

**Biblical Pleas Against The Discrimination Of Homosexual People**

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**Romans 1,26f*****Consequences of Renouncing God***

The statements most typically used to argue against homosexuality can be found in Romans 1. Yet contrary to what is sometimes believed, only Romans 1:26f deal with homosexual behaviour instead of the whole passage, which is why those statements lack any sound basis that equate homosexuality with idolatry or that conclude that homosexuals would exhibit all of the negative characteristics described in verses 29-32. Claiming that idolatry is a direct consequence of homosexual practices, also means to turn the overall message of the text upside down.

Instead, here Paul unfolds his theological interpretation of mankind's perdition and wrongness. His argumentation is ultimately aimed at the conclusion that *all* people, Jews and gentiles, pious and godless, cannot enter God's kingdom through their own efforts, but only through their belief in the atoning death of Jesus.

According to Paul, the fundamental evil lies in man's deliberate renunciation of God or of that which every person could perceive of God. Man has chosen the creature over the creator and, thus, has ultimately chosen mankind itself to be his god that he worships. God's punishment for this choice doesn't consist of active retaliation, but he simply surrenders mankind to the consequences of their actions.

These consequences are portrayed and dramatically increased by the threefold repetition of the words 'for this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions'. Godlessness is followed by lawlessness, abandoning God leads to wrong moral conditions. Male and female homosexuality is mentioned here as *one* example among others in connection with 'being delivered':

'For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; and 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.' (Rm 1:26f)

Several aspects are important in these verses. First, this passage is not intended as an educational text about homosexuality, as for instance Mt 19:3ff teaches about divorce, but homosexuality merely serves as an example in a superior argumentation context that discusses the forlornness of all people. So, we shouldn't expect Paul to give neither a differentiated nor a specific outline on the topic of homosexuality, one that maybe even supplies the reader with socio psychological reasons for the phenomenon. He is rather looking for a handy example to illustrate the overall

reasons for sinful behaviour.

Numerous of Paul's basic motives in Romans 1 don't constitute fully original ideas. He more or less draws on certain aspects of a text of Jewish wisdom literature that was widely known at that time and that can be found in apocryphal addendums in modern editions of the Bible. Wisdom 13 and 14 already sees the creator reflected in its creation and it also contains elements that interpret idolatry as man's unforgivable, self-imposed wrong path which results in moral decay, but also in arrogance, that boasts with people's distance to God, etc. 'Unnatural indecency' (Ws 14:26) is mentioned here as one among other examples for mankind's misconducts.

While the somehow excessive apocryphal text deals with God's wisdom and patience, that is in stark contrast to the foolishness and degeneration of men, Paul argues much more clearly, logically and stringently and, of course, his argumentation is oriented towards Christ: He emphasizes mankind's desolation only in order to contrast it to Christ's act of salvation later on. Everything else simply serves as an introduction which is the reason why Paul doesn't indulge in elaborate, even eager portrayals of various sins (cf. Ws 14:23-28), but by choosing homosexuality, he picks on one example of his time with which all of his readers must have been familiar and that has a long tradition in scripture-based argumentation (the depictions in the book Wisdom itself also refer to Canaanite customs). Since Paul starts off by broaching the issue of the gentiles' guilt in Romans 1, he has chosen a 'typically heathen' sin, that, on top of everything, also conjured up undeniably daunting circumstances in his Christian readers.

After all, we have to remind ourselves of the manifestations of homosexuality that Paul must have had in mind when he wrote these lines. Those who maintained homosexual contacts to a 'lover', a slave or a 'malakos' indeed 'transformed' or 'exchanged'<sup>1</sup> and, therefore, 'gave up natural relations' with their spouse with whom they naturally had heterosexual intercourse in everyday life. He exchanged the plan for marital companionship between man and woman predetermined in creation against a self-determined alternative – as he also did before when he exchanged the creator against a self-chosen idol. He 'gave up' the protected realm for a sexual relationship within the family in favor of 'passions' marked by a lack of commitment, changing partners, addiction to pleasure and enslavement, or that at least culturally idealized the 'alternative', homosexual relationship in comparison with the 'natural' heterosexual. It is therefore not surprising that Paul saw in these circumstances a prime example for his explanations of mankind leaving God and reversing the order of things.

