

IS THERE A NATURAL READING OF ROMANS 1:24-27?

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ROMANS 1:24-27 IS widely regarded as the clearest biblical proscription against same-sex sexual behaviour. In his recent Larkin Stuart Lecture delivered in Toronto in April 2007, Archbishop Rowan Williams said, “[Romans 1] is, for the majority of modern readers the most important single text in Scripture on the subject of homosexuality, and has understandably been the focus of an enormous amount of exegetical attention.” It is safe to say that the “enormous amount of exegetical attention” to which he refers is little more than thirty-years old. Before the advent of the sexual revolution, commentators were more interested in the theological causes and effects of such behaviour than they were in the salacious details.¹ It wasn’t until the 1970s that contemporary psychological models began to be appealed to as offering anthropologies that were superior to pre-modern understandings of human personality. Up until that point the notion that Romans 1 condemned all forms of homosexual activity was never questioned. After that time we begin to find various attempts to reinterpret Romans 1 based on the assumption that Paul’s way of thinking was grossly naïve or even intentionally misleading (rooted as it was in his own pathological dysfunction), thus rendering the passage at least irrelevant to some contemporary expressions of same-sex desire.

Many modern textual and theological readings of Romans 1 and Pauline thought in general have now been articulated that question the Church’s earlier assumptions and seek to make space within a contemporary Christian conscience for “committed, adult, monogamous, intended lifelong, same-sex relationships which include sexual intimacy”.² Textually, Romans 1 is now being construed to refer either to a form of behaviour which St. Paul thought ought to be avoided because it was characteristic of the heathen Gentiles, or to heterosexual individuals who engage in homosexual activity (since homosexuality is “unnatural” for them), or to behaviour that amounts to little more than a Jewish taboo and needs therefore not to be regarded as “sin” by those who don’t share the same cultural outlook. Theologically, it has been suggested that, whatever Paul’s particular take on this matter is, the broader biblical (or even dominical) demands of love, justice and toleration require us to supersede his teaching.³ In the following discussion, I would like briefly to summarise these modern approaches to the passage and evaluate their cogency.⁴

1. Athanasius, for example, displays a prudish reluctance in describing the πάθη ἀτιμίας (“degrading passions”), but traces them quite readily to their origin in the pagan cults (*contra Gentes*, 1.26). Meanwhile Chrysostom, who is perhaps the most censorious of homosexual behaviour of any patristic source, understands them cosmologically as coming from the design of the Devil (*Homily IV on Romans 1:26-27*). The creation narrative of Genesis 2–3 features prominently in his line of reasoning.

2. Footnote to Section 1 of the *St Michael Report*.

3. Here I have in mind, for instance, the very insightful article by Gary Hauch, “Same Sex Unions and Biblical Fidelity: Discerning the Spirit in Text and Context” (2005).

4. I regret that the following summary does not give sufficient credit to the arguments discussed. Though I have tried to avoid caricature the reader is encouraged to consult the works listed and the more comprehensive critiques of scholars such as Robert Gagnon (e.g., *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: texts and hermeneutics* (Abingdon : Nashville, 2001).

Novel readings of Romans 1

The Apostle Paul writes:

²⁴ Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the degrading of their bodies among themselves, ²⁵ because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen. ²⁶ For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions. 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. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error. (Romans 1.24-27, NRSV)

1. *Doing what comes naturally*

The late Yale historian, John Boswell, in his influential work, *Christianity, Social Tolerance and Homosexuality*⁵, described by Robert Wright of General Seminary as “the most sophisticated revision of church history to date from a pro-gay or pro-homosexual viewpoint,”⁶ argued that the phrase *para physin*, translated above as “unnatural” (v. 26), should be translated “*beyond* nature in the sense of ‘extraordinary, peculiar.’”⁷ He wrote, “The persons Paul condemns are manifestly not homosexual,” rather “what [Paul] derogates are homosexual acts committed by apparently heterosexual persons.”⁸ This line of thought is related to a distinction made by D. Sherwin Bailey between homosexual “inverts,” those who are homosexual by constitution, and homosexual “perverts,” whom the Bible condemns.⁹

A detailed analysis of Boswell’s exegesis has been undertaken by a number of scholars, most notably Richard Hays of Yale Divinity School.¹⁰ Hays demonstrates that the phrase *para physin* was frequently used in Hellenistic Jewish sources as a way of identifying behaviour which was thought to be immoral, not just awkward or misdirected. Consequently, in the context of Romans 1 he says that *para physin* means “contrary to the structure of creation” (and not “contrary to the innate inclinations of the individual”). He writes, “The understanding of ‘nature’ in this conventional language does not rest on empirical observation of what actually exists; instead, it appeals to an intuitive conception of what ought to be, of the world as designed by God.”¹¹ Moreover, in discussing Paul’s exegetical argu-

5. University of Chicago Press, 1980.

6. “A Case Undemonstrated”, *Anglican Theological Review*, 66:1 (1984), pp. 89f.

7. *Op. cit.*, pp. 111-14.

8. *Op. cit.*, p. 109; Jeffrey John repeats this argument in “Christian Same-Sex partnerships” in *The Way Forward? Christian voices on homosexuality and the Church*, ed. Timothy Bradshaw (London : Hodder, 1997), pp. 44-59. Bishop John Shelby Spong makes the same case without citing Boswell in *Living in Sin? A Bishop Rethinks Human Sexuality* (San Francisco : Harper & Row, 1988) p. 150.

9. See Sherwin Bailey, *Homosexuality and the Western Christian Tradition* (New York : Longmans, 1955).

10. Bernadette Brooten of Brandeis University and University of Helsinki professor Martti Nissinen have also offered critiques. Hays’s work is “Relations Natural and Unnatural: A Response to John Boswell’s Exegesis of Romans 1,” *Journal of Religious Ethics*, 14/1 (1986), pp. 184–215; cf. Brooten, *Love Between Women: Early Christian Responses to Femal Homoeroticism* (University of Chicago, 1996), p. 241; and Nissinen, *Homoeroticism in the Biblical World: A Historical Perspective* (Fortress Press, 1998), p. 109.

