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Paul, Romans and Homosexuality

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To most readers, the first chapter of Paul's letter to the Romans contains the Bible's clearest condemnation of same-sex relations, both male and female. Recent scholarship, though, reads the same text and finds just the opposite, that homosexuality is innate and therefore normal, moral, and biblical.

Reconstructing Romans

In Romans chapter one, Paul seems to use homosexuality as indicative of man's deep-seated rebellion against God and God's proper condemnation of man. New interpretations cast a different light on the passage, though.

According to the new view, Paul, the religious Jew, is looking across the Mediterranean at life in the capital of Greco-Roman culture. Homosexuality itself is not the focus of condemnation. Rather, Paul's criticism falls upon paganism's refusal to acknowledge the true God.

It's also possible Paul did not understand the physiological basis of genuine homosexuality. John Boswell, professor of history at Yale, is among those who differ with the classical interpretation. In *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality* he writes:

The persons Paul condemns are manifestly not homosexual: What he derogates are homosexual acts committed by apparently heterosexual persons....It is not clear that Paul distinguished in his thoughts or writings between gay persons (in the sense of permanent sexual preference) and heterosexuals who simply engaged in periodic homosexual behavior. It is in fact unlikely that many Jews of his day recognized such a distinction, but it is quite apparent that, whether or not he was aware of their existence Paul did not discuss gay persons, but only homosexual acts committed by heterosexual persons. [emphasis in the original]

Paul is speaking to those who violate their natural sexual orientation, Boswell contends, those who go against their own natural desire: "'Nature' in Romans 1:26, then, should be understood as the personal nature of the pagans in question." [emphasis in the original]

Since a homosexual's natural desire is for the same sex, this verse doesn't apply to him. He has not chosen to set aside heterosexuality for homosexuality; the orientation he was born with is homosexual. Demanding that he forsake his "sin" and become heterosexual is actually the kind of violation of one's nature Paul condemns here.

Romans 1:18-27

It's clear that both views can't be correct, but who is right? Only a close look at the text itself will give us the answer. The details of this passage show why these new interpretations are impossible. This is a lengthy passage that is worth quoting in its entirety:

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because that which is known about God is evident within them, for God made it evident to them.

For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse. For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God, or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures.

Therefore, God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, that their bodies might be dishonored among them. For they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen.

For this reason God gave them over to degrading passions, for their women exchanged the natural function for that which is unnatural, and in the same way also the men abandoned the natural function of the woman and burned in their desire toward one another, men with men committing indecent acts and receiving in their own persons the due penalty of their error.

Let me start by making two observations. First, this is about God being mad: "For the wrath of God [orge] is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men."

Second, there is a specific progression that leads to this "orgy" of anger. First, men "suppress the truth in unrighteousness" (v. 18). Then they exchanged "the truth of God for a lie, and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator" (v. 25). Next, "God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts to impurity" (v. 24). They "exchanged the natural [sexual] function for that which is unnatural" (v. 26). Therefore, the wrath of God rightly falls on them (v. 18); they are without excuse (v. 20).

This text is a crystal clear condemnation of homosexuality by the Apostle Paul in the middle of his most brilliant discourse on general revelation. Paul is not speaking to a localized aberration of pedophilia or temple prostitution that's part of life in the capital of Greco-Roman culture. He is talking about a universal condition of man.

Regarding the same-sex behavior itself, here are the specific words Paul uses: a lust of the heart, an impurity that is dishonoring to the body (v. 24); an indecent act and an error (v. 27); a degrading passion that's unnatural (v. 29); not proper and the product of a depraved mind (v. 28).

There's only one way the clear sense of this passage can be missed: if someone is in total revolt against God, which is precisely Paul's point. According to the apostle, homosexual behavior is evidence of active, persistent rebellion against one's Creator. Verse 32 shows it's rooted in direct, willful, aggressive sedition against God, true of all so-called Christians who are defending their own homosexuality. God's response is explicit: "They are without excuse" (v. 20).

Born Gay?

What about Boswell's counter, though? What if one's "natural" desire is for the same sex? If homosexuals are born that way, then homosexual desire is a normal expression of their physical constitution. Paul's condemnation only applies to those who violate their sexual orientation. Indeed, demanding that homosexuals change their ways is precisely the kind of thing Paul prohibits. Each person, whether heterosexual or homosexual, must follow his own natural inclinations. That's God's design.

There are four specific reasons this is a bad argument. The first three are compelling; the fourth is unassailable.

First, regarding the claim that homosexuals were "born that way," there is no scientific evidence that homosexuality is biologically determined. None. In spite of the hasty and oft-repeated claims of the press, all researchers uniformly report they have failed to show that homosexuality is biologically innate.

