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## The Condemnation of Homosexuality in Romans 1:26-27

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In the past several decades waves of moral and ethical issues have broken on the shores of Western civilization, often leaving those expected to answer the sound of the surf dazed by the multitude of approaches and solutions to the problems. Homosexuality, and especially the question of its validity as a practice for Christians, is one such breaker.

The pervasiveness of this issue is especially evident in the United States and Great Britain. In 1948 the Kinsey Institute Report changed general attitudes toward homosexuality and heterosexuality. Instead of viewing those practices as polar opposites people were led to view everyone on a continuum between exclusive heterosexuality and exclusive homosexuality. The report also affirmed that between 5 and 10 percent of the population is exclusively or primarily homosexual in orientation.<sup>1</sup> Stott reported that "in Britain the Sexual Offenses Act of 1967 declared that a homosexual act performed between consenting adults over 21 in private should no longer be a criminal offense."<sup>2</sup> Likewise Logan notes that in 1973 the American Bar Association called for the repeal of all laws categorizing homosexual activity between consenting adults in private as a crime.<sup>3</sup> Also Socarides reports,

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On December 14, 1973, the Board of Trustees of the American Psychiatric Association, meeting in Washington, D.C., eliminated homosexuality from its official Diagnostic and Statistical Manual. In essence and by direct implication this action officially declared homosexuality a normal form of sexual life. Henceforth, the only "disturbed homosexual" would be one who was disturbed because he was homosexual. He would be considered neurotic only if "unhappy."<sup>4</sup>

Clearly the social cry of the West has been one of reevaluation with respect to the legality, if not the morality, of homosexuality.<sup>5</sup> This wave of questioning has since been sympathetically set in motion in the discipline of theology.

Pittenger supports homosexuality from a "theological basis" in four ways. (1) He says love is the dominant quality by which one measures all human activity.<sup>6</sup> (2) He

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<sup>1</sup> M. Kent Millard, "Model for Thinking about Homosexuality," and James C. Logan, "Theological/Ethical Perspectives on Homosexuality," in *Homosexuality: In Search of a Christian Understanding*, ed. Leon Smith (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1981), 25, 53.

<sup>2</sup> John R. W. Stott, *Homosexual Partnerships: Why Same-Sex Relationships Are Not a Christian Option* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1985), 5.

<sup>3</sup> Logan, "Theological/Ethical Perspectives on Homosexuality," 24.

<sup>4</sup> Charles W. Socarides, "Homosexuality Is Not Just a Life Style," in *Male and Female: Christian Approaches to Sexuality*, Ruth Tiffany Barnhouse and Urban T. Holmes III (New York: Seabury, 1976), 149.

<sup>5</sup> Stott notes that there is now a division between what is sin and what is a crime: Adultery has always been a sin, but in most countries it is not an offense punishable by the state. Rape, by contrast, is both a sin and a crime. This leads to confusion and ultimately to a question as to whether something which is not a crime (ones experience) should be considered a sin (ones morality) (Stott, *Homosexual Partnerships*, 5).

<sup>6</sup> William Norman Pittenger, "Theological Approach to Understanding Homosexuality," in *Male and Female: Christian Approaches to Sexuality*, 159-63.

asserts that since between 10 and 15 percent of the human race is homosexual, there must be theological relevance for these people.<sup>7</sup> (3) He relegates specific Old Testament and New Testament passages either to cultural nonrelevance or to a lack of truth and thus a lack of authority.<sup>8</sup> (4) He insists that the variety in God's creation allows for variety in mankind as they express love toward other men and women.<sup>9</sup> From these early splashes of permissive arguments the dike seems to have been broken by authors who not only speak in broad general terms but also invoke considerable Hellenistic cultural and linguistic arguments against any specific scriptural prohibitions of homosexuality.<sup>10</sup> These questions have

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particularly focused on the Pauline texts of Romans 1:26–27; 1 Corinthians 6:9; and 1 Timothy 1:10 since these alone are the New Testament prohibitions against homosexuality. Therefore it is necessary to examine Paul's rationale for condemning homosexuality in light of contemporary arguments for its validity as a practice for Christians.

