

BOUNDARIES
Romans 1:16-32

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November 1, 2020

Today we come to one of the most uncomfortable passages in Paul's letter to the church in the capital city of Rome – a passage which deals with same-gender sexuality. I will certainly try to be careful in the selection of my words, but, the church cannot bury her head in the sand and let everyone else do the talking. We must, surely, try to bring some moral clarity to the confusion.

The thesis statement of Romans is found in Romans 1:16-17, where Paul says he is not ashamed of the good news story of Jesus, for in the good news we find “the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.” But also in the story of Jesus, we find “the righteousness of God which is revealed from faith to faith” (v. 17).

And this righteous God, we learn in verse 18, exercises wrath against unrighteousness. His nature is holy, and all unrighteousness receives His wrath. The good news – he will tell us later in chapter 3 – is that the wrath of God was received by the Son of God on Calvary. Before we find the remedy to our unrighteousness, we must see how depraved we have become. So, in verse 18, he lets us know that the wrath of God is revealed against all ungodliness.

At the center of this argument about the wrath of God being poured out on all ungodliness, he says, that creation has fallen to such depths that men are no longer worshiping the Creator, but they are worshiping the creation (v. 25). The creation is so upside-down that men and women are ignoring the created boundaries of their bodies, and they are doing unnatural things – like men being with men and women being with women.

And lest we think he's just pointing the finger at those who practice homosexuality, you need to know that he adds to his list of sinners people who are arrogant, boastful, disobedient to their parents, deceitful, and even gossips (29ff.).

So, at the end of the day, we're all caught in the same net together as unrighteous people.

Our culture has decided that same-gender sexuality must not only be accepted but also blessed. Those who think or say otherwise are quickly depicted as bigoted, hateful, narrow-minded, and dreadfully old-fashioned. We are told to be totally tolerant, make no critical or moral evaluations, and see acting upon sexual orientation as no more than a genetic trait or personal choice.

I want to address, in straightforward fashion, the major arguments I hear set forth to push us toward a new position of blessing same-gender sexuality. The reality is the church's historical approach toward same-gender sexuality has always – and I mean always – been one of rejection. While the patriarchs were not consumed with the issue of homosexuality, they expressed in unanimity their

disapproval of same-gender sexual relations. In medieval thought, homosexuality was described as an unnatural vice – much like Paul described it in the first century – which transgressed the very order established by God. The writers of the Reformation, likewise, condemned homosexuality as an unnatural passion which found its source in Satan. Only in the last several decades have some Christian interpreters expressed a theology which accepts homosexual behavior. Clearly, the tradition of the church speaks overwhelmingly against the acceptance of same-gender sexuality within the community of faith. Before we do an about face as a church, making the historic blunder of condoning sinful behavior, I would like for us to examine the issues, examine the reasons set forth by those who would have us depart from the time-tested tradition of the faith.

I. First of all, I hear some arguing that the Bible really says nothing about homosexuality. On the contrary, Romans 1:18-32 is quite clear on the rejection of same-gender sexual lifestyles as an acceptable alternative to heterosexuality. Leading New Testament ethicist Richard Hays of Duke University, who rejects homosexuality as an alternative lifestyle, as well as United Church of Christ minister Gary Comstock, who accepts it, conclude that Paul depicted homosexuality as an example of turning away from God and His created order. While homosexuality is only a part of Paul's broader attempt to deal with the Jewish agenda in his letter to the church in Rome, it plays the role of demonstrating that perversity occurs – as part of God's wrath – when individuals worship the creation rather than the creator.

As Paul alludes to the creation narrative in Romans 1, readers should remember that part of God's creation included the forming of humankind in his own image... “male and female He created them,” commanding them “to be fruitful and multiply.” Also, Genesis 2:18-24 described the creation of the opposite sexes for one another and moralized, “Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and cleaves to his wife, and they become one flesh.” The complementary nature of maleness and femaleness are given nothing less than a complete theological grounding based upon God's creative activity. The act of becoming “one flesh” is the created goal of “maleness” to “femaleness.”

Being a fundamental part of God's design as depicted in the early chapters of Genesis, sexual distinctions are not to be ignored. Refusing to acknowledge such distinctions results in ignoring the Creator of those boundaries. The employment of same-gender sexual relations as an illustration was a powerful instrument used by Paul to formulate his argument. No other sin seemed to go more directly against the Creator and His created order.