11. *Op. cit.*, p. 194.

ment, Hays points out that the object of the Apostle's opprobrium is not a specific group of heterosexuals choosing to engage in homosexual behaviour, but all humanity in its rejection of the Creator.¹²

2. Pederasty

Another new reading of Romans 1 has been put forward by former Union Seminary New Testament Professor, Robin Scroggs. Scroggs asserts that “[a]part from certain exceptions of an adult male prostitute [. . .], *I know of no suggestions in the texts that homosexual relationships existed between same-age adults.*”¹³ He maintains that Paul's interests in Romans 1 are primarily theological and not ethical, and that the Apostle is not “especially incensed” against homosexuality except when it involves pederasty (sexual relations with “effeminate call boys”¹⁴). In this he says that Paul is adopting a perspective, common in Hellenistic Judaism, which censures all relationships that are unequal and exploitative.

Once again, a number of scholars have found Scroggs's argument unconvincing. In the first place, he does not pay sufficient attention to the presence of non-pederastic relationships, particularly sexual relationships between women.¹⁵ This is a particularly important deficiency in light of the reference to female homoerotic activity in Romans 1:26. Secondly, his contention that pederastic relationships were dehumanising has been described as anachronistic and ignores evidence that there were some pederastic relationships that were regarded as mutually fulfilling.¹⁶ A more natural reading of the passage is that Paul rejects all forms of homosexual behaviour and not just a particular expression of it.¹⁷

3. Purity

A third approach to Romans 1 has been proposed by William Countryman, Associate Professor of New Testament at the Church Divinity School of the Pacific, that is anthropological in nature.¹⁸ According to Countryman, Paul

12. Brooten criticises Boswell's assumption that homosexuality was understood to be an “ordinary part of the range of human eroticism”, pointing out that such was not the case for same-sex love between women (*Op. cit.*, p. 11), while Nissinen repeats the common observation that the notion of sexual “orientation” is anachronistic (*Op. cit.*, p. 109). What Nissinen and others say is true if by “orientation” we mean that the ancients shared our assumptions that sexual orientation is “the result of a complex interaction of environmental, cognitive and biological factors” (American Psychological Association). Boswell doesn't clearly define his construct, however.

13. *The New Testament and Homosexuality: contextual background for contemporary debate* (Fortress Press : Philadelphia, 1983), p. 35 (italics his).

14. *Op. cit.*, pp. 106-8.

15. See Brooten's concerns in *op. cit.*, p. 253.

16. See Mark D. Smith, “Ancient Bisexuality and the Interpretation of Romans 1:26-27” in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* LXIV/2 (1996), pp. 223-56.

17. A related argument is that Paul could not have understood the contemporary phenomenon of same-sex relationships that are lifelong and monogamous because he had no word to describe them. This, of course, is a fallacy that was debunked by James Barr's *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (Oxford : Oxford University Press, 1961). A concept may exist even though there is no single word to describe it.

18. His work, *Dirt, Greed, and Sex: Sexual Ethics in the New Testament and Their Implications for Today* (Fortress Press, 1988; rev. 2007), draws on the theories of Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London, 1966).

defines the deeds done in Romans 1 as an impure aspect of Gentile culture, but not as sinful: “While Paul wrote of same-gender sexual acts as being unclean, dishonourable, improper, and ‘over against nature,’ he did not apply his extensive vocabulary for sin to them. Instead, he treated homosexual behavior as an integral if filthy aspect of Gentile culture.”¹⁹ Countryman bases his conclusion on a perceived distinction between two ethics in the Bible: the purity ethic and the property ethic. The first is an “avoidance of dirt” and involves “all rules that govern the boundaries of the human body.”²⁰ The second understands property as “something which is [. . .] an extension of the self, so that a violation of my property is a violation of my personhood.”²¹ Countryman says that Gentiles were never expected to live up to Israel’s purity standards. He concludes that we cannot make the purity or property systems of antiquity the basis of today’s sexual ethics.

However, Countryman’s distinction between sin and impurity does not make sense in the context of Romans 1. In the first place, the reference to “unnatural” relations is followed by a list of behaviours that are not matters of impurity, but are clearly sinful for Paul. These involve “every kind of wickedness,” including envy and murder, and they leave those guilty with “no excuse” (1.29-2.1). Additionally, one of the chief arguments of Romans is that divine salvation and judgement are universal in their scope, thus placing Jew and Gentile on equal footing before a God who “shows no partiality” (2.11).²²

4. Theological superiority

Gary Hauch, an Anglican priest and Old Testament scholar from Ottawa, wrote a moving paper in 2005 entitled, “Same Sex Unions and Biblical Fidelity: Discerning the Spirit in Text and Context.” His discussion of the biblical texts that appear to proscribe same-sex unions places those texts in the context of a larger narrative of divine grace and hospitality. Just as the Spirit brought the early Church to the place where they embraced Gentiles (Acts 10-15), he argues, perhaps that same Spirit is leading us to the full inclusion of our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters in the Church’s life, witness and sacraments. Dr Hauch suggests that even if the five key biblical passages usually appealed to in the debate about same-sex unions mean what they have appeared to mean over the course of the last two millennia, there are sufficient examples within the biblical corpus itself of tradition being overturned by Jesus and apostolic authorities that we ought to be able to detect and join a Spirit-led trajectory of receptiveness. Dr Hauch thinks that there is enough scholarly uncertainty about the meaning of these texts that we ought to act with courage and imagination to open the doors to same-sex marriage.

In his analysis of continuity and change in the biblical story, Dr Hauch actually pays scant attention to Paul’s argument in Romans 1. He says that the passage expresses a common conviction in Judaism that all Gentiles are sinners. In his reading this makes the action of the early Church in admitting uncircumcised Gentiles into the economy of God’s salvation all the more extraordinary.

