

# THE TABLE BRIEFING: SEXUALITY AND PAUL'S TRANSCULTURAL MESSAGE IN ROMANS 1:18–32

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**E**NTERING INTO A CONVERSATION about same-sex sexuality in the public square can seem like a crosscultural experience for many Christians. In a context where the church is under more and more pressure to conform to cultural views of sexuality, believers must be equipped to understand this important topic biblically.

In a Table podcast called “The New Testament View of Same-Sex Sexuality,” Jay Smith, Joe Fantin, Darrell Bock, and Robert Chisholm discuss key New Testament passages, including Romans 1:18–32. When it comes to understanding a Christian perspective on sexuality, this is one of the most discussed texts in the New Testament. Here, Paul frames the conversation in terms of God’s original intent, presenting a transcultural argument for the idea that all people are in need of the gospel. In order to appreciate the force of his conviction in this passage, it is important to see the contrast between his view, rooted in Judaism, and Greco-Roman views of natural and unnatural sexual expression. How did Paul’s first readers tend to think about sexuality?

## CULTURAL VIEWS OF SEXUALITY

While Rome was one of the most sophisticated cultures, it was also one of the most depraved; hedonism was rampant. Indeed, many forms of sexual expression were commonplace that were outside the norm of Paul’s Jewish background. How did Paul’s readers un-

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derstand sexuality within their cultural context?

Rather than defining sexuality in terms of heterosexual or homosexual contexts, Greco-Roman society focused more on which partner took either an active or a passive role in the sexual experience. In this, many perceived social status as a more important factor than gender. For example, only certain kinds of people were expected to take an active or a passive role in the sexual experience. Fantin explains:

*Fantin:* A Roman male citizen could only be an active individual, whereas a woman really could only be a passive individual. . . . In addition to women, you could have slaves—both men and women—that could be passive and . . . hoys as well; usually, they wouldn't be citizens.

This is interrelated with the structure of society—with [an] honor and shame culture with . . . a really low view of women. . . . this idea of controlling individuals, this all is tied together; it's not a separate category of sexuality.

Understanding the cultural background of Paul's Roman audience reveals the kind of crosscultural conversation that went on within the early church. In Romans 1, the apostle used a Jewish polemic based on the existence of a creator God who intended that created human beings function in specific ways—a view that flows out of a sexual ethic derived from the Torah.

In contrast to this, many Roman men viewed homosexual experiences as commonplace in their culture. This seems to make Paul's message all the more pointed. Fantin and Bock note the countercultural nature of Paul's transcultural argument:

*Fantin:* In the Roman culture, men with other males was an accepted thing. So for Paul to actually be drawing upon this, he's not just [saying], "Oh, I've grown up as a heterosexual, and I know everything else is wrong," like we might do today. He was in a culture that was dominated by this active-passive [idea of sexuality]; males could be with males in certain situations. Then he applies this test or a Jewish idea to this.

We know Paul is not necessarily opposed to going against Jewish tradition in many things, but here he does affirm it. So to me, this is strong evidence that what Paul's saying here is countercultural, at least to a Roman audience, and gives, I think, a lot more staying power to his argument.

Bock agrees, highlighting the idea that Paul's argument makes an objective claim that supersedes Roman social conventions: "The

point that Paul is making is designed to be transcultural. He's dealing with something that—from the standpoint of God—applies to cultures no matter what." But this transcultural point involves only a part of his larger transcultural message: All people are in need of the gospel.

### PAUL'S VIEW OF SEXUALITY

This passage focuses on how people have rebelled against God and the way their lifestyles reflect this distance from their Creator. Because people suppressed the truth, ignored general revelation, and rejected the purpose for which God made them—to glorify him and be thankful to him—Paul wrote,

Therefore, God gave them over in the desires of their hearts to impurity, to dishonor their bodies among themselves. They exchanged the truth of God for a lie and worshiped and served the creation rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.

For this reason God gave them over to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged the natural sexual relations for unnatural ones, and likewise the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed in their passions for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in themselves the due penalty for their error (Rom. 1:24–27, NET).

Paul argues that when human beings refuse to recognize God and they live in a way that fails to be sensitive to his moral commands, they grow even more insensitive to truth. Beyond this, God did not merely allow the natural consequences of sin to play out; He allowed people to carry out those passions with even more intense, dysfunctional behavior. All of this reveals that all people are responsible to God for their idolatry and rejection of his moral commands.

*Smith:* In verse 25, they exchanged the truth of God for a lie and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator, and therefore as a consequence, or for this reason, God gave them over to these degrading passions—exchanging normal, if I can use the word “normal,” heterosexual relations for same-sex relations. So this is a part of the divine judgment for idolatry.

*Bock:* So this becomes an illustration of one sin among many sins that leave the nations culpable before God.

Indeed, sinful behavior shows the culpability of humanity and demonstrates their desperate need for the gospel. But what does Paul mean when he mentions natural and unnatural sexual rela-

tions? Is there any ambiguity here, as some suggest in contemporary discussions of sexuality?

### NATURAL AND UNNATURAL SEXUAL RELATIONS

While his definitions of “natural” and “unnatural” may have been clear to Paul’s original first-century audience, American readers in the twenty-first century may have some difficulty understanding his perspective due to psychological categories that tend to frame today’s conversations about sexuality and gender identity. As Bock notes: “Modern conversation about the situation has more . . . categories and more ways to think about it from a psychological point of view. To think that that would be something that would enter into the mind of someone who’s writing in the first century . . . is unlikely.”

