

July 24, 2013

A response to the discussion of the biblical “prohibitive” texts in Ken’s paper “A Letter to My Congregation...”. Ken’s text is boxed in black font, my response is in blue font. – Don Bromley

I will now present a reading of the prohibitive texts that highlights the difficulties in treating the biblical prohibitions as a sweeping condemnation of all same sex relationships today. Regarding them as prohibiting all such relationships is commonly asserted.<sup>1</sup> I won’t summarize the arguments for this view because it has been done exhaustively elsewhere. The effect of this traditional reading is thoroughgoing exclusion of all gay persons from the life and ministry of the church, which is widely practiced.<sup>2</sup> This reading has the support of many faithful Christians so it is by definition weighty. But on close examination, I found *big* problems with this reading of the texts.

**Leviticus 18: 22 and 20: 13**, part of the block of laws referred to as the Holiness Code, state that a man must not “*lie with a man as with a woman.*” Leviticus has nothing to say about lesbian sex.<sup>3</sup> “*Lie with*” is generally thought to be a euphemism for anal intercourse. Philo, a Jewish commentator and contemporary of Jesus and Paul, understood this as a reference to male temple prostitution.<sup>4</sup> Male shrine prostitutes are mentioned several times in the Old Testament.<sup>5</sup>

The textual context of the gay sex prohibition in Leviticus 18 is this: Don’t have sex with your close relatives (your mother, father’s wife, sister, daughter-in-law, half-sister, aunt, sister-in-law), don’t have sex during menstruation, don’t commit adultery, don’t sacrifice your children to Molech, men don’t have sex with men, no bestiality.

We accept the prohibitions on incest and bestiality at face value—you can’t have sex with close relatives, you can’t have sex with animals. Not because it was connected to a particular cultic activity or nation, but because the act itself was detestable and forbidden. Is there much question that they would not have understood “don’t have sex with another man as you would with a woman” as a similar prohibition?

Philo clearly understood the Old Testament law as unequivocally prohibiting *all* male-male sexual activity, not simply those connected with shrine prostitution.

In the “Special Laws” section you reference, Philo goes on to describe homosexual activity not connected with any particular cultic activity, but a violation of created order. The problem was men lusting after each other and men treating men as women:

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<sup>1</sup> See Gagnon, Robert A. J. *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2001.

<sup>2</sup> Gagnon argues for exclusion from church membership at least for those churches that exclude for unrepentant incest, polygamy, adultery, prostitution and fornication, Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, pp. 489-490.

<sup>3</sup> Commenting on Leviticus 18 Hays says “Nothing is said here about female homosexual behavior.” *Moral Vision*, p. 381.

<sup>4</sup> Philo, *The Special Laws*, III, VII, 40-42 (40)

<sup>5</sup> see Dt. 23: 17-18; 1 Ki. 14: 24; 15:12; 2 Ki. 23: 7

“...those who were men lusted after one another, doing unseemly things, and not regarding or respecting their common nature ...and so, by degrees, the men became accustomed to be treated like women, and in this way engendered among themselves the disease of females, and intolerable evil; for they not only, as to effeminacy and delicacy, became like women in their persons, but they made also their souls most ignoble, corrupting in this way the whole race of man, as far as depended on them.”

Philo goes on to make it clear that the offense of homosexuality was not its connection to shrine prostitution, but to the created male/female order:

“But God, having taken pity on mankind, as being a Saviour and full of love for mankind, increased, as far as possible, the natural desire of men and women for a connexion together, for the sake of producing children...”

Finally, in Deuteronomy 23:17-18 (also Gen 38:21-22; 1 Kgs 14:21-24; 15:12-14; 2 Kgs 23:7; Job 36:13-14; Hos 4:14), which you refer to here, the Hebrew word for “shrine prostitute” is *qedesim/qades*. This is not a word used in Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13, or anywhere in the holiness code which these passages occur in. It seems that if this specific practice is primarily in mind the author would have used this word, as done elsewhere, rather than a very general description of men sleeping with men.

Robert Gagnon, a conservative scholar, notes that Leviticus 18 was produced with homosexual cult prostitution in view, given the context of Canaanite and Egyptian idolatry.<sup>6</sup>

But Gagnon then says, “However, male cult prostitution was not the only context in which homosexual intercourse manifested itself in the ancient Near East generally. It was merely the most acceptable context for homosexual intercourse to be practiced in Mesopotamia, certainly for those who played the role of the receptive partner.” Non-cultic homosexual activity was even less acceptable than cultic. Gagnon’s entire argument is that these texts should not be understood as limited to cultic prostitution.

