

## HOMOSEXUAL ACTIVITY: DOES ROMANS 1 CONDONE OR CONDEMN IT?

By R. M. Springett

Southern College of Seventh-day Adventists

Those who have assumed for years that Paul condemns homosexual activity in Romans chapter 1 might be rudely awakened if they read much of the modern literature on homosexuality. Today, the idea that homosexual activity is not condemned in Scripture is prevalent in the world and present even in the church. This article takes a brief look at the background and context of anti-homosexual-activity statements in the New Testament. In particular, it attempts to determine what Paul meant—and didn't mean—by his references to homosexuality in Romans 1.<sup>1</sup>

### The Social Background of Early Christianity

Christianity took root first in Roman provincial towns and cities, as the titles of some of Paul's epistles indicate, e.g., Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Philippians, and 1 and 2 Thessalonians.

The apostle Paul walked Roman roads and sailed Roman trade routes. The aim of Roman policy was the education and unification of the provinces in Roman ideas. In the process, Rome worked in alliance with Greek civilization, especially in the Eastern provinces, for as Ramsey has observed:

The Greek influence was, on the whole, European and Western in character; and opposed to the oriental stagnation which resisted Roman educative efforts.<sup>2</sup>

Christianity as a force in the social life of the time was doubtless perceived by many as arrayed on the side of imperial policy.

Christianity worked against ignorance, stagnation, social anarchy, and the enslavement of people to priests. At the same time it stood for universal citizenship, universal equality of rights, and universal religion, concepts also being worked out over time by the empire.<sup>3</sup>

Paul appears to have made use of certain basic elements of Greek education. He did not disdain the best in Greek ethics, learning, and courtesies. Nothing in his speeches at Lystra and Athens is overtly Jewish or Christian. When he wished to, Paul could express the truth of Scripture in the language and ideas of an educated Roman as well as in those of a Christian.

The first churches were formed in cities and towns, and the first Christians were urban dwellers. Though the cities were certainly small by modern standards, their population density in many cases equaled that of a modern slum. Privacy was rare. Thus Christians were very sensitive to public opinion. Their safety as Christians depended to a certain extent on their religious activities' largely escaping public attention. Abnormal behavior in any Christian community could feed willing rumors to the discredit of the entire Christian community. E. A. Judge is of the opinion that "the basic problem for Christians was thus not their relations with the government, but with the communities within which they lived."<sup>4</sup> Early Christian apologists responded to social as well as to state criticism.

It is a mistake to consider the triumph of Christianity as tantamount to the triumph of the lower classes (the "proletariat") over the upper classes. Early Christian churches were composed of a cross-section of society and have even been described as being mostly middle-class.<sup>5</sup> It has been suggested that "the triumph of Christianity in a hierarchically organized society necessarily took place from the top down."<sup>6</sup>

The structure of early Christian communities was inevitably influenced to some extent by the environment. Christians built no churches but met in private homes, as frequent references in the New Testament attest. Further, the conversion of a person along with an entire "household" is mentioned several times in Acts. In New Testament times a household likely included relatives outside the immediate family, and slaves, freedmen, and hired hands as well—and even business partners. It could be extended to include virtually anyone who depended on the group for a livelihood. Thus

the household was a basic political unit and the householder was charged with legal responsibilities for the group's members.

Not unsurprisingly, the loyalty of household members to one another could easily rival their loyalty to the state. As Abraham J. Malherbe points out, the solidarity of such groups was based "on economic, and especially psychological, social and religious factors."<sup>7</sup> In respect to religious factors, households were often centers of a cult under the patronage of the household's head.

So the new Christian groups were superimposed on an existing network. Households, many small, others numbering at most perhaps thirty, forty, or fifty, afforded privacy, intimacy, and the stability of place for early Christian communities.

Of course, when a Christian community contained several households, a potential for factions existed, which may help explain the problems Paul addressed in 1 Corinthians 1-4. On the other hand, the solidarity of Christian groups as a whole was remarkable and points to the fact that cohesive factors were at work in the church besides those that held a single household together.

Christians did not forbid social intercourse with non-Christians, but they did draw a clear line between the ethical-moral behavior allowed to those outside the group and that expected of members (see, e.g., 1 Cor 5:9-13); and, for obvious reasons, Paul strongly discouraged involvement in non-Christian cults (see, e.g., 1 Cor 8 and 10).

