

## Natural and Unnatural

*Summary of the key facts prepared by David Coltheart*

The most common Bible text used by Christians to condemn homosexuality is Romans 1:18 – 2:1. Two verses from this chapter, taken out of context, have been responsible for more bigotry and abuse than probably any other reference in the Bible. It is always important to read the context of any passage of Scripture. Here is the passage in full. Take the time to read it carefully.

“The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—His eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.

“For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles.

“Therefore, God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshipped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised. Amen.

“Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones. In the same way, the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed indecent acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their perversion.

“Furthermore, since they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, he gave them over to a depraved mind, to do what ought not to be done. They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; they are senseless, faithless, heartless, and ruthless. Although they know God's righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them.

“You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge the other, you are condemning yourself” (Romans 1:18 – 2:1 New International Version).

### Context

When conservative Christians pull two verses about same-sex behaviour (Romans 1:26-27) out of the longer passage and use them in isolation, they are engaging in the practice known as “proof-texting.” This involves selecting a biblical passage to support a previously held belief without regard for the context provided by the surrounding text as interpreted within the author's culture.

Romans chapter 1 as a whole describes people who have rejected God. Paul primarily describes the pagan, or Gentile, world, which knew of God through His creation but refused to show Him honour and thankfulness. The people made images of created things and worshipped them instead. In their self-sufficiency they turned from the truth to a lie. God respected their choices and left them to the results of their darkened minds.

Paul goes on to list other forms of unrighteousness exhibited by the Gentiles of his time, people who trusted in their own professed wisdom, but whose minds were debased. They were filled with sexual immorality, wickedness, covetousness, maliciousness, envy, murder, strife, deceit, disobedience to parents, gossip, slander, insolence, arrogance, boastfulness, faithlessness, heartlessness, and ruthlessness.

In Romans chapter 2, just as his Jewish readers are nodding their heads in agreement, Paul says, “You Jews, to whom God has given His law—when you condemn others, you are guilty of the same things!” He condemns people who judge others and says that by doing so, they judge themselves. He goes on to enumerate the sinfulness of the Jewish people.

The point Paul is making in these first two chapters of Romans is to set up his argument in the rest of his letter that everyone, whether Gentile or Jew, is a sinner and in need of God's grace, freely available to everyone by faith.

## Sex and Idolatry

Idolatry is literally the worship of idols, or more broadly, the worship of false gods instead of the God of heaven. Paul wrote this letter from the city of Corinth to Christians in Rome after his third missionary tour of the Mediterranean. On his journeys, Paul saw temples built to honour Aphrodite, Diana, and other fertility gods and goddesses of sex and passion instead of the true God the apostle honours. He no doubt heard of the sexual orgies that were part of their worship. Priests and priestesses, as well as many of the worshippers, performed some odd sexual behaviours—including castrating themselves, carrying on drunken sexual orgies, and having sex with temple prostitutes, both male and female. Such worship rituals were believed to guarantee the fertility of the soil, the growth of crops and the reproduction of their animals.

In Greek mythology, Aphrodite and Hermes were the parents of Hermaphrodites, a god/goddess that was both male and female. Confusion of sexual roles was part of these sexual orgies. Paul’s reference to idolatrous sexual orgies, which include the “unnatural” mixing of gender roles, is a well-known example of the behaviour of pagans, who refused to recognize God as Creator.

Paul's focus in this chapter is not homosexuality, but “sinful desires” (verse 24), including lust, orgies, promiscuity, prostitution and sex offered to the god or goddess as an act of worship. It is unreasonable (and unjust) to compare committed, same-sex love to the rituals of the priests and priestesses who danced around the statues of Aphrodite and Diana.

The context of the passage is idol worship, not a discussion of the morality of homosexual relationships. Paul starts by talking about people who refuse to worship God. The chain of events is that the people know God, but refuse to worship the true God. Then they make images of animals and worship those animals. As a result of their idol worship, God allows them to express their worship of other gods by engaging in sexual acts in temples built to glorify pagan gods. The kind of lustful, promiscuous same-sex activity mentioned in these verses is the result of their idolatry, not the result of God’s curse.

Paul’s first century readers would be more likely to understand the sexual activities as shrine prostitution or street prostitution. Some of Paul's readers would have understood the references to pederasty, Roman orgies, or women having sex with the priests, or men having sex with the gods, all common first century activities.