A similar argument to Dr Hauch’s can be found in the work of one theologian in particular who discusses the teaching of Romans 1 in the context of a broader theological framework. An insightful and erudite analysis is developed in the book by University of North Carolina professor Eugene F. Rogers Jr, *Sexuality and the Christian*

19. *Op. cit.*, p. 116.

20. *Op. cit.*, pp. 9, 11.

21. *Op. cit.*, p. 144.

22. For a more detailed analysis, see Thomas E. Schmidt, *Straight and Narrow? Compassion and Clarity in the Homosexuality Debate* (Downers Grove : InterVarsity Press, 1995), pp. 68-85.

*Body: Their Way into the Triune God.*²³ In exploring the Christological, ecclesiastical, sacramental, soteriological and anthropological dimensions of same-sex desire, Rogers also contends that the Spirit is doing a new thing in the Church. A significant part of the book is taken up with a reading of Thomas Aquinas and Karl Barth that seeks to open a space for his revised Christian ethic. I don't have the space or the competence to offer a critique of Rogers's theological method, but of course he does have to deal with the biblical witness, and particularly with the teaching of the Apostle Paul in Romans 1.²⁴ How does he answer the contention that the Apostle condemns same-sex eroticism because it diverges from God's design at creation? To the objection that homosexual behaviour is "contrary to nature" Rogers responds that it is God's own way to act "contrary to nature" — he did so after all by incorporating Gentiles into the Jewish olive tree (cf. Romans 11.24 where the phrase *para physin* is also used). In expounding on this thesis Rogers assumes that nature is thus morally neutral and that the male-female duality is a contingent rather than a constitutive feature of human existence (*contra* Barth). This gives sexual intimacy a recreational as opposed to a procreational priority. Procreation, he says, is an option for heterosexual couples, just as adoption is an option for same-sex couples (indeed, the biblical use of the language of adoption to describe God's elective purposes would seem to make adoption the more noble of the two).

While Hauch and Rogers clearly understand just how socially revolutionary the Jewish Church was in suspending prejudice against the Gentiles and in admitting them to the household of faith without the usual ritual restrictions placed on Gentile converts to Judaism, I am not sure that they have paid sufficient attention to what Romans 1 actually says about the gravity of homosexual behaviour as being immoral. In the first place, it should be recognised that same-sex behaviour is described as a manifestation of idolatry (v. 25: they "worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator"). Moreover, as we have indicated above, homosexual behaviour is mentioned in close proximity to a list of sins, including "wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice;" "envy, murder, strife, deceit, craftiness;" gossip, slander, God-hating, insolence, haughtiness, boasting, conniving, insolence, foolishness, faithlessness, heartlessness, and ruthlessness (vv. 29-31). Do these novel readings mean to imply that if the Spirit is leading the Church to accept same-sex behaviour, the Church should also be prepared to endorse other behaviours that are described as debased? Even if it is supposed that the description of Gentile behaviour in Romans 1 is a gross generalisation and that Paul is indulging in a bit of hyperbole in order to demonstrate just how generous God's benevolence is, it does not obviate the need for repentance. "Do you not realize that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?" writes Paul in the next chapter (2.4).

Now it may be possible to isolate Paul's description of same-sex behaviour from its context in Romans 1 by affirming that homosexual individuals actually belong to a category of humanity akin to Gentiles. This is a move made by Rogers when he adds the phrase "gay or straight" to the Apostle's great manifesto in Galatians: "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (3.28).²⁵ Of this two things could be said. First of all, there is no indication in Romans 1 that Paul has

23. (Oxford : Blackwell, 1999). See also the volume he edited entitled *Theology and Sexuality: Classic and Contemporary Readings* (Oxford : Blackwell, 2002).

24. Those interested in a theological critique of Rogers's work are encouraged to consult Douglas Farrow, "Beyond Nature, Shy of Grace" in *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 5.3 (November 2003), pp. 261-86; Gilbert Meilander "What Sex Is – and Is For" in *First Things* 102 (April 2000), pp. 44-49; Berndt Wannewetsch, "Old Docetism – New Moralism? Questioning a New Direction in the Homosexuality Debate" in *Modern Theology* 16.3 (July 2000), pp. 353-64; and Francis Watson's review in *Studies in Christian Ethics* 14.1 (2001), pp. 102-05.

25. Galatians 3.28 is regularly appealed to as a programme of radical inclusiveness that crosses identity barriers (e.g., Brian K. Blount, "Reading and Understanding the New Testament on Homosexuality," in Choon-Leong Seow, ed., *Homosexuality and the Christian Community* (Louisville : Westminster/John Knox, 1996), pp. 28-38). What Paul is talking about here is not an obliteration of social distinction (since he clearly continues to recognize and honour these), however, but the incorporation of differentiation into a new community.

in mind a category of human identity labelled “homosexual.” What he addresses is human behaviour; behaviour that may be characteristic of Gentiles, admittedly, but behaviour that is unacceptable in any social or ethnic class. This brings us secondly to Rogers’s emended manifesto. It is conceivable that Galatians 3.28 could be revised infinitely. To the dualities listed by Paul one could add “rich or poor,” “Francophone or Anglophone,” or even “liberal or fundamentalist.” But the question of Romans 1 isn’t whether God’s rule abolishes human political barriers, but whether human beings in all of their diversity respond to the truth of God in living righteously by faith: “As it is written, ‘The one who is righteous will live by faith’” (v. 17).