Also, Gerald T. Sheppard (who was an OT scholar/professor in Canada, not a conservative, and someone who affirms same-sex unions) writes, “I do not think that the texts in Leviticus can be read from a historical perspective as applicable only to cult prostitution because they stand in the context of other laws regulating general immoral conduct such as incestuous relationships, adultery, and bestiality.” (“The Use of Scripture Within the Christian Ethical Debate Concerning Same-Sex Oriented Persons,” USQR 40 (1985): 22)

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<sup>6</sup> Gagnon in *The Bible and Homosexual Practice* states on p 130 “I do not doubt that the circles out of which Lev 18:22 was produced had in view homosexual cult prostitution, at least partly. Homosexual cult prostitution appears to have been the primary form in which homosexual intercourse was practiced in Israel.”

While Leviticus 18 uses the term “abomination” to refer to a man lying with another man, many other behaviors so designated (e.g. sex during menstruation) are allowed today, at least among Gentile believers. The attempt to resolve this by categorizing one as a matter of moral concern and the other as a matter of ritual purity is not easy to establish on the basis of textual evidence.<sup>7</sup> In fact, the Authorized Version’s use of the English term “abomination” to translate the Hebrew *toevah* is disputed. In English, “abomination” implies severe condemnation reserved for the most egregious forms of immorality; yet *toevah* is also used for offenses against ritual purity such as sex during menstruation and eating shellfish.

It is true that in some cases “detestable” seems synonymous with “gross” or “taboo.” But in other cases it is used for truly horrific practices, like sacrificing children in the fire (Deut 12:31). In fact, the *only* prohibition in this section of Leviticus which we would not consider universal and timeless would be the sex-during-menstruation prohibition. We still consider all the rest: incest, bestiality, child sacrifice and adultery (the other prohibitions in this chapter) as universally sinful and not just connected to ritual purity.

In the entire Holiness Code, where the Leviticus 18 text is located, there is only one forbidden act to which the designation “abomination” is specifically attached: homosexual intercourse. The Hebrew word for “detestable”, *toevah*, always means something uniformly detested and abhorred. Also, it’s very unlikely that sex during menstruation was thought to be equivalent to homosexual activity by the author of Leviticus. The result of sex during menstruation, according to Lev. 15:24 is uncleanness for seven days for the man (the woman is unclean during this period). There is no clear penalty that I can find for eating shellfish, it is simply prohibited. But the penalty for homosexual activity, like bestiality and incest, is death. It is not simply ritual uncleanness.

The next relevant text is **Romans 1: 24-27**. Like Leviticus 18, Romans 1 is framed as commentary on pagan idolatry. The practices referenced are in fact cited as the *effect* of end stage paganism. God is said to have “given over” the pagan idolaters to such behavior because of persistent and egregious idolatry.<sup>8</sup> The pagan idolaters of Romans 1: 24-27 are “inflamed with lust”—a particularly intense form of unrestrained passion. This is followed by a list of vices that Luke Timothy Johnson calls “cold hearted vices”—the sins of the overtly and insolently rebellious.<sup>9</sup>

N.T. Wright is very informative here. His argument is that Paul’s argument here is not simply drawn from Leviticus but from the narrative of Genesis 1-3. The whole idea of human beings, as male and female, reflecting God’s image part of what is “self-evident” (or should be) to everyone. But according to the narrative of Romans 1, people stop recognizing the male-female created order, just as they stop recognizing the Creator.

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<sup>7</sup> Hays, *Moral Vision*, p. 382

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p 385, p. 388.

<sup>9</sup> Johnson, Luke Timothy. *Reading Romans: A Literary and Theological Commentary*. Macon, GA: Smyth and Helwys, 2012.

Paul isn't simply describing pagan idolatry, he is also describing the *effects* of an idolatrous mindset which doesn't recognize God's order. When people worship things that are not God, their image-bearing-ness begins to deconstruct, and an obvious sign of this is the breakdown of male-female relationships. Wright ties this into the later chapters in Romans where Abraham is seen as someone who restored right relationship with God by acknowledging God, and by the coming together of Abraham and Sarah to fulfill the "being fruitful" of Genesis.

As noted earlier, the text is arguably ambiguous regarding women. Most commentators, including Robert Jewett, whose commentary in the *Hermeneia* series is widely regarded as the most exhaustive, think that Paul is speaking of lesbian sex here. But most also admit that the nature of the relationships is not known, since there is so little attention paid to such liaisons in the literature of the period.

Scholars seem fairly confident that the reference is to lesbianism. As Brooten (whom you cite below) says,

"References to lesbians in the Graeco-Roman world are relatively more numerous than in earlier periods, which could indicate that lesbians were living more openly than previously. For example, while the Hebrew Bible does not forbid lesbian existence, post-biblical Jewish writings do discuss whether it is forbidden...others also mention lesbians, usually in a derogatory fashion. This is different from discussions of male homosexuality in ancient sources, some of which are accepting and others of which are negative. It is this nearly thoroughgoing rejection of love between women in both ancient and non-Christian and Christian sources which causes me to question the thesis posed by John Boswell...that a broad strand of tolerance of homosexuality existed in the early church...The pre-Christian and Christian Sappho interpretation of the Hellenistic and Roman periods further confirms the general rejection of lesbian existence." (Brooten, p. 289).