The focus of this article is on Paul's condemnation of homosexual activity in Romans 1:26–27. Contemporary arguments are examined in light of historical, lexical, cultural, and contextual exegesis to demonstrate that Paul actually did condemn homosexual activity for all mankind and especially in the church. (A forthcoming article will discuss Paul's condemnation of the practice in 1 Corinthians 6:9.)

## **A Critique of Contemporary Views**

A plethora of explanations have been applied to Paul's discussion of homosexual activity in Romans 1:26–27 in an attempt to ease or even erase any relevance to present-day expressions of erotic, same-sex relationships. Some accuse Paul of imposing Jewish customs and rules on his readers. Others affirm that Paul was not presenting homosexuality as sinful but as punishment for idolatrous sin. But the most permissive view suggests that Paul was referring to abuse within the genus of healthy homosexuality. Those advocating this view affirm that Paul was addressing *perverted* homosexuality, either as unnatural homosexuality by heterosexuals, homosexuality combined with idolatry or with temple prostitution, or pederasty (men having relations with boys).

### **View One: An Imposition of Jewish Customs and Rules**

Scanzoni and Mollenkott wrote that in Romans 1:26–27 "it is doubtful that Paul is speaking of nature in the sense of custom, unless he is referring to a violation of Jewish

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 161-62.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 164.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 165, and idem, *Time for Consent* (London: S.C.M., 1970). Also Thieliicke seeks to decide the question of homosexuality on sociological and psychological grounds (Helmut Thieliicke, "Erwägungen der Evangelisch-Theologischen Ethik zum Problem der Homosexualität und ihre Strafrechtlichen Relevanz," *Zeitschrift für Evangelische Ethik* 6 [May 1962]: 150-66).

<sup>10</sup> Some of the major proponents of homosexuality as a valid practice for Christians are John 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); Victor P. Furnish, "Homosexuality," in *The Moral Teaching of Paul: Selected Issues* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1979), 5283; John J. McNeill, *The Church and the Homosexual* (Kansas City: Sheed Andrews and McMeel, 1976); Letha Scanzoni and Virginia Ramey Mollenkott, *Is the Homosexual My Neighbor?* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978); and Robin Scroggs, *The New Testament and Homosexuality: Contextual Background for Contemporary Debate* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983).

custom and law."<sup>11</sup> Their point is that since homosexuality was an accepted part of the social custom in the Greek and Roman world, Paul must have been imposing his Jewish custom on his readers.

Scroggs also suggests that Paul's knowledge of Greek

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homosexuality was less than extensive. "What he 'knew' probably originated from the rumor mills of the day, particularly perhaps from Jewish suspicions about Gentile activities."<sup>12</sup>

These affirmations, however, are full of presuppositions and exegetical oversights, as the following discussion reveals.

*Paul's cultural setting.* It is true that Jewish culture opposed homosexuality. The Jews' Scriptures did,<sup>13</sup> and their extrabiblical sources did.<sup>14</sup> However, Paul was not merely imposing Jewish custom onto the Greek and Roman world.

Paul demonstrated extensive awareness of Greek culture, having been born and educated in Tarsus in the region of Cilicia, one of the three centers of Greek culture in his day (Acts 21:39).<sup>15</sup> As Blaiklock has commented, "He could talk and think like a Gr. and quote his native Cilician poets to the intellectuals of Athens. He could write strong Gr. in closely argued documents."<sup>16</sup> Paul was hardly an isolated Jew in a Greek world, and would thus be well aware of the homosexual activities of his time without depending on "Jewish rumor mills."<sup>17</sup>

*Specific terms in Romans 1.* In sharp contrast to the notion that in Romans Paul was speaking only of Jewish culture are the

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very terms he used—terms that reach back into the creation account of Genesis 1 and 2 rather than Hellenistic Judaism.

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<sup>11</sup> Scanzoni and Mollenkott, *Is the Homosexual My Neighbor?* 64.

<sup>12</sup> Scroggs, *The New Testament and Homosexuality: Contextual Background for Contemporary Debate*, 43.

<sup>13</sup> Though not undisputed by present writers, the primary passages include Genesis 19 (cf. Ezek 16:49-50 and Jude 7); Leviticus 18:22; 20:13; and Judges 19.

