

Romans 1:24-28 and same-sex practice: Some exegetical remarks

Abstract: Few things can potentially divide (and are dividing) Christians, like the LGBTIQ+ issue. Conservative churches argue that sexuality forms an integral part of the human being and, hence, that sexual sin falls in a category of its own in any catalogue of sins. They are sins committed in the human body that radically affect one's participation in Christ's earthly body. To act in the realisation of same-sex lust is in itself sinful. It views same-sex practices as sexual sin and condemns all practitioners. On the other hand, there are Christians who accept that a homosexual orientation can be a biological given that needs to be accepted but that God views homosexual practice as an evil that should be avoided at all costs. Then there are also Christians who accept that a homosexual orientation is integral to some people's humanity and accept same-sex behaviour as a regular expression of sexuality. Romans 1 plays a key role in the church's discussion of the issue. The article reconsiders the textual evidence, using an exegetical model based on the historical-critical method combined with biblical theology. The conclusion is that Romans 1:24-29 refers to same-sex behaviour within the context of the Gentile world of idolatry that engages in wilful transgression of God's bounds, resulting in degeneration in the lives of offenders. Rather, this pericope refers to same-sex-oriented persons within an exclusive, durable relationship in serving love. The focus is not on an individual's fundamental predisposition towards same-sex practice; it functions within a list of sins and perversities that characterise paganism and pervert what God gave in sexuality.

Keywords: Romans 1:24-29; same-sex orientation; paganism; idolatry

1. Introduction

Theological perspectives on homosexuality vary significantly across different religious traditions and denominations, illustrating the differing interpretations of sacred texts, theological principles and cultural contexts. Some key theological positions within major religious traditions include the traditionalist views of many conservative Christian denominations that the Bible condemns the acceptance of a homosexual orientation and related behaviour as sinful. Such behaviour, it is argued, is incompatible with Christian teachings on sexuality and marriage that are intended exclusively for heterosexual unions. More progressive views argue that conservatives' traditional interpretations of biblical texts on homosexuality are outdated or misapplied. Instead of condemnation, the Bible emphasises love, justice and the overarching message of inclusivity, as found, for instance, in the teachings of Jesus. Hence, they affirm same-sex relationships; long-term same-sex relationships can be consistent with Christian values. They argue that the historical and cultural contexts of biblical texts do not address committed same-sex relationships as understood today. Lastly, affirming views exist that assert that biblical references to homosexuality do not apply to modern, consensual same-sex relationships. They affirm LGBTIQ+ individuals, including their relationships and identities, and advocate for equal rights and recognition within the church and society.

It can be concluded that churches' theological differences over homosexual orientation and behaviour illustrate the complex interplay of scriptural hermeneutics and interpretation, cultural context and evolving social values that lead to a spectrum of beliefs and practices within and across religious traditions. Some churches, using a literalist approach, believe that Scripture speaks immediately into the lives of believers. This article

accepts that, as a condition for understanding any ancient text, no text can be interpreted without contextualising it historically, socially and culturally. Like William Loader, it accepts that attempting to understand the biblical text requires examining the historical, cultural and rhetorical context. The relevance of the biblical text for contemporary discussion is possible but only by understanding the context of the writing.¹

The biblical texts related to the issue are few: the conflict between Noah and Ham (perhaps) in Genesis 9:20-27, the Sodom and Gomorrah narrative in Genesis 19,² the laws in Leviticus 18, 20 and Deuteronomy 22, the narrative about the Levite's concubine in Judges 19, perhaps the relationship between David and Jonathan, Romans 1, 1 Corinthians 16, 1 Timothy 1:3-11, 1 Timothy 4 and Jude 6-7.

Many scholars refer to the pericope in Romans 1:18-32 as key evidence of New Testament thinking about homosexuality.³ For instance, Bert Loonstra remarks that Paul's reference to same-sex practice in Romans 1 is the most explicit in Paul's literature and the Bible.⁴ Much has been written about the reference. This article reconsiders the textual evidence, applying historical criticism, as an open-ended and critical inquiry into the meaning and function of God's language to attempt to reach a conclusion relevant to a non-confessional biblical theology.⁵ The exegetical model applied consists of five elements: a historical-cultural analysis of the text to interpret the background, followed by a lexical-syntactic analysis, a theological analysis, which determines what the relevant text communicates about God's revelation to human beings and the principles behind possible commands in the text, a literary analysis of the text during which literary characteristics, figurative language, the genre etc. are examined and an interpretation of the text.⁶

2. Romans 1:24-25

As argued, a precondition for interpreting a historical document like the letter of Paul to the Romans is to know enough about the circumstances surrounding the letter's origins. Therefore, the vital questions are: Who was the author, what was the author's reason for writing the letter, and who were the recipients? What was the author's relationship with the receivers, and were there any challenges that led to the communication?

The chief difficulty in the letter to the Romans lies in the paucity of information regarding the church in Rome. Many researchers have suggested various circumstances for the letter's origin.

2.1. Paul's circumstances when writing the letter

Paul was probably in Corinth when, during the period of three months in Greece, he wrote the letter (Acts 20:2-3) before he sailed east. He mentioned that he intended to visit Jerusalem to hand over the contribution that the Greek churches collected for the poverty-stricken Christians in Judea (15:25). After that, he intended to visit Rome, a city he had repeatedly but unsuccessfully attempted to visit (1:11f.; 15:23f.) and then go to Spain to take the gospel to the unreached (15:20, 24, 28).⁷ Rome was situated between Jerusalem and Spain, which illustrated his continuing commitments to the welfare of Jews (Jerusalem) and non-Jewish unbelievers (Spain). He was apprehensive about visiting Jerusalem, requesting Christians in Rome to pray for him (15:30) for success in his mission and protection from Judean unbelievers (15:31).

