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RENEWED HEART MINISTRIES

P.O. Box 1211, Lewisburg, WV 24901

Phone: 304.520.0030

Email: info@renewedheartministries.com

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Calling Good Evil

(Part 4)

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Gaius Caligula

by Herb Montgomery

“No good tree bears bad fruit, nor does a bad tree bear good fruit. Each tree is recognized by its own fruit.” (Luke 6:43–44)

As we continue this series this week, we’ll look at a passage that Christians have used in harmful and destructive ways against the Christian and non-Christian LGBTQ communities: Romans 1.

I want to begin with the basic understanding that the culture in which Paul wrote this passage was one where the earth was thought to be at the center of the universe. That culture knew nothing of germ theory. It held women as of lesser than men. It practiced slavery as morally and ethically innocent. And it knew nothing of what we understand today as a person’s sexual orientation or gender identity. Paul’s society assumed everyone was born what we’d call today “straight,” and they thought that gender was binary and static.

Matthew Vines tells us how Paul’s society, therefore, viewed same sex relations: “The fact that societies of the biblical world associated same-sex relations with sexual excess rather than sexual orientation has been conceded even by a number of non-affirming scholars” (*God and the Gay Christian*, p. 38).

If we are going to interpret Paul’s words in Romans 1 without harming those who are demonstrably different from cisgender, heterosexual people, we must first understand that Paul’s society assumed all people naturally possessed a straight orientation and same-sex

relations could only result from straight people with out-of-control lust being satisfied by different-sex and same-sex sexual acts. Again, this society had no understanding, as we have today, of humanity’s ability to naturally possesses other orientations. Today we know that humanity can also naturally possess lesbian, gay or bisexual orientations which do not in the least bit imply the simultaneous possession out-of-control lust or what we might call today a sex addiction. Out-of-control lust can occur within all orientations. And I have bisexual friends today that practice a more holistic, non-objectifying, values based, humanizing sexual ethic than do a lot of my “straight” friends.

With this in mind, let’s begin.

“For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse. For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like a mortal human being and birds and animals and reptiles.

Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. They exchanged the truth about God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised. Amen. Because of this, God gave them over

“If Brownson is correct and Paul is referring to Gaius Caligula’s actual behavior, which Paul’s contemporaries, Philo, Dio Cassius, and Dio Chrysostom all wrote about with similar language, then he is describing harmful behavior that most LGBTQ people would condemn alongside most straight, cisgender people.”

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 the due penalty for their error. Furthermore, just as they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, so God gave them over to a depraved mind, so that they do what ought not to be done. They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; they have no understanding, no fidelity, no love, no mercy. 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.” (Romans 1:20-32).

At this point I want to turn to Brownson’s work on this text. His evidence for what may be lying behind this passage has resonated the most with me. He writes:

“We see a similar connection between idolatry and excessive lust and perversion in the Wisdom of Solomon, a Jewish apocryphal text dating from a period not long before Paul’s writings.

‘For the idea of making idols was the beginning of fornication, and the invention of them was the corruption of life... For whether they kill children in their initiations, or celebrate secret mysteries, or hold frenzied revels with strange

customs, they no longer keep either their lives or their marriages pure, but they either treacherously kill one another, or grieve one another by adultery, and all is a raging riot of blood and murder, theft and deceit, corruption, faithlessness, tumult, perjury, confusion over what is good, forgetfulness of favors, defiling of souls, sexual perversion, disorder in marriages, adultery, and debauchery. For the worship of idols not to be named is the beginning and cause and end of every evil.' (*Wisdom 14:12, 23-28*). (*Bible, Gender, Sexuality: Reframing the Church's Debate on Same-Sex Relationships*, p. 154)

The fact that these authors tie idolatry to objectifying lust is telling. As we continue, ask yourself: is what Paul could have been writing about even remotely related to committed, faithful, consensual, loving same-sex relationships then or today? Paul's culture viewed same-sex relations as conducted by straight people going against their natural, straight orientation because of insatiable sexual lust.

Brownson offers more evidence from Roman orator Chrysostom:

"The Roman orator Dio Chrysostom, for example, who wrote shortly after Paul's time, speaks of same-sex eroticism as the manifestation of insatiable lust: The man whose appetite is insatiate in such things, when he finds there is no scarcity, no resistance, in this field, will have contempt for the easy conquest and scorn for a woman's love, as a thing too readily given—in fact, too utterly feminine—and will turn his assault against the male quarters, eager to befool the youth who will very soon be

magistrates and judges and generals, believing that in them he will find a kind of pleasure difficult and hard to procure. His state is like that of men who are addicted to drinking and winebibbing, who after long and steady drinking of unmixed wine, often lose their taste for it and create an artificial thirst by the stimulus of sweating, salted foods, and condiments." (*Ibid.*, pp. 154-155)

So far, what Paul is describing looks nothing like committed, faithful, consensual, loving same-sex relationships aligned with whichever orientation one naturally possesses.