<sup>14</sup> In discussing Genesis 19, Josephus pointed out that if Lot had offered the men of Sodom his own daughters, "not even this would content them" (*The Antiquities of the Jews* 1.11.13). Also the *Babylonian Talmud* deals with female homosexuality by stating, "Samuel's father did not permit his daughters to... sleep together" (Shabbath 65a). Also Rabbi Huna believed that women that commit lewdness with one another are unfit for the priesthood (Shabbath 65b). Other than these cases little is said about homosexuality in rabbinical literature. As Strickland notes, "Perhaps one plausible suggestion might be that the issue was straightforward. There were no situations which allowed homosexual practices. Under no condition was this practice condoned" (Wayne G. Strickland, "The Unnaturalness of Homosexuality" [ThM thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1980], 20).

<sup>15</sup> Tarsus "became the Athens of the eastern Mediterranean, the ancient equivalent of a university city, the resort of men of learning, the home town of Athenodorus (74 B.C.-A.D. 7), the respected teacher of Augustus himself, the seat of a school of Stoic philosophers, a place of learning and disputation, and the very climate in which a brilliant mind might grow up in the midst of stimulus and challenge and learn to think and to contend" (*Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, s.v. Tarsus, by E. M. Blaiklock, 5:602). Also see P. Michael Ukleja, "The Bible and Homosexuality; Part 2: Homosexuality in the New Testament," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 140 (October-December 1983): 354.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> See Strickland, "The Unnaturalness of Homosexuality," 423, for a more complete discussion of the various cultural influences on Paul's understanding of homosexuality.

Φύσικο and φύσι ("nature") refer to one's constitution as given by God the Creator.<sup>18</sup> When Peter compared the false prophets to "unreasoning animals, born as creatures of instinct [gegennhmena φύσικ] to be captured" (2 Pet 2:12), he was referring not to Jewish tradition or heritage but to a natural constitution as established by God in the creation of animals. Also Romans 1:26 bears the idea of a natural constitution as established by God in the creation of the human race.<sup>19</sup> Οὐσί may have the figurative sense of a natural endowment or condition inherited from one's ancestors, as in Romans 2:27.<sup>20</sup> However, there is also the literal sense of a physical naturalness that is beyond heritage and is based on creation. Paul clearly used the term this way in 1 Corinthians 11:14 when he referred to "nature" as an argument for head coverings.<sup>21</sup> In Romans 11 Paul wrote of the branches of an olive tree that are "natural" (κατὰ φύσιν, v. 21 ) and of the tree

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itself which is "by nature [κατὰ φύσιν] a wild olive tree" (v. 24 ) and has had branches grafted into it contrary to nature (παρὰ φύσιν).<sup>22</sup> Therefore Cranfield rightly observes that in Romans 1:26 φύσικον means "in accordance with the intention of the Creator" and παρὰ φύσιν means "contrary to the intention of the Creator."<sup>23</sup> "The decisive factor in Paul's use of [φύσι] is his biblical doctrine of creation. It denotes that order which is manifest in God's creation and which men have no excuse for failing to recognize and respect (cf. vv. 19 and 20 )."<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> This is contrary to some affirmations that Paul's argument from nature is linked neither to theories of natural law (a concept which developed later) nor to the Genesis creation stories (Mark Olson, "Untangling the Web: A Look at What Scripture Does and Does Not Say about Homosexual Behavior," *The Other Side*, April 1984, 27). He is in error on both accounts. Creation will be addressed below, but even Plato had a sense of natural law as seen in these words: "When male unites with female for procreation the pleasure experienced is held to be due to nature, but contrary to nature when male mates with male or female with female" (Plato, *Laws* 636C).

Going even further, Boswell proclaims that "'nature' is not a moral force for Paul: men may be evil or good by nature, depending on their own disposition. Therefore he concludes, Nature in Romans 1:26, then, should be understood as the personal nature of the pagans in question" (Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, 110-11).

However, after a rather thorough study of φύσι DeYoung concludes that the term never has the sense of "what is natural to me" (James B. DeYoung, "The Meaning of Nature in Romans 1 and Its Implications for Biblical Proscriptions of Homosexual Behavior," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 31 [December 1988]: 430). Likewise Köster says, "Φύσι is then used for a man's character or nature, without reference to his birth or descent, in so far as this nature is given and [is] not dependent on conscious direction or education" (*Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, s.v. "φύσι, φύσικος φύσικω", by Helmut Köster, 9:253).

