

The Bible and Homosexuality

This paper contains two articles. The first is by Dr. Wayne Grudem, theologian and seminary professor from his article in the ESV Study Bible.

The second article is by Pastor John Piper on the teaching of Paul about homosexual behavior in his letter to the Romans.

Wayne Grudem on Homosexuality and the Bible

A reminder of what God’s Word has to say about homosexual conduct, a teaching many believers increasingly prefer to forget

Almost all Christians, young and old, prefer peace to war. In particular, most of us don’t like fighting a culture war—but sometimes, if we are to be faithful to biblical teaching, we have no choice. We do have a choice of tactics, and at times Christians have chosen poorly, but we still should not cry “peace, peace, when there is no peace.” That’s why it’s important to have teachers who remind us of what the Bible says, even when we’d prefer to skip pages.

God’s Original Design

In God’s original design, human sexual conduct was to occur within the context of marriage between one man and one woman. The first chapter of the Bible says, “God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them” ([Genesis 1:27](#)). Differentiation of the human race into two complementary sexes (“male and female”) is the first fact mentioned in connection with being “in the image of God.” In Genesis 2, which describes in more detail the process summarized in 1:27, God said, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him” ([Genesis 2:18](#)). Genesis then applies the example of Adam and Eve to all marriages: “Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh” ([Genesis 2:24](#)). This “one flesh” sexual union was thus established as the pattern for marriage generally, and Jesus cites Genesis 1:27 and 2:24 as the normative pattern that God expects all marriages to follow (see [Matthew 19:4–6](#)). Furthermore Paul, as a good disciple of Jesus, likewise strongly echoes Genesis 1:27 and 2:24 in his two primary texts on homosexual practice, [Romans 1:23–27](#) and [1 Corinthians 6:9](#). Jesus and Paul both assume the logic of sexual intercourse implied in Genesis: a sexual bond between a man and a woman requires two (and only two) different sexual halves (“a man” and “his wife”) being brought together into a sexual whole (“one flesh”).

This is further emphasized in the story of the creation of Eve from Adam’s side:

“And the rib that the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. Then the man said, ‘This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man.’ Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh” ([Genesis 2:22–24](#)).

The word “therefore” connects the making of Eve from a part of Adam’s body with the “one flesh” sexual union between a man and a woman in marriage: it is the reunion of the two constituent parts of a sexual whole. It is not another man who is the missing part or sexual complement of a man, but rather a woman. (Jesus emphasizes this connection between the two different sexes, “male and female,” in [Matthew 19:4–6](#) and [Mark 10:6–8](#).)

Prohibited Sexual Relations

Consistent with the pattern in Genesis 1–2, sexual intercourse outside of the marriage relationship between one man and one woman is prohibited. For example, “You shall not commit adultery” ([Exodus 20:14](#); reaffirmed by Jesus in [Matthew 19:18](#); cf. [Romans 13:9](#); [James 2:11](#)). In addition, other specific kinds of sexual intercourse outside of marriage are also prohibited, such as prostitution ([1 Corinthians 6:15–18](#)), incest ([Leviticus 20:11–21](#); [1 Corinthians 5:1–2](#)), and bestiality ([Leviticus 18:23](#); [20:15–16](#)).

Homosexual conduct is also viewed as a sin (something contrary to God’s will) in several passages of the Bible. [Leviticus 18:22](#) says, “You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination [Hebrew *to‘ebah*, actions that are extremely displeasing to God].” Similarly, “If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination” ([Leviticus 20:13](#); cf. [Genesis 19](#); also [Jude 7](#)). These absolute Levitical prohibitions are grouped with other relevant sex proscriptions (incest, adultery, bestiality) and are considered first-tier sexual offenses that are grouped together in [Leviticus 20:10–16](#).

In the New Testament, Paul speaks of homosexual conduct:

“For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error” ([Romans 1:26–27](#)).

The phrase “contrary to nature” means that homosexual conduct does not represent what God intended when he made men and women with physical bodies that have a “natural” way of interacting with each other and “natural” desires for each other. (See the *ESV Study Bible* note on [Romans 1:26–27](#); cf. also [Romans 1:19–20](#), that the truth about God and his moral law is visible and apparent in the material creation.) Homosexual desires are “dishonorable” both because they are contrary to God’s purpose and because they treat a person’s biological sex as only half of what it is. While the logic of a heterosexual bond is that of bringing together the two (and only two) different and complementary sexual halves into a sexual whole, the logic of a homosexual bond is that another person of the *same* sex complements, and fills what is lacking in, that same sex, implying that each participant is only half of his or her own sex: two half males making a full male or two half females making a full female. In other words, the logic of sexual intercourse requires a sexual complement, and thus a same-sex bond is a self-devaluing of one’s own gender inasmuch as one sees the need to complement structurally one’s own sex with someone of the same sex.

