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Exchanging the Natural for the Unnatural: Homosexuality's Distortion of God's Design

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On August 30, 2007, Judge Robert Hanson of Polk County, Iowa, ruled as unconstitutional the Iowa law forbidding homosexual individuals the right to enter into marriage and take advantage of the legal protections and benefits of marriage. In his decision, Hanson makes the following observation regarding homosexuality as he writes, "Homosexuality is a normal expression of human sexuality. Although homosexuality once was classified as a mental disorder or abnormality, empirical research since the 1950s consistently has failed to provide an empirical or scientific basis for this view, which has been renounced by professionals in multiple disciplines."¹ At the conclusion of his judgment, Hanson declares the Iowa law to be unconstitutional and declares, "Couples, such as plaintiffs, who are otherwise qualified to marry one another may not be denied licenses to marry or certificates of marriage or in any other way prevented from entering into a civil marriage pursuant to Iowa Code Chapter 595 by reason of the fact that both persons comprising such a couple are of the same sex."² With this most recent judgment in the ongoing fight regarding homosexual marriage, we are reminded again of the emotions, politics and controversy surrounding homosexuality.

While much of the discussion regarding homosexuality takes place in the political and judicial arenas, the church is not immune from the emotions, controversy and even politics of this discussion as well. At the 2003 Annual Meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention in Phoenix, Arizona, homosexual activists protested the work of the convention as delegates from all across the country affirmed the convention's stance against

¹*Katherine Varnum, et al. v. Timothy J. Brien*, Iowa District Court for Polk County, Case No. CV5965, <http://desmoinesregister.com/assets/pdf/D284280830.PDF> (accessed 11 September 2007).

²*Ibid.*

homosexuality as an acceptable lifestyle. Presbyterians, Methodists, and Lutherans are divided over the issue, and they potentially face major divisions among their denominations if they do not settle the issue in short order.³ No matter the denomination, churches face the reality of dealing with homosexuality on a regular basis.

While the church in the past held generally to a consensus regarding homosexuality, various denominations have changed their stances recently.⁴ In order for the church to address the issue of homosexuality effectively, we must depart from the vitriolic, political rancor that so often characterizes such discussions and turn to Scripture's treatment of the topic. Rather than focusing on public opinion, we need to concern ourselves with the only opinion that matters—the teaching of Scripture. Unfortunately, dedicating ourselves to the task of studying Scripture's discussions of homosexuality is not as easy as it may first appear. It has become more common for biblical scholars to interpret the six major passages dealing with homosexuality positively or at least neutrally in reference to it.⁵ Since those passages have not been subject to new discoveries in the field of textual criticism, the difference in interpretation has been the result of a different hermeneutic.⁶

Space does not allow for us to survey all the Scripture passages related to homosexuality. Due to its specific reference to homosexuality and the nature of Paul's argument within its context, Romans 1:26–27 is perhaps the most significant passage of Scripture regarding this issue. This paper will review and evaluate the hermeneutic approaches of those who use Scripture, specifically Romans 1:26–27, to support homosexuality. In order to accomplish this purpose, the paper will examine the supposedly

³For a discussion of denominational strife regarding homosexuality and other sexual issues, see Daniel R. Heimbach, *True Sexual Morality: Recovering Biblical Standards for a Culture in Crisis* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004), 89–112.

⁴Mark Liederbach observes, "Before 1950, Christianity's doctrinal statements or rulings remained consistently opposed to homosexuality. Since then, however, there has been a dramatic change in society toward this issue." Mark Daniel Liederbach, "A Historical-Theological Evaluation of John Boswell's *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality* Three Points of Debate: Behavior, Orientation, and Church Discipline" (M.A. thesis, Denver Seminary, 1993), 3.

⁵Most scholars agree that the six passages addressing homosexuality are Gen 19:1–11; Lev 18:22; Lev 20:13; Rom 1:26–27; 1 Cor 6:9–11; and 1 Tim 1:10. Some also discuss Judg 19:1–26; Ruth 1; and 1 Sam 18:1–4; however, there is very little consensus concerning whether those passages have any relation to homosexuality. Some of the arguments, such as the relationship between David and Jonathan in 1 Samuel have been used by some to give biblical precedent for homosexual relationships; however, most scholars who support homosexuality do not even reference those passages. John S. Feinberg and Paul D. Feinberg, *Ethics for a Brave New World* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1993), 189.

