

Paul's condemnation of homosexual conduct: Romans 1 in recent exegesis

Biblical teaching on same-sex relationships is currently being subjected to intense scrutiny. In the wake of the far-reaching shifts in sexual morality that have occurred in western culture in recent decades, interpreters are revisiting the scriptures to determine whether the traditional Christian condemnation of homosexual conduct is, in fact, supported by biblical teaching.¹ In the process, long established understandings of key biblical texts, once taken for granted by almost everyone, are being strongly challenged, not only by apologists for the gay lifestyle but also by senior and widely respected biblical scholars. The bitter division of opinion over the moral status of homosexual practice witnessed in all the mainstream denominations today is also reflected in the academy, as exegetes debate the intention and implications of the handful of biblical texts that refer explicitly to same-sex genital relationships.

Of these texts, undoubtedly the most important is Paul's ringing condemnation of homosexual practice in Romans 1:26-27. This is one of only three texts in the New Testament which expressly mention same-sex relations and the only passage in the whole of Scripture that comments, apparently, on lesbianism (cf. Gen 19:1-25; Lev 18:22; 20:13; 1 Cor 6:9; 1 Tim 1:10).

For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way

also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error.

My intention in this article is to review some of the recent exegesis of this passage. My aim is not to debate the morality or otherwise of homosexuality, though that matter will inevitably arise in the course of

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discussion. My goal is rather to explore whether recent attempts to qualify or deny what appears, on the surface, to be a global condemnation of homosexual conduct are justified by the usual canons of historical exegesis. Accordingly we must begin, as every good exegete knows, with setting the passage in its context.

Literary & theological context

The unit on homosexuality belongs to the first phase of Paul's argument in Romans in which he depicts the tragic plight of the human race (1:18-3:20), initially focusing on the extremes of Gentile depravity and idolatry as perhaps the most graphic illustration there is of human degradation (1:18-32). In the immediately preceding verses, Paul has summarised the essence of the gospel as God's saving righteousness toward both Jew and

Gentile (1:16-17). He now documents the desperate condition of the human race that necessitated God's act of deliverance. His concern is twofold. On the one hand, he wants to underline the *absolute proportions* of sin's power over humankind. So overwhelming is the power of evil that only the power of God, available in the gospel, is sufficient to combat it. On the other hand, he wishes to emphasise the *universal sway* of sin.

It holds sway not just over pagan Gentiles but even over God's covenant people, the Jews. This dual focus of 1:18-3:20 is succinctly stated in 3:9: “all people, both Jews and

Gentiles, are under the power of sin”.²

The central thesis of 1:18-32 is that humanity's enslavement to wickedness is a result of its primeval, and continuing, idolatry. Paul's argument is that,

*people begin by choosing wrongly (the creature rather than the Creator) and end by being unable to distinguish between right and wrong. What they first chose to do, they are finally unable to avoid, for God does not protect them from the consequences of their own actions.*³

In formulating this argument, Paul borrows heavily from Old Testament-Jewish tradition. His discussion echoes themes and language found in several Old Testament texts,⁴ and employs familiar Jewish exegetical patterns.⁵ Some scholars argue that 1:18-2:29 is based on a synagogue sermon or missionary tract from Diaspora

Judaism which Paul has taken over without significant modification.⁶ If so, Paul's use of such traditional material would presumably imply his agreement with it.⁷

Of particular interest are possible allusions in vv. 19-25 – the unit immediately preceding the mention of homosexuality – to the Creation-Fall narratives in Genesis 1-3 (e.g., the threefold division of the animal kingdom [v. 23, cf. Gen 1:20, 24]; the use of the terms “image” and “likeness” [v. 23, cf. Gen 1:26]; the recurring emphasis on the loss of the knowledge of God [vv. 19, 21, 22, 25, 28, 32]; and, later, the sentence of “death” pronounced on rebellious humankind [v. 32, cf. Gen 2:17]). Such allusions probably mean that in this section Paul has in mind the fall of Adam and its consequences for corporate humanity (cf. Rom 5:12-25).⁸ Not all scholars agree on this however. In

Fitzmyer's judgment, “the alleged echoes of the Adam stories in Genesis are simply nonexistent”.⁹ Similarly, Moo points to differences between Paul's description

in Romans 1 and the Genesis accounts and suggests that the apparent echoes of Genesis actually derive from descriptions of idolatry in Hellenistic Judaism.¹⁰

Either way – whether borrowed directly from the Genesis narratives or indirectly via later Jewish texts – biblical reflection on the Fall of humankind surely informs Paul's exposition.¹¹ In addition, Paul makes considerable use of standard Hellenistic-Jewish polemic against idolatry, especially from v. 23 onwards. Indeed, so close are the parallels between Romans 1-2 and the Wisdom of Solomon 12-15 that it is very probable Paul modelled his discussion on this book.¹² There are also echoes of several other Jewish works, such as the Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs, the Sibylline Oracles, the Qumran texts, the Letter of Aristeas,¹³ and rabbinic

tradition.¹⁴

This Hellenistic-Jewish tradition in turn reflects the influence of Greek religious thought and language. Paul too was prepared to employ the language and concepts of Greek (especially Stoic) thought in order to build a bridge with his non-Jewish audience.¹⁵ In vv. 19-20, for example, Paul draws on the influential Stoic notion that because the divine *logos* is immanent both in the world and in human nature, the eye of reason can perceive invisible divine realities in the visible cosmos. Paul takes over this idea, but modifies it, in light of his Jewish heritage, to the effect that knowledge of God is the product of God's initiative of revelation. Paul also echoes Stoic technical vocabulary in vv. 26-27 (*para phusin*, “against nature”) and v. 28 (*ta me kathekonta*, “that which is not

“... instead of representing a polemic of one group of human beings against another, he transforms it into a universal accusation against all people without exception, Jew and Gentile alike.”

fitting”). Cook regards Paul's knowledge of such sophisticated philosophical language, and the rhetorical skill with which he redeploys it, to be indicative of his high level of education.¹⁶

Other putative sources for Paul's analysis could also be mentioned, but enough has been said to show that Paul has borrowed much. But what he has borrowed he has transformed, by putting it in service of a radically different purpose; instead of representing a polemic of one group of human beings against another, he transforms it into a universal accusation against all people without exception, Jew and Gentile alike.¹⁷

