

Biblical Self-Defense Course on Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Concerns

Interpreting Paul's Letter to the Romans *Naturally*

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Romans 1:26–27

²⁶ For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, ²⁷ 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. [NRSV]

Literary Context

The Letter to the Romans presents a “slice of life” of the early church in Rome. Written by the apostle Paul, it is his longest, weightiest and most influential. Compared to “epistles” which are products of literary art, Paul’s “letters” arose out of real situations in his life and the lives of the people to whom he wrote. Yet unlike his other letters which give systematic summaries of his theology, Paul’s Letter to the Romans has the structure of a letter, conveys the warmth of personal correspondence, addresses real concerns of the Roman church, and deals with uncertainties about the apostle’s imminent visit. [NRSV, pp. 206, 208; Harper’s, p. 877.]

After the customary salutation and thanksgiving, Paul describes the world’s need of redemption (1:18–3:20); discusses God’s saving act in Christ (3:21–8:39), deals with the role of the Jewish nation in God’s plan (Chapters 9–11), and closes with ethical teaching and some personal remarks (Chapters 12–16). [NRSV, pp. 206, 208.]

Historical Context

Letters in the New Testament that are ascribed to Paul were written between 50–60 CE, before the

fall of Jerusalem to the Romans and the destruction of its temple in 70 CE and before all the rest of the New Testament literature (including the gospels) was produced between 70–140 CE. [Perrin, p. 43.]

The founder(s) and founding date of the church at Rome are unknown, although a congregation apparently existed before 49 CE when the Emperor Claudius banned Jews, including Christian Jews, from Rome for internal squabbling. The presence of Jewish Christians in the Roman church suggests that Paul wrote the letter after 54 CE when Nero lifted Claudius’ ban and sometime during the next several years (55–58 CE). [Harper’s, p. 877.]

Paul wrote his letter to the Roman church probably while he was in Corinth. According to Romans 15:25–28, Paul planned to go to Jerusalem to give the poor church resources from the predominantly Gentile churches in Greece and Asia Minor. Then he expected to stop in Rome on his mission trip to Spain. [NRSV, p. 208.]

Scholars cite several possible reasons why Paul wrote the church in Rome. He perhaps realized his career was ending and wished to summarize his thoughts. With his mission in the east complete, he perhaps sought support for his proposed mission in Spain. Uncertain of his reception in Rome, he perhaps wrote to defend himself and his gospel against charges brought to Corinth and Galatia. Perhaps tensions had arisen between Jewish and Gentile Christians in Rome requiring his attention. [Harper’s, p. 877; Perrin, pp. 187, 188.]

Cultural Context

Boswell states, “If the Old Testament had no specific positive role in creating early Christian attitudes toward homosexual acts, may it not have

had a negative role? Would not the complete silence on the subject of gay sexuality and the prediction of all Old Testament moral legislation on a heterosexual model have predisposed Christians to reject homosexuality as alien to God's plan, no matter how they viewed the authority of Jewish law? The assumption that the creation of humankind through heterosexual union in Genesis and the subsequent emphasis on marriage throughout the Old Testament demonstrates tacit rejection of gay sexuality is unsupported in modern context, and it does not seem to have occurred to early Christians. It does not figure in any polemic on the subject and would have constituted an extremely weak argument if it had. In fact intense love relations between persons of the same gender figure prominently in the Old Testament—e.g., Saul and David, David and Jonathan, Ruth and Naomi—and were celebrated throughout the Middle Ages in both ecclesiastical and popular literature as examples of extraordinary devotion, sometimes with distinctly erotic overtones. Moreover, in an age which employed symbols and myths to explain all its fundamental truths, it would have been obvious even to the most naive that in order to account for the origins of the human race the writer of Genesis would inevitably describe the creation of the separate sexes which produce offspring and would comment on the nature of the union which brings about procreation. One would no more expect an account of gay love than of friendship in Genesis: neither could produce offspring, neither had and neither would contribute to the story of the peopling of the earth.