In a long list of sins, Paul also includes “men who practice homosexuality” ([1 Corinthians 6:9](#)). This phrase translates two different Greek terms: *malakos* means “soft” or “effeminate” and was commonly used in the Greco-Roman world to refer to the “passive” partner in homosexual acts, while *arsenokoitēs* is a combination of Greek *arsēn* (meaning “man”) and *koitē* (here meaning “sexual intercourse”). The term *arsenokoitēs* was apparently coined by Paul from the Septuagint (Greek translation) of Leviticus 20:13, and means (in plural) “men who have intercourse with men.” In [1 Timothy 1:10](#) Paul uses the same word *arsenokoitēs* in the midst of vices derived from “the law” (here, the second half of the Ten Commandments), which means that this verse also should be interpreted as an absolute prohibition of male-with-male intercourse, in keeping with Leviticus 18:22; 20:13. Early Jewish interpretation of Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13, and early Christian interpretation of 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10, also show that these verses were understood as absolute prohibitions against all types of homosexual conduct.

Does the Bible address the question of homosexual attitudes and desires? It must be remembered that God ultimately requires moral perfection, not only in human actions but also in attitudes of the heart. Therefore the Bible prohibits not only adultery but also a desire for adultery ([Exodus 20:17](#); cf. [Matthew 5:28](#)), not only theft but also coveting ([Exodus 20:17](#)). This is because “the LORD sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart” ([1 Samuel 16:7](#)). Therefore Scripture teaches that any desire to break God’s commandments is also viewed as wrong in God’s sight. “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God” ([Matthew 5:8](#)). While an impulse to do what God expressly forbids is (by definition) an impulse contrary to God’s will, the Bible recognizes that Christians will be “tempted” by their “own desire” ([James 1:14](#)) and encourages Christians in such circumstances to “remain steadfast” ([James 1:12](#)) and to “be doers of the word” ([James 1:22](#)). This implies not actively entertaining the wrongful impulse (cf. [Matthew 5:28](#)), and not dwelling on it so that it “gives birth to sin” ([James 1:15](#)).

It is not surprising, therefore, that not only homosexual conduct but also homosexual desires are viewed as contrary to God’s will. Homosexual desires are viewed as “dishonorable passions” ([Romans 1:26](#)), and Paul also says that homosexual partners are “consumed with passion for one another” ([Romans 1:27](#)), giving a strong image of a powerful but destructive inward craving.

This is not to say that homosexual *desire* is as harmful as homosexual *conduct*. Though all sin is wrong and brings legal guilt before God (cf. [James 2:10–11](#)), a distinction between wrongful desires and wrongful actions can be made with regard to many areas of life. Hatred of another person is wrong in God’s sight, but murdering the person is far more harmful. Coveting a neighbor’s farm animals is wrong, but actually stealing them is much more harmful. And lustful desires for adultery are wrong, but actually committing adultery is far more harmful. Similarly, homosexual desires are wrong in God’s sight, but actually committing homosexual acts is far more harmful.

The Bible’s Solution regarding Homosexuality

As with every other sin, the Bible’s solution to homosexuality is trusting in Christ for the forgiveness of sin, the imputation of righteousness, and the power to change. After talking about

the “sexually immoral” and “adulterers” and “men who practice homosexuality” and “thieves” and “drunkards” ([1 Corinthians 6:9–10](#)), Paul tells the Corinthian Christians, “And such were some of you” ([1 Corinthians 6:11](#)). Then he tells them, “But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God” ([1 Corinthians 6:11](#); cf. [Romans 6:23](#); [Philippians 2:13](#); [1 John 1:9](#)). This implies that some former homosexuals in the church at Corinth had left their previous homosexual lifestyle and, by the power of the Holy Spirit, were seeking to live lives of sexual purity, whether in celibacy or in faithful, heterosexual marriages.

It is important that the Christian community always show love and compassion toward those engaged in homosexual conduct, and also extend friendship toward them where opportunities arise, though not in a way that signals approval of homosexual practice. It is also important to extend hope for change, since many homosexuals will say that they long to establish a different pattern of life. However, a number of studies have concluded that long-term change from a homosexual lifestyle seldom occurs without a program of help and encouragement from others.

Objections

Numerous objections have been presented against the view that homosexuality is morally wrong. One objection is that some people are “born gay,” that is, that many homosexuals do not choose their homosexual orientation but it is part of their genetic makeup from birth, and so homosexuals can never change, and for them homosexual behavior cannot be wrong. But, as noted above, Paul, in talking about “men who practice homosexuality” ([1 Corinthians 6:9](#)), says to the Corinthian church, “And such were some of you” ([1 Corinthians 6:11](#)), indicating that homosexuals can change and become former homosexuals. This does not mean that homosexual desires will automatically or necessarily be eradicated for those who come to Christ. Becoming a Christian does not mean that people will no longer experience intense sinful urges (sexual or otherwise). But genuine faith does produce the fruit of obedience and real, substantive change, and Paul indicates that this is precisely what happened with some who had practiced homosexuality in Corinth.

