

As verse 1:24 stands as Paul's articulation of his general maxim, so verses 1:26 and 1:28b further develop what is entailed in being given over to one's own lust. Because of his inward corruption, man's lust cannot help but manifest itself in *degrading passions*. Accordingly, when God gives a man over to such passions He is also giving him over to the *depraved mind* that underlies, informs, and directs his lust.

And so these latter two phenomena should not be understood as increasingly intense or progressive manifestations of lust, as if lust leads to degrading passions that, in turn, lead to a depraved mind. *Paul's point is that when God gives men over to their lusts He is giving them over to the defining principle of their fallen existence; He is giving them over to themselves.* This principle of reigning lust expresses itself in all manner of impurity associated with the degrading passions that proceed out of a depraved mind.

With respect to *degrading passions*, Paul's concern was with improper sexual relations, and more specifically, *homosexuality* (1:26-27). The dishonoring of the body spoken of in verse 1:24 is here correlated with dishonorable passions. Once again Paul adheres to his thesis that idolatry incurs wrath. Because men have exchanged the truth of God for a lie and insisted upon worshipping the creature rather than the Creator (1:25), God has given them over to homosexual passions. For obvious reasons this passage, and others like it, have been much debated in contemporary Christian circles. As homosexuality has become more acceptable (and even somewhat honorable) in Western culture, increasing societal pressure has been brought to bear upon the Church to more closely scrutinize the Bible's teaching regarding it. Given that it has such great contemporary relevance, it is worthwhile to interact with current arguments by considering Paul's instruction from three vantage points:

- a. The first is Paul's own position on homosexuality. The reason for this consideration is that some in recent times have postulated that Paul's concern was with homosexual *promiscuity* rather than homosexuality per se. This view finds its premise in the fact that homosexual relationships were widely accepted in the Greco-Roman culture of Paul's day, whereas homosexual prostitution was frowned upon. For this reason it is argued that, were Paul condemning all forms of homosexual practice, he would have explicitly said as much. For, given the prevailing cultural norms in Roman Europe, he would have known that speaking in broad generalities would result in his readers missing his point.

Others have gone so far as to argue that Romans 7 provides a good indication that Paul himself probably struggled with homosexual urges, with the result that his condemnation of homosexuality was the product of personal guilt rather than divine prohibition. The contention is that God has no problem with homosexuality as such; Paul's problem was purely his own. All such claims certainly make Paul's theology more palatable to contemporary sensibilities, but they are entirely unsupported. For in the contexts in which he addresses homosexuality Paul gives no indication either that he was making a distinction or simply conveying his own opinion (cf. 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 and 1 Timothy 1:8-11). As Christ's apostle, he condemned homosexuality in all forms, male and female, as sin.

This is not to say that he considered it to be an especially grievous sin in a class all its own. Rather, he lists it among numerous manifestations of human unrighteousness, all of which bring men under God's condemnation. In fact, it is plausible that he mentioned homosexuality in his epistles specifically because it carried a degree of acceptability in his day. As with other commonplace sins, he wanted his readers to understand that such things, however acceptable or trivial they may be to men, exclude from God's kingdom those who practice them.

- b. The second is Christ's position on homosexuality. For, even among those who are willing to acknowledge Paul's negative stance on it, it is often argued that Jesus held no such conviction. A common portrayal is that Paul was a strict Pharisee who was steeped in the Old Covenant law, but Jesus insisted upon a more "human" and tolerant perspective on life, which included an acceptance of homosexuality. Though all openly concede that the Law of Moses prohibited homosexual practice, it is argued that Jesus did away with the Law. For this reason Jesus was able to hold a position contrary to that of Paul.

This conclusion is said to find further biblical support in the fact that the Lord nowhere directly condemned homosexual orientation or practice. While this contention is true, such individuals are, at best, standing upon an argument from silence; they have embraced the fallacy that, because the Scripture does not record Jesus teaching against homosexuality, it is concluded that he regarded it as acceptable, and perhaps even honorable.

But the truth is that Jesus was not silent on the subject. Even though He did not address homosexuality directly, His teaching on related subjects makes His position clear.

- 1) The first thing to note is that Jesus everywhere insisted upon the righteousness of the Law of Moses and His own personal conformity to its principles and ethics. Not only did He represent in His person and work the promised fulfillment of the Law (Matthew 5:17-20; Luke 24:25-27, 44-47), He kept all of its demands as the perfect Israelite and covenant son (cf. Matthew 17:1-5; John 8:29, 46; Galatians 4:4-5; Hebrews 7:26-27). God's law in the Old Covenant provided to Israel the definition of what is required for a person to stand in covenant fellowship with Him as sons. This is the covenant law under which Jesus was born, and which He fully satisfied as the beloved Son in whom the Father was well pleased.
- 2) A second consideration is Christ's insistence upon His oneness with God. Repeatedly He asserted that His teaching did not originate with Himself, but came from His Father in heaven (John 7:14-18, 14:24, etc.). Furthermore, His true deity makes it impossible that Jesus could contradict God, so that it is folly to claim that God condemned homosexuality as sin under the Law of Moses but Jesus approved of it. For Jesus to change or abolish one of God's laws is to destroy the doctrine of the Trinity.

