

HOMOSEXUALITY AND THE NEW TESTAMENT

The writings of the New Testament do not deal explicitly with the subject of homosexuality. There are references to it, but these are quite rare, all being limited to the Pauline Epistles. The most logical explanation for this fact lies not in a permissive attitude toward the matter but in the fact that homosexuality had already been condemned by the Jewish tradition, to which the early Christian writers are basically indebted. Similarly, in the Greek world, it was censured by the predominant Stoic philosophy as contrary to nature. Thus, in the context of the first century, Philo of Alexandria, who is the leading exponent of Hellenistic Judaism, in his treatises, repeatedly criticizes sodomy and pederasty as "illicit relations" (*On Abraham* 135) and those that practice them as "enemies of nature" (*Special Laws* 3:36). In the same way, the Stoic philosopher Musonius Rufus defines homosexuality as "against nature" (*Diatribes* 12), while the Roman historian Tacitus speaks openly of the "degeneration of youth" with reference to its practice during the time of Nero (*Annals* 14, 20, 4). The New Testament, therefore, did not have any particular battle to fight on this front, needing only to align itself with the positions current in the cultural world of the first century. What was new, if anything, as invariably happens in an ethical discussion, were the reasons given for urging its avoidance.

Jesus never speaks of homosexuality. A bare mention can perhaps be seen when, in referring to John the Baptist, he says to the crowd: "What did you go out into the wilderness to behold?...a man clothed in soft raiment?...those who wear soft raiment are in kings' houses" (Matthew 11:7, 8; Luke 7:25). The Greek word *malakos*, translated as "soft, tender", could also mean "effeminate". But, in this case, the allusion could only be very indirect, since the word is used about clothing and not people. The only real pronouncement Jesus made on human sexuality concerns the union of male and female as the expression of the order created by God (with an explicit quotation from Genesis 1:27 and 2:24) in a discussion on marriage: "Have you not read that he who made them from the beginning made them male and female...and the two shall become one?" (Matthew 19:4 & 5; Mark 10:6 & 7)

But, as we were saying, it is in Paul's Letters that there are explicit references to homosexuality. There are three cases, and they are always treated with disapproval.

In the First Letter to the Corinthians, the Apostle, among other things, gives a list of vices to be avoided: "Do not be deceived: neither the immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor *homosexuals*, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor robbers will inherit the kingdom of God" (6:9 & 10).

In a perspective that is only slightly different but quite similar, we read in the First Letter to Timothy: "...understanding this, that the law is not laid down for the just but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy and profane, for murderers of fathers and murderers of mothers, for manslayers, immoral persons, *sodomites*, kidnappers, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine: (1

Timothy 1:9 & 10) The Greek word in question, *arsenokoitai*, which the RSV translates differently each time (respectively "homosexuals" and "sodomites"), is in fact a neologism that literally means "males who sleep together." It derives from the phraseology of the biblical Greek of the Septuagint, where the Levitical text 20:13 is translated: "If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death, their blood is upon them." The linguistic and thematic reference to this passage, where no exceptions are allowed, makes it impossible to interpret the Pauline statement in the restricted sense of only male prostitution, or more specifically, of pederasty, as some would like. On the other hand, it should be noted that Paul, who has the greatest respect for life, does not repeat the extreme severity of the punishment envisaged by the Levitical legislation. He, however, reacts to homosexuality by pointing out its eschatological exclusion from the kingdom of God precisely because the practice does not conform to the divine law, just like all the other infractions that he lists by way of example.

A certain relativity of the Pauline assertion can be deduced from the fact that the Apostle's main intention in these passages is certainly not to impart a specific teaching on homosexuality, which would, in any case, be very indirect; it is, however, unquestionably listed in a catalogue of actions judged reprehensible. Nevertheless, it should be noted that, like the biblical passage previously quoted, he only considers male, not female, homosexuality. But, indeed, here he expresses himself in the manner of biblical tradition, as can be seen from the explicit reference to the law in the Letter to Timothy. In other places, the casuistry is more complete.