Paul's argument in 1:18-32 progresses in the following broad stages:

- v. 18 Heading (for the entire section up until 3:20)

- vv. 19-23 Sin against God
- vv. 24-27 Sin against Nature
- vv. 28-32 Sin against Others

The most significant feature of the literary arrangement is the threefold “sin-consequence” sequence, in which Paul gives three parallel descriptions of the human rejection of God and its results (vv. 21-24, 25-27, 28-31). That a parallelism is intentional is clear from the repeated language: in each unit humanity's turning from God is described as an “exchange” (*allassô* or *metalassô*, vv. 23, 25, 27) and God's reaction as a “handing over” (*paradidômi* vv. 24, 26, 28). There are word-associations within each unit that may suggest Paul is hinting at a correspondence between human rebellion and divine response. Humanity's failure to give God “honour” (v. 23) leads to a “dishonouring” (v. 24) of their bodies.

Humankind's “exchange” (v. 25) of the true God for idols leads to an “exchange” of proper sex roles for improper ones (v. 26). Human failure to “approve” (v. 28a) God leads to an “unapproved” (v. 28b) mind.¹⁸

While there is no progression of thought from one unit to the next, there is a certain stylistic intensification. The portrayal of guilt becomes shorter and the description of corruption increasingly extensive, culminating in the longest vice list in the New Testament in vv. 29-32, in which Paul cites around two dozen social evils (sexual sins are not mentioned).¹⁹ It is worth emphasizing that the discussion climaxes at this point, not in the earlier reference of homosexuality in vv. 26-28, which should help us keep the issue in perspective (homosexuality is neither the primary nor dominant theme in Romans 1).²⁰ But why does Paul mention homosexual activity at all, and how should his words be understood?

Recent Interpretation of the Homosexuality Text

At first glance, Paul's meaning seems crystal clear. He takes for granted the common Jewish assumption that the gross sexual immorality rampant among the Gentiles was the direct result of their idolatry (cf. Wis 13-14, Sib. Or. III. 8-26, 763-64), and that homosexuality was a particularly graphic expression of such sexual excess. In recent years, however, several arguments have been advanced to suggest that Paul's words should not be taken as a universal condemnation of all homosexual relationships. In what follows we will identify five approaches to the text that, in one way or another, relativise the scope and implications of Paul's words.

1. *An unassimilated legacy of Jewish tradition:* Some argue that Paul's diatribe is merely the rehearsal of pre-formed, conventional Hellenistic Jewish tradition that has nothing distinctively Christian about it.²¹ Paul is not particularly concerned to offer a Christian moral evaluation of homosexuality but to denounce pagan idolatry. To do so, he takes over stereotyped polemic from the synagogue, which typically included denunciation of homosexuality, without necessarily approving of its every feature.
2. *Cultic homosexuality:* Others discount Paul's words by emphasising the links between idolatry and perverse sexuality. He speaks of God giving women and men over to shameless deeds as a direct consequence of idolatry (vv. 25-26), suggesting that the deeds Paul has in mind are those which are part and parcel of idolatrous worship. Paul is either indicting temple prostitution in particular or cultic sexual practices in general. He is saying nothing about faithful monogamous relationships between consenting homosexuals.²²
3. *"Unnatural" homosexual sex:* A third argument stresses the significance of Paul's appeal to

nature. Elsewhere in Pauline usage, "nature" can refer to nothing more than social convention, fashion, or general consensus (e.g., his suggestion that nature teaches that men ought not to have long hair, 1 Cor 11:14). Paul's rejection of homosexuality in Romans 1 as "against nature" (*para phusin*) may therefore mean nothing more than that it offends Jewish sensibilities. More significantly, some insist that "nature" in Romans 1 means "what is natural to me". Paul is not referring to those whose nature or primary orientation is homosexual, but to heterosexuals acting as homosexuals. They "exchange" their natural heterosexual inclinations for homosexual practice, which is "contrary to [their] nature". Even if Paul did not consciously differentiate in his own mind between sexual orientation and sexual behaviour, the text itself implies such a distinction. In short, Paul condemns sexual *perversion* not *inversion*.²³

4. *Abusive homosexuality, such as pederasty:* Still another suggestion is that Paul's words deal with only with abusive, exploitive homosexual conduct, such as pederasty (*paiderastia*, "the love of boys"), not with mutual, consensual, egalitarian homosexual relationships.²⁴ Neil Elliott, for instance, points out that in Paul's world sexuality was readily perceived as a means of exerting power and that homosexual activities in the Greco-Roman environment generally took place within relationships characterised by inequalities of power – the use of prostitutes, the abuse of slaves, and pederasty. This is the context Paul has in mind in Romans 1. The passage cannot be read as Paul's theology of homosexuality, nor is he using homosexual acts to express something as abstract as humanity's alienation from the Creator. Instead he is targeting

sexually abusive behaviour, and in particular the moral bankruptcy of the imperial household, since at the very time Paul wrote, the sexual outrages of recent emperors had scandalized practically everyone in the capital.²⁵

Jeffrey Siker similarly argues that "Paul's condemnation of homoerotic practices in Romans 1 can only be a condemnation of those forms of homoeroticism that he knew: pederasty and male prostitution", and these forms Paul rejects as exploitive and idolatrous. "But homosexual relationships today are not by definition exploitive any more than heterosexual relationships are." Indeed, if such relationships exhibit the reciprocity and mutuality that Paul elsewhere extols as essential to sexual relationships (e.g., 1 Cor 7), then, says Siker, "I am not clear on what scriptural basis such a relationship is condemned."²⁶

5. *Irrelevant to Modern Debate:* A final approach is to admit that Paul's words do indeed relate to homosexual practice in general, but to reject them as irrelevant to the moral debate today because neither Paul nor any of the ancients had any conception of the in-born, even genetic, basis of *homosexual orientation*.²⁷ Paul assumes heterosexuality as the norm and condemns homosexual practice as a freely chosen perversion. Today we are more aware of the complexity of sexual identity, and recognise that many homosexuals are born, not made. Accordingly, "Paul's arguments have little to teach us directly about homosexuality as we understand it today"²⁸.

