

What does Romans 1 teach about homosexuality, and how should we live in response?

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From the book

Frequently Asked Questions About Sexuality, The Bible, and The Church: Plain Talk about Tough Issues

A collection of essays considering the appropriate participation of gay and lesbian Presbyterians in church life and leadership.

In the first chapter of Paul's letter to the Romans, we find an extended attack on humanity for its failure to live in a properly creaturely relationship to God. Among the things Paul says in this long accusation is that "their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error" (Romans 1:26-27). Understandably, these lines prompt many Christians to regard Paul as unequivocally opposed to homosexual relationships.

As with any text, however, whether an e-mail message or the Gettysburg address, we need to examine the literary context in which these verses appear. Having opened the letter by characterizing the gospel as God's own power for the salvation of all human beings, Paul in this section begins a relentless indictment of humanity. The indictment, which he puts forth in 1:18-23, is that human beings rejected the very godliness of God: they suppressed God's truth (1:18), they did not honor God or give God thanks (1:21), they worshipped things of their own making instead of worshiping God (1:22-25). This, in Paul's analysis, is the fundamental sin of humankind.

Because of humanity's implacable refusal to acknowledge its own creatureliness in the face of the God of heaven and earth, God "gave them up." Three times Paul repeats this terrifying assertion that God handed humanity over (1:24, 26, 28) to a whole series of actions. The behaviors include out-of-control passions, such as those mentioned in vv. 26-27, but they also include all the attitudes and actions itemized in the remainder of the chapter, such as envy, murder, gossip, foolishness, faithlessness, and a host of others. In their literary context, then, vv. 26-27 depict same-sex relations as the result of

human sinfulness, a sinfulness involving all humanity, a sinfulness rooted in human rebellion against God. What Paul is writing here constitutes a sweeping depiction of fallen humanity; this is not an exhortation, much less an early church order.

New Testament scholars – highly learned individuals of good will who are deeply shaped by these texts and who strive to serve the gospel faithfully – have serious disagreements about the cultural and historical factors that influence Paul’s comments in Romans 1. Out of the complex discussion, a few points are crucial. First, Paul does not operate with a notion of a homosexual (or heterosexual) “orientation” in the contemporary sense; instead, his language reflects the Greco-Roman world’s understanding of sexual relations among people of the same gender as discrete acts rather than a homosexual orientation or lifestyle. A number of ancient writers speak of same-sex acts not as indications of an orientation or a preference, but as symptoms of passion that has simply gone out of control. For instance, they would not say that a man who was married to a woman but also enjoyed sex with men was bisexual, or wrestling with two different orientations.

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They would say that he had a super-abundance of what they took to be a single, gender-indifferent, sexual passion. We need to understand that Paul is addressing a different question than the ones we are asking.

Second, when Paul speaks of “natural” and “unnatural” actions, he reflects the rigid hierarchy of Greco-Roman understandings about gender and sexuality. To put the matter directly, the sexual penetrator is regarded as superior to the one who is penetrated, so that a man who allows himself to be penetrated is regarded as unnaturally passive and women who engage in sex with one another are regarded as unnaturally active. Before finding ourselves compelled by this argument, we would do well to remember that what seems “natural” or “unnatural” is not fixed for all people and all times. In 1 Corinthians 11, Paul claims that it is “unnatural” for women to have their heads unveiled and for men to have long hair, but few contemporary Christians feel compelled to agree with Paul’s understanding of nature in that case.

Third, and perhaps most important, in this passage Paul seems to be playing, perhaps even deliberately, on some stereotypical Jewish accusations about Gentiles. For example, most annotated Bibles will refer to the Wisdom of Solomon

13-15, a Jewish text of the late first century B.C.E., which in several important ways parallels Romans 1. There also the author claims that Gentiles should have known about God from observing the world around them, that they instead made their own gods, and that the result is that their lives are mired in wickedness, including sexual promiscuity.

Addressing gatherings of Jewish and Gentile Christians in Rome, gatherings in which there may have been conflicts both theological and ethnic, Paul appears to be using this stereotype of the godless, wicked Gentile to draw in his audience. As the chapter proceeds, the audience will surely understand that the “they” to whom Paul refers are those outside the congregation, and the audience will imagine itself to be siding with Paul in his sharp attacks on godlessness and immorality. By the time he reaches the end of the chapter, with its declaration that those who commit such acts deserve death itself, the audience may have reached a frenzy of outrage.

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In an instant, however, the outrage is undone, for Paul’s next comment is this: “Therefore you have no excuse, whoever you are, when you judge others; for in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things” (2:1). No longer does the indictment point outward to “those people over there,” now it points directly to the Roman congregations who have joined him in condemning others. Paul has pulled the rhetorical rug out from under the audience, equating their judgment of others with the rest of the godless rebellion depicted in Romans 1.

Where does Romans 1 leave us with the question of homosexuality? The passage does not address homosexuality as an orientation, and it certainly does not address ordination or leadership in Christian communities. In common with many of his contemporaries, Paul assumes (but never actually argues) that same-sex relations are symptomatic of human sinfulness. Even those who conclude faithfully that this text requires Christians to condemn contemporary forms of same-sex relations must nevertheless hear in Romans 2:1 a powerful word of caution: we too stand under judgment, especially when we stand in judgment of others.

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