“Moral codes are generally silent on the subject of homosexuality, for reasons described at length above [see Boswell's conclusion on Leviticus.] The laws of Rome have no more to say about homosexual relations than those of Israel, and they regulate marriage as thoroughly, if with different purposes and assumptions. Yet no one would imagine that this silence in Roman law betokened the absence of interest or knowledge regarding homosexual behavior. If all that survived of Roman literature were laws ambiguously denigrating homosexual liaisons of some sort and a wealth of regulations safeguarding the purity of marriage, historians might well imagine that gay sexuality was unknown or severely repressed in Rome. Such an inference would be wholly wrong in the case of

Rome and has scant justification in analysis of societies from which little erotic literature survives.

“What is more to the point is the fallacy of selective inference which underlies this approach. Certainly opposition to homosexual behavior was not seen by most non-Jews as the hallmark of the Jewish religion: Jews were most noted for their dietary and ritual distinctiveness and for the practice of circumcision. Since all three of these were abandoned wholesale by the Christian community within less than 100 years of the inception of the religion, it seems hardly likely that lingering prejudice against this or that particular action could be ascribed to the overwhelming force of the Jewish tradition.

“Saint Paul, whose commitment to the Jewish law had taken up most of his life, never suggested that there was any historical or legal reason to oppose homosexual behavior: if he did in fact object to it, it was purely on the basis of functional, contemporary moral standards.

“it should be recognized that the point of this passage is not to stigmatize sexual behavior of any sort but to condemn the Gentiles for their general infidelity. There was a time, Paul implies, when monotheism was offered to or known by the Romans, but they rejected it (vv. 19–23). The reference to homosexuality is simply a mundane analogy to this theological sin; it is patently not the crux of this argument. Once the point has been made, the subject of homosexuality is quickly dropped and the major argument resumed (vv. 28ff.).

“What is even more important, the persons Paul condemns are manifestly not homosexual: what he derogates are homosexual acts committed by apparently heterosexual persons. The whole point of Romans 1, in fact, is to stigmatize persons who have rejected their calling, gotten off the true path they were once on. It would completely undermine the thrust of the argument if the persons in question were not ‘naturally’ inclined to the opposite sex in the same way they were ‘naturally’ inclined to monotheism. What caused the Romans to sin was not that they lacked what Paul considered proper inclinations but that they had them: they held the truth, but ‘in unrighteousness’ (v. 18), because

‘they did not see fit to retain Him in their knowledge’ (v. 28).” [Boswell, pp. 105, 106, 108, 109.]

Textual Notes

Boswell states, “There is,..., no clear condemnation of homosexual acts in [Romans 1:26–27.] The expression ‘against nature’ [‘unnatural’] is the standard English equivalent of Paul’s Greek phrase “para psusin,” which was first used in this context by Plato. Its original sense has been almost wholly obscured by 2,000 years of repetition in stock phrases and by the accretion of associations inculcated by social taboos, patristic and Reformation theology, Freudian psychology, and personal misgivings.

“The concept of ‘natural law’ was not fully developed until more than a millennium after Paul’s death, and it is anachronistic to read it into his words. For Paul, ‘nature’ was not a question of universal law or truth but, rather, a matter of the character of some person or group of persons, a character which was largely ethnic and entirely human : Jews were Jews ‘by nature,’ just as Gentiles are Gentiles ‘by nature.’ ‘Nature’ is not a moral force for Paul: men may be evil or good ‘by nature,’ depending on their own disposition. A possessive is always understood with ‘nature’ in Pauline writings: it is not ‘nature’ in the abstract but someone’s ‘nature,’ the Jews’ ‘nature’ or the Gentiles’ ‘nature’ or even the pagan gods’ ‘nature’

“‘Nature’ in Romans 1:26, then, should be understood as the personal nature of the pagans in question.

“‘Against’ is, moreover, a somewhat misleading translation of the preposition ‘para.’ In New Testament usage ‘para’ connotes not ‘in opposition to’ (expressed by ‘kata’) but rather, ‘more than,’ ‘in excess of’; immediately before the passage in question, for example, what the King James renders as ‘more than’ (the creator) is the same preposition.