Some argue that science supports the argument that homosexuality is determined by one’s biological makeup from before the time of birth. Studies have in fact shown some indirect, congenital influences on homosexual development that may increase the *likelihood* of homosexual development. But there are certain hereditary factors that give people a greater likelihood of developing all sorts of different sinful behavior patterns (such as frequent wrongful anger, violence, adultery, alcoholism, and so forth), and it would not be surprising to find that some people, from certain hereditary backgrounds, have a greater likelihood of developing homosexual desires and conduct. But this is far different from proving congenital *determinism* of homosexuality, that is, that some people are genetically incapable of making any other choice than to entertain homosexual desires and engage in homosexual conduct. Especially significant are studies of identical twins, where one has become a homosexual and the other has not, even though they have identical genetic makeup.

The moral teachings of God’s Word, not people’s inward desires, must be the final standard of right and wrong. It is important to recognize that (1) virtually all behavior is, at some level,

biologically influenced, and that (2) no command of God is predicated for its validity on humans first losing all desire to violate the command in question.

As for environmental factors that have been shown to increase the likelihood of homosexual behavior, two of the most significant, particularly for male homosexuals, are the physical or emotional absence of a caring father during childhood years, and sexual abuse sometime during childhood or adolescence.

Another objection is to say that the biblical passages concerning homosexuality only prohibit certain kinds of homosexual conduct, such as homosexual prostitution or pedophilia, or unfaithful homosexual relationships. (This is sometimes called the “exploitation argument”: the Bible only prohibits exploitative forms of homosexuality.) But there is no legitimate evidence in the words of any of these verses, or their contexts, or in evidence from the ancient world, to prove that the verses were referring to anything less than all kinds of homosexual conduct by all kinds of people. Two biblical counterarguments against the “exploitation argument” may be briefly mentioned: (1) In [Romans 1:23–27](#) Paul clearly echoes Genesis 1:27, indicating that Paul viewed any sexual relationship that did not conform to the creation paradigm of “male and female” to be a violation of God’s will, irrespective of whether the relationship is loving. (2) Paul’s absolute indictment against all forms of homosexuality is underscored by his mention of lesbian intercourse in [Romans 1:26](#), since this form of intercourse in the ancient world was not typically characterized by sex with adolescents, slaves, or prostitutes.

Some have suggested that the Sodom and Gomorrah episode does not point to judgment on homosexual practice, but relates only to coercive homosexual practice. But [Genesis 19:4–5](#) indicates that homosexual conduct was characteristic of the entire city and was a primary reason for God’s judgment (cf. the *ESV Study Bible* note on [Jude 7](#)).

Some object that the phrase “contrary to nature” in [Romans 1:26–27](#) shows that Paul is only talking about people who “naturally” feel desires toward a person of the opposite sex but who then practice homosexuality. Paul says, “For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another” (Romans 1:26–27). According to this view, Paul is not saying anything about people who “naturally” feel desires for a person of the same sex, for such desires would not be “contrary to *that person’s* nature.” However, this is reading into the text a restriction that has no basis in the actual words that Paul wrote. He does not say “contrary to *their* nature,” but “contrary to nature” (Greek *para physin*), a phrase that is used several times in literature outside the Bible to speak of all kinds of homosexual conduct as something contrary to the natural order of the world. In other words, Paul is not saying in [Romans 1:24–27](#) that some people switched their innate heterosexual urges for contrived homosexual urges, but rather that people exchanged or left behind sexual relations with a true sexual complement (someone of the other sex) to gratify their inward urges for sex with members of the same sex. Paul sees such people as choosing to follow their desires over God-ordained creation structures.

Finally, there is an objection from experience: some homosexual “couples” have faithful, fulfilling relationships, so why should these be thought immoral? But experience should not be used as a higher standard for moral right and wrong than the teaching of the Bible. In addition,

many studies indicate that, particularly among male homosexuals, long-term one-partner relationships are uncommon, and the widespread pattern is many sexual partners, often numbering many hundreds over the years. An additional harmful result of homosexual conduct is often immense damage to the family structures of a society and also to physical health (e.g., various studies have shown a significant reduction in life expectancy for homosexual males compared to the general population).

Same-sex Marriage?

Proposals for governments to recognize “same-sex marriage” should be evaluated in light of the Bible’s teaching that one role of civil government is to “praise those who do good” ([1 Peter 2:14](#)). Government recognition of a relationship as a “marriage” carries with it the *endorsement* and *encouragement* of that relationship by a society. Married couples enjoy many protections and benefits (legal, financial, and interpersonal) that society has granted in order to encourage marriage and signal that the institution of marriage brings benefits to society as a whole. So the question is really whether a society, through its laws, should give approval and encouragement to homosexual relationships that both the Bible and most cultures throughout history have considered to be morally wrong rather than “good,” and that also bring significant harmful consequences. Governmental recognition of “same-sex marriage” would imply a requirement to allow homosexual couples to adopt and raise children, and this would rob many children of the opportunity to be raised in a home with both a father and a mother, which is by far the best environment for them. In addition, government recognition would likely soon carry with it governmental prohibitions against criticizing homosexual conduct.

