

Romans 1:18-32 - Interpretations I have met

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[online at interactingwithjesus.org/gaymatter]

Our Mennonite Church USA (MC USA) views “homosexual sexual activity as sin” (Membership Guidelines, 2001, 2015).

Only a handful of biblical texts specifically speak of same-sex intimacy, possibly supporting the stance that same-sex sex is against God’s intent. Of those texts, Romans 1 receives the most attention for several reasons:

- It is in the New Testament, unlike Gen. 19:1-13 and Lev. 18:22, 20:13.
- It uses more than a word or two as it refers to same-sex behavior, unlike 1 Cor. 6:9 and 1 Tim. 1:9.
- It sets its depiction of same-sex behavior in the middle of a theological description of humanity.

During my years of dialogue on the “h-issue” (the term we used on MennoLink 20 years ago) I have encountered many interpretations and arguments regarding this passage. The discussion boils down to this:

Does Rom. 1 teach that *all* forms of same-sex intimacy are contrary to God’s will (the church’s historic stance)?

Or is the passage only viewing *abusive, exploitive, or excessive* forms as sinful (the revisionist, progressive stance now held by half or more of MC USA)?

I am sure that this paper will not address all the revisionist interpretations that have been offered. Nor will it fully settle every

argument, answer every question. But we as believers do not seek total certainty—if we wait to “trust and obey” until all our questions are answered, we remain forever stalled. We rather seek to discern the *amount* of certainty for the historic or the revisionist positions.

That *amount* of certainty is what is crucial:

- If I have *strong certainty* (80%?) that the biblical writers view all forms of same-sex sex as against the Creator’s design, I will be unsettled by a call to “agree to disagree” on blessing same-sex marriage, for it will feel like a call to loosen our commitment to observe Scripture (since I do not see Jesus putting unity above obedience [see Matt. 10:34, 18:17, Rev. 2:20] or letting welcome cancel a call to repentance [Luke 15:2,7, John 8:11]).
- If I only have *moderate certainty* (40-60%?) that Scripture says that all forms of same-sex relations are wrong, I need not oppose those pushing the church to fully include persons in same-sex partnerships, for then same-sex would be a Romans 14 issue over which believers can differ, a matter of personal conscience and tolerance.

Interpretation #1 - For Paul, vv.18-32 had no value except as a “sting” to catch judgmentalism

Richard Hays introduced the idea that this text is “a homiletical sting operation” [*The Moral Vision of the New Testament* (Harper-Collins, 1996) p.389; “Awaiting the Redemption of Our Bodies,” *Sojourners* (July 1991)]. He points out that Paul builds within his Jewish readers a crescendo of condemnation over Gentile wickedness (leading off with the Gentile vice which would most quickly draw indignation —women engaging in homosexuality). And then in 2:1, the sting strikes: “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.”

Persons such as Ted Grimsrud take this idea much further than Hays,

appearing to say that Paul's purpose in writing the passage is *only* to argue against self-righteously condemning others. Ted writes in a March 31, 2016 blog:

[T]he purpose of Romans 1:18-32 (which includes the reference to same-sex “shameless acts” in 1:26-27) is not a considered statement concerning how Christians should not endorse same-sex marriage. It's not even a considered statement concerning any kind of should or should not. It's an exaggerated caricature meant to confront the self-righteous religiosity among Paul's readers that leads to judgmentalism. ...If Paul *did* believe that there were such a thing as God-given gender boundaries that are universal and absolute, we would have to say, based on the evidence from life, that Paul was wrong. However, Paul surely had nothing of the kind in mind here. He simply repeats stereotypes about pagans in order to stimulate the kind of response that will allow him to make his anti-judgmentalism critique. [thinkingpacifism.net/2016/03/31/a-kinder-gentler-machine-gun-hand-a-response-to-preston-sprinkles-people-to-be-loved-why-homosexuality-is-not-just-an-issue/]

Ted is right that Paul's purpose in writing the passage was not to tell the Romans what he thinks about homosexuality. Paul's purpose for vv.18-32 is to tell us what happens when humanity abandons the truth of God for a lie. And, yes, Paul does use the list of Gentile sins at the end of the passage to catch his Jewish readers who weren't acknowledging that they, too, have sinned (2:1,3,9,12).

