

1 John 1: The Rainbow Flag and the Cross

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Date: 28 July 2024

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[0 : 0 0] Hi, my name is George Sinclair. I'm the lead pastor of Church of the Messiah. It is wonderful that you would like to check out some of the sermons done by Church of the Messiah, either by myself or some of the others. Listen, just a couple of things. First of all, would you pray for us that we will open God's Word well to His glory and for the good of people like yourself?

The second thing is, if you aren't connected to a church and if you are a Christian, we really, I would really like to encourage you to find a good local church where they believe the Bible, they preach the gospel, and if you have some trouble finding that, send us an email. We will do what we can to help connect you with a good local church wherever you are. And if you're a non-Christian checking us out, we're really, really, really glad you're doing that. Don't hesitate to send us questions. It helps me actually to know, as I'm preaching, how to deal with the types of things that you're really struggling with. So God bless.

I invite you to pray with me as we begin. Dear Heavenly Father, we ask that by your Word and your Spirit, you would open up our ears and our hearts to hear you this morning. We ask that you would help us to rejoice in your goodness, in your compassion, in your mercy, so much so that we would show that to those around us in our daily lives, the people we meet, the people we serve, and also that we might walk with you more faithfully.

In Jesus' name, amen. From 1989 to 94, Stella and I lived in Vancouver. You know we've been around a lot, and so keeping track of us is not easy. But there we were for those five years. She was studying at Regent College, and I was working my way through a long list, a long reading list of works in Russian literature.

Now at the end of all that, I must have written something at least semi-coherent, because UBC, University of British Columbia, gave me a nice piece of paper that I can display in my office.

[2 : 4 0] But that's not what I'm here to talk about with you this morning, but I am going to keep us in Vancouver. I want to take you to a moment in 93, the summer of 93, in fact the same month that we're in now. To an event hosted by the then Dean of the Diocese of New Westminster, Michael Ingham. Here's what Ingham wrote a few years after that event. In July 1993, we held a debate in Vancouver between John Stott and Bishop Spong. It was held in the cathedral on a hot summer's night, and about 1400 people came. We turned 300 away at the door. It was an amazing event. Both men spoke passionately and persuasively. They spoke with an evident measure of respect for each other, but what they described were two fundamentally different understandings of human sexuality, human freedom, the interpretation of scripture, and indeed the gospel itself. And they were applauded by two quite different sections of the audience. He continues, and here I can ask for the slide that continues on.

Two things became clear to me that night. First, what a marvelous thing the Anglican church is that we can hold together such diverse and opposite viewpoints within both our members and our leaders.

Many of us remain in good fellowship, in good relationship with each other, despite disagreement on these fundamental issues. And second, what a huge gulf divides our church in its understanding of human sexuality. Now, I concur with nearly everything there that he said. It was a hot day in July. Many were turned away at the door. I managed to get in. Spong and Stott were quite respectful towards each other in debate, and it was evident from where I sat that a huge gulf divided the church on issues of human sexuality. But I'm convinced that it is not a wonderful thing when the church body contains within itself contradictory views on something so central as the good news itself and what sort of authority the Bible is.

Now, as a matter of historical record, I myself was somewhat sitting the fence on the issue at the time. In fact, as much as I admired and revered John Stott, I went sort of secretly hoping that

Spong's progressive view would persuade me if this was the way the Spirit was leading the church. [5 : 34] And part of my indecision was no doubt related to the kind of ideas that were floating in the academy at the time. It was becoming somewhat fashionable to think, at least in my field of literature, that the meaning of, say, a poem or a short story is really determined by the individual reader.

In other words, it was starting to become fashionable to think that everyone makes up or has their own truth. And the idea has now, as you know, has become fairly mainstream. In a TED Talk a couple of years ago, Catherine Marr, who is CEO of the American National Public Radio, could say this, part of the reason we have such glorious chronicles to the human experience in all forms of culture is because we all acknowledge that there are many different truths. I'm certain that the truth exists for you and probably for the person sitting next to you. But this may not be the same truth. But I believe that it was around that time that God took my heart and made it more teachable in a decisive way when I wasn't especially seeking Him. He put in me a desire through means I won't try to explain here, but He put in me a desire to submit to the authority of Scripture.