Conclusion

Homosexual conduct of all kinds is consistently viewed as sin in the Bible, and recent reinterpretations of the Bible that have been raised as objections to that view do not give a satisfactory explanation of the words or the context of the relevant verses. Sexual intimacy is to be confined to marriage, and marriage is to be only between one man and one woman, following the pattern established by God in creation. The church should always act with love and compassion toward homosexuals, yet never affirm homosexual conduct as morally right. The gospel of Jesus Christ offers the “good news” of forgiveness of sins and real hope for a transformed life to homosexuals as well as to all sinners.

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John Piper on Homosexuality and the Bible

A thoughtful pastor's teaching on what the Apostle Paul says about homosexual behavior in his letter to the Romans

NOTE: When a new idea—like same-sex marriage—is sweeping through society like a scythe, it's good to see how thoughtful pastors in past years have taught their congregations to think about homosexuality. Below is [a sermon](#) that Minnesota minister John Piper gave on Oct. 11, 1998. Piper was preaching on Romans 1:24-28:

“Therefore God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, so that their bodies would be dishonored among them. For they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen. For this reason God gave them over to degrading passions; for their women exchanged the natural function for that which is unnatural, and in the same way also the men abandoned the natural function of the woman and burned in their desire toward one another, men with men committing indecent acts and receiving in their own persons the due penalty of their error. And just as they did not see fit to acknowledge God any longer, God gave them over to a depraved mind, to do those things which are not proper.”

Astonishing Relevance

In our exposition of Paul's letter to the Romans, we come now to this astonishingly relevant section in 1:24-28 where Paul touches on the reality of homosexuality. It is relevant for many reasons. For example, yesterday there was conference called “Here I Stand” to address the issue of homosexually active clergymen in the ELCA (*Star Tribune*, 10/10/98). On the front page of the *Star Tribune* there was the story of what appeared to be a hate crime against a homosexual student at the University of Wyoming who was in critical condition after being tied to a fence and beaten. In August, 641 Anglican bishops from around the world gathered for the Lambeth Conference in Canterbury, England, and voted overwhelmingly to affirm that homosexual practice is “incompatible with Scripture.”

Full-page ads were recently taken out in *USA Today* and *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* showing some 850 former homosexuals who gathered last summer at the Exodus conference and who declared there is power in Christ to be changed. Here in Minnesota, legal cases continually crop up about child custody and adoption of children by homosexual people. And most immediate of all, here in our church there are people who have homosexual desires and many more people among us who have people in their families whom they care about very deeply who consider themselves homosexual. The reality of homosexuality is inescapable today, and this would come as no surprise to the Apostle Paul, and therefore should not to us.

One of the things that makes matters unusual today is the effort on the part of some people to defend the legitimacy of homosexual behavior from the Bible. Most common, for example, is the claim that the denunciations of homosexuality in the New Testament are not references to

committed, long-term homosexual relations, which these people say are legitimate, but rather refer to promiscuous homosexual relations and to pederasty, which are not legitimate. To use the words of one scholar, “What the New Testament is against is something significantly different from a homosexual orientation which some people seem to have from their earliest days. In other words, the New Testament is not talking about what we have come to speak of as sexual inversion. Rather, it is concerned with sexual perversion” (Paul Jewett, *Interpretation*, April, 1985, p. 210).

Simply Denouncing Heterosexuals Engaging in Homosexuality?

With regard to our own text this morning, some would argue that what Paul is denouncing in 1:26b-27 is heterosexual people forsaking what is natural for them and engaging in promiscuous homosexual relations which are unnatural for them. Paul writes, “Their women exchanged the natural function for that which is unnatural, and in the same way also the men abandoned the natural function of the woman and burned in their desire toward one another, men with men committing indecent acts.” So, the argument goes, it is not unnatural when a homosexual person has homosexual relations, it is only unnatural when heterosexual persons have homosexual relations and (by implication) homosexual persons have heterosexual relations.

There are at least three major problems with this way of interpreting these verses. I will mention them because the last one will take us into the overall exposition of this section of Romans. The first problem is that in verse 27 Paul says, “The men abandoned the natural function of the woman and burned in their desire toward one another.” Now if these were men who were by nature heterosexual, and who were going against their natural desires, what is the meaning of “they burned in their desire toward one another”? It is a very strong term. Does a natural heterosexual burn with lust for another man? If not, it is very unlikely that what Paul is dealing with here is the subject of heterosexuals engaging in homosexuality.

There is such a thing as a bisexual, who seems to have desires for both men and women. But if that were in Paul’s mind, the interpretation we are talking about wouldn’t work either, because then the burning of a man for a man and a woman would both be natural (according to this interpretation), and Paul would be unjust to denounce either one. But he does denounce this unnatural burning and the acts that follow. So the argument doesn’t work that says, Paul is only denouncing homosexual acts by heterosexual people.