Cantarella indicates that Greek society separated the sexes for initiation where girls sometimes had sex with adult females.<sup>10</sup> How widespread this practice was, seems unknown.

At any rate, most commentators at least notice the difficulty because the language used to describe the actions in question isn't as clear in the case of women as it is in the case of men: "their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural" is more ambiguous than "men committed shameful acts with other men." Which form of "unnatural relations" is Paul referring to? Does the subsequent clarity in regard to men help us with the ambiguous wording in regard to women?

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<sup>10</sup> Cantarella, Eva. *Bisexuality in the Ancient World*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002. p. 83: "Sex during initiation, for boys, was with an adult. For girls, on the other hand, it was sometimes with their mistresses, and sometimes...with another girl of the same age."

On balance, I'd have to agree: it seems that a preponderance of evidence points to sex between women. But it is just that: a preponderance of evidence.

This is not a "slam dunk" conclusion, however. I'm still arguing with myself with some friends over this one.

I wonder: if Romans has Leviticus 18-20 in the background (both are commentary on the pagan practices associated with idolatry) the "unnatural relations" involving women could be an allusion to bestiality. Bestiality, and not lesbian sex, is the perversion of women that parallels a "man lying with a man" in Leviticus 18 and 20, where both are mentioned.<sup>11</sup>

The text says that the women exchanged their "natural sexual relations" for unnatural ones, "in the same way" that the men committed shameful acts with other men. Isn't a "woman lying with a woman" the clear parallel to a "man lying with a man" here, rather than bestiality? Was bestiality prevalent among women at this time? That seems much more unlikely than lesbianism. In verse 24 it refers to "the degrading of their bodies with one another." Bestiality wouldn't be "with one another."

In support of this view are these considerations: Paul's only Bible was the Old Testament. The Holiness Code of Leviticus 18-20, unfamiliar to most of us, would have figured prominently in his understanding of pagan idolatry. In Romans Paul is concerned with the Greco-Roman version of pagan idolatry. Both texts are framed at the outset as commentary on the behavior of the surrounding idolatrous nations. For Paul, the comparison might have come easily. I couldn't find this hypothesis in my review of the literature however, though a friend who is Jewish scholar thought it had merit. But that doesn't even merit a footnote, does it?

Since the language with respect to the "unnatural relations" of women isn't explicit, others have posited that Paul may have had anal or femoral intercourse in view.<sup>12</sup>

Romans 1:26 says "Even their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones." If this is simply an "unnatural" form of heterosexual intercourse, why is it referring here just to "women"? This just doesn't seem to make sense of the parallel that Paul seems to be demonstrating between women exchanging natural (heterosexual) relations for unnatural (homosexual), just as men abandoned natural relations with women (heterosexual) in light of their lust for one another (homosexual).

There is evidence that the revered church fathers, Augustine and Anastasius, may have thought it referred to a form of "unnatural" sexual relations other than lesbianism.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> In support of this view, Paul's only Bible was the Old Testament, and Romans, chapter on can be seen as his version of the holiness code of Leviticus 18-20, both of which are framed around the behavior of the people of God as distinct from the surrounding pagan society.

<sup>12</sup> Ruden, *Paul Among the People*

<sup>13</sup> Brooten, Bernadette. "Patristic Interpretations of Romans 1:26." *Studia Patristica XVIII: Papers of the 1983 Oxford Patristics Conference*. Ed. Elizabeth Livingstone. (1985): 338-340. *The Writings of St. Paul: Annotated Texts, Reception and Criticism*. 2d ed. vol. 1 Ed. Wayne A. Meeks and John T. Fitzgerald. New York: Norton, 2007, p 287

But, as Brooten notes, Anastasius disputed the possibility of sexual relations between women because they cannot penetrate one another. He simply overlooked the existence of lesbian sex, as did many men of that age. Men were in general not much concerned with female sexuality. But the majority of church fathers, like John Chrysostom and Clement of Alexandria, interpreted Romans 1 as referring to lesbian sex. And all the church fathers uniformly condemned it.

If the rites of female initiation included sex between a girl and an adult mistress, one can imagine this as an abhorrent practice to Paul and thus his primary referent.

If the primary issue is that adults were having sex with children, and not the genders involved, then why wasn't the thrust of Paul's argument against adult-child relationships in general? Was Paul not also concerned about exploitative relationships between older men and young girls? It seems a bit convoluted to say that Paul, when he is condemning same-sex relationships (between men and boys, or between women and girls) is actually condemning pederasty not homosexuality (especially when he doesn't use the words for pederasty, as I will note below). If the power imbalance between an adult and a child is the issue, is it not similarly an issue if the adult is male and the child is female, or if the adult is female and the child male.

Also, in an age when girls were usually married by the age of 14, usually to a much older man, isn't it anachronistic to suggest that Paul was primarily concerned with the age differences between the girl and an adult woman?