⁶Heimbach asserts that this new hermeneutic is the result of a return to sexual paganism within the culture and even within the church. Heimbach, *True Sexual Morality*, 52–54, 71–73.

scriptural arguments of proponents of homosexuality, evaluating in particular the hermeneutical principles employed by those authors, then draw applications for the church concerning homosexuality. In the end, we will see that proponents of homosexuality employ faulty hermeneutics to reach their conclusions and that Scripture does indeed forbid the exchange of the natural for the unnatural concerning God's design for sexuality.

Evaluation of Arguments Treating Romans 1:26–27 as Supporting Homosexuality

The passage of Romans 1:26–27 “is the best-known and most-often cited passage in Christian debates about homosexuality.”⁷ The passage also appears to be the clearest prohibition against homosexuality in the entire Bible, but there is a substantial group of interpreters who see this passage in a different light. Romans 1:26–27 reads, “For this reason God gave them over to degrading passions; for their women exchanged the natural function for that which is unnatural, and in the same way also the men abandoned the natural function of the woman and 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.”⁸ Proponents of homosexuality offer several interpretations that eliminate the apparent proscription against homosexual behavior.

Idolatry

Some believe that the prohibition of homosexuality in Romans 1:26–27 is part of a larger prohibition against idolatry as pronounced throughout Romans 1:18–32. Margaret Davies notes, “In Rom. 1:18 ff., an argument is advanced which suggests that idolatry leads to unethical behaviour because it suppresses the truth about God, the creator of the world, and encourages a futility in understanding, a foolishness which exchanges the glory of the immortal God for images of creatures.”⁹ The basis for this interpretation comes from vv. 18–19, which read, “For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them.” Thus, the homosexuality forbidden in this passage is merely that which results from an idolatrous expression of one suppressing the truth of God. Therefore, it

⁷Marcus J. Borg, “Homosexuality and the New Testament,” *Bible Review* 10 (1994): 20.

⁸All Scripture passages are quoted from the New American Standard Bible, Updated Edition.

⁹Margaret Davies, “New Testament Ethics and Ours: Homosexuality and Sexuality in Romans 1:26–27,” *Biblical Interpretation* 3 (1995): 317.

is not homosexuality expressed within a “God-honoring” relationship or atmosphere; rather, it is an action expressed as a result of rebelling against God. Davies claims this interpretation reflects a Jewish understanding of Hellenistic culture: “Two aspects of a Hellenistic way of life particularly offended Jews, idolatry and homosexual practice, and the two are related as cause and effect.”¹⁰

It is significant that Scripture states that God has abandoned these individuals because they have suppressed the truth about him. Leland J. White observes, “Clearly, Paul depicts God as abandoning those who do not honor him, who fall into idolatry. Thus, those condemned are outside Israel, possibly outside the faithful remnant of Israel. This is a diatribe against the gentiles. God, who created them, has abandoned them, i.e., no longer claims them as dependents. Thus, without honor, they act dishonorably, lacking control over their bodies.”¹¹ The abandonment by God results in immoral behavior. Therefore, their arguments follow the line of thought that idolatry leads to abandonment which results in homosexual behavior. In essence, this interpretation holds God responsible for homosexuality.

The link with idolatry is sometimes attributed to temple prostitution, which could be both homosexual and heterosexual in nature. Boswell notes, “It is sometimes argued that the significance of the passage lies in its connection with idolatry: i.e., that Paul censures the sexual behavior of the Romans because he associates such behavior with orgiastic pagan rites in honor of false gods.”¹² This connection is made through Old Testament condemnations of temple prostitution and the somewhat common practice of temple prostitution in the first century. However, Boswell does not believe that such a link is completely accurate:

First of all, there is no reason to believe that homosexual temple prostitution was more prevalent than heterosexual or that Paul, had he been addressing himself to such practices, would have limited his comments to the former. Second, it is clear that the sexual behavior itself is objectionable to Paul, not merely its associations. Third, and possibly most important, Paul is not describing cold-blooded, dispassionate acts performed in the interest of ritual or ceremony: he states very clearly that the parties involved “burned in their lust one toward another” (“ἐξεκαύθησαν ἐν τῇ ὀρέξει αὐτῶν εἰς ἀλλήλους”). It is unrea-

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Leland J. White, “Does the Bible Speak about Gays or Same-Sex Orientation? A Test Case in Biblical Ethics: Part I,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 25 (1995): 23.

¹²John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980), 108.

sonable to infer from the passage that there was any motive for the behavior other than sexual desire.¹³

Part of Boswell's solution to this problem is to link homosexuality to the Gentiles' rejection of monotheism. He argues that "it should be recognized that the point of the passage is not to stigmatize sexual behavior of any sort but to condemn the Gentiles for their general infidelity. There was a time, Paul implies, when monotheism was offered to or known by the Romans, but they rejected it (vv. 19–23). The reference to homosexuality is simply a mundane analogy to this theological sin; it is patently not the crux of this argument."¹⁴ According to this interpretation, homosexuality is not even the point of the context surrounding Rom 1:26–27, and students of Scripture are in error to impose a proscription against it based on this passage. Fundamentally, idolatry is what Paul condemns, not homosexuality.