The second reason the argument doesn’t work is that when Paul says in verse 27b, “Their women exchanged the natural function for that which is unnatural,” the Greek phrase for “that which is unnatural” (*ten para phusin*) is a stock phrase in Greek ethical literature of the time for homosexual behavior per se, not for homosexual behavior among heterosexuals—as though that’s what made it unnatural. So it is very unlikely that Paul is arguing that what’s wrong and unnatural about these folks is that they are heterosexuals by nature and acting contrary to nature by doing homosexual acts. “Contrary to nature” in this text, as it most Hellenistic literature of the time, meant homosexual behavior per se. That’s what Paul regards as unnatural.

The third argument against this kind of interpretation is the most significant, because it takes us into the deeper meaning of this text. But before I develop it, let me explain where we are going in these two weeks. My aim today is to give as sound and faithful an exposition of [Romans 1:24-28](#) as I can, which will leave me little time for application. That is why I plan to continue the message next week. We will need to broaden our biblical base and to tackle some practical issues next week.

Pray for Biblical Balance

My prayer for both weeks is that we as a church, and I in particular as the preacher, will find a biblical balance between clear conviction about the sinfulness of homosexual behavior, on the one hand, and patient compassion to come alongside those of you who have homosexual desires, and your friends and relatives, and seek your good. I have no desire to drive homosexual people away. On the contrary, I would like to be able to say of our congregation what Paul said to the church in Corinth: After mentioning “fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, effeminate, homosexuals, thieves, covetous, drunkards, revilers, swindlers,” he says in 6:11, “Such were some of you; but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God.”

I would like us to be a church like that—justified sinners battling together to walk in purity, with all of our differing genetic, hormonal, environmental disorders that incline everyone of us, in varying ways, to do sinful things. We will talk more about that next week. It’s a very important issue. But the point for now is simply this: We want to be a church where homosexual people can either overcome their sexual disorder, or find the faith and courage and help and love and power to live a triumphant, joyful, celibate life with the disorder.

Triple Repetition of Three-fold Sequence of Thought

Now we turn to the third reason for rejecting the interpretation of [Romans 1:26-27](#), which says that Paul is not denouncing homosexuals who do what comes naturally, but rather he is denouncing promiscuous heterosexuals who act unnaturally by doing homosexual acts. The reason is that the overall argument of the passage assumes another viewpoint.

Let’s look at it. Three times in this passage Paul repeats a three-fold sequence of thought. The three-fold sequence of thought goes like this:

Step 1: Human beings exchange God for what God has made; we prefer the creature to the Creator.

Step 2: God hands us over to what we prefer.

Step 3: We act out externally and bodily in our sexual relations a dramatization of the internal, spiritual condition of the fallen human soul, namely, the horrendous exchange of God for man and the images of our power.

Walk with me through the text. I will show you the three times that Paul gives us this sequence of thought.

First time through the three-fold sequence: verses 23-34

Step 1: “They exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man ...” (verse 23).

Step 2: “Therefore God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts to impurity” (verse 24).

Step 3: “... so that their bodies would be dishonored among them” (end of verse 24). In response to the rejection of God’s glory as their treasure, God wills that there be a disordering of their bodily life in dishonorable deeds. He hands them over to impurity “so that their bodies would be dishonored among them.” The sexual disordering of the human race is a judgment of God for our exchanging him for the creature—all of us.

Second time through the same steps: verses 25-27

Step 1: “They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen” (verse 25). This parallels verse 23: They exchanged the glory of God for images. The “truth of God” is that he is glorious and to be desired above all things. The “lie” preferred by us humans is that the creature is more desirable than God.

Step 2: “For this reason God gave them over to degrading passions” (verse 26). That parallels verse 24: “God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts to impurity.”

Step 3: “... for their women exchanged the natural function for that which is unnatural, and in the same way also the men abandoned the natural function of the woman and burned in their desire toward one another, men with men committing indecent acts” (verses 26b-27). That corresponds to verse 24b: “... so that their bodies would be dishonored among them.” So the dishonoring of the body that Paul had in mind in verse 24 is specifically homosexual behavior. And notice carefully, now we can say more specifically than in the first sequence of thought: The sexual disordering of the human race, especially homosexuality (but not only homosexuality) is a judgment of God for our exchanging the truth of God for a lie.

Third time through the same three-fold sequence: verse 28

Step 1: “They did not see fit to acknowledge God any longer” (verse 28). That corresponds to verses 23 and 25: They exchanged the glory of God for images and they exchanged the truth of God for a lie. Here: They simply don’t want God in their knowledge any more.

Step 2: “God gave them over to a depraved mind” (verse 28b). That corresponds to verse 24, “God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts to impurity,” and verse 26, “God gave them over

to degrading passions.” This was God’s response to the universal exchange of God for the creature.