Let's assume we would like to illustrate the circumstances of perverted mankind in the 21st century and let's add an example: 'Through modern industry, man massively exploits nature and, finally, destroys his own natural habitat by badly damaging the earth's atmosphere.' Everyone who hears these few keywords today would

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1 according to the *Einheitsübersetzung*, which is one of the German standardized Bible translations

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immediately understand the implied correlation between exhaust fumes, the ozone whole, climate change, and so on. Most of them, on the other hand, would surely agree that it would be an overinterpretation to assume that the speaker generally rejects any kind of industry.

Can we unscrupulously translate a deliberately short example – that will inevitably simplify matters – into a much more complicated overall topic? Do Paul's lines about 'leaving one's natural intercourse' also apply unproblematically to a partnership between two homosexual persons founded in love and aimed at faithfulness, who don't even know how to feel differently? It has rightly been pointed out that homosexuals possibly don't even 'give up' their natural relations with either men or women, but that they only maintain the relations that correspond to the way they feel (which, in fact, would be the more 'natural' thing for them to do – even though this argument is quite likely not consistent with Pauline mindset).

Christians who take a firm stand against living one's homosexual disposition because of Romans 1 otherwise like to highlight that people who feel homosexually only make up a small minority. However, the phenomenon Paul describes and argues with only makes sense if it is seen as socially elevated and widely practiced behaviour in the Greek ancient cultural sphere. If Paul had actually focused on a minority with a homosexual disposition, it seems perplexing that of all things he should have chosen the problem of a fringe group to give the reader a comprehensible example of mankind's distance to God.

Those people, especially, do not arbitrarily turn away from their true nature for pure pleasure. Romans 1:26f uses verbs that imply a conscious and egomaniac decision, which doesn't correspond with a real sexual orientation. There is rather no alternative to the emotions of homosexuals that cannot be adapted at will. These people merely decide for themselves what kind of life they are going to live between promiscuity and monogamous relationship – which is a choice every heterosexual has to take as well.

Thus, it should not come as a surprise when a homosexual who has lived in a stable, happy relationship (which he surely will *not* consider a 'penalty for error', but possibly an undeserved, wonderful present) will most likely not be able to identify with this condemnation of antique homosexuality. It is particularly excruciating for religious homosexuals if fellow Christians put them into the greater context of Romans 1 since Paul explicitly doesn't describe a way of life according to God's will, but he illustrates the attitude of a person who has taken the conscious decision to live without God. He describes someone who disdains God and who, therefore, wants to decide to act against his standards, of which he boasts. He downright enjoys his revolt against God. This doesn't have anything to do with a person – be he or she heterosexual or homosexual – who wishes to honor, love and serve God.

It could be argued – corresponding to the problem of 'atrocities' in the Old Testament (see above) – that in order to avoid unclear judgements God would surely

not have allowed homosexuality to be identified with negative labels such as 'disgrace' or 'aberration' if he had wanted to abandon these notions later in special cases. In this case, however, the same should be true for the numerous other passages and words in the Bible that are now read as potential misunderstandings. This, however, wouldn't do justice to a historical document which the Bible remains, despite of it being the inspired word of God.

Let me illustrate this with two of the numerous examples in the Bible: The synoptic Gospels consistently make use of the specific designation 'scribes and Pharisees' when they tell of the adversaries of Jesus. In contrast, the evangelist John speaks of 'the Jews' in general. Would he have stayed with this word had he known how much anti-Semitic pseudo Christians have liked to use it, and had he anticipated the Holocaust that was imminent to 'the Jews' as a people some 2000 years later?

If you examine the Bible to find statements about how to deal with difficult children, you will find recommendations that a Christian special education teacher will hardly put into practice anymore, as beating up a stubborn son (e.g. Prov 22:15; 23:13f) or even stoning him to death (Dtn 21:18-21). In both cases, limiting these singular statements that developed within a specific historic context and under particular cultural circumstances, would easily lead us astray. Similarly, this should be taken into consideration with regard to homosexuality.