The problem with this interpretation of the passage is that it dismisses the plain reading of Scripture for a more circuitous interpretation that may be equally valid, yet not the direct intention of the immediate text. The hermeneutical principle employed in this interpretation may be called the rule of purpose. Charles H. Cosgrove defines the rule of purpose as follows: "The purpose (or justification) behind a biblical moral rule carries greater weight than the rule itself."¹⁵ In this interpretation, one sees the overall purpose of the passage to condemn idolatry; thus, the purpose of the passage outweighs any specific prohibition that may be viewed as untenable by future generations. While Cosgrove affirms the use of this rule, he admits that it can be subjective and lead to antithetical interpretations. Thus, one's interpretation based upon the rule of purpose would be no more authoritative than someone else's formulation. Since both could not be right, this principle becomes unworkable on the basis of subjectivity and must be cast aside by any exegete seeking the meaning of Scripture and its applicability for homosexuality.¹⁶

Certainly, idolatry is in view in the larger context of Romans 1 and may bear some significance to the proscription against homosexuality. In Romans 1:22–23 Paul writes, "Professing to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures." Thus, part of the depravity of foolish men was that they traded

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Ibid., 108–09.

¹⁵Charles H. Cosgrove, *Appealing to Scripture in Moral Debate: Five Hermeneutical Rules* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 12.

¹⁶For a full treatment of the rule of principle's application to homosexuality in Romans 1:26–27, see Cosgrove, *Appealing to Scripture*, 37–44.

worship of God for worship of images, idols, and creatures—idolatry. However, a better way to view Paul's statements about homosexuality in relation to these about idolatry is to see them as comparable distortions. The ungodly and unrighteous have distorted a proper worship of God by actively pursuing idolatry. In the same way, the ungodly and unrighteous have distorted a proper understanding of sexuality by actively pursuing the unnatural relations of homosexuality. The root of the problem, therefore, is a rebellion against God in unrighteousness, and idolatry and homosexuality are manifestations of this rebellion. Richard B. Hays sums up this idea as he states, "The genius of Paul's analysis, of course, lies in his refusal to posit a catalogue of sins as the cause of human alienation from God. Instead, he delves to the root: all other depravities *follow* from the radical rebellion of the creature against the creator."¹⁷

Homosexual Acts versus Homosexual Orientation

The most significant argument made concerning this passage and its relation to homosexuality is the matter of homosexual orientation. Some interpreters believe that when Paul condemned those who exchanged the "natural function" for the "unnatural," he was speaking to heterosexual individuals who participated in homosexual acts, rather than homosexually-oriented individuals. Paul could not have known that certain individuals had a "natural" homosexual orientation. Arland J. Hultgren writes, "In 1:27 Paul is not speaking of homosexual attraction on the part of males. The concept of sexual orientation, including homosexual orientation, had to wait another nineteen centuries to be formulated."¹⁸ Since Paul was incapable of understanding sexual orientation, according to this interpretation, he could not have condemned homosexuals who were acting according to their nature. Instead, Boswell states that "the persons Paul condemns are manifestly not homosexual: what he derogates are homosexual acts committed by apparently heterosexual persons. The whole point of Romans 1, in fact, is to stigmatize persons who have rejected their calling, gotten off the true path they were once on."¹⁹

In Paul's limited, first-century understanding of the human condition, he would only have recognized the relationship between a man and a woman as evidenced from the creation narrative in Genesis 1 and 2. Abraham Smith declares, "Paul's cultural interpretation of the Genesis traditions would indeed have left him with only one option for sexual relationships—

¹⁷Richard B. Hays, "Relations Natural and Unnatural: A Response to John Boswell's Exegesis of Romans 1," *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 14 (1986): 189.

¹⁸Arland J. Hultgren, "Being Faithful to the Scriptures: Romans 1:26–27 as a Case in Point," *Word & World* 14 (1994): 319.