But the example that forever changed how I read Romans 1 is the story of Gaius Caligula, a Roman emperor whose excesses and lust fit Paul's description in Romans 1 perfectly.

Please forgive the length of this next passage from Brownson. I want you to get the whole story.

Content note: this story contains graphic sexual violence, including rape and forced same-sex relations as entertainment.

"Neil Elliott has called attention to the striking similarities between Paul's language and the incredible greed, violence, and sexual excesses of Gaius Caligula, an emperor who reigned in a period not too long before Paul wrote Romans. First of all, Gaius is closely linked to the practice of idolatry. The Roman writer Suetonius reports how Gaius' set up a special temple to his own godhead, with priests and with victims of the choicest kind.'

Another Roman writer, Dio Cassius, comments negatively on how Gaius was the only emperor to claim to be divine and to be the recipient of worship during his own lifetime. Gaius also tried at one point to erect a statue of himself in the Temple in Jerusalem; he was dissuaded only by a delegation from Herod Agrippa. Hence the link between Gaius and idolatry would have been well-known indeed, particularly in Jewish circles.

But Gaius also serves as "Exhibit A" for out-of-control lust. Suetonius reports how Gaius 'lived in perpetual incest with all his sisters, and at a large banquet he placed each of them in turn below him, while his wife reclined above'.

He records gruesome examples of Gaius's arbitrary violence, vindictiveness,

and cruelty. Later, Suetonius chronicles Gaius's sexual liaisons with the wives of dinner guests, raping them in an adjoining room and then returning to the banquet to comment on their performance. Various same-sex sexual encounters between Gaius and other men are similarly recounted. Finally, a military officer whom he had sexually humiliated joined a conspiracy to murder him, which they did less than four years into his reign. Suetonius records that Gaius was stabbed through the genitals when he was murdered. One wonders whether we can hear an echo of this gruesome story in Paul's comments in Romans 1:27:

'Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own person the due penalty for their error.'

Gaius Caligula graphically illustrates the reality of which Paul speaks in Romans 1: the movement from idolatry to insatiable lust to every form of depravity, and the violent murderous reprisal that such behavior engenders.

Interestingly, Elliott notes how the Jewish writer Philo writes in similarly scathing terms of the evils of Gaius Caligula, interpreting his depravity as the result of his refusal to honor God, and his death as a manifestation of divine justice. This suggests that Gaius's excesses and the divine judgment incurred by them were a common theme that would have been familiar to many Jews in the ancient world." (*Bible, Gender, Sexuality: Reframing the Church's Debate on Same-Sex Relationships*, pp. 156-158).

If Brownson is correct and Paul is referring to Gaius Caligula's actual behavior, which Paul's contemporaries, Philo, Dio Cassius, and Dio Chrysostom all wrote about with similar language, then he is describing harmful behavior that most LGBTQ people would condemn alongside most straight, cisgender people. Like everyone else in his society, Paul knew nothing of what we refer to today as someone's sexual orientation. The only instances of same-sex relations that Paul wrote about were rooted in Gaius' violent lustfulness. Gaius' narrative doesn't even remotely represent the numberless committed, faithful, consensual, loving same-sex couples whose love—not lust—was forcibly hidden for their own safety from straight,



Photo by Georgia de Lotz on Unsplash

continued on page 4

Book of the Month for April 2019

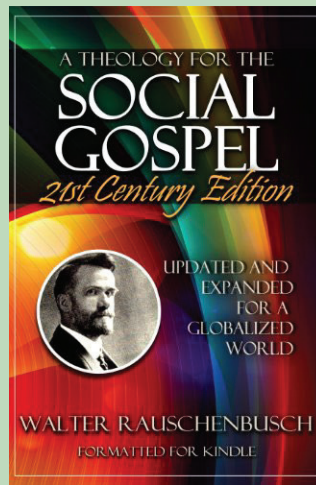
A Theology for the Social Gospel, 21st Century Edition

by Walter Rauschenbusch

The Social Gospel movement was a Protestant Christian movement that was most prominent in the late 19th century and early 20th century. The movement applied Christian ethics to social problems, especially social justice, inequality, liquor, crime, racial tensions, slums, bad hygiene, child labor, weak labor unions, poor schools, and the danger of war. Walter Rauschenbusch was one of the leaders of this important Christian movement.