Step 3: “[He gave them over ...] to do those things which are not proper” (verse 28c). That corresponds to verse 24b: “... so that their bodies would be dishonored among them,” and to verses 26b-27, where the women and the men are pursuing homosexual relations. So homosexual behavior is parallel with dishonoring the body and doing what is not proper.

Conclusions

Now let me close with four brief concluding statements:

1. The deepest problem of our lives, whether heterosexual or homosexual, is the terrible exchange of the glory of God for images (verse 23). The exchange of the truth of God for a lie (verse 25). The disapproval of having God in our knowledge (verse 28). Failed worship is our worst disorder. This is beneath all the maladies of the world. Repairing this, not first our disordered sexuality, is our main business in life.

2. The sexual disordering of our lives, most vividly seen in homosexuality (though not only there), is the judgment of God upon the human race because we have exchanged the glory of God for other things. Sometimes people ask, “Is AIDS the judgment of God on homosexuality?” The answer from this text is: Homosexuality itself is a judgment on the human race, because we have exchanged the glory of God for the creature—and so is AIDS and cancer and arthritis and Alzheimer’s and every other disease and every other futility and misery in the world, including death. That’s the point of [Romans 5:15-18](#) and [Romans 8:20-23](#), which we looked at when talking about [Romans 1:18](#).

And what we saw there was that those who believe in Jesus Christ and are justified by faith and become the children of God are not taken out of this world of woe, but are given the grace to experience the very judgments of God on the human race as the merciful pathway to holiness and heaven rather than sin and hell.

3. The reason Paul focuses on homosexuality in these verses is because it is the most vivid dramatization in life of the profoundest connection between the disordering of heart-worship and the disordering of our sexual lives. I’ll try to say it simply, though it is weighty beyond words.

We learn from Paul in [Ephesians 5:31-32](#) that, from the beginning, manhood and womanhood existed to represent or dramatize God’s relation to his people and then Christ’s relation to his bride, the church. In this drama, the man represents God or Christ and is to love his wife as Christ loved the church. The woman represents God’s people or the church. And sexual union in the covenant of marriage represents pure, undefiled, intense heart-worship. That is, God means for the beauty of worship to be dramatized in the right ordering of our sexual lives.

But instead, we have exchanged the glory of God for images, especially of ourselves. The beauty of heart-worship has been destroyed. Therefore, in judgment, God decrees that this disordering

of our relation to him be dramatized in the disordering of our sexual relations with each other. And since the right ordering of our relationship to God in heart-worship was dramatized by heterosexual union in the covenant of marriage, the disordering of our relationship to God is dramatized by the breakdown of that heterosexual union.

Homosexuality is the most vivid form of that breakdown. God and man in covenant worship are represented by male and female in covenant sexual union. Therefore, when man turns from God to images of himself, God hands us over to what we have chosen and dramatizes it by male and female turning to images of themselves for sexual union, namely their own sex. Homosexuality is the judgment of God dramatizing the exchange of the glory of God for images of ourselves. (See the parallel uses of “exchange” in verses 25 and 26.)

Which leads us to one last word: The healing of the homosexual soul, as with every other soul, will be the return of the glory of God to its rightful place in our affections.

Seeing God at the Center

I confess that my main aim in these two messages is not to persuade you that homosexual behavior is wrong. It is wrong. But you can believe that and not be a Christian. So what does it profit a man if he knows everything that’s wrong, and loses his own soul? My aim is much higher than to persuade you that there are many sexual disorders in the world—both homosexual and heterosexual. My aim is to transform the way you see Reality, and to put the glory of God back at the center, like the sun in the solar system of sexuality (and everything else) that holds all the planets of our passions in their proper order. When you exchange the sun for a man-made satellite all the planets leave their orbit and head for oblivion.

The murder of Matthew Shepard in Laramie, Wyoming, was committed by men who had exchanged the centrality of God’s glory for the satellite of self-exaltation. And self-exaltation or self-determination over against God cannot hold the planets of passion in their orbit. I learned this from verses 28 and 29. Look at them with me. [Romans 1:28-29a](#): “And just as they did not see fit to acknowledge God any longer, God gave them over to a depraved mind, to do those things which are not proper, (29) being filled with all unrighteousness, wickedness, greed, evil; full of envy, murder. . . .”

There it is. Where does murder come from? It comes from this: “They did not see fit to acknowledge God any longer.” Or as verse 23 says, “They exchanged the glory of God for images”—in this case money and hateful power. Or as verse 25 says, “They exchanged the truth of God for a lie.”

The Root of All Our Disorders, and God’s Judgment

We saw this in the text last week. The root of all our disorders—sexual and social and physical and emotional—is the exchange of the glory of God for other things. The solar system of our soul and our society was made to orbit around the glory of God as its all-controlling sun. And the entire human race has exchanged the glory of God for weightless, substitute satellites that have

no gravity and can hold nothing in its proper orbit. Therefore all the world is disordered and decaying and moving toward destruction.

