
PODCAST START:

[intro music]

Brian: Welcome to the Queer Theology podcast!

Fr. Shay: Where each episode, we take a queer look at the week's lectionary readings. We're the cofounders of QueerTheology.com and the hosts for this podcast. I'm Father Shay Kearns —

B: And I'm Brian G. Murphy. Hello there and welcome back! Today I am flying solo. Shay is abroad right now and he's unable to record with me. He was just in the Czech Republic, sharing the good news of queer theology with folks there, and now he is in Rome. So, you've got all me, all episode long today. Today I want to do something a little bit different from what we've done in the past. We got an email recently to our connect@queertheology.org email address that I thought would resonate with you, and so I want to share it with you and then respond to it, because it deals with a particular passage in scripture. Here's what the email says:

“Hi there! I was just listening to your ‘Shake it off, shake it off’ podcast [episode], and it was mentioned how someone asked someone else to explain the Romans passage. This for me is the hardest passage to wrap my head around. I understand with the other passages there are translation issues and so on but Romans seems pretty straight forward to me. I don't understand how to move past this passage. When I read it, it seems pretty clear to me that being gay is seen as unnatural and wrong. I have read so many articles on the seven clobber passages but I am never satisfied with the ‘justification’ to being gay of Romans. Do you have any resources or advice on how I can understand this better?”

Ooh! This speaks to my heart. It may speak to your heart, or to the heart of someone you know. I know this could easily have been an email that I wrote ten, fifteen years ago, and so I'm grateful for the opportunity to address it head-on. You know, this sort of looking for, “Is it okay or is it not okay to be gay and Christian? What does the Bible say about homosexuality?” is something that I know, when I was first starting to realize that I liked dudes, one of the first things I did was turn to the index of my Teen Study Bible to see what the Bible had to say about it. I actually made a video about that experience; I'll link to that in the shownotes of this episode.

But also, after that, I googled – it was the 90s, so I Asked Jeeves – what does

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the Bible say about being gay? And I read all the articles that I could find. I would read the appropriate articles, and like this email says, a lot of them would seem really solid but there were a few arguments that I just was like, mm, not so sure about that. And then I would read all of the opposing arguments and I would be convinced all over again that I was wrong, those first arguments were wrong, it wasn't actually okay to be gay. Then I'd read the counterarguments to the counterarguments about how actually it *is* okay to be gay, and on and on and on. It just was this hamster wheel of addiction to always looking for the next justification. Some outside authority to write the article to end all articles, that would finally convince me that I knew everything there was to know about being LGBTQ and Christian. Here is the hard and also necessary and also liberating truth: there just is no one thing the Bible says. Not about homosexuality, not about justice, not about women, not about slaves, not about money. The Bible says many things. It's tempting to want to look at the Bible as this guidebook to life. I've heard the acronym – Basic Instructions Before Leaving Earth. But the Bible's not actually an owner's manual, right? The Bible is a collection of writings written by people across millennia who are struggling to make sense of who they are and their place in the universe and who they are together and who God is. The Bible tells us many things. The authors share their insights. Sometimes they get things really beautifully right, and sometimes the authors of the Bible say and do and recount things that maybe are a little bit problematic. Some of the passages in the Bible seem to support slavery. Some of the passages in the Bible are very very violent. The first two chapters in Genesis contradict each other. The Bible is neither meant to be this textbook of science and history, nor is it meant to be a step-by-step instructions for life.

Throughout the Bible, the example that we see is people engaging with God, engaging with their community, and engaging with their faith. That's what we have to ask ourselves when we're looking at, is it okay to be queer and Christian, what does the Bible say about queerness. You know, homosexuality as a word didn't exist until the past couple hundred years, let alone when the Bible was being written. When we look at, what is Romans saying? There are lots of things that Romans *might* be saying, but if you already think that being gay is a sin, and if you already think that being gay is unnatural, and you already think that being gay is a perversion, then you will absolutely see that in this passage. There's a word for that – it's called proof-texting. Proof-texting is looking at one particular passage or chapter or verse, in isolation from not only the context of the rest of the writing, the book that you found that in, but also the context of scripture and of faith.