That Paul considered the Christian community a pure and holy place as compared with the impure and profane world outside is clear from the advice he gave Christians to avoid the abhorrent vices and sexual practices of the pagan world. His regulations in Ephesians 4:17ff. reveal what he expected of members of the Christian communities and were, in fact, essential for the solidarity and cohesiveness of Christianity as a whole (see also 1 Cor 1:2). These regulations highlight Paul's conviction that the purity of the community was in danger "only from within, not by contact with outsiders, even though the latter are considered typically immoral."<sup>8</sup>

#### The Popularity of Vice Lists

It is notable that regulations for Christian ethical behavior appear frequently in a negative form in the New Testament. Many

lists of vices are found for Christians to avoid.<sup>9</sup> C. H. Dodd has suggested that such lists may have been used in catechetical instruction from a very early period.<sup>10</sup>

Somewhat similar lists were employed in the popular moral teaching of the day, and in these popular lists Stoic influence was unmistakable. This is not to suggest that Paul took his ideas directly from the teachings of the great classical schools of philosophy. Though Paul's teachings had much in common with philosophical thought, Judge thinks they cannot be identified with any regular philosophical system<sup>11</sup> but that Paul rather made use of the popular ethical instruction of the day—not a system of ethics as such “but the way in which a loose body of general principles for life develops among thoughtful people in a community.”<sup>12</sup>

Christians surely found precedent for ethical lists in Hellenistic Jewish literature. In such literature vice lists were abundant, as for instance in the writings of Philo. An excellent example of a vice list is found in *Wisdom* 14. 25, 26:

Blood and murder, theft and fraud, corruption, faithlessness, tumult, perjury, troubling of good, unthankfulness for benefits, defilement of souls, confusion of sex, disorder in marriage, adultery and wantonness.

Burton Scott Easton observes that in accord with Jewish custom this list in Philo's *Wisdom* is concerned with actions rather than thoughts, whereas Stoic lists centered on sins of disposition.<sup>13</sup> Also characteristically Jewish is the emphasis in *Wisdom* on “idolatry” as the cardinal defect, whereas Greek and Roman moralists emphasized “ignorance.”<sup>14</sup> Paul's line of thought in Romans 1:26-31 resembles the thesis and language of the *Wisdom* list but does not simply repeat it. Of the fifteen terms in the *Wisdom* list and the twenty-one in the Romans list, only two, “murder and deceit,” are common to both.

Because most lists were conventional, particular listed sins had little to do with the immediate context within a given document where a list appeared. Stoic and Jewish precedent informed most New Testament lists. Easton finds non-Jewish precedent highly likely for Romans 1:29-31 and only less likely for 2 Timothy 3:2-4.<sup>15</sup> Other lists most likely had Jewish-Greek influence as their imme-

diate background. Neil J. McEleney finds no pattern of terms followed in the vice lists of the pastoral epistles and concludes:

The vice lists of the Pastorals have been influenced by more or less of these elements: (1) reference to the Decalogue or other commands of the Law; (2) polemic against immoral pagan idolaters; (3) Hellenistic conceptions of virtue and vice as qualifications of a man; (4) moral dualism due to various inclinations of spirits in a man causing him to walk in one of two ways; (5) the theme of eschatological punishment.<sup>16</sup>

Here again Stoic and Jewish backgrounds are observable. However, similarities with Stoicism should not be overemphasized. The pagan concept of *philanthropia* "love for mankind" while present in *Wisdom* is notably absent from the New Testament. On the other hand, the Christian concept *makrothymia*, "patience," is absent from Stoicism, and qualities such as *eleos*, "mercy," and *tapeinotes*, "humility," are Christian virtues but Stoic vices.

The differences may be explained by noting differences in concepts of man, his nature, and his purpose in life. Because the Christian concept of man's relationship to God is determinative in Christian lists, it is vital to understand the conceptual framework in which the terms are used in the New Testament—and also, that these terms are not used in such a framework outside the New Testament. As Easton has noted:

Avoidance of the sins cataloged in these lists is never identified with Christian morality. Life as a Christian hardly begins until such temptations have been put to death.<sup>17</sup>

It is highly significant that all major references to homosexuality in the New Testament occur in vice lists. Nowhere does Paul issue positive instructions for the happiness of homosexual couples or indicate how such couples are to be integrated into the church. Paul does give instruction in respect to slaves, to families where only one spouse is a believer, to persons coming in from pagan cults and worldly associations, to women who are virgin and those who are not, and to Jews and Pharisees with all their religious and cultural baggage. But he consistently lists homosexual activity among the lifestyle elements that are to be left behind and discontinued when one becomes a Christian.

### Conclusions to Be Drawn So Far

For the most part, the apostle Paul evangelized Roman provincial cities. Most early Christians were city dwellers. Cities at the time were overcrowded, with the consequence that early Christians were seriously concerned about their place in local society and the influence society might have on them.