For Paul, sexual behavior is “unnatural” if it is contrary to the Creator’s intent. Indeed, his argument presupposes the worldview of the Torah, even alluding to Genesis 1:27, which specifically mentions both genders: “God created humankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them, male and female he created them.” Fantin and Chisholm discuss this idea:

*Fantin:* [Paul] doesn’t say “husband” and “wife.” He says “male” and “female,” and again that should echo, at least in some reader’s ears, of that original creation.

*Chisholm:* I don’t think Paul defines this idea of functioning according to nature or not according to nature culturally. He’s defining that in terms of the Old Testament; in terms of Genesis. That determines what’s contrary to nature and with nature.

He also doesn’t define it psychologically, which I think we do more commonly today: “Psychologically, I am a woman caught in a man’s body.” I don’t think Paul’s defining functioning naturally in psychological terms. Where we might say, “Well, it’s against my nature to play the role of a male, because I’m really a woman.” I don’t think Paul’s thinking in terms of psychological categories. He’s thinking in terms of creative categories and God’s original intent, not in terms of how I view my makeup or my gender identity or sexual identity.

According to Smith, the idea that gay relationships are natural for men attracted to men or that lesbian relationships are natural to women attracted to women—whereas heterosexual relationships would be unnatural for them—seems too complicated to ascribe to

a first-century author and audience. Rather, Paul seems to be referring to sexual acts qua acts.

Still, some today agree with the editors of the Queen James Bible, who hold that Paul did not view gay or lesbian sex as unnatural. Rather, they claim Paul's comments may have referred to exploiting women in pagan rituals. Others say Paul's comments may have referred to exploiting young boys. But Smith and Bock note how Paul introduces the concept of unnatural relations by citing lesbian relations precisely because first-century Romans already viewed this act as unnatural even by societal standards. That is, lesbian relationships were seen as going against normative roles for women even as prescribed in Roman society. Paul's definition of unnatural starts here and then advances to all sexual experiences outside God's original design.

*Smith:* It's not just an exploitive relationship with an adult male and an underage boy. . . . As soon as he starts talking, he brings women in. You can see that his purview is a little wider than just exploitive relationships.

It is worth pointing out that women-and-women would have been a big taboo generally speaking. . . . So that would be, right there, something that probably most everyone would have agreed with at that point . . .

*Bock:* So he's starting with, in some ways, the most grievous category, or the one that everyone accepts as a taboo and then works his way to the places that might be more culturally debated.

*Smith:* Yes, because women-with-women would mean somebody would have to take a role of the man.

This detail about how lesbian relations were perceived in the culture sheds more light on Paul's argument. Paul was not merely talking about sexual exploitation in pagan worship, but about a distortion of God's original design for sexuality. As people put God out of their minds, thoughts and actions follow that are an affront to God and divine design. Paul continued,

And just as they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them over to a depraved mind, to do what should not be done. They are filled with every kind of unrighteousness, wickedness, covetousness, malice. They are rife with envy, murder, strife, deceit, hostility. They are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, arrogant, boastful, contrivers of all sorts of evil, disobedient to parents, senseless, covenant-breakers, heartless, ruthless. Although they fully know God's righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but also approve of those who practice

them (vv 28–32)

As idolatry leads into further immorality, this list pictures a lifestyle of depravity that openly flouts God and rejects his moral commands, despite a recognition of serious consequences that are justly deserved. But there is more than one sin in this list Paul casts the net wide here when it comes to sin. But what does Paul mean by “deserve to die”? And what does this section ultimately teach?

### ALL PEOPLE NEED FORGIVENESS

Paul is saying that God's judgment on all immoral practices is justified. Further, he is building the case for why every person is in need of God's forgiveness. Because of this, it's important to note that the apostle has the entire list of sins in mind—not just the sexual component, which tends to attract the most contemporary discussions of this passage.

*Bock:* When we come to verse 32 and we say, “Those who practice such things deserve to die” it wouldn't be fair to say we're only talking about what's discussed in verse 27. We would be saying, No, Paul's condemnation extends to the entirety of the list because in part he's building the case on why everyone needs to have their relationship with God restored, as opposed to only certain people who engage in certain particular practices. Would that be fair?

*Smith:* I think it would be fair. He does. It's a little expansive there when Paul talks about same-sex relations, but I'm not sure you can make a big distinction in ultimate culpability before God in terms of the other sins. You know, malice and gossip and slanders and hate all make one culpable. So I'm not sure you can list these sins as one more grievous than the other. They're all damning, if you will. But anyway, the penalty of deserving death would include the whole list.

*Bock:* And we're talking about a backdrop in which the deserving of death talks about being spiritually separated from God and having the need now to come into a restored life, which of course the rest of the book is about. It's talking about how what Jesus has done and the sacrifice that he's made covers all these sins, can remove the guilt and the culpability before God, and can bring us into a state where we're reconciled with God. Would that be fair?

*Smith:* Exactly right. Exactly right.

Indeed, Paul's message is that all people fall short of God's moral standard. Christians have a relationship with God not because they have earned the right to avoid his judgment, but because of God's infinite mercy through Christ extended as a benefit to those who believe in the offer of that mercy.

### CONCLUSION

In some ways, Paul's crosscultural conversation in the first century is similar to the conversations Christians today must have—especially in cultures that have rejected a biblical view of sexual ethics. There is an issue of divine design at work, not psychological status or perception. Still, it is important not to divorce the sexual piece of Paul's argument from the larger list of items Paul presents that clarify his transcultural message: Everyone is in need of the gospel.

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