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So, the book of Romans was a letter written to a particular people about a particular set of issues. We only are seeing one side of this letter, so we'll never know exactly what the author was trying to address. Right off the bat, that's not – I like *neat* answers! I have a math and science oriented mind. That's even why I like film editing – it's very mathematical in an unexpected sort of way. I like clear answers, and that's not what we get when we come to the Bible. And it's certainly not what we get when we come to a letter like Romans. And so the question is, how does this passage fit into the arc of scripture, the Hebrew Bible and the Christian writings together? And for Christians, how does this passage fit into the life and ministry and legacy of Jesus?

You know, it's tempting to say, "Well, this passage condones temple prostitutes, not loving married gay couples." Or, "This passage condemns orgies and loveless sexfests, not committed married gay relationships." And that's one way to read it. We don't, again, really know what this passage is talking about. The better question is not, "Explain to me how this doesn't mean that being gay is a sin" because that holds homosexuality to a standard that we just don't hold anything else to when it comes to the Bible. The Bible *very* clearly endorses slavery in many parts. There are numerous stories of men who are praised by God, who are giving positions of importance by God, who have not only multiple wives but also concubines, who have slaves, who have lovers – sometimes, these things are condemned. Oftentimes, they're not. They're celebrated. The Bible says lots of things that we say, you know, they were doing the best they could in their time, but that's not what we believe anymore. Or, there might have been a cultural, contextual reason for that teaching or idea that no longer holds sway.

It's just – I don't get it! That we're having this conversation over and over and over again about "What does the Bible say about homosexuality?" when, like, many times over and over the Bible comes up pretty strongly not in favor of divorce. That is an open-shut case. Should people be able to get divorced? Yes. Are divorced people real Christians? Yes. Will people who get divorced be barred from heaven just because they're divorced? Absolutely not. The fact that we're even entertaining this conversation gets at the heart of it. That because being queer is already seen as this thing that is less than, that's not quite good enough, that's a little bit icky maybe – it's seen that way not just in religious circles, in Christian circles, but seen that way in pop culture, in movies, in love songs. Obviously, it's 2016; that's changing a bit. But the overwhelming narrative of the past, like, hundred years when it comes to love songs and movies and TV shows and novels is man, woman, together. Anything less than that is just seen as just that – less than.

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And so we bring all of our cultural baggage to bear on the Bible when we come to look and we ask, what is Romans saying? So with all that in mind, being predisposed to see 'it's not okay to be gay,' it makes sense that we would see that in this Romans passage. But really, when we look at this Romans passage, it's about so many more complex things than that. We've got paganism going on in this passage, we've got temple prostitution going on in this passage, we've got orgies going on in this passage – more to the point, though, we've got turning our backs on God, and denying the truth of God, going on in this passage. Something that's often overlooked is how this passage ends. The last little bit is, "Although they know God's righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them." The people who made the chapters and the verses in the Bible put a period there and concluded Romans 1. If you click over to Romans 2, it is *very* clear that this is all one continuous thought and not a break. The next sentence is, "You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge another, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment do the same things."

And so what we find here is that this passage is perhaps not really at all about the things being described in it, right? It's perhaps not really about the temple of prostitution or orgies or paganism or whatever is going on and on and on. Really, really what it's about is you who are passing judgement on someone else. You condemn yourself. That is what is totally overlooked. Every person that has ever used Romans 1 to condemn LGBTQ people, read them the very next passage, the very next sentence. "You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge another, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment do the same things." And that is where we see the gospel. The gospel is good news. We can see – oh, yes. This fits into the life and ministry and legacy of Jesus because it's not about keeping people out and saying "We're not like *those* people who do *those* things. We're better than that." Or even not, better than that, but, "They're sinning and indulging in their sin, but we're sinning and we feel bad about it and try not to sin, or don't do those types of sin." We see here, really, that this reinforces one of the central ideas of Jesus's ministry about grace, about tearing down walls that divide us.

Another way to look at this passage is to think about the people who you think are the most messed up, who you just can't stand, who you think are doing life all the way wrong. ... You've got something in common with those people. None of us are perfect. Elsewhere in the Bible it says 'take the plank out of your own eye before worrying about the speck in your brother's.' That's what this passage is

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about. It's not about condemning people for participating in the acts that are described in the first passage. It's about condemning, if anything, people who are judging those people.