The ethical regulations given to Christians in the New Testament are found in both positive and negative forms. Negative lists of vices to be avoided were common in both pagan and Jewish societies. But in contrast to Stoic thinking, Christians did not suppose that mere avoidance of vices made a person moral. Instead, Christians taught that morality and ethics cannot begin until vicious acts are removed from the lifestyle. Christian ethics and morality involve the doing of positive things and not merely the removal of the negative.

Even though numerous worthwhile activities are mentioned in a positive way in the New Testament, homosexual activity is never treated positively. References to homosexual activity appear in the New Testament only in the lists of vices to be avoided, a fact that must not be overlooked if the Bible's teachings on homosexuality are to be taken seriously.

### Romans: Text and Context

As promised earlier, we turn now to a study of Romans 1, beginning with verses 24-28 RSV:

Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed for ever! Amen.

For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. Their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural, and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in their own persons the due penalty for their error. And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a base mind and improper conduct.

These verses are followed immediately (in vss. 29-32) by the longest vice list in the New Testament. This particular list mentions no sexual sins; Paul apparently was satisfied with his treatment of

sexual sins in verses 24-28, so that the whole passage, from verse 24 to verse 32, should be viewed as one extended vice list.

Numerous interpretations of this passage have been offered that see it as totally condemning homosexual activity. On the other hand, numerous interpretations perceive these verses as condemning only a certain kind of exploitative homosexual activity; and of *these* interpretations, most conclude that Paul did not oppose all homosexuality but only homosexual lust. These latter interpretations claim that Paul could not have been opposing "natural" or permanent, constitutional homosexuality because he was ignorant of it.<sup>18</sup> Thus, they say, Paul was concerned only with exploitation, prostitution, and unbridled homosexual lust. As proof, these interpretations point to the fact that Paul was talking against homosexual activity carried on contrary to nature, whereas it is not contrary to nature (they say) for a constitutional homosexual to indulge in homosexual activity, even though it would be against the nature of a heterosexual to do so. Thus, they conclude, Paul was not speaking against the loving homosexual relationship of the constitutional homosexual couple whose affection and responsibility are the marked criteria of their relationship rather than unbridled lust.<sup>19</sup>

A third interpretation, sometimes held in conjunction with the second view just outlined, is that Paul in this passage condemned homosexuality associated with idolatry, rather than mere homosexual activity as such.<sup>20</sup> Various assumptions are involved here, among them that homosexuality was practiced in conjunction with idolatry in Paul's day and was, therefore, a conscious voluntary choice. Another assumption of this view is that homosexuality was in some way the result of idolatry, or that it was God's punishment for idolatry.<sup>21</sup>

Still other interpretations focus on the word "nature." Some of these interpretations protest the view that Paul's use of the word was tied to Greek philosophical usage.<sup>22</sup> Others read it as simply meaning convention, the generally accepted practice in a particular time and place, and cite in their support 1 Corinthians 11:14, where Paul says, "Does not nature itself teach you that for a man to wear long hair is degrading to him?" In this passage Paul uses the word "nature" in what these interpretations regard as a merely conventional sense, inasmuch as in Graeco-Roman culture it was generally

accepted that men should have short hair and be close shaven, whereas among the Jews the practice was for men to have long hair and (if they so chose) to wear beards. If, then, "nature" means only the custom of a current time and place, the homosexual activity which Paul condemns on the grounds that it is contrary to nature is simply activity not acceptable in one society but which might be acceptable in another.<sup>23</sup> Thus, these interpretations conclude, Paul is not saying that God condemns homosexual activity but that contemporary Jewish culture opposes it.

Finally, some interpreters minimize the references to homosexuality in Romans 1. They claim that Paul mentions many other sins as well, including covetousness, malice, envy, deceit, and gossip. We are all sinners, and Paul doesn't select any group of sinners as more worthy of condemnation than another, and all sinners may be saved by Christ. If fornicators, adulterers, and thieves are accepted into church fellowship, why not homosexuals? Bartlett paraphrases Galatians 5:6 to encapsulate this view: "In Christ Jesus, neither heterosexuality, nor homosexuality—in themselves—are of any avail, but faith working through love."<sup>24</sup>

### So What Does Paul Really Mean?

Let us begin our own exegesis of the passage (Rom 1:24-32) by reviewing the broader context in which Paul wrote it.

As almost any reader of this article is aware, the principal theme in Romans is the doctrine of justification by faith. In Romans 1:16, 17 this theme is announced in the declaration that the righteousness of God is revealed in the gospel and that "He who through faith is righteous shall live." Paul proceeds at once to illustrate our need for God's righteousness by showing that our sin brings retribution while we live and eventually culminates in death.