But Ted is wrong in suggesting we do not learn what Paul thinks about homosexuality. We know what Paul thinks of “gossips” and “slanderers,” for instance—because he has them on the list of those who do “not see fit to acknowledge God” and have been given up “to a debased mind and to things that should not be done” (v28). And we know what Paul thinks of women who “exchange natural intercourse for unnatural” and men who “give up natural intercourse with women” and are “consumed with passion for one another.” Because they, too, are on this list. As Hays writes:

Paul singles out homosexual intercourse for special attention because he regards it as providing a particularly graphic image of the way in which human fallenness distorts God's created order. God the Creator

made man and woman for each other, to cleave together, to be fruitful and multiply. When human beings ‘exchange’ these created roles for homosexual intercourse, they *embody* the spiritual condition of those who have ‘exchanged the truth about God for a lie.’ [*The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, p388]

Interpretation #2 - v.26 might not refer to lesbian acts

...*Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural,* ²⁷*and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. ...* (NRSV)

Most often this verse is understood as a reference to lesbian relations:

- v.27, which all agree is talking about homosexual acts, uses the same words for the sexual relations as v.26. Also, v.27 implies that it is continuing the same topic of v.26 because it begins “and in the same way also the men...”

- Robert Gagnon cites two patterns that further increase the odds that Paul was referring to lesbian relations. (Gagnon is author of *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics* [Abingdon, 2001]; Willard Swartley in his review wrote, “Gagnon's book is one I have long felt needed... [H]is arguments are clear, cogent and persuasive.” [www.goshen.edu/mqr/pastissues/apr02swartley.html].) Gagnon claims that “lesbian intercourse is the form of female intercourse most commonly labeled ‘contrary to nature’ and most commonly paired with male homosexual practice in Greco-Roman sources.” [robgagnon.net/articles/homosexmarinloveisorientation.pdf]

Yet some progressives interpret v.26 as not referring to lesbian sex but to some form of unacceptable or “unnatural” heterosexual act. For instance, James Brownson, author of *Bible, Gender, Sexuality: Reframing the Church's Debate on Same-Sex Relationships* (Eerdmans, 2013), writes:

[F]or the first 300 years of the church's life, Romans 1:26 (referring to women who “exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural”) was

understood to refer, not to lesbian sexual activity, but to nonprocreative forms of *heterosexual* intercourse. This also suggests that the early church saw the common theme between the sexual misconduct of women in Romans 1:26 and that of men in verse 27 to center on the *nonprocreative* character of both forms of sexual misconduct (rather than the alleged commonality of same-sex eroticism). In short, any sexual activity of women that was not directed toward procreation was “unnatural”... [p.244]

(Ted Grimsrud, referring to the above quote, writes that “Brownson does a nice job showing that the reference to ‘women’ here almost certainly does not concern lesbian activities.” [thinkingpacifism.net/2016/07/05/refuting-the-evangelical-rejection-of-same-sex-relationships-a-response-to-james-brownsons-bible-gender-sexuality/])

However, Bernadette J. Brooten, counters the idea that the early church fathers never viewed the female activity in v.26 as lesbianism. (Brooten is author of the award-winning *Love Between Women: Early Christian Responses to Female Homoeroticism* [University of Chicago Press, 1996].) She describes Rom 1:26 as “the only passage in the entire Bible referring explicitly to lesbians,” and then writes that

