

Human Sexuality and Our Future in the UMC

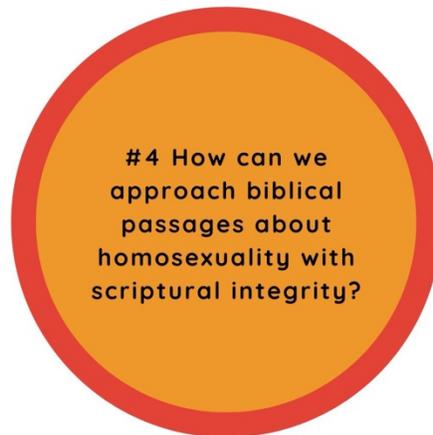
Circle #4

Part C

“How Can We Approach Biblical Passages About Homosexuality with Scriptural Integrity?”

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Fig. 4.1



In a previous paper, Circle #4, Part A, I dealt with four of the seven Scripture passages related to homosexuality (*Genesis 19:1-11, Jude 7, 1 Corinthians 6:9-11, & 1 Timothy 1:8-11*). In the last article, Part B, I covered the two biblical passages from Leviticus (*18:22 & 20:13*). This paper covers Romans 1:26-27, the only apparent biblical reference to both male and female homosexuality.

Let me reiterate that this is not an attempt to change anybody's mind or viewpoint on human sexuality. You must decide for yourself what you believe about interpreting these passages, and I am simply answering the question:

If someone believes homosexuality is not inherently sinful, how can they justify this view with what the Bible says?

I noted in Paper 4A some preliminary issues for consideration in approaching all biblical texts, along with some other contextual concerns in Paper 4B for interpreting Scriptures. If you have not read those comments, please review those papers to understand better the challenges of translating texts from ancient cultures into 21st-century applications. Additionally, whenever we work with a New Testament Scripture, we must also consider that many of its authors were writing with a sense of urgency, believing that Jesus would return within only days, months, or, at most, years.

So, their work reflects the perceived immediacy of the moment. A prime example of this is Paul's instructions about marriage in 1 Corinthians 7.

"To the unmarried and the widows, I say that it is good for them to remain unmarried as I am. But if they are not practicing self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to be aflame with passion." (1 Corinthians 7:8-9, NRSVue)

We celebrate marriage in our church as a godly way for two people to share in a sacred relationship. Yet, Paul's chief concern in the passage above is getting people ready for Jesus' return, so he advises the Christians on whether they should marry based on how it would impact their ability to maintain a lifestyle in the short term that honors God. He uses his singleness as the ideal but allows for "weaker" individuals to marry to keep from sinning. Understanding Paul's frame of reference helps us clarify how to apply his teaching to different contexts like ours.

In this paper, I will introduce Paul and his background, the religious and cultural environment of 1st-century Rome, and how this analysis adds to our understanding of Romans 1:26-27.

Introduction to the Apostle Paul

Paul, also known as Saul of Tarsus, was a Pharisee (*an expert in God's law*) who experienced a dramatic conversion and became a follower of Jesus Christ. Tom Holland described Paul's transformation,

"[Paul's] life had been upended. As a young man, he had been a Pharisee, ferociously committed to his studies; it was as a scholar [who was] 'zealous in the extreme for the traditions of my fathers' that he had sought to patrol the boundaries of what a Jew might acceptably believe. Inevitably, then, the followers of an itinerant teacher named Jesus, who insisted, despite the wretched man's crucifixion, that he had risen from the dead and ascended into heaven, there to reign as the Son of God, could not help but arouse in Paul profound emotions of shock and revulsion. Such a claim was not to be endured. It was a repellent folly. It had to be silenced. Paul had duly set himself to the destruction of the cult. But then, unexpectedly, traumatically, rapturously, the tipping point of his entire existence [occurred]. Some decades later, a version of what [turned his faith and life around] would be reported by one of Paul's followers, a historian to whom tradition would give the name of Luke: how it had occurred on the road from Jerusalem to Damascus, [from] words uttered from a blinding light."

--Tom Holland, Dominion: How the Christian Revolution Remade the World, Basic Books, 2019, p. 84.