Romans 1 Again

For these reasons, the proposed reinterpretations of Romans 1 have not held up to scholarly scrutiny. In each case it would appear that insufficient attention is being paid to the Old Testament context of Paul’s thought. It would seem clear that however Paul’s reasoning runs, it doesn’t begin with observations about culture or “natural” inclinations, but rather it takes its ethical bearings from the creation story of Genesis 1 and 2. But more needs to be said concerning the assumptions Paul had about the Genesis creation account. begins his elucidation of humanity’s wretched condition by arguing that God’s wrath, his righteous reaction to human unrighteousness, is revealed from heaven against “all ungodliness and wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth.” What is “the truth” to which Paul refers? It is the truth of God’s character as it is manifest in creation.²⁶ Paul contends that “what can be known about God is plain” to anyone who ponders the created order (v. 19). The NRSV translation of the phrase to τὸ γνωστὸν τοῦ θεοῦ (“what can be known about God”) reflects the Hellenistic Jewish tradition that God makes himself evident in what he has created.²⁷ In other words, the created order is so designed that humanity ought to perceive that there is a Designer while distinguishing the creature from the Creator.²⁸ This is a major theme in the Hellenistic wisdom tradition and it carries with it the notion that the cosmos was created for a particular purpose.²⁹ Indeed, Paul believes that the divine purpose is so evident in creation that all people can not only know “God’s decree,” his general will for human behaviour (v. 32), but also the consequences for those who choose to ignore it.³⁰ In a moment we shall consider how this will is to be known with respect to sexual behaviour, but Paul concludes that, although people should have known better, they chose to suppress the truth.

How do people suppress the truth? While the created order clearly reveals the hand of a Creator, Paul affirms that people are nevertheless unwilling to acknowledge “God’s eternal power and divine nature,” and to respond in worship and submission (v. 20: “they did not honour him as God or give thanks to him”). Many commentators point

26. I say “character” here because ἡ ἀλήθεια may in Paul’s mind have something of the OT notion of נְאֻם (God’s covenant fidelity) behind it. Nevertheless, as the vocabulary of vv. 19f. demonstrates, the primary context is Hellenistic.

27. Cf. the use of the word γνωστός in the LXX Gen 2.9; Wis 16.28; also the cosmology of Plato in *Timaeus* 28A-30C, 32A-35A and Cicero *Tusculan Disputations* 1.29.70. See Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Romans: A new translations with introduction and commentary*, Anchor Bible (Chapman, 1993), p. 280, for other antecedents in Greek philosophy and the Hellenistic Jewish tradition.

28. E.g. *Test. Naph.* 3.1-5: “in all the products of his workmanship discern the Lord who made all things.”

29. E.g. Philo in *Op. mund.* 3: “purpose and will of Nature.”

30. The word δικαίωμα is commonly used in the LXX to translate words coming from the Hebrew roots קָקַח/קָח (92x) and מִצְוָה (41x), meaning “decree” or “ordinance.”

out that the result of this rejection of the Creator and his purposes is a distortion of relationship in two directions, both vertically and horizontally. Not only does such denial incur God's wrath, it manifests itself in distorted human relationships. This, of course, is a pattern discerned in the biblical story from the creation account itself. It is dramatically patent in the chronicle of the fall of Adam and Eve (Genesis 3.8-19): following their disobedience, the first couple are estranged from God (they hide from him in their nakedness), from the created order (which now requires hard labour for a crop of thistles), and from each other (the woman's desire will be for her husband, but he will rule her).

Those who no longer worship the true God nevertheless have a need to worship, and so the creation ("images"), rather than the Creator, becomes the object of their worship (v. 23). It is important to note echoes of the creation narrative in this verse, since it is arguable that what St Paul calls "unnatural" in the next few verses is informed by the Genesis account.³¹ But then, secondly, when people found a substitute for God, they discovered that their relationships with other human beings no longer functioned as God intended them, and God gave both women and men over to the custody of their degraded ἀτιμίας passions: "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" (vv. 26, 27). Of course, the key question for biblical interpreters is the meaning of the term "unnatural" (v. 26). It is generally held that the Greek phrase, παρὰ φύσιν means, literally, "contrary to nature."³² So by this, given the background of Genesis, we may understand Paul to mean that such relationships do not conform to God's intention for sexual congress, since, among other things, they cannot fulfil the creation mandate to procreate (Genesis 1.28).

Now, as related above, it is commonly asserted that Paul's teaching is limited by his ignorance of sexual dispositions we now describe as God-made. It is true that Paul knew nothing of modern theories of developmental psychology, or of genetic factors in determining sexual inclination. But this is not to say that Paul was naïve. In the Roman world, sexual liaisons were complicated by social factors (whether it was public or private, whether it involved people of different status, and whether it involved boys) and could be related to environmental factors as well (Ptolemy related sexual orientation to astrology). Paul would have been cognisant of the variety of ways people expressed their sexuality, and so it is conceivable that no modern argument about the origin of sexual preferences would have changed Paul's mind. Bernadette Brooten, who has conducted one of the most extensive analyses of ancient sources in this matter, and who utters a fervent hope that churches today "will no longer teach Rom 1:26f as authoritative," has written, "I see Paul as condemning all forms of homoeroticism as the unnatural acts of people who had turned away from God."³³

Brooten comes to the conclusion that Paul's views of same-sex love and the template of gender that underlies them make him a more or less typical product of the cultural world in which he was formed, one that viewed women as inferior, unfit to rule, passive, and weak. Whatever the exceptions in practice, she maintains that in the typical Roman view, some behaviour is inherently masculine and some inherently feminine, and these categories of behaviour are not supposed to be confused. In sexual relations between members of the same sex, one man becomes "like

31. Gen 1.26 describes humankind being made in God's "image." There are many other allusions to the Genesis creation account that might be identified in the early part of Romans: the emphasis on knowledge in Rom 1.19 may find an echo in Gen 2.9; the phrase "like birds, four-footed creatures, or reptiles" (1.27) finds a parallel in Gen 1.20, 24. See Morna Hooker, "A Further Note on Romans 1" *New Testament Studies* 13 (1966-67), pp. 181-83; James Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, Word Biblical Commentary (Word, 1988), pp. 53-62; C.K. Barrett, *Paul: An introduction to his thought* (Westminster/John Knox : Louisville, 1994), p.62. That the opening chapters of Genesis are in Paul's mind as he writes to the Romans is also evident from explicit allusions at 5.12 (Gen 2.17; 3.19); 7.11 (Gen 3.13); 8.20 (Gen 3.17-19) and 16.20 (Gen 3.15).