¹⁹Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, 109.

that between a male and a female.”²⁰ According to Boswell, this would be part of the only valid application of the term “natural” (φύσιν) because there was not a fully developed understanding of natural law in Paul’s day. Boswell asserts, “The concept of ‘natural law’ was not fully developed until more than a millennium after Paul’s death, and it is anachronistic to read it into his words.”²¹ Thus, there is no moral significance attached to Paul’s words; it is merely a matter of character. Boswell continues, “For Paul, ‘nature’ was not a question of universal law or truth but, rather, a matter of *character* of some person or group of persons, a character which was largely ethnic and entirely human. . . . ‘Nature’ is not a moral force for Paul: men may be evil or good ‘by nature,’ depending on their own disposition.”²² In Paul’s purely Jewish understanding, he would not have any knowledge of a natural relationship outside one between a man and a woman.

In addition to Paul’s understanding of natural relationships, this interpretation presupposes that his use of the phrase *παρὰ φύσιν* limits what is meant by “unnatural.” Boswell claims, “Against’ is, moreover, a somewhat misleading translation of the preposition ‘*παρά*.’ In New Testament usage ‘*παρά*’ connotes not ‘in opposition to’ (expressed by ‘*κατά*’) but, rather, ‘more than,’ ‘in excess of’. . . .”²³ This means that the “unnatural” actions of homosexuality are just more than what is normally expected from natural behavior, and not necessarily immoral. John J. McNeill argues that the term *φύσιν* represents not a created nature but a learned behavior as he writes that “the character referred to by *phúsis* does not necessarily represent something that is innate, but could be a matter of training and social conditioning.”²⁴ Boswell further elaborates, “Finally, this exact same phrase—‘*παρὰ φύσιν*’—is used later in the same epistle to describe the activity of God in saving the Gentiles . . . (Rom 11:24). Since God himself is here described as acting ‘against nature,’ it is inconceivable that this phrase necessarily connotes moral turpitude.”²⁵ With such an understanding of *παρὰ φύσιν*, proponents of this view believe that the condemnation of homosexual acts cannot be a moral condemnation. Instead, Paul simply notes the unusual nature of such behavior, but not something that is morally impermissible.

The foundation for this interpretation of the passage is the belief that the progression of science since the first century to the twenty-first has

²⁰Abraham Smith, “The New Testament and Homosexuality,” *Quarterly Review* 11 (Winter 1991): 25.

²¹Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, 110.

²²*Ibid.*

²³*Ibid.*, 111.

²⁴John J. McNeill, *The Church and the Homosexual* (Kansas City: Sheed Andrews and McMeel, 1976), 54.

²⁵Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, 112.

caused parts of Scripture, specifically Paul's prohibition of homosexuality to be an outmoded, cultural statement that does not square with modern science. Again, Cosgrove has provided a technical term for this hermeneutical principle—the rule of nonscientific scope. This rule states, “Scientific (or ‘empirical’) knowledge stands outside the scope of scripture.”²⁶ This hermeneutical principle is essential to the proponents of homosexuality because they appeal to the advancements of modern science in relation to Scripture passages that deal with homosexuality. Cosgrove suggests, “The Bible contains both momentous and trivial instances of scientifically outmoded empirical knowledge. . . . It is widely acknowledged that where modern scientific knowledge contradicts ancient biblical assumptions about empirical reality, the church ought not to assert those ancient assumptions in the teeth of scientific evidence.”²⁷

Cosgrove's principle has a specific application to Romans 1 in that Paul viewed homosexuality as “unnatural” because he was deprived of modern scientific knowledge. Had he known what twenty-first century scientists know, it is alleged, he would have been more specific in his prohibition. He would not have deemed homosexual orientation as unnatural. Instead, he would have only prohibited homosexual actions performed by heterosexuals. Hultgren declares, “He [Paul] had no idea that there could be persons who actually have a homosexual orientation; he could not have done so.”²⁸ Since Paul could not have known the information available to biblical scholars today, it is the responsibility of the modern interpreter to put the information into the text that was not available to Paul.

The problem with interjecting the rule of nonscientific scope into the debate about homosexuality is that some scholars unequivocally claim as fact scientific evidence that has not been finally proven. Citing studies on rats or small groups of deceased humans, scientists have made speculative conclusions about the role of the brain in homosexual activity. As evidenced by the studies of LeVay and Swaab and Hofman,²⁹ the results of such studies are inconclusive and should only be viewed as potential explanations for homosexual behavior. In addition, no conclusive genetic evidence has been found linking a particular gene to homosexual tendencies. Until that day comes, the rule of nonscientific scope cannot be employed because it does not accurately represent the scientific data available at this time.

²⁶Cosgrove, *Appealing to Scripture*, 116.

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸Hultgren, “Being Faithful to the Scriptures,” 322.

²⁹For a full discussion of the scientific evidence, see Simon LeVay, *Queer Science* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1996), 129–47, and Feinberg and Feinberg, *Ethics for a Brave New World*, 185–89.