This being so, why does the Bible indicate that Jesus did indeed do away with certain of the Old Covenant laws, one example being Israel's dietary regulations (Mark 7:14-19)? On the surface this appears to be a problem, but a closer examination of the Scripture reveals that Jesus did not abolish any law but fulfilled the Law of Moses in its entirety. This means that the cessation of the dietary laws results from *fulfillment* and not *abrogation* (Matthew 5:17-20). In other words, Israel's food regulations served a typological or *prophetic* function as they anticipated the Messiah and His new covenant (Matthew 11:13). With His arrival, their prophetic purpose had been served and they passed away (ref. Galatians 3:1-29).

As the Law of Moses in its totality served a prophetic purpose, so the law against homosexuality was prophetic in that it pointed to the purity and righteousness that would mark the true covenant people of God, and therefore also Christ, who is the true covenant Son. But its fulfillment does not mean its retraction. Eating certain foods is in itself *amoral*. The dietary laws were instituted to teach Israel about the *moral* principle of consecration. Conversely, the practice of sexuality is not amoral, so that immoral expressions of it continue to be immoral even in the context of New Covenant fulfillment. Thus Paul could affirm that "*the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit*" (Romans 14:14-17), while at the same time insisting that "*neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor the covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, shall inherit the kingdom of God*" (1 Corinthians 6:9-10). The issue in God's kingdom is righteousness, and the way in which any particular law portrayed and anticipated that principle and its fulfillment in Christ determines what "survives" in the context of His coming.

- 3) Finally, Christ's teaching on marriage indicates His disapproval of homosexuality. Whenever He addressed issues of sexuality Jesus spoke of the union of man and woman as a sacred institution ordained by God as part of the original created order. As such, it is to be held in the highest regard (Matthew 5:27-32, 19:1-9), and even more so because marriage portrays the holy relationship that exists between Christ and His Church (John 3:25-29, 14:1-3; also Ephesians 5:22-33; Revelation 19:1-9). Given that Jesus and His followers placed such heavy emphasis upon the marital union of a man and woman, attempting to prove His endorsement of homosexuality on the basis of silence is foolish and unfounded.
- c. Having considered the general positions of Paul and Jesus with respect to sexuality, Paul's teaching in the context at hand must be examined. The fundamental question to be answered is why he specifically mentioned homosexuality in relation to the principle of men being given over to their lusts. If it is true that human lust embraces every form of personal longing, why single out homosexual desire?

At first glance it may appear that Paul focused on homosexuality because it has a unique capacity to communicate the ugliness and lack of restraint characteristic of lust. It is this capacity that likely leads commentators to view Paul's movement in this context from impurity (1:24) to homosexuality (1:26-27) as a progression in intensity and/or perversity. Certainly it is possible that Paul chose to highlight homosexual practice because it has a shocking quality, but if it is true that the Greco-Roman culture of his day accepted it as routine, then it would seem that Paul's intention to shock would fall short with his Roman audience. Rather, the overall context suggests two other reasons for singling out homosexuality:

- 1) The first is the relationship between lust and degrading passions. It has been observed that lust is, in one sense, amoral. That is to say, because every inclination and operation of human existence is expressive of the inward compulsion of lust, human exertions that are not observably wicked or immoral are equally "lustful." In fallen man, his apparently noble aspirations arise from the same principle of lust as do his ignoble ones. His good actions, as well as his neutral and bad ones, spring from the same polluted fountain. As a result, even the *amoral* things in man's experience are actually *immoral*. This is why Paul could insist that nothing is pure to the impure, and everything that is not from faith is sin.

But though people are capable of good actions, the perversion that is man's *death* insures that human lusts will inevitably manifest themselves in evil. When as image-bearers Adam and Eve were cut off from the life of God, they lost their sense of their own identity. To this day the same "lostness" characterizes all people; because they suppress the truth they operate in life without the sole objective datum that is God Himself. Being left to their own perceptions, speculations, and devices, their assessment of personal good is corrupted by their futile thinking. And so, what in many instances men believe to be good and beneficial is actually very destructive. With respect to the context at hand, passions that appear to be enlightened, exhilarating, and liberating bring misery and calamity.

- 2) But even more important is the relationship between the rejection of the "natural function" associated with homosexuality and the rejection of God's authority in the created order. *Paul's primary point in referencing homosexuality is that it is a profound example of what results when men refuse to submit to the Creator/creature distinction (1:21-25).* For inherent in that distinction is God's prerogative in establishing natural structures in which His creatures are to operate. *Homosexuality is rebellion against the natural order God instituted,* and so is a graphic witness of what transpired in the garden: man taking to himself the authority to judge and act independently of God. Having been "set free" in Adam to serve their own interests, all men have been taken captive by their own lusts. Ironically, this freedom sets them in rebellion against their own created identity, as seen in their rejection of the natural function assigned to them.