32. E.g., Brooten, *op. cit.*, p. 241.

33. *Op. cit.*, p. 244.

a woman,” the ancient commentators argue, because that man is penetrated; conversely, in female-female relations, one woman becomes “like a man.” Underlying all this is a worldview that, Brooten contends, saw the distinction between “active” and “passive” as more fundamental even than distinctions of gender. It was the basis of social order and hierarchy, a conceptual framework that defined the categories of superior and inferior. In Brooten’s analysis, to erase or ignore this distinction was “unnatural.”³⁴

But is this an adequate explanation of Paul’s perspective? I don’t believe it is sufficient simply to say that Paul reflected his culture. Some accounting needs to be made for why Paul supported some ethical standards, but opposed others. Why could the Jewish dietary law be abrogated, for instance, but not Old Testament legislation governing sexual behaviour? I believe that there is more to the Apostle’s censure than an ethic based on broadly held gender biases.

Although the Apostle Paul is not explicit in this matter, it should be noted that one of the recurring arguments in the ancient world among those who disapproved of homosexual behaviour was the contention that sexual relationships were unnatural if they did not manifest an intention to procreate. As early as the fourth century BC, the Greek philosopher Plato wrote that male and female nature (*phusis*) is intended for procreation, and that sexual acts between males and between females are therefore contrary to nature (*para physin*).³⁵ This argument was endorsed by other philosophers, and was embraced by Hellenistic Judaism. One example would be the author of *Pseudo-Phocylides*, a Jew (probably) writing between 30 BC and AD 40: “Do not remain unmarried, lest you are nameless. Give nature her due, you also, beget in your turn as you were begotten.”³⁶ An even more notable example, because of the significant overlap with Romans 1, is the Jewish philosopher, Philo of Alexandria. The conviction that a sexual relationship is “contrary to nature” if it cannot lead to procreation was enough to cause this contemporary of Paul’s to denounce not only homosexuality, but also male sexual relationships with menstruating women, a boy, or even a sterile woman.³⁷

The Jewish endorsement of a Greek philosophical ideal may strike some as odd. But perhaps one of the reasons Hellenistic Judaism felt free to adopt an essentially Greek understanding of the nature of sexuality is because Jews recognised that all of creation expresses God’s law and moral purpose, and that built into the created order was the intent to procreate. This brings us back to Romans 1 and St Paul’s contention that “ever since the creation of the world God’s eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things God has made. So they are without excuse” (v. 20). His point is that there is nothing abstract about the natural moral code governing sexuality, and it should be superfluous to codify it. It does not need to be rationalised, since it is more akin to common sense. Some forms of behaviour do not require written laws to classify them as immoral. When Dinah’s brothers are informed of her rape, for instance, they are outraged on the simple grounds that “such a thing ought not to be done” (Genesis 34.7). Similarly, Romans 1 could be read to say that if a sexual relationship does not conform to the pattern of a relationship designed to produce offspring, then it is obviously “unnatural.”

Such arguments are common in rabbinic Judaism as well. In particular, the ban on homosexuality came to be

34. *Op. cit.*, pp. 190-92.

35. See Leg. 636c; cf. Roy Bowen Ward, “Why Unnatural? The Tradition behind Romans 1:26-27,” *Harvard Theological Review* 90:3 (1997), pp. 263-84.

36. 175-76; for his teaching on homosexuality, see 190-92.

37. See *Abr.* 133, 137; *Spec.* 3.3-42; and *Op. mund.* 151; while Philo’s definition of “unnatural” may be in some respects narrower than Paul’s, Professor Henry Chadwick has noted significant overlap with Romans 1 in “St Paul and Philo of Alexandria,” *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 48 (1965-66), pp. 286-307.

regarded as a universal law included among the “seven commandments of the sons of Noah” (the so-called “Noachide Commandments,” which, because they were dispensed before the Law came down from Sinai, were regarded as applying to gentiles as well as Jews).³⁸ According to one rabbinic source, homosexuality was deemed unnatural because it frustrates the procreative purpose of sex, just as do any other forms of “spilling the seed in vain.”³⁹

So it can be seen that Paul’s teaching on the matter of sexual ethics is in accord with the implied teaching of Genesis, and Hellenistic and rabbinic Judaism.⁴⁰ In his commentary on Romans, Joseph Fitzmyer has written that “nature” expresses for 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 sexual organs themselves, which were ordained for an expression of love between a man and a woman and for the procreation of children.”⁴¹

The “Natural” Reading of Romans 1.24-27

One of the reasons many scholars have a hard time accepting the conclusions of those who would seek to revise Paul’s teachings is that they sound too ingenious. In some cases they make assumptions about the pathology and classification of homosexuality which would have been unintelligible to the ancient ear. While there is ample evidence that all manner of sexual expression was a feature of ancient society,⁴² there was also a strong philosophical and religious conviction, particularly in Judaism and Christianity, that homosexual behaviour was “unnatural.” And by that the ancient philosopher or theologian didn’t mean that homosexuality went against a man or a woman’s inner nature (so that it was “unnatural” for a heterosexual individual to engage in homosexual relations). And neither did they mean that since heterosexual partnerships were dominant in animal nature, therefore they ought to be deemed “natural.” What, then, was meant by the claim that erotic relationships between two members of the same sex was “unnatural?” The answer is that such a relationship is “unnatural” because it does not conform to the intention of procreation.⁴³

This would seem to be the natural or “plain sense” of the text, and it is a meaning that has been understood universally by Christian commentators throughout the history of the Church until the twentieth century. Of course, when we apply the term “plain sense” to a reading we must take care to remember that our determination of mean-

38. *Sanh.* 57b-58a.

39. *Sefer ha-Hinnukh*, 209. Furthermore, a homosexual man was believed to be likely to abandon his wife, which would also hinder the appropriate purpose of marriage (*Tos. Ned.* 51a).