“Finally, this exact same phrase—‘para psusin’—is used later in the same epistle to describe the activity of God in saving the Gentiles. ‘For if thou wert cut out of the olive tree which is wild by

nature, and wert grafted contrary to nature [para psusin] into a good olive tree: how much more shall these, which be the natural branches, be grafted into their own olive tree?’ (Rom. 11:24, KJV). Since God is here described as acting ‘against nature,’ it is inconceivable that this phrase necessarily connotes moral turpitude. Rather, it signifies behavior which is unexpected, unusual, or different from what would occur in the normal order of things: ‘beyond nature,’ perhaps, but not ‘immoral.’ There is no implication of the contravening of ‘natural law’ in Paul’s use of this phrase, and for Christians familiar with all the books which now comprise the New Testament the phrase may have had no negative implications at all; in 2 Peter 2:12, for example, a similar passage employs ‘nature’ as a term of derogation.” [Boswell, pp. 110–112.]

Conclusions

Boswell concludes, “Paul believed the Gentiles knew of the truth of God but rejected it and likewise rejected their true ‘nature’ as regarded their sexual appetites, going beyond what was ‘natural’ for them and what was approved for the Jews. It cannot be inferred from this that Paul considered mere homoerotic attraction or practice morally reprehensible, since the passage strongly implies that he was not discussing persons who were by inclination gay and since he carefully observed, in regard to both the women and the men, that they changed or abandoned the ‘natural use’ to engage in homosexual activities.”

Edwards concludes, “The theological world view [of the wrath of God against all ungodliness] is,..., ridden with problems for contemporary theological reflection,

“Romans 1:26–27 stands in a rhetorical context wherein Paul uses a traditional Jewish pattern of ideas directed against gentile depravity in order to turn the accusation against the accuser, just as the prophets turned the ethnocentric accusations against the Canaanites in on Israel itself and gave rise thereby to the moral depth of prophetic religion. In this manner heterosexuality, particularly male heterosexuality, is called into judgment against

itself on the basis of homosexual inclusion that faith justification implies.

“A number of supportive arguments can now be adduced that reinforce the thesis that in its context Romans 1:26f. serves a dogmatic or rhetorical function, rather than a purpose of moral exhortation (parenthesis) deriving from Paul’s basic theological outlook.” [Edwards, pp. 86–95.]

Scroggs concludes “First, Paul’s primary purpose in this entire section [1:18–32] is to describe the fall of humanity into the false reality in which it now lives. Both the section on homosexuality [1:26, 27] and the vice catalog [1:29–31] are part of that description. They do not belong in any way to Paul’s ethical admonitions,

“Second, the verses attacking homosexuality seem dependent on Hellenistic Jewish propaganda against Gentiles. What may be remarkable is that Paul takes a Hellenistic Jewish attack on paganism and generalizes it to include the entire world, Jew as well as Gentile.

“Third, since Paul’s intention is theological, not ethical, and since the two verses ultimately stem from his Jewish tradition, it cannot fairly be said that Paul is especially incensed against homosexuality. That he opposes it, on the other hand, is not to be denied.

“Finally, Paul is dependent for his judgment that it is against nature ultimately on Greek, not Jewish sources. There it rests not on some doctrine of creation or philosophical principles, but on what seemingly is thought to count as common-sense observation. I know of no Greco-Roman text which attempts to explain why homosexuality is against nature. Paul makes no attempt either.

“Thus, or so it seems to me, Paul’s theology leaves one in the same ambiguous position that the church finds itself in today. Theological or ethical assertions without adequate rationale are not to be convincing except to people already convinced.” [Scroggs, pp. 116, 117.]