In this revised and expanded edition, Walter Rauschenbusch's classic theological text "A Theology for the Social Gospel" is brought to bear on a rapidly changing and globalized world. The original text is expanded with provocative subheadings in each chapter for clear and concise organization. The book is edited for gender neutrality. The book contains over 50 end of chapter reflection questions bringing Rauschenbusch's theology for the social gospel into conversation with twenty-first century concerns, including everything from global terrorism to technology, LGBT issues to social media, and the persisting problems of poverty and wealth.

[You don't have to order this book through Amazon.com, but if you do, please consider using Amazon Smile (smile.amazon.com) and selecting Renewed Heart Ministries as your designated charity for a portion of your purchase to be donated to RHM at no additional cost to you.]



"Calling Good Evil" continued from page 3

cisgender people like me.

The violating behavior of Gaius Caligula should be rightly condemned. And still I have yet to meet a Christian LGBTQ person or couple who even remotely resembles what we have read about this week.

Do we have the courage to admit our interpretations have been wrong? Can we own up when our interpretations have done demonstrable bodily harm to a group of humans born different than others? Do we have the courage to let go of those damaging interpretations and make them give way to life-giving interpretations instead?

We have much to ponder this week. We also have much to apologize for. I hoping to conclude next week as we consider one more New Testament passage and then return to the Genesis story.

For now, remember:

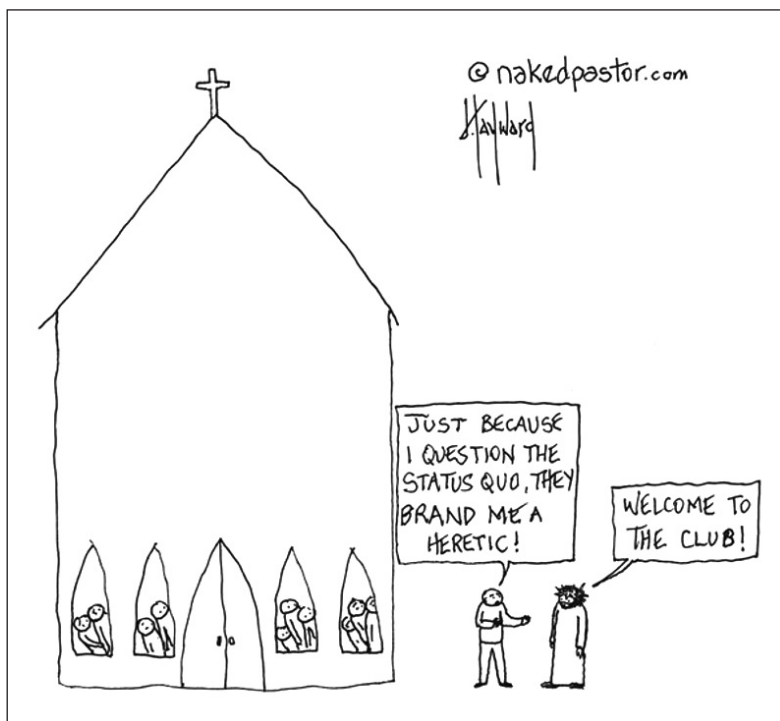
"No good tree bears bad fruit, nor does a bad tree bear good fruit. Each tree is recognized by its own fruit." (Luke 6:43-44)

HeartGroup Application

This week I want to ask you, as a group, to discuss your progress on last week's *HeartGroup Application*. You were to make a list of ways you, as a group, can be more inclusive of those others are excluding and then begin putting them into practice.

1. How *were* you successful this week?
2. How were you *not* successful this week?
3. Looking at both of the above, what can you do better this week?
4. Next week will be our last installment in this series and I'll have a very special offer for our HeartGroups to engage more deeply in the work of creating safe spaces. Until then, I'm so glad you're still with us along this journey. Together we can shape our society into a safe, compassionate, just home for all.