Scholars in all fields are understandably anxious to use scientific evidence to justify their particular agendas, but one should not sacrifice the true scientific results for the sake of an agenda or a cause. D.A. Carson would consider this to be the logical fallacy of “appealing to selective evidence.” He states, “As a general rule, the more complex and/or emotional the issue, the greater the tendency to select only part of the evidence, prematurely construct a grid, and so filter the rest of the evidence through the grid that it is robbed of any substance.”³⁰ The apprehension of scholars in using incomplete information is only overshadowed by their desire to prove their point. Thus, some feel obligated to present the complete story that the scientific evidence is not complete, but the revelation of such information is often relegated to a footnote or endnote.³¹

An acceptance of the scientific idea that homosexuality is an inborn trait leads to even greater problems than merely a misinformed interpretation of Romans 1. Heimbach writes, “Once the idea of inborn orientation takes hold, Christians start thinking the Bible is out-of-date and cannot be trusted on sex. Instead, they believe the culture is more trustworthy because it understands sex better than scripture does—better even than God himself.”³² Thus, all biblical standards of sexuality must be dismissed by the culture based on “scientific evidence” that homosexuality is a constitutional trait. Beyond that, it also impacts the way that one views God. Heimbach surmises, “If God is responsible for creating homosexuals who cannot help having same-sex desires and cannot change, yet he also condemns having same-sex desires with no hope of same-sex marriage, he must then be unfair, cruel, and evil.”³³ For these reasons, the rule of nonscientific scope must be dismissed as a relevant hermeneutical principle regarding the issue of homosexuality until conclusive scientific evidence is discovered.

Instead of leaning upon uncertain scientific evidence, the student of Scripture is capable of fully understanding Paul’s meaning for “against

³⁰D.A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 93.

³¹In her treatment of homosexuality and Romans 1, Margaret Davies admits that she has used scientific evidence in her interpretation that was not available to Paul when he wrote his epistle to the church at Rome. She states, “I have used some arguments from nature which take account of more recent research and reflexion [sic] than were available when Pauline texts were written. In advancing these arguments, I do not mean to imply that human nature is absolutely fixed and unalterable. We need to recognize that human nature is to some extent malleable.” This is the extent of her admission in the body of her article that scientific evidence is not complete concerning her arguments. Then in a footnote, she cites a study by a Professor Roger Gorski of the University of California in Los Angeles admitting that homosexuality may not be a result of different brain structures. Instead, he says that the practice of homosexuality may change the structure of the brain. Davies, “New Testament Ethics and Ours,” 330.

³²Heimbach, *True Sexual Morality*, 129.

³³*Ibid.*, 129–30.

nature.” Translated literally, the phrase *παρὰ φύσιν* means “against nature.” But what does that mean for this passage? Bauer offers the following lexical meaning for the term *φύσιν*: “[T]he regular or established order of things, *nature*.”³⁴ This implies that there is a created order that is established by something other than human action. That created order is exactly what Paul intends to bring to mind in this argument. The reader, especially one with any familiarity with the Old Testament, is likely to recall the words of Genesis 1 and 2 while reading this passage. In Genesis 1:27, Scripture says, “God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.” Continuing on in chapter 2, Scripture says, “The Lord said, ‘It is not good for man to be alone; I will make him a helper suitable for him.’ . . . The Lord God fashioned into a woman the rib which He had taken from the man, and brought her to the man. The man said, ‘This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man.’ For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother, and be joined to his wife; and they shall become one flesh” (Gen 2:18, 22–24).

Thus, arguing from the pattern set forth in the rest of Scripture, it is concluded that men were designed from creation to develop intimate relationships with women, and sexual intercourse is by nature designed for the relationship of a man and a woman. Therefore, Paul’s statement that “their women exchanged the natural function for that which is unnatural (*παρὰ φύσιν*)” means that the unrighteous women gave up natural sexual relationships with men for unnatural sexual relationships with women. In the same way, the men exchanged natural sexual relationships with women and pursued unnatural relationships with other men, burning “in their desire toward one another.” David F. Wright notes, “But the allusions in the chapter to divine creation (vv. 20, 25) justify us in believing that the argument from nature has to be taken with great seriousness.”³⁵

Pederasty

Another argument developed from Romans 1:26–27 is the understanding that Paul is condemning the Greek practice of pederasty rather than homosexuality. According to this view, the only understanding of homosexuality that Paul knew was the ancient Greco-Roman practice of pederasty. Mark D. Smith states, “If Paul knew only the ‘model’ of pederasty, his words in Rom. 1 can only be interpreted as a proscription of

³⁴Walter Bauer, Frederick William Danker, W. F. Arndt, and F. W. Gingrich, eds., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), 1070.