References

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Romans 1:26-27 Additional Interpretations

According to Countryman, “Paul’s basic argument here runs thus: Idolatry was the root of sin of Gentile culture. In the creation, God left ample evidence of his goodness, power, and divinity, so that any people should have known enough to worship and give thanks to him alone. The Gentiles, in the stupidity of their hearts, chose instead to worship ‘a likeness of an image of a perishable human being and of birds and beasts and vermin’ (1:23). This was a voluntary act, effected in full knowledge of its meaning; and it is the reason why ‘God surrendered them in the desires of their hearts to uncleanness’ (v. 24). Paul did not, of course, mean that every Gentile invented idolatry individually or that each began to experience homosexual desire as a direct result of individual sin. He was thinking in terms of Gentile culture as a whole, not of individuals: the original forbears of the Gentiles committed the sin of idolatry, in which their descendants, in the normal course of events, have followed them; and this is why God has also decreed that certain unclean practices are to be characteristic of their culture. Compare Paul’s similar treatment of God’s dealings with Israel as a nation in Rom. 11:11-36.

“Did Paul understand these unclean practices as also being sinful? That is not inconceivable, for the religious tradition of Israel and of Christianity was willing to entertain the idea that God might punish one sin by causing the sinner to commit another. In order to determine whether that is Paul’s meaning here, however, we must look carefully at the vocabulary he used in discussing homosexual acts. Unfortunately, the existing English translations, having been made with the presupposition that Paul regarded these acts as sinful, tend to predetermine the conclusions of anyone using them. For those readers who cannot consult a Greek text directly, there is a need for a more neutral translation, which I shall supply as we proceed” [pp. 110, 111]. [Countryman translates and exegetes 1:24-25 (pp. 111-112).]

“Paul continues the discussion by reiterating his original point and making it more explicit:

““On account of this [i.e., the sin of idolatry], God surrendered them to passions (pathos) of dishonor (atimia), for their females exchanged the natural use for that over against nature and in the same way the males, too, having left the natural use of the female, burned with their desire (orexis) for one another, males accomplishing shamelessness (aschemosyne) with males and receiving the due recompense (antimishia) of their error (plane) among themselves.’ (Rom. 1:26-27)

“As in the preceding verses, we find terms for desire (pathos, orexis) which can be understood either positively or negatively. Insofar as Paul, like his Gentile counterparts the Stoic teachers, regarded desire as something for the mature person to subdue, he will be looking askance at it here. This is the same Paul, however, who wrote to the Corinthians that, even though he preferred for single persons not to marry, ‘it is better to marry than to burn’ (1 Cor. 7:9). In other words, Paul was willing, if need be, to accept the legitimacy of sexual desire and its appropriate satisfaction.

“We also find again, in vv. 26-27, the language of social dishonor, including the term ‘shamelessness’ (aschemosyne) which Paul applies to homosexual acts among males. In the ancient world generally, the most important social imperative was to maintain or improve the standing of one’s family, whether positively by increasing its public honor or negatively by avoiding anything that might shame the family. ‘Shamelessness’ meant being deficient in concern for the latter. It was thus a synonym for dishonor, not a term for denoting sinful behavior. King James’s translators found a suitable equivalent in the English of their day: ‘that which is unseemly.’ Paul’s choice of this particular term in Greek also ties his argument back to the purity code itself, for the Old Greek version of the Old Testament uses the term to denote (among other things) sexual violations of the purity code, genitalia, and human excrement. Paul does not question that what the Gentiles do is contrary to the Israelite code of purity and therefore certainly

dirty from a Jewish perspective. This still does not settle, however, the question of whether it is sinful for them to commit unclean acts.

“A new element that Paul introduces in vv. 26-27 is the statement that homosexual intercourse is an abandonment of ‘natural use’ for what is ‘over against nature.’ This terminology is not easy to interpret, since the terms ‘nature’ and ‘natural’ can mean a great many different things, particularly in the context of ethical discourse. Paul’s own use of the term ‘nature’ elsewhere offers us some important help – no so much in clarifying his usage as in warning us against misapplications of it. In most instances, he uses the term to refer to the continuity of an organism with its past; thus, he distinguishes branches that are still attached to their original tree (*kata physin*, according to nature) from those that have been grafted into a tree of another species (*para physin*, over against nature) (Rom. 11:24); or he speaks of those who ‘by nature’ are without law (Rom. 2:14) or uncircumcised (2:27) or Jewish (Gal. 2:15). If this is the sense Paul has in mind in Rom. 1:26-27, he is simply reiterating the idea he has already hinted at – that Gentiles experienced only heterosexual desire before God visited uncleanness on them and have therefore changed their ‘nature,’ that is, lost a certain continuity with their remotest past. . . .

