

On Homosexuality in the New Testament

By Gabriel Ramos

Today, many Christians have pulled away from the faith due to their sexual orientation and the most common exegesis of scriptural commentary on homosexuality and homosexual acts, especially Romans 1. However, through a close reading of biblical texts, one may realize that many scholars have misinterpreted the moral justification of the Church's opposition to homosexuality. While Romans 1 advances sound arguments against homosexual practices for the period in which it was written, it should not be decisive for Christian moral judgments today due to shifts in culture and thought.

First, though, before we explore what *should* be authoritative in today's society and what the implications of those moral imperatives are, we should examine what Romans 1 says. Romans 1 may harbor the most condemnatory words of the Bible regarding homosexuality and its related practices in the New Testament. Paul, the author, primarily regards homosexuality and homosexual acts as a capitulation "to shameful lusts" (Romans 1:27), and, hence, a conscious rejection of the teachings of God. He regards homosexual acts as "unnatural" and "shameful" (Romans 1:26-27). Paul directly criticizes men who feel lust for and partake in sexual acts with other men. And through linking verses 28 and 27 ("in the same way"), he implies that women did the same (and that their acts were just as condemnable). Why, however, did Paul see this as so largely reprehensible? One reason that we can quickly point to is the Roman and Jewish conception of sex and gender at the time.

What *did* the Israelites think about sexuality, gender, and sexual expression? For one, sexuality and gender were heavily linked. Romans acknowledged and accepted that sex between men occurred, as long as it did not upset normative power dynamics. To the Romans, male homosexual sexual acts had nothing to do with sexuality and everything to do with "anxieties about masculinity" (Tushnet 1). The society that informed Paul's idea of gender and sexual behavior was deeply misogynistic with deeply codified gender roles. Some of these tenants of

separation and subjugation still exist (unfortunately). However, many, such as the notion of penetration, are no longer significant.

Penetrative acts were masculine, and the act of being penetrated was feminine. To be feminine (or an *effective* female through passive sexual acts) is to subject oneself to societal inferiority. To make things more complicated, however, Paul writes from the perspective of a Roman citizen *and* a devout Jew. Jews, by consensus, condemned sexual relations between men, due to their “unnatural” and “effeminizing” nature (Nissinen 117). Jewish teachers also thought it “posed a threat” to the successful propagation of humanity (Nissinen 109). Several Jewish texts also equate homosexual acts with a variety of other sins ranging from adultery to pedophilia to idolatry.

Why is this idea of a deviance from “nature” in homosexual acts and relationships such a centerpiece of Paul’s argument? What humans perceive to be natural is almost always inherently constructed by the culture, but we’ll indulge in Paul’s societal paradigm. First, one must engage what it means to be “unnatural” (a translation of *para physin*). Some scholars argue that the passage does not condemn homosexuality at all, but rather contemns heterosexuals who have abandoned their actual orientation to have homosexual relations. One can extrapolate this ideation because the concepts of homosexual and heterosexual orientations did not exist explicitly during the period wherein Paul lived. He did not know how to make a distinction because an innate romantic or sexual attraction toward the same sex did not conceptually exist. The conception stood that all people were heterosexually-oriented. All other behavior was a “vice freely chosen” (Johnson 2) — something most people now believe to be false. Paul was not condemning loving, monogamous, committed, same-gender relationships as they exist today, because that was not even a conceivable possibility during the period within which Paul wrote Romans 1. The author and readers, therefore, would not have yet realized that “God has created us” (Johnson 2) in our

orientation, and it is not a depravity. As with any translation, however, *para physin* does not have to mean “unnatural,” it could also be legitimately translated as unconventional. In this case, we can remember that Paul’s criticism, while criticism of homosexual behaviors, is a criticism of idolatry. Just as the gentiles turn away from Jewish convention in religious practice, Paul might be arguing that deviance from conventional sexual practices is accordingly immoral.