The arena in which sin operates is universal. God's righteousness is needed not only by those who drink the dregs of pagan vice and crime but also by the pagan moralists who consider themselves superior to such outcasts of society. Even the Jews, the chosen people of God who consider themselves supremely enlightened in contrast to the rest of mankind, fall under the stern judgment of God. In short, all mankind is found guilty before God. There is no room anywhere for complacency and congratulatory self-righteousness.



Paul's aim is to show that the whole of humanity is morally bankrupt, . . . He begins with an area of human life whose moral bankruptcy was a matter of general agreement among moralists of the day—the great mass of contemporary paganism.<sup>25</sup>

It is important to understand that by placing the pagan moralists and the Jews in the same category as the pagan masses, Paul was not saying that moralists and Jews were involved in the same forms of immorality. What he was saying was that the most degraded pagans could know enough from creation itself to avoid confusing the Creator with His creatures. But because they deliberately confused the Creator with His creatures, they fell inevitably into further errors of thought and action.

Paul was not suggesting that the pagan masses or any other group were not intelligent enough to understand what was right, but that in consequence of their resolute moral obduracy, they failed to do what was right. The Jews as a group demonstrated that the essential problem was not ignorance. The Jews were placed under the judgment of God because, as they boasted, they were indeed supremely enlightened and in consequence truly should have done better than those who were not. But even *they* failed.

Righteousness was not to be found among the pagan masses, or among the moralists, or even among the Jews, for all showed the same fundamental failure, a stubborn disobedience to what they knew to be right. It is here that Paul reintroduced the gospel into the picture (see Rom 3:21-5:21). God does not expect man to become righteous before He declares him such. Rather God declares a man righteous and initiates a right relationship and then helps a man grow up to his full potential. For Paul, freedom from religious activity as a means for getting right with God, and freedom from death (see Rom 7:1-8:39) are preceded by freedom from sin (see Rom 6:1-23). Paul vigorously opposed the idea that the outpouring of God's grace means a life of continued sin. In baptism, we die to sin; and, changing the analogy, Christians are like redeemed slaves, purchased by Christ's blood in the slave-market of sin and now working for their new master, God, and no longer for their old master, sin.

Paul's arguments encompass all of humanity. He writes not against a merely Jewish or Greek background but against a cosmic background. He deals with the broad canvas of creation, sin, fall,

and redemption. Because everyone has sinned and come short of God's original glorious intention for the race, God offers to all of us the opportunity to come into a right relationship with Him through Jesus. The relationship once accepted is to be maintained (on man's part, that is) by our cooperating with God to the best of our ability in good faith. The ultimate aim or ideal is that man may be restored to God's image as God intended when creating us.

In the section under consideration, Paul shows how far mankind has fallen from the ideal or original state. In Romans 1:24 he uses the words, "God gave them up," for the first of several times. It is doubtful that these words, repeated in verses 26 and 28, are intended to imply that the abandonment of the heathen to the dominion of sin represents a punitive act inflicted by God. If God withdraws the restraints of His providence and grace from the wicked, He may be described in Biblical terminology as giving them over to sin. But "the permission to sin is not necessarily a judicial or punitive act."<sup>26</sup> The sin of Adam was permitted, but scarcely as a judgment or penalty for sin.

The issue here is the free relationship between God and man. God allows the wicked to "enjoy forever the horrible freedom they have demanded, and [they] are, therefore, self-enslaved."<sup>27</sup> Sin is exposed and to some extent punished by its own results, but this is because God has so constituted natural processes that wrong inevitably gravitates to wretchedness. God leaves men where they place themselves—in the fatal region of self-will and self-indulgence.<sup>28</sup>

There is a moral law in life that men are left to the consequences of their own freely chosen course of action; and unless this tendency is reversed by divine grace, their situation will go from bad to worse.<sup>29</sup>

It is not helpful, then, to consider homosexuality as merely a punishment for sin. Such an opinion can lead to the judgmental question asked by the Pharisees, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents that he was born blind?" (John 9:2). As with blindness, so with the homosexual condition, the reality may be that "it was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be made manifest in him" (John 9:3).

There is no doubt that in Romans 1:25 Paul saw the vices of paganism to be a consequence of idolatry. This perception was

commonplace in Jewish apologetic of the time (see, e.g., *Wisdom of Solomon*, 12-14 and *The Epistle of Aristeeas*). For Paul the vices of paganism, with their inevitable results, were in themselves a retribution for the fundamental error of taking up an irreligious attitude toward life—that is, of placing the reasoning and will of the creature at the forefront in spite of the knowledge of God which is native to the human mind. In this context, idolatry cannot be reduced to pagan practices and cultic life. Rather, paganism in essence is seen to be an attitude toward God that places human will above God's will, and human authority above God's sovereignty (see Rom 1:28, 32). Therefore, to say that homosexuality is a result of idolatry is to say that it is the result of the sinful human condition in which we all live.