In terms of the renewal of my mind, here I mark a definite before and after. And so in a sense, I can thank Bishop, who became Bishop Ingham for hosting that event, because this became a turning point for me.

I was starting to imagine with that theologian I mentioned last time, her name is Lindsay Perez Lopez, who she writes for Sojourners. I was starting to imagine with her that Scripture is a mixture of human understanding and misunderstanding as well as divine revelation. You see that lovely mix of human insight, human misunderstanding, and a bit of revelation thrown in there. Isn't that nice?

[7 : 50] But then God let me see why and how that was going to be a dead end. So it wasn't long before I came to be certain that the man who was going to become our diocesan bishop, Mike Lingham, a senior leader in the church, called to safeguard the apostolic message, was very wrong. He was wrong to be enthusiastic about the existence of contradictory views of human sexuality within our church. He was wrong to imagine that we might really take that on board. He was wrong, in other words, to imagine that the rainbow flag is compatible with the cross. He didn't say it in those terms, obviously, but that was the meaning. His hope was not only that Anglicans who believed contradictory things about human sexuality and other matters could stay together, but that they should. And somehow that diversity views was supposed to be a healthy thing. For vast numbers of young people today, I'm afraid, who identify as as a Christian in one way or another, that's come to be almost gospel truth. It's the way they have been catechized by our culture. But imagine a hockey coach saying something like, isn't it a wonderful thing that among our coaching staff and among the players, we have two basically contradictory views about the rules of hockey and about what equipment the game requires and about how we should train for it. Imagine that. I didn't have a name for that kind of approach to things at the time, but it has a name. And it's the way of institutionalism. You kind of give way to the institution itself for its own sake of deciding not to decide about issues that are central to the

Christian faith. And so it was that our pastors in the Diocese of New Westminster let the wolves in. But let's back up and assume for a moment that we believe that the Spirit is leading the church to bless sexual intimacy and unions apart from the marriage between one man and one woman.

What is the core value that drives our belief? And I ask you to keep an eye on the next slide. What's the core value that would drive our belief? Just I pulled out a few points that I think would be help us make the case for that and why the Holy Spirit is leading us in that direction. Probably the main reason we would we'd want to be on board with this project would be a sense of compassion towards marginalized groups. If you were here with us last Sunday or you followed us remotely, you'll recall the progressive idea that God's love just flows through everything, drawing everything into the divine life, making the Christian life a road that you make by walking. So Paris Lopez names a second core value among progressive Christians. Since life in the church, she says, must be an expression of the love that is at the heart of everything. Any kind of exclusion, except exclusive forms of Christianity, which exclude themselves from this embrace, is ruled out. Any kind of exclusion is ruled out. The call put to the church, she says, is to celebrate differences that have traditionally been marginalized, differences with respect to race, with respect to race, class, sex, and gender preference.

At heart, my motivation would be a concern for justice, I think. And here, there are certain parallels with the Protestant Reformation. So the progressive message has a certain Protestant feel to it.

Let me explain. If the central theological conviction of the Reformers, like Martin Luther and others, was that we are justified through faith alone, apart from works, then the new conviction would be that all without exception are redeemed through God's unconditional love. All without exception are redeemed through God's unconditional love. If the main concern for justice back then, in the 16th century, had to do with the sale of indulgences and other forms of corruption, then today's concern has to do with systems that oppress minorities, in particular sexual minorities. If the main liturgical, ceremonial concern back then was to reform the Lord's Supper, to get rid of the Mass. Then today, it's to reform marriage and to get rid of restrictions on who may love whom. Following on these concerns would be the felt need to celebrate diversity.

[13 : 12] The assumption here would not be that God understands our weakness and he makes allowances. Rather, the idea is that God positively intends a variety of forms of sexual fulfillment.

And this argument is often backed by the claim that the Bible really doesn't say much at all about committed same-sex relationships between consenting adults, of course. To get a sense of what these convictions look like in the context of the gathered community, I decided to tune in to a few sermons for Pride Sunday. I don't know, maybe you did too. One pastor spoke of liberation several times throughout his service to how it is that in Christ we have the freedom not to be bound by the law, not to be shamed by those in power, those who inevitably appeal to a rigid orthodoxy as a way to just control others.

Another pastor used the word quirkiness to speak of the diversity of sexual preferences and declared that God shines through our quirkiness in it and with it and not in spite of it.