As a Pharisee, Paul ardently defended the Hebrew faith, persecuting and overseeing the execution of those who followed the disgraced and executed rabbi, Jesus. On one of his

outings to eradicate this sacrilege among the Jews, he witnessed a young Christian, Stephen, preaching the Good News of Jesus Christ even as the Pharisees stoned him for blasphemy (see *Acts 7:1-60*). Later, the resurrected Jesus, of which Stephen spoke, appearing as a bright and blinding light, confronted Paul on the road to Damascus. He asked, “*Why do you persecute me?*” This encounter reset Paul’s faith and put him on a path to radical devotion to the One he previously persecuted, the Risen Christ. Paul’s zealotry for persecuting Christians transformed into a passionate desire to lead others to faith in Jesus Christ. He also formed churches throughout Asia Minor and Europe to disciple new believers.

Paul never entirely erased the Jewish law from his religious mindset and continued to use the Torah (*the books of the Law*) to define acceptable and unacceptable behavior for his fellow Christians. When you look at the vices in Paul’s lists in his letters, they often correspond loosely with the Ten Commandments, referring to murder, lying, stealing, idolatry, and adultery.

Even after his conversion, Paul struggled with the degree to which Christians must follow the law as opposed to the sufficiency of God’s grace for salvation. The tension between law and grace is real, even today, as we struggle to understand how much grace God is willing to extend to those trapped in sin. Paul’s belief in the impending return of Jesus Christ further impassioned his pleas for Christians to live righteous lives, almost as an insurance policy against the possibility he was wrong about God’s miraculous grace.

Paul, a Pharisee, who radically converted to Christianity, would need to move from the familiarity and comfort of life in Jerusalem into a world where he would encounter Gentiles, pagan gods, and heathen practices daily. Yet, to do so would help him become one of the most influential leaders in the Christian movement. Let’s examine Paul’s new world more closely.

The Religious and Cultural Context of Rome

In the second and first centuries BC, foreign cults permeated the religious landscape in Rome, with an increasing number of people involved in worshipping Hercules and the Anatolian Mother Goddess Cybele (*Magna Mater*). During the first century AD, the emperor cult of the Caesars was also at the forefront of everybody’s thoughts – primarily for seeking the economic and social advantages that worshipping the emperor could bring, even if they weren’t fully convinced the emperors were gods.

The Jews were monotheists, so they refused to worship anyone but their One True God (*Yahweh*), resulting in their marginalization and persecution for refusing to pay tribute to the emperor. Fearing the growing influence of the rebellious Jews in Rome, Emperor Claudius (*ruling from 41 AD-54 AD*) evicted the Jews in 49 AD. Since Jewish and Gentile Christians practiced their faith alongside the Jews in the synagogues, most Gentile Christians, primarily poor or lower class, deserted the synagogue to begin worshipping

in their homes in the multi-story tenements of the inner city. Years later, presumably, after Claudius' death, when it was safe for the Jews to return to Rome, the Jewish Christians returning home struggled with the direction the Gentile Christians had taken the church in Rome, forcing Paul to intervene and mediate the tension. This friction is one of the reasons why Paul wrote his letter to the Romans.

Paul wrote his letter while in Corinth in the mid-50s AD. He had never visited Rome before writing to the mix of Jewish and Gentile Christians; however, Corinth's cultural and religious context was similar to Rome's. Paul knew how the highly sexualized pagan rituals associated with worshiping Hercules and Cybele impacted the church members.

In *"Roman Sexuality in Paul's World,"* Bruce Gerig points out that most men of means (*excluding Jews and Christians*) in the Roman Empire were heterosexual by orientation but behaviorally bisexual. By choice, they engaged male and female prostitutes, participated in orgies at pagan temple feasts and dinner parties, and abused their slaves, who were duty-bound to provide sexual services to their masters. This culture of sexual promiscuity and permissiveness was on Paul's mind when he wrote to the church in Rome. Let's turn our attention to the two verses in the New Testament that have stirred a lot of controversy in the church for several decades.