40. W.D. Davies wrote that “the dress in Rom. 1, 2 is Hellenistic, but the body Rabbinic” (*Paul and Rabbinic Judaism: Some Rabbinic Elements in Pauline Theology* (London : SPCK, 1955), p. 117. It is now generally thought that Paul’s understanding of what constituted “unwritten law” is Stoicism filtered through rabbinic Judaism; that is, it is a “common sense” philosophy rooted in ancient doctrines of creation. Paul’s Platonism was common in the Jewish world according to Daniel Boyarin (*A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity* [Berkeley : University of California Press, 1994]). For example, καθήκω (v. 28) was a technical term of Stoic philosophy denoting what constituted proper or fitting conduct. Wisdom 7.20 is regularly cited as an example of Jewish Platonizing of the creation account.

41. *Romans: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible (Geoffrey Chapman, 1993), p. 286.

42. Amy Richlin, ed., *Pornography and Representation in Greece and Rome* (NY : OUP, 1992).

43 Indeed, from the ancient perspective, “unnatural” would apply to heterosexual relations where there was no procreative intent. See Plato, *Timaeus* 30a-b; 41a-d; *Leg.* 841d, and *Phaed.* 250e-251a.

ing depends a great deal on our social and imaginative location.⁴⁴ But in the Christian community the imagination is formed and informed by the reading of the whole of Scripture, and it is in this context that individual texts are read.⁴⁵ As we have tried to demonstrate, the primary context for matters of ethics related to sexuality for the Apostle Paul was the creation account. It is also a rational assumption that this account would be foundational for our Lord's own opinions on this matter. It is true, as many point out, that Jesus does not directly address the subject of homosexuality. And yet, when Jesus does discuss sexual propriety in marriage, his reference point is also the story of creation (see Mark 10.4–9; Matthew 19.3–12, etc.). Is it unwarranted to assume that he would view same-sex erotic relationships as “fornication”? Probably not. Jesus frequently used the word “fornication” (Greek *porneia*) to describe unhealthy sexual behaviour (Mark 7.21; Matthew 5.32, 15.19, 19.19), and in Greek literature this term could also apply to homosexual practice. The fact that Jesus uses this word to refer to adultery and not homosexuality explicitly probably has more to do with the comparative incidence of infidelity in marriage. Moreover, we know that Jesus endorsed the Old Testament (“I have not come to abolish the Law or the Prophets”, Matthew 5.17), so why would he differ in any way from what other Jewish teachers (including Paul) regarded as the teaching of Scripture on the question of the proper expression of human sexuality?⁴⁶

It is reasonable to assume that God's mandate to “be fruitful and multiply” stands behind biblical texts addressing the themes of sexuality and the marriage relationship, and indeed the evolutionary development of the doctrine of marriage in the Church.⁴⁷ It should not be surprising, therefore, to find that any reference to the proper or improper use of human sexuality in the New Testament would presuppose the procreative purpose of marriage. And where Jesus' convictions may be regarded as implicit in his teachings on marriage, the convictions of St Paul are quite

44. Programmatic in the thinking of Roland Barthes; cf. E. Schüssler Fiorenza's statement: “What we see depends on where we stand.” (“The Ethics of Biblical Interpretation: Decentering Biblical Scholarship,” in H. Räisänen, et al., eds., *Reading the Bible in the Global Village: Helsinki* (Atlanta, 2000), p. 109.) Stephen Fowl reminds us that the “literal sense” can have a diversity of meanings (“The Importance of a Multivoiced Literal Sense of Scripture: the example of Thomas Aquinas,” in *Reading Scripture with the Church: toward a hermeneutic for theological interpretation*, A.K.M. Adam; Stephen E. Fowl; Kevin J. Vanhoozer; Francis Watson, eds (Grand Rapids : Baker, 2006), pp. 35–50. In her monograph, *Ad Litteram: How Augustine, Calvin, and Barth Read the “Plain Sense” of Genesis 1–3* (New York and Frankfurt : Peter Lang, 1999), K. Greene-McCreight explains how “plain sense” reading is also in some respects ruled by the community's *regula fidei* (pp. 22; 243).

45. Rowan Williams describes the “interiority” that comes through the diachronic reading of the canonical Scriptures in his 1991 essay, “The Literal Sense of Scripture,” *Modern Theology* 7:2, pp. 129–30.

46. Walter Deller's paper *The Bible, Human Sexuality, Marriage and Same-Sex Unions*, appears to understand Paul's teaching as initiating a descent into religion from the openness of Jesus. The relationship between Paul's ethics and Jesus' teaching is complicated by the fact that the Gospels were written *after* the Pauline corpus. A number of studies have appeared recently that argue that Paul's ethics are in fact a logical development of Jesus' ethics, and that both share in a programme of a critique of religion. See Paul Barnett, *Paul: Missionary of Jesus*, After Jesus Series 2 (Grand Rapids : Eerdmans, 2008); Michael Thompson, *Clothed with Christ*, Society for the New Testament Monograph Series 59 (Sheffield : JSOT Press, 1989).

47. In rabbinic tradition, this is regarded as the first *mitzvah* of the Torah. This mandate has been affirmed in virtually every wedding ceremony performed in the Anglican Church since the period of the Reformation. At one time, the stated “causes for which matrimony was ordained” began with “the procreation of children, to be brought up in the fear and nurture of the Lord” (1662 Book of Common Prayer). In a revision of the 1662 rite, the 1918 Canadian *Book of Common Prayer* demoted this cause to secondary status, giving “the hallowing of the union betwixt man and woman” pride of place. Procreation remained in the middle of the matrimonial causes in the 1959 revision, but was dropped to third place in the 1985 *Book of Alternative Services* (where it is also bracketed, presumably so that it can be omitted in cases where couples are incapable of bearing children).

explicit and in accord with commonly held ideas about the proper use of human sexuality in the ancient Jewish and Hellenistic world.⁴⁸

