

Introduction:

In Spring of 2019, the General Conference of the United Methodist Church, after a special called session on the issue earlier in the year, voted to reaffirm the denomination's traditional stands on issues surrounding homosexuality. These traditional statements include the following:

1. Homosexuals are persons of sacred worth.
2. The practice of homosexuality is incompatible with the teachings of scripture
3. The denomination shall not ordain self-avowed, practicing homosexuals to ordained ministry within the United Methodist Church.
4. No United Methodist clergy person shall participate in the celebration of a same sex union.

Let's be clear that nothing in this traditional language forbids homosexuals from membership in the church, or from service within the church's lay ministries. Also implicit in this language is a statement that we within God's church are bound by our love of Christ to love and serve those within our LGBTQ community. What is at stake, here, is a fairly small number of very significant prohibitions.

For many, however, a larger concern was raised by the new legislation which accompanied the affirmation of these traditional principles. New policies were instituted to deal with those persons who violated the traditional language. As one observer put it: "Our church policies should have teeth, not fangs." To many, the punitive language voted into effect by the General Conference has turned up the heat under this already divisive controversy. This is no longer simply an issue on which the church is divided roughly in two (56% supported the Traditional language, while 44% opposed it.) The debate has become a battle with living casualties.

Along with these other provisions, the General Conference also passed a plan by which churches could choose to leave the denomination and still retain their current church properties. To do so, a church must express a conscientious objection to the traditional language and meet certain financial obligations to the larger denomination. This decision must be declared and approved by an Annual Conference vote before December 2024.

This "disaffiliation window" constitutes a crisis at the level of each local church. For some, to be sure, the crisis is minor. The traditional language has served us well and still accurately reflects the values and beliefs of the local church.

For others, the crisis is more pressing. It is immediately clear to these congregations that they are at odds with the traditional language. The question before these congregations is whether they can meet the not inconsiderable cost of disaffiliation in time to meet the hard deadline imposed by General Conference.

And then, there are the other churches: ones who perhaps most accurately reflect the state of the denomination as a whole. These churches, like the denomination, have a substantial portion of their membership on each side of the current debate. They may be hard pressed to make a categorical statement either for or against the traditional language. A simple "majority rules" type vote will be a death knell for many of these congregations, dividing church families who have somehow managed to worship together, serve together, and uphold their vows to support one another with "prayers, presence, gifts, and service" for generations.

And yet the clock is ticking. Each of these churches must be able to articulate a clear case for staying within a denomination which supports the traditional language, or for paying the price to move out on their own. And they don't have a lifetime to decide.

As a church leader, I have remained committed throughout the current conversations on human sexuality to finding an answer that creates space for God's people, who disagree on much, to remain united in our love for one another, our love for God, and desire to serve His Kingdom. For me, the first steps in this quixotic journey are a loving respect for people who think differently than I do, and the humility to accept that.. Despite my sincere blue collar effort to discover God's will for my own life and for the world, I could conceivably be (gulp) mistaken.

The Bible study summarized in these pages took place as a group of members of our church came together with the following assumptions:

1. *The Bible matters.* To say something like "I don't care what the Bible says, this is what I think we should do" is not an acceptable solution. We need to know what the Bible says and be prepared to surrender to its authority as such becomes clear. However, this is not so simple as many try to make it. In fact, the Bible is *always* subject to interpretation. Part of what makes the current discussion so difficult is that thoughtful persons on *both* sides can give profound scriptural and theological reasons for their positions on the matter.
2. *People matter:* We need to be stubborn in our commitment to one another precisely *because* we disagree. Getting along with people who always agree with me is easy. But Christ continually called his disciples to choose the narrow road, a way of living that relied on a faith in the miraculous. We should always remember that Jesus' last wish, expressed as an upper room prayer, was that his disciples would be "...one, as you and I are one..." We owe it to our Savior to do everything that the Spirit gives us strength to do in order to find ways to live out the unity of the Church.

These assumptions shaped the study from beginning to end. Our goal was to encounter the word and to listen to one another within its light. We tried our best to let our conversation be guided not by a need to change the other person's mind, but by a desire to understand and appreciate people who think differently than ourselves.

In the Beginning

The book of Genesis in our Bible has been the source of some considerable controversy in its own right. Scholars contest the historicity of some of the stories in Genesis, and modern science often finds itself at odds with a literal interpretation of its opening chapters. Maybe its bad form to try to resolve one controversy by stirring up another, but it's hard to argue the logic of Rogers and Hammerstein: "Let's start at the very beginning. It's a very good place to start..."

Laying aside, for a moment, the scientific controversies surrounding the creation stories, we quickly discover that these stories have a good deal to say about human sexuality.

You may notice that I uses the phrase "creation stories" instead of "creation story" in the preceding sentence. Our Bible does, indeed, contain two different creation stories. Chapter 1 of Genesis (spilling over a few verses into Chapter 2) gives the controversial account of the seven days of creation. This passage is about order. Much of God's activity is described as "separating" one thing from another: the day from the night, the sky from the waters, the waters from the land. God is not so much causing things to appear out of thin air as he is arranging and ordering things. In fact, he is only aid to speak two types of things into existence: Light and Life. John's gospel seems to pick up on this feature of the story in its own epic fist chapter.

As he creates and gives order to things, God repeatedly declares that they are "good," or "very good." At the climax of this creative outburst, God brings forth his crowning achievement. He creates humans. Here's the language the Bible uses:

The God said, "Let us make mankind in our own image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground."