³⁵David F. Wright, “Homosexuality: The Relevance of the Bible,” *The Evangelical Quarterly* 61 (1989): 295.

that ancient practice, not as a condemnation of mutually consenting, adult homosexual relationships such as are widely publicized in modern American culture.”³⁶ As a result, Paul’s comments in Romans 1 are construed to carry little or no significance for the modern Western world because the practice of pederasty is already considered illegal by most Western governments. Thus, the proscription of this passage becomes irrelevant in light of modern cultural practices.

The popularity of the Christian understanding that Paul is referring to pederasty in his condemnation of Romans 1 is due to the influential work of Robin Scroggs. In his book, *The New Testament and Homosexuality*, Scroggs defines pederasty as follows:

1. In the typical romantic relationship, the beloved is most often a boy or a youth around the age of puberty extending at times into the late teens. 2. The lover is most likely to be an adult, probably older than twenty years, the upper age extending indefinitely, at times to middle age and even beyond. 3. There are enough variations of the above to blur the focus of the picture. These may well be exceptions, and are on occasion branded as such by the tests themselves. Historical reality can never be completely captured by generalizations. 4. What *does* seem constant, no matter how much the typical age differential was modified in specific instances, is the acceptance of the roles of active and passive by the partners. . . . 5. Apart from certain exceptions of an adult male prostitute who retains his passive (or perhaps also active) role well into adulthood and thus may service adults his age, *I know of no suggestions in the texts that homosexual relationships existed between same-age adults.*³⁷

Scroggs bases his conclusions on the work of K.J. Dover in his book, *Greek Homosexuality*.³⁸ Mark Smith observes, “For Scroggs, pederasty is far more than a description of behavior; it is a sexual ‘model,’ a cultural construct which includes patterns of behavior that are considered appropriate, concepts of normal and abnormal activity, and a cultural ideal of beauty. For the Greeks, pederasty was considered normal and, within certain legal and customary bounds, appropriate.”³⁹ Thus, Paul addresses a “culturally-ap-

³⁶Mark D. Smith, “Ancient Bisexuality and the Interpretation of Romans 1:26–27,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 64 (1996): 226.

³⁷Robin Scroggs, *The New Testament and Homosexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 34–35.

³⁸K.J. Dover, *Greek Homosexuality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978).

³⁹Smith, “Ancient Bisexuality,” 227–28.

propriate,” specific behavior that stands outside the boundaries of behavior established by the church.

This interpretation finds its basis in Paul’s use of the term ἄρσενες in Romans 1:27. James E. Miller asserts, “Important for understanding Romans 1:26–27 is the frequent use of *arsen/arren* (male, not age specific) and the rarity of the term *aner* (man/adult male) in these Jewish attacks on pederasty. The use of the non-age specific term is sometimes a code-word for the adolescent boy. . . .”⁴⁰ Such an interpretation would fall in line with the basic understanding that pederasty involved a boy or youth and an adult male. The most common form of pederasty is considered to be that between a teacher and a student. The greatest problem that Paul would have with this kind of relationship, thus bringing his condemnation of it, was the dehumanizing characteristic involving the youth who submitted to homosexual acts. Scroggs, thus, only condemns homosexual relationships that involve active/passive distinctions between partners.⁴¹ Miller adequately sums up the arguments of this position as follows:

There are two basic reasons why a first-century hearer of Romans 1:27 would think specifically of pederasty. First, Paul is attacking an accepted Gentile practice. Homosexuality between adult males was not an accepted activity, but pederasty was. Second, in light of Jewish polemic against Gentile practices, by using the term *arsen* Paul implies that at least one of the males involved is not an *aner*. The terminology of Romans 1:27 is characteristic of pederasty.⁴²

Again, Paul’s prohibition becomes culturally irrelevant in the context of twenty-first century Western culture because even the secular government forbids such action, and Scripture no longer needs to forbid this behavior in order to distinguish between the church and the world.

This interpretation suffers from two basic problems. First, it ignores an essential element of the text that would subvert the interpretation of pederasty. In Romans 1:26, Paul introduces the only direct proscription of female homosexuality in all of Scripture. Interestingly, most commentators gloss over this reference in their greater attempts to legitimize all forms of homosexuality.⁴³ Scroggs states, “I had to conclude that our sources did not

⁴⁰James E. Miller, “Response: Pederasty and Romans 1:27: A Response to Mark Smith,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 65 (1997): 863.

⁴¹Smith, “Ancient Bisexuality,” 228.

⁴²Miller, “Pederasty and Romans 1:27,” 863.