Romans 1:26-27

Biblical scholars agree that these two verses in Romans 1 are pivotal verses for understanding Paul's views on same-sex relations. That assertion is where the agreement stops, and critical analysis leads these same scholars to an impasse on interpreting and applying these verses in a 21st-century context. Paul wrote,

"For this reason, God gave them over to dishonorable passions. Their females exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way, also, the males, giving up natural intercourse with females, were consumed with their passionate desires for one another. Males committed shameless acts with males and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error."
(Romans 1:26-27, NRSVue)

Romans 1:26-27 leaves little ambiguity that Paul condemned the same-sex behavior he observed throughout the Roman Empire. Paul assumed that same-sex relations were a personal choice with no recognition of any biological role in sexual attraction, so he condemned the promiscuous sexual interaction among people of the same sex as *"sinful behavior"* in a *"fallen world."*

Some Christians are content to stop here without further analysis and agree with Paul's condemnation of all homosexual behaviors without considering that Paul's conclusions may be inaccurate. Did Paul ever observe same-sex relations where there were faithful, committed, monogamous relations between two mature adults of the same sex, and was

he condemning that? Or was Paul condemning the promiscuous and lewd behavior of heterosexuals indulging in abusive and uncontrolled homosexual behavior? It's possible Paul condemned both, but we don't know for sure. This uncertainty is why it's imperative to fully understand the context and see if we can understand Paul's reasoning behind his words in Romans 1:26-27.

Here are some critical observations to help us understand the context of Romans 1:

- 1. *The Romans wanted to "play God" and oversee their own lives instead of submitting to God as their Creator and following his lead.***

Paul described the Roman situation this way,

"For though they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles." (Romans 1:21-23, NRSVue)

Paul assumed everybody knew about God because he revealed himself in his creation, and nobody could miss it. Yet, the Romans ignored God and foolishly settled for the futility of worshiping human-made idols instead. Steve Harper offers this assessment,

"The first key [to understanding Romans 1:26-27] is the context of idolatry and lust. In keeping with the spirit of Leviticus, Paul knew that sexuality has the power to turn us from the true God to false gods. And that was what was happening in Roman culture. Paul described it as exchanging "the glory of the immortal God for images that look like humans" (Romans 1:23). But as in Leviticus more than five hundred years earlier, and in Corinth not far away, idolatry was not merely the breaking of one of the ten commandments, it was a deformative act of the will, which set in motion a downward spiral into other sinfulness."

--Steve Harper in Holy Love: A Biblical Theology for Human Sexuality, Abingdon Press, 2019, pp. 45-46.

Lustful idolatry and the sinful practices that follow threaten our well-being, so Paul emphasizes the need to continually focus on following God to prevent this downward spiral into sinfulness. Robert Jewett notes,

"In the thrice-repeated formulation, 'God [gave] them [over]. . .' [verses 24, 26, & 28], Paul insists that God becomes directly involved in the process of moral retribution visible in the present, whereby the distorting and darkening of the heart (v. 21) result in God's confining the heart within the twisted circle of its desires (v. 24). Those who choose a dishonest heart are required to live out the life imposed by its twisted desires."

--Robert Jewett, in Romans: A Short Commentary, Fortress Press, 2013, p. 24.

In other words, be careful what you wish for because God might “give you over” to your desires, and you must deal with the aftermath.

Many who read Romans 1 think all this human vice, including sexual immorality, is what spurred God’s wrath (*Romans 1:18*); however, it was AFTER “God gave them over” to “the desires of their hearts, their dishonorable passions, and to their unfit minds” that Paul says,

“They were filled with every kind of injustice, evil, covetousness, malice. Full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, craftiness, they are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, rebellious toward parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless.”
(*Romans 1:29-31, NRSVue*)

God allowed them to be their own “lords,” and they paid the price for it. In Paul’s view, all these things were “the result of God’s wrath, not the reason for it.” If we manage our lives without allowing God to direct us, even things we think are good may become bad for us, bringing suffering and shame. Sex is a good thing in the proper context; however, it leads to hardship and hurt outside God’s healthy boundaries. The issue in these verses (*Romans 1:26-27*) is where those boundaries lie.

In his letter to the Romans, Paul’s overwhelming desire was to steer them away from worshipping idols and false gods and direct them toward believing in Jesus Christ. The way Paul saw the situation in Rome, they rejected God, God gave them over to their desires, and their desires led them away from the abundant life God created them to live. Paul hoped to bring them back to God.

2. Roman society narrowly defined gender roles where men dominated the social order, and respectable women were subordinate.

Roman values placed strict boundaries on gender roles. The Roman family was male-dominated, and the women were subordinate. The appropriate male persona exuded confidence, strength, and power. Therefore, any characteristic or trait that communicated weakness was socially unacceptable. Effeminate men were “unnatural” and ostracized, and even the male partners in same-sex relations were supposed to preserve their masculinity.