This would all be much less of a concern were there *any other reference at all* to lesbian sex in the entire Bible, but there is not. This was an added concern to me because the first openly gay people coming to our church were women.

It is not just in the Bible—there is very little reference to lesbian sex in any ancient sources, compared to gay sex. This is not because lesbian sexual activity was viewed more favorably (it wasn't), it is because the ancient authors are almost uniformly men, and had much less interest in the world of female sexuality (because it didn't involve them). Also, because female "sex" did not include penetration, many men did not even think of it in terms of "intercourse" or "sex."

Regardless, the link between sexual practice and Gentile idolatry is central, not incidental to Paul's argument. The Greco-Roman gods were viewed as sexual beings. Zeus practiced pederasty with Ganymede, a young male god.<sup>14</sup> Temple prostitution linked sexual perversion with idolatry, the context of Romans 1. Would the original recipients of Paul's letter, all too familiar with the widespread practices of temple prostitution and pederasty have viewed this first and foremost as a condemnation of these practices? Is the text a sweeping condemnation of all same sex practice or does it speak to the *predominant*

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<sup>14</sup> Buxton, Richard. *The Complete World of Greek Mythology*. New York, NY: Thames and Hudson, 2004. p 100.

practices of the time, especially those particularly associated with idolatry—temple prostitution and pederasty?

Is there any evidence *at all* that Paul or his audience would have accepted *some* forms of homosexual activity, but not these predominant forms? Or that they would not have understood Paul's condemnation as referring to *the act itself*? Is it not the very act itself, as with incest or bestiality, that is prohibited?

As per N.T. Wright's article, Paul's discussion in Romans 1 seems most likely to be an illustration of the breakdown of created order (as per Genesis) when idols instead of God are worshipped, and when the created order of male-female is abandoned. That would include all same-sex activity, because the created order was male-female, per Genesis 1-2. As Wright indicates, Paul is not here just describing some of the things that pagan idolaters do, he is specifically mentioning men engaging in relations with men, and women with women.

Also, there were Greek words related to pederasty that Paul *never* uses. There is the *erastes/eromenos* relationship itself: the *erastes* is the older lover, seen as the active or dominant partner, the *eromenos* is the passive or subordinate partner. Then there is the Greek *paiderastes*, which meant "lover of boys" usually with a negative connotation (where we get our word pederasty). Isn't it informative that Paul nowhere uses these words, if pederasty is the predominant form of homosexuality he is critiquing?

Is there much question that Paul, an observant 1<sup>st</sup> century Jew, would have condemned *all* same-sex activity, per Leviticus 18 and 20? All of evidence available from that era suggests that any and all same-sex activity was considered abhorrent by Jews.

In a telling aside, Jewett, who seems to support the traditional view adds this: "It remains puzzling why Paul assumes that his audience, consisting of a majority coming from a background in which same sex relations were often tolerated, would have accepted Paul's point of view without argument. While the Jewish background of Paul's heterosexual preference has been frequently cited as decisive by previous researchers, little attention has been given to the correlation between homosexuality and slavery. The right of masters to demand sexual services from slaves and freedmen is an important factor in grasping the impact of Paul's rhetoric, because slavery was so prominent a feature of the social background of most of Paul's audience in Rome."<sup>15</sup>

So that makes three very significant and pervasive sexual practices that would have been well known to Paul's audience and would have framed or dominated their view of "homosexual acts": temple prostitution, pederasty, and the sexual services required of slaves.

Why would we assume that same-gender sexual activity between truly homosexual adults was not as common then as it is the modern era? If homosexuality is an inborn trait,

<sup>15</sup> Jewett, Robert. *Romans: A Commentary*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2007. p. 180

wouldn't the population of gay adults then be about the same as it is now? Is there reason they wouldn't have been attracted to each other then as they are now?

True, in the ancient world the "receptive" partner in male gay sex would have been seen as inferior, so there would still have been a stigma attached to two adult men being in a sexual relationship. But social stigma certainly didn't prevent same-gender adults from engaging in mutual relationships in our recent history, and neither would it have in the ancient context.

And wouldn't the original audience of the letter to the Romans be quite familiar with the Hebrew prohibitions against homosexuality in Leviticus, and the male-female created order of Genesis? Would they not have understood Paul as drawing a contrast between this order and what was currently going on around them?

Yet, these same practices are virtually unknown to many modern readers. To others, they are merely an historical footnote that has little impact on the imagination as we read his words today.<sup>16</sup> But how would we hear Paul's condemnation of same sex practice if our view of it had been shaped by widespread and widely accepted institutions like pederasty, temple prostitution, and slavery (where the sexual servicing of masters by their slaves was a given)? When reading Romans 1, would we have in our minds two women who have formed their own family unit, having made commitments to each other, and are now raising children together? That's hard for me to imagine.