In Romans 1:26 Paul specifies some of the things that result from as well as contribute to the fallen existence which is our common lot. God gives us up to the dishonorable passions which spring from our basic attitude toward Him. Paul specifically mentions homosexuality as a dishonorable passion—though not the only dishonorable passion, for he lists others in verses 29-31. It is part of the irony of idolatry that people actually believe they can serve God by indulging in these passions. Here is the ultimate foolishness of those who claim to be wise (see vs. 19). Paul begins with the women ("females," *thelus* in Greek) who exchange natural relations for unnatural—a characterization that becomes clearer in verse 27, which refers to the men who analogously give up natural relations with women and are consumed with passion for one another, men ("males," *arsen* in Greek) committing shameless acts with other men.

The two key terms in these verses (Rom 1:26, 27) are the expressions "natural" and "unnatural," and much depends upon what Paul meant by them.

For many commentators, the crux of the issue concerns the sources on which Paul may be presumed to have been dependent for his judgment that homosexuality is unnatural. He used the terms *kata phusin*, "according to nature," and *para phusin*, "against, beside, or contrary to nature."

There is no doubt that these terms were used by other Greek writers when expressing an ethical judgment on homosexuality. For example, in the classical period prior to Paul's day, Plato, the

influential philosopher, in his *Laws*, 1. 636 and 8. 836-841 many times described heterosexual intercourse as "natural" and homosexual intercourse as "unnatural." Plato attempted to give a reason why homosexual intercourse is unnatural, namely, because men ought not to fall below the level of the animal world, where (he believed) homosexuality does not take place (*Laws*, 8. 841).

From the later Hellenistic period, other writers could be cited to show that the phrases in question were common enough. For example, Diodorus Siculus (ca. 49 B.C.), in his *History*, 32. 10. 8-11 used *kata phusin* for natural intercourse with a woman, but in the case where the woman was in reality a man he spoke of the intercourse as having taken place "as with a man" and the marriage as "against nature" (*para phusin*). In this event the woman (in reality a man) had to submit to "unnatural (*para phusin*) embraces."

Musonius Rufus, a Roman Stoic philosopher sometimes referred to as the Roman Socrates, was a contemporary (ca. A.D. 30-101) of Paul's whose works show "the typical characteristics of the popularized philosophical treatise."<sup>30</sup> For Musonius, life in accordance with nature was life in accordance with virtue. Thus he identified *kata phusin zen*, "to live according to nature," with *en arete zen*, "to live according to virtue." Men and women can have equal virtue, he said, and should have equal education, a concept that led him to consider marriage between a man and a woman as the most worthy of human relationships. Such a marriage was definitely "natural," *kata phusin*. "In the later Stoics marriage was always said to be *kata phusin*"<sup>31</sup> and homosexual acts were considered contrary to nature. Thus Musonius allowed for sexual intercourse only within marriage and for procreation. All other instances of intercourse he considered "indecent relationships" (adultery) and unlawful. In his Fragment 12,<sup>32</sup> which deals with sexual relationships, Musonius referred specifically to paederasty as *para phusin tolmema*, "an outrage against nature."

Another contemporary of Paul's, the Jewish historian Josephus (ca. A.D. 37-97), spoke of sodomy as "unnatural (*para phusin*) vice" and as "unnatural (*para phusin*) pleasure."<sup>33</sup>

We pass by the various authors who used the terms *para phusin* and *kata phusin* but did so without clearly defining what they meant by them, and proceed to ask what Paul did *not* mean by

these expressions and in what way Paul's usage was distinct from that of the later Stoics.

Paul's God, like the classic philosopher Aristotle's, was transcendent, completely above and beyond the world. Like Plato's God, Paul's God was also the Creator of nature and separate from it. The Stoics, however, believed in a God who was immanent in nature in ways which Paul could not have agreed with at all. For the Stoics, God not only controls the world but in the last resort is the world. For them, too, existence continues forever in endlessly recurring cycles following the fixed *logos* ("law" or "formula") known to the Stoics as Fate and Providence—which is ordained by God. The Stoics said that the *logos* in fact is God or is at least the mind of God and the universal world soul. Thus the Stoic system was basically determinist. The Roman orator, statesman, and Stoic philosopher, Cicero (106-43 B.C.), claimed that according to Zeno "the law of nature is divine," that Cleanthes held that "the world itself is god," and that Chrysippus said that "the divine power resides in reason and in the soul and mind of the universe."<sup>34</sup> There is little doubt that the late Stoics deified Nature. The Emperor philosopher Marcus Aurelius spoke of Nature as "the eldest of deities."<sup>35</sup>