<sup>19</sup> Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 2d ed., rev. F. Wilbur Gingrich and Frederick W. Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 869. DeYoung says, Note how the Creator and creation immediately precede in the context (Rom 1:19-23) (The Meaning of Nature in Romans 1 and Its Implications for Biblical Proscriptions of Homosexual Behavior, *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 31 [December 1988]: 439).

<sup>20</sup> Those who are uncircumcised from nature are in contrast to Jews who become heathen by violating the Law.

<sup>21</sup> Οὐδέ τι φύσι" αὐτῆ διδασκε.

<sup>22</sup> Παρὰ has the sense of beside something in that it is contrary to it (Bauer, Arndt, and Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 869). Also see H. E. Dana and Julius R. Mantey, *A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament* (New York: Macmillan, 1927), 108, ¶ 116, where this same sense is affirmed.

<sup>23</sup> C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to Romans*, 2 vols., International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1975), 1:125.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 126.

אִי קְהִלֵּי עֵיבָרִים ("their women," v. 26) and אִי אֲרִסֵּי ("the men," v. 27) are terms chosen by Paul to highlight the created order of male and female rather than other connotations which might be communicated through *gunh* and *ajh*. It is significant that the Septuagint uses *ar's* and *qhl u'* in referring to the creation of humankind as "male and female." When Jesus discussed divorce, He spoke of God's created order in Genesis 1:27, and both Matthew 19:4 and Mark 10:6 use *ar's* and *qhl u'* to refer to male and female. Also in Paul's first epistle, he used these terms to define men and women as polar opposites in the race (Gal 3:28). Therefore these words for men and women do not refer to the cultural heritage of marriage but to the "natural" expression of mankind as seen in God's creation.

Other terms in Romans 1:23 draw the reader's attention to creation rather than to Hellenistic Judaism. Paul's reference to the unsaved exchanging the glory of the incorruptible God "for an image" alludes to the creation account in Genesis 1:26 ("Let us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness").<sup>25</sup> The emphasis is on the fall of the race from God's design (Rom 1:18–22), and from the worship of God (v. 23). Also the words "of birds and fourfooted animals and crawling creatures" (v. 23) are reminiscent of "the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the earth" in Genesis 1:26. This emphasizes the creation account and thereby the fall of the race from God's design and from the

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natural, moral pattern of God for sexual expression (Rom 1:24–27) and social interactions (vv. 28–32).<sup>26</sup>

Therefore the terms of the passage show that Paul's discussion was based not on Jewish customs and rules but on the Hebrew creation account.

*The argument of the passage.* Another argument opposing the view that Paul described merely a cultural heritage in Romans 1:26–27 is the logical progression of thought in 1:18–3:20. Paul's thesis is that all mankind is condemned and needs God's righteousness, including the unrighteous who reject God (1:18–32), the moralists in their hypocrisy (2:1–16), and Jews who trust in the external aspects of their religion (2:17–3:8). Paul then validated this from Scripture by affirming that all are under sin (3:9–19). Paul did not even address Judaism until 2:17. Up to that point he was simply speaking to the natural man on the basis of general revelation and reason from the vantage point of creation.

Therefore there seems to be no hard evidence to indicate that in Romans 1 Paul addressed homosexual activity from the perspective of Jewish customs and rules that no longer apply today. On the contrary, Paul addressed same-sex relations from the transcultural perspective of God's created order.

## **View Two: Homosexuality Is Punishment for Idolatrous Sin**

Bartlett affirms that Paul did not present homosexuality as sinful in itself but as a punishment for sin.<sup>27</sup> He then builds on this supposed observation with the following line of reasoning:

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<sup>25</sup> S. Lewis Johnson, Jr., "God Gave Them Up: A Study in Divine Retribution," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 129 (April-June 1972): 132.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. For an in-depth discussion of the correlations of Genesis 1 and 2 with Romans 1 see Richard B. Hays, "Relations Natural and Unnatural: A Response to J. Boswells Exegesis of Romans 1," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 14 (Spring 1986): 191, 212, n. 6.