In support of such an approach, Victor Furnish identifies four cultural assumptions in the ancient world about homosexual conduct that Paul would have shared:

- It was universally presupposed that everyone was naturally heterosexual

and that anyone who engaged in same-sex intercourse was wilfully overriding his or her natural desire for the opposite sex. That Paul shares this perspective is demonstrated by his references to women “*exchanging* natural intercourse for unnatural” and men “*abandoning* natural intercourse with women” (vv. 26-27).

- It was also commonly assumed that homoerotic acts are intrinsically lustful, the outcome of insatiable sexual appetite, or, as Paul says, the result of being “consumed with lust for one another” (v. 27). This perception was reinforced by the fact that the two most common forms of male homosexuality in Paul’s day were pederasty and the abuse of slaves.
- It was also generally accepted that sexual intercourse requires one partner to be active and the other passive, and that nature has assigned the passive role to women. Homoerotic acts therefore required one male to assume the passive, female role, which both confused “natural” sex roles and was a source of dishonour or shame to the man (cf. vv. 24-27).
- Finally it was widely feared that homosexual practice could lead eventually to the extinction of the human race. It was falsely believed that same-sex intercourse rendered men sterile and, equally falsely, that such acts were a temptation for everyone.

Viewed in this context, Furnish argues that although Rom 1:26-27 is “the most comprehensive and important biblical reference to same-sex intercourse”, it is largely irrelevant to the modern debate about the morality of homosexuality. It is irrelevant because, on the one hand, Paul’s critique of homosexual activity rests on a set of false cultural

assumptions, about which there is nothing distinctively Christian, and on the other hand because neither Paul, nor any other biblical writer, had any conception of sexual orientation or homosexuality as an in-born “condition”.²⁹ Because “there is no biblical passage about ‘homosexuality’ understood as a ‘condition’ or ‘orientation’“, passages that refer to homosexual sex are of little help to the modern discussion.³⁰ Leland White arrives at a similar conclusion by means of anthropological analysis. He insists that the Bible’s references to same-sex relations are shaped not by moral considerations but by three key values of Mediterranean society: honour/shame, reproductivity, and holiness.

- Homosexual activity is repudiated because, firstly, it entails loss of honour by the males involved, especially the one who assumes the position of the female. Honour was a typically male attribute and required the man to maintain control over his social environment, and in particular his women and his own body. Homosexual sex is shameful in such a cultural system because it entails a confusion of gender roles (White helpfully points to the language of honour, dishonour and shame that shapes Paul’s discussion in Romans 1).
- Homosexuality is rejected, secondly, because it contravenes the values of reproductivity. Reproduction was usually conceptualised in terms of the male planting his “seed” in the “field” of the woman. Homosexual sex is shameful because another male is used as a female, a field for another man’s seed, and a barren field at that!
- Homosexual conduct is opposed, thirdly, because it breaches concepts of holiness, the strict separation of

people, things and actions into categories of clean and unclean (Lev 18-20).

Homosexual acts are ritually impure because they cross boundaries and mix categories.

White argues that since these three key values belong to a markedly different social-symbol system than that of contemporary western society, the biblical texts on same-sex activity cannot be used as a source of norms for contemporary gay people.³¹ Clearly we must look elsewhere than in the classical biblical texts rooted in cultural assumptions about male and female roles and assumptions about the sexual division of labour in procreation scarcely tenable in our culture.³²

Such, then, are some of the revisionist readings of Romans 1:26-27 currently being proffered. Of course, such arguments have not gone unchallenged. Many scholars still insist that careful analysis of Paul’s language and context confirms that he is making a global condemnation of all forms of homosexual practice, though not of homosexual desire or orientation as such. To their arguments we now turn.

The traditionalist response to revisionist readings

Arguments in support of the more traditional reading of the text may be grouped, this time, into six categories, with the last one including six sub-points:

1. *Irrelevant to modern debate?* We will begin with the final point listed above. The suggestion that biblical texts on same-sex relations express ancient cultural viewpoints that are essentially irrelevant to the current debate concerning gay rights raises troubling questions, for traditionalists, of an epistemological and theological nature. Is it acceptable to view biblical understandings of sexuality as culturally limited conceptions within a framework of meaning that has been

superseded by subsequent discoveries? Are biblical sexual values to be regarded as social constructions without remainder? Does not the Christian doctrine of creation point us to a reality deeper than culture for principles to guide human sexual relationships? Again, if it is true that the Bible is inadequate to deal with this issue, does this not lead to the substitution of biblical revelation with some form of natural morality wherein the existence of an inherent "orientation" is taken as adequate moral justification for corresponding behaviour, at least within the context of a loving relationship? Or again, does not the profound reflection in the biblical creation narratives on the origin and significance of the heterosexual "one flesh" relationship as an expression of the divine image and even a pointer toward the internal nature of God, imply a normative status for

heterosexuality?³³

Can a comparable theology of homosexual union be given, either on the basis of Scripture or elsewhere?³⁴

2. *Unassimilated Jewish tradition?*

While it is true that Paul's critique of homosexuality is deeply indebted to Hellenistic Jewish tradition, his preparedness to adopt such tradition implies his own essential agreement with it as a Christian. It is highly improbable that Paul would use homosexuality as a stock Jewish illustration of human degradation without himself regarding homosexual activity to be inherently degrading.³⁵ There is no justification for regarding Paul's appeal to convention as either sub-Christian, or unthinking or superficial. Rather, as Dunn observes: That Paul simply takes for

granted that the Jewish abhorrence of Gentile sexual license is still the appropriate ethical response of the Gentile believer in Christ means that he recognises at least one distinctive element of Israel's covenant righteousness which remains unchanged within the wider freedom of the new covenant.³⁶

In the Greco-Roman world, homosexual practice was widespread and even, in some circles, highly regarded.³⁷ The predominant form was pederasty, which even the gods were said to practice. Indeed Greek religion, far from restraining homosexual activity, provided significant support for it, although some Greek moralists denounced its exploitive and lustful