2.2. Reason for writing the letter

Paul did not state a clear reason for visiting the believers in Rome or writing the letter. However, since his vision was to reach out to people who had not received the gospel, he might need their fellowship and support on his way to Spain. Rome was approximately two-thirds of the way between Jerusalem and Spain. Rome would then serve to prepare and stock up for his Spanish visit. Therefore, he discreetly requested their (financial) assistance on his journey to Spain (15:24). Perhaps he saw Rome as a potential base for his

operations in the Western Mediterranean, as he viewed Antioch as a base to reach the East.⁸

Another reason might be that Paul wished to visit the believers in Rome and present them with a sample of his proclamation, 'a sustained and coherent statement of the gospel'.⁹ Hopefully, this would have resulted in their invitation to Paul to visit and stay with them longer next time. He had not visited Rome before, implying he did not know most church members. Hence, he wanted to establish his apostolic credentials by giving a full account of his gospel.¹⁰ It is clear from the long list of greetings in Romans 16 that Paul already knew several believers in the congregation by name and desired to create a bond with the congregation. He may have met them during his travels to many cities where they might have visited.

By writing the letter, Paul relates to the challenges Christians face in Rome. John R.W. Stott discusses these challenges mainly as conflicts resulting from the mixed composition of the church in Rome, with Gentiles in the majority and Jews as a smaller group (1:5f., 13; 11:13). Considerable conflict arose from this composition, not primarily ethnic but theological. It may be possible that the Jewish disturbances in Rome 'at the instigation of Chrestus'¹¹ led to their expulsion from Rome in AD 49 by Emperor Claudius (Acts 15:1). This conflict could be attributed to it.¹²

Perhaps the Jewish Christians in Rome represented Judaizing Christianity, regarding Christianity as part of Judaism and requiring Christians to observe the Jewish law, in contrast to Gentile Christians' law-free gospel.¹³ In Pauline's jargon, Jewish Christians were 'the weak' while law-free Christians were 'the strong' (Rom 14–15). However, Stott warns against oversimplifying the conflict.¹⁴ Many Jews, probably including some Jewish Christians, saw Paul as an enemy of the law and a traitor to the covenant. The strong, referring to non-Jewish Christians, think they were better than the weak, arguing that Jewish believers' adherence to the Mosaic law accounts for the denial of Christ's atonement. They were betraying that they were still under the bondage of the law. The weak were proud of their favoured status as Jews, while the strong boasted of their freedom. Paul decided he had to address and humble both groups' self-assurance of being correct.

Paul's role in making peace between the Christian groups in Rome was based on being a patriotic Jew (9:3) while also being commissioned by the Jerusalem church as the apostle to the Gentiles (11:13; cf. 1:5; 15:15f.). His statement as an agent of reconciliation of the apostolic gospel was required to resolve the conflict among Roman believers over the covenant and the law.

On the one hand, Paul states succinctly that guilty sinners can only be justified by God's grace through faith in Christ, without any works. On the other hand, he redefines God's people, the children of Abraham, according to faith in Jesus and not to descent, circumcision or culture. Hence, Jews and Gentiles differ in no respect (e.g. 3:21f., 27f.; 4:9f.; 10:11f.).¹⁵ The covenant includes non-Jews and Jews, while the Spirit fulfils the law as the revelation of God's holy will.¹⁶

It can be argued that Paul argues for a form of remnant theology that appealed elsewhere within Judaism during the period. For that reason, he states unequivocally that Jesus is the key to salvation without speculating about the fate of non-believing Jews, given his focus on God's promises.¹⁷

2.3. Author's relation to receivers

Acts 28:17–29 provides important information about Paul's relation to the congregation in Rome. Eventually, Paul arrived as a prisoner of the Roman Empire after being arrested in Rome and met with the local leaders of the Jews in Rome. He justified himself as a member of the sect against which many people everywhere were talking (v. 22). In his second meeting with them, he emphasised that he had done nothing against the Jewish people or their customs. His arrest in Jerusalem was at the hands of the Jewish authorities; they accused him before the Romans. Although the Roman Jews did not find anything substantial against him except several controversial issues about the Jewish religion and

a “certain Jesus”, whom Paul claimed was resurrected, the Jews insisted that he be prosecuted. It compelled Paul to appeal to Caesar (28:19). Paul promised his Jewish audience that he would not charge his nation before the imperial court. He declared to the Roman believers that “I am bound with this chain because of the hope of Israel” (28:20). Acts ends with the remark that Paul lived two years in his own rented quarters and welcomed all who came to him while proclaiming the Gospel with boldness and without restriction. However, the account does not refer explicitly to his meeting with the Christian believers in Rome.

3. Exegetical remarks

Scholars differ about the genre of the letter, whether it is polemical and irenic, conciliatory, apologetic or prophylactic. Instead, Richard Lenski proposes that the exegete should spend time with the exposition of the letter instead of contending unprovable hypotheses regarding the specific genre.¹⁸

3.1. Textual context

Romans 1:26–27 is part of a larger argument in Romans 1–3. Paul’s argument is that all humanity, both Jews and Gentiles, stand guilty before God and in need of salvation through Christ.¹⁹ The author introduces himself (1:1) before explaining his subject matter (1:2–7). Next, he defines his recipients, the Roman Christians (1:8–15), before qualifying the overarching theme of the letter, the gospel’s power to deliver all people from sin and death (1:16–17). As an introduction to this theme, discussed in 1:18–15:13, the author refers to unrighteous humanity that suffers God’s wrath (1:18–3:20). Next, he discusses the righteousness that comes by faith alone in Christ (3:21–4:25).²⁰