This really gets down to whether you think Paul believed there was something *intrinsically* sinful with same-gender sexual activity, or if he was *only* condemning all of the activities that were associated with some predominant forms of it in his time—prostitution, idolatry, pederasty, and rape, but not the sex act itself. I agree with Wright that the context of Romans 1 would suggest that the exchanging of the God given male-female order with male-male or female-female is the most straightforward and obvious reading of Romans 1. But even if that is arguable, Romans 1 is not the only biblical text dealing with homosexuality, and it would be a very difficult argument to suggest that all the other texts are likewise not talking about the same-gender sex act itself.

The evidence I kept seeing presented to indicate that the original readers would definitely have known of something equivalent to our modern day gay families is a section in Plato's Symposium that purportedly indicates that such unions were well known at the time (roughly 400 years before Romans was written, that is.) When I dusted off my (unread) some cases, where the youth seduced by the older mentor wants the relationship for the right reasons and the mentor has "noble" reasons as well.<sup>17</sup> I had to agree with Sarah Ruden, a Greco-Roman scholar steeped in this literature, who debunks the idea that Plato knew of gay relationships that are equivalent to today's monogamous gay unions, formed

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<sup>16</sup> I was surprised to see that in what was otherwise a thoughtful treatment of homosexuality in *A Moral Vision of the New Testament*, Richard Hays does not even address the possibility that Paul may have these practices in view in Romans 1, which is explicitly about pagan idolatry.

<sup>17</sup> See the speech of Pausanias, pp. 534-538, *Plato: The Collected Dialogues*, Edited by Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns, Princeton University Press.



as a co-equal partnership between adults who are committed to lifelong fidelity in these relationships.

This all depends on what you mean by “equivalent to our modern day gay families.” I’m not even sure the original readers would have known of something equivalent to our modern day *heterosexual* families. With egalitarian relationships, women working outside the home, a whole different notion regarding child-rearing—it would look quite foreign. Would Plato have even known about co-equal *heterosexual* relationships, let alone gay? Would Paul have?

In Paul’s day, it would have been considered *extremely* shameful for an adult man to be the receptive partner in a male-male sexual relationship. So it is not strange that we find little open discussion of adult men in sexual relationships, just like we don’t find a lot of discussion of gay relationships in our country just a century ago. Gay couples were not adopting kids and living openly in our country 100 years ago, but that surely doesn’t mean that people were unaware that consenting men were having sex with one another in secret. In fact, there is an abundance of evidence that people were very aware of it.

Yet the dissimilarity between today’s heterosexual marriages and heterosexual marriages two thousand years ago wouldn’t lead us to dismiss marriage-related prohibitions or exhortations out of hand as being anachronistic or not relevant. We would need to carefully determine the cultural context and discern what is a universal principle and what is a culturally-bound prohibition, like we do for every text. So the question is whether or not there is a biblical, universal principle that male-female pairing in a covenant commitment is the only God-given context for sexual intimacy. (Also, the assumption is that the book of Romans is God-inspired scripture, not just dependent on Paul’s own limited understanding of things.)

So yes, given the prevalence of pederasty (remember: the sexual exploitation boys and young men by older men as an aspect of initiating them into adulthood) it is possible, maybe even likely, that at least some continued their sexual relationship well into the adulthood of the minor party. Though the younger passive partner would have suffered the loss of social standing as a result, so the relationships couldn’t have been between social equals. Yes, there may have been some adult men who were known to be in a sexual relationship that might have been similar to a modern day gay union because it involved two adult men, who for their own (probably very different) reasons were willing to be in the relationship. But if the relationship had been formed in the exploitative, abhorrent, often violent institution called pederasty, wouldn’t that be a different kind of relationship entirely?

I think that many of us might consider normal, heterosexual marriages in the ancient world (including the Hebrew/Jewish) as exploitative of women, right? With middle-aged men marrying teenage girls, and treating them essentially as property? Was this not a form of “exploitation”? If we’re going to say that the Bible does not talk about modern-day homosexuality, we might as well also say that it does not talk about modern-day heterosexuality, because they are likewise *very* different. And again, this begs the question

of whether Paul believed that the God-given order for human sexuality is male-female, and any divergence from that would be sinful.

Just an aside: Who digs out Plato's Symposium to check out a reference like this?  
Answer: pastors who might have to speak to modern day gay families to tell them what they are doing is so clearly and unambiguously condemned in the Bible that they should expect to be excluded from something in the church as a result.

The fact is, when scholars search the literature of the period, they can find untold examples of homosexual acts in the context of pederasty, temple prostitution, and slavery. But they can't find anything like that to back up the assertion that something like today monogamous gay union were well known and thus, *must* have been included in Paul's condemnation.

As you know, N.T. Wright disputes this. For example, in section 191d-192b of Plato's Symposium Plato refers to gay men (men who are attracted to men rather than women) once grown as: "A man of this sort is at any rate born to be a lover of boys or the willing mate of a man." They were boy lovers *OR* the "willing mate of a man."