“It remain to ask, with regard to the verses above, what Paul meant by saying that Gentile males were ‘receiving the due recompense of their error among themselves.’ The common interpretation of this statement understands the ‘error’ to be homosexual behavior and the ‘recompense’ as some evil which punishes it. The RSV goes so far as to speak of a ‘penalty’ that they suffered ‘in their own persons,’ though the latter must be reckoned an unlikely translation of *en heautois* (‘among themselves’). Two difficulties attend this interpretation. First, no one has yet given a satisfactory explanation of what this ‘penalty’ might have been. Although hemorrhoids and sexually transmitted disease have been suggested, neither is suitable, since they are in no way confined either to homosexuals or to Gentiles. The common interpretation thus makes nonsense of the text itself at this point. The second problem lies in supposing that Paul used the term *plane* (error) with reference to sexual acts. This term and its near

relatives appear a good many times in Paul’s undoubted writings, but always with reference to wrong belief rather than desire or action. Even in 1 Thessalonians, where ‘error’ appears alongside ‘uncleanness’ and ‘deceit’ (2:3), a perusal of the whole passage will show that Paul refers to a kind of false teaching framed with a view to deceiving the audience and enriching the teacher (2:5-6). To take *plane* in Rom. 1:27, then, as referring to homosexual behavior is to suggest that Paul altered his normal usage without apparent reason.

“The common interpretation, then, whether of the ‘recompense’ or of the ‘error,’ is impossible to maintain. How can the phrase be interpreted with greater fidelity to the text and to Paul’s normal usage? The simplest solution – and one fully in accord with the context here – would be to take the ‘error’ as idolatry and the ‘recompense’ as the uncleanness of Gentile culture. In this way, *plane* retains its otherwise invariable sense of ‘wrong belief.’ In other words, Paul is reiterating once again, at the end of v. 27, the point he had made previously in vv. 24 and 26: because the progenitors of the Gentiles forsook the true God to worship idols, God visited on them and on their progeny a characteristic kind of uncleanness, namely the desire for and practice of homosexual relations. This is not a matter of individual idolators receiving a recompense for their errors; it is a cultural phenomenon, as Paul says: ‘receiving among themselves the due recompense [uncleanness] for their error [idolatry]’” [pp. 112-116]. [Countryman then translates and exegetes 1:28-32 (p. 116).]

Country concludes, “We thus find that a close reading of Paul’s discussion of homosexual acts in Romans 1 does not support the common modern interpretation of the passage. While Paul wrote of such acts as being unclean, dishonorable, improper, and ‘over against nature,’ he did not apply the language of sin to them at all. Instead, he treated homosexual behavior as an integral if unpleasingly dirty aspect of Gentile culture. It was not in itself sinful, but had been visited upon the Gentiles as recompense for sins, chiefly the sin of idolatry but also those of social disruption. This reading of the passage also brings it into reasonable accord with what we have seen of Paul’s attitude to purity elsewhere. Paul did not deny the existence of

a distinction between clean and unclean and even assumed that Jewish Christians would continue to observe the purity code. He refrained, however, from identifying physical impurity with sin or demanding that Gentiles adhere to that code” [pp. 116, 117].

Countryman further concludes, “Whatever we are going to learn of Paul’s attitude toward homosexual behavior we must glean from the first chapter of Romans; and that, as we have seen, indicates that Paul regarded it as unclean but not therefore sinful. Indeed, it is difficult to see how he could have done otherwise, for his whole mission was predicated on the principle that Gentiles did not have to become Jews in order to be Christians. This was not merely a question of whether their males must be circumcised, but also included differences with regard to Sabbath observance (Rom. 14:5-6) and purity. Even in the matter of eating food sacrificed to idols, with the implied danger of participation of alien cults, Paul found it impossible to prohibit the behavior of the Strong on grounds of impurity; instead, as we have seen, he merely discouraged it on grounds of consideration for the Weak.