The pericope of Romans 1:18–32 provides conservative evangelical believers with their most significant hermeneutical firepower in the raging debate over homosexual practice. In their interpretation, Paul links homosexuality with idolatry, identifying homosexuality with idolatry and calling same-sex practices of both men and women abominable.²¹ The subject under discussion is faith in Christ as a condition for righteousness before God. But first, Paul explains that humanity’s unrighteousness demands Christ’s sacrifice on the cross. All people are condemned before God due to the debt of their sins, unable to live a righteous life. They are held in sin’s sway.²²

3.2. Catalogue of sinful behaviour

Humans’ ungodliness and wickedness include various sins, of which Paul mentions a few.²³ They include impurity, dishonouring their bodies among themselves, exchanging natural sexual relations for unnatural ones, envy, murder, strife, deceit, hostility, gossiping, slander, hating God, insolence, arrogance, boastfulness and disobedience to parents (1:24–32). What is clear is that Paul makes no qualitative difference between them. Hence, it is not possible to establish a special category for sexual sins (among which is same-sex behaviour).

By rebelling against God, sinners turn to their passions as objects of desire and even worship them, implying that they become the centre point of their attention. The result of these deeds of idolatry is that God hands them over to the lusts of their hearts (v. 24). It is feasible to translate “gave them over” (παρέδωκεν αὐτοὺς) in three ways: Permissively, that God passively permits them to face the retributive consequences;²⁴ privatively, that God withdraws the divine hand from evil; and in active judicial sense, that God actively gives them over to retributive vengeance.²⁵ R.C. Sproul argues that when human beings refuse to honour God, it becomes normal that they dishonour themselves since man is created in God’s image. And by denuding and denigrating the divine image, humankind suffers accordingly.²⁶

3.3. Impurity

The term “impurity” (ἀκαθαρσίαν) in verse 24, “God gave them over (possibly alluding to Ps 81:12) in the desires of their hearts to impurity”, refers essentially to a substantive disorderliness, as Mary Douglas from her background as a cultural anthropologist argues.²⁷ Impurity is what is out of sync with what is normal and acceptable. In the context of sexual immorality, as verse 24 suggests, impurity is a substance that is out of place within human relationships. L. William Countryman supports the derivation of the meaning of “impurity” and adds that Judaism had a dualistic sexual ethic.²⁸ The first was the ethic of the right of possession; the inherent sin was covetousness. The second was an ethic of purity; the inherent sin was impurity or spiritual dirtiness. Exchanging God’s truth for the lie involves idolatry (1:23, 25) but also impurity as a perversion of right or correct sexuality (in an ethical sense) in God’s image to distorted sexuality (1:24, 26). Once people have perverted the divine image, they distort it also in themselves. It is important to note that Paul thinks not only of Gentile idolatry. He also has in mind Jewish idolatry, criticised in Romans 1:18-32, as King argues convincingly.²⁹

In exchanging the truth about God for idolatry, God hands sinners over to impurity. Hence, they defile (or degrade) their own bodies sexually (1:24), including in same-sex intercourse, which was “against nature” (εἰς τὴν παρὰ φύσιν; 1:26–27). Daniel Louw views “unnatural” (παρὰ φύσιν) as standard terminology in several other ancient texts for homoerotic acts.³⁰ However, he emphasises that what is vital to note is that Paul is not referring to same-sex relationships grounded in love. The context shows that he thinks of same-sex relations in terms of idolatrous worship that abuses and threatens what was considered to be “natural” sexual relations in a heterosexual relationship, as will be stated again.³² It is also true that temple worship in many cultures accepted male-on-male and female-on-female prostitution as an essential element, perhaps to arouse the gods’ sexual desires to lead to the fertility of participating worshippers. However, this may not be the case in the context of Rome, given the Roman authorities’ suppression of Bacchic cults for their licentiousness in the late Roman Republic in the light of Augustan moral codes.³⁴

Craig Keener disagrees and argues that limiting the term’s use to only certain forms of behaviour implies that others are excluded. He simultaneously states that the text is silent about any applications, concluding that it is not an honest way of interpreting it.³⁵ “Impurity”, in his opinion, implies what exists (for a Jew) against the way God created things to be, what conflicts with nature as God created it.³⁶

In ancient times, sexuality was a matter of social structure and order. What Paul addresses here is sexual intercourse, not love, according to Martin.³⁷ Same-sex intercourse goes against the social order because penetration signals the social superiority of the penetrator, while being penetrated implies passivity and social subordination. Hence, for Paul, the practice of same-sex intercourse proves that the social structure is corrupt.

3.4. Natural – intention of Creator

Petrus Botha argues that χρῆσις (*chrēsis*) in Romans 1:26-27 (“for their females exchanged the natural function for that which is contrary to nature” ... “likewise so also the males abandoning the natural function of the female”) has the force of “sexual relations” here. He argues that *physikos* and *physis* refer to one’s constitution given by the Creator; hence, Romans 1:26 bears the idea of a natural constitution as established by God in the creation of the human race.³⁸ *Physikos* should be interpreted as “in accordance with or under the intention of the Creator” and *para physikos* as “contrary to the intention of the Creator”. It defines Paul’s understanding of human nature: male and female were created for each other; their complementary sexualities are grounded in the distinctive, observable constitutions of their sexual organs. Keener thinks that the text suggests that an essential part of God’s image in humanity included the complementarity of male and female (Gen 1:27) and the distortion of God’s image leads, *inter alia*, to same-sex intercourse “against nature”, which for Paul meant “against the way God had created human beings to function”.³⁹

Not everyone agrees. For instance, Anthony Thiselton says, “Paul sees homosexual intimacy as one among many symptoms of human fallenness, along with greed, materialism, self-assertion, and other qualities which fall short of the ideal, in contrast to today’s obsessiveness with this particular phenomenon”.⁴⁰ What is important to note is that Paul does not exalt any of the mentioned sins above the others.