Plato's Symposium is relevant because 1) It identifies the same-sex orientation as something a person is born with (Plato gives an explanation for why some men are born attracted to men, and why some are born attracted to women), and, 2) It acknowledges the possibility of his being "the willing mate of a man" as an option, not just the well-known forms of pederasty.

After that somewhat dizzying foray into the details of Greco-Roman sexual practices, here's the point. In a situation like this, a *pastor* is left to make the call: Does the text sound like it's *aimed* at the people I know in such relationships? In this case, knowing what I know (which may be inadequate, but I've been working hard on this) I feel confident to say: No, these are not the people Paul is speaking to, not when he is speaking like this. He is speaking like this of idolaters who have been given over, after many attempts to reach them, to the sexual practices that characterize awful institutions like pederasty, temple prostitution celebrating sexually active gods like Zeus and Ganymede, and the horrible way that masters exploit the bodies of people they think they *own*. This level of detail is difficult to fit into a thirty-five minute sermon. Perhaps your eyes have already glazed over reading this detailed analysis. But this level of detail is *absolutely necessary* to speak as a pastor with any informed confidence to a gay person.

And keep in mind: the current debate on homosexuality in the church doesn't have anything to do with defending institutions like pederasty, temple prostitution or slavery and the sexual servicing of masters that goes along with it. It revolves around a different concern entirely, a much smaller one: the question of monogamous gay covenantal relationships. It is easy to read the question of monogamous gay covenantal relationships back into the text and fail to appreciate the abhorrent, widespread, and socially acceptable same sex practices that were the cultural model for same sex activity in the Greco-Roman world.

As a pastor, I didn't need help to discern how to respond to temple prostitution, pederasty, and slave sex. I was dealing with gay people who had strong same sex attraction from childhood—some from devout Christian homes—who endured a period of deep anguish about their sexuality, perhaps sought healing to no avail, and were tempted to suicide. After much soul searching, some had come to believe that they were called to a faithful covenantal relationship with a same sex partner. Others came to the church with pre-existing commitments of this sort, and some were parents with kids in tow.

The more I studied this text, the less it held up as a condemnation of all gay relationships. Even traditional commentators agree that the Romans 1 is not to be used as a condemnation of specific individuals.<sup>18</sup> Richard Hays goes so far as to say, “The aim of Romans 1 is not to teach a code of sexual ethics; nor is the passage a warning of God’s judgment against those who are guilty of particular sins”.<sup>19</sup> Thus, the text does not offer either a pastoral approach or a church policy regarding the people involved. In fact, the exhortation that flows from Romans is to condemn those who would judge others, while participating in any of a wide range of other sins!<sup>20</sup>

Hays, whom you cite, writes about Romans 1:

“The charge that these fallen humans have "exchanged natural relations for unnatural" means nothing more nor less than that human beings, created for heterosexual companionship as the Genesis story bears witness, have distorted even so basic a truth as their sexual identity by rejecting the male and female roles which are "naturally" theirs in God's created order. The charge is a corporate indictment of pagan society...” (“Relations Natural and Unnatural: A Response to John Boswell's Exegesis of Romans I" by Richard B. Hays in the Journal of Religious Ethics, Vol. 14 (1986), pp. 199-201)

Yes, the “aim” of Romans 1 is not to teach sexual ethics, but as Hays points out, Paul is clear that humans were created for heterosexual companionship and that homosexual relationships are a distortion of the created male/female roles.

The reason for this caution, though, is not simply that Paul’s argument is framed as a wide-angle assessment of idolatry and its consequences writ large, but the fact that the “particular sins” in view are not crystal clear. The text seems to *best* fit the sexual acts of pederasty, temple prostitution, or to the sexual servicing required of slaves and freedmen (all but freeborn) in the asymmetrical and exploitative power relationships that

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<sup>18</sup> For example, “To use these texts appropriately in ethical reflection about homosexuality, we should not try to wring rules out of them, nor should we abstract principles from them.” Hays, *Moral Vision*, p. 396.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 387

<sup>20</sup> Romans 2:1 You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge another, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment do the same things. Stowers, Stanley K. *A Rereading of Romans* (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 1994. p. 12

characterized the Greco-Roman context.<sup>21</sup> This coherence breaks down when applied to the people I am caring for.

When I consulted more conservative or traditional sources—highly regarded sources—I found them unconvincing. They simply weren't dealing with the questions that I faced as a pastor.

The conservative commentator Hendrickson, echoing many others, says that “A person's sexual orientation, whether heterosexual or homosexual is not the point at issue. What matters is what a person does with his sexuality!”<sup>22</sup> I once found this distinction quite helpful. But as I studied the texts more carefully, I came to wonder about its relevance. In Romans 1, Paul says that “God gave them over to shameful lusts” as a punishment for their end stage paganism. The homosexual acts are not disconnected from the shameful lusts that precede them. This seems to be a reference to what we might now call sexual orientation, which the Catholic Church regards as “intrinsically disordered.” This framing is in stark contrast to the experience of so many. Is God in the business, for example, of giving over children in Christian families to their shameful lusts as a punishment for gross idolatry? Hendrickson's clear distinction between orientation and behavior may be a helpful pastoral distinction, but it does not seem to be derived from the text at all—quite the contrary.

