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Cultural Exegesis of “Same Love” by Macklemore

Principles for Effective, Biblical Outreach to the LGBT Community

Western Seminary

DIS 501: Communicating Christ in Culture

April 12, 2015

Ben Haggerty, a rapper since 2000 who goes by the name of Macklemore, got his big break in 2012 when his album *The Heist* reached the top ten on the Billboard charts leading to four Grammy awards and an additional three nominations.¹ The breakout hit from *The Heist* was the widely popular “Thrift Shop,”² which as of this essays writing has garnered over 686 million views on YouTube. Two other songs emerged as chart toppers between the album’s release in late 2012 to early 2014, “Can’t Hold Us”³ and “Same Love,”⁴ which have over 300 million and 137 million views on YouTube respectively. With well over one billion views on YouTube from just three songs, it is without a doubt that Macklemore has become an influential musician in American popular culture.

While “Thrift Shop” and “Can’t Hold Us” have little to no substance lyrically, the first being comical and the second being a stereotypically produced hip hop song, the third song, “Same Love,” the subject of this discourse, has tremendous lyrical substance, tackling the highly controversial issue of homosexuality. Not only is the song controversial by confronting the anti-gay themes that exist in religious and political circles, but also by confronting the anti-gay themes that exist within his own genre of music. Because of “Same Love,” Macklemore has been embraced as a hero for LGBT rights and criticized by Christian leaders for his message of love, which stands in stark contrast to their message of love. Moreover, at the 2014 Grammy Awards, he performed “Same Love” and about three dozen couples were married on live television: a dozen heterosexual couples, a dozen gay couples, and a dozen lesbian couples

¹ <http://macklemore.com/post/63746955005/the-heist-1-year-anniversary-a-look-back-on-the>

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QK8mJJJvae8>

³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2zNSgSzhBfM>

⁴ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hIVBg7_08n0

married to go along with the song's title and theme, that all love is the same regardless of whom it is shared with.⁵

Christian leaders took the unbiblical themes that exist in "Same Love" and declared the whole song as farce, yet a careful look at several of the things discussed in the song would lead a careful examiner to determine that the song is not entirely unbiblical. Recognizing the areas where "Same Love" is in line with biblical themes and concepts could very well give an individual the correct tools to bridge the gaps between that which *is* biblical and that which *is not* biblical. To be able to identify with the pagan culture as an intentional attempt to bring unbelievers into the Truth of the Gospel is one that is of utmost importance in this growing post-Christian America. Even so, this idea of starting from the pagan culture is not new; we see Paul do this very thing in Acts 17, standing on the altar of the unknown god. Adolph Deissmann regards this encounter as "the greatest missionary document in the New Testament."⁶

Moreover, theologians over the course of the last two millennia have asserted this method is more vastly needed than in just evangelism. Twentieth century theologian Paul Tillich recounts that all of life's major questions start from agnostic/pagan culture. He states that while there is a distinction between philosophy (life's questions) and theology (life's answers), both are essential; one cannot live without the other. If we start from paganism—by asking difficult philosophical questions—and then move into theology as the answers to those questions, then we maximize our functionality, in

⁵ <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/news/macklemore-queen-latifah-turn-same-love-into-mass-grammy-wedding-20140126>

⁶ Deissmann, Adolph, *Light from the Ancient Near East* (New York: H. Doran, 1927), page 384, used in Charles, J. Daryl, "Engaging the (Neo)Pagan Mind: Paul's Encounter with Athenian Culture as a Model for Cultural Apologetics (Acts 17:16-34)," *Trinity Journal*, 16:1 (Spring 1995), page 47-62. http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/athenian_charles.pdf

Tillich's view.⁷ Therefore, for the remainder of this discourse, we will examine some of the lyrics of "Same Love" that are closer in line to biblical themes or realistic cultural dynamics, and conclude with a summary of our findings so the same intentional desire of Paul, through the methodology of Tillich, can ensue in reaching the contemporary American culture.

Haggerty's opening scene in his music video is a hospital bed where a mother gives birth, with the words giving the historical context of where he is coming from. He attacks his issue head on, "When I was in the third grade I thought that I was gay, because I could draw, and my uncle was, and I kept my room straight." Yet, as the story continues to unfold, Ben realizes that he is indeed not gay and only aligns with several stereotypes, then calls out other stereotypes that should change, in his view. His video goes on to document the struggle of a gay man finding his identity, leading to him getting married and ending on him holding hands with his husband as wrinkly old men.

"The right wing conservatives think it's a decision, and you can be cured with some treatment and religion, man-made rewiring of a predisposition playing God." While this assertion is most certainly speaking to reparative therapy and the very legalistic view that homosexual unbelievers must become heterosexual before they can experience the full glory of salvation, a major question that arises from this is whether individuals can be born gay. There are dozens of examples throughout scripture that suggest individuals are born in sin, or are sinners at birth, most notably in Psalms 51:5, *Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin my mother conceived me*. If true, then who are we to choose what type of sins an individual can be born predisposed with? If it

⁷ Musser, Donald and Joseph Price, *A New Handbook of Christian Theologians* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996) page 451.

is true that individuals are born sinners, and if it is true that individuals generally do not develop sexual desires until adolescence, it is reasonable to recognize the delay in the manifestation of those sexual desires, whether heterosexual or homosexual sexual desires, as legitimate. Therefore, Haggerty is correct in questioning the catchall “decision” stance toward gay individuals held by those often characterized as politically conservative.