So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

God blessed them and said to them, "be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over all of the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that lives on the ground." (Genesis1:26-28)

In case you missed the obvious repetition, the main idea in this brief passage is that humanity was created in God's image. The passage is also bookended by God's desire for humans to take dominion over the rest of God's creation.

Of special interest to us in this study that revolves around human sexuality is the phrase "...male and female he created them."

In support of traditional language, we might note a couple of things here. First, the text lists “male and female” without reference to other gender identities. In contemporary parlance, this statement is a “binary” expression of sexuality, very much in keeping with the binary pairings of “the heavens and the earth... light and darkness... the firmament above and the firmament below... the land and the waters.” Much of this text is structured around contrasted pairings, and the “male and female” description of humanity seems to echo the nature of God’s creative activity.

Second, it is possible to read the pairing “in his image he created them; male and female he created them” to imply that it is only in the context of this male/female pairing that God’s image is fully realized. This implies a very high view of traditional marriage, in which a man and a woman are not fully realized until they are brought together as one.

In response to the first point, Steve Harper argues in his book, *Holy Love*, that the pairings in the creation story are more poetic than binary. He points out that while God created darkness and light, day and night, he also created a dazzling array of “in between” states: dawn and dusk, sunrise and sunset. Neither did he create only one kind of “fish in the sea,” or “birds of the air.” Creation, in fact displays incredible diversity

In response to the idea that God’s image requires both male and female to be complete, we simply recognize an alternative reading: males are created in God’s image, and so are females. This reading will have sounded a very important note in the culture in which these creation stories are first told. In a culture in which women were often traded, bought and sold, and “given” in marriage, the notion that they are to be understood as fully human and as fully possessing the image of God is a radical assertion. A woman, it seems, can be a fully realized human being without “belonging” to a man.

This very simple idea has its own profound implications for the idea of Biblical marriage, and is echoed by the theology of the *second* of the Bible’s creation stories, which we find in Genesis chapters 2 and 3.

The second creation narrative, if read as a freestanding piece, might give us a different idea about the order in which God created things, in particular the plants and animals that inhabit the world. Placed as it is, though, alongside the first creation story, it is probably best understood as an elaboration upon the events summarized on day 6 of creation.

Again, we have the creation of humanity as a sort of climactic event, and a clear purpose given to Adam for his life in God’s world: to care for the other things God has made. Adam’s story, however includes a moment at odds with the theme of the first creation story. God has created Adam and declares:

“It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.” (Genesis 2:18)

The word “helper” in this verse is an unfortunate piece of translation. The Hebrew word used here is *‘ezer*. Other than its use here in Genesis chapter 2, the word occurs 19 more times in the Old Testament. In the vast majority of cases it uses to refer to the activity of God on behalf of his people. On those few occasions when it is not, it is used to describe a military act, the arrival of timely reinforcements. Picture the cavalry arriving in the nick of time in an old western movie and you’re getting the right picture.

Eve is not Adam's assistant, the prehistoric fore-runner to Vannah White. Eve is Adam's rescuer. She is God's act of grace in the face of an untenable obstacle.

There is no marriage ceremony described between Adam and Eve, but the language of husband-and-wife is immediately appropriated to describe their relationship to one another. Adam's response to being rescued from his aloneness together with the authors aside which follows it becomes the Biblical definition of marriage carried forward through the church to the present day:

"This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called "woman," for she was taken out of man."

That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh. (Genesis 2:23-24)

This language of sharing flesh and bone, to the point of being "one flesh" has often been understood to describe a sort of mystical unity that comes from being partners in a sexual relationship. There is a profound truth somewhere in that understanding, but the original intent of the language may have been more practical.

Kinship was an incredibly important concept in the ancient world, especially in tribal societies before the advent of civic states. One's family was one's primary source of welfare, protection, and support. Whose house you belonged to was roughly equivalent in modern terms to the country of which you are a citizen. It describes who takes responsibility for you, to whom you belong, for whom you will fight when battle lines must be drawn.

By and large, kinship is a simple concept. My kin are those who share my ancestry. However, most tribal societies also had mechanisms by which a person could achieve what anthropologists call "fictive kinship." Perhaps you and I don't share an ancestry, but your family can still choose to treat me as though I were kin. The most common mechanism of fictive kinship is the institution of marriage. In modern terms, we understand that a man and women who marry become a "new family" while retaining strong connections to both of their birth families. In ancient societies, because of the importance of kinship bonds, the idea would be somewhat different. Either the husband or the wife would become a part of the other partner's clan or tribe.

This raises an interesting point about the text at hand. Do you see it?

Genesis 2:24 seems to describe what anthropologists call a "matrilocal" society. The husband leaves his own kin behind in order to become part of the wife's kinship group. What is interesting about this is that throughout almost the entirety of our Bible, the cultures in which the characters lived were described as *patrilocal* societies, societies in which the wife left her own kinship group behind to join that of her husband.

We do have evidence of very ancient matrilocal societies in the ancient near east, but these societies would appear to predate Abraham, and certainly would predate Moses.

The current passage could be a slip of the pen or a mistranslation from somewhere along the transmission history of the story. But it could also be a snippet of some much older piece of story that has been borrowed and inserted into what is now our book of Genesis. If so (and I think this is the case) the author who pulled these stories together didn't feel compelled to correct this bit of out-of-date cultural language, perhaps because they believed more strongly in preserving the actual wording of a wise and ancient tradition.