The whole essence of the argument is that God is the Creator. The Creator made boundaries, and creation must stay within the boundaries. The Western culture has an agenda to ignore, even mock, creation boundaries. If we can erase all the boundaries, then we have erased the boundary maker. Thus, we become our own god – idolatry – and every man can do what is right in his own eyes.

Let me give you some more examples outside of homosexuality. There is actually an ethicist, Peter Singer, a professor of bioethics at Princeton University, who argues *for* bestiality. He said, and I quote, “Sex with animals does not always involve cruelty.” What Peter Singer argues is that if we want to knock down boundaries, we need to knock down all the boundaries. If we knock down the boundary between male and female, then we might as well knock down the boundary

between humanity and animals. He criticizes the act of maintaining the human/animal boundary as speciesism. (Peter Singer, "Heavy Petting," www.utilitarian.net, *Nerve* 2001)

The whole movement of boundary breaking argues: "I can do anything I want to do. I will not observe any boundaries; therefore, I will not acknowledge the boundary maker. Therefore, I have, at last, become my own God."

There is another display of boundary confusion in our culture – the movement to actually encourage, even children, to declare themselves a gender other than the sex to which they were assigned at conception. There is especially a lot of pressure for little girls to declare themselves to be boys. A clear devaluation of womanhood. No girl should ever feel as if she has to become a boy to have value. The moment a child becomes transgender, they become cool, their popularity soars. Every institution, from elementary schools to the Olympic competition committee, is having to decide what they are going to do with boys who pretend to be "girls" and girls who pretend to be "boys."

According to CBS News, a preschool teacher read two children's books about transgenderism to her class. One observer said the kindergarteners came home very confused about whether or not you can pick your gender, whether or not they really were a boy or a girl. (CBS News, August 22, 2017)

Do you know which girls declare themselves to be "boys?" Teenagers who belong to a peer group in which one friend had also come out as transgender. And in some groups, the majority of their friends had done so. Declaring oneself transgender carried a lot of social benefits. In fact, the pressure to become transgender is so great that the *Wall Street Journal* concluded that "being trans is a gold star in the eyes of other teens." (Jillian Kay Melchior, "Peer Pressure and 'Transgender' Teens," <https://www.wsj.com>, 9/9/2018)

Even airlines now are working on a process by which you can pick "male," "female," or "u" for undisclosed. According to the *Wall Street Journal*, airlines like American and United are changing their reservation system categories. (Alison Sider, "Airline Bookings to Offer New Gender Options," <https://www.wsj.com>, 2/16/2019)

The "choose your own gender myth" is a lie. There are boundaries. There are chromosomes, X and Y, which determine whether one is a male or a female. This is a dangerous and anti-scientific trend toward an outright denial of biological identification of gender. Colin Wright, an evolutionary biologist at Penn State, and Emma Hilton, a developmental biologist at the University of Manchester, say biologists and medical professionals need to stand up for the empirical reality of biological sex. To do otherwise undermines public trust in science and is dangerously harmful to those most vulnerable. (Colin Wright and Emma Hilton, "The Dangerous Denial of Sex," <https://wsj.com>, February 13, 2020)

In fact, Dr. Paul R. McHugh, former psychiatrist-in-chief for Johns Hopkins Hospital and its current Distinguished Service Professor of Psychiatry, said that "transgenderism is a mental disorder that merits treatment," and that "sex change is biologically impossible," and that people who promote sexual reassignment surgery are collaborating and promoting a mental disorder.

McHugh is the author of seven books and at least 125 peer-reviewed medical articles. In fact, a new study has shown that the suicide rate among transgendered people who had reassignment surgery is 20 times higher than the suicide rate among non-transgender people. The doctor says the idea of sex misalignment is simply mistaken – it does not correspond with physical reality and it can lead to grim psychological outcomes. The assumption that one’s gender is only in the mind, regardless of anatomical reality, has led some transgendered people to push for social acceptance and affirmation of their own subjective personal truth. Put plainly, sex change is a biological impossibility, said McHugh. All you become is a feminized man or a masculinized woman. (<http://cnsnews.com>, April 14, 2016, “Johns Hopkins Psychiatrist: Transgender is ‘Mental Disorder;’ Sex Change ‘Biological Impossible’”)

This absolute obsession in our culture with insisting that what was created is irrelevant to the purpose, life, and hope of a human being is one of the most destructive messages a human can hear. Once the chromosomes come to a conclusion, which is the case in 99.99 percent of all humanity, a gender is established from birth to death.