In a biological sense, “natural” and “unnatural” refers to the supposed incompleteness of the genitalia of the different sexes, referring to Stoic philosophy where *physis* means the order of the cosmos.⁴¹ However, Paul uses it in a moral and religious sense. He does not refer to his knowledge of the different biological sexual organs. “Natural” is his theological norm for what was determined by God; he is not interested in empirical investigation or speculative determinism. As a result, he views same-sex intercourse as transgressing natural boundaries defined by God. The way males and females are made, with the female possessing the complementary opening for insertion by the male member, clearly shows in his opinion that the complementary male and female sex represent what is natural.⁴² In the same way, idolatry is also implicitly contrary to nature (*παρὰ φύσιν*), not because people are constitutional monotheists but because the created cosmos betrays its origin in a Creator that must undoubtedly be much greater than the idols carved out of wood or stone in the image of one of God’s creatures (Rom 1:19-23). Besides, what can be known about God is plain to all humans (1:19).

The author of 1 Corinthians 11:14, the same as the author of Romans, states that the head of every man is Christ, the head of a woman is her husband, and the head of Christ is God (v. 3). Sexuality is for Paul a matter of social hierarchy and order, as stated above. Therefore, a man should pray and prophesy with his head uncovered. In contrast, a woman should cover her head because of the angels (v. 10).⁴³ Verse 14-15 adds: “Does not nature (*ἡ φύσις*) itself teach you that for a man to wear long hair is degrading to him, but if a woman has long hair, it is her pride? For her hair is given to her for a covering”. Again, Paul justifies the hierarchical (patriarchal) ordering of men over women and women having to wear clothing - that is culturally specific - at the hand of what is “natural”. He implies that he appeals to what is self-evident. It is submitted that it is vital that these two texts, both referring to what Paul assumes to be natural and unnatural, should be linked in any discussion about Paul’s that some human behaviour is unnatural, as recounted in Romans 1.

Christian churches accept widely that 1 Corinthians’ accommodation of culturally defined clothing is inapplicable in another context, like the present day. Therefore, Daniel Helminiak remarks that for Paul, “contrary to nature” means “atypical,” not against nature but against culture.⁴⁴ He writes that *para physin* is originally a Stoic technical term Paul employed to impress his Roman readers. He argues that although Paul knew of Stoicism, he did not necessarily understand Stoic philosophy well enough and contends that Paul implies something else with the term, such as “atypical.” In contrast, Stoic understanding defined the concept as “beyond the natural.” Unfortunately, Helminiak does not produce further evidence of Paul’s use of the concept, although others have done so, most prominently Engberg-Pederson.⁴⁵ Not everybody agrees with this viewpoint. Some deny that *para physin* does not mean contrary to culture but behaviour contrary to nature/god/logos, referring to the principle that holds the *kosmos* together. However, it is submitted that Paul’s use of the term to refer to a cultural custom implies that he was thinking of behaviour that was atypical rather than contrary to the natural. It concurs with Loader’s position that ‘unnatural’ reflects cultural norms of the time rather than an eternal, universal condemnation consisting of inherent morality, as in Greco-Roman thought.⁴⁶

3.5. Dishonouring their bodies

The “dishonouring of the bodies” is demonstrated in verse 26 by referring to women who exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones or women who changed the natural use into that which is against nature. τοῦ ἀτιμάζεσθαι (“to dishonour”) is a genitive

articular infinitive that may refer to an infinitive of purpose, an infinitive of result or an epexegetical (i.e., explanatory) infinitive, expanding the previous clause that relates to impurity.⁴⁷ Verse 27 implies that men are doing the same by giving up natural relations with women, being consumed with passion for one another, or leaving the natural use of women and burning in their lust toward one another. Such men are then characterised as committing shameless acts with men and receiving in their own persons the due penalty for their error.⁴⁸ The presupposition that Christians do not have the right to do with their bodies as they please is a belief that Christians historically taught through the ages.⁴⁹ Believers are called upon to care for and sanctify their bodies with their behaviour. Their bodies are temples because the Spirit of God resides in them (1 Cor 3:16-17; 2 Cor 6:14-7:1; Eph 2:21-22).

The concept “shameful” (ἀσχημοσύνην) used in Romans 1:27 (see also Rev 16:15, with cognates in 1 Cor 7:23; 12:23; 13:5) is defined as “to act in defiance of social and moral standards”, with resulting disgrace, embarrassment and shame. The Lexham Research Lexicon of the Greek New Testament translates it as a shameless deed, leading to a state of dishonour, or indecent behaviour, an indecent or improper act, especially one that shames oneself.⁵⁰ Johannes Louw and Eugene Nida agree and suggest that the term be translated as “to act shamefully or indecently”.⁵¹ The authors refer to such sexual behaviours and acts as “against nature”, “dishonour”, and “shameful acts”.⁵³ The conclusion is accepted that Paul is actually condemning non-productive sexual acts that include same-sex and heterosexual activities.⁵⁴

3.6. Adult same-sex behaviour

It is noticeable that in Romans 1:27, Paul uses the terms “males with males” (ἄρσενες ἐν ἄρσενι), not the typical terms found in Plato and other Greek authors who referred to “males with boys”. Paul’s use implies adult-adult actions (contra Louw’s argument).⁵⁶ Given the background of the social order of the day, this is hardly surprising since men having intercourse with boys left the social hierarchy intact and occurred widely, whereas men penetrating men do not. Roman cultural thinking frowned on men’s penetration by another, which implied the degradation of the status of the penetrated man. Remarkable is also that Paul does not use the terms preferred in Hellenistic literature for female and male persons who were habitually involved in homoerotic relationships, namely *tribades* (τριβαδέες) and *kinaidoi* (κιναιδοί) respectively.⁵⁷