⁴³Derrick Sherwin Bailey, *Homosexuality and the Western Christian Tradition* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1955), 40.

permit us to make any certain statements about female homosexuality.”⁴⁴ Unfortunately for proponents of the pederasty view, Paul’s reference to female homosexuality in v. 26 causes great problems. Pederasty among females was not a common practice and, therefore, would subvert the argument that Paul knew only of the “model” of pederasty in relation to homosexuality. Obviously, he understood that some form of lesbian behavior existed when he wrote the words of v. 26. Smith writes, “It is probable that there was no female parallel to pederasty (with the possible, though doubtful, exception of Plutarch’s Spartan women). From what we can tell from the available evidence, the most prevalent form of female homosexual practice involved mutually consenting women of roughly equal age.”⁴⁵ The understanding of female homosexuality effectively dismisses the interpretation of pederasty as the only form of homosexuality condemned by Paul.⁴⁶

Second, proponents of this interpretation, and the others as well, employ one final hermeneutical principle to support their positions—the rule of moral-theological adjudication. The rule of moral-theological adjudication states, “Moral-theological considerations should guide hermeneutical choices between conflicting plausible interpretations.”⁴⁷ This hermeneutical rule is perhaps the broadest principle employed by anyone interpreting Scripture in regard to homosexuality. Its function is various and without substantial limitations. Cosgrove writes, “Analyzed in rhetorical terms, an appeal to *one* interpretation of scripture when other equally reasonable options are available typically functions as follows: the attractiveness of the resultant ethical/theological construction is held out as a kind of silent argument for the exegesis adduced in its support.”⁴⁸ While this hermeneutical rule is not as evident on the surface of interpretations as others already discussed, it is still present.

Every interpreter approaches the text with certain presuppositions that almost always color his interpretations. The main presupposition with which proponents of homosexuality approach the text is the rule of love. While no one explicitly states that the passages concerning homosexuality should be interpreted in favor of homosexuals because it is the most loving thing to do, such a presupposition does underlie the interpretations. Many count homosexuals among their closest friends and, therefore, desire to do nothing that would bring them pain or anguish. Thus, the only loving thing

⁴⁴Scroggs, *The New Testament and Homosexuality*, 126.

⁴⁵Smith, “Ancient Bisexuality,” 243.

⁴⁶Köstenberger and Jones appeal to the inclusion of lesbianism as evidence that the pederasty view is not a consistent interpretation of Romans 1:26–27. Andreas J. Köstenberger with David W. Jones, *God, Marriage, & Family: Rebuilding the Biblical Foundation* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004), 217.

⁴⁷Cosgrove, *Appealing to Scripture*, 154.

⁴⁸Ibid., 154–55.

to do would be to support them in their lifestyle and tell them that God also supports them. Since the greatest commandments are to love God and to love one's neighbors (Matt 22:34–40), one should interpret Scripture in light of these commandments. Since someone can love God and still be a homosexual, then it is the duty of the exegete to view Scripture in such a way that his interpretation also expresses love for his neighbor.

This rule, however, “is really not a rule at all but only a description of a state of affairs.”⁴⁹ Just because something is actually happening in the world does not necessarily mean that it should be happening. The use of this rule sets up an interpretive grid based on the actions of others. Another problem with this hermeneutical rule is that it is based on a faulty method of interpretation. E.D. Hirsch, Jr., proposes that a fundamental rule of the ethics of interpretation is to seek the author's intent, thus honoring the rights of the author to have his words understood as he intended them when he wrote them. He writes:

Therefore, let me state what I consider to be a fundamental ethical maxim for interpretation, a maxim that claims no privileged sanction from metaphysics or analysis, but only from ethical tenets, generally shared. *Unless there is a powerful overriding value in disregarding an author's intention (i.e., original meaning), we who interpret as a vocation should not disregard it.* Mere individual preference would not be such an overriding value, nor would be the mere preferences of many persons. The possible exception is mentioned only because every ethical maxim requires such an escape clause.⁵⁰

If the text is not interpreted as the author intended for it to be, then there is no end to the various interpretations possible. In the case of Romans 1:26–27, such adjudication leads to honoring the shameful of homosexuality.⁵¹ The final problem is that this rule of interpretation does not solve the issue as much as it complicates it. Various moral-theological adjudications are possible because each exegete will approach the text with his own set of presuppositions. However, there is no method for determining whose presuppositions are more valid.

Only a faithful interpretation of the text understands homosexuality as one of the distortions of God's created order that is the result of the “un-godliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness.”

⁴⁹Cosgrove, *Appealing to Scripture*, 177.

