

Homosexuality in Rom 1:26-27

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While a number of Christians hold that Romans 1:26-27 describes homosexuality and rejects it in all its forms, considering it to be sin, others acknowledge that the passage is dealing with homosexuality but they claim that the issue in Paul is idolatry and pederasty, and that Paul could not have taken in account sexual orientation as we know it today. Furthermore, it is argued that the reference to nature should be understood in the following way:

In describing homosexuality as ‘against nature’ (Rom.1:26 KJV), Paul does not condemn homosexual orientation or any committed mutual relationship. Instead, he condemns perversion of what comes naturally. It is ‘against nature’ for homosexuals to practice heterosexuality or for heterosexuals to practice homosexuality. Paul does not condemn people for having been born homosexual, nor does he condemn the homosexual orientation (inversion).¹

Therefore, the issue is hardly whether or not Paul in Rom 1:26-27 addresses homosexuality and considers it to be sin; this can be taken for granted. The issue is whether or not homosexuality in Romans 1 includes all forms of homosexuality and has a universal scope.

I. *The Historical Context*

The ancients did not only know what has been called “contingent homosexuals” (people who are not true homosexuals such as teenagers and adults that are bored with heterosexuality and get involved with members of the same sex) and most probably “situational homosexuals” (people who for the lack of heterosexual encounters resort to homosexual acts) but had also some idea or concept of “constitutional homosexuality” (homosexuality which is said to be permanent and may be part of people’s constitution). At least the notion that a person is attracted to the same sex because of his or her constitution is found in Plato’s androgynous myth.

In this myth Plato explains that primal man was dual. He had four hands, four feet, two faces and two privy parts, that is, like two people back to back—the faces opposite directions. Some of these dual, primal creatures were male in both parts, others were female in both parts and yet others (a third sex) part male and part female. These primal creatures were so strong that they became insolent, attacking the gods. Because of their continued insolence, Zeus divided these dual four-legged creatures into two-legged creatures. A dual male became two males, a dual female two females and the male-female (androgynous) became a male and a female. On this basis he accounts for the differing sexual desires apparent in society, for each creature searches out its own or opposite kind, according to its original orientation. When dual parts encounter each other they fall in love. By the creation of this myth Plato attempts to explain the attraction some men and women have for persons of the same sex.²

It is hardly possible that Paul, who was an educated man and who even quoted Greek authors (e.g., Acts 17:28; Tit 1:12) would not have known Plato’s myth and the concept of innate homosexuality. Therefore, to suggest that Paul was referring to violent or exploitative homosexuality or pederasty only but not to permanent caring one-partner same-gender relationships because they supposedly were not known at his time, cannot be proven.

A. C. Thiselton declares: “Paul witnessed around him *both* abusive relationships of power or money *and* examples of ‘genuine love’ between males. We must not misunderstand Paul’s ‘worldly’ knowledge.”³

II. *The Literary Context*

The context of Rom 1:26-27 is universal in nature. While Romans 1 shows that all Gentiles are sinners—and Paul presents a catalogue of vices (Rom 1:21-32)—and Romans 2 points out that the Jews are also sinners, Romans 3 concludes that all people are sinners and all are dependent on God’s grace, as revealed in Christ’s sacrifice on our behalf. Romans 5 elaborates on the fact that all of us have been slaves to sin but in Jesus are free from it. Paul’s argument is not limited to humanity in the first century A.D. but encompasses people at all times, while dealing with creation, the fall, sin, and salvation. Therefore, the list of vices which includes homosexual activity is not limited to a special period of time but is applicable also today. Since Paul does not distinguish different forms of homosexuality he seems to reject all cases of same-gender sex.

The background for the discussion of homosexuality in Romans 1 is creation. In Rom 1:20 the creation of the world and God’s created works are referred to. Evidently Paul’s argument is that God can be known through creation. But although the Gentiles “knew God, they did not honor him as God” (Rom 1:21). God was replaced by gods which were no more than images of created beings, whether humans or animals. The list of animals, the mention of humans, and the concept of “likeness”/“image” suggest that Rom 1:23 echoes Gen 1:24-26. Rom 1:25 points out that the Gentiles worshiped created things instead of the creator. Furthermore, Rom 1:26-27 seems to echo Gen 1:27 by concentrating on the same terms, namely “male” (*arsēn*) and “female” (*thēlu*), instead of using the terms “man” and “woman.” Since creation is so clearly referred to in the preceding verses, homosexuality must be understood in the context of creation. “Idolatry and same-sex intercourse together constitute an assault on the work of the Creator in nature”⁴ no matter which form of homosexuality it is. The creation account points out God’s intention for man and women, which is monogamous heterosexual marriage.

III. *Analysis of the Text*

Rom 1:26-27 states that God allowed people to exercise their free will even if it is shameful and may lead to self-destruction. After a description of lesbianism, male homosexuality is addressed. The term “use/function/relation” is found in the NT in Rom 1:26-27 only, but in this setting it must be understood as sexual relation/intercourse. The last part of verse 22 mentions the punishment that these sinners receive.