We also, when trying to read this as a text out of context, fail to realize what most homosexual acts looked like. During the period, Paul’s dissension would have mainly been kind, empathetic, and pastoral, especially by those who had been sexually exploited. The dominant forms of sexuality during the period were mostly coercive. Especially in Rome, the centerpiece of homosexual relations was pederasty (where adults would have same-sex relations with boys) and master-slave sex in a world where 2/3 of the populous were (or were formerly) slaves. Those who existed as exploited peoples would have felt vindicated to hear this dissension; Paul condemns a culture of rampant exploitation by giving a voice to the victims of the world around them. It is a treatise against idolaters and sinners with darkened understanding, not two people in love. It is in this that I disagree with Johnson’s notion that we “reject the straightforward commands of Scripture, and appeal instead to another authority when we declare that same-sex unions can be holy and good” (Johnson 2). Instead, those who reject the Church’s teachings on homosexuality disagree with blindly applying the scripture that Paul wrote for a different time to our wholly different society and culture. For example, another word is often used for homosexuality in 1 Corinthians 6:9 – the word *arsenkoites*. This word is mainly translated as “homosexuals” or “sexual perverts” (Nissinen 114) – but Martin Luther translated it as “child molesters.” During the time of Romans 1’s authorship, many pagan rituals were primarily and basally hedonistic. Masters could have sex with any of their slaves – and a favorite of most were young males. One must

remember that the acts, in this case, were rape. Hence (by this vein of thought), an interpretation of this letter is in regard to abuse of boy slaves – not loving committed relationships.

Another interpretation regards the hedonistic nature of most pagan rites, and, therefore, the passage is about placing a false god before the Lord and pursuing non-righteous sexual acts. Thus, people living this way perpetuate something converse to the intention of sexual expression – a sacred sign of a covenant between two people made before God. In this thinking, the pagan pursuance of sexual pleasure before a false god both offends the intention of sex and rejects the true God. That is, it does not make “whatever feels good” something “morally acceptable” (Johnson 3) – quite the converse. The argument Paul forms in Romans, therefore, is not a condemnation of all homosexual expression but more so about the lustful nature that drives the impurity that causes sinful sexual acts. This argument implies that channeling sexual desire in healthy and holy ways within marriage, whether straight or gay, still honors a covenant made before God, which is one of the most fundamental biblical statements on heterosexual (or homosexual) acts. We must look to texts like Galatians as well. Verse 28 states that there are no temporal separations — whether that separation is gender, nationality, or slavery-status — in Christ because all are one in Him. We can extrapolate that there must be no separation of sexuality, then, also – that there is neither gay nor straight. Therefore, when discussing temporal relations between people of any orientation, we must hold equal standards and ask the same questions “concerning the holiness of the church” (Tushnet). If porneia for heterosexuals (a sinful act) includes promiscuity, violence, and exploitation, then the same should go for homosexual activity as well. Of course, these sins were almost always a part of homosexual practices at the time of Paul's condemnation. If the church, on the other hand, condemns the “bath-house style of gay life, it must also condemn the playboy style of straight life” (Tushnet). A marriage (or even relationship) that values fidelity, chastity, and modesty is “fruitful” and “holy” for a heterosexual

person. If the same elements are present in a same-sex partnership, Catholics should also regard it as fruitful and holy.

We commonly neglect to see the broader point that Paul potentially tries to make in the book of Romans, as it is largely overshadowed by the ostensible implications of the first chapter alone. He reminds us that we are all sinners. Christians should not pass judgment, which Paul emphasizes is also sinful, through an interpretation of Romans 13:9 – the Golden Rule. If we are to love others like ourselves, we have to expect reciprocity in hate, an act that is both self-deprecative (a sin) and hateful to God’s creation (an overarching sin). It is our duty, stemming from the same passage, to realize that Romans contains a theme of advocating for those on the margins of society and protecting and welcoming them into their *Father’s love*. What then of homosexual people and their actions in loving relationships analogous to that of their heterosexual counterparts? Do they also not deserve this protection and affirmation? We must remember that the citizens may have seen Paul’s words as *protecting* exploited people from evil, due to the cultural implications of the acts during the period. Why then should our reading and our application not reflect this cultural shift away from exploitive homosexuality? Pragmatically, there are several things that we have appropriated in this way. For example, in 1 Timothy 2:9, Paul prohibits women from braiding their hair because the norm at the time was that prostitutes did so. But that changed in our culture and became permissible. The Church ought to acknowledge that sexual norms, like hair styles, are not absolute. In doing so, the Church would recognize the dignity and normalcy of queer people, and — like Paul — would uplift the marginalized.

References

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