⁵⁰E.D. Hirsch, Jr., *The Aims of Interpretation* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1976), 90.

⁵¹Heimbach, *True Sexual Morality*, 305–06.

teousness” (Rom 1:18). In the larger context of Paul’s prohibition against homosexuality, he mentions that the truth of God has been suppressed in the unrighteousness of men (Rom 1:18). As a result of the unrighteousness of men and turning from the truth of God, God gave them over to their lusts. A part of that “giving over” was the exchange of natural sexual functions for unnatural functions. Thus, the homosexual act is labeled as being the result of unrighteousness and turning from God. No matter if one understands the acts described in Romans 1:26–27 as homosexual intercourse or homosexual orientation, such behavior is still linked to unrighteousness. Therefore, no conceivable form of homosexual behavior can be acceptable to the New Testament believer because all homosexual acts are clearly understood to be acts of unrighteousness.

Applications for the Church

After examining the arguments from Scripture by proponents of homosexuality and evaluating the hermeneutical principles employed by those proponents, one can clearly see that the debate over homosexuality is quite emotional and unlikely to be resolved to the satisfaction of the diverging parties in the near future. While the exegesis may seem clear to those who view Scripture as inerrant, infallible, and sufficient to teach modern believers what they need for living the Christian life in this world, the experiential complexities of various influential scholars will continue to impact the church.

There are several applications that the church can take away from this analysis of the scriptural debate concerning homosexuality. First, it is the duty of the church to base its arguments on sound exegesis. Every hermeneutical principle that a scholar may present is not necessarily one that the church wants to accept. Many hermeneutical principles employed by proponents of homosexuality are extremely subjective (e.g., the rule of purpose) and may be used to support all types of arguments. If the teachings of Scripture are to be considered at all, there must be some objective basis by which one interprets Scripture. When addressing homosexuality, it should be the goal of all interpreters to understand Paul’s intended meaning.

Next, believers should engage in the debate over homosexuality and other moral issues in the church today. As mentioned earlier, many denominations are currently facing division or complete collapse over the issue of homosexuality. The clearest example of this division is seen in the Anglican Communion. While official church documents declare an opposition to homosexuality, large portions of the denomination have vocally abandoned the previously accepted moral standards. Unity among the

brethren should be a goal within the church; however, it should not come at the cost of doctrinal integrity. Therefore, those who uphold a biblical understanding of sexuality should stand firm upon the Word of God and declare what Scripture teaches regarding homosexuality.

The third application is that the church should love homosexuals and those who interpret Scripture in favor of homosexuality. This does not mean that the church should unequivocally accept them into their midst without correction and teaching, but it does mean that the church is called to love all people. Homosexuals are people who need to hear the life-changing message of the gospel just like heterosexuals. The church should reach out to homosexuals with the gospel and help them to turn from their unrighteous lifestyle when they accept Christ. For homosexuals who also claim to be believers, the church should lovingly show them the error of their ways and seek to restore them to a proper relationship with the Lord. Concerning those who interpret Scripture to support homosexuality, the church should love them as well. They should lovingly confront them with their error and seek to show them what the Scripture actually says about homosexuality. If they refuse to listen and a proper relationship cannot be restored, then they should be dismissed from the church *with the hope that they will one day be restored*. False teaching and false teachers have no place in the church; however, even homosexuals and false teachers may repent. After mentioning homosexuals among a list of offenders, Paul writes, “Such were some of you; but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God” (1 Cor 6:11). Homosexuality is a sin that individuals can overcome, and resources are available to help those individuals do so.⁵²

Conclusion

The issue of homosexuality impacts all parts of the American culture from religion to politics. While most debates over homosexuality in the public square revolve around personal preferences, spousal rights, and cultural mores, the debate within the churches centers on Scripture, and Romans 1:26–27 is a crucial part of the scriptural debate. A commitment to the true teaching of Scripture must be maintained in the face of cultural preferences in order to support a true sexual morality. It is the responsibility of believers to accept the teaching of Scripture and proclaim it to a lost and dying world so desperately in need of the truth. Therefore, even concerning the matter of homosexuality, Christians need to set aside personal preference and cultural pressure in order to teach the truth about Scripture

⁵²Köstenberger with Jones, *God, Marriage, & Family*, 226, 402–03; Jeffrey Satinover, *Homosexuality and the Politics of Truth* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 168–209.

that homosexuality is a sin. At the same time, we must never forget that we are all sinners and that “the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness” (Rom 1:18). It is only by the grace of God that we have been saved, and our refrain should be that we are “not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, ‘But the righteous man shall live by faith’” (Rom 1:16–17).