### Who is Paul Referring To?

In most of chapter 1, Paul is referring to the lifestyle, practices and worship rituals of non-Jews, or Gentiles. Paul starts off talking about godless and wicked people “who suppress the truth by their wickedness” (verse 18). For the next 14 verses, he consistently refers to these same people using the pronouns “they” or “them” 19 times in this passage (according to the NIV) and lists “their” (used 7 times) sinful practices.

| Reference | Summary   |
|-----------|---|
| V.18      | The wrath of God is revealed against all the godlessness and wickedness of men [people] who suppress the truth by <b>their</b> wickedness   |
| V.21.     | <b>They</b> [godless and wicked people] knew God, but did not glorify him as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their imaginations, and <b>their</b> foolish heart was darkened.        |
| V.22      | <b>They</b> professed themselves to be wise, but became fools.  |
| V.23      | <b>They</b> changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like to corruptible man, and to birds, and four-footed beasts, and creeping things  |
| V.24      | Wherefore God also gave <b>them</b> up to uncleanness through the lusts of their own hearts   |
| V.25      | <b>Who</b> [the same godless and wicked people] changed the truth of God into a lie, and worshipped and served the creature more than the Creator   |
| V.26, 27  | For this cause, [idolatry] God gave <b>them</b> up unto vile affections: for even <b>their</b> women did change the natural use into that which is against nature [ <i>para phusin</i> – see below] |
| V.28      | <b>They</b> did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God  |
| V.29      | <b>They</b> were filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity  |
| V.30      | <b>They</b> invent ways of doing evil, disobey their parents, senseless, faithless, ruthless  |
| V.31      | <b>They</b> know God’s righteous decree but they continue to do these things  |

Paul does not change the subject between verse 18 and verse 32. He is talking about the same godless and wicked people. The passage describes these particular people as engaging in specific forms of idolatry and engaging in certain sexual activities that were *para phusin*—against nature (verse 26).

### Natural and Unnatural

In Romans 1:26-27 Paul describes women who exchange “natural relations for unnatural ones” and men who “abandoned natural relations with women and inflamed with lust for one another.” Paul uses the words *para phusin* and *atimia*. *Para phusin* is often translated as “against nature” and *atimia* is translated as “vile”, “shameful”, or “disgraceful”. No one really knows what Paul meant by *para phusin* (against nature)—it simply is not clear within the letter to the Romans. There are several possible interpretations.

**1. If he really meant “the natural world” then Paul was badly mistaken.** Biologists have shown that same-sex sexual activity is common in at least 1500 animal species and some of those animals even form lifelong same-sex pairs. If any thing should be against nature, it would be for men to cut their hair. Leviticus 19:27 forbids men from cutting hair on the sides of their heads, a practice still followed by orthodox Jews.

**2. Maybe the description was culturally specific.** Perhaps “*para phusin*” meant “unexpected”, or “beyond current cultural customs”. Paul’s additional description of male-male sex as *aschemosyne* (Romans 1:27) supports the idea that the description is culturally specific. *Aeshemosyne* is a feminine word meaning “unseemliness” or “indecent” and refers particularly to the exposure of one’s genitals. This same word is found in only one other New Testament text to describe naked people (Revelation 16:15). Surely there is nothing inherently wrong with being naked. In ancient Israel, Jewish culture forbade people from approaching God’s altar by walking up stairs for fear that the person’s genitalia would be exposed. The ancient Greek translation (Septuagint) of Exodus 20:26 refers to this custom using the word *aschemosyne*.

**3. Maybe the “unnatural” argument was limited to Paul’s times,** or represented the preferences and expectations of people in his day. Paul uses the same terminology to describe men with long hair. He asks his readers, “Does not even nature [*phusis*] itself teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a dishonour [*atimia*] to him?” (1 Corinthians 11:14). The same key words used in Romans 1:26 are used against men with long hair. Now, virtually no Christians condemn men who choose to wear their hair long. All traditional pictures of Jesus and his disciples depict Jesus with long hair. If Paul’s language in Romans 1 implies universal moral condemnation of gays and lesbians, then why shouldn’t we interpret 1 Corinthians 11:14 the same way? If Paul’s condemnation of long hair is culturally limited, then is it possible that his condemnation of same-sex intercourse in Romans is also culturally limited?

**4. Maybe Paul meant “against individual inclinations”** and was describing heterosexual men. This would make sense of his claim that the men “abandoned” women for each other. In general, gay men do not “give up” on women. Rather, they are attracted to other men from an early age and usually do not experience any attraction to women. Why heterosexual men would abandon women to engage in homosexual acts is another discussion. Perhaps they were engaging in homoeroticism as a way of worshipping their god or goddess.

**5. The words *phusin* and *atimia* are not applied to same-sex eroticism in any other Biblical text.** Those specific words in Romans 1 do not imply a universal moral condemnation. If Paul were really making a universal moral condemnation with the words *phusin* and *atimia*, then perhaps it was just his own opinion.