Another value aligned with male dominance was that women could not take on any role that typically belonged to a man. We see the strong influence of Roman social structures in the complementarian theology expressed in Ephesians 5:21-25. While Paul’s Judaism was patriarchal and Christianity emerged out of that system, Ephesian’s specific references to “wives be subject to your husbands” seems like a direct cultural appropriation of the secular norms in Rome, probably to help Christians fit into the larger culture for evangelistic purposes.

Roman wives were subject to their husbands in every respect, including in the bedroom. The Romans believed it was “unnatural” for a woman to initiate sexual contact or to take an active role in sexual interactions with her husband. This use of the word “unnatural” sheds light on Paul’s comments in Romans 1:26,

“For this reason, God gave them over to dishonorable passions. Their females exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural.” (Romans 1:26, NRSVue)

Based on the common Greek usage of the phrases translated as “natural” and “unnatural” in verse 26, the “unnatural” intercourse to which Paul referred was not between two women but between a woman and her husband. Romans 1:26 is not about same-sex female relationships but about women in the privacy of their bedroom swapping roles with their husbands. Without being too graphic, sometimes couples engaged in “unconventional” role reversals during sexual intimacy that violated the norms of gender boundaries. Interestingly, the Roman social convention also required total darkness for married couples who engaged in sexual relations because it was “unnatural” for a wife to be fully nude in the presence of her husband.

Paul referred to these or similar heterosexual situations when he said, “females exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural.” Ironically, these cultural prohibitions were not in place for illicit homosexual and heterosexual interactions in which married men engaged.

3. The homosexuality that Paul observed was mainly heterosexual men engaging in illicit homosexual activity.

Most Roman men were heterosexual (*as is the case today among the world’s total male population*). While they continued to have opposite-sex relationships, heterosexual men also willfully participated in same-sex relations in violation of their natural sexual orientation. They found permission, if not compulsion, for this licentiousness in the mythologies of their chief god, Zeus, who had both homosexual and heterosexual lovers. This adaptive and uninhibited behavior could have accounted for Paul saying,

“The males, giving up natural intercourse with females, were consumed with their passionate desires for one another.” (Romans 1:27a, NRSVue)

It’s a fact that not everyone is sexually attracted to members of the opposite sex. While the overall percentage of same-sex attraction is at 6% of the population, there is growing evidence that biological factors play some role in determining a person’s sexual orientation. Suppose Paul had been able to conceive of a genetic predisposition toward same-sex attraction or gotten to know two committed adults of the same sex who loved each other and intended to spend the rest of their lives together. If so, Paul may have arrived at a different conclusion about monogamous same-sex relationships rather than condemning all homosexuality based on his observance of the promiscuous and

abusive same-sex relationships in his day. We can only speculate on Paul's conclusions about human sexuality if he were alive today; however, we can use the knowledge we have to evaluate Paul's findings and see how they apply in today's context.

4. *Many church members in Corinth were slaves or former slaves who experienced sexual abuse either of themselves or their children at the hands of their masters.*

Although slaves could not marry, they could cohabit, so some had children. The master controlled not only the parents but the children, too, and often sexually abused them. Paul would have heard the members in Corinth speak of the trauma of such experiences, and he would have been aware of similar behavior in Rome. This awareness may have been in Paul's mind when he said,

"Males committed shameless acts with males and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error." (Romans 1:27b, NRSVue)

The notion of forced sex between two young males is possible in this passage because Paul used a Greek word for "males," which refers to the broader male gender, including "boys." If he wanted to refer to adult males, Paul would have chosen more specific Greek words to communicate the mature-sounding word "man." History shows evidence of rampant sexual abuse of boys in the 1st century resulting from pederasty, sexual slavery involving minors, and temple prostitution utilizing children of both sexes. Even if Paul intended to refer to adult men in v. 27, it was likely the interaction of heterosexual men with male prostitutes or male slaves that he observed. We universally condemn all exploitative or abusive behavior involving vulnerable people because God expects us to protect those who can't defend themselves—especially children.