William Webb explains further that Romans 1 adds two significant contributions to a biblical discussion of homosexuality.⁵⁸ In the first place, what he calls the “implied creation and procreation theology” underlying Leviticus 18 is now made explicit in Romans 1, with Paul’s appeal for male-with-female sexuality as something that is natural and clearly revealed in nature and thus, by special inference, within the complementary gender design of women and men. The observation reflects the core biblical concern with gender boundaries that Paul agrees with. Secondly, Romans 1 provides the only explicit prohibition of lesbian sexuality within a biblical discussion of the issue.

The text also argues against a narrowing of biblical concerns to certain limited forms of homosexuality, such as pederasty. Romans 1 states that God’s revelation is clear in the created world around us, verifying that the Bible limits sexuality to what accords with God’s creation of males and females.⁵⁹

3.7. Conclusion

Paul considers homosexual practices as an outgrowth connected with idolatry practised by non-Jews. In other words, Paul’s intent was not to single out same-sex behaviour as uniquely sinful but to use it as an example of humanity’s broader estrangement from God, brought about by idolatry, as Loader argues.⁶⁰ He hints that he knows of the decadent sexual practices that characterised some religious rituals of the heathen as well as relations between people. He argues that they could have known the Creator “(f)or since

the creation of the world his invisible attributes—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen because they are understood through what has been made” (v. 20). They do not have any excuse since they already knew the Divinity but did not recognise God. Hence, their thoughts became futile and their hearts darkened (v. 21). As a result, God made them the victims of their impurity. One of the results was that they dishonoured their bodies among themselves (v. 24). It includes what is referred to today as lesbianism, something rarely mentioned in ancient literature.⁶¹ As part of the lie, they worship the form of an image resembling mortal human beings (see wordplay on the Greek terms ἀφθαρτος [*aphthartos*, “immortal, imperishable, incorruptible”] and φθαρτός [*phthartos*, “mortal, corruptible, subject to decay”])⁶² or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles (v. 23). Their dishonourable passion included the exchange of natural sexual relations for unnatural ones (v. 26). Paul describes these passions as shameless acts that justify the penalty they received. Other acts are included in the catalogue, starting with unrighteousness and ending with being ruthless (vv. 29–31).⁶³

With unnatural passions, the author implies that such behaviour contradicts what is natural or what nature demonstrates as feasible.⁶⁴ In other words, it clashes against the divinely created order. The presupposition is that God established the different sexes with the view on sexual relations that terminate in children, in Jewish thinking, the most significant of riches that people can accumulate in life. To exchange the natural function of intercourse for that which is against nature is counter to the way God originally created and intended things to be. Ignoring the natural order of things God put into creation, which **should** be followed, necessarily leads to a corresponding penalty.⁶⁵ In Paul’s view, homosexual behaviour flows spontaneously from idolatry, which implies that people reject the creation order.⁶⁶ They refuse to acknowledge the manifestation of God’s activity in creation.⁶⁷ Paul’s thinking about creation is proven by the context of God as Creator in verse 20.⁶⁸

However, it may also be possible that Paul refers to the terms “natural” and “unnatural” as a popular conception in the Hellenistic culture that natural phenomena explain the order that characterises it **and** contains normative moral standards for humans. It may also explain his reference to Romans 2:14, which explains that when non-Jew Gentiles who do not have the law do by nature the things required by the law (Greek “do by nature the things of the law”), they become a law to themselves.⁶⁹ The phrase φύσει (*phusei*, “by nature”) explains the preceding “do not have the law,” implying: “the Gentiles who do not have the law by nature,” that is, by virtue of not being born Jewish. Corinth is writing the letter from Corinth, an immoral city with homosexuality being one of its many vices, while Rome was also notorious for its homosexual practices.⁷⁰

In other words, **and to conclude**, nature demonstrates that same-sex practices are reprehensible, illustrated by the human physique and the relation between sexual intercourse and reproduction. Non-Jewish idolatry leads to various practices that miss the divine intention with creation, suppressing the truth of God’s majesty revealed in nature (1:18–23). Same-sex practices are seen, hence, as an extension of idolatry.⁷¹

4. Biology and same-gender orientation

Is same-sex orientation a biological given or a learned behaviour? Both biblical insights and appropriated insights from many valid sources, including the biological and psychological sciences, should inform theology’s agenda when thinking about the LGBTIQ+ issue.⁷² What are the findings from the different sciences in humanities about the phenomenon of LGBTIQ+ people? **There is room only for a short discussion.**

Historically, the Christian church looked upon LGBTIQ+ acts as intrinsically immoral and sinful, without regard for the relational context, intentions behind or consequences of gay and lesbian behaviour and the matter of mutual consent affecting their fundamental moral evaluation. The church did not ask whether the behaviour took place in the context of a monogamous, loving relationship between two committed, consenting adult individuals or if those acts occurred in a promiscuous context between two individuals who did

not know each other, between an adult and minor or in cases of violent abuse of another person of the same sex.⁷³

In many (or perhaps most) cases, making any moral conclusions from scientific findings is impossible. Behavioural science findings do not (and should not) formally support any particular moral view; it is not the prerogative of the behavioural (or any other) scientist to transgress in moral ethics but to objectively study available evidence and form conclusions. The moral status of homosexuality is not and can never be a scientific question.⁷⁴

In the contemporary debate, there are two fundamental viewpoints. The essential view argues that the term “homosexual” is a proper qualifier for a person’s inner core nature or self and that sexual orientation is intimately intertwined with one’s identity as a human being. Hence, a person’s sexual orientation is an objective and transcultural fact.⁷⁵ Homosexual behaviour is then a manifestation of some inner essence characteristic of a specific segment of the population. However, the question can be asked: What is the distinction between *being* and *doing*? According to Jesus, to desire to sin is already sinning (Matt 5:27–28; see Job 31:1).⁷⁶ Do believers with a same-sex orientation need to seek healing for their sinful desires, do they have to accept that a same-sex orientation can never form part of a believer’s identity or do they need to make peace with their orientation and practise it responsibly as an essential element of their sexuality?