But we saw something even more stunning last week from this text. This disorder and decay in our lives and in our society and in our universe is the judgment of God, and is meant by him to be seen as a terrible drama of a horrific underlying spiritual evil. We saw this three times. After each statement that we have exchanged God for other things (verses 23, 25, 28), it says, God therefore hands us over to our depravity so that our soul and our society disintegrate into all sorts of evil deeds and dreadful diseases and death and destruction.

For example, verse 24: “Therefore God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, so that their bodies would be dishonored among them.” Verse 26: “For this reason God gave them over to degrading passions.” And here in verses 26-27 he details homosexual behavior as one outworking of these degrading disorders. Then verse 28b: “God gave them over to a depraved mind, to do those things which are not proper.” And here in the following three verses (29-31), he details twenty-one other outworkings of a depraved mind. No one escapes here. Homosexual, heterosexual, male, female, old, young, religious, irreligious—all of us are under the sway of a depraved mind. As [Romans 3:9-10](#) says, “Both Jews and Greeks are all under sin; as it is written, “There is none righteous, not even one.”

The root of all our problems in this world is that the human race has exchanged the glory of God for other things and that God has handed us over to bear the fruit of this exchange in ten thousand troubles—all of which should call us to repentance and worship rather than rebellion and atheism. And when I say all our problems, I really mean all. I mentioned last week that even our physical diseases and our natural calamities are owing to God’s judgment on creation for our exchange of his glory for other things.

What if There Were Genetic Origins for Sexual Disorder?

This is crucial for dealing with the origins of homosexuality. I don’t think anyone knows for sure what the physical components of homosexuality are. But what if genetic origins were found? What would this imply about the morality and fitness of the behavior? Very little, if nature itself is disordered and in need of redemption. So let’s look at this matter more closely this morning.

Consider [Romans 8:20-23](#), “The creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it, in hope.” Notice that all of creation has been subjected to futility: things don’t work the way they were originally designed to work. Winds, rains, rivers, volcanoes, bacteria, viruses, Swiss Air jet electrical wiring, brake linings, heart-attacks of 86-year-old men driving through a crosswalk while a blind student crosses the street, wild white blood cells, trisomy of the 21st chromosome, and ten-thousand heartaches from a fallen world—the creation was subjected to futility.

By whom? Verse 20 says, “By Him who subjected it in hope.” That’s not man and not Satan, but God. God subjected the world to futility “in hope.” All the futility of this world is meant to waken us to the horrors of exchanging the glory of God for other things and to make us rely not

on ourselves, but on God who raises the dead ([2 Corinthians 1:8-9](#)) and restores the glory ([Romans 8:18-19](#)).

Keep reading. Verses 21-22: "... that the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption (= futility) into the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now." Paul pictures the miseries and futilities and pains of creation as childbirth before the resurrection when all the pain of our disordered bodies and sexuality will be replaced with glory of God among his people.

And Paul even addresses the crying question that we raised last week: But surely, if all this misery and disorder and dysfunction in the world is owing to God's judgment—his handing us over to the outworking of our ungodliness—then would he not lift the misery and the disorder and the dysfunction and the pain from his children who repent and believe the gospel? He gives his answer in verse 23: "And not only this [that is, not only does the "whole creation groan"] but also we ourselves, having the first fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our body."

The answer is: No, God does not deliver his people all at once from the futility of this fallen, judged creation. He turns the effects of judgment into the means of grace for his people ([Romans 8:28](#)). And he saves us in stages. "Having been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved" ([Romans 5: 9-10](#)). We have forgiveness for sin now; we will have freedom from all sinning later. We have reconciliation with God now; we will have complete intimacy later. We have the first fruits and the down payment of the Holy Spirit now; we will have the full harvest of his power and presence later. We have some healing now (from our sexual disorders!); we will have full wholeness later. We see his beauty through a glass darkly now, later we will see face-to-face. We have peace with God now; we will have perfection later. That's the meaning of [Romans 8:23](#).

What is "Natural"? The point of all this is that, whatever the physical or social or personal origins of the homosexual disordering of our sexuality, none of that would define it as good or "natural" or "normal." In a world where God is the Creator and Designer of life, "natural" means in sync with God's purpose and design, not just anything that has physical causes. Having a physical root makes nothing right. Physically based, aggressive tendencies may lead to violent behavior, but we don't condone it. Physically based lethargic tendencies may lead to laziness and neglect, but we don't condone it. Frenetic tendencies may lead to disruption and workaholism. A gloomy bent may lead to suicidal thoughts. An anxious bent may lead to paranoia. Addictive tendencies may lead to alcoholism or bondage to gambling or deadly smoking. A low frustration threshold may lead to outbursts of rage. Strong sexual desires may lead to lust or pornography or fornication or adultery or polygamy.

In other words, in a world where the effect of sin permeates to the roots of nature and disorders all of life, we cannot define as good and natural whatever has physical roots. There must be a higher norm than fallen nature. There are many physically based abnormalities in the world. Therefore having a physical base or root is not sufficient reason for condoning anything as natural or good.