5. *While Paul addresses sexual immorality in Romans 1:26-27, he also includes other vices in the larger context of Romans 1 that require resisting.*

We often focus on vs. 26 & 27 whenever we approach Romans 1 as if the rest of the chapter is immaterial. Yet, Paul's comments about homosexuality exist within a much larger framework that describes the outcomes of rejecting God in favor of serving our wants and desires. Paul says,

"And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them over to an unfit mind and to do things that should not be done. They were filled with every kind of injustice, evil, covetousness, malice. Full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, craftiness, they are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, rebellious toward parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. They know God's decree, that those who practice such things deserve to die, yet they not only do them but even applaud others who practice them." (Romans 1:29-32, NRSVue)

It's hard to read over Paul's list above and not recognize that we're guilty of one or more of those behaviors. Gerig notes,

"With a play on words, Paul notes that these pagans did not see 'fit' to acknowledge their Creator God; therefore, he gave them over to an 'unfit' mind. They are no longer able to discern what is true, good, and beautiful, and capable of producing a wholesome and fulfilling life – and so they descend into a living death, a condition that destroys their humanity and poisons their relationships with others. Paul hardly considers homosexuality the worst sin in Romans 1:18-32, which is really the pagans' social depravity (1:28-32), their 'cold' sins of 'strength' against the weak. The pagans' sexual sins may be out of control and shameful, but it's only in this last section that Paul uses the words 'wickedness' and 'evil' (1:29), and it is only these social sins that Paul calls 'worthy of death' (1:32)."

--Bruce L. Gerig, in "An Analysis of Romans 1:18-32," 2013, (Bolding and underlining mine).

To fully grasp Gerig's point that "Paul hardly considers homosexuality the worst sin," we must read Romans 1:26-27 in its larger context of Romans 1:18 to Romans 2:11. Many people fail to recognize that our Bible chapters sometimes mislead us or even change the meaning of a text by where the break occurs. The scribes who added chapter designations and verse notations as they copied the Scriptures didn't always pay attention to the narrative flow of the text and sometimes divided chapters in unhelpful ways. See the difference in meaning when we read Romans 1:26-27 apart from reading the rest of the 1st chapter through Romans 2:1-11.

Romans 1:26-32

For this reason, God gave them over to dishonorable passions. Their females exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the males, giving up natural intercourse with females, were consumed with their passionate desires for one another. Males committed shameless acts with males and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error.

And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them over to an unfit mind and to do things that should not be done. They were filled with every kind of injustice, evil, covetousness, malice. Full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, craftiness, they are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, rebellious toward parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. They know God's decree, that those who practice such things deserve to die, yet they not only do them but even applaud others who practice them.

Romans Chapter 2:1-11

Therefore, you are without excuse, whoever you are, when you judge others, for in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things. We know that God's judgment on those who do such things is in

accordance with truth. Do you imagine, whoever you are, that when you judge those who do such things and yet do them yourself, you will escape the judgment of God? Or do you despise the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience? Do you not realize that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?

But by your hard and impenitent heart, you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath, when God's righteous judgment will be revealed. He will repay according to each one's deeds: to those who, by patiently doing good, seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life, while for those who are self-seeking and who obey not the truth but injustice, there will be wrath and fury. There will be affliction and distress for everyone who does evil, both the Jew first and the Greek, but glory and honor and peace for everyone who does good, both the Jew first and the Greek. For God shows no partiality.

The implication is that we're all in the same boat as sinners who need God's grace. "God shows no partiality" means that my sins are no greater than yours and your sins are no greater than mine. There are no degrees to sin – any sin separates us from God – and sin is always our problem.

Some may attest that they are fully sanctified (*i.e., without sin*), but as John Wesley pointed out, the moment one conceives of themselves as "fully sanctified," pride enters their heart, and they are no longer without sin. So, no matter how good or bad we are, we all must seek mercy at the feet of Jesus Christ, who is our only hope when we stand before God to account for our lives. I'm counting on Jesus Christ!

Conclusion

On the surface, one could argue that Romans 1:26-27 condemns homosexuality; however, further Scriptural analysis reveals the possibility that Paul intended to condemn illicit and abusive sexual behavior, either outside of one's natural orientation or in violation of culturally defined gender roles. Paul directs his harshest criticism to those whose sexual relationships break the bonds of covenantal love. Covenantal love is only possible between two mature adults in sacred, faithful, permanent, and monogamous relationships.

Through the Scripture passages I've covered in this and the last two papers, each must decide our interpretation of God's will for human sexuality. I am comfortable that my perspective aligns with Scripture; however, I can see how others come to a different interpretation and conclusion. Despite any disagreement, I respect their faith in God and their love for Jesus Christ. I hope they also value my faith and Christian witness as authentic and treat me respectfully. Therefore, I choose to stay in fellowship with those who disagree with me, and I hope they will remain in fellowship with me.