“If Paul, however, did not regard homosexual acts among Gentiles as necessarily sinful, why did he open a letter in which he proposed to make a major statement of his understanding of the gospel with an extended passage emphasizing the unclean nature of this aspect of Gentile culture? The answer lies in the demands the Roman situation made on Paul and the rhetorical means he chose to respond to them. The Roman church was not of Paul’s founding, nor had he ever visited it hitherto. Since he was himself a controversial figure, he was perhaps in some doubt as to what kind of reception he would meet with when he did go there. The letter, therefore, had not only to lay out the main outlines of this theological stance but to do so in such a way as to gain the approval of all parts of the congregation. At Rome, as elsewhere, the outstanding question was how unclean Gentiles and Jews concerned for purity were to coexist in a single community. Since Paul’s own work was so intimately bound up with the Gentile side of that problem, he had to begin by conciliating the Jewish part of the congregation, so as to persuade them that they could and should tolerate the presence of

the Gentiles. Then he could lay out the ways in which he expected the Gentiles to cooperate in the matter.

“The main body of Romans begins with a strong statement that the gospel is for ‘Jew first and also Greek’ (1:16), and the remainder of the book addresses the two groups in this same order. In 1:18-32, Gentiles are spoken of as ‘they’ and described in negative terms. Then, in 2:1, Paul begins reproving an anonymous critic of the Gentiles in the second person singular: ‘So you are without excuse, you fellow, whoever you are, sitting in judgment; for when you judge the other, you condemn yourself, for you that judge do the same things.’ Only in 2:17, does Paul reveal that the critic he is addressing is in fact the Jewish Christian. He has thus taken care to bring the Jewish part of his audience along with him gradually. Rather than confronting Jewish Christians directly, he begins with a critique of the dirtiness of Gentile culture in which he expects that they will silently join him. He then questions whether this condemnatory attitude toward Gentiles is justified by unimpeachable virtue in the critic. Only then does he spring the rhetorical trap with his ‘Thou art the man’ – or, as he puts it, ‘But if you bear the name Jew . . .’ (2:17). (Paul does not explicitly address the Gentile members of the Roman church until 11:13, though he begins to speak of Jews in the third person in chap. 9) The vivid account of the origins of Gentile uncleanness which Paul gives in Romans 1, then, is serving the rhetorical function of *captatio benevolentiae*, that is, of capturing the sympathies of the audience – or, in this case, of one part of the audience.

“Still, one asks, why the specific choice of homosexual acts as the illustration of that uncleanness? One reason must have been that it was a very obvious and oft-belabored difference between Jewish and Gentile cultures. A second must have been that it was not a point of contention between the two groups in the Roman church. Food purity, as we have seen in our study of Romans 14-15, every much was; and to have begun with it would have exacerbated the tensions within the audience – something no competent rhetorician would do when one of his goals is to heal divisions. Paul had to begin with a noncontroversial point in order to lay the

groundwork for an irenic treatment of that question by discussing the relationship of the Torah to salvation. A third reason was that homosexual acts were clearly a purity issue; no other reason was assigned their prohibition in Leviticus. This meant that the original audience would be able easily to distinguish what Paul had to say about Gentile sin from what he had to say about Gentile uncleanness. The 'debate' with the anonymous Jewish critic in chapter 2 was thus freed to be a debate about sin, not about impurity. Having granted in chapter 1 that Gentiles are unclean, Paul could insist in chapter 2 that they are not therefore necessarily more or less unrighteous than Jews. Thus, the Jewish interlocutor's sense of superiority is distinguished from a true right to judge.