Where you are today, keep living in love, compassion, action and justice. Another world is possible. I love each of you dearly. ■



Schedule

MAY 2-5, 2019

Rehoboth Weekend Retreat
Rehoboth Beach, DE, USA
304.520.0030

JULY 10-13, 2019

40th Annual Kinship
Kampmeeting
Portland, OR, USA
304.520.0030

Quotable Quotes

"Entering paradise in this life is not an individual achievement but is the gift of communities that train perception and teach ethical grace. Paradise provides deep reservoirs for resistance and joy. It calls us to embrace life's aching tragedies and persistent beauties, to labor for justice and peace, to honor one another's dignity, and to root our lives in the soil of this good and difficult earth."

– Rita Nakashima Brock
& Rev. Dr. Rebecca Parker;

Saving Paradise: How Christianity Traded Love of This World for Crucifixion and Empire, p. 410

"Where humans live in the consciousness of solidarity and in the actual practice of love with their fellow men, they are not far from the Kingdom of God. The great thing in the salvation of humanity is that salvation is present. Life begets life."

– Walter Rauschenbusch;

A Theology for the Social Gospel, p. 165

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A weekly podcast where we discuss where faith in Jesus and social justice work for the vulnerable today intersect and what a first-century, Jewish, Galilean prophet of the poor might offer us today in our work of survival, resistance, liberation, restoration, and transformation.

renewedheartministries.com/Podcasts



Finding Jesus in Glendale, CA

March 2, 2019

by Herb Montgomery

"A journey of rediscovering the intersection of faith, love, compassion and justice."

A decade ago now, a book manuscript I had written titled *Finding the Father* was picked up and published. It chronicled the curious journey of my surprising discovery of the man who is my father. Using my personal story as a foundation, *Finding the Father* then went on to straight forwardly challenge many of the common assumptions many Christians make about what we refer to when we use the term "God" or "our heavenly Father." Five years after *Finding the Father*, I would embark on another journey. This one unexpected and unplanned for. This new journey would lead to deep and transformational discoveries for my own life, an earnest crisis in my own faith, and an experience I refer to as *Finding Jesus*.

Two weekends ago, I had the immense privilege of sharing the story of my journey of rediscovering the intersection of faith, love, compassion



and justice through the Jesus story with the congregation at Glendale City Church.

I shared three presentations which were warmly received. This was my third time visiting and sharing with this group. One of the things I love about this church is that they aren't afraid to be honest about their own journey toward love, justice and inclusion. This is a church whose administration "get's it" and they desire to find new ways of putting into practice Jesus' vision for human society where the presently marginalized are not only included but centered. As Dr. Emilie Townes states in *Journey to Liberation: The Legacy of Womanist Theology*, "When you start with an understanding that God loves everyone, justice isn't very far behind." This first presentation of this new weekend series can be

found at renewedheartministries.com/presentation/Finding-Jesus. The recordings of remaining presentations will be added soon. *Finding Jesus* is also the title of a new book manuscript I've written that chronicles my new journey. Our hope here at RHM is that this new book will be available later this year. We'll keep you posted.

To all of those who sustain our work through their ongoing support, I want to take this opportunity to thank you. Without your generous support we could not continue to engage faith communities like this one and help to inspire people of faith and/or goodwill in the work of shaping our societies into safe, just and compassionate places for all. This is gospel work. And your partnership with us makes it possible.

If you would like to become a partner with us in this work, you can do so by going to renewedheartministries.com and clicking "Donate."

Or by mailing your support to:

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Don't forget to sign up for our free educational resources, too.

And from all of us here at RHM,
thank you for your support.



Photo by Lina Trochez on Unsplash

Quotable Quotes

"The all pervading life of God is the ground of the spiritual oneness of the race and of our hope for its closer fellowship in the future."

— Walter Rauschenbusch;
A Theology for the Social Gospel,
p. 186

The RHM team, in any given month, consists of a small team of 10–12 people working either full-time, part-time, or as volunteers dedicating hundreds of hours to make what we do possible. If you find blessing, encouragement, and renewal here, please consider becoming one of our Monthly Partners with a reoccurring donation or by making a one-time gift.