Concluding Thoughts

While we may acknowledge that many gay and lesbian relationships approach (or even surpass) heterosexual relationships in their ability to foster love and support, they must still be regarded as unnatural and contrary to God's design for sexuality on the basis of St Paul's teaching. We believe that this is because an essential component of a healthy expression of sexuality is whether or not it conforms to the pattern of relationship which gives rise to the bearing of children. The obligation human beings have to gratify their sexual desires only in relationships of heterosexual monogamy is not satisfied by the fact that gay and lesbian couples can adopt and raise children. Once again, this is not based on a judgement regarding the social or psychological advantages or disadvantages of rearing children outside the context of a heterosexual monogamous relationship. The point is that these relationships, for reasons of gender, are not capable of producing children and therefore stand outside of the divine ideal. We moderns may not understand why openness to procreation is a *sine qua non* of properly ordered sexual relationships any more than we understand the dynamics of divine election. But there are many things in theology and in life that Christians must accept until what is hidden to human understanding is fully revealed.⁴⁹ The celibate option for Christian gays and lesbians may be painful (as it is for many unmarried heterosexual individuals), but if we believe that God is good, then we believe that his intentions for a proper expression of human sexuality must also be good.

This having been said, there are related dimensions to the discussion that are worth exploring, even if only briefly in what follows.

1. Procreation considered theologically

It is perhaps inevitable that in the "libidinal economy of Western capitalism" we might have difficulty in understanding procreation in anything other than clinical terms.⁵⁰ Moreover, the socially permissive attitude of our culture (with its gender agnosticism and "buddy sex") makes arguments promoting the necessity of procreation seem like a form of medieval consequentialism designed to satisfy some ecclesiastical prurience. But if the command to "be

48. Walter Deller's paper (*op.cit*) pays little attention to Romans 1 because he deems it as "irrelevant." Consequently, I have not included his analysis in the discussion above. I do want to say, though, that I don't read such negative nuances into the words *katergazomenoi* and *antimisthian*. The former simply means "do, accomplish; produce, bring about, work out; prepare, make ready" in nearly all of Paul's use of the term (16x for the word and its cognates). Only in Eph 6.13 does it have the sense of "overcome, conquer," and that is easily understood by the context. The latter word is used only once more by Paul, and then to mean, benignly, "response, return:" "Our heart is wide open to you. [. . .] *In return* — I speak as to children — open wide your hearts also" (2 Cor 6.11, 13). Finally, the senses of patriarchal overpowering and hatred that Walter imports into the passage do not fit well with Paul's description of homoerotic behaviour between women in v. 26.

49. I well remember the first set of vaccinations our elder daughter received when she was just an infant. Her usually placid face took on a look of surprise and then anguish when the needle pierced her skin. As she howled, her mother and I tried to comfort her. How I wished to be able to explain our apparent betrayal of trust, and to tell her that what she was undergoing was because of our love and care for her. Surely we are as infants when it comes to our understanding of why God's will for us requires certain ethical ideals.

50. The phrase is Jane Barter Moulaison's and was used in her paper delivered at the Nuptial Mystery conference in Winnipeg in 2008.

fruitful and multiply” is located in a canonical text that has been regarded as describing a covenantal relationship between humanity and its Creator, and is, moreover, part of a “blessing formula,” it would be in order to attempt to consider procreation in a broader theological framework.

One way of approaching the subject of procreation in the biblical witness is to see it as a missiological matter. In his discussion of Romans 7, Daniel Boyarin makes the remark that for “old Israel procreation as the means of continuation of God’s People was *the* central and highest of goods and of religious values.”⁵¹ Missiological language of this sort permeates the Old Testament and was readily adopted by Christian authors. New Testament writers are accustomed to describe the growth of the Church and the expansion of the kingdom in procreative terms. The genealogies of the Synoptic Gospels draw genetic lines of continuity with the redemptive purposes of God beginning, in the case of Luke, with Adam (3.38; cf. Romans 1.3 and especially Galatians 3.16). St John the Evangelist uses the phrase “being born from above” to indicate the process by which an individual becomes a child of God (3.3–6; 1.12). The believing community itself is referred to as descendents (lit. “seed”) of Abraham (Romans 4.16, 18; 9.7–8; Galatians 3.29) and as “family” (on at least five occasions, e.g., 1 Peter 2.17: “Love the family of believers”). In 1 John 3.9 those who have been “born of God” can actually be described as “God’s seed.” The language of procreation is expressive of God’s purpose in the world, coming to the aid of ancient authors in their attempts to document the unfolding of salvation history.

Now, this terminology is clearly analogical. But it must be added that the social constructions of the first century also understood conversion as embracing the literal *oikos* or “household” (e.g. Acts 10). The entities that we differentiate as the social and the spiritual were not so readily distinguished in the ancient world. Consequently, one way of thinking about the place of procreation in Christian ethical ideals regarding sexuality is to see the begetting of children as a way in which believers physically participate in the divine mission of bringing salvation to the world. The Pauline directives around church leadership in the Pastoral Epistles may be seen as an explication of this. When it is required that candidates for church leadership have children who are believers (Titus 1.6), it would seem that what is at stake is more than the ability of a candidate to maintain domestic order. The aspiration of the Christian community is that children brought up “in the fear and nurture of the Lord” will themselves become ambassadors of God’s kingdom and agents of his love.

2. Procreation considered teleologically

Considered in this way, that is, as an embodiment of God’s missiological purposes, we can hopefully transcend the literalistic framework that attends so much of the discussion about procreation. The ethical issue is not a matter of fecundity (e.g., what about couples who are unable to have children?), but of intention. We ask rather, “Does this relationship honour the divine intention that the earth be filled by those bearing the *imago Dei*, and by those who will exercise a responsible stewardship over the created order?” (Genesis 1.26–28).