Simon LeVay, a homosexual himself, had this to say of his famous study of the hypothalamus in gay men: "It's important to stress what I didn't find. I did not prove that homosexuality is genetic....I didn't show that gay men are born that way, the most common mistake people make in interpreting my work."

Current research demonstrates that homosexuality is the result of a "combination of psychological, social, and biological factors working in concert." Homosexuality is not biologically determined. Neither is it chosen by homosexuals, strictly speaking (i.e., the desire is not chosen, though the behavior is). Instead, it seems that developmental factors during formative stages of a person's life account for the idiosyncrasies of one's sexual tastes.

As to what is "natural" for homosexuals, the testimony of nature is clear: Homosexuals have male sex organs designed by nature to fit the sex organs of females, not other males. If homosexuals have sexual desires for men rather than for women, it's clear that, however they developed those desires, it is contrary to their natural, physical provision.

Second, this interpretation introduces a concept, constitutional homosexuality, that is entirely foreign to the text, a detail Boswell himself admits: "It is in fact unlikely that many Jews of [Paul's] day recognized such a distinction," and that possibly even Paul himself was in the dark. If Paul was ignorant of the notion of "natural" homosexuality, then he could not very well be letting men who were "born gay" off the hook when he wrote that they "exchanged the natural function for that which is unnatural." This argument self-destructs.

Further, if Paul spoke only to those violating their personal sexual orientation, then why didn't he also warn of men who burned unnaturally towards women? Wouldn't Paul warn against both types of violation, some men committing indecent acts with members of the same sex, and other men committing indecent acts with members of the opposite sex?

There's a third problem. If all homosexual desire is natural, then to whom do Paul's harsh words apply? If all those who engage in homosexual acts are merely following their natural desires, then who falls under Paul's ban? Those heterosexual men who are not aroused by other men, but have sex with them anyway? Hardly. For men, if there is no arousal, there is no sex. But if there is arousal, according to Boswell et al, then the passion must be natural. Men who are heterosexual would never be inclined to have sex with other men; men who are homosexual do so "naturally" with Paul's blessing. You're blessed if you do, and blessed if you don't. There's no one left to rebuke. Paul must be condemning a group of people who do not exist.

Each of the points above is adequate to justify dismissing this silly reconstruction of Paul's theology by modern scholars. But there's one more problem. What in the text allows anyone to attempt to distinguish between constitutional homosexuals and others in the first place? Only one word: "natural." A close look at what this word refers to, though, leads to the most devastating critique of all of "born gay" theology.

Natural Desire or Natural Function?

Paul was not unclear about what he meant by "natural." According to him, the problem is not that men abandon natural desires. The problem is they abandon natural functions: "For this reason God gave them over to degrading passions, for their women exchanged the natural function for that which is unnatural, and in the same way also the men abandoned the natural function of the woman and burned in their desire toward one another..." (1:26-27)

The Greek word *kreesis*, translated "function" in this text, is used only these two times in the New Testament, but is found frequently in other literature of the time. According to the standard Greek language reference *A Greek/English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, the word means "use,...relations, function, especially of sexual intercourse."

Paul is not talking about natural desires here; he is talking about natural functions. He is not talking about what one wants sexually, but how one is built to operate sexually. The body is built to function in a specific way. Men were not built to function sexually with men, but with women.

This conclusion becomes unmistakable when one notes precisely what it is that homosexual men abandon in verse 27, according to Paul. The modern argument depends on the text teaching that men abandoned their own natural desire for woman and burned toward one another. Men whose natural desire was for other men, though, would then be exempt from Paul's condemnation. Paul says nothing of the kind, though.

According to Paul, the problem wasn't in man forsaking his own natural desire (his constitutional make-up), but rather the "natural function of the woman.." He abandoned the female, who was built by God to be man's sexual compliment. He rejected the proper sexual companion God made for him, a woman: "The men abandoned the natural function of the woman and burned in their desire toward one another, men with men committing indecent acts..." (v. 27)

Natural desires go with natural functions. The passion that exchanges the natural function of sex between a man and a woman for the unnatural function of sex between a man and a man is what Paul calls a degrading passion.

Jesus clarified the natural, normal relationship: "Have you not read that He who created them from the beginning made them male and female and said 'For this cause a man shall leave his father and mother and shall cleave to his wife and the two shall become one flesh [sexual intercourse].'" (Matthew 19:4-5)

Homosexual desire is unnatural because it causes a man to abandon the natural sexual compliment God has ordained for him: a woman. That was Paul's view. If it was Paul's view recorded in the inspired text, then it is God's view. And if it is God's view, it should be ours too, if we call ourselves Christians.

Yours for the Kingdom,

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