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dimensions³⁸. In marked contrast, Jewish writers consistently denounced homosexuality as a perversion and a pagan abomination³⁹. "No feature of pagan society", writes C.K. Barrett, "filled the Jew with greater loathing than the toleration, or rather admiration, of homosexual practices"⁴⁰. The Jewish antipathy was partly due to the linkage between idolatry and homosexual excess, but also because it violated the order of creation.⁴¹ Both Philo and Josephus, like Paul, branded homosexual sex as "against nature" because it is a distortion of God's creative design. Paul is not therefore merely echoing Jewish tradition uncritically; rather, like other Jewish writers, he is reflecting on the implications for sexual behaviour of the Hebrew

creation accounts.⁴²

3. *Cultic homosexuality?* It is true that Paul's repudiation of homosexuality occurs in the context of his polemic against idolatry. But there is little textual justification for claiming that Paul merely rejects cultic prostitution or homosexual activity in a religious setting. The motive he mentions for homoerotic behaviour is lust (v. 27), not the securing of some ritual benefit. More importantly, Paul is not thinking of individual acts of idolatry and attendant sexual perversion but the slide of humankind as a whole into idolatrous sin and sexual confusion.⁴³ He is not speaking of the life-decisions of individual persons but giving a global account of the universal fall of humanity.⁴⁴ Besides, even if Paul did have cultic

homosexuality in mind, this need not imply approval of "secular" homosexuality.⁴⁵ It is more likely that he would consider the cultic expression of homosexual sex as

one further reason, not the *only* reason, for condemning it.⁴⁶

4. *"Unnatural" homosexual sex?* The suggestion that Paul's words relate only to those individuals who abandon their own "natural" heterosexual dispositions to engage in same-sex behaviour, contrary to their nature, is dismissed as implausible by traditionalist interpreters. To begin with, it assumes either that Paul was aware of the difference between homosexual and heterosexual natures, for which there is no evidence in antiquity or any time prior to the 19th century, or that if he was not consciously aware of such a distinction, his text nonetheless fortuitously makes it, which raises important questions about the role of authorial intention in securing the text's primary meaning.

The argument also assumes that had Paul known of the condition of an exclusive homosexual orientation, he would not have disapproved of the homogenital expression of such an orientation in a loving, stable relationship. But this is, at best, an argument from silence.⁴⁷

Finally, DeYoung's review of the usage of the term *phusis* ("nature") in Greek literature concludes that it never carries the meaning of "what is natural to me".⁴⁸ The Stoics also spoke of the human obligation to live *kata phusin* ("according to nature") rather than *para phusin* ("against nature"), and deemed actions that opposed nature as *ta me kathekonta*, ("improper conduct", cf. v. 28). By using the same technical terminology, Paul appeals to the philosophical commonplace of his day that nature is purposeful and moral, and that actions which contradict nature are morally wrong.⁴⁹ Thus, as commentators almost universally agree, Paul uses the language of nature in v. 27 to denote, not one's in-born sexual disposition, but the intention of the Creator in making humankind as male and female.⁵⁰

5. *Abusive Homosexuality, especially Pederasty?* The argument that Paul's condemnation relates to pederasty alone is also vigorously contested by traditionalist interpreters. If Paul is thinking of pederasty, it is surprising that neither here nor elsewhere does Paul use one of the several words and phrases in common use at the time to refer to pederasty. Instead of such specific identification in Romans 1, he speaks generally (in a phrase unique to Paul) of "males with males committing indecent acts", not "men with boys" (as Plato is capable of saying).⁵¹ The phrase "exchanged...the natural use" also suggests adult-adult sexual relations, not adult-child relations,⁵² while the phrases "toward one another", "men

with men" and "their error" all suggest reciprocal, consensual activity.⁵³

Besides, even if Paul does have pederasty specifically in mind, "so dominant was the pederastic form of homosexuality that its vocabulary had come to refer to other forms, almost generically".⁵⁴ Elsewhere Paul uses the terms *malakos* ("soft", "weak", "effeminate") and *arsenokoites* ("homosexual") apparently to designate the passive and active partners in homosexual intercourse (1 Cor 6:9, cf. 1 Tim 1:10). The precise meaning of the latter term, which does not occur in any pre-Pauline literature, has been disputed. Some argue from its etymology (literally "males who go to bed") that it specifically denotes male prostitution⁵⁵ or pederasty.⁵⁶ Traditionalists consider it more likely however that either Paul or Hellenistic Jewish-tradition deliberately fashioned a term to reflect the prohibitions in Lev 18:22 and 20:13 (LXX), where the terms *arsen* and *koiten* occur, and which condemn homosexual sex *per se*, not just prostitution or pederasty.⁵⁷

6. *Homosexual sex per se?* At least six observations can be made about Paul's language in vv. 26-27 which suggest that Paul's critique rests not on a particular aversion to pederasty or cultic prostitution or to bisexuality amongst heterosexuals but to homosexual activity in general:
- Assuming that v. 26 designates lesbianism,⁵⁸ the fact that Paul condemns both female and male same-sex conduct in parallel terms is significant. The use of *te...te* ("both...and") and *homoios kai* ("likewise also") strengthens the connection. Such an association is rare in antiquity, and "strongly suggests that Paul gives us something like a generic condemnation of homosexuality".⁵⁹ It certainly argues against seeing

pederasty as Paul's specific target, since there is no female equivalent to this male pattern of sexual domination. "As lesbianism was usually between adults in mutuality, so the force of the comparative argues for male adult-adult mutuality."⁶⁰

- Paul implicitly criticises homosexual practice for distorting the God-given pattern of relationship between the sexes as laid down in creation/nature. It entails "leaving the natural function of the female" for what is unnatural. Such sexual confusion is the direct consequence of confusing the Creator with the creation;⁶¹ "the reversal of the created order in worship (Rom 1:21-23, 25) is reflected in a reversal of the created order in sexuality".⁶² Such a cause-and-effect relation is perhaps because sexuality is intrinsic to being an image-bearer of God (Gen 1:27),⁶³ as well as one of the primary ways in which God's creatures participate with God in on-going acts of creation.⁶⁴ "When human beings engage in homosexual activity," Hays suggests,