**6. Paul explicitly speaks about men and women exchanging what is “natural” for what is “unnatural.”** Maybe he calls their sexual passions “unnatural” because what they are doing what is unnatural for them as heterosexuals. For heterosexual people, homosexual sex is “unnatural” for them. On the other hand, for gay people, sexual intimacy with members of their own gender is not unnatural; it is purely natural. For gay people, having intercourse with someone of the opposite sex is “unnatural” – and for most, impossible.

Most gay people are repelled by the very thought of having intercourse with people of the opposite sex, let alone the act. By contrast, the first time a gay person has sex with someone else of his or her own gender, they usually recognise immediately that the action fulfils their deepest longings and desires, and feels like the most natural action in the world.

Sexual orientation is natural. To attempt to change our sexual orientation is, in effect, telling God that He created us wrong. As created beings, we cannot “re-create” ourselves. For the vast majority of adults, those who are heterosexual, it is “indecent” for them to engage in homosexual activities. One can interpret Paul’s writing as stating that, for the small minority of humans who are homosexual, it would be “indecent” for them to engage in heterosexual activities.

## Sexual Orientation

Like everyone else in antiquity, Paul had no concept of sexual identity or orientation. While Paul knew about sex acts that took place between persons of the same gender, he had no concept of homosexual persons in the modern identification of gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender. Paul had no concept of an entire population of people who, as a fundamental, unalterable condition of their existence, were sexually attracted to persons of the same gender, and not sexually attracted to persons of the opposite gender.

There was no concept of sexual orientation until the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. People in Paul's day assumed that all people were naturally attracted to the opposite sex. This was considered the natural order of Creation and behaviour that departed from that order was considered unnatural. There was also no awareness at that time that homosexual behaviour occurs many times in the natural world among birds, animals, fish and insects. In this case, same-sex behaviour is natural.

In Romans chapter 1, Paul wrote about same-sex acts between heterosexual persons. He did not address the subject of homosexual acts between a committed, even married, gay couple. This passage says nothing about homosexuality, as we understand it. Paul was not writing to, or about, gay people because he simply could not have been, any more than he could have written about smart phones or iPads. No other idea of human identity was available in his world. We do not know what Paul might write or say today about gay people. All we know is that in the New Testament he condemned promiscuous, predatory, non-consensual same-sex acts between heterosexuals. Therefore Paul's condemnation of "unnatural lusts" cannot be used as a biblical support for condemning same gender love and intimacy; indeed, he is not describing love at all.

## Homosexuality Not a Choice

Scientific studies have shown that sexual identities evolve in early childhood and for most people, seem to have genetic origins. Sexuality is not a matter of choice but a process of gradual, often painful, discovery. You can choose to practice your sexuality or remain celibate, but you can't choose to be heterosexual or homosexual. Most gay, lesbian and bisexual people who have grown up as Christians have struggled for long years against their same-sex attractions and have tried their best to love and serve God.

Sexuality is a gift from God to be celebrated with passion. But the Bible is clear that when passion takes control of our lives, we're in deep trouble. When we live for pleasure, when we forget that we are God's children and that God has great dreams for our lives, we may end up serving the false gods of sex and passion, just as people did in Paul's time. In our obsession with pleasure, we may even walk away from the God who created us—and in the process, God may abandon all the great dreams God has for our lives.

## Application to Christians Today

The Bible does condemn excessive and exploitive sex (both homosexual and heterosexual). The Bible does not, however, address homosexuality—much less sexual acts between married gay couples. Christians therefore have no Bible-based justification for condemning such acts.

Paul's reference to same-sex behaviour is made within the broader setting of idolatrous worship of fertility gods. It is about sexual acts in which lust is the defining characteristic, not about loving relationships. The people Paul described refused to acknowledge and worship God. They exhibit all sorts of evil behaviour, including homosexual acts performed within a context of temple prostitution. For this reason they were abandoned by God. And being abandoned by God, they sank into sexual depravity.

Paul's condemnation of immoral sexual behaviour should not be applied to faithful gay and lesbian Christians, who are not idolaters, who love God, who thank God for his grace and his gifts, and who seek to live in thankful obedience to God. God has not abandoned them to homosexuality as a punishment for refusing to acknowledge God, as many would claim. Paul's description of same-sex behaviour in Romans 1 simply does not apply to them.

*This summary of Bible evidence was prepared by David Coltheart using many different sources.*

*Sources that deserve mention are:*

<http://wouldjesusdiscriminate.org/>

<http://www.gaychristian101.com/>

[http://www.religioustolerance.org/hom\\_bibl.htm#menu](http://www.religioustolerance.org/hom_bibl.htm#menu)

<http://www.someone-to-talk-to.net/>

<http://www.stopbibleabuse.org>