Chapter 2 ends with a very brief but powerful statement of male-female intimacy:

Adam and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame. (Genesis 2:25)

This statement sets the scene for Genesis chapter 3, which tells us the familiar story of Adam and Eve's fall into sin. After succumbing to temptation, the intimacy which God had intended between the couple disintegrates. The first act of the now fallen couple is to hide their nakedness. Their second act is to try to hide themselves from God.

But the Lord God called to the man, "Where are you?"

He answered, "I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid." (Genesis 3:9-10)

Both intimacy with one another and intimacy with God are first consequences of sin in the world. Interestingly, these are seen as naturally flowing from the event itself, as opposed to the punishments leveled by God himself in verse 14-19 in response to human disobedience. These divine punishments are doled out to the serpent, the woman, and the man in turn. The serpent will crawl on its belly and find itself in eternal enmity with human offspring. The man will have to struggle to coax a living from the now cursed ground until the day that he succumbs to the now ever present threat of death.

To the woman he said, "I will make your pains in childbearing very severe; with painful labor you will give birth to your children. Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you." (Genesis 3:16)

Like death, child birth enters the narrative here for the first time. Obviously, with death on the table, only the ability to reproduce will deliver humanity from complete obliteration. Having children is a piece of grace, but it comes with the price tag of pain and difficulty (even mortal danger!) in the birthing process.

The second sentence in Eve's curse is of special interest to us. It stands here as an explanation of a fact of female existence that will have been implicitly familiar to every hearer of this story for centuries to come. Women are clearly exploited by men. That's the way life is, and this is how it got to be that way.

What is revolutionary in the telling of this particular story is that this subservience was not part of God's original plan for creation. Rather it was a consequence of the entry of sin into the world and the ensuing decay of true intimacy. Male oppression is how things are, but *not how they ought to be*.

This is important to our current study, because the ancient attitudes towards homosexuality (and indeed toward sex in the more general sense) revolve around this idea of masculine dominance over feminine submissiveness. We'll see this idea reappear as we move through our study of the texts dealing with homosexuality.

Summary:

The Biblical creation stories, while they do not talk about homosexuality *per se*, do give us a narrative framework to understand human sexuality in general.

In defense of a traditional stance on homosexuality, both creation stories describe God creating humanity as male and female and declaring this implicitly binary picture of humanity as "good."

Laying a possible framework for other understandings, though, are a couple of key observations:

First, the primary problem God sought to solve in creating a woman to live alongside the man was that the man was alone. The primary goal of this new relationship, then, is intimacy. Proponents of traditional language often speak of the purpose of marriage as primarily procreation, but child birth is first mentioned after the fall, perhaps in response to the rather formidable problem of death itself.

Second, while male dominance is assumed as a fact of life in the text, it also presented as a consequence of the fall, perhaps as a byproduct of the fractured intimacy introduced by sin. Male dominance and the second class nature of women in the ancient world often played a part in explaining why homosexuality was seen as wrong.

Set Apart for God

Leviticus 18:22 and its follow up in Leviticus 20:13 provide us with the scriptural prohibition that probably stands behind the rest of what the Bible has to say about homosexuality as a sin. Before we look at these passages in their own right, however, we should probably talk a little bit about Leviticus as a whole, and in particular about that portion of the book which contains chapters 18 and 20.

The book of Leviticus is part of the Hebrew Torah, the foundational document for the God's people prior to the coming of Jesus. It is preceded (in Biblical order) by Genesis and Exodus, which tell the stories of the Hebrew people as they enter covenant with God through Abraham, find themselves in captivity in Egypt, and are decisively rescued from slavery by God's mighty acts through the ministry of Moses.

The newly delivered people make their way toward the land of their ancestors under Moses' leadership and that of his brother, Aaron. Aaron becomes the first of the Old Testament priests and is given instructions on how to order the religious life of God's people. A plan is described for the construction of a tabernacle, a sort of portable Temple and place of sacrifice.

The book of Leviticus includes detailed instructions for this religious life, including instructions on how to make proper offerings, and when and how to celebrate holy feasts commemorating God's activity in the midst of his people. These instructions throughout the first 17 chapters of the book are passed through Moses to Aaron.

Beginning in chapter 18, the book takes a turn. The instructions which begin in chapter 18 are still passed through Moses, but now their intended audience is not Aaron and the priesthood, but the people of Israel as a whole.

The Lord said to Moses, "Speak to the Israelites and say to them: 'I am the Lord your God. You must not do as they do in Egypt, where you used to live, and you must not do as they do in the land of Caanan, where I am bringing you. Do not follow their practices. You must obey my laws and be careful to follow my decrees. I am the Lord your God.'" (Genesis 18:1-4)

The Lord said to Moses, "Speak to the entire assembly of Israel and say to them: 'Be holy because I, the Lord your God, am holy.'" (Genesis 19:1-2)

This part of the book of Leviticus is sometimes called the *Holiness Code*. It has a somewhat different writing style and language than the earlier chapters of the book, and it has a very clearly stated goal. The items dealt with in this section are things designed to set Israel apart from her neighbors.

To be sure, many of the commandments in the holiness code can be seen to have other benefits, as well. Modern genetics warns us of the long-term effects of incest and inbreeding, for example. Much is made of the possible health benefits of the kosher diet outlined in Leviticus, especially in a pre-refrigeration era. The idea of Sabbat Years and Years of Jubilee present an enticing outline of a political experiment that might be seen as an antidote for systemic poverty.

Other prohibitions, however, seem much more arbitrary. What is the problem with mixed fibers in clothing? Does it really matter if I cut the hair on the sides of my head or trim the edges of my beard?