*they enact an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual reality: the rejection of the Creator's design. They embody the spiritual condition of those who have "exchanged the truth of God for a lie"*⁶⁵.
- The use of the antonymy "females" / "males" (*hai theleiai/ hoi arsenes*), rather than "women" / "men" (*gunai/ andres*) underlines the confusion of the pattern of sexual behaviour given in creation resulting from the corporate idolatry of the human race. The pair *thêlus/ arsen* is consistently associated with the creation narratives in the New Testament (cf. Gen 1:27; Mt

19:4; Mk 10:6; Gal 3:28). It is inconceivable, in view of what Pauline tradition says elsewhere about heterosexual one-flesh union as expressing both the goodness of original creation and the pattern of new creation in Christ (Eph 5:21-32), that Paul would have regarded same-sex genital relationships on equal terms. Instead for Paul,

*such acts do not cohere with our embodiment as male and female or with the story of our creation as sexual creatures. The story, rather than some statute considered by itself, formed Paul's vision of good sex. And it continues to sustain a moral preference for the "one flesh" union of a man and a woman that gestures and nurtures the covenant made in vows, carried out in fidelity, and being hospitable to children.*⁶⁶

That is why Paul allows for no sexual relations

except within a heterosexual, monogamous, permanent marriage (cf. Rom 7:2-3; 1 Cor 5-7; 2 Cor 6; Eph 5; Col 3; 1 Thess 4; 1 Tim 3, 5; Tit 2, cf. Heb 13:4).

- Against those who argue that Paul uses the language of purity and social status rather than the language of sin to treat homosexuality, Schmidt traces the use elsewhere in Paul (and other relevant literature) of eight words employed in Romans 1:24-27 – desires (v. 24), passions (v. 26), lust (v. 27), uncleanness (v. 24), dishonour (v. 26, cf. v. 24), shame (v. 27), improper actions (v. 28), against nature (v. 26) and error (v. 27) – and concludes that Paul indeed applies the vocabulary of sin to same-sex relations.

- Paul's profound analysis of the human condition in Romans 1 finds in homosexuality an example of sexual sin that falsifies our identity as sexual beings, just as idolatry falsifies our identity as created beings.⁶⁷
- Paul condemns homosexual acts as a manifestation of lust. Turning away from heterosexual relations, "they were inflamed in their desire for one another". Even if, as Furnish notes, the connection between homoeroticism and lust was a cultural commonplace,⁶⁸ lust is something inherently unacceptable from a Christian perspective (cf. Mt 5:27-30). Whether lust and promiscuity are more common in the homosexual community than the

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heterosexual community is open to debate,⁶⁹ although it could be argued that the absence of sexual complementarity in same-sex relations allows more scope for sexual excess.

- Paul also deems homosexual practice to be an "error" (*planê*), a term denoting "a thoroughly serious going astray from the truth in thought and/or in conduct".⁷⁰ As such, those guilty of it "receive in themselves the fitting penalty". It is possible that "due penalty" refers to sexually transmitted diseases, but it is more likely that Paul means that abnormal sexual practice is its own penalty. God delivers them over to the distortion they have embraced, to experience "in

their own persons" its full negative consequences.⁷¹ The penalty is "fitting" or "necessary" because it is rooted in the free choice of humanity to confuse creation with the Creator.⁷²

In light of these considerations, many exegetes consider it hard to avoid the conclusion that Paul condemns homosexual *practice* in general as inconsistent with God's intention for humankind, and something rooted ultimately in humanity's defiance of God.

Concluding Reflections

Such, then, is the exegetical debate over the force of Rom 1:26-27. Of course, even if we conclude that the exegetical evidence favours the conclusion that Paul's words are best taken as a generic condemnation of homoerotic practice, the issue cannot rest there.

There remain a range of other issues that any Christian evaluation of homosexuality needs to take into sensitive consideration. Not least of these is the

fact that for many gay people, their sexual orientation is not the result of personal choice but of influences in their upbringing (or personality make-up) over which they have had no control. It is totally unhelpful, and ultimately unloving, to point such people to Romans 1 as the definitive reply to their personal struggles.⁷³

It is important to note that Paul is speaking in global terms in Romans 1. He is characterising, in narrative form, the common experience of the human race following on its fall into sin. Given that human sexuality in some sense reflects the image of God (Gen 1:27), it is not surprising that Paul should trace sexual distortion back to humanity's primal rebellion against God. But such distortion affects us all in some way, whether we are heterosexual or homosexual. We all belong to the same broken stream of

humanity. We all are affected, in one way or another, by humankind's sexual disorder. Moreover, individuals who struggle with sexual dysfunction do not usually do so because of personal wickedness or spiritual defiance but because they have been affected by, or had inflicted upon them, this particular, and uniquely painful, legacy of Adam's rebellion.

There is therefore no justification for homophobia of any kind (cf. Rom 2:1), and there is potential room for compassionate responses to this form of sexual brokenness that make allowances for the complexity of the problem, the pressures of contemporary culture, the "not yet" of the redemption of our bodies, and the call upon us all as sexual creatures to fidelity and mutuality in sexual behaviour rather than infidelity and promiscuity.⁷⁴

By the usual canons of historical exegesis, therefore, it is difficult to construe Paul's words in a way that limits their intended application to only certain forms of homosexual practice. Yet neither Paul nor any other biblical writer tells us anything about homosexuality as a condition or unchosen orientation, and this must be taken into account in applying the biblical witness to the contemporary scene.⁷⁵ Even if Scripture views homosexual practice as anormative, homosexual orientation cannot be condemned as morally culpable.⁷⁶ Furthermore, just as vocational celibacy by a minority of people (cf. Mt 19:12; 1 Cor 7:38) does not invalidate the global mandate on the human race to marry and multiply (Gen 1:28; 2:23-24; Mt 19:4), so homosexual preference by a minority of individuals need not be seen as a denial of, nor a threat to, the normative status of heterosexuality in human creation.

Endnotes

1. Of course, the concepts (and terminology) of "homosexuality", "heterosexuality" and "bisexuality" were unknown in the ancient world (indeed the term "homosexual" was not coined until 1869 and first appeared in the OED in 1912), and there was no concept

of an in-built "sexual orientation". Everyone was assumed to be "heterosexual", with same-sex relations being a matter of conscious, and perverted, choice.