Another viewpoint, social constructivism, suggests that although the essence of same-gender sexual behaviours and attractions cannot be disputed, the intellectual construction of two categories of people based on sexual behaviours and attractions is a historical and cultural artefact; it is not enduring but culturally dependent and historically conditioned. It emphasises the social origin of the definition of sexuality (and homosexuality).⁷⁷ Sexuality as a historical construct implies that another culture in another era might have used another definition of sexuality, making it possible to indicate a moment when “the homosexual” emerged in Western culture. Hence, in the cultural consciousness of biblical times, the homosexual person did not exist. Others argue that there are no real homosexuals (or heterosexuals) because no one actually fits the script.⁷⁸ In ancient times, sexual acts were categorised in terms of the one who penetrates and the one who is penetrated, a construction that is not usable or used anymore. In the same way, moral and civil responses toward homosexuality can be modified; they are a social construction, as are our views of sexual orientation. They are fictive intersubjective realities that can (and should) change over time, as happened with slavery, the subordination of women, the expropriation of Indigenous people and extreme economic inequality.⁷⁹ Although people engage in same-sex sexual activities, this does not mark them out as a particular type of person; their sexual behaviour does not provide a means to identify them in the way that Western society utilises the term. Sexual orientation as a social construction is proven by the divergent ways cultures construct and interpret desire and sexual behaviour differently.

The most prominent advocate of social constructivism, Michel Foucault (1926–1984), was an influential French philosopher, historian of ideas, social theorist and literary critic.⁸⁰ He rejected the notion of a fixed, essential identity based on any individual’s behaviour. He warned that identity discourses are part of power games used by dominant groups to marginalise all people who do not conform to their normative claims, differentiating between “us” and “them.”⁸¹ Desiring and seeking a significant degree of control in life, they use sex as the ultimate wild card.⁸²

Foucault pinpointed the construction of “the homosexual” to around 1870 as a result of medical discourse that interpreted same-sex activity as evidence for a particular identity of some individuals. He writes, “(w)e must not forget that the psychological, psychiatric, medical category of homosexuality was constituted from the moment it was characterized”.⁸³ “Homosexuality appeared as one of the forms of sexuality when it was transposed from the practice of sodomy onto a kind of interior androgyny, a hermaphroditism of the soul. The sodomite has been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a

species".⁸⁴ Social constructivism wanted to deconstruct and historicise identity based on sexual orientation and root it in specific cultures.⁸⁵

The point of convergence in all these arguments is the question of the aetiology of homosexuality: Is it wilful or determined behaviour? The behavioural sciences form a consensus that the convergence points toward asserting a non-volitional aetiology. The conclusion is that the moral condemnation of a behaviour pattern of homosexual acts is obviated. It can no longer legitimately be deemed intrinsically immoral but should rather be viewed as morally neutral in and of itself. Moral judgment about the behaviour is inappropriate and irrelevant since a same-sex orientation is a transcultural and transhistorical phenomenon.⁸⁶ Likewise, Aristotle, Plato and Aristophanes had already verbalised the ancient Greek belief that homosexuals are born and not made.⁸⁷ This also partly motivated the decision of the American Psychiatric Association to remove homosexuality from its official diagnostic nomenclature of mental disorders.

This conclusion requires ethicists to be more sophisticated in reflecting on how aetiology should influence their moral reasoning. Otherwise, paederasts may argue that their pederasty is not made; they were born into it. Holger Szesnat suggests that it has become necessary to go beyond essentialism and social constructivism since both perspectives are basically reductionist; both assign primacy and agency either to the biological or to the cultural.⁸⁸ What is needed is rather a dialectic approach that gives ontological priority to neither "nature" nor "culture" (nurture) because the biological and social are neither separable nor antithetical, not alternatives but complementary. Human beings are both the result and cause of their environments rather than the product of two sets of fixed, independent phenomena.⁸⁹ As a set of potentialities and insuperable necessities, biology provides the material of social interpretations and extensions; it does not cause human behaviour but conditions and limits it.

Enough scientific data does not exist that imply that biological or genetic factors predispose one to homosexual proclivities.⁹⁰ Theology should be informed by science, but at the same time, the limitations of scientific methods of obtaining knowledge – and of scientific knowledge as such – should also be considered. Several issues, especially the limitations of the existing research on homosexuality, are of concern here.⁹¹ The first is the individual differences between the groups of people to whom the description of "homosexual" is applied. It must be kept in mind that the label "homosexual" comprises a large array of diverse people, demonstrated by the non-fixability of a term to describe it (such as LGBTIQ+). A second issue is the essentialist-constructionist debate, already commented on, with the essentialist arguing that "homosexual" is a real and critically important description of someone in some manner parallel to that individual being a "human being" or "female"; it refers to a real, enduring and universal categorisation and implies a gay-affirming morality. In contrast, social constructionists argue that in our culture, we have constructed two (intersubjective) categories based on sexual behaviour and attractions (heterosexual and homosexual); these categories are historical and cultural artefacts which are non-enduring and damaging to some people and should be avoided for that reason.