"Finally, an important reason for choosing homosexual acts as the prime illustration of Gentile uncleanness must have lain in the Gentile part of the audience itself. The most difficult part of Paul's rhetorical task was to gain the good will of the Jewish part of the audience without losing that of the Gentiles. Although Paul largely ignores the Gentiles until chapter 11, they were present and responding to the whole letter as they heard it read. When he was being critical of them, therefore, he had to speak in such a way as not to alienate their support of him. He might criticize their culture freely with respect to sin, since all Christians were expected to acknowledge their past sinfulness (cf. Rom. 3:9); but he must not suggest at any point that it was uniquely sinful, so that they had to cease being Gentiles and become Jews in order to be Christian – in other words, that being an unclean Gentile was somehow in itself a sin. The Gentiles would have been familiar with the repulsion Jews felt toward homosexual acts; and, given their own relative lack of interest in purity, they would have regarded this reaction as a Jewish peculiarity. Since Paul already had a large number of connections with the Roman church (Romans 16), they also would have known that Paul defended the right of Gentile Christians to remain unclean in the physical sense. As he would put it, later in this same letter, 'I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in and of itself, except that for the person who regards anything as unclean it is' (14:14). Thus, by singling out the uncleanness of homosexual acts as an example of Gentile behavior, Paul can conciliate the Jewish part of his

audience by inviting them to share with him a sense of their superiority, and yet not alienate the Gentiles who already know where he stands on the whole issue of purity.

"Surprising as it may seem, then, the text (Rom. 1:18-32), which has perhaps been most used in recent Christian debates to justify the continuation of some kind of purity ethic, probably bears witness to a situation exactly opposite that envisioned by most modern interpreters. Instead of demonstrating Paul's retention of Levitical purity law as regards homosexual acts, it makes rhetorical sense only on the presupposition that he kept, in the realm of sex as well as that of food, a consistent distinction between impurity and sin. Indeed, Romans 1 becomes intelligible rhetorically only on the hypothesis that no one in the Roman church ever thought that Paul would wish to apply the purity laws of Leviticus to Gentiles. The argument is simply this: 'We all know Gentiles have sinned. Only look at the dirtiness into which God plunged them as a consequence. But what of the Jew who criticizes them? Are you claiming to be sinless?'" [pp. 120-123]. _____

The ELCA report states, "Paul describes sexual activity (Rom. 1:26-27), together with a long list of vices (1:28-31), as evidence of the ungodliness of pagans who have given themselves over to the sin of idolatry. According to Paul, God 'gave them up' to their consuming passions due to their eagerness to serve and worship the creature rather than the Creator. Paul is indebted here to Hellenistic Judaism for this type of indictment of the idolatrous and corrupt Gentile world (see Wisdom of Solomon 12:23-27).

"Considerable attention has been given to the meaning of Romans 1:26-28, because of the reference to same-sex activity (the only biblical text containing a reference to same-sex acts between women as well as between men). In an endnote we offer a representative sample of the scholarly debate [between Boswell and Richard Hays] about the interpretation of this text. Here we simply note that most interpreters conclude that Paul viewed the confusion of sex roles as characteristic of the pagan world and one result of their rejection of God the Creator. In this manner the apostle depicts the general depravity of the entire Gentile world. Here

Paul is not simply describing individuals; he cannot think about individuals apart from their corrupted world.

“It is critical to note that Romans 1:26-27 is part of Paul’s major argument in which he seeks to demonstrate not only the ‘fallenness’ of the Gentile world but also the sinfulness of the Jews because they have failed the Torah. Pauls develops his argument so that his readers first feel revulsion against ‘those sinful pagans.’ The passage culminates (in 2:1 ff.) with the condemnation of those who judge others. Both Jews and Gentiles stand in the need of God’s redemptive activity in Jesus Christ: ‘{all} have sinned and fall short of the glory of God’ (3:23). It is important to realize that:

“Paul is not primarily concerned here to attack specific vices; he uses the illustrations to point to his main theological arguemtn. This is not to overlook Paul’s judgement of same-sex activity, but it does suggest that the Apostle is not ‘out to get them,’ as some people have assumed’ [Scroggs, p. 114].