(<http://townhall.com/columnists/kevinmccullough/2016/06/12/olympics-genitals-included>)

You see what is happening here? Get rid of all the boundaries. Thus, get rid of the boundary maker. Thus, it’s idolatry – you worship yourself.

II. Some argue that the Apostle Paul was speaking only against heterosexuals who engage in homosexual behavior, rather than homosexuals who follow their inner orientation. In reality, however, such anachronistic readings of the text should not be used by the church simply to make the text less offensive to modern ears. We cannot force categories from the 21st century onto a first-century text. For example, those who oppose interracial marriage do a grave injustice to the Old Testament admonitions prohibiting ancient Israel’s taking foreign wives when they shape those texts, anachronistically, for their own agenda. The concern of Yahweh was religious purity and fidelity among his covenant people rather than for racial distinctiveness.

Such readings which “collapse the distance” between ourselves and the ancient text by smuggling modern categories and assumptions fail to recognize potential conflicts among competing sources of authority. Realizing that Paul knew nothing of a “natural homosexual orientation” or “monogamous homosexual relationships,” we must avoid the great temptation to re-read the text through modern lenses. Paul clearly uses homosexuality in his rhetorical flow in the book of Romans as an example of a creation rebelling against the Creator’s order.

The fallacy of the anachronistic approach is clear. Such an interpreter is arguing along these lines: “If Paul knew then what I know now, Paul would have agreed with me.” Employing such willy-nilly logic, we could reformulate many of Paul’s positions to agree with our modern sensibilities. For example, to be consistent in his treatment of the issues, we would have to, likewise, assert that if Paul had known that some alcoholic behavior is based upon biological factors, Paul would not have condemned all drunkenness (Romans 13:13; 1 Corinthians 5:11; 6:10; 11:21; Galatians 5:21; Ephesians 5:18; 1 Thessalonians 5:7), but only drunkenness by those who had no genetic factor in the formulation of their alcoholism.

The truth is we can never project how the apostle would have assimilated any modern information into his ethical matrix. Rather than re-reading the apostle, it's best to follow his overall rhetorical flow in Romans to see how he clearly condemned all same-gender sexuality, including both homosexual and lesbian behavior. My own ethical matrix will not allow me to contradict Paul nor perform hermeneutical gymnastics in order to make the apostle appear to agree with modern assumptions.

III. The third argument I hear set forth for the acceptance of same-gender sexuality is that sexual orientation is innate and unchangeable – that is, beyond one's choosing. Therefore, it must be accepted. It seems to be faulty logic to assume that any behavior that has a biological basis must be approved and blessed by the church. I wonder if those who make such arguments are willing to travel fully down the road upon which they have begun? I actually agree that there is often a biological – and I would add psychological – predisposition in regard to sexual orientation. Scientists themselves, however, are not professing a biological determinism. Even the studies which make the most radical claims for a biological basis for sexual orientation indicate that the development of an orientation is complex. No one claims that biological factors are so strong that individuals are simply responding helplessly – like puppets on the end of biological strings – to physiological impulses that are beyond their control. Dean Hamer, a pioneer in sexual orientation research, warned, “We have never thought that finding a genetic link makes sexual orientation a simple genetic trait like eye color. It's much more complex than that.”

Not all biologically-based desires must be approved by God and the community of faith. Part of humanity's fall is the resulting predicament of being enslaved to sin, predisposed to turn away from God and His boundaries. As scientific research moves forward, I believe that we are going to find that many behaviors which are not accepted within the community of faith have a biological basis. Already, scientists have looked at the issues of alcoholism, gambling, and even racial hatred.