In the case of lesbian relationships, this seems especially problematic. It is the only text in all of Scripture that pertains to lesbian sex. How does a pastor sit down with two women who are in a lifelong covenantal relationship, read them *this* text and expect it to resonate with their experience, as Scripture does when the Spirit is wielding it? When Scripture is convicting, it seems to describe the sinner with uncanny accuracy. This text did not seem to be describing the people I know with uncanny accuracy. In the case of the lesbian couple, how does one use a text like this (the only one available in all of Scripture) to justify the exclusionary practices common to the traditional approach?

The limitations and difficulties of Romans 1 are significant, because the remaining New Testament texts are even more problematic as guides in the care of such couples. Get ready for some more mind-numbing detail that doesn't make for snappy, easy to digest sermons.

The next occurrence is **1 Corinthians 6:9**, where two terms, *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai*, appear in a list of vices. Vice lists, by definition, are not useful to define the behaviors in view when the precise meaning of terms is uncertain.<sup>23</sup> This is especially the case when Scripture doesn't treat the behaviors indicated in more depth elsewhere. For example, the

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<sup>21</sup> “The right of masters to demand sexual services from slaves and freedmen is an important factor in grasping the impact of Paul's rhetoric, because slavery was so prominent a feature of the social background of Paul's audience in Rome.” Jewett, *Romans: A Commentary*, p. 180.

<sup>22</sup> Hendriksen, W., & Kistemaker, S. J. *New Testament Commentary Vol. 12-13: Exposition of Paul's Epistle to the Romans*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1953-2001.

<sup>23</sup> “The proper way to read such lists is not to dwell so much on their individual elements as to assess their overall impact. Such lists were based on the premise that wicked people tended to practice all the vices, just as good people practiced all the virtues.” Johnson, *Reading Romans*.

mere listing of adultery in a vice list doesn't help us understand whether remarriage after divorce or lusting after a woman constitutes adultery. For that we need more than a vice list and Scripture provides it with many specific examples of adultery offered in Scripture. These relevant examples are missing with respect to same sex relationships.

The Greek terms employed by Paul in 1 Corinthians 6:9, *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai*, are notoriously difficult to translate.<sup>24</sup> Martin Luther translates *malakoi* as “weichlinge” or “weaklings”<sup>25</sup> and *arsenokoitai* as “knabenschänder” a German word that means “ravisher of male youth.”<sup>26</sup> Neither term is connected in any way to monogamous gay relationships.

The first term, *malakoi*, has also been rendered “effeminate,” (KJV) “male prostitutes,” (NIV) “weakling” (Luther, 1522)<sup>27</sup>, “catamites” (handsome young men kept for sexual purposes, analogous to Ganymede, the young consort of Zeus).<sup>28</sup>

I was particularly affected by Gordon Fee's commentary on 1 Cor. 6:9. I've met Fee, loved his books, and trust him as a man of the Spirit and a man of the Book. So it caught my attention when Fee candidly elaborates on the translation difficulties over these two key Greek words. Fee writes, “The first word, *malakoi*, has the basic meaning of ‘soft’ but it also came to mean ‘effeminate,’ most likely referring to the younger, ‘passive’ partner in a pederastic relationship—a common form of homosexuality in the Greco-Roman world. In many instances, young men sold themselves as ‘mistresses’ for the sexual pleasure of men older than themselves. The problem is that there was a technical word for such men, and *malakos* is seldom, if ever, so used. *Since it is not the ordinary word for homosexual behavior, one cannot be sure what it means in a list like this, where there is no further context to help* [italics added].”<sup>29</sup> Fee suggests that *malakoi* means “male prostitute” or “effeminate call boy” but adds that this is only a “best guess.”<sup>30</sup>

The next term, *arsenokoitai* is even more problematic. Again, Fee says, “This word (*arsenokoitai*), however is also difficult. This is the first appearance in preserved literature, and subsequent authors are reluctant to use it, especially when describing homosexual activity.”<sup>31</sup> Fee notes that the word is a compound with roots meaning “male” and “intercourse” but adds, “what is not certain is whether ‘male’ is subject (= ‘males who

<sup>24</sup> Soards, Marion. L. *Scripture and Homosexuality, Biblical Authority and the Church today* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995) p 18-20. Fee, Gordon. D. *The First Epistle to the Corinthians, The New International Commentary on the New Testament*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1987; p 244.

<sup>25</sup> Jung, *Heterosexism: An Ethical Challenge*. In 1522 Martin Luther translated this term Weichlinge or “weaklings”

<sup>26</sup> Switzer, David K. *Pastoral Care of Gays, Lesbians and Their Families*. Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1999: Luther in his translation of the New Testament published in 1522, used the word *Knabenschänder* to translate the word *arsenokoitai* both in 1 Corinthians and 1 Timothy. This German word means raper or ravisher of male youth. Luther knew on the basis of his research that the Greek word was not to be used to refer to all homosexual acts, but only to one type, the pederast.