2019 Annual Budget Goal:
\$185,000.00

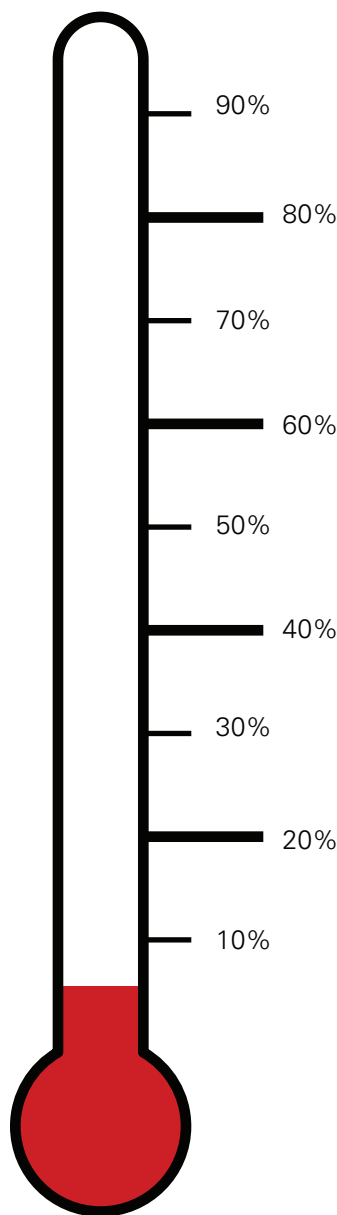
January-February Budget Goal:
\$30,834.00

**January-February's
Contributions Received:**
\$19,095.16

February Contributions Goal:
\$15,417.00

**February's Contributions
Received:**
\$9,718.12

**To support our work
and help us grow, go to
renewedheartministries.com
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Have you benefited from RHM's work?

We at Renewed Heart Ministries are asking our followers to share their stories of how RHM has been a blessing to you. We believe every person's story matters and every person's voice has value. Sharing our stories is one of the ways that we bring change and heal our world. Hearing one another's stories empowers us to let go of our fear of one another and enter into compassion. Listening to the diverse experiences of one another's lives leads us to replace insecurity with a much broader understanding of each other and our larger world.

We want to hear your story! And if you give us permission, we may feature your story in one of our upcoming newsletter issues so your story can help others, too! (But only if you give us permission.)

Will you share your story with us?

Send your story of how you have been positively impacted by the ministry of Renewed Heart Ministries by emailing: info@renewedheartministries.com.

We look forward to hearing from you.



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Renewed Heart Ministries is a not-for-profit group that is passionate about rediscovering, following and helping others rediscover the teachings and sayings of the historical Jesus of Nazareth. We believe these teachings have an intrinsic value in informing the work of nonviolently confronting, liberating and transforming our world into a safe, more just, more compassionate home for us all.

Everything we do here at Renewed Heart Ministries is for free. Even the many educational events that we hold in various venues. You can support our work either with a one-time gift or by becoming one of our monthly contributors by going to **RenewedHeartMinistries.com** and clicking the **donate** tab at the top right.

Or you can mail contributions to:
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P.O. Box 1211
Lewisburg, WV 24901

Also, please sign up for our free resources and remember, every little bit helps.

Anything we receive over and above our annual budget we happily give away to other not-for-profits who are making both personal, systemic and structural differences in the lives of people who are less privileged.

And to those already supporting the work of Renewed Heart Ministries, your generous support makes it possible for us to exist and to continue being a presence for positive change in our world. So with all of our hearts, "Thank You."

Together we are making a difference, till the only world that remains is a world where only Love reigns.

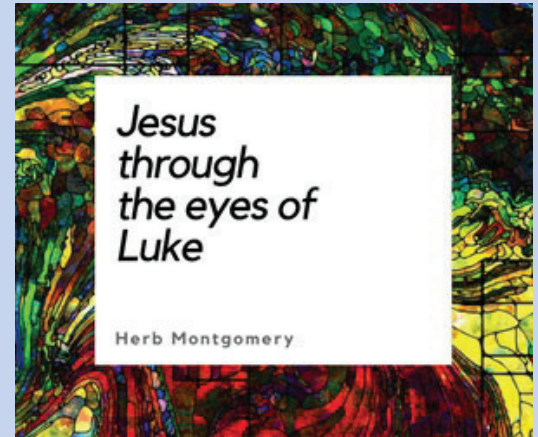
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Featured Presentation

The stories of Jesus' resurrection teach us that systemic injustice, oppression and death do not have to have the last word. We can choose differently. We can choose life, love, compassion, faith and justice. Another world is possible. This month, as we continue to work toward a world that is a safe, compassionate, just home for all, it is our pleasure to feature this presenting from our *Jesus through the eyes of Luke* weekend series:

He is Not Here by Herb Montgomery.



"If our theology is silent on social salvation, we compel [people] to choose between an unsocial system of theology and an irreligious system of social salvation."

WALTER RAUSCHENBUSCH
A THEOLOGY FOR THE SOCIAL GOSPEL, P. 7

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