Would we, therefore, contend that if racial hatred has a biological basis that the behavior of an anti-Semite or Skinhead is to be blessed and accepted by the church? When the scientists of the next generation link the sexual preferences of a pedophile to a physiological source, are we therefore going to bless adults engaging with children in sexual behavior? The church must never use the faulty logic that a biological basis for any temptation makes it acceptable to engage in behavior that has been determined by the apostles to be hurtful to the body of Christ. The biblical witness is clear: As a result of the fall of Adam, all humanity is predisposed to sin. Biologically or psychologically, we all find ourselves carrying the temptation to give in to the impulses of the flesh.

We must make a clear distinction between sexual orientation – which might be beyond one's choice – and sexual behavior, which is always an act of volition. No serious ethicist finds fault in the same-gender orientation itself. The sin resides in acting upon the orientation. Some assume it is unrealistic for the church to expect celibacy from those with a same-gender orientation. On the contrary, we must realize that sexual fulfillment is not, in itself, to be considered a right. In reality, the church's call for celibacy is the same for all who cannot express their sexuality within the boundaries of heterosexual marriage. The church denies sexual fulfillment to many single or divorced members of the congregation who, despite their best efforts, have been unable to find an appropriate spouse for marriage. Following the New Testament pattern, the church recognizes

singleness and the accompanying celibacy as a faithful, perhaps even preferred path of discipleship (Matthew 19:10-11; 1 Corinthians 7).

IV. A fourth argument I often hear in regard to the acceptance of same-gender sexuality is that many churches and pastors are sinning greatly against homosexual people and, therefore, we must show love and compassion. While I regret any mistreatment of any human being by the church, the censorious and abusive spirit of others does not place an obligation upon us to condone sinful behavior.

But, we must find a new sense of compassion and understanding for those struggling with same-gender sexuality. Even in our compassion and acknowledgment of the complexities surrounding same-gender sexual orientation, however, we must never approve of homosexuals acting upon their same-gender sexual orientation as long as we give Scripture the place of primacy in the formation of our ethical responses.

V. Another argument I often hear is that no sex act has morality inherent in itself. This argument says that God has no interest in sexual acts, but only in the hearts of the actors. Homosexual sex, they argue, can occur between two men with loving hearts and is, therefore, justifiable sex. Transferring the definition of sin away from the action to the heart of the actor may seem to embrace Jesus' ethic found in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7). To be sure, Jesus broadened His condemnation to include the angry man along with the murderer (Matthew 5:21-22). In other words, Jesus condemned the murderous heart of the angry man just as much as the hand of the murderer. I am afraid, however, that this argument reverses the broadened equation of Jesus by narrowing the scope of condemnation to apply to heart issues alone. Jesus never dismissed "the act" from the definition of sin; he just added "the attitude" as well. Some acts are sinful in themselves.

Like the Gnostics of antiquity, such arguments seem to have diminished the body to simply focus on the spirit. God's redemption and Christ's resurrection, however, include transforming our broken flesh. And Paul made clear that our "bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit" (1 Corinthians 6:15-20).

VI. Another argument I hear espoused in regard to accepting same-gender sexuality is that the church must follow the trend of the culture or be left behind in the Dark Ages. The argument, put another way, is that the acceptance of same-gender sexuality by Western culture obligates the church to follow suit. I fear that such a position reverses the biblical paradigm. The church, the people of God, are to be the prophetic voice of guidance to a lost world. Rather than adjusting our course to accommodate the ever-changing and often confused moral compass of the world, the people of God are to live by the revealed word of the Lord. For example, the people of God, ancient Israelites, were never called to live by the moral matrix of their pagan neighbors. In the New Testament, moreover, the church was admonished to be salt and light in the midst of a culture dominated by lust and greed.

VII. The final argument I hear in regard to same-gender sexuality is that the church, at one time, shamefully discriminated against minorities – either ethnic minorities or women. In fact, some could argue we still do. But I think it is a great fallacy to equate being a woman or being part of a

ethnic minority group with being homosexual. In fact, I find minority groups and women, themselves, are often bothered by this fallacious comparison. There is nothing sinful about being a woman or a member of a minority group – Jesus, Himself, was a member of a minority group. Being a woman is representative of God’s creative order of maleness and femaleness (Genesis 1:27), while engaging in homosexual activity is Paul’s very paradigm of rejecting both the Creator and His orderly creation boundaries (Romans 1:25).