And he grounded this in the doctrine of original blessing. Have you heard of it? Original blessing, which speaks of our essential goodness as humans and questions the traditional understanding of Adam and Eve's fall from grace. So as progressive Christians, what would our attitude, what sort of attitude would we want to adopt towards those who don't, sorry to give my age and point back to John Denver, but those who don't come stand beside us and seek a better way? Well, in the context of worship, I picked up on one attitude that was fairly negative. Those who uphold the church's traditional teaching on sexuality are, that nasty word, fundamentalists, because they are mainly concerned for power and control. In the parts of the service devoted to prayer, I didn't hear prayers for our fundamentalist siblings caught in the darkness of dogmatism and who need God's special touch.

Now, maybe those do happen, but I didn't hear any. The attitude was, was at least through these sermons, hardly generous. It's not as though traditional Christians at least serve to raise good questions so that we can refine our progressive message through dialogue. Not at all. In this approach, traditionalists are, quote, hate-filled. George Conger of Anglican Inc. tells of how a certain bishop described those who don't support the LGBTQ plus cause, crazy, evil, or stupid.

[16 : 17] A bishop in the Church of God. Paris Lopez took a somewhat more generous view. She said this, by starting with the marginalized and the vulnerable, those traditionally excluded and exploited and radiating outward, we deepen the love within ourselves and reach out in the love, to the love within others.

We can express agreement where it exists, hold firm to our values when others challenge them, and show compassion over all. Eventually, compassion wears down callousness and empathy, erodes enmity. This is how we move from rivalry to relationship, exclusion to embrace.

And that brings me to this final point in the progressive message. For Paris Lopez, the progressive vision is one driven by that basic desire for community, for fellowship, which will one day, she's convinced, will embrace everyone without exception. In the meantime, the circle does have a circumference, but that circumference is only drawn by those who, for now, exclude themselves from God's embrace. So that's what we're up against. That's the basic shape, I think, of progressive Christianity as it relates to human sexuality. It's been, you know, I come from Latin America, and it's sad to see evangelical pastors, formerly evangelical pastors, move so slowly but surely in this direction. It's heartbreaking to see it happen. And that's why there's a strong desire to share with you these things as a way that we can together inform ourselves, understand what it is that we're up against so that we can have a good response. So to a response. Well, one way would be to ask whether the whole framework can reasonably be called Christian or if it would be better, say, to describe it in some other way. But, and of course, that suggestion annoys progressive Christians because they sincerely believe that the way they are following is the way of Jesus. They believe it is the way of compassion.

But sincerity aside, since sincerity is not a reliable standard for what's right and wrong, what can we actually affirm about this core value? And where do we begin to see internal problems?

Well, as far as I can tell, every faith system has some impulse or value that reflects something of a yearning that God has put in the human heart. So in Hinduism, and you know I spent some time in India, and even though you can talk to Hindus here in Canada, it's another thing altogether when you're just always around Hindus. So in Hinduism, there's a yearning to be freed from the endless cycle of reincarnation. And I would say we don't have to agree with reincarnation as a doctrine to affirm that the desire to be freed from that, that the power of that idea is a good thing. I think we can commend, I think we can say that's wonderful that you wish to be freed. Let me tell you where we find freedom.

[19 : 48] So it is with progressive Christianity. We don't have to affirm its central theological convictions to agree that it's a good thing to want to pursue fellowship or communion with God and with others.

God has made us for that. He's put it in our DNA. And in my introduction, I've already mentioned the way in which we make room for progressive values.

Bishop Michael Ingham, when he was dean, was just making room. He wasn't stating his own views openly. He was saying, isn't it wonderful that we have this diversity of views?

But we can make it not a hill to die on, as they say. I'm referring to that institutionalism and how our leaders were teaching us to not break fellowship, which was to do injury to the body of Christ. In other words, they were teaching us that schism was worse than heresy, than the possibility of serious, grave error in the church. So at this point, I think we can turn directly to our passage of Scripture and respond to some of its central beliefs about justice, about the human condition, and about fellowship, because that's the central theme there, fellowship. Fellowship, the desire for it, and I think guided by what John teaches us here in the beginning of his epistle. And if we can have the next slide.

No, I think we have it already. Thank you. Then guided by this passage, let me just highlight two visions of fellowship. Two ways to think about what exactly fellowship is, what it's for, how we receive it, and how we remain in it. So what is fellowship? Well, fellowship, according to John, is restored communion.

