



“Can I Be A Christian If . . . 6. I’m Gay?”

Text: Galatians 3:26-29

a sermon by Kevin Fleming

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When you stop to think it through, mathematics should play some part in the church’s history. The odds of the church getting it “right” all the time are not that great. From time to time, the church just gets things wrong – dead wrong.

Take slavery. Back in the day, the church looked at a story from the ninth chapter of Genesis – the story of Noah’s curse of Ham and Canaan – as the Biblical justification for enslaving people with black skin. Now, please know that nowhere in all of scripture does it say that Ham and Canaan were black, nor does it say that their descendants were black. But, that’s how the story came to be taught and preached. Prominent Presbyterian preachers and teachers – among them James Henley Thornwell and Robert Lewis Dabney – taught in no uncertain terms that it was not a sin to enslave black people because black people were cursed by God, less than fully human, and that abolitionist views were “essentially wicked, disorganizing, and ruinous.”¹ James Henry Thornwell stated, that “the parties in this conflict are not merely abolitionists and Slaveholders; they are Atheists, Socialists, Communists, Red Republicans, Jacobins, on the one side, and the friends of order and regulated freedom on the other. In one word, the world is the battleground – Christianity and atheism the combatants; and the progress of humanity the stake.” That was in 1850. A significant part of the church got it dead wrong.

Or, take the church’s view on women. We’ll talk more about this next week, but there was a time when the church used the Bible’s story of Eve’s curse as the justification for excluding and, in fact, oppressing women in the church. The church father, Tertullian, in the third century, wrote of Eve, “You are the Devil’s gateway. You are the unsealer of that forbidden tree. You are

the first deserter of the divine law. You are she who persuaded him whom the Devil was not valiant enough to attack. You destroyed so easily God's image of man. On account of your desert, that is death, even the Son of God had to die."² If you see women – as represented by Eve – as the cause of everything terrible and horrific in the world, it is not hard to see why you might exclude and oppress them. Once again, a significant part of the church got it dead wrong and for a long, long time.

While those two examples dominate the conversation, there are plenty of other times the church got things wrong. After all, despite what we may want to believe, the church is a human institution, controlled by mere mortals – mortals who are all too easily able to take a wrong turn from time to time and lead lots of others into a wilderness of misinformation and unreliable and unfaithful interpretation.

Knowing our propensity for such wild goose chases, you have to stop and wonder when you hear some Christian people make the most egregious statements about gay and lesbian people. For the past thirty years or more, some of the most hurtful and pernicious statements have been leveled against gay and lesbian Christians by some prominent church leaders and by some denominations. The result is that the very children the church embraced in baptism and promised to uphold and encourage in their discipleship have been the victims of a kind of spiritual child abuse at the hands of those who promised to love them and encourage them.

The question is: could we have gotten it wrong yet again? Could what we've been told to believe about homosexuality be wrong? Could it be that we have, once more, gone off on a theological wild goose chase? Walk gently with me this morning, friends. This is not an easygoing sermon for a hot summer morning. We're taking on some very heavy lifting this morning, so stay with me, and if you see me getting a little overwhelmed, whisper a prayer, would you?

One of the realities we have to face is that, from time to time, the church's prejudices show. We like to hide them and even pretend that they are not there. But they are and every now and then we put them on display. We did it with the slavery question. We did it with the question of the role of women in the church.

And it is entirely possible – some might even say probable – that the church has done it again when dealing with its gay and lesbian children. As human beings – and predominantly heterosexual human beings at that – we are uncomfortable with people who are not heterosexual. We are not sure that such folk should be a part of our church. We are not sure that we should allow gay and lesbian people too much in the way of acceptance and support. We listen to the voices that say that gay and lesbian people are really about recruiting others – especially young people – to be gay or lesbian. We wonder about the people down the street who might be a gay couple living together, but don't give a second thought to the nice couple living down the street who may be an unmarried heterosexual couple.