It is clear that in Romans 1 and 2 Paul used terms that Stoic philosophers also used, but it is equally clear that he did not use them with the same meanings they had in Stoicism or even in Hellenism. That when using "nature" Paul included the providential ordering of the natural world, as the Stoics did, is probably correct.<sup>36</sup> Apart from this agreement, however, the term has a completely different function for Paul. The direct influence of non-Jewish Hellenistic thought on Paul's thought has been exaggerated. Paul's main background was Jewish, or more precisely, Hellenistic Judaism.

For Paul, nature and man were created perfect by God and subsequently fell away from perfection, suffering the blight of sin. Thus nature as it now stands cannot be determinative for man's essence, and any appeal to it as if it were determinative is at best relative and at worst harmful. Within fallen nature only relative distinctions between the natural and the unnatural can be made. For the Christian, this fallen natural life is preliminary to life with Christ and has validity as "natural" only because Christ entered

fallen natural life through His incarnation. From Paul's point of view, then, the "natural" was the form of life preserved by God for the fallen world. It is that life which is directed toward justification, redemption, and renewal through Christ.

Now human reason, being embedded as it is in the natural, is nothing more than the conscious perception of nature that presents itself to man. Thus this side of the fall, reason itself is fallen.<sup>37</sup> From this observation the crucial conclusion follows that the truly natural can never be determined by any single authority within the fallen world.

Paul's perspective in Romans 1 and 2 is not limited to relative distinctions between natural and unnatural in our present fallen world. Only God's original intention for man can be considered determinative for man's essence, and this original intention is revealed in Scripture. The "unnatural" came as a consequence of the fall and does not reflect God's original intention for us. That Romans 1:18-32 takes in all the world since the creation and the fall is recognized quite generally. Thus when Paul refers here to homosexuality, he is not treating it merely as an expression of idolatry. Rather he is tracing both homosexuality and idolatry back to the bad exchange man made in the first place when he originally departed from the Creator's intention.

In writing about "natural relations," Paul is not referring to individual men and women as they are. His canvas is much broader. He is taking the argument back, radically, to man and woman as God created them. By "unnatural" he means "unnatural to human beings according to God's creation pattern," a pattern Paul understood to be heterosexual. So the modern distinction between pervert and invert is completely undercut.<sup>38</sup>

In this light, Paul has in mind not only the casual and capricious sex swapping of the pervert driven by lust and desire for fleshly stimulation but also the basic divergence from God's original creation scheme that all homosexual behavior represents. The invert or constitutional homosexual may be seen as an aberration of God's original creation. He may be considered depraved in the theological sense (as we all are to some extent) even if not in a moral sense.<sup>40</sup> The constitutional homosexual who has physical and emotional attraction to other males may be less culpable morally than the lustful heterosexual who constantly fantasizes adulterous

relationships. The excessive sexual drive of a heterosexual may be due to some physical predisposition, but it is nonetheless a perversion of God's original intention and design. Both homosexual and heterosexual persons are culpable when they act out their "unnatural" drives. The same must be said about the nymphomaniac, whose sexual impulses cannot be satisfied by one man.

Paul uses the homosexual practices of his day as an appropriate illustration of the depravity which results from mankind's departure from God's will. If in our fallen state homosexual acts could be accorded divine approval in any sense, surely Paul would have indicated this and drawn any needed distinctions.<sup>41</sup> A variety of homosexual activities was commonly practiced and widely known in Paul's day. Paul must have been aware of distinctions among the various homosexual practices as found in the writings of Plato, for instance, and in the city of Sparta, and as carried out in prostitution and in paederasty. He must also have known about adult relationships of the more permanent kind.

But he made no distinctions in Romans 1. In the total absence of distinctions and exceptions, interpretations of his words that allow for homosexual activity must be seen as allowing exceptions for all the listed vices which follow.

At the same time, we ourselves need to make a distinction. Paul speaks only of homosexual activity, not of temptations to homosexuality or of a disposition to homosexuality. Paul concludes verse 27 with the observation that those who *practice* the various vices in his list receive "in their own persons the due penalty for their error."

By this "due penalty" the apostle may be speaking of moral erosion in the life or of the physical deterioration which results from a dissolute life, or of both.