Many of the ideas and insights generated in the different scientific endeavours originated in a new way of thinking that eventually crystallised in queer theory, reflecting a critical approach toward sexuality and gender that challenges everything that is described or perceived as "natural" and "normal". "Queer theory", coined in 1990 by Teresa de Lauretis with "queer", meaning "across", implying "crossing of borders", challenges the very concept of "normal".⁹² As a political movement, it deliberately wanted to disrupt (yet not necessarily eradicate) existing categories of sex, gender and sexuality, dramatising incoherencies in essentialism by highlighting the fallacies associated with theories which present heterosexuality as seemingly dominant and homosexuality as subordinate.⁹³

The so-called first wave of theorising on homosexuality was courtesy of pathological accounts based on medical definitions and claiming that homosexuality represented an illness. Lesbian and gay studies emerged in the late 1950s and provided what several academics considered a homogeneous representation of the lesbian and gay community. It

represents the second wave. This provided the basis for a possible third wave of theorising about sexual orientation, although critiqued extensively by proponents of queer theory.⁹⁴

The essence of queer theory is that there is no essential sexuality of gender. Queer discourse in the academy, arts and philosophy calls into question the gender binaries, gender roles, the implication of gender in social divisions of power and, indeed, the whole idea of a fixed self as part of the postmodern consumerist dream of being able to make ourselves whatever we want to be, beyond any and all constraints, including the body we are given.⁹⁵ Exactly because of the biblical preference for those unfairly marginalised and disenfranchised, Christian ethics should concern itself with queer theory and reconsider its conservative stance.

5. Conclusions

Caution should be taken against uncritically applying ancient texts to modern contexts without accounting for the differences in cultural understanding, social practices and language. Reading Romans 1 should be characterised by being both faithful to the text's historical context and sensitive to contemporary ethical and pastoral concerns, particularly the experiences and dignity of LGBTQ+ individuals.

Romans 1:24-29 refers to same-sex behaviour in the context of wilful transgression of God's bounds, related to contempt of the Holy Spirit. It results in degeneration in the lives of offenders. The text does not function within the context of a personality problem or a local church; the context is the Gentile world of idolatry. The focus is not on an individual's fundamental predisposition towards same-sex behaviour but functions within a list of sins and perversities that characterise paganism and pervert what God gave in sexuality. In other words, these texts do not relate to the conscientious same-sex-oriented person within an exclusive, durable relation in serving love.

The traditional response to this argument is that the Bible consistently condemns homosexual behaviour. It contradicts the moral order that God built into creation, implying that the prohibition is universally valid. It also applies to conscientious believers who consider getting involved in a same-sex relationship based on love and faithfulness.

In the case of Romans 1, such an argument does not hold water because the context clearly does not consider believing homophiles in the church, implying that the text cannot be applied to determine the church's attitude towards or judgment of such people. The depravity and decay that the text ascribes to such behaviour is of another order than the search for an honest relationship in which homosexuals find a way to express their sexual orientation. The text argues that Gentiles' behaviour deviates from the moral order embedded in creation, and same-sex behaviour demonstrates it.

In other words, the author's field of view is the heathen practices of homo-prostitution and other forms of decadent same-sex behaviour within paganism, including religious rituals in which such practices occurred.⁹⁶ The scopus is decadent practices that characterise paganism, manifesting divine judgment of the pagan way of life. Paul connects homosexuality with idolatry and paganism; homosexuality as a challenge for the Christian church is missing. The range of the text does not include the local church's handling of the issue. A theological evaluation of durable homo-relations cannot be based on this text but requires a broad consideration of Paul's discussion of the Christian way of life.

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¹ Loader 2012, 14.

² Philo *De Somnis* II, pp. 61-64, discusses it from a Jewish viewpoint (Sandmel 1955, p. 243).

³ E.g., Michels, "Dismantling a Clobber Text", 12; Figueroa, *Bible as Text of Terror*; Botha and Van Rensburg. "Homosexuality as" against nature", 41; Christopher, "A Grammatical–Historical Critique of the Pro-Gay Hermeneutic in Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13," 32.

⁴ Loonstra 2005, p. 48.

⁵ Collins 2005, p. 22.

⁶ Virkler & Ayayo 2007.

⁷ Stott 2001, pp. 32–34.

⁸ Wright 1991, p. 234.

⁹ Stott 2001 pp. 31–32.

¹⁰ Stott 2001, p. 34.

¹¹ Suetonius; [Slingerland 1997](#).

¹² Suetonius, Divus Claudius (c. ad 120), 25.4. <https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Per-seus:text:1999.02.0132:life=cl.:chapter=25>; accessed on 8 August 2024.

¹³ It may be related to the conflict Acts 15 refers to that flared up in Antioch in Syria when some men came down from Judea and began to teach the brothers, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved (v. 1), resulting in the Jerusalem Council and the decision not to place any greater burden on non-Jewish believers than that they abstain from meat that has been sacrificed to idols (εἰδωλόθυτος) and from blood and from what has been strangled and from sexual immorality (vv. 28-29).

¹⁴ Stott 2001, pp. 34–36.

¹⁵ Sanders 1991, p. 66.

¹⁶ Stott 2001, p. 36.

¹⁷ Mendonça, Teixeira, Alfredo and Palma (eds.) *What Are We Talking About When We Are Talking About The Remnant?*, 7. Paul’s starting point in thinking about the Remnant is the Pharisaic model, centred on observance of the commandments. He then denies the decisiveness of the theophany on Mt. Sinai and redefines the concept of election by inserting Christ (Mendonça, pp. 24-25. It leads to a new hermeneutic of Israel’s past and a new way of doing things by changing the meaning of the covenant to restrict it to the tiny Remnant of Christian disciples.