Whether a particular law seems sensible or ridiculous, however, is not the point. The point is that these behaviors stand as clear markers that the Israelites are different, set aside for God.

Chapter 18 kicks off the Holiness Code in a way guaranteed to get the reader's attention. It talks about sex. All kinds of sex. Especially the kind you're not supposed to have. The text begins with a general statement:

"No one is to approach any close relative to have sexual relations. I am the Lord." (Genesis 18:6)

The text then proceeds to give a rather detailed definition of "close relative," listing thirteen specific relationships that would be examples of relatives you shouldn't be looking to as sexual partners (vss 5-19). For good measure, the text throws in a prohibition about having sex with another man's wife (vs 20). Not technically a close relative, but still probably a really bad idea.

Then, apparently wandering around lost in this catalogue of sex, we find verse 21:

"Do not give any of your children to be sacrificed to Molek, for you must not profane the name of your God. I am the Lord." (Genesis 18:21)

Molek was one of a family of gods claimed by various cultures throughout the Ancient Near East, very often associated with fertility and the cycle of life and death. Scholarship is divided, but the current consensus is that this God was worshipped by burning children alive and by an annual "New Year" celebration that included some form of orgy. Speculation suggests that prostitution played some part in those orgiastic proceedings, and that these prostitutes were both male and female. A successful offering to Molek was thought to ensure a good crop for the community. It has been suggested that this is why prohibitions against idolatry and sexual immorality so often accompany each other in Biblical texts. In some cases the practices were quite literally connected.

Molek was a Canaanite god, and his appearance here in a section of the book which begins with a warning to not behave like the Canaanites of Egyptians seems entirely appropriate. The Canaanites were said to be descended from (not surprisingly) Canaan, who was the son of Ham and the grandson of Noah. Canaan figures most prominently as the object of a curse in the narrative of Genesis 9:20-26:

Noah, a man of the soil, was the first to plant a vineyard. He drank some of the wine and became drunk, and he lay uncovered in his tent. And Ham, the father of Canaan, saw the nakedness of his father, and told his two brothers outside. Then Shem and Japheth took a garment, laid it on both their shoulders, and walked backward and covered the nakedness of their father; their faces were turned away, and they did not see their father's nakedness. When Noah awoke from his wine and knew what his younger son had done to him, he said,

"Cursed be Canaan; lowest of slaves shall he be to his brothers."

He also said,

"Blessed by the Lord my God be Shem; and let Canaan be his slave. May God make space for Japheth, and let him live in the tents of Shem, and let Canaan be his slave." (Genesis 9:20-25)

This is an odd sort of story. Noah receives no censure for getting drunk or exposing his nakedness. But Ham, who seems to have inadvertently stumbled upon the sight earns a curse against his children.

In the Old Testament, though, "looking upon the nakedness" or "uncovering the nakedness" of a person was a euphemism for approaching them for sex. In fact, it is precisely this language that the book of Leviticus uses throughout much of chapter 18 to describe the sexual offenses that it prohibits. Likewise "nakedness" and "shame" are virtually synonymous. Think back to the description of intimacy between Adam and Eve in Genesis 2 as "naked and unashamed," and of their immediate scramble to hide their nakedness after sin enters the world.

A more literal translation of Leviticus 18:8, for example, would be:

"You shall not uncover the nakedness of your father's wife; it is the nakedness of your father." (Leviticus 18:6)

We don't know exactly what happened in Noah's tent that night, but Noah woke up and knew, and he didn't like it. The stink of this occurrence is connected to the children of Canaan from that moment forward. It should not surprise us, then, to find homosexual encounters among a list of things that Canaanites do that Israelites (the sons of Shem) should avoid. In Leviticus, the prohibition comes right after the prohibition to worship the Canaanite god:

"You shall not lie with a male as with a woman. It is an abomination." (Leviticus 18:22)

This prohibition takes a different form than most of those that precede it. The earlier sexual prohibitions tend to follow the formula "You shall not uncover the nakedness of.... It is the nakedness of..." as in the example of Leviticus 18:6 above. The person who is not to be approached and the person who is thusly dishonored fill in the blanks.

In 18:22, the euphemism of “uncovering the nakedness” is discarded in favor of a somewhat more direct euphemism of lying with a male as with a woman. The obvious first observation here is that (taken literally) this text says absolutely nothing about sexual relations between women, but only addresses men. More particularly, it may be understood to only address a very particular behavior of sexually treating a man like a woman; that is, it addresses the man who takes the penetrative (perceived masculine) role in the encounter.

Given the status of women in the ancient world, it is further possible to suggest that the offense here is not so much one of sexual preference as one of demeaning another individual by treating a man as though he were something less (a woman.)

Likewise, the consequence of the homosexual act is not to cause “nakedness” (shame) as it is in most of the previous sexual prohibitions in Leviticus 18. Instead, the homosexual act is pronounced an “abomination.”

The word “abomination” in English carries a heavy moral load. The Hebrew word behind it, however, refers to something that “makes unclean.” Much of Leviticus is given over to describe things that make one unclean. In some cases, we would identify these things as moral offenses as well, but in many cases the thing that makes one unclean is morally neutral (a rash or open sore) or even something required by Torah (contact with the dead.)

That is not to say that the homosexual act described in Leviticus 18:22 is not viewed as morally wrong. It is clearly prohibited by God. I only point out that the word “abomination” here does not raise the act of homosexuality to some higher level of evil.