“Interpretations of Rom 1:26 occur only rarely in the patristic sources. When the verse is quoted at all, it is usually the first half, ‘God gave them up to dishonorable passions,’ which is quoted without comment (e.g., Origen often does this). The interpretations which do occur fall into two categories. According to the one, Paul is referring here...to unnatural heterosexual intercourse. According to the other, lesbians are indeed meant. Anastasius and Augustine are examples of the unnatural heterosexual intercourse interpretation, while John Chrysostom and Clement of Alexandria would be examples of the second category.” [“Patristic Interpretations of Romans 1:26,” people.brandeis.edu/~brooten/Articles/Patristic_Interpretations_of_Romans_1_26.pdf]

Robert Gagnon brings in other patristic writings, strengthening this case. He writes:

The dominant history of interpretation of Rom 1:26 supports the assumption that lesbianism is in view. Augustine (ca. 410) is a notable

exception... All the other Church Fathers from Augustine’s time or earlier who commented on what Paul meant by unnatural female intercourse in Rom 1:26 understood it as lesbian intercourse: probably Clement of Alexandria (ca. 200) and the Apocalypse of Peter (second century), certainly “Ambrosiaster” (ca. 370) and John Chrysostom (ca. 390). [robgagnon.net/articles/homosexmarinloveisorientation.pdf]

What about the contention that Paul’s concern in v.26 centered on nonprocreative sex rather than lesbianism? It is only speculation, and rather weak:

- The context in Rom. 1 never mentions procreation. It does mention same-sex intimacy.

- In his many writings on marriage, Paul never mentions procreation as a purpose for marriage. We cannot be sure it was a central aspect of his understanding of marriage.

The probability seems strong that Paul in v.26 was referring to lesbian relations rather to some “unnatural” heterosexual sex.

This mention of lesbianism is significant, as we will see. (Yes, a small degree of uncertainty remains; but our common sense approach to an instance of ambiguity is to weigh the various possible meanings and go with the one that would be the most natural and straight-forward in its context.)

Interpretation #3 - Paul was only condemning homosexual acts connected to temple worship

Some assert that Paul objected to homosexual conduct only because he was thinking of such relations as part of pagan temple practice.

Jack Rogers has argued along these lines:

[Paul] wrote Romans from Corinth. I think he was remembering the AcroCorinth [a mountain on which was a temple to Aphrodite, a bisexual god/goddess; the temple was said to have 1,000 prostitutes] and saying:

“That is the worst example of idolatry I have ever seen.” I would agree. Paul’s point is not about homosexuality, but idolatry, worshiping false gods. Paul is talking about idolatrous people engaged in prostitution. It is hardly fair to apply his judgment on them to Christian gay and lesbian people who are not idolaters. [“How I Changed My Mind on Homosexuality,” covnetpres.org/2003/10/how-i-changed-my-mind-on-homosexuality/]

(A highly respected pastor in MC USA used that exact argument at length several months ago when we talked together.)

However, many aspects of the text argue against the idea that Paul was thinking of acts of temple worship:

- Paul leads with the reference to female-to-female sexual relations (v.26), but in the ancient world, temple prostitution never involved lesbian intercourse. In other words, Paul is thinking of forms of same-sex conduct not associated with idol worship.
- Paul uses the language of mutual desire (v.27 - “consumed with passion for one another”). Far from portraying a picture of temple prostitution where one party is degraded and exploited by the other, Paul portrays both partners as seeking to gratify their urges with one another.
- vv.28-32 continues the list started in vv.26-27. If we say that Paul only had cult prostitution in view in vv.26-27, then that means Paul likewise viewed the vices in vv.28-31 as occurring in a pagan temple context. Looking at the list, that seems highly unlikely!
- Those taking this argument seem to be limiting “idolatry” to temple worship. But idolatry in this text is much broader: it involves placing any created thing ahead of the Creator, whether self, material items, or pleasure.