The argument that the phrase “the natural intercourse” and its opposite “against/contrary to nature” in Rom 1:26-27 are describing what is natural to an individual is unsubstantiated. Nowhere is the term *phusis* used in such a sense. In Romans itself the noun is found seven times;⁵ however, the phrase *para phusin* occurs just twice (Rom 1:26; 11:24). In Rom 11:24 there is a wild olive tree “by nature” (*kata phusin*). From this wild olive tree branches were cut off and “against nature” (*para phusin*) grafted into the cultivated olive tree. *Kata phusin* means to exist in harmony with the created order. *Para phusin* on the other hand, refers to what is in contrast to the order intended by the Creator.⁶ This understanding corresponds with Rom 1 where creation is the background for the discussion of idolatry, homosexuality, and other vices. Here, activities and behavior described as being “against nature” imply a negative moral judgment. “. . . homosexual practice is a violation of the natural order (as determined by God).”⁷ This includes all forms of homosexuality.

Although Paul lived several hundred years after the giving of the law through Moses, obviously this law is—in his opinion—still applicable to NT times. The mention of the adult-adult homosexual intercourse in verse 27 is dependent on Lev 18 and 20. Paul goes even a step further by including female same-gender activity which was not mentioned in the OT. Dealing with the objection that Romans 1 “identifies a temporary Jewish purity rule rather than a universal moral principle” De Young insightfully remarks: “God cannot consign the Gentiles to punishment for breaking a Jewish purity law.”⁸ Since God punishes people who practice homosexuality, the laws of Lev 18 and 20 must have a moral quality and be universal in nature.

The fact that Paul adds lesbianism to male homosexuality supports the point that Paul considers all homosexual relationships as sin. “Lesbian intercourse in antiquity normally did not conform to the male pederastic model or entail cultic associations or prostitution.”⁹ It was not exploitative. Therefore, non-exploitative but caring homosexual partnerships are included in the sins mentioned in Rom 1.

That Paul was not so much concerned with coercion in a homosexual relationship can be derived from Rom 1:27: “. . . men . . . burned in their desire toward one another, men with men committing indecent acts and receiving in their own persons the due penalty of their error.” Obviously in such a homoerotic union, both partners lust for each other. Both of them are responsible for their actions, and both of them receive the penalty. God is not so unfair that he would punish a young boy who has been forced to play the female in a homosexual relationship, whether by being raped or by being forced into a pederastic relationship.

Homosexuality in Romans 1 is not limited to a certain time, culture, or to certain homosexual forms only. Homosexual practice is sinful behavior.

IV. Implications

By pointing out that all forms of homosexual activity are sin, our passage warns us not to get involved in such behavior. If we are already involved, we are called upon to give it up. In 1 Cor 6:9-11 Paul records that Christians had experienced such a change. However, Romans 1 and its context does not call us to hate, despise, blame, or ridicule sinners. All of us have sinned and need the salvation offered to us by Christ.

Therefore, Adventists respect all people whether heterosexuals or homosexuals. They acknowledge that all human beings are creatures of the heavenly Father who loves them and who are valuable in His sight. Adventists are opposed to scorning or abusing homosexuals. They love sinners but separate themselves from sin. Adventists are called to support prevention of homosexuality and to care for homosexuals; which in some cases may include to follow Jesus’ advice outlined in Matt 18:15-20 in order to save them for the kingdom of God (1 Cor 5:1-5). Adventists support change, and they support those who are struggling.¹⁰

¹James B. De Young, *Homosexuality: Contemporary Claims Examined 16 in the Light of the Bible and Other Ancient Literature and Law* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2000), 10.

²Ronald M. Springett, *Homosexuality in History and the Scriptures* (Silver Spring: Biblical Research Institute of the General Conference, 1988), 97-98.

³Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), 452.

⁴Dan O. Via and Robert A. J. Gagnon, *Homosexuality and the Bible: Two Views* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 78.

⁵Rom 1:26; 2:14, 27; 11:21, 24, 24.

⁶Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Romans*, The Anchor Bible, Volume 33 (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 286, suggests: “. . . in the context of vv 19-23, ‘nature’ also expresses for him [Paul] the order intended by the Creator, the order that is manifest in God’s creation or, specifically in this case, the order seen in the function of the sexual organs themselves, which were ordained for an expression of love between man and woman and for the procreation of children. Paul now speaks of the deviant exchange of those organs as a use *para physin*.”

⁷James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word Books, Publisher, 1988), 764.

⁸De Young, 159.

⁹Via and Gagnon, 80.

¹⁰Cf. “Seventh-day Adventist Position Statement on Homosexuality.” General Conference Executive Committee, October 3, 1999, Silver Spring, Maryland.