Chapter 20 of Leviticus would be problematic to the modern Christian ethic with or without its mention of homosexuality in 20:13. Throughout this chapter, we find language suggesting that the fitting punishment for violating sexual taboos is death. The punishment of homosexuality is no exception.

In John 8, we find Jesus challenged by the severity of Leviticus 20. A woman has been brought to him who has been caught in adultery. Her accusers point to Leviticus 20 when they suggest that she should be put to death. Jesus famously suggests that whichever of her accusers is without sin should cast the first stone. This should probably stand as a general indictment against the whole chapter.

Does sin deserve death? Yes. This is the testimony of both old covenant and new. In the new covenant, however, we recognize that this death has already been died by another who, ironically, might have been uniquely qualified to cast the first stone.

Summary:

In defense of the traditional approach to homosexuality, Leviticus names it among a number of other sexual prohibitions, most of which we would still consider deplorable today. Like the others, the offense is considered grave enough to warrant immediate and radical attention: the death penalty.

For those who challenge the traditional language, we might note that the homosexual act described in Leviticus is male only, and perhaps only describes a demeaning form of penetrative sex that treats a male as though he were a lesser being (female.)

Furthermore, chapters 18-20 form a section of the book of Leviticus that is explicitly aimed at Israel, to call her to behaviors that will set her apart from the nations around her. Much of this section of the book (as well as much of Torah as a whole) have been traditionally understood to be set aside for Christians who have entered into relationship with God through Jesus Christ apart from the law.

And a word to all of us, whether in support of traditional language or not. Take note that this prohibition is surrounded by a raft of others, equally as pressing, that do not find themselves at the center of our denomination's current debate. If we are to hold one another accountable to some higher moral standard, we might do well to start with standards on which we all readily agree.

Fire From the Sky

The story of Sodom and Gomorrah has, from very early days, been read as a sweeping condemnation of homosexuality. In most modern languages, the word “Sodomy” (or its cognate) is virtually synonymous with sexual perversion.

The story begins in Genesis 18, with a visit to Abraham from three “men” that we later come to understand are the Lord and two of his angels. They come bearing news that Sarah will (after years of barrenness) conceive and bear a child for Abraham.

Abraham greets the visitors in high fashion, displaying the value placed on hospitality in his culture. His lavish welcome, is clearly to be understood as a mark of his noble character. After the visitors have made their announcement to Abram and Sarah, they turn to leave. It is their intent to visit the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah to witness first hand the depths of depravity that they have heard exist there. It is clearly their plan, should things be as they are led to understand, to destroy these cities.

The Lord turns back, sending his angels ahead of him into the cities. He feels compelled to return to Abraham and declare his intent. Abraham, whose nephew, Lot, resides in Sodom, begins to bargain with the Lord to save the city. In an almost comic “reverse auction” sequence, Abraham secures a promise that if the Lord finds as many as 10 righteous men living in the Sodom, he will spare it.

Meanwhile, the angels have arrived in Sodom to be welcomed in the city gate by none other than Lot himself, who offers them hospitality in his own home. They politely decline, and he (equally politely) pushes the offer. The angels relent, and soon find themselves the object of Lot’s noble hospitality.

It is at this point, of course, that the story takes its evil turn. The men of Sodom surround Lot’s house and demand that he surrender his guests to them “so that we can have sex with them.”

Lot persists in his hospitality by going out to face down the mob. He offers them his two virgin daughters in place of the guests, but the mob is will have none of it. They identify Lot himself as a foreigner in their midst, in spite of the fact that he has lived among them now for years and even apparently earned a favorable position among the townspeople. Lot’s foreign origin is an important point in the story, as is the fact that the angels were perceived as outsiders. The mob threatens Lot with bodily harm: “We’ll treat you worse than them!”

At this point the angels intervene, pulling Lot back into the house and striking the men of the city blind. They then lead Lot and his family out of Sodom before the Lord rained down burning Sulphur on the cities of the plain.

To make this story about sex (of *any* preference) is to utterly miss the point. The evil on display here is not licentiousness, but subjugation and brutality. The intent of the mob was not to have a wild night of unfettered passion, but to demean and do bodily harm to the foreigners who had showed up in their town.

Such things were not unknown in the ancient world, any more than they are unknown today. In more modern times, we can hear stories of sexual brutality as part of the terrorism and horror that surrounds war, particularly when the goals behind the military action include genocide.

Only a few chapters previously, the people of Sodom and Gomorrah had themselves been brutalized by war, their fighting men being chased into the mountains and their belongings (which included many of their own citizens, including Lot and his family) were pillaged and carried off by enemy soldiers. Now two strangers have entered town and are meeting together in the home of “that foreigner” planning who-knows-what and the men of Sodom gather to make sure that these travelers get a clear picture of just who it is they are dealing with.

Thanks to the intervention of the angels, nobody is harmed during the evening’s events. However, we develop a clear picture of what-might-have-been from a parallel story in the book of Judges, chapter 19.

The traveler in this case was a Levite from Ephraim, who had travelled to Bethlehem to retrieve a runaway concubine. Like Abraham’s angels, the Levite is greeted with lavish hospitality in Bethlehem. On his return trip to Ephraim, however, he finds himself arriving around nightfall into an Israelite city called Gibeah. He has selected Gibeah over several nearby villages because it is an Israelite city. His own people.

The Levite negotiates hospitality with an elderly man in the town square, though he is forced to pay for his own keep. As in the Sodom narrative then men of Gibeah surrounded the house where the Levite was staying and demanded that the guest be surrendered for humiliation. The host (also like in the story of Lot) offered up his virgin daughter as a substitute. Perhaps unlike Lot, the host also volunteered one of his guests: the Levite’s concubine.