Those who really want to be "pauline" [*sic*] in their understanding of homosexual practices today would have to argue that people who engage in homosexual acts are being punished by God for their idolatry. One wonders whether people who engage in homosexual practices have been more idolatrous than heterosexual people. Turning it around, one wonders why, given the pervasive idolatry in which most of us live, more of us have not been "punished" by burning with homosexual lust.<sup>28</sup>

This view poses three problems. (1) Bartlett assumes that this punishment has no relationship to sin, (2) he intimates that Paul's argument is not true for today since more people are not

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"punished" even though this is not the only consequence of idolatry (cf. the added vice-list in Rom 1:28–32), and (3) he misses the significant point that Romans 1:18–32 is not a description of the pattern of individuals today who act out homosexuality, but is a description of the movement of mankind historically. Each individual's experience may be different, but the result—homosexuality—is still an evil perversion of nature.

*The punishment is related to the sin.* Paul's discussion of homosexuality does pertain to the consequence of idolatry.<sup>29</sup> But does that mean that no moral kinship exists between the sin and its consequence? One answer, though debated, is that in 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10 Paul clearly identified homosexuality as a sin. However, Romans 1 also indicates that the punishment for sin was a handing over of mankind to sin.

The strongest support for this observation is in the use of the phrase "God gave them over" (paredwken autou' ol ) in Romans 1:24, 26, and 28.<sup>30</sup> Johnson discusses three views of this term: (1) the permissive sense, which means God passively permitted men to fall into retributive consequences (however, the active force of paredwke argues against this);<sup>31</sup> (2) the privative sense, which means God withdrew His restraining hand from evil (however, this too misses the active sense of the verb),<sup>32</sup> and (3) the active judicial sense, meaning that God actively gave men over to retributive vengeance. This third sense is the idea in Paul's writings elsewhere (Rom 4:25; 6:17 ; 8:32 ; 1 Cor 5:5; 1 Tim 1:20; cf. Acts 7:42). As Johnson says, "Both the Romans and Acts passages describe the act of God as a penal infliction of retribution, the expression of an essential attribute of God's nature and being and it is thoroughly consistent with His holiness."<sup>33</sup> And

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<sup>27</sup> David L. Bartlett, "Biblical Perspective on Homosexuality," *Foundations* 20 (April-June 1977): 139.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 140.

<sup>29</sup> Hays rightly says, "The genius of Paul's analysis, of course, lies in his refusal to posit a catalogue of sins as the cause of human alienation from God. Instead, he delves to the root: all other depravities follow from the radical rebellion of the creature against the creator" ("Relations Natural and Unnatural: A Response to J. Boswells Exegesis of Romans 1," 189; cf. 190-91).

Käsemann writes, "For the apostle, history is governed by the primal sin of rebellion against the Creator, which finds repeated and universal expression. It is thus governed by the wrath of God, which throws the creature back on itself, corresponding to its own will, and abandons it to the world... Paul paradoxically reverses the cause and consequence: Moral perversion is the result of God's wrath, not the reason for it" (Ernst Käsemann, *Commentary on Romans*, trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980], 47).

<sup>30</sup> Johnson describes this word as a terrifying refrain ("God Gave Them Up: A Study in Divine Retribution," 126).

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 127.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 127-28.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 128.

Hays wrote, "God's judgment allows the irony of sin to play itself out; the creature's original impulse towards self-glorification ends in self-destruction. The refusal to acknowledge God as creator ends in blind distortion of the creation."<sup>34</sup>

The reversal of the created order in worship (Rom 1:21–23, 25) is reflected in a reversal of the created order in sexuality. Both are instances of overturning God's design and are thus evil by nature. This is emphasized by the term "exchanged," which links rebellion against God with the consequences of that rebellion.<sup>35</sup> Also the words "degrading passions" (παῖς ἀϊμί) in verse 26 and "committing indecent acts" (τὴν ἀσχημοσύνην κατεργάζομαι) in verse 27 describe the sinfulness of the punishment.

Therefore a strong correlation exists with respect to the sin and the retributive consequence which by nature is also sin.

*A reference to mankind.* The argument that this must be the experience of each individual disregards the fact that Romans 1:18–32 refers to the fall of the human race and not each individual's private experience. The sweep of the passage highlights the movement of the race of mankind in general rather than that of any particular person. Four facts support this view. (1) God's wrath is against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of "men" (ἀνθρώπων, v. 18 ). (2) General revelation has been available to mankind since creation (vv. 19–20 ). (3) "Men" (all the verbs and pronouns are plural) rejected this revelation by worshiping creation rather than the Creator (vv. 21–23 ). (4) "Therefore" (διό, v. 24 ) God gave "them" (again the pronouns are plural) over as a race to their lusts (vv. 24–31 ). This does not mean that every individual must have passed through this pattern for the passage to have any bearing on him. Rather, the practice of homosexuality is an expression of God's giving mankind over to its fallen desires. Paul was simply saying that the roots of homosexuality are in the turning of the race from God. It is unnatural within God's creation (vv. 26–27 ), as this is a judgment on the unnatural way in which the race turned from the revelation of God.