Finally, in verse 32, at the end of the vice list, Paul notes that "they not only do them but approve those who practice them." Here is a reminder that among people who were not philosophers, male-with-male sexual relationships not only went largely uncondemned in the ancient world but were sometimes glorified as a stage of love higher than that between man and woman.<sup>42</sup>

Richard F. Lovelace observes,

Paul's target in Romans 1:26 and 27 is, therefore, not a few

dissolute heterosexual experimenters, but the Gentile culture whose male aristocrats could use women as chattel and child rearers but reserve their most refined erotic passion for other males."<sup>43</sup>

It may seem logical to a commentator to assume that Paul was a conservative Jew who merely reacted to the Gentile culture around him in typical Jewish fashion. Paul, however, was no reactionary conservative. He was the most liberated of the apostles. He was very accepting of Gentiles and was openly willing to reject Jewish traditions whenever he saw that rejecting them was God's will. The evidence appears to be that no "Pauline privilege" for homosexual activity is to be found in Romans 1:26-28.

### Summary

In reference to homosexual activity, Paul employed terms current in his day. The question has been raised as to whether he used the terms according to their Hellenistic or their Hebrew meanings, or less likely, according to unique definitions of his own.

The evidence discussed above leads to the conclusion that under the concept of what is "natural" Paul did not include the modern concept of permanent, constitutional homosexuality. For both Hellenistic Greek and Hebrew thought patterns, homosexuality was considered "unnatural." Likewise, in Romans 1 Paul did not use "unnatural" solely to refer to heterosexuals who break over into homosexual activity. Nor is it probable that Paul used "nature" to refer merely to social convention or local mores, or to the *logos* determinism of Stoicism.

We have argued that Paul used Greek words with Hebrew meanings, a methodology that has been widely recognized for Paul and other New Testament writers. The immediate context in which he used the terms in question was that of a world which God made perfect but which subsequently fell into sin. The book of Romans as a whole demands this broad understanding. Modern commentators who suggest that Paul approved or even permitted homosexual activity must make their case within this broad context. The burden of proof at the moment lies with those who challenge the historic interpretation of Romans 1 rather than with those who uphold it.

The evidence is that Romans 1 does not condone homosexual activity. It condemns it.



## Endnotes

- 1 This article is excerpted and revised from Ronald M. Springett, *Homosexuality in History and the Scriptures* (Washington: Biblical Research Institute, 1988).
- 2 W. M. Ramsey, *St. Paul the Traveller and Roman Citizen* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1904; reprint, Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1979), p. 131.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 138.
- 4 See, e.g., E. A. Judge, *The Social Pattern of the Christian Groups in the First Century* (London: Tyndale Press, 1960), pp. 71, 73.
- 5 Robert M. Grant, *Early Christianity and Society* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1977), p. 11.
- 6 *Ibid.*
- 7 Abraham J. Malherbe, *Social Aspects of Early Christianity*, Rockwell Lecture Series (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), p. 69.
- 8 Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1983), p. 105.
- 9 New Testament vice lists are found in Matt 15:19; Mk 7:21-22; Rom 1:18-32; 13:13; 1 Cor 5:10-11; 6:9-10; 2 Cor 12:20; Gal 5:19-21; Eph 4:31; 5:3-7; Col 3:5-9; 1 Tim 1:9-10; 6:4-5; 2 Tim 3:2-5; Tit 3:3; 1 Pet 2:1; 4:3-4; Jude 8:16; and Rev 9:20-21; 22:8; 22:15.
- 10 C. H. Dodd, "The Ethics of the New Testament," in *Moral Principles of Action: Man's Ethical Imperative*, ed. R. N. Anshen (New York: Harper Bros., 1952), pp. 544, 545.
- 11 E. A. Judge, *St. Paul and Classical Society*, p. 32. The extent to which the philosophical vice lists had penetrated the popular consciousness may be seen in Adolf Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East*, trans. L. R. M. Strachan (New York: G. H. Doran Co., 1927), pp. 314-317. Roman game pieces contain all of Paul's vice list in 1 Cor 6:9, 10 except for two words.
- 12 Judge, *St. Paul and Classical Society*, p. 33.
- 13 Burton Scott Easton, "New Testament Ethical Lists," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 51 (1932): 2.
- 14 Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, 2. 1: "Say to thyself at daybreak: I shall come across the busy-body, the thankless, the overbearing, the treacherous, the envious, the unneighborly, all this has befallen them because they know not good from evil."
- 15 *Ibid.*, p. 8.
- 16 Neil J. McEleney, "The Vice Lists of the Pastoral Epistles," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 36 (1974): 218.
- 17 Easton, "New Testament Ethical Lists," p. 8.
- 18 Derrick Sherwin Bailey, *Homosexuality and the Western Christian Tradition* (Hamden, Conn.: The Shoestring Press, 1975), pp. 38, 157.
- 19 H. K. Jones, *Toward a Christian Understanding of the Homosexual* (New York: Association Press, 1966), p. 70.
- 20 R. W. Wood, "Homosexual Behavior in the Bible," *Homophile Studies: One Institute Quarterly*, Winter 1962, p. 16; N. Pittenger, *Time For Consent, a Christian's Approach to Homosexuality* (London: SCM Press, 1976), p. 82.
- 21 Jones, *Toward a Christian Understanding*; also, D. L. Bartlett, "A Biblical Perspective on Homosexuality," in *Homosexuality and the Christian Faith: A Symposium* (Valley Forge, Penna.: Judson Press, 1978), pp. 30, 31.

