns the tables. "You who judge others have no excuse either, because when you judge the other, you are condemning yourself."

Why? Because of another sin: you are showing contempt for the riches of God's kindness, tolerance, and patience. (Kindness, tolerance, and patience... Paul's words, Scriptural words, not mine.)

Because it is God's kindness that leads to repentance. Jesus never condemned anyone to heaven. And we don't need to, either. It is patience, loving patience to sinners that gives sinners the power rise from sin to righteousness. At least that's what Paul implies.

The church needs to find a way to continue to regard homosexuals as people who need the redeeming love of Jesus Christ, not as enemies to be destroyed. Yet I had a pastor write to tell me I am evil for even suggesting such a thing. Here's the background.

A Joseph Swank [a pastor in Maine] regards any such talk of how to accept gays in the Christian faith as demonic. In an article, he dismisses them all as people who don't care a twit about Christ. [I think he meant "whit," but no matter] I wrote him an email, challenging his point of view, because I know many gay Christians who wrestle with what is in fact right and wrong given their relationship with Christ. Here's what I wrote:

*Dear Sir, as a United Methodist pastor who has more than a little sympathy for your point of view, I must say I think the tone of your article can, in its own way, also be injurious to the cause of Jesus Christ. Homosexuals are people too, who, even if wrongly, do struggle with issues of faith. I think some do actually care "more than a twit" about Jesus Christ. And, perhaps we should not forget that we are all sinners who fall short of God's expectations for us. Homosexuality is not the only sin, nor the most important sin, mentioned in Scripture. As we seek to uphold Christian standards within the denomination, it strikes me that compassion and mercy are also standards worth affirming. Sincerely yours, Eric Lindblade ...his reply:*

*you leave me no doubt that YOU are a part of the problem / evil. Repent.*

I sought to talk about mercy and compassion, and he could do nothing but call me evil. If this

makes me evil, then I'll just have to be evil!

I wrote him back: "I'll repent if you will. I assume you have at least a few sins yourself." He did not respond.

Folks, Gay people will not destroy the church. But a spirit which would exalt condemnation over grace might.

How then might we respond as a church? Perhaps we could . . .

Practice radical hospitality. All are welcome, because all stand in need of Jesus' forgiving love. And God wishes that none of his children be lost. Our arms must be open wide to all people, even those whose sins aren't ones we usually tolerate. Our calling isn't to determine levels of sinfulness, our calling is to welcome all sinners to new life.

Emphasize that Christ leads us to a life of holiness. A life in which we put behind us all unhealthy passions, be it greed or gossip or hard-heartedness, of self-righteousness. We must do more than condemn.

Yet, we must do more than simply accept behavior that falls short of holiness. We must invite people to live holy lives. Not force, not coerce. But continue to offer Christ's transforming love, and offer it in a kind and compassionate way.

Am I saying that it is better for gay people not to live out their sexuality? Well, yes, just as I am saying that it is better that no one live out their sexuality outside the bonds of marriage. Not because to live out one's sexuality casts one out of the Kingdom, but because to live such a life might deprive one of knowing a deeper blessing, of knowing a deeper blessing that comes from living as holy a life as possible according to Christ's highest ideals.

Does this stance deprive people of sexual fulfillment? Yes, and this is a high price, for sexuality is one of God's good gifts. But at the same time, to live this way, is to have hearts opened for greater, spiritual blessings.

What about urging Gay people to leave that life behind and marry someone of the opposite sex? It might seem to be an obvious answer, but studies have shown consistently that efforts to change one's sexual identity meet with limited success. Even ministries that offer such programs, and offer retreats with counseling and prayer and Bible study, find their success rate discouragingly low.

But what of gay Christian people who live out their sexuality with a partner they love? I would counsel them that they would have a greater blessing if they did not do so. But at the same time, the calling of the Christian community is to love all people, and care about all people, and reach out to such people, even as other people reach out to us in the midst of our sins.

Folks we all are sinners. It's just that some sins are less acceptable and some are more tolerated by the conventional religious establishment.

And in the meantime, let's remember what God said about patience. Sometimes we come to Christ quickly, but it takes a while for us to leave all our sins behind.

I'm reminded of the story of John Newton, a blasphemous slave trader. [I can't think of a more sinful occupation than to be a slave trader] One day a great storm came upon him at sea, and in the midst of the storm, he was saved. He accepted Jesus Christ as the Lord of his life in 1748. But guess what? He kept on slave-trading until 1755 and not until 1780 did he come to see his slave-trading as wrong. Finally, in 1785 he became an eloquent spokesman against slavery.

In an instant, he accepted Christ. But it took a while for him to leave all his sin behind. Eventually he became a pastor. Eventually, he wrote a hymn called Amazing Grace. But he was able to do all that because God was patient with him in the midst of his sins, before and after he accepted Christ.

And so may we be as loving and welcome and patient of all those, who, like us, find that sin still clings on our journey. Affirming the holy standards of conduct, sexual and otherwise. And offering in Christ's name, welcome to those who fall short, even as Christ has welcomed, and redeemed us, despite our sins.

May we continue to acknowledge our faith in Jesus Christ, who sets such a high standard of sexuality, so high in fact that even to look at a person with lust, is at some level in fact adultery.

May we continue to acknowledge our faith in Jesus Christ, who set such high standards, yet was unfailingly so merciful and accepting and forgiving of those who could not yet meet them.

It's not a question of condemning. It's not a question of agreeing with a lifestyle. It is a matter of welcoming, of welcoming with the radical welcoming of God's forgiving love made known on the cross, Jesus who died for us while we were yet sinners, Jesus who is unwilling that even one of God's children be lost, no matter what the nature of our sin might be. Amen.