

Sexual Orientation and the Bible – wk. 3

A Sunday School Class for Dayspring Baptist Church
led by Pastor Chris Fillingham; August 20, 2017

Natural/Unnatural Sex in Genesis 1-2 and Romans 1

Traditionalist Interpretation:

- Gender Complementarity: God’s original design for human sexuality in creation is defined by the opposite and complementing natures of male and female.¹
 - Genesis 1:26-28.
 - Genesis 2:18-25.
- Larger focus on anatomical complementarity. What “nature” teaches most centrally about sex is “the anatomical fittedness of the male penis and the female vagina.”

Digging Deeper into Genesis 1 and 2:

- Genesis 1:
 - vs 26-27: Who is created in the image of God? How does the value of women compare to men? How does this fit into a patriarchal worldview?
 - vs. 28: Is procreation the essential role of marriage?
- Genesis 2:
 - vs. 18: What is the problem?
 - vs. 19-20: What is the immediate response to the problem?
 - vs. 21-23: Why is the woman a “suitable” helper?
 - vs. 24-25: “One Flesh” = new “kinship-bond.”
 - Sex as “Unitive-Bonding”
 - Ephesians 5, 1 Cor. 6,
- Normal vs. Normative. Descriptive vs. Prescriptive readings.

What does *Paul* mean by “natural/unnatural”?

3 Layers of Meaning

1. Subjective Disposition: - What comes “naturally” to a person?
 - a. One’s Individual Nature - Ephesians 2:3; Romans 2:14
 - b. “To act ‘unnaturally’ is to fail, in the deepest sense, both to be yourself and to find your rightful place in the wider world.”² Notice Paul’s language:
 - i. “exchanged” what was natural for unnatural
 - ii. “gave up” natural intercourse
 - c. Paul’s Assumptions: Everyone has a “natural” inclination to heterosexual relationships.

¹ This is the leading argument of the primary contemporary traditionalist scholar, Robert Gagnon. See his *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics*, 2001.

² James Brownson, *Bible, Gender, Sexuality: Reframing the Church’s Debate on Same-Sex Relationships*, 231. Many of my notes this week are derived from Brownson’s book.

- d. Sexual “Orientation” as distinct from same-sex “acts” develops in the 18th century.³
2. Social Order and Assumptions – Natural Order of Patriarchy
 - a. 1 Cor. 11:14-15: A man having long hair is against “nature” and degrading.
 - b. Patriarchal Social Order: Men and women have clearly different roles and values.
 - i. “Degrading” a man’s “status” to that of a woman.
 - ii. “Men having sex with other men was considered ‘unnatural,’ at least in part, because it violated established gender roles, forcing men to play the role of women.”⁴
 - iii. Universal pattern of same-sex erotic relationships (particularly among men) that involved status differences between the active and passive partners.
 - iv. “Shameful Acts” 1:27 – Honor/Shame is a key component.
 3. Biological Meaning – Natural Purpose of Procreation
 - a. Jewish, Christian, and Pagan writers all spoke of procreation as the “natural” purpose for sex.
 - i. Josephus & Philo
 - ii. Early Church Teaching: Romans 1:26 not as referring to lesbian relationships, but to non-procreative forms of heterosexual intercourse and thus “unnatural.”
 - iii. Catholic teaching today: opposition to gay or lesbian marriages connected to procreation
 - b. Paul’s not focused on anatomy. No ancient texts allude to anatomy as what defines “natural.” This is a **“striking and ominous silence, particularly in [the] argument, where ‘anatomical complementarity’ comprises the very heart and essence of [the] entire case against homosexual practice.”**⁵

When Paul speaks about natural/unnatural – his underlying assumptions include all three of these simultaneously:

1. The natural inner disposition of a person
2. What are the socially natural/normal roles for “men” in particular
3. Procreation as the only natural role for sex

Natural and Unnatural in ancient writings, including Paul’s writings, were not synonyms for *straight* and *gay*.

³ Michael Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*.

⁴ James Brownson, 236.