2. See D. Moo, *The Wycliffe Exegetical Commentary on Romans 1-8* (Chicago: Moody, 1991), 112-113.

3. J. Ziesler, *Paul's Letter to the Romans* (London: SCM/Philadelphia: Trinity, 1989), 74 (italics mine).

4. For example, 1:21 echoes Jer. 2:5 and Ps. 94:11; 1:23 recalls the language of Ps. 106:20; Jer 2:11; and so on.

5. Ellis maintains that Rom 1:18-2:5 represents a midrashic interpretation of the proem text (Hab 2:4) in 1:17. See E.E. Ellis, "Exegetical Patterns in 1 Corinthians and Romans", in *Prophecy and Hermeneutic in Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 213-20.

6. E.P. Sanders, *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 123-35; so too J.C. O'Neill, *Paul's Letter to the Romans* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975), 52, 53.

7. Porter has recently argued however that Paul first quotes what is really a judgemental and exclusionary speech (1:18-32), then in the remainder of Romans, beginning in 2:1, he "challenges, argues against, and refutes both the content of the discourse and the practice of using such discourses", C.L. Porter, "Romans 1:18-32: Its Role in the Developing Argument", *NTS* 40 (1994): 215, 221-28.

8. See especially M.D. Hooker, "Adam in Romans 1", *NTS* 6 (1959-60), 297-306; and "A Further Note on Romans 1", in *From Adam to Christ: Essays on Paul* (Cambridge: CUP, 1990), 85-87; J.D.G. Dunn, *Christology in the Making* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1980), 100-01; and *Romans 1-8 WBC* 38A (Dallas: Word, 1988), 53, 72. L.E. Keck suggests that Paul explains the human situation on three, progressively deepening levels, each understood as a dimension of the Adamic situation: in Rom 1, the human need is one of wrong relationship to God and God's norms; in Rom 5, it is one of subjection to death, the enslaving power of sin; in Rom 7, it is impotence before sin as a resident power in the self; see further, "What Makes Romans Tick?", in *Pauline Theology: Volume III Romans*, eds. D.M. Hay and E.E. Johnson (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 25-27.

9. J.A. Fitzmyer, *Romans* (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 274.

10. For example., in Genesis, idolatry precedes disobedience, while in Romans it follows it; human rebellion in Genesis entails a turning away from special revelation, in Romans it is a rejection of natural revelation,

Moo, *Romans*, 119.

11. Kaylor argues that in describing humanity's plight in terms of failure to honour or thank God and its consequent pursuit of idolatry, and God's reaction of "giving up" humanity, Paul means to suggest that "within creation itself there exists a bonding covenantal relationship which precedes the covenant with Israel and which, like the covenant with Israel, is in need of renewal. By the act of creation as well as by the historical deliverance of Israel, God has made a binding covenant with humanity" (41). But the covenant given in creation has lapsed because of human rebellion and corresponding divine abandonment. "Thus Paul's understanding of human existence is thoroughly covenantal from beginning to end", R.D. Kaylor, *Paul's Covenant Community. Jew & Gentile in Romans* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1988), 43.

12. See especially W. Sanday and A.C. Headlam, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 19025), 51-52.

13. C.E.B. Cranfield, *The Epistle to the Romans*, (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1975), I:104 n.1

14. See W.D. Davies, *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism* (London: SPCK, 1958), 27-30.

15. See Dunn, *Romans*, 57-58, 70-71.

16. J.G. Cook, "The Logic and Language of Romans 1:20", *Biblica* 57 (1994): 494-517.

17. Cranfield, *Romans*, I:104 n.1.

18. See Moo, *Romans*, 123.

19. E. Käsemann, *Commentary on Romans* (London: SCM, 1980), 44.

20. "Paul's fundamental claim is not a claim about sexual behaviour. It is a claim about right worship", D.L. Bartlett, *Romans* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1995), 31.

21. So, for example, L. Scanzoni and V.R. Mollenkott, *Is the Homosexual My Neighbor?* (San Francisco: Harper & Rowe, 1978), 64; R. Scroggs, *The New Testament and Homosexuality: Contextual Background for Contemporary Debate* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 43.

22. J.J. McNeill, *The Church and the Homosexual* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988), 52-57.

23. So especially J. Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 109. For a critical response, see R.J. Neuhaus, "In the Case of John Boswell", *ERT* 19 (1995): 64-70.