The mob loudly objects and insist on their original plan. Perhaps in desperation, the concubine is pushed out into the street nevertheless.

At daybreak, the concubine, who had been abused throughout the night, crawled back to the threshold of the house where she had been the presumed guest. There on the threshold, she died from her injuries.

No fire falls from the sky in this story, but as the tale makes its way into the countryside, the other tribes of Israel are so incensed that they gather an army and bear down on Gibeah to exact justice.

The story of the Levite’s concubine and the ensuing war form the final and climactic narrative in the book of Judges. The parallels between this story and the Sodom and Gomorrah story are so strong that it’s hard to imagine the writer of the book of judges is not deliberately shaping his story to evoke the earlier, better known event. In this context of a book whose theme is how Israel struggled and failed as a people without a king, this story serves as the ultimate indicator of failure. Israel has deteriorated to state where we are worse than the people of Sodom and Gomorrah.

Both stories set the same stage, contrasting the evils of their respective cities with the behavior of Godly individuals in their midst. If the stories were intended to highlight problems of sexual preference, the Godly examples would be examples of sexual purity or family covenant. Instead, the storytellers contrast the brutality of the men of the cities with the hospitality and kindness of Godly strangers. The sin being indicted here is the sin of blind hatred and aggression for aggression’s sake.

Summary:

In defense of the traditional stand on homosexuality, we can only point out that at some point these stories were misunderstood by the church to be about sexual sin, and that this misunderstanding was perpetuated across many generations with few dissenting voices. The church settled into this interpretation because it was an interpretation that matched what they believed the remainder of the Bible taught about homosexuality, and the depth to which this sort of behavior must grieve God.

However, to read these stories as stories about sex is roughly equivalent to reading a story about the horrors of Auschwitz and deciding that it was a story about the evils of making Jewish people shave their heads. Sex, in these Old Testament stories, is merely a tool for humiliation and degradation in the hands of humans who have chosen the course of brutality against their perceived enemies. It is this inhumanity towards their fellow human beings that calls down the fire from Heaven.

Making a List...

Modern Christianity has an uneasy truce with the Old Testament. The relationship between the laws and regulations found there and the grace which we find through Jesus Christ in the New Testament is a complex and often confusing issue. Many Christians don't believe that the Old testament applies to the church at all, and those who feel otherwise often struggle to articulate why and how it should be applied today.

For this reason, if homosexuality were only discussed in Old Testament passages, we would probably not be having the full on debate we are experiencing in the church today. As it stands, however, there are several mentions of homosexuality in the New Testament, as well.

Many people will point out that Jesus himself appears to have never broached the issue. This assertion is debatable, but it is certainly true that he never used the word "homosexual" on any of the common idioms of the day. This lack of evidence is a two edged sword, however. It is often construed as an implicit approval (or at least apathy) on the subject. However, it might equally be argued that when Jesus was prone to speak most directly when he took positions contrary to the traditional wisdom of his day. If the religious establishment around Jesus took a stance he didn't agree with, he usually said so. We find this rule at work when he discusses the keeping of the Sabbath, for example. In the absence of any dialogue between Jesus and the Pharisees on this issue, we might be led to assume that this was something on which they agreed.

Obviously, then, Jesus' silence on the issue can be claimed by either side of the debate as point in their own favor.

Paul, however, was *not* silent on the matter. In this section, we'll discuss two different passages in which Paul mentions homosexuality as part of lists of objectionable behaviors. These may be found in 1 Corinthians 6 and 1 Timothy 1. He gives the topic a more extended treatment in his letter to the Romans which we will deal with in a later section.

Paul's first letter to the church at Corinth is noted for its tremendous emphasis on unity among the believers. He has barely finished his opening address before he takes up the issue of division, beginning with the debate within the church about whose teachings they should follow. Apparently, other Christian teachers have come to Corinth in Paul's absence, most notably a man called Apollos. The new teachers have some ideas that seem different than those which Paul has previously taught the church. Paul is actually diplomatic as he approaches this conflict. He is careful not to deride Apollos, or even to debate the particular theological differences between them. He calls the church to discernment, asking only that they recognize his own teaching as "foundational" and ask themselves how what Apollos offers can be seen to "build upon" what the Corinthians have already received from Paul.

In chapter 5 of the letter, Paul takes on the issue of sexual immorality that is taking place in the church at Corinth and which has apparently been reported to him. The issue at hand is that a man has been sleeping with the wife of his father. This, of course, is a violation of the Torah, as stated in Leviticus 18:8. Paul, however, addresses this issue from a different angle.

It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that even pagans do not tolerate: A man is sleeping with his father's wife. (1 Corinthians 5:1, NIV)

As we can see, Paul does not focus directly on the violation of Torah, here, as on the witness which this activity creates in surrounding community. “Even the pagans” recognize this particular sort of sexual immorality as being improper. Paul is shocked that any disciple of Jesus would boast about an activity that is universally accepted as over-the-line.

Apparently, the foundation for this boasting is a freedom from the law which Paul has proclaimed in Christ. Paul is quick to remind them that this freedom is not a license to do as they please:

“I have the right to do anything,” you say— but not everything is beneficial. “I have the right to do anything” — but I will not be mastered by anything. (1 Corinthians 6:12)

Freedom from the law still comes with an obligation to behave within certain parameters which set Christ’s followers apart from the world around them.