<sup>27</sup> Jung, Patricia Beattie. *Heterosexism: An Ethical Challenge*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1993.

<sup>28</sup> Buxton, *The Complete World of Greek Mythology*. p 100

<sup>29</sup> Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, p 244

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p 244

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p 244. What makes “male prostitute” (in the sense of “effeminate call-boy”) the best guess is that it is immediately followed by a word that does seem to refer to male homosexuality, especially to the active partner. This word (*arsenokoitai*), however, is also difficult. This is its first appearance in preserved literature, and subsequent authors are reluctant to use it, especially when describing homosexual activity.

have intercourse'; thus a word for male prostitutes of all kinds) or object (= 'intercourse with males' therefore male homosexual.)"<sup>32</sup>

I could see for myself the difficulty understanding what the term refers to by comparing the different English translations: "sodomites" (NRSV), "homosexual offenders" (NIV), "homosexuals" (NASB) and "abusers of themselves with mankind" (KJV) "child molesters" (Martin Luther).

It doesn't seem so problematic in reading the commentaries and lexicons, which all agree that the reference is men having sex with men. Keep in mind that if Paul were to refer to the Levitical prohibitions against men sleeping with men, he would be referring to (in the Greek LXX):

Lev 18:22 *kai meta arsenos ou koimēthēsē koitēn gunaikos bdelugma gar estin*

Lev 20:13 *kai os an koimēthē meta arsenos koitēn gunaikos bdelugma epoiēsan amphoteroi thanatousthōsan enochoi eisin*

The key words being *arsenos* (man) and *koiten* (to lie with, sexually). *arsenos + koiten = arsenokoites*. So if Paul is using a term referring to those who do what Leviticus prohibits (men having sex with a man, as with a woman), he would use *arsenokoitai*.

The most recent NIV, which assembles the best of evangelical scholarship, notes: "The words men who have sex with men translate two Greek words [*malakoi* and *arsenokoitai*] that refer to the passive and active participants in homosexual acts."

The Levitical prohibitions are not related to pederasty. It is a prohibition on men having sex with men. Neither have I found a single serious bible scholar who thinks that Paul was referring primarily to temple prostitution in 1 Cor 6:9, or 1 Tim 1:10. The vice lists clearly are not focused on idolatry. "Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor men who have sex with men." Idolatry is *one of* the sins listed, not the entire category.

Philo uses the word *malakia* ("softness, effeminacy") in his discussion of homosexual behavior (Spec. Laws 3.37-42) to refer to the behavior of passive homosexual partners (*hoi paschontes*) who cultivate feminine features. Men who braid their hair and use makeup and perfume to please male lovers. It is *not* limited to pederasty. Philo refers to these men using various means to prolong "their youthful beauty." In the Greek these are the *kinaidos* -- men with a love of being sexually penetrated by other men. (See Winkler, John J. "The Constraints of Desire: The Anthropology of Sex and Gender in Ancient Greece").

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<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p 244

To summarize: Fee regards “effeminate call boy” for *malakoi* as “a best guess” and NIV’s “homosexual offender” [itself an ambiguous term] for *arsenokoitai* as only “very likely moving toward a proper understanding.”<sup>33</sup>

But, wait a minute. Any translation that uses the modern term “homosexual”—common in modern translations—is seriously misleading for two reasons. First, it obscures the fact that only men are in view, since the term in Greek only applies to men. Second, the use of “homosexual” in translation obscures the fact that homosexuality was not a category in use in the biblical period. As is attested by many sources, the *predominant* same sex practices of the Greco-Roman world were very different than the practices debated within the church today.<sup>34</sup> Is that the best we can do, given all the above ambiguities?

The plural of *arsenokoitai* (*arsenokoitais*) appears in **1 Timothy 1: 10** in another vice list and offers no further clues to its meaning.<sup>35</sup> The term *malakoi* is noticeably absent.

Any form of effeminacy is going to be included in the word *malakoi*, whereas *arsenokoitai* includes only homosexual sex acts. Stating *malakoi* first in 1 Cor 6:9 has the effect of getting the gentile reader to agree with Paul (most Romans would see an effeminate man as shameful, even if they themselves have no problem with having sex with an effeminate man) before their worldview gets challenged by the placing of *arsenokoitai* in the same camp.

Understanding *arsenokoitai* as referring to men having sex with men (the literal meaning of the word), regardless of a particular context, seems to make the most sense. To suggest that Paul is referring primarily to the sins of pederasty, slavery, or idolatry, and not the sex act itself, seems to be reading much more into the text than is there.

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<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p 244

<sup>34</sup> Ruden, *Paul Among the People*, p 45-71.

<sup>35</sup> “The context offers little discussion of sexual morality as such” Hays, *Moral Vision*, p. 383.