

The Pauline Epistles

“God therefore has abandoned them to shameful passions. Even their women exchanged natural intercourse for practices contrary to nature (*para physin*). And likewise the men gave up natural relations with women and burned with lust for each other...” (Rom.1:26-27).

“Do not deceive yourselves... Neither morally dissolute men (*malakoi*) nor male sexual practitioners (*arsenokoitai*)...will inherit the kingdom of God...” (1 Cor.6:9; cf. 1 Tim.1:10).

Where does St. Paul discuss homosexuality?

St. Paul, the only Christian biblical writer to mention the subject, alludes to homosexuality, not directly but parenthetically, within three letters to new Christian converts. These lived at the pagan Gentile communities of Rome, Corinth, and Ephesus, where St. Timothy was bishop. The cities were notorious for their multiple sexual activities. They were rampant with promiscuity and prostitution, as the inevitable concomitants of heathen idolatry.

Paul refers to their same-sex behavior with only two short verses (Rom. 1:26- 27) and two obscure words (1 Cor.6:9; 1 Tim.1:10). His Jewish background probably colors his Christian outlook, through the influence of the Hebrew laws of Leviticus.

Paul, in condemning homosexual conduct, above all reacted to the historical or cultural scene that he encountered. He denounced the sordid and dehumanizing dimensions of same-sex practices as he observed them in the Greco- Roman world.

How does St. Paul regard homosexual orientation?

St. Paul could have had no knowledge of constitutional homosexuality or heterosexuality as genuine affectional orientations already determined by early childhood. Hence, he would have perceived and criticized same-sex behavior as a perversion of sexual attraction to the opposite gender.

St. John Chrysostom emphasizes this idea with a commentary on the words “exchanged” and “gave up” in St. Paul’s epistle to the Romans: “Notice how in the passage Paul...observes that the women ‘exchanged natural intercourse’ (Rom. 1:26). No one can claim, Paul points out, that women came to this because they were precluded from lawful [hetero]sexual activity... Again Paul indicates the exact same thing about the men. He says that they likewise ‘gave up natural relations with women’ (Rom.1:27)...charging that they had legitimate [heterosexual] enjoyment and abandoned it...” (Patrology, Greek Series, 60:417).

Moreover, St. Paul does not refer to a genuine homosexual love but to a perverted heterosexual lust, so fierce that copulation with the opposite gender could no longer satisfy desires. Thus he views homosexual acts as sinful liaisons sought by dissolute heterosexual people solely for their pleasurable diversion.

St. John Chrysostom again points out this Pauline idea of consuming desires: “Notice how emphatically Paul phrases his comments. He says not that the persons had fallen in love and felt drawn to one another by romantic passion but that they ‘burned with lust for each other’ (Rom.1:27). You can see that such craving stems from a greed which will not remain within its usual [hetero- sexual] bounds...” (Patrology, Greek Series, 60:417-418).

Doesn't St. Paul call homosexuality unnatural?

No, St. Paul does not state that homosexuality in and of itself is unnatural.

He does say that, at least for those naturally attracted to the opposite gender, same-sex practices are “contrary to nature” (Rom. 1:26). Whether he also would have felt that homosexual acts are unnatural, for those naturally attracted to the same sex, remains an unanswered question. People have frequently reacted with repugnance toward lesbian women and gay men because of this very brief biblical phrase.

However, only a few chapters later in the same epistle, Paul describes God grafting a wild olive branch, i.e. the Gentiles, onto a cultivated tree, i.e. the Jews, as contrary to nature (Rom.11:24). Because Paul utilizes the identical Greek phrase in each instance (*para physin*, literally “against nature”), the words do not necessarily denote moral degeneracy. Paul would certainly never portray God as doing anything morally repugnant.

Furthermore, in using the term “nature,” Paul does not always make a clear distinction between essential character and accepted custom. He writes, for example, that “it is disgraceful by nature for a man to have long hair” like a woman (1 Cor.11:14). Paul here signifies behavior that is unusual or unexpected from a traditionally heterosexual point of view, and he possibly has the same idea in mind when referring to homosexuality.

But aren't homosexual persons excluded from God's kingdom?

Two Greek words, transliterated as *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai*, appear on the list of people excluded by St. Paul from God's kingdom (1 Cor.6:9). The second of these terms also occurs in a later catalogue of the godless for whom laws are formulated (1 Tim. 1:10).

Scriptural scholars disagree over the exact meaning of both words and provide a great variety of possible translations. Obviously, despite its use in some Bibles, the simple word “homosexuals” is an inadequate rendition of either noun. Gay/lesbian persons, who remain committed to Christ, are neither unworthy of heaven nor irreligious lawbreakers because of their given affectional orientation.

The first word (*malakoi*, literally “soft”) probably refers to loose individuals, who are morally weak and sexually unrestrained. The second word (*arsen + koitai*, literally “males” + “beds”) seems to mean either debauched pederasts or male prostitutes. The latter apparently offered their sexual services to women as well as to men.

The *malakoi* and the *arsenokoitai* are not even necessarily homosexual in their basic make-up. Paul condemns them for their sexual indulgence of self and others. Nevertheless, unlike some modern preachers, he does not single them out for special censure as more shameful than other sinners named in the same catalogues.

Significantly, Paul himself did not use several readily available Greek phrases, which described people given to general homosexual practices, apart from such abuses as pederasty and prostitution. Conversely, other Greek writers never employed the two Pauline terms as a designation for homosexual persons, either before or after the Apostolic period. In fact, no Christian commentator interpreted or cited the words in reference to homosexuality until the early Middle Ages.

Still doesn't St. Paul condemn homosexual acts?

Paul also condemns certain other practices that are widely accepted and even sanctioned today. He forbids women to speak in church (1 Cor. 14:34-35) or to act as teachers (1 Tim.2:11-12). He orders women to cover their heads at services (1 Cor.11:5-13) and considers men with long hair disgraceful (1 Cor.11:14). Paul urges the submission of slaves to their masters, instead of exhorting Christians to free all their slaves (1 Cor.7:21-24; Eph.6:5-7; Col.3:22-24; 1 Tim.6:1-2; Titus 2:9-10; Philemon 10-18). He justifies the subordination of women to men, as a time-bound reflection of a sexist culture and patriarchal society (1 Cor.11:3-9; Eph.5:22-24; Col.3:18; Titus 2:5).

Such teachings have been seriously reexamined in an effort to fulfill the liberating Gospel of Jesus, Paul's references about homosexuality are being submitted to similar scrutiny, especially in light of his primary emphasis against sexual abuse and in view of our current knowledge of psychosexual development.

“Our knowledge of psychology and the make-up of the human person is vastly different today from Saint Paul's... He was indeed harsh with heterosexuals engaging in homosexual activity... He spoke out strongly against homosexual activity where associated, with orgiastic pagan ritual sacrifices... Current biblical scholarship has been of tremendous help in bringing these and similar texts into a total cultural context...”

(Archbishop Rembert Weakland, *Who Is Our Neighbor?*, 1980).

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