24. So especially Scroggs, *The New Testament and Homosexuality*. A similar approach is taken

- with respect to other biblical texts referring to same-sex relations. The story of Sodom in Gen 19 is taken as a condemnation of sexual violence and inhospitality to strangers; the Levitical rules against same-sex relations are understood on ritual rather than moral terms (i.e., the concern is to maintain ritual purity by maintaining strict, black and white boundaries, in this case between male and female sexual roles); and the prohibitions in 1 Cor 6:9 and 1 Tim 1.10 are taken as references to male prostitution or pederasty. For such a perspective on these texts, see V.P. Furnish, "The Bible and Homosexuality: Reading the Texts in Context", in *Homosexuality in the Church: Both Sides of the Debate*, ed. J.S. Siker (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 18-35; L.J. White, "Does the Bible Speak about Gays or Same-Sex Orientation? A Test Case in Biblical Ethics: Part 1", *BTB* 25/1 (1995), 14-23.
25. N. Elliott, *Liberating Paul: The Justice of God and the Politics of the Apostle* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1994), 193-94.
26. J.S. Siker, "How to Decide? Homosexual Christians, the Bible, and Gentile Inclusion", *Theology Today* 51 (1994), 227. Siker goes on to use the inclusion of Gentiles in the apostolic church as portrayed in Acts as a model for the inclusion of homosexuals today.
27. For a sensitive response to this point, and related issues, by a biblical scholar, see R.B. Hays, "Awaiting the Redemption of Our Bodies", in *Homosexuality in the Church: Both Sides of the Debate*, ed. J.S. Siker (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 3-17.
28. Siker, "How To Decide?", 228.
29. Furnish, "The Bible and Homosexuality", 25-35.
30. Furnish, "The Bible and Homosexuality", 19.
31. Siker similarly asks, "Do we blithely adopt first-century (or ancient Israelite) social constructions of human sexuality and sexual relations and apply them today?", "How To Decide?", 228.
32. White, "Does the Bible Speak about Gays?", 23.
33. On this, see H. Turner, "Gender and Homosexuality", *ERT* 19 (1995): 43-53; J.C. Yates, "Towards a Theology of Homosexuality", *EQ* 67 (1995): 71-87. It is significant that advocates of the legitimacy of homosexual practice usually deny this understanding of heterosexuality in the creation accounts (e.g. Furnish, "The Bible and Homosexuality", 21-23) and also deny that Paul consciously alludes to the Genesis narratives in Romans 1 (e.g. Scroggs, *New Testament and Homosexuality*, 114-115).
34. For a helpful and probing discussion on such epistemological issues, see Yates, "Towards a Theology of Homosexuality", 71-87.
35. "Paul does not reject this Jewish rejection [of homosexuality] but exploits it by maintaining that Jews also stand under God's judgment", T.E. Schmidt, *Straight and Narrow? Compassion and Clarity in the Homosexual Debate* (Leicester: IVP, 1995), 67. "Paul was against homosexuality, both active and inactive, both male and female. This marks him as Jewish", Sanders, *Paul*, 110, cf. 112-113.
36. Dunn, *Romans*, I:74.
37. For a brief overview, see Sanders, *Paul*, 110-113; Fitzmyer, *Romans*, 275-77.
38. See J.B. DeYoung, "The Meaning of 'Nature' in Romans 1 and its Implications for Biblical Proscriptions of Homosexual Behaviour", *JETS* 31 (1988): 435-36; Schmidt, *Straight and Narrow?*, 65-66.
39. The attitude of Scripture is consistently hostile; see Lev 18:22; 20:13; 1 Kings 14:24; 15:12; 22:46; 2 Kings 23:7, cf. Gen 19:1-28; Deut 23:18; Is 1:9-10; 3:9; Jer 13:14; Lam. 4:6; Ezek 16:43-58; 1 Cor 6:9; 1 Tim 1:10; 2 Pet 2; Jude 7. On the OT, see G.J. Wenham, "The Old Testament Attitude to Homosexuality", *ExpT* 102 (1991): 359-63. For a discussion of later Jewish literature, see Dunn, *Romans*, I:65-66.
40. C.K. Barrett, *The Epistle to the Romans* (London: A. & C. Black, 1962), 39.
41. Dunn, *Romans*, I:66.
42. D.E. Malick, "The Condemnation of Homosexuality in Romans 1:26-27", *BibSac* 150 (1993): 329-333; Cranfield, *Romans*, 1:125.
43. Cf. Malick, "Condemnation of Homosexuality", 333-335.
44. Hays, "Redemption of Our Bodies", 8-9.
45. Neuhaus goes further: "the point is not that some homosexual acts are wrong because they are associated with idolatrous cults; rather, homosexual acts are wrong because they are themselves a form of idolatry", "In the Case of John Boswell", 66.
46. David Wright uses this argument to refute the claim that because the levitical condemnations of homosexuality occur in a cultic setting, they have no relevance to homosexual relations in non-religious settings. Wright points out that other acts condemned in the Holiness Code for their cultic associations are unambiguously sinful apart from their idolatrous linkages, such as child sacrifice (18:21), bestiality (18:23), adultery (20:10) and incest (18:6ff), "Homosexuality: The Relevance of the Bible", *EQ* 61 (1989): 292-94.
47. Neuhaus suggests that the evidence is that Paul would still *not* have approved of homoeroticism by people of homosexual orientation since he deems homosexual practice to be "contrary to nature" (Rom 1) and in light of his own struggle to find deliverance from disordered desires that are deeply rooted in human nature (Rom 7), "In the Case of John Boswell", 67-68. Schmidt argues that Paul also does not assume that each person has a heterosexual orientation, only that *corporate humanity* as a whole has such an orientation but that it has been corrupted by the Fall. "It is extremely unlikely that Paul would alter his assessment if he knew about modern notions of orientation, which he would merely regard as secular ways to describe the results of the Fall", *Straight & Narrow?* 82-83.
48. DeYoung, "The Meaning of 'Nature'", 429-41. Also Schmidt, *Straight & Narrow?* 77-83.
49. J.W. Martens, "Romans 2.14-16: A Stoic Reading", *NTS* 40 (1994): 55-59.
50. Furnish, however, denies that Paul rejects same-sex relations as "unnatural" on the basis of the Genesis accounts. "Rom 1:18-32 contains neither a quotation from Genesis 1-3, nor a single identifiable allusion to any part of those creation accounts. Creation is of course in view, but not because Paul wants to emphasise *what* God brought into being or God's *intentions* for creation. Rather, in this passage his emphasis is almost entirely on *God as Creator* because his concern is to show the folly of pagan idolatry", "The Bible and Homosexuality", 30. But this denial of any allusions to the Genesis accounts is surely mistaken. Not only is there explicit reference to "creation" and "creator" (vv. 20, 25) and a close thematic link with Genesis, but certain key terms, such as "male", "female", "image", "birds and fourfooted animals...", serve to recall Genesis (cf. Rom 1.23 & Gen 1.26). See above.
51. Plato, *Laws*, Book 3:836C.
52. DeYoung, "Meaning of 'Nature'", 439; Malick, "Condemnation of Homosexuality", 339.
53. Malick, "Condemnation of Homosexuality", 339.
54. Wright, "Homosexuality", 298. Malick argues that "even if pederasty were the dominant expression of homosexuality, Paul's argument in Romans 1 need not be limited by the cultural expression of sin in his day since it is related to the creation account" (338). Malick concludes that "the view that Paul was discussing pederasty in Romans 1:26-27 breaks on the rocks of logical

and exegetical reasoning (340), "Condemnation of Homosexuality", 338-40.

