

Additional Objections

to the Traditional View of the Bible and Homosexuality

Regarding Romans 1:

The Roman church was divided. When the Jewish Christians returned to Rome after the expulsion of the Jews by Claudius they found themselves a minority, fostering resentment. Romans was written to show how Jew and Gentile are one both in their sin and their need for grace. In chapter 1, Paul refutes the claim Gentiles might make that they, not being given the revelation God gave the Jews, are not culpable in the way the Jews were. Paul will continue after that to point out that the Jews, who might claim a special position on the basis of the covenant, were disobedient, turning away from God's revealed truth.

In this passage there's a notable parallel structure around the phrase "God gave them over" in vv. 24, 26 and 28. Because Gentiles turned their back on God's eternal power and divine nature as clearly seen in creation (20), choosing to worship creation rather than the creator (23), God handed them over to sexual impurity and their sinful desires (24); to "shameful lusts" including "unnatural sexual relations" on the part of women and homosexual acts on the part of men (26-27); and to "a depraved mind" resulting in "every kind of wickedness" (29). In this passage Paul uses language reminiscent of creation; rather than "men" and "women" he refers to "male" and "female". As Robert Gagnon puts it,

Paul in Rom 1:24-27 rejects homosexual practice because it is a violation of the God's creation of 'male and female' as a sexual pair in Genesis. In Rom 1:23-27 Paul intentionally echoed Gen 1:26-27, making eight points of correspondence, in the same tripartite structure, between the two sets of texts (humans/image/likeness, birds/cattle/reptiles, male/female).

Paul contrasts sinful behavior with "natural" behavior. The Gentiles could clearly see in creation what was right, and what God's like, and turned their back on him to do what's wrong and to worship creation itself. To be clear, Paul condemns everything God "hands them over" to. A revisionist reading must make the case that the sins described in 26-27 do not represent modern homosexual practice. Some objections include:

1. **Objection:** Paul refers to homosexual practice as an "error" (27). If Paul had meant "sin" he would have said so.

Response: In several other places in his writings Paul uses "error" to refer to the sins of Gentiles. "Error" is not a weak term here, as is made clear by the rest of the passage.

2. **Objection:** When Paul refers to "nature" (*physis*) he is referring to an individual's nature. The real sin is to act against one's God-given desires.

Response: Paul has in mind the "nature" of the created order, as is made clear by his using terminology for homosexuality also found in Philo and Josephus. Some revisionists suggest that what Paul had in mind is, e.g., lesbians engaging in heterosexual behavior. If so, then the parallel phrase "enflamed with lust" would be out of place.

3. **Objection:** Paul is not condemning homosexual practice, only the "lust" with which the Gentiles were "inflamed for one another".

Response: At the heart of this objection is the idea that what made the “acts” committed “with other men” “shameful” is their lust. But 27 points out that they had “abandoned natural relations with women” showing that homosexual practice is in view.

4. Objection: Paul’s language of being “inflamed” with “lust” shows he didn’t have loving, committed, homosexual Christian couples in mind. What he didn’t address he can’t condemn. [Brownson]

Response: Paul *does* have mutual desire in mind. To quote Robert Gagnon,

Paul in Rom 1:27 specifically indicts male homosexual relations that involve mutual, reciprocal affections—“males, having left behind the natural use of the female, were inflamed with their yearning for one another”—precluding any supposition that Paul is thinking only of coercive relationships. Paul’s indictment of lesbianism in Romans 1:26 further confirms this, since female homosexuality in antiquity was not primarily known, or criticized, for the exploitative practices of sex with slaves, prostitutes, or children. And there can be little doubt that Paul was indicting female homosexuality. Contrary to false claims that people in the Greco-Roman world had no concept of committed homosexual unions, there is plenty of evidence for the conception and existence of loving homosexual relationships, including semi-official “marriages” between men and between women. Obviously marriage implies commitment, yet commitment does not change the unnatural and sinful character of the relationship. Jewish writers in Paul’s day and beyond rejected all forms of homosexual activity. [Gagnon]

Still, the logic of the passage goes beyond the mutuality of the relationships in question: This brief section is introduced by “God gave them over to shameful lusts”, showing that the *behaviors* he is about to list constitute such “shameful lusts”. The flow of argument in 18-32 requires that anything which is against nature is sinful. Paul’s language, reminiscent of creation, shows how humans broke from the pattern of creation.

5. Objection: The Gentiles deliberately suppress the truth they knew (18) with their wickedness, and despite knowing God (21) they *choose* idolatry (23). They “exchange” (25, 26); they “abandon” (27); they “do what ought not to be done” (28). Paul is clearly describing acts, not orientation.

Response: First, as already stated, the acts themselves are against nature and thus sinful. Second, this just supports the point that the sin is the *action* they engage in. Paul would not disapprove of someone with a same-sex orientation who chooses not to act on his or her desires.

General and Miscellaneous Objections

1. Objection: Maybe homosexual acts are sinful. But if I have to advise my son, knowing the loneliness and pressure of celibacy, I would prefer to err on the side of compassion. What if the pressure of celibacy makes a wreck of his or her faith? I can't risk that!

Response: We each have to make the wisest choices we can, guided by Scripture, the Spirit and the body of Christ. We should remember, though, that God's Word guides us for a reason, even when we don't know that reason. We may not presently see how, but we must trust that God's law is merciful and not cruel. That said, we must never do what the Scribes and Pharisees did, piling laws on the shoulders of the people and not lifting a finger to help (Mt 23:4). Do not tell your son to follow God's Law without also providing a community which can support him.