Relationships that are not based on the male–female complementarity described in Genesis 1 would seem to be deficient because they cannot be ordered toward these ends. A potentially useful analogy might be drawn from Jesus’ Parable of the Talents. The story itself focuses on the third servant, a man who was ill prepared for the master’s return because he had not properly valued and treated what he had been given. For when entrusted with the master’s property, this servant had buried it. Now, burying, according to rabbinic law, was regarded as the best security against

51. *Radical Jew*, p. 159. A Babylonian Talmudic tradition affirms that procreation has a national and soteriological significance in that it provides the conditions whereby the Shekinah dwells in the midst of Israel, and can even bring the Messiah (*B. Yev.* 63b–64a; *Mekilta de R. Simeon Yitro ba-Hodesh* 3; de *R. Simeon b. Yohai* 19.11).

theft.⁵² Anyone who buried a pledge or deposit immediately upon receipt of it was free from liability. Understandably, the servant did what he thought was best by making sure that he was not legally defenceless and at the same time comforting himself in the knowledge that the money was as safe as it possibly could be. But when the master returned, the servant's shrewdness and practicality actually incurred the master's anger: "You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest" (Matthew 25.26-7).

It is instructive that the master was not angry that his money had been misused. In fact, we are left to wonder how the master would have reacted if his servant had bought forty-two acres of desert in the Sahara. The master was not upset because his money was *misused*, but rather because it was *disused*. The master's property had the possibility of growth and maturity; it was like a living thing. But the servant had treated it like a dead thing by burying it.⁵³ In other words, the servant had not understood that the purpose of the master's property was to be wagered in a situation that could attract a profit.

A similar argument could be made with respect to procreation as an intended result of coitus. If one of the purposes of sexual intercourse is to produce offspring, it would be inconsistent of the Church to endorse a form of union where the sexual relationship was not open to the possibility of bearing children. This is not to say that every union must produce children, just as not every investment is required to bear profit. The question is whether or not sexual congress occurs in a manner that is befitting its divinely ordered nature and purpose.

3. *A hermeneutics of consent*

In my paper I have been trying to establish a reading of Romans 1 that might be regarded both as the "plain sense" of the text, and as rooted in a historically commonly accepted (if not theologically compelling) rationale regarding the procreative goal of the sexual act. My effort can be easily dismissed, however, by the objection that the biblical witness is so historically and philosophically contingent as to be irrelevant, or that Paul's bigotry is only superseded by my own.

Such objections cannot be adequately treated here, but it is the case that many modern attempts to read Paul are undertaken in a hermeneutic of suspicion. I once received an undergraduate essay entitled, "St Paul the Little Rascal." Although such a title may strike the teacher as adolescent, it is remarkable how often one encounters similarly dismissive attitudes towards Paul in both the Church and the academy. Susanne Heine has written: "In feminist literature Paul is [. . .] clearly the most attacked person in the New Testament: he has been made responsible for all the misfortunes of a Christian tradition which is hostile to women and indeed leads to neurosis."⁵⁴

For this reason a related discussion is necessary regarding the nature of Paul's writing as the word of God. My

52. 'Abot R. Nat. 14

53. One of the peculiar features of the Greek language is that the word that is used here to mean "interest" (τόκος in v. 27) is also a synonym for the word "child" in Classical Greek. Plato plays on the double meaning of the word in *Republic* 507a. Very literally, as the adage goes, "interest is the child of capital."

54. *Women and Early Christianity*, trans. John Bowden (London, 1987 (Ger. 1986)), p. 82. An example may be cited from Karen M. Rogers, *The Troublesome Helpmate: a history of misogyny in literature* (University of Washington, 1966): "[Paul] was the first Biblical writer to emphasize the misogynistic implications of the Jahvist's account of the Creation and Fall. He gave unprecedented emphasis to the Fall, in part no doubt because the story gave support to his natural misogyny, in part because it was the cornerstone of his theology; without the Fall there would have been no need for redemption by Christ, and hence no need for his own mission. The more catastrophic the Fall was, the more important it became to exonerate Adam as much as possible by placing the major guilt on Eve" (p. 9). Paul Gibson, without substantiation, avers, "Paul's unquestioning acceptance of an ancient tribal rejection of homosexuality as a social norm had become the basis of an inflexible regulation" (*Discerning the Word: The Bible and Homosexuality in Anglican Debate* (Toronto : ABC, 2000), p. 85).

predisposition in this paper could be described by Peter Stuhlmacher as a “hermeneutic of consent,” that is, a “readiness to receive trustingly what a loving God desires to give us through the testimony of those who have preceded us in the faith.”⁵⁵ This is not a naïve or thoroughly uncritical stance. A hermeneutic of trust does not discard suspicion, but is chary of applying it too readily to Scripture.⁵⁶ Some may regard this as a cop-out, as an example of what Bonhoeffer called a *sacrificium intellectus*. But I would reply, with Bonhoeffer, that this is simply an expression of humble Christian faith — the same kind of faith that affirms that God is revealed in the Bible, even when we can’t understand it completely. As Richard Hooker wrote in *Laws* 3.10.1:

The nature of every law must be judged of by the end for which it was made, and by the aptness of things therein prescribed unto the same end. It may so fall out that the reason why some laws of God were given is neither opened nor possible to be gathered by wit of man. [. . .] Such laws perhaps cannot be abrogated saving only by whom they were made: because the intent of them being known unto none but the author, he alone can judge how long it is requisite they should endure.

55. Richard B. Hays, “Salvation by Trust? Reading the Bible Faithfully” in *The Christian Century*, February 26, 1997, pp. 218–223.

56. An authentic hermeneutic of faith is suspicious of suspicion (see Rowan Williams, “The Suspicion of Suspicion: Wittgenstein and Bonhoeffer” in *The Grammar of the Heart: New Essays in Moral Philosophy and Theology*, ed. R.H. Bell (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), pp. 36–53). Ben Meyer draws attention to the approach of the respectful inquirer when he writes, “[The interpreter] does not confront mute nature; he enters into a dialogue, questioning and being questioned. He knows in advance only that without attention and sympathy he may not ‘hear’ the text.” p. 17; “The primacy of consent and the uses of suspicion” in *Ex auditu* 2 1986, pp 7–18.