55. So Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance and Homosexuality*, 341-53. Martin reviews the use of the *arsenkoites* in Christian and Jewish texts and argues that its precise meaning in Greco-Roman culture is now lost to us; however on the basis of the contexts in which it is used, he proposes that it probably did not refer to homosexual penetration in general but to some kind of economic exploitation by sexual means, such as rape or coerced sex, prostitution, pimping, etc. The term *malakos* also does not refer to homosexual sex itself, but to effeminacy in men. The term expresses the ancient denigration of women, and of homosexuals insofar as they assume the feminine role of the penetrated one. See further "Arsenkoites and Malakos: Meaning and Consequences", in *Biblical Ethics and Homosexuality*, ed. R.L. Brawley (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 117-136.

56. So, e.g., H.C. Waetjen, "Same-Sex Relations in Antiquity and Sexuality and Sexual Identity in Contemporary American Society", in *Biblical Ethics and Homosexuality*, ed. R.L. Brawley (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 109-110.

57. See D.F. Wright, "Homosexuals or Prostitutes? The Meaning of ARSENOKOITAI (1 COR 6:9, 1 TIM 1:10)", *VC* 38 (1984): 125-53; and, more briefly, "Homosexuality", 296-99. See also J.B. DeYoung, "The Source and Meaning of the Translation 'Homosexuals' in Biblical Studies", *ERT* 19 (1995): 54-70; P.M. Ukeleja, "Homosexuality in the New Testament", *BibSac* 140 (1983): 350-52; cf. Furnish, "The Bible and Homosexuality", 24.

58. Most commentators assume that vv. 26-27 deal with female and male homosexuality in turn. But James Millar queries whether v. 26 is referring to lesbian conduct. He notes that:

- If v. 26 is a reference to female homosexuality, it is exceptional in the whole of the Bible; there is no other verse that refers to lesbianism in Scripture.
- Female homosexuality is described only twice in the Talmud's Gemara (*Shabbat* 65a; *Yebamit* 76a), and although disapproval is expressed, the practice is not forbidden outright or declared unlawful. There is only one example in Hellenistic Jewish literature where female homosexuality is described and condemned in parity with male homosexuality.
- Female homosexuality is also hardly ever spoken of by classical writers; there are only three classical sources which

explicitly treat male and female homosexuality in parity. "Though discussions of male homosexuality are rather common [in antiquity], references to female homosexuality in either Classical or Jewish literature are rare enough for us to require some specificity from Paul before we can conclude with assurance that he is discussing female homosexuality in Romans 1:26. Without such specificity the reference to female homosexuality would be lost on his audience." (8)

- Rom 1:26 does not specify that the unnatural sexual partner of the woman is another woman; the condemnation could apply to unnatural heterosexual intercourse. Indeed, "a homosexual reading for verse 26 is in no way warranted." (8)
- In Romans, the female perversion is mentioned first. When female homosexuality is discussed alongside male homosexuality in classical and Jewish sources, it is never mentioned first; the male condition is the primary topic and is always introduced first.
- The term *chrēsis* ("use") in vv. 26-27 is best taken as a reference to sexual activity itself rather than a specific or technical reference to homosexual practice; the term *homoios* ("likewise") that commences v. 27 is comparing unnatural sexual practice, not homosexuality as such. "Natural" practices (not partners) are exchanged for "unnatural".
- In contrast to female homosexuality, "unnatural" heterosexual intercourse, especially oral and anal intercourse, is widely discussed in classical literature (often as a form of contraception). Jewish literature is largely silent about non-coital sexual practices, and whether this signals rejection or acceptance of such behaviour is unclear.

Miller concludes that Rom 1:26 refers to "non-coital sexual activities which are engaged by heterosexual women similar to the sexual activities of homosexual males" (10). See further, "The Practices of Romans 1:26: Homosexual or Heterosexual", *NovT* 37/1 (1995): 1-11.

59. Wright, "Homosexuality", 295.

60. DeYoung, "Meaning of 'Nature'", 439.

61. Ziesler, *Romans*, 78-79.

62. Malick, "Condemnation of Homosexuality", 335.

63. For a denial that sexuality is linked with humanity's status as image bearer, see

Furnish, "The Bible and Homosexuality", 21-23.

64. Cf. Dunn, *Romans*, I:74.

65. Hays, "Redemption of Our Bodies", 8.

66. A. Verhey, "The Holy Bible and Sanctified Sexuality: An Evangelical Approach to Scripture and Sexuality", *Interpretation* 49 (1995): 44.

67. Schmidt, *Straight & Narrow?* 85.

68. Cf. Furnish, "Bible and Homosexuality", 26-27.

69. DeYoung quotes research that indicates that only 1% of homosexuals have had fewer than eight partners, 75% have had more than thirty, and the average gay man has between 59-500 sexual contacts in a lifetime, "Meaning of 'Nature'" 439 n.59.

70. Cranfield, *Romans*, I:127; Fitzmyer, *Romans*, 288; cf. Mt 27:64; Eph 4:14; 1 Thess. 2:3; 2 Thess. 2:11; Jas 5:20; 2 Pet 2:18; 3:17; 1 Jn 4:6; Jude 11.

71. Moo proposes that Paul is alluding here to future judgment (cf. 1 Cor 6:9-10). (111) But, as Dunn points out, "that the divinely ordered punishment for sin is to be handed over to the power of that sin, to be left to its consequences, is the theme throughout this section (*paradoken*: vv 24, 26, 28), which is given further emphasis here", *Romans*, 1:65.

72. For other options, see Cranfield, *Romans*, I:127.

73. "In the context of his general judgment speech, Paul had no occasion to go into detail or to be concerned with the problem of homosexuality from the perspective of the gospel. But now that in the course of church history Paul's general formulations have led simply to excommunicating homosexuals, instead of getting to the root of their distinct behaviour, accepting them, and helping them, there does exist for us today a reason not to repeat Paul's statements without reflection!", Stuhlmacher, *Romans*, 37.

74. On this, see especially L.B. Smedes, *Sex for Christians* (rev. ed.) (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 48-58, 239-44; also Verhey, "Sanctified Sexuality", 44.

75. See Smedes, *Sex for Christians*, 239-44.

76. For a helpful comparison between how both advocates and opponents of homosexual practice use the distinction between orientation and behaviour, see Siker, "How To Decide?", 220-222.

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