Interpretation #4 - This passage refers to heterosexual persons who engage in homosexual acts

Persons assert that vv.26-27 do not condemn those who are homosexual by nature, but only individual heterosexuals who occasionally deny their own “natures” by engaging in same-sex acts. They point to this as evidence: Paul says these persons “exchanged” their “natural relations”—that is, they knew and experienced heterosexual affections but abandoned them. John Boswell wrote:

“[T]he persons Paul condemns are manifestly not homosexual: what he derogates are homosexual acts committed by apparently heterosexual persons. ...Paul did not discuss gay *persons* but only homosexual *acts* committed by heterosexual persons.” [*Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality* (University of Chicago Press, 1980, 2015) p.109.]

Ted Grimsrud wrote:

Is Romans 1 relevant to all same-sex relationships or only same-sex sex that is practiced by people who are heterosexual in orientation? [*Reasoning Together* p.44; peacetheology.net/homosexuality/the-homosexuality-debate-two-streams-of-biblical-interpretation/]

Karl Shelly, co-pastor of Assembly Mennonite Church, Goshen IN:

Many biblical scholars tell us these verses actually refer to...[p]eople naturally inclined toward heterosexuality who, in a burst of lust, abandon their natural orientation for one that isn’t natural to them. [Pastor’s Pen column, *The Goshen News*, June 23, 2012; goshennews.com/lifestyles/x1447683308/PASTORS-PEN-Gay-equality-part-of-Christian-theology-ethics]

However, when Paul stated that acts of sexual passion between two women or two men are “unnatural,” he did not mean “contrary to what a person feels is natural” but rather “contrary to the natural order as God originally created it.” Paul was not thinking of an *individual’s* “natural relations”, but of *humanity’s* “natural relations.” As Hays writes:

Repeated again and again in recent debate is the claim that Paul condemns only homosexual acts committed promiscuously by heterosexual persons. ... This interpretation, however, is untenable. The “exchange” is not a matter of individual life decisions; rather, it is Paul’s characterization of the fallen condition of the pagan world. [*The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, p.388-389]

Only a thoroughly modern person with our emphasis on the individual would assume that Paul had in mind persons acting against their personal natures, rather than acting against humanity's natural relations (i.e., against the typical pattern in human cultures, against how the human body fits sexually, or against the order of the world as designed by God and revealed through the stories and laws of Scripture).

Interpretation #5 - This passage refers to abusive, exploitive same-sex relations

Is it possible that Paul censured same-sex conduct because, when he thought of it, he thought of exploitive, violent forms rather than the committed, loving same-sex relationships that we now know in our day? After all, the most common form of same-sex eroticism in the Greco-Roman world was pederasty (men with boys or men with slaves); consensual adult-to-adult relationships between persons of the same sex, though they existed, were rare.

Such conjecture ignores elements of the text.

- If Paul was only thinking of acts connected with violence and exploitation, why did he lead with the reference to female-to-female sexual relations (v.26) which has no such associations?
- Further, the words “consumed with passion for one another” (v.27) suggest something consensual rather than something exploitative. The language of mutual desire (“for one another”) shows that Paul was referring to relations of attraction and affection rather than domination or prostitution.

Paul was unique among ancient writers in that he (1) linked female and male same-sex relations and (2) used the language of mutual desire. He described a practice that is virtually indistinguishable from homosexuality as we know it today.

Interpretation #6 - This passage refers to same-sex relations driven by excessive lust

In the last couple years another interpretation of the phrase “consumed with passion” has been introduced and widely embraced: Paul only has in mind same-sex relations that are driven by excessive lust; he is thinking of out-of-control, destructive homoerotic lust and not the love of committed same-sex couples.

James Brownson writes:

[T]hree times in Rom 1:24-27, Paul characterizes the same-sex eroticism he speaks of as marked by excessive lust. In 1:24 he speaks of how God gave them over in the lusts [ἐπιθυμία] of their hearts to impurity. Later, he speaks of how this activity is marked by “degrading passions” (1:26) and as “consumed with passion” (1:28). The intensity of Paul’s argument seems appropriate to promiscuous and abusive encounters, but it seems less relevant to those who want to live together in life-long bonds of committed love... [jimbrownson.wordpress.com/2015/03/25/response-to-gagnon-in-first-things/]

Indeed, Paul seems to use passion in a negative sense. In 1 Thes. 4:5, which is somewhat parallel to this passage, Paul uses “passionate lust” (ἐπιθυμία) for obviously-sinful conduct.