[21 : 48] Communion with God. In other words, it's a reality that's lacking up until the moment that God grants it. That's why, that's precisely why, moved by the Spirit of God, John can say to his readers there in the beginning, let me tell you something, let me tell you something, so that you too can enjoy the communion with God that we have come to know in Jesus.

Well, with what sort of God do we have communion? Well, God, according to the teaching they receive from Jesus, John says, is light.

This speaks particularly of God's goodness. As when Jesus says, no one's good, except God alone. Mark 10, 18.

But John doesn't leave it there because he adds in verse 5 that in God there is no darkness at all. And you would think, well, why do you need to spell out the negative?

Well, it speaks of a different attribute of God, a different quality. It speaks of his holiness, no darkness at all. When we speak of God's different qualities or attributes as revealed in Scripture, we have to be careful not to divide him up into parts as if he were partly good and partly holy or partly faithful, partly just attributes that John mentions in verse 9.

[23 : 21] The truth is, God is completely and entirely all these things with no division in himself as if he were torn in one direction or another.

Quite the contrary. He is generous and gracious, taking no pleasure in the death of the wicked, Ezekiel 18.23.

Based on an offer of salvation that goes out to all, John can say boldly, I'm writing about the things we've experienced so that you too can enter into fellowship with us even as we are in fellowship with God through Jesus.

Now, think about it. Progressive Christians find the idea that there was a moment in your life and mine when we were alienated from God, well, an idea that's just a little bit too hard to accept.

Rather, they prefer to believe that we start off in God's embrace with that original blessing in harmonious relationship with him, and then at some point we pull away, perhaps, through this or that influence that's external.

[24 : 32] So, along with not knowing what to do with the warning that the truth is not in us, as John says, if we deny that we're sinners, verse 8, progressive Christians must find a way to overlook the clear diagnosis of our human problem in Romans 3, 9, and 22, where Paul says this.

He says that all of us, Jews and Gentiles alike, are under the power of sin. Under the power of sin. And that God's righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.

So, let's turn to the second question. What's the purpose of fellowship? Well, when the bad news, it turns out, isn't quite so bad, it turns out that the flip side is true.

The good news was really not that great and spectacularly good news either. At any rate, the progressive Christians' view of the purpose of fellowship is very much this worldly.

The Jesus-following community, we're told, exists for the flourishing of society as we become more and more liberated from unjust structures that are out there and that we perpetuate.

[25 : 50] But in John, we see that the end of fellowship is, over here on the one hand, cleansing from sin. So the darkness of our past is dealt with.

As God applies the blood of Jesus, verse 7, to our unrighteousness and gives us a new start, a fresh beginning.

Now, that's great news. And our future is also, if our past is taken care of, our future is dealt with too because God's design for fellowship is also, is fullness of joy.

Forgiveness of sins. Fullness of joy. In verse 4, John says, he's writing his letter in hopes for completeness of joy as more and more people give their lives to Jesus.

If we've been, if you sit there and you can say, I've been privileged to know something of the joy of Christian fellowship. Well, know this, it's because God has been kind to you in giving you a foretaste of the blessings that David was talking about in, for instance, Psalm 1611.

[27 : 03] He said, you make known to me the path of life. There's last week. You will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand.

So as we put our trust in Jesus, our deepest needs are met. And I think that's the kind of response we would hope to give.

Are our deepest needs and our deepest longings really satisfied? Question 3. So, how do we enter into fellowship? Well, we've heard about the exercise of faith from Paul made possible through the proclaimed word of God.

And so, we're reminded that faith depends on hearing his word, the good news of Jesus, as well as the special gift that God imparts so that we can take hold of what we hear.

But the ultimate basis or ground of our fellowship is a person. It's Jesus himself. Jesus brings us into fellowship.

[28 : 08] It's clear. It's right clear in John. See how he begins the letter once again in verses 1 and 2. He says, that which was from the beginning, in other words, God's word or the logos, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and have touched with our hands concerning the word of life.

The life, the life was made manifest. The life was made manifest. In other words, John is saying that the word took on flesh and dwelt among us and there's more.

He continues, and we have seen it and testified to it and proclaimed to you the eternal life which was with the Father and was made manifest to us. The eternal life made manifest to us.