In the end, we do no one a favor by redefining destructive sin as acceptable. One of my preacher friends has long said that if he were to replace the label on a bottle of strychnine with “essence of peppermint,” it wouldn’t make the contents any less deadly or harmful.

I want to conclude by reminding you that this is a Western issue, not an issue for all Christendom. In fact, in 2019, when, on a global scale, the Methodists were examining this very issue and many progressive Americans in the United Methodist Church were ready to condone same-gender sexuality, an African theologian, Dr. Jerry P. Kulah, stood up and made a speech. I quote:

“[P]lease hear me when I say as graciously as I can: we Africans are not children in need of western enlightenment when it comes to the church’s sexual ethics. We do not need to hear a progressive U.S. bishop lecture us about our need to ‘grow up....’

“Unfortunately, some United Methodists in the U.S. have the very faulty assumption that all Africans are concerned about is U.S. financial support.... With all due respect, a fixation on money seems more of an American problem than an African one.... So if anyone is so naive or condescending as to think we would sell our birthright in Jesus Christ for American dollars, then they simply do not know us....

“We will remain steadfast and faithful. And some day we will wear the victor’s crown of glory with our King Jesus. Come walk with us!”

When African Christians discover that the American church is actually considering condoning homosexuality, they are absolutely shocked that such is even on the table for discussion. The reality is, if the American church keeps following fallen humanity into a boundary-free, and thus God-free, existence, the Africans and Asians will be sending missionaries to us. In fact, they already are. These folks have lived their faith in some hard places during some hard days – civil wars, persecution, Ebola, and martyrdom. They do not fear standing up to American heresy.

When we as Americans try to push our “enlightened” translation of Christianity down the throats of the rest of Christendom, we’d better beware – for it’s an awfully arrogant position. (“Critique of the American church from the global majority,” *The Baptist Standard*, March 6, 2019; “Three things the global church is telling the American church,” *The Baptist Standard*, March 7, 2019)

The gay community must realize that for healthy debate to continue, it cannot dismiss those who maintain a traditional stance toward homosexuality as being homophobic or “full of bigotry.” While homosexuals are experiencing a great deal of emotional pain and mistreatment from a heterosexual society, all arguments which withhold the church’s blessings from same-gender sexuality cannot be described as “homophobic.” Such an approach is too simplistic and will not

foster a healthy discussion. I do have homosexual and lesbian friends. I still do not, however, bless their behavior any more than I could bless any sinful behavior (v. 32).

I would conclude that the most loving position the 21st century church can take is to continue to identify, along with the Apostle Paul and the historic church, same-gender sexual behavior as sinful. At the same time, the church must reach out to all who struggle with a same-gender orientation, just as we reach out to those who struggle with greed, heterosexual lust, alcoholism, or any other temptation known to fallen humanity.

To be clear: There is a boundary maker, and boundaries cannot be broken, for He is Creator and we are mere creation.

Richard B. Hays, "Relations Natural and Unnatural: A Response to John Boswell's 'Exegesis of Romans 1,'" *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 14 (Spring 1986): 184-215; Gary David Comstock, *Gay Theology Without Apology* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 1993), 43.

Frank Stagg wrote, "Male and female do look to one another for completion; homosexuality is a denial of this," "The Plight of Jew and Gentile in Sin: Romans 1:18-3:20," *Review and Expositor* 73 (Fall 1986): 406.

Paul J. Achtemeier stated, "The violation of the created order in human sexuality is therefore, as Paul understands it, an outgrowth of the violation of the created order, a violation whose root lies in idolatry," *Romans. Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1985), 41.

Richard B. Hays, "Awaiting the Redemption of Our Bodies: Drawing on Scripture and Tradition in the Church Debate on Homosexuality," *Sojourners* 20 (July 1991): 19.

John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980), 109.

Hays, "Relations Natural and Unnatural," 210.

Pepper Schwartz, sociologist at the University of Washington, wrote, "There is a great deal of information that shows that human sexuality is too cultural, cognitive, situational, and learned to be perfectly programmed at birth; "The Science of Sexuality Still Needs Social Science," *The Scientist* 9 (6 February 1995): 12.

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Jillian Kay Melchior, "Peer Pressure and 'Transgender' Teens," <https://www.wsj.com>, 9/9/2018.

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