However, even if it is true that “consumed with passion” means excessive, wrongful lust, a strong case can be made that Romans 1 applies to committed same-sex couples:

- Paul, like all Hebrews of his day, saw same-sex relations as sin. So he would have viewed even committed, loving same-sex relationships as instances where desire has ballooned out of control, leading persons to go where the law of God forbids.
- There indeed is a strong indication that out-of-control desire is an apt description for a dominant pattern in today’s male couples, even long-term ones. Gays themselves estimate that *most* long-term male couples agree to allow outside sexual liaisons. (For instance, google “The Couples Study” which lists studies on the incidence of agreed-

upon non-monogamy among “male couples who have been together for five years or more.” Read my attempt to sift through this data at interactingwithjesus.org/pattern.) Non-monogamy is definitely sexual desire going out of control.

Let me be clear on something. I am not saying that the presence of monogamy would automatically make the relationship of a particular same-sex couple right. (An analogy: driving without a license means your driving is wrong; but we cannot say that driving *with* a license automatically means your driving is right —there are other laws that need to be observed too. Similarly, a male couple who is monogamous can still be breaking another law of God.) What I am saying is that Romans 1 gives an amazingly accurate description of a pattern still today seen in male couples.

Conclusion

I have presented why I see the historic understanding of Romans 1 as enjoying strong exegetical certainty. [Read a similar study on 1 Cor. 6:9-11 at interactingwithjesus.org/1cor6.] This means that, for me, a call to “agree to disagree” on same-sex feels like a call to put the desire to preserve relationships higher than the desire to observe Scripture. (Surely we no longer have Scripture as a trusted authority when we hold a stance on same-sex relations that must reject a biblical interpretation with strong exegetical certainty and instead must rely on an interpretation with a weak probability of being right.)

Let me point out that conservative scholars are not the only ones who believe that the Bible views all forms of same-sex sex as wrong. It is my perception that *most liberal scholars* do so too. For instance, Walter Wink, author of seminal works on “The Powers”:

Where the Bible mentions homosexual behavior at all, it clearly condemns it. I freely grant that. The issue is precisely whether that biblical judgment is correct. [*Homosexuality and Christian Faith* (Fortress, 1999) p.47]

And Luke Timothy Johnson, Professor of New Testament and Christian Origins at Candler School of Theology and Senior Fellow at the Center for the Study of Law and Religion at Emory University:

The exegetical situation is straightforward: we know what the text says...I think it important to state clearly that we do, in fact, reject the straightforward commands of Scripture, and appeal instead to another authority when we declare that same-sex unions can be holy and good. [“Homosexuality & The Church,” *Commonweal*, June 11, 2007; www.commonwealmagazine.org/homosexuality-church-1]

If it is the case that Romans 1 views *all* forms of same-sex eroticism as contrary to God's creation design, then why do half of us in MC USA want to bless same-sex marriage? Here are possible reasons:

- (1) Perhaps many of us hold the revisionist interpretation of Romans 1 because it's like an urban legend—something we give credence to without closely examining because we want it to be true. If so, let's fully examine the passage.
- (2) Perhaps we, like the liberal scholars, believe that Romans 1 might be mistaken about same-sex intimacy. If so, we need to talk about our view of Scripture.
- (3) Or perhaps we have some sort of “good sense” hermeneutic: we who love the Bible expect it to make good sense, and so we assume the rightness of the interpretation that has Paul saying what we think he should say. If so, we need to talk about which we trust more: our sense of what is right? or the witness of Scripture as we let it speak (those interpretations with strong exegetical certainty)?