How then shall we live and love in this disordered world? At the risk of oversimplification and selectivity, let me try to give some brief biblical counsel concerning the personal, family and social dimensions of homosexuality.

Biblical Counsel for Someone with Homosexual Desires

First, a few words to those among us who have homosexual desires.

1. Acknowledge the presence and pain of a disordered sexuality, with all the ambiguity of where it came from—much like other disorders and disabilities—and do not define your God-given personhood by your disordered sexuality.
2. Put your faith in Christ alone for the forgiveness of all your sins and for the gift of God's righteousness and for the fulfillment of all his promises to you ([Romans 1:16-17](#)). The only sinner who can successfully battle his sins is a justified sinner. In other words, you fight against sexual sins from relationship, not for a relationship.
3. Begin to reorder your entire life around the centrality of the glory of God as your highest treasure. Homosexual sinning, like all other sinning, is an echo of exchanging the glory of God for other things. So restore the sun of God's glory to its place at the center of your soul and all the planets of your desires will begin to return to their God-given orbit.
4. Resolve to live a chaste and, if necessary, celibate life by the power of God's Spirit, with the confidence that if God does not heal now, he will in the age to come; and all the patience of purity of will be worth it ([Romans 8:18](#)). May God grant all the single people (and married!) at Bethlehem a passion for purity.
5. Seek wholesome friendships with both sexes, especially in groups. Here the burden lies heavily on the church to be a place where this can happen. We don't do very well at this. And so I call on us—especially families—to go out of our way to have people (especially single people) over for meals and other gatherings. The more we do things in groups rather than pairs, the more opportunities we create for wholesome non-sexual relationships.
6. I probably don't need to tell you that there are ministries like Outposts here in our cities that have insights and experience and encouragement and biblical counsel from a depth of awareness that goes beyond what most of us can bring. This may be something God would use in your life.
7. Take a bold and compassionate stand for truth the way Joe Hallett did, and hold up God's purposes for human sexuality, namely, as an expression of Christ's love for the Church dramatized in the covenant love of marriage between one man and one woman.

Biblical Counsel to Parents

Now let me say a few words to parents.

1. For Christian parents, wayward children are more painful than a child's death. Because death usually is not intensified by feelings of guilt and failure and shame. How many of these feelings are legitimate is impossible to know for sure. The only hope for parents is the gospel—that whatever we have done poorly we may be forgiven by trusting in Christ for a righteousness that is not our own ([Romans 1:16-17](#)).
2. If we know our shortcomings, we should confess them to our children, and seek their forgiveness.
3. If we have grown children with homosexual desires we should love them and pray for them and speak biblical truth to them when they will hear it.
4. In the fellowship of the church, search the Scriptures and seek counsel concerning the incredibly complex and painful issues of how to relate to your children if they go on living in sin.
5. If your children are still small or yet to come, realize that, in large measure, their healthy sexuality hangs on your healthy attention and teaching and touching and loving. I say this especially to you fathers. For both boys and girls, the development of a healthy sexuality hangs more on strong, loving, godly male figures in their lives than on the women in their lives—though both are very important. Biblically and experientially and psychologically this can be shown—that the role of the father (or of some crucial man) is paramount for normal sexual development of boys and girls.

If you ask, what is normal, healthy sexuality—what does it mean for a boy to grow up to be a man and not a woman, and what does it mean for a girl to grow up to be a woman and not a man—if you ask this, I urge you to think it through. I have done my best to answer that question in *What's the Difference: Manhood and Womanhood Defined according to the Bible* (Crossway, 1990).

Speak the Truth in Love

Finally, one brief word about the social issues surrounding the controversy over homosexuality: marriage, domestic partners, housing, employment, parenting, adoption, education, diversity training, multiculturalism. Each of these issues requires serious reflection. I don't think the answers are easy. And I call you all to think and study and pray and discuss. How does a democratic, constitutionally governed society determine its values, shape its laws around those values, preserve the inalienable rights of "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" while limiting destructive behaviors and protecting minorities from majority hostilities? These are not easy questions, and they demand our best thinking, not sound bites or shrill slogans.

I would give one guideline and a closing declaration. The guideline is this: normalizing wrong behavior and endorsing wrong behavior and dulling the "reflexive recoil" from wrong behavior is, in the end, harmful for persons and destructive to society. One example: The normalization and endorsement of homosexual behavior will profoundly weaken the fragile norm of long-term, committed heterosexual marriage and child-rearing which are essential to social survival.

My closing declaration is this: God has not called us to win elections, but to win souls and hearts and minds; he has not called us to control Congress, but to preach the gospel; he has not called us to be safe, but to tell the truth. He has not called us to avoid conflict, but to love everyone ([1 Thessalonians 3:12](#)). So speak the truth in love, entrust your cause to God, and keep the glory of God in the center of your soul, so that all the planets of your passions will be pulled into their proper orbit.