⁵ James Brownson, 243.

Lust/Degrading Passion/Consuming Passion – Roman 1:24-27

Are Paul’s “unnatural/lustful/passion out of control” condemnations applicable to all same sex relationships? Is it the “same –sex” that is the moral problem, or is there a particular kind of same-sex relationship that Paul is condemning?

Literary Context – Paul’s Rhetoric

- Romans 1 –
 - Primary Problem: Idolatry
 - Rhetoric: Indignation, setting up 2:1
- Romans 2: Surprise! You are judging them, but doing the very same thing!!
 - How? What is their sin?
 - 2:1 Passing judgment
 - How does this influence our conversation? What might it look like to “not judge”?

Lust/Passion/Impurity – Reflection on Greco-Roman same-sex eroticism.

- Jewish connection between idolatry and lust.
- Greco-Roman Sources: Connect same-sex eroticism as manifestation of insatiable lust – an overflow of desire, always wanting more.
 - Dio Chrysostom – “*The Man whose **appetite is insatiate** in such things [i.e. his sex life], when he finds there is no scarcity, no resistance, in **this field** [i.e. sex with his wife], will have contempt for the easy conquest and **scorn for a woman’s love, as a thing too readily given**—in fact, too utterly feminine—and will turn his assault against the male quarters, eager to **befoul the youth** who will very soon be magistrates and judges and generals, believing that in them he will find a kind of pleasure difficult and hard to procure. His state is **like that of men who are addicted to drinking** and wine-bibbing, who after long and steady drinking of unmixed wine, often lose their taste for it and **create an artificial thirst** by the stimulus of sweating, salted foods, and condiments.”⁶*
 - Notice connection with Paul’s words “giving up” or “leaving behind” natural intercourse with women.
- Most common practices of same-sex eroticism in the Greco-Roman World:
 - Pederasty: teacher/pupil
 - Prostitution – especially in temples
 - Masters and Slaves – men has the “usage” of their household “property”
- Greco-Roman Assumptions about same-sex eroticism
 - People were thought to be capable of both opposite-sex and same-sex attraction, and participated in both.
 - Not an exclusive sexual orientation, but a product of excessive sexual desire. The majority of same-sex behavior fit easily into a paradigm of excess.⁷
 - Notice comparison Dio Chrysostom makes to gluttony.

⁶ Quoted in James Brownson, 154

- Allusion to Roman Imperial House:
 - Gaius Caligula – Emperor not long before Paul wrote Romans.
 - Connected to Idolatry
 - Tried to erect a statue of himself in the Temple of Jerusalem – The link between Gaius and idolatry was well-known in Jewish circles.
 - Cultural/Political Symbol of out-of-control lust
 - Suetonius wrote:
 - Gaius, “lived in perpetual incest with all his sisters, and at a large banquet he placed each of them in turn below him, while his wife reclined above.”
 - Reported raping the wives of his dinner guests in an adjoining room and then returning to the banquet to comment on their performance.
 - Reports various same-sex sexual encounters between Gaius and other men.
 - Philo – Jewish –similarly gives a scathing critique of Gaius Caligula.
 - Military Officer whom he had sexually humiliated joins a conspiracy to murder him. He was stabbed through the genitals.
 - Romans 1:27 – **“Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own person the due penalty for their error.”** – Paul’s writing to the church in Rome. Many would surely make this connection.
- Gaius Caligula: Cultural Example – movement from idolatry to insatiable lust, to every form of depravity and the results it creates in your life.

So, how does this compare with Christians in loving, committed, covenant relationships who are of the same gender?

- Paul wasn’t condemning the expression of a same-sex orientation as opposed to the expression of an opposite-sex orientation. That’s not a category or question he has to even consider. ***He was condemning excess as opposed to moderation.***⁸
- No one is condoning what Paul has in mind as he writes Romans 1.

The question to come back to:

- Are Paul’s assumptions when writing Romans 1 a basis for condemning all same-sex relationships?

⁸ Mathew Vines, 105