<sup>22</sup> Particularly Plato's view that homosexuality was "unnatural" because animals do not do it.

<sup>23</sup> 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, 1981), pp. 110, 111; also T. D. Perry, *The Lord is My Shepherd and He Knows I'm Gay* (Los Angeles: Nash Publishing Co., 1972): 152. J. Robert Wright, "Boswell on Homosexuality: A Case Undemonstrated," *Anglican Theological Review*, 66 (1984): 86, 87, points out that no fewer than twenty-two recent critical commentaries fail to make the distinctions on which Boswell bases his interpretation here. Most of them actually reinforce the opposite point of view.

<sup>24</sup> Bartlett, "A Biblical Perspective," p. 39.

<sup>25</sup> F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans: An Introduction and Commentary* (London: Tyndale Press, 1969), pp. 81, 82. Suetonius, *The Twelve Caesars*, reports homosexual activity on the part of all the emperors he writes about except one, Claudius.

<sup>26</sup> W. G. T. Shedd, *Commentary on Romans* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1980) p. 25.

<sup>27</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1961) pp. 115 ff.

<sup>28</sup> H. C. G. Moule, *The Epistle to Romans* (London: Pickering and Inglis, 1925) p. 49.

<sup>29</sup> Bruce, *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans*, p. 81.

<sup>30</sup> A. C. Geytenbeck, *Musonius Rufus and Greek Diatribe*, trans. B. L. Hijmans Jr. (Assen, Holland: Van Gorcum and Co., 1963), p. 13.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 68.

<sup>32</sup> Fragment 12. 8-10; Greek text with translation and introduction in C. E. Lutz, *Musonius Rufus, "The Roman Socrates"* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1947).

<sup>33</sup> Josephus, *Against Apion*, 2. 273, 275.

<sup>34</sup> Cicero, *Of the Nature of the Gods*, 1. 14, 15. On Stoic determinism see, e.g., E. Bevan, *Stoics and Skeptics* (New York: Arno Press, 1979), p. 53.

<sup>35</sup> Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, 9. 1.

<sup>36</sup> A. J. Herschbell, "De Virtute Morale (Moralia 523c-528b)" in *Plutarch's Ethical Writings and Early Christian Literature*, ed. H. D. Betz. = *Studia ad Corpus Hellenisticum Novi Testamenti*, vol. 4, ed. H. D. Betz, G. Dellling, W. C. Van Unnik (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1988), p. 167. For the Stoics to be in agreement with nature was to be in harmony with God. For Paul this would not necessarily be so, for nature too was fallen. Even for the Stoics what is natural for animals is not necessarily natural for man; see Bevan, *Stoics and Skeptics*, p. 55.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, ed. E. Bethge (New York: Macmillan Co., 1968), p. 146.

<sup>38</sup> Robin Scroggs, *The New Testament and Homosexuality: Contextual Background for Contemporary Debate* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), p. 110.

<sup>39</sup> David Field, *The Homosexual Way: A Christian Option?* (new ed., Bramcote, Notts., England: Grove Books, 1980), p. 16.

<sup>40</sup> Helmut Thielicke, *The Ethics of Sex*, trans. J. W. Doberstein (Greenwood, S.C.: The Attic Press, 1978), p. 282.

<sup>41</sup> Paul is able to draw fine distinctions at other places in his epistles. We cannot entirely agree with V. P. Furnish, *The Moral Teaching of Paul* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1979), p. 81, when he says, "To Paul it represented a rebellion against

the Creator and his creation, a surrender to one's lusts, the debasement of one's own true identity and the exploitation of another's. It is no longer possible to share Paul's belief that homosexual conduct always and necessarily involves all these things."

42 Ernest Best, *The Letter of Paul to the Romans* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), p.23.

43 Richard F. Lovelace, *Homosexuality and the Church* (Old Tappan, N.J.: Fleming H. Revell, 1978), p.92.