Therefore each person need not be an idolater for this passage to have relevance to him. Also all idolaters need not experience this particular form of judgment; many other consequences are listed in verses 28–32 .<sup>36</sup>

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### **View Three: Paul Was Addressing Perverted Homosexuality**

Another contemporary view of Romans 1:26–27 is that Paul was discussing the practice of homosexuality by heterosexuals and not present-day expressions of love by true homosexuals. Boswell is one of the strongest proponents of this view. He wrote, "The persons Paul condemns are manifestly not homosexual: what he derogates are homosexual acts committed by apparently heterosexual persons."<sup>37</sup> He adds, "It is in fact unlikely that many Jews of his day recognized such a distinction [between gay persons with a permanent homosexual preference, and heterosexual persons], but it is quite apparent

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<sup>34</sup> Hays, "Relations Natural and Unnatural: A Response to J. Boswells Exegesis of Romans 1," 190.

<sup>35</sup> See verses 23 (ἡ | α), 25 (meth | α), and 26 (meth | α).

<sup>36</sup> See similar discussions by Hays, "Relations Natural and Unnatural: A Response to J. Boswells Exegesis of Romans 1," 200; Käsemann, *Commentary on Romans*, 33; and Johnson, "God Gave Them Up: A Study in Divine Retribution," 125, 131-32. Concerning the exact time of this retribution toward mankind Johnson notes that the allusions to the Genesis creation account, as well as Paul's later mention of the entrance of sin in Eden, intimate that Paul had the Garden of Eden in mind. "There, then, man fell into sin, judgment, and the retributive justice of immorality, crime, and all manner of evil" (ibid., 132).

<sup>37</sup> Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, 109.



that—whether or not he was aware of their existence—Paul did not discuss *gay persons* but only homosexual *acts* committed by heterosexual persons.”<sup>38</sup>

A variant of view three is that Paul viewed pederasty as an abuse. The strongest proponent of this interpretation is Scroggs.<sup>39</sup> He defines all Hellenistic homosexuality as pederasty and then says that Paul’s discussion of *paraʹ fʹuʹs* is a reference to pederasty.<sup>40</sup>

*Homosexual activity by heterosexuals.* Some have argued against the hetero-homo perversion view on the basis of the words “degrading passions” (*paqh ajtimi*) and “committing indecent acts” (*thnʹ ajšmosunhn katergazome*),<sup>41</sup> but these words could support either view since those affirming “homosexuality by heterosexuals” would agree that this is a “dishonorable passion” and an “indecent act.”

However, Romans 1:18–32 refers to humanity’s downward movement away from God and thus away from morality as well.

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The permissive argument presupposes that homosexuality is a “natural” practice rather than a perversion of God’s design of heterosexual relationships in marriage. However, the passage teaches otherwise. There is a movement from heterosexuality to homosexuality in Romans 1:26–27, and according to the rest of Paul’s argument, this is a movement away from godliness. Having moved from the knowledge of God, the human race has also moved from God’s natural, moral pattern for sexual expression (vv. 24–27 ) and social interaction (vv. 28–32 ). Therefore it is improper to limit this one expression to a particular immoral expression of an otherwise acceptable practice referred to as “natural homosexuality.” Homosexuality is no more godly, and thus is no more “natural,” than any of the other evils mentioned.

Another evidence that homosexuality in general is in view as a movement away from God’s design and thus from godliness is that, as stated earlier, the word *paredwke* (He “give them over,” vv. 24, 26, 28 ) is not simply permissive or even privative but is descriptive of a judicial act of God giving men over to judgment for turning from the Creator. While this condemnation is not enough in itself to prove that Paul was addressing homosexuality in general rather than “homosexuality by heterosexuals,” it adds to the overall argument that Paul was describing the movement of humanity away from the Creator and thus from God’s created order of heterosexuality. Therefore homosexuality is not another proper expression of sexual relationships but is a perversion of God’s created order. Homosexuality in itself (and not homosexual acts by heterosexuals) is the talionic expression of judgment against man’s movement from the Creator.