And because our prejudices are what they are, when someone in the church says that the Bible says this, or that, about homosexuality, we are ready to listen and believe with unquestioning minds. We listen to people talk with enlightened eloquence about “the sin of Sodom,” while failing to see that whenever the subject is broached anywhere else in the scripture, the sin of Sodom is not homosexuality, but greed, injustice, inhospitality, excess wealth, indifference to the poor, and general wickedness.³ We listen to people quote verses from the holiness code in Leviticus that seemingly condemn homosexuality, but fail to hold up all the other commandments and requirements that make up the rest of the code. We read 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10 but fail to do the serious homework of correctly translating the verses, for if we did, the condemnation we so desperately want from Scripture would be less than forthcoming. And when we take up the first chapter of Romans, often cited as Paul’s condemnation of homosexuality, we are forced to own the truth that what Paul is talking about is one of the central pillars of the Reformed Christian faith – not that some have sinned, but that all have sinned and there is none of us that are nearly as righteous as we think we are.

And when it comes to Jesus, well, let me tell you what Jesus had to say about homosexuality. (silence) Jesus said nothing at all.

Yet, still, we keep finding ways to have the Bible baptize what we already believe. We look for ways to make God say what we would prefer God to say, rather than change our views and our behaviors and our actions. We keep trying to turn Jesus into God’s enforcer.

But, it won’t work anymore – if it ever did. Our prejudices cannot be baptized. Hate – in whatever form it takes – has no place in the kingdom of God.

We are looking for a new beginning. The church needs a new starting place – a new source – a different foundation. And the good news is that we don’t need to make it up. We already have it in the letter to the Galatians. We read it again this morning: “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”

This was one of the early church’s most radical teachings. What if we left the labels the world so loves to use outside the doors of the church? What if we simply didn’t look at people the way the world looks at people? Play with it for a minute. What if we no longer paid any attention to spiritual origin, or ethnic origin? What if we no longer noticed those who have much and those who have little? What if political party didn’t matter? What if we no longer cared whether someone attended a Big Ten school? Okay, that’s just crazy talk – you can take anything to extremes.

Are you getting it? What if we really allowed our connection to God and to each other in Jesus Christ to make that kind of difference? What if we allowed God to erase the prejudices we carry into the church?

And then, are you ready, what if we allowed that to include God’s gay and lesbian children? What if we – in the church – what if we no longer worried

about who is gay and who isn't? What if we no longer saw that as something that concerns us? What if "there was no longer Jew or Greek, there was no longer slave or free, there was no longer male and female; for all of us are one in Christ Jesus?"

One of the things that has so touched me is how this congregation has moved into this new reality over the past decade and a half. I distinctly remember when Wendy and I came here for our weekend of candidating and we met with the Session, Deacons, and Trustees. The issue of gay members came up and I remember a few of the people at that gathering say, "We don't want to become the 'gay' church." The words had the ominous tone of divisiveness about them. In back of the words were other words, some of which were, "don't make me change my mind about this."

But, in the intervening years, minds have changed along with hearts. Somewhere along the way, we decided to be a church where the labels so easily attached to people by the world no longer mattered here. Without directly advertising or soliciting, gay men and lesbian women found their way here and received a warm and authentic welcome. I cannot begin to tell you how many times I have had gay people say to me, "I finally found a real church." Having been run off by other congregations, here they find a place where the truth is, "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."

The question for the day is, "Can I Be A Christian If I'm Gay?" The answer is "yes." Anyone who trusts in the God revealed by Jesus Christ is a Christian. Anyone who embraces the new life offered by Jesus – loving God and loving neighbor – is a Christian.

And Christians come in all shapes and sizes and, yes, orientations. Some Christians are black, and some are brown, and some are tan, and some are not. Some Christians are men and some are women. Some Christians are heterosexual and some are homosexual.

And, if I'm reading the Bible correctly, God loves them all. In that highly quoted verse, I do believe I remember it saying that "God so loved the world," not just some of it, not just a neighborhood or two, not just the nice people, not just the straight people. "God so loved the world."

Maybe it's time we did the same. For now and evermore. Amen.

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1. Jack Rogers, *Jesus, the Bible, and Homosexuality*, p. 20
 2. *ibid*, p. 26
 3. *ibid*, p. 68



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