With the chorus, Haggerty utilizes the vocals of Mary Lambert, a lesbian, who sings, “I can’t change even if I tried, even if I wanted to.” How true this is, because only God can transform the heart and desires of individuals He wants to change (Ezek. 36:26). The Western Seminary faculty teaching position affirms this: “[The Holy Spirit] convicts the world of sin, righteousness, and judgment, indwells all believers, regenerating them.”⁸ The teaching positions echoes the themes presented throughout scripture, that a sinner becomes a believer, and then changes begin to take form in their life—to suggest that changes must take place before an individual can be saved is a legalistic view. Therefore, believers first should not just recognize that a person having a predisposition toward homosexuality at birth does not conflict with the biblical evidence—there was original glory thwarted by original sin; and second should recognize that if homosexuality is a predisposition, then only God *can* change their desires. This should motivate us and give us urgency to reach out to homosexual individuals with a new mindset on who they are: sinners in need of Jesus Christ.

“If I was gay, I would think hip hop hates me; have you read the YouTube comments lately? Man that’s gay gets dropped on the daily; we become so numb to

⁸ <http://www.westernseminary.edu/admissions/what-we-believe>, Faculty Teaching Position: Concerning God: God the Holy Spirit

what we are saying. A culture founded from oppression, yet we still don't have acceptance for them, call each other faggots behind the keys of a message board; a word rooted in hate, yet our genre still ignores it. A gay is synonymous with the lesser."

While the previous section does not speak to theological issues, it does present believers with a prime opportunity to engage with the homosexual community with a greater understanding of the personal struggles they face. As a former public school teacher, I heard phrases leave the mouths of my students such as "that's gay" or "that's retarded" on a regular basis. It was bothersome because while 'gay' and 'retarded' are not what those students really meant, to students who were gay or mentally disabled, or students who had a close friend or relative who fits one of those two categories, it is most certainly an alienating term. This alienation is before a discussion of whether homosexuality is a sin even takes place. To be sure, scripture is clear that practicing homosexuality is a sin; however, a new understanding of who gay individuals are can help us approach those conversations with them with greater sensitivity, not shying away from the truth of scripture about the homosexual lifestyle, but in presenting it in a new way that does not *further* alienate that individual.

A second note from this portion of the song is the final line: "a gay is synonymous with the lesser." This is an accurate statement when one looks at popular culture—if anything, popular culture perpetuates the second-class citizen status many gay individuals share. Nevertheless, this stereotype is accurate when looking at culture, and because of this, the Church must learn to reach out to gay people in a way that is sensitive to the realities they face. Can Christians hold the view that gay individuals are

lesser beings? May it never be! The Bible is clear: we are all created in God's image, and as image-bearers of the Most High God, we all have inherent value.

While Hagar and Ishmael in Genesis 16 were not cast away because of homosexuality, it is telling that the love of God is what met her in the wilderness, saw her, heard her—recognized her as a human being with value—and guided her back to the household of Abram and Sarai. Again, while homosexuality does not find its place in this story, this story does tell of an individual exiled from her household and steered back, and that manner in which she was steered back was by an understanding ear who spoke tender words into her life. If Christians mimicked this example of love—not ignoring sin, but through speaking life—to gay individuals who may have been exiled from their own households, perhaps more of them would hear the tender words of the Lord through us and be steered back into the household of God.

Christian leaders often know how to deal with people who struggle with lying, or with people who struggle with lust; however, they do not know how to deal with people who struggle with same-sex attraction. I think a major reason for this is because we generally have personal familiarity with the issues of lying and lust, but we are generally unfamiliar with the issue of same-sex attraction. Therefore, it is understandable that we have generally struggled to deal with others facing the issue of same-sex attraction. This essay is not meant to water down what scripture says about homosexuality, but merely to give Christian leaders who are unfamiliar with homosexuality a greater understanding of how to speak to gay individuals about their eternal home and identity.

As Christians, we must speak to those in the LGBT community with sensitivity to their circumstances, while also clearly, boldly, and definitively declaring the Gospel to

them. The Gospel is that Christ dwelled among us as a real person, died, and was raised from the dead by the Father; therefore, we must repent—to believe God is who He says He is—and be baptized so we may receive a new heart by the Holy Spirit, so we may be forgiven of our sinfulness, and so we may live in communion with Him for all eternity.⁹ We should not seek to speed up this process in others in accordance to our timetable, but rather let the Holy Spirit work on God’s timetable. In the meantime, as Christians, we should walk alongside our gay brothers, sisters, children, neighbors, and classmates every step of the way, showing them God’s love through our tender words of understanding, standing up against those who unjustly diminish them as lesser beings, and eventually teaching them to observe all that Christ has commanded his followers to do.

⁹ Personal notes from Western Seminary course: Equipping for Spiritual Warfare