“Even if we conclude that Pauls’ judgment on same-sex acts is clearly negative, this does not necessarily determine the significance of this text for us today. Moralists of Paul’s day (such as Seneca and Plutarch) viewed homosexual practice as essentially exploitative and driven by lust. If this was the kind of same-sex activity Paul had in mind in Romans 1:26-27, there is reason to question how appropriate this text is for addressing same-sex relationships in which there is mutual love and commitment” [pp. 22, 23]. _____

The Minnesota UMC Conference curriculum gives this “alternate interpretation:” “A response to the traditional of the Romans passage is complex. There are several things to be said. The first of them, mentioned above, is that we have no record anywhere that Jesus said anything about homosexuality. Other responses cluster around the issue of ‘naturalness’ and around abuse of the gift of sexuality.

“1. Natural vs. unnatural. This description of male and female homosexuality is set in the context

of Paul’s discussion about idolatry, specifically idolatry as it is practiced in Rome, where worship was evidently directly to ‘images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles. As part of these rituals, the worshipper had intercourse with the sacred prostitutes, both male and female. It is important to note that the exchange of natural intercourse for unnatural was a result of their participation of these pagan rituals [Boswell, p. 108].

“Paul probably had no concept of sexual orientation, nor did any authoritative writer of his time. Since he probably assumed that everyone was ‘naturally’ heterosexual, we can therefore understand his opposition to homosexual acts on grounds that they were unnatural.

“In Ephesians 2:3 Paul says that we are naturally ‘children of wrath.’ Given that he knew of pederasty – sexual relations between a mature man and a boy – in Greek culture and the impersonal homosexual activity of pagan temple worship, it is small wonder that Paul condemned these practices as unnatural.

“We often read in Pauls’ use of the words ‘nature’ and ‘natural’ the meanings those words carry in the 20th century. Paul, however, was employing firrst century meanings. In 1 Corinthians 11, Paul argues that it is against nature for a woman to pray or prophesy (preach) without a veil, and that long hair on a male is unnatural.

“2. Abuse of the sexual gift. It is quite evident that Paul assumes that those who engage in the abovementioned displays of homosexuality are ‘consumed with passions’ (NRSV) or ‘inflamed with lust’ (NIV). Christian proponents of accepting homosexual persons do not condone all forms of homosexual activity any more than they condone all forms of heterosexual activity. As [this] task force [unanimously] agrees: ‘We recognize that both heterosexual and homosexual persons can abuse the sexual gift. Both sexual promiscuity and prostitution are abusive of the gift of sexuality, whether they occur among homosexual or heterosexual persons.’

“Surely all Christians are repelled not only by promiscuity and prostitution but by heterosexual or

homosexual rape, child sexual abuse, or any other relationship which is not loving, committed and mutual.

“Robin Scroggs writes, ‘... the basic model in today’s Christian homosexual community is so different from the model attacked by the New Testament . . . that the conclusion I have to draw seems inevitable: Biblical judgments against homosexuality are not relevant to today’s debate. They should no longer be used in denominational discussions about homosexuality....’ [Scroggs, p. 127].

“Nowhere in Scripture is there a condemnation of mutual, loving homosexual relationships between adults; judgments about the morality of homosexuality must be made on the basis of love and the inclusive nature of God’s grace” [Lesson 4, pp. 6, 7].

References

[Countryman] Countryman, William L. *Dirt, Greed, and Sex: Sexual Ethics in the New Testament and Their Implications for Today*. Philadelphia PA: Fortress Press, 1988. This offers an excellent investigation of Jewish and early Christian understandings about purity and sexual property, and their value for today’s world. Chapter 6, “Paul and Purity,” contains the section on “Purity, Homosexual Acts, and Sin,” part of which is included here.

[ELCA] Evangelical Lutheran Church in America Task Force on *Human Sexuality. Human Sexuality and the Christian Faith: A Study for the Church’s Reflection and Deliberation*. Minneapolis MN: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 1991. Portions of Chapter Two, “Human Sexuality in the Bible” are included here.

[Minnesota Conference] Minnesota Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church Task Force to Study Ministries with and for Homosexual Persons. *Faithful Inquiry: Exploring Christian Responses to Homosexual Persons*. Minneapolis MN: Minnesota Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church, 1992. Exercise 8 of Lesson 4,

“Scripture and its interpretation,” presents traditional and alternate interpretations of biblical passages most often used in discussions of homosexuality. Only the alternate interpretations are included here.

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