But now I am writing to you that you must not associate with anyone who claims to be a brother or sister but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler. Do not even eat with such people. (1 Corinthians 5:11)

The phrase “anyone who claims to be a brother or sister” is an important part of this verse. Paul is very clear that he fully expects the church to engage the community around them without judgement, but that persons who don’t meet certain standards shouldn’t be considered part of the church.

The organization of Paul’s list in this passage is also of interest. The objectionable behaviors are listed in pairs. The first item in each pair (sexual immorality, idolatry, and drunkenness) all seem to reflect a hedonistic lifestyle of the sort that might have been associated with the orgiastic feasts of the Romans. The second item in each pair (greed, slander, swindling) seems to address justice issues, perhaps associated with the corrupt use of the courts by the rich and powerful to legally take goods and property from those unable to mount a legal defense. Both hedonism and legal abuse were common within the provinces occupied by the Roman Empire. Having made a statement on sexual immorality, Paul now turns his attention to the issues of justice.

In the sixth chapter of the letter, Paul is addressing the problem of lawsuits among believers. Again, he expresses that part of his concern is the public nature of this activity:

I say this to shame you. Is it possible that there is nobody among you wise enough to judge a dispute among believers? But instead, one brother takes another to court —and this in front of unbelievers! (1 Corinthians 6:6)

He is disturbed that the church in Corinth is despoiling its witness by taking one another to court. He strongly suggests that the church handle its own disputes within the context of Christian community.

*The very fact that you have lawsuits among you means you have been completely defeated already. Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be cheated? Instead, you yourselves cheat and do wrong, and you do this to your brothers and sisters. Or do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolater nor adulterers **nor men who have sex with men** nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. (1 Corinthians 6:7-10, NIV)*

Paul's logic here banks on the fact in any suit, somebody has either done wrong already, or is being wrongfully accused. If wrongfully accused, then the accuser is doing wrong. In either case, for one Christian to bring suit against another is highlighting to the world that the church is no different than the pagans around them. He underlines that Jesus should have made a difference in their lives, and he lists a number of behaviors common among the pagans, behaviors that should have been left behind through the transformative power of Christ.

The phrase which the NIV translates as "men who have sex with men" is actually made up of two different words in the original Greek: *malakos* and *arsenokoites*.

Arsenokoites appears to be a word which Paul made up. It is a word that occurs nowhere else in Greek literature beyond this passage and the passage from 1 Timothy which we will discuss later. The word is a compound, made up of the Greek words for "male" and "bed." Some scholars would try to argue that we don't really know what *arsenokoites* means since it's a word Paul has made up, but this argument seems to grasp at straws. It seems pretty clear that the word is intended to echo the language of Leviticus 18:

*'You shall not **lie with a male** as with a woman. It is an abomination.'*" (Leviticus 18:22 NIV)

*Perhaps ironically, the word that Paul made up has a clearer meaning for us in this passage than the very common word with which he paired it. *Malakos* is a common Greek word that simply means "soft." As it was used in the writings of Paul's time, the word often carried the connotation of "effeminate." English translations of this text treat the word *malakos* in a variety of ways. The NIV (1978) translation we quoted above seems to combine *malakos* with *arsenokoites* in order to embrace both partners in the homosexual act. This is a departure from the book of Leviticus, which (if read literally) only seems to condemn the male who takes on the dominant masculine role of sexual penetration.*

Other English translations (KJV, NAU,) translate *malakos* in the much milder sense of "effeminate." This more honest translation leaves us wondering exactly what it is that Paul is condemning, as there are any number of behaviors, especially in Paul's time, that might be seen as straying from the male ideal.

Interestingly, when the NIV was updated in 2011, the editors decided to "go another way" with this text, following the lead of the NRSV in rendering the word *malakos* as "male prostitutes." This translation reflects a knowledge of the cultural practices at the time the text was written, in which prostitution in general was widely accepted and practiced, and in which males were nearly as popular a choice as females. This translation of *malakos* is right at home on Paul's list. It describes an obviously objectionable behavior forbidden by Torah, as well as a behavior that was often associated in practice with idolatry.

In the wider Greek culture of the day, *malakos* appears to be a word that is often used to refer to the passive (penetrated) partner in *any* sexual act. The word is usually used in a pejorative sense. Within these Greek cultures (as has been widely noted) homosexuality enjoyed a certain level of favor, so long as the erotic act did not include actual penetration.

Classical Greek culture celebrated a practice known as pederasty, in which a mature male would act as a mentor to a younger, pubescent male. The mentor would guide the younger man into adulthood, passing along knowledge of culture, providing important personal contacts, and tending to the general education of their ward. It was expected that this relationship would also have a sexual component, and “beautiful” youth were sought out as protégés. The sexual contact between the two was presumed to be consensual and to not include the demeaning act of penetration.

The Romans later took on some outward form of this pederasty, though the younger male was more often a slave or some other person of much lower social status than the “mentor.” In particular, it was not uncommon for Roman military officers to keep young male slaves for the purposes of sex. Some suggest that this is the backdrop of the story we find in Matthew 8:5-13 and Luke 7:1-10.

In this story, a Centurion makes a request of Jesus on behalf of a sick servant who he believes is about to die. When Jesus offers to come to the Centurion’s home to heal the boy, the Centurion responds that Jesus’ presence is not necessary. As a commander of men, the Centurion asserts that if Jesus gives the command, that the disease will be compelled to obey, even at a distance.