If we look at scripture in general, there's a lot of messy stuff in there. There's wars, there are people living under occupation trying to make the best of the situation. Genesis starts us off with – God created us, and it was very good. And we see that in Genesis 3 we lose track of that. We lie, we deceive, we begin to sin, and something goes awry. The Hebrew Bible is filled with these amazing, beautiful, prophetic prophets who work to call us back to what God would have for us. Let justice roll on; I hate, I despise religious feasts. There's this call that God is on the side of the oppressed, that God wants justice. We see that with Jesus, right? He begins his public ministry by quoting from Isaiah, "I have come to bring freedom to the oppressed, break the chains, bring good news to the poor." Jesus is like "I'm here for justice." His ministry embodies that: reaching out to the folks that society has said should be outcast, healing the sick, feeding people, taking on those roles that are traditionally done by the empire or neglected by the empire and taking them on for himself. Saying, there is another way of being. We see that as the early church who come together in Acts and share everything they have all amongst themselves. We see that in Jesus when he is confronted by a woman in Naphtali. He apologizes, changes his mind because of this woman pushing back against his teachings. We even see in Jesus someone who evolves and expands their thinking. We see in the early church expanding the cultural laws about what is allowed to eat, about Jews and Gentiles coming together and being one in Christ. The clear (to me) trajectory is an ever-widening circle of inclusion and ever-deepening emphasis on grace and on justice.

We see that even in this Romans passage. This Romans passage that is supposed to condemn queer people is actually this beautiful moment of, no, tear down the walls that separate us. We all fall short. We need to come together. It says, later, "So when you, a mere human being, pass judgment on them and yet do the same things, do you think you will escape God's judgment? Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, forbearance and patience...?" That God is kind, that God has forbearance, that God is patient – it's just a tragedy that this passage has been used to clobber LGBTQ people when, really, it is a site of grace and of coming together. That's my thoughts on Romans 1.

You know, what the Bible says and doesn't say about homosexuality is something that has been written about many times over the decades. For us, at Queer Theology, we believe that being LGBTQ is not only okay, but it is a good

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and necessary part of the diversity of God's creation. Queer people have something liberating and lifegiving to offer, not just the world but the church in particular. That's our starting point. We start there. And so, what we explore here at Queer Theology is what being queer can mean for our lives and for our faiths, how our faith and our queerness can inform and enlighten each other, how straight cisgender folks fit into queer theology... Those are all the things that we explore here at Queer Theology. We're not usually so interested at digging into the minutiae of this translation or that translation, or what exactly does this clobber passage say.

If apologetics is where you're at, and you really feel like you're stuck there and you need to dive deeper there, I have two things to leave you with. One is, fear not, we created a document listing a bunch of different resources that we have found helpful. If you would like that, you can go to QueerTheology.com/apologetics. We'll also link to it in the show notes. From there, you can download this sheet full of resources, books and articles, and some videos even, to dig into. We'll also send you an email series that will help you sort of get started on, is it *really* okay to be LGBTQ; how can I know that for sure? We'll walk alongside you in that journey. The other thing that I want to leave you with if you feel like you're stuck at "I'm just not sure if it's okay to be LGBTQ," – just, for one moment, suspend your disbelief, hang in with us, open your heart up to God, to the holy spirit, to the movings of community around you, and just say, "Well, what if it is? Then what?" And see if you might be able to even skip over that step of trying to have the exact, perfect argument for why it's okay to be gay, because I'm just not sure that it exists. Instead, ask, "I'm not really entirely 100% sure if it's okay to be LGBTQ, but if so, what might that tell me about my faith? How might that enrich my faith and my life? How might I come to know God better?"

Join us each week on the Queer Theology podcast. Go to our website, QueerTheology.com, for more articles and inspiration. We send a daily email, every single weekday, with some queer-positive affirmations. And just sort of give yourself permission to experiment and be led by the spirit. That's all for this week. I will see you next week here on the Queer Theology podcast. If you are not yet subscribed, you can subscribe on iTunes just by searching for queer theology or queer lectionary. See you soon. Bye!

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B: The Queer Theology podcast is just one of many things that we do at QueerTheology.com, which provides resources, community and inspiration for LGBTQ Christians and straight cisgender supporters.

FS: To dive into more of the action, visit us at QueerTheology.com. You can also connect with us online on Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr and Instagram.

B: We'll see you next week.

PODCAST END

Transcript by Taylor Walker