As noted earlier, Boswell claims that Paul did not discuss gay persons but only homosexual acts (with the idea that no one in Paul’s day distinguished between those who were inwardly gay and those who were simply carrying out homosexual acts).<sup>42</sup> However,

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid. Also see a similar discussion by McNeil, *The Church and the Homosexual*, 10, 66. Surprisingly even Stott wrote that “although Paul knew nothing of the modern distinction between inverts (who have a homosexual disposition) and ‘perverts’ (who, though heterosexually inclined, indulge in homosexual practices), nevertheless it is the latter he is condemning, not the former. This must be so, because they are described as having abandoned natural relations with women, whereas no exclusively homosexual male would ever have had them” (Stott, *Homosexual Partnerships*, 11).

<sup>39</sup> Scroggs, *The New Testament and Homosexuality: Contextual Background for Contemporary Debate*.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>41</sup> Greger Walve, “A Critique of Some Contemporary Theologians” (ThM thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1983), 23.

<sup>42</sup> Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, 109.

if Paul did not make such a distinction himself, how can it be maintained that Romans 1:26–27 strictly observes the distinction?<sup>43</sup>

Therefore the movement in Romans 1:26–27 from heterosexuality to homosexuality does not mean a perversion of same-sex

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relations but instead refers to an exchange of the created order (heterosexuality) for a talionic perversion (homosexuality).

*Pederasty.* As mentioned, Scroggs approaches the New Testament passages on homosexuality with his conclusions already drawn before he even examines the material.

In all three of the passages the material is expressed in very traditional terms, that of Greco-Roman and/or Hellenistic Jewish cultures. Thus not only is the New Testament church uninterested in the topic, it has nothing new to say about it. The passage in Romans may on the surface seem to be an exception to this judgment, but in the final analysis I do not think such a claim can be substantiated.<sup>44</sup>

Scroggs then proposes that Paul was opposing the practice of pederasty.<sup>45</sup> Four observations point up the fallacy of this view.

First, 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.<sup>46</sup> Because Paul linked his argument to creation, and thus to God's design for sexual fulfillment in monogamous, heterosexual marriage, any movement away from that standard is sinful. Therefore since homosexual relationships are a departure from heterosexual relations, homosexuality is wrong. If Paul's awareness of homosexuality was primarily that of pederasty, that need not mean that the application of his words must likewise be limited to pederasty rather than to mutual adult-adult relations.

Second, many of the terms Paul used in Romans 1 allow for more than pederasty. They support a much more general idea of homosexuality including adult-adult mutuality. (1) Paul wrote of "males with males" (ἀρσενεῖ ἐν ἀρ, v. 27); he did not refer to men with boys as did Plato.<sup>47</sup> (2) In verse 27 Paul compared male homosexuality to lesbianism (ὁμοί, "likewise"). Lesbianism was usually understood to be between mutual adults, thereby arguing for adult-adult actions, not adult-child actions. (3) The

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<sup>43</sup> Hays discusses this very point in reference to Boggs view ("Relations Natural and Unnatural: A Response to J. Boswells Exegesis of Romans 1," 201). Even Scroggs affirms that the cultural climate of male superiority and male sexuality makes it impossible to distinguish between categories of inversion and perversion. Scroggs therefore questions Boswells assertion that in Romans 1:26-27 Paul was speaking only of perversion (*The New Testament and Homosexuality*, 28, n. 39).

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

<sup>45</sup> "The homosexuality the New Testament opposes is pederasty of the Greco-Roman culture" (*ibid.*, 84). And yet, strangely, this conclusion runs counter to evidence he presents in his discussion of Palestinian Judaism, for example.

<sup>46</sup> DeYoung says that to claim that Paul had pederasty in view is to miss the point that he was speaking of "nature" from a Jewish perspective based on creation and not from a Greek viewpoint. Therefore Paul was not limiting his discussion to Greek abuses ("The Meaning of 'Nature' in Romans 1 and Its Implications for Biblical Proscriptions of Homosexual Behavior," 439). Much of the following support is derived from DeYoung's excellent observations (*ibid.*, 439-40).