It came in and with Jesus. So yes, we take hold of it by faith, but the new life comes in Jesus.

By contrast, and here's a very sharp contrast, the progressive gospel message tells us that the ground of our fellowship is nature itself. We're naturally in fellowship.

[29 : 21] It's our natural condition. And the idea that it might not be, you're to think of as an illusion. Last question. How do we remain in fellowship?

In the progressive vision, clearly we remain as long as we don't exclude ourselves through hate and other attitudes, fundamentalistic attitudes aimed at policing people's behavior.

But John tells us that we remain in fellowship with God as we acknowledge and confess our sins, expecting his pardon. How wonderful that Thomas Cranmer built that into our worship, that we regularly have an opportunity to confess our sin and to trust in God's pardon.

So we're always reminding ourselves that this is the truth, that we need God's daily cleansing, cleanse the thoughts of our hearts, we say together, by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit.

And it's here that life in the Spirit is not set against submission to law. God cares about what we do with our bodies.

[30 : 38] And part of what he commands is that we run from a whole series of things that draw us away from him. And we're all called to run from these things together.

At the top of the list, at least in Galatians 5.19, is sexual immorality. At the top of the list. In Greek, the word is pornea, which is a, if you like, a catch-all term, which includes forms, all forms of sexual intimacy outside of marriage between one man and one woman.

Now, to be clear, God's holy law reveals the darkness in all our hearts. That's why the regular need for repentance. But the story, of course, doesn't end with just the law shining in the darkness of our hearts.

Because the good news is that we can be forgiven. and receive the fruit of the Spirit, which Paul says is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

It's given, Paul says, to those who belong to Christ and have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. So you'll notice in my response, I have chosen not to bring a series of what our progressive friends call clobber passages, as though with seven or eight passages of Scripture that deal particularly with homosexual acts and so forth would seal the deal.

[32 : 17] I have tried to bring what we understand as the whole overall message of Scripture so that we would recognize that the idea that sexual unions apart from marriage are true, wholesome, and lovely, the idea that sexual unions apart from marriage are true, wholesome, and lovely can only be made by appealing to something other than God's written word.

So, to pull things together, how do the two views compare? And then a few questions that we might raise with progressive friends.

In the progressive view, the new birth from above has already happened for everyone, and this reality just needs to be expressed in ever greater ways. And since the circle of fellowship provides no standards for sexual intimacy, discipleship has no real cost.

So, we never quite hear Jesus' words in Matthew 16, 24, if anyone would come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me.

But according to the Bible, fellowship comes from above through faith in Jesus. And we can't generate that, we can't manufacture it, we can't take it for granted. It's the blessing that is given to all those who seek the kingdom that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God.

[33 : 50] So what should our attitude be towards those who believe that the cross and the pride flag might be compatible? Well, remembering that we also entertain confusion in one way or another, our prayer should be that the Holy Spirit would simply touch their hearts with the simplicity of the good news.

To that end, three questions as God gives the opportunity. Regarding the pursuit of justice, does that pursuit of justice ever get to the heart of the human predicament, the human problem, the human need?

As we work hard to eradicate things like homophobia and colonialism, transphobia, climate change deniers, or denial, at what point do we look within our hearts to examine our own motives?

I often recall Dostoevsky here because he's so good at making us think about motives, and in that he's very scriptural. But what standard would we know?

By what standard would we know that our motives are pure and holy? We just take that for granted too? Question two, you claim that same-sex marriage must have God's approval because nowhere does the Bible speak to those who seek committed same-sex relationships.

[35 : 24] That's one of the harder questions to respond to. We might say, but is it not also true that the Bible does not speak directly to those who seek committed lifelong polyamorous relationships?

If you think I'm inventing something, just start poking around the internet. We're back to the question of God's design for sexual intimacy.

What would it take for us to take him at his word as well as to trust that he's faithful and strong to wrap us in his love and shield us from temptation?

And thirdly, regarding your hopes for lasting fellowship by being welcoming and affirming of all sexual orientations, can the church for long welcome and affirm people just as they are setting no specific standards for right belief and behavior?

For instance, when we read, as I just did yesterday, I think, that in today's Episcopal church in the United States, there is no room for polyamorous priests and that the clergy who seek to have these blessed, as there have been, are being disciplined by their bishops.