¹⁸ Lenski 1936, p. 11.

¹⁹ Loader 2014, p. 294.

²⁰ López 2010, p. 623.

²¹ Eagle 2010, p. 47; Paul’s concern is not primarily about sexual ethics per se but about how idolatry distorts human relationships and behaviour - Loader 2014, 299.

²² López 2010, p. 627.

²³ Dallas (1996, p. 205) finds 24 sins or vices in Romans 1:20-31’s list.

²⁴ For instance, Philo uses this thought pattern to state that homosexuality leads to effeminacy not only in the body but also in the soul (Sandmel 1955, p. 243).

²⁵ Malick 1994, p. 337.

²⁶ Sproul 1994, p. 41.

²⁷ Douglas 1966, p. 35.

²⁸ Countryman 1988, p. 66.

²⁹ King 2018, ‘the idolatrous misplaced confidence of his own people in their God-given religion and status’ p. 184; also pp. 237, 296. Jews do not have any advantage (see the opening and closing of Rom 3:1-9), King 2018, p. 249

³⁰ Louw 2008, p. 120.

³² Louw 2008, p. 120.

³⁴ Lipíński 2024. <https://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/ancient-cultures/ancient-israel/sacred-prostitution-in-the-story-of-judah-and-tamar/>; accessed 10 August 2024.

³⁵ Keener 2009, pp. 34–35.

³⁶ So also Pronk 1989, p. 245.

³⁷ Martin, *Corinthian Body*, 39..

³⁸ Botha 2004, p. 92.

³⁹ Keener 2009, p. 35.

⁴⁰ Thiselton 2004, p. 187.

⁴¹ [Engberg-Pedersen 2000, 340.](#)

⁴² Botha 2005, p. 139.

⁴³ Why the motivation, “because of the angels”? The author argues that it was proper for women to wear head coverings when worshipping God because the angels are then present. Because the angels observe God’s people at worship, God’s people should be sensitive to follow God’s commands in worship. The angels live to serve God; likewise, God’s people, who have been saved by his grace, should live in obedience to his commands. His commands include the subjection of women to men (Barton & Osborne 1999, p. 157.

⁴⁴ Helminiak 1997, p. 87.

⁴⁵ [Engberg-Pedersen 2000, 83.](#)

⁴⁶ [Loader 2014, 302.](#)

⁴⁷ Biblical Studies Press 2005, Ro 1:21–32.

⁴⁸ This verse has been used repeatedly in the emotionally volatile discourse about HIV/AIDS as proof of God’s judgment of gay men in the form of this syndrome.

⁴⁹ Botha 2005, p. 41.

⁵⁰ ἀσχημοσύνη -ης, ἡ; (*aschēmosynē*), in Lexham Research Lexicon of the Greek New Testament. See also Chae, 1997.

⁵¹ Louw & Nida 1996, p. 758.

⁵³ [Botha 2005, p. 151.](#)

⁵⁴ [Brooten, Love Between Women, 79.](#)

⁵⁶ [Louw 2008, p. 120.](#)

⁵⁷ Botha 2004, p. 90.

⁵⁸ Webb 2005, p. 407.

⁵⁹ Webb 2005, pp. 406–407.

⁶⁰ [Loader 2014, p. 304.](#)

⁶¹ López 2010, p. 629.

⁶² Biblical Studies Press 2005, Ro 1:23.

⁶³ “Vice lists” like vv. 28–32 can be found elsewhere in the NT in Matt 15:19; Gal 5:19–21; 1 Tim 1:9–10; and 1 Pet 4:3. An example from the intertestamental period can be found in Wis 14:25–26.

⁶⁴ Loonstra 2005, p. 14.

⁶⁵ Wright 2002, p. 433.

⁶⁶ Bryan 2000, pp. 84–89.

⁶⁷ Witherington & Hyatt 2004, p. 69.

⁶⁸ Loonstra 2005, p. 14.

⁶⁹ Biblical Studies Press 2005, Ro 2:14.

⁷⁰ López 2010, p. 629.

⁷¹ Loonstra 2005, p. 15.

⁷² So also Vorster 2019.

⁷³ Jones & Yarhouse 2000b, p. 77.

⁷⁴ Gudorf, “Bible and Science”, 121.

⁷⁵ Stuart 2003, p. 8.

⁷⁶ Fergusson 2019.

⁷⁷ Pronk 1989, p. 118.

⁷⁸ Stuart 2003, p. 8.

⁷⁹ [Harari 2024, pp. 35, 37.](#)

⁸⁰ Foucault 1978. Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault were twentieth-century French post-structuralists who, along with Teresa de Lauretis, Judith Butler and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, used deconstruction in literary analysis (Lightsey 2015, p. 15).

⁸¹ See also Goss 1993, p. 183.

⁸² Robertson 2006, pp. 240-241.

⁸³ Rothmann 2014, p. 41.

⁸⁴ Foucault 1978, p. 43.

⁸⁵ Lightsey 2015, p. 20.

⁸⁶ Boswell 1980; also Boswell 1994.

⁸⁷ Peterson 2004, p. 37.

⁸⁸ Szesnat 1997, p. 284.

⁸⁹ De Cecco & Elia 1993: p. 8

⁹⁰ Jones & Yarhouse 2000b, 76.

⁹¹ Jones & Yarhouse 2000a, pp. 24-28.

⁹² Hill 2009, p. 1.

⁹³ Rothmann 2012, p. 49.

⁹⁴ Plummer 1995, p. 5.

⁹⁵ Cowdell 2017, p. 2.

⁹⁶ Loonstra 2005, p. 24.