2. Objection: Isn't homosexual behavior a "victimless crime"? In fact, aren't there many loving, gay Christian couples who demonstrate the fruit of the Spirit just the same as straight couples?

Response: Consider a man who meets a woman who represents for him all the attraction and deep kinship that he is missing with his wife of many years. Within the year, he has left his family and married this new woman. Without the distraction of young children he is able to invest in this relationship and it flourishes; they spend the rest of their lives together, loving one another and, after finding a new church together, growing in the Lord.

Now compare this to the gay couple in the objection. Both relationships have love, both couples in these examples show the fruit of the Spirit, and (in the examples) genuinely so. That can't be used to validate their behavior. For those who know that even loving, committed homosexual relationships are condemned by Scripture, they represent willful sin and can lead to hardness of heart and eventually a turning away from God's mercy—surely what Paul warns of in 1 Corinthians 6:9 (see also Gal 6:7). It also sets an example which will draw others into sin. And on a basic level, it falls short of God's design, both in marriage and in parenting for any children who are adopted.

3. Objection: Some Christians use sexual sin to avoid focusing on their own sins of materialism idolatry, and then vilify sexual behavior which is out of the ordinary.

Response: It's true that one sin should not be used to distract from other. It's also true that some Christians have tended to focus on those sins which they don't personally fall prey to, while ignoring those they do. Any sin, large or small, constitutes breaking the whole law (James 2:10), but not all sins are equal in their effects. Sexual sin is damaging in a way other sins are not (1 Cor 6:18-20).

4. Objection: Genesis 2:18-22 presents the creation of Eve as a helper for Adam. But in the text, Eve is contrasted with all the animals God brings to Adam, none of which is a suitable helper. Eve's distinction, then, is not her complementarity with Adam but her similarity with him. [Brownson]

Response: Eve's species similarity is on view in this passage. However, the reader must also note that the pattern for all of the other animals brought to Adam is male and female. God is following that pattern exactly with Adam by selecting a female of Adam's species.

5. Objection: Adam and Eve become “one flesh” (Gen 2:23-25). This is taken by traditionalists as representing gender complementarity when it really is addressing formation of a new “kinship group”, as 2:24 makes clear. This can just as well be done by a same-sex couple. [Brownson]

Response: It’s true the language is of kinship-group formation. But the pattern established in 2:23 is that of forming a new family of a man and a woman (“she shall be called ‘woman,’ for she was taken out of man”). To apply this to a same-sex couple is to ignore this important verse.

6. Objection: Paul, immersed in first-century Jewish culture, could never have known of committed, loving, same-sex marriage, and being the product of that culture he certainly would never have approved of it. To know God’s will we must extract the principles which form the ethical foundation of the Scriptures, and those clearly support loving, committed relationships.

Response: The prohibitions in Leviticus and Romans 1 do not depend upon whether the relationship is loving and committed, but on its breaking God’s pattern in creation.¹ To quote Gagnon again,

Homosexual practice is totally rejected wherever mentioned in Scripture. It is absurd to argue for affirmation of homosexual unions as the Spirit’s new work, since this would put the Holy Spirit at odds with Scripture’s core values in sexual ethics. The entirety of early Judaism out of which Jesus emerged believed homosexual practice to be a violation of foundational sexual ethics (there are no extant Jewish texts within centuries of the life of Jesus indicating any openness to homosexual relationships of any sort, in contrast to the existence of such texts among “pagans”); The early church that knew Jesus best was united in its belief that a male-female prerequisite for sexual unions was essential. The supposition of a Jesus supportive of, or even neutral toward, committed homosexual unions is without historical analogue in Jesus’ immediate cultural environment. The trend of Jesus’ teaching on sexual ethics is not toward greater license but toward fewer loopholes.

7. Objection: Isn't celibacy a gift given to some and not to all (1 Cor 7:7; Mt 19:4-12)? And just as Paul warns that some should choose marriage rather than “burning” with passion (1 Cor 7:9), isn't it clearly better that someone with same-sex attraction enter into a healthy relationship rather than subjecting himself lifelong temptations? [Brownson] Even if you disapprove of same-sex activity, surely this is the lesser of two evils?

Response: Paul describes a gift of celibacy, but still calls all to celibacy outside of marriage between a man and a woman. Similarly, Paul can refer to the gift of faith (1 Cor 12:9), but never intends this to mean that only some are called to have faith in the Lord. Finally, when Paul advises a couple to marry rather than “burn” with passion, a choice is being made between two paths sanctioned by scripture: remaining celibate and unmarried, and becoming married. Paul is simply giving advice on how to resist temptation in this case. To prevent homosexual temptation by entering into a homosexual marriage is like resisting temptation to steal by robbing a bank. God does not give us challenges without empowering us to face them (1 Cor 10:13).

1 Nevertheless, there is excellent reason to believe that Paul, being from the university city of Tarsus in the Roman Empire, knew of homosexual love; evidence can be shown that sexual orientation and peer homosexual relationships were known in the ancient world [cf. Sprinkle, *Bulletin for Biblical Research* **24** (2014) 515-528; also William Loader (who himself sees no problem with homosexual relationships), in his *The New Testament on Sexuality* (2012)].