<sup>47</sup> ἸΑρρενῶν καὶ Ἰν, Plato, *Laws* Book 3, 836C.

phrase “natural use [or ‘function’] of the woman” (thh fusikhh crh’sin th" qhl ei) in verse 27 describes the activity of adults rather than adult-child behavior. (4) The phrases “toward one another” (ei]” aj] l hl ), “men with men” (a]rsene” ej] a]r), and “their error” (th" pl anh" au]tw) describe reciprocal activity with adults.

Third, in Hellenistic literature the phrases kata] fus and para] fus do not necessarily describe pederastic relationships. Plato used them to describe natural (normal) and unnatural (abnormal) sexual relations and nothing more.<sup>48</sup>

Fourth, a major flaw in the argument that Paul was limiting his discussion to pederasty is that he also discussed homosexual acts by women. Even Olson notes this.

It seems strange that Paul begins with a brief reference to women. Pederasty, by definition involves only men. And not only does the Old Testament never prohibit female homosexual activity, but secular Greco-Roman literature hardly even acknowledges its existence. If there were some kinds of female activity at this time, they were not well known—and almost never discussed. Given present resources, it’s almost impossible to know what kind of female homosexuality Paul had in mind.<sup>49</sup>

Olson does later explain Paul’s inclusion of women as an attempt by Paul to be comprehensive in his theological statement, but in doing so he accuses Paul of speaking figuratively with his inclusion of women as he supposedly did in Romans 2:1 when he accused “Jews” of doing the same things as the Gentiles.<sup>50</sup> The problem here is that Paul had not come to his discussion of the Jews (cf. 2:17 ). In verse 1 he was still discussing Gentiles or mankind as a whole (note w] a]hr, in v. 1 ), though he was referring there to “moralists” among the Gentiles. Also au]t in 2:1 refers to the practices mentioned in 1:27–32 which include more than homosexuality.

Olson also suggests that Paul may “have had some specific kind of destructive female homosexual behavior in mind, something unmentioned in other literature of the period.”<sup>51</sup> In response it is interesting to note that in order to avoid the view that Paul was addressing homosexuality in general, Olson had to call

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this “destructive female homosexual behavior.” Also if Paul spoke about female homosexuality whereas the literature of his day did not, why was he not able to speak about male homosexuality in a similar way? One must assume that pederasty is a case of special pleading that ignores the very terms and arguments of the passage placing the perversion against the norm of God’s created order.<sup>52</sup> Therefore the view that Paul was discussing pederasty in Romans 1:26–27 breaks on the rocks of logical and exegetical reasoning.

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<sup>48</sup> “When male unites with female for procreation the pleasure experienced is held to be due to nature, but contrary to nature when male mates with male or female with female” (ibid., 636C).

<sup>49</sup> Olson, “Untangling the Web: A Look at What Scripture Does and Does Not Say about Homosexual Behavior,” 28.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Once again Scroggs provides an example of this special pleading in spite of the facts when he acknowledges that “nature” refers to creation (a point which argues against the theory that Paul discussed only Greco-Roman abuses) but then glibly dismisses the admission with, “however creation was understood” (Scroggs, *The New Testament and Homosexuality*, 60). For a Jew like Paul, there could be no question as to how creation was understood in Genesis 1 and 2 .

## **Conclusion**

A contextual and exegetical examination of Romans 1:26–27 reveals that attempts by some contemporary writers to do away with Paul’s prohibitions against present-day same-sex relations are false. Paul did not impose Jewish customs and rules on his readers; instead he addressed same-sex relations from the transcultural perspective of God’s created order. God’s punishment for sin is rooted in a sinful reversal of the created order. Nor was homosexuality simply a sin practiced by idolaters in Paul’s day; it was a distorting consequence of the fall of the human race in the Garden of Eden. Neither did Paul describe homosexual acts by heterosexuals. Instead he wrote that homosexual activity was an exchange of the created order (heterosexuality) for a talionic perversion (homosexuality), which is never presented in Scripture as an acceptable norm for sexuality. Also Hellenistic pederasty does not fully account for the terms and logic of Romans 1:26–27 which refers to adult-adult mutuality. Therefore it is clear that in Romans 1:26–27 Paul condemned homosexuality as a perversion of God’s design for human sexual relations.

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