Idolatry As A Religious Aberration

In fact, in the Letter to the Romans, with regard to the moral perversion of the pagans, Paul writes: "God gave them up to dishonorable passions. Their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural, and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in their own persons the due penalty for their error" (Romans 1:26 & 27). This is one of the very rare texts in ancient times in which male homosexuality and female homosexuality are condemned together as practices against nature: two other cases can be found in Plato (*Laws* I, 636c) and in a Jewish-Hellenistic poetic composition of the first century attributed to a Pseudo-Phocilides (*Sentences* 191 & 192). But, the Pauline passage has a certain originality because of its context. The Apostle is, in fact, discussing the moral disorder resulting from the lack of knowledge of God in the pagan world, so that homosexuality together with a series of other vices (cf. Romans 1:29: "*all manner of wickedness*") is seen as a consequence of man's fatal "exchange" of the Creator with his creatures.

Some authors have tried to minimize the radical importance of this condemnation, claiming that Paul is thinking either of a depravation connected with idolatry, or of homosexuality that is contrary to the proper nature of homosexuals, or again thinking that the expression "unnatural" is equivalent to "against the common patterns of social

convention", or, lastly, that it is not a true sin but merely one of the less pleasant aspects of pagan society.

Interpretations of this kind are basically artificial because they lose sight of the fact that the Apostle bases his argument on a view that is not cultural but rooted in creation. In fact, the theme of the whole section of Romans 1:18-32 consists in the succession and mutual integration of three closely connected arguments: (1) the real possibility of a natural knowledge of God by all people (2) in fact clashes with the human perversion of idolatry that tragically reverses the roles of creature and Creator, and (3), therefore, God consigns and almost abandons people to every sort of wickedness that inevitably follows. It may be interesting to observe that the penalty foreseen by Paul in these cases, in our text of the Letter to the Romans, is not the Jewish-eschatological type (as in the previous passage from the Letter to the Corinthians), but the Stoic-immanent type. He, in fact, adopts here the classic ethical principle of Stoic philosophy that, if virtue rewards itself, vice is likewise its own punishment. Thus, we can say that homosexuality is considered from the standpoint of self-corruption, so that it is at the same time the sign and consequence of a subversion of God's created order.

However, we should not exaggerate Paul's stand in the matter. In fact, it is important to realize that the real criticism he develops in this context does not directly concern homosexuality but rather idolatry as a religious aberration. It is this that he sees as the pagans' real problem, and homosexuality is only one indication together with many others.

Cross Offers Every Sinner Hope Of Redemption

At the source of all these biblical and non-biblical passages, we must remember that, in antiquity, the discussion of homosexuality always considers the phenomenon either as a moral choice, and thus its practice is condemned, or as a conventional choice, and as such can be accepted, as happens in some cases (especially in classic Hellenism because of its presumed teaching values}. Lacking, however, were the hereditary, physiological, and psychological connotations that today are appropriately used for better judging the phenomenon.

Apart from this observation, there remains, in fact, as Professor D. F. Wright of Edinburgh University, who has dedicated some specific publications to the matter, notes, that whatever may be said about individual tendencies and attitudes, Paul could only have considered all erotic homosexual behavior as contrary to the Creator's plan for human life, and so to be abandoned at the moment of conversion. It is certain that nobody could honestly refer to the texts of the New Testament to justify a sexual practice that is constantly considered as deviating from God's created order.

Finally, it should be stated clearly that St. Paul, when he speaks of it more fully, as occurs in the passage from the Letter to the Romans, subordinates this matter to the more general and decisive theme of man's universal sinfulness and of the merciful answer that God

gives it in the Gospel. In fact, on the one hand, the objective and, in a certain sense, inevitable situation of sin, in which all humanity outside of Christ finds itself, leads to attitudes of wisdom and magnanimity that shrink from moralistic fanaticism. On the other hand, the revelation of God's saving justice in the Cross of Christ offers every sinner not only the hope but also the certainty of a redemption that affects the whole person of the believer. Professor M. L. Soards, of the Presbyterian Theological Seminary of Louisville, rightly notes that we should never pronounce disagreement or disapproval regarding homosexuality without giving voice to and expressing God's word of grace in Jesus Christ that is even stronger. (*cf. Scripture and Homosexuality: Biblical Authority and the Church Today*, Westminster, John Knox Press, Louisville, Kentucky, 1995, p. 75)

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