The word for “servant” in Matthew’s gospel is an unusual one that literally means “boy” and has the connotation of “attendant” more than “slave.” Luke’s gospel throws in an adjective which the NIV translates as “highly valued,” but which might also be translated as “precious.”

These hints are far from conclusive, of course, but it is interesting to consider that we might have in this passage an example of Jesus in ministry to a pagan in a homoerotic relationship. If so, we might spend more time unpacking Jesus actions in this story, including his high praise of the Centurion’s faith.

As with the list in the fifth chapter, this list is evenly divided between behavior associated with hedonism and those associated with the miscarriage of justice. This, along with Paul’s concern for the outward testimony of the church in its surrounding community tie chapter 5 and 6 to one another. Both hedonism and injustice are behaviors that are to be given a wide berth in Christian community, both because of their destructive nature, and because of their witness to the outside community. The church, however, is to take care not to judge the world around them (yet!). For whatever we have become in Christ, we should remain mindful of who we were without him:

Or do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor men who have sex with men nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ by the Spirit of our God. (1 Corinthians 6:9-11, NIV)

Summary:

Paul's agenda in 1 Corinthians chapters 5 and 6 is to address behaviors that he believes are extreme enough to give the church a black eye in the community at large.

In support of the church's traditional stance on homosexuality, Paul places an item on one of the two lists that is a clear reference to homosexuality as it is forbidden in Leviticus 18:22. It is also possible that he intended to broaden the prohibition from Leviticus to include not only the male taking the active masculine (penetrative) role in the homosexual act, but also the passive effeminate role.

Further, based on his advice from chapter 5, it might be inferred that persons who find themselves on this list should be expelled from the church.

Posing questions towards the traditional language we might note first of all that the language in this list might be understood to refer to practices very different from those currently being considered within the church. Common homosexual practices in the ancient world included prostitution, idolatry, and pederasty (both consensual and non-consensual.) All of these behaviors could be considered as in a different category than that of same sex partners entering into a life long covenant relationship with one another.

Also, the language referring to the "passive" partner in a homosexual coupling is far from clear, leaving us with the law from Leviticus as our primary scripture defining what homosexual behavior is unacceptable. We should be careful to remember that, taken literally, this prohibition is only imposed males, and only on those who "womanize" their partners.

Further, this passage is a list. We should be very careful to understand that homosexuality has certainly been given no special place in the list. If we intend to militate against homosexual behaviors in the church, we should certainly be prepared to also take on the other behaviors we see listed there: greed, drunkenness, thievery, and deceit.

Finally, whatever our final answer on homosexuality turns out to be, Paul is very careful to remind us that we are all sinners who need to remember our brokenness as we approach those in the world around us.

Checking It Twice

Much like the mention of homosexuality in 1 Corinthians 6, 1 Timothy contains a list which lists homosexuality as a behavior inconsistent with Christian doctrine.

1 Timothy is one of a handful of letters in our New Testament that have been labeled the “Pastoral Epistles) because they seem to be written to individual pastoral leaders in the early church rather than to the larger church body. The body of the letter tells us it is written by Paul, though many scholars dispute this. This is an argument beyond our scope. It is sufficient to say that if Paul did not write it himself, it was consistent enough with his writings to be received in his name by the early church and to find its way into Biblical canon.

The letter opens with an exhortation to Timothy, a young protégé of Paul, to remain in Ephesus to give direction to others who had been teaching there. Paul wants these teachers to refrain from teaching false doctrines “myths,” and “endless genealogies.” The exact nature of the false teaching is not described. Some scholars believe that it may have been an early form of Gnosticism, but the evidence for this is scant and controversial.

What we do have is Paul’s opinion that these teachers want to be “teachers of the law” (Torah) but that they really don’t understand what they are talking about. To be fair, this is an accusation that Paul might make of many in his day. In fact, his own understanding and interpretation of Torah had been radically altered by his encounter with Jesus Christ. Paul asserts that their failure to understand leads them into meaningless conversations that stir up controversy without forwarding the cause of the kingdom.

Ove against these “false” teachings, Paul gives a shorthand version of his understanding of the Torah:

The goal of this command is love, which comes from a pure heart and a sincere faith. (1 Timothy 1:5)

He also explains what he believes is the purpose of the law. It is in this context that he gives the list which includes the letter’s only reference to homosexuality:

*We know that the law is good if one uses it properly. We also know that the law is made not for the righteous, but for lawbreakers and rebels, the ungodly and sinful, the unholy and irreligious, for those who kill their fathers or mothers, for murderers for the sexually immoral, **for those practicing homosexuality**, for slave traders and liars and perjurers —and for whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine that conforms to the gospel concerning the glory of the blessed God, which he entrusted to me. (1 Timothy 1:8-11)*

Like the reference in 1 Corinthians, the word Paul uses here to refer to homosexuality is *arsenokoites*, a word coined by Paul himself borrowing language from the Greek translation of Leviticus 18. The word means “a man-bedder.” Unlike the 1 Corinthians passage, there is no language here that would explicitly expand the definition of homosexuality to include the passive partner

Paul's logic in this passage is a little opaque, to the point of near contradiction. The general thrust seems to be that the purpose of the law is to place people under conviction. Those who are described in the list are the sort of people who need to be aware of their brokenness as their first step in understanding what God wants to do in their lives through Jesus Christ

The list Paul gives here in 1 Timothy contains a couple of things not mentioned in his list in 1 Corinthians. Perhaps most jarringly, 1 Timothy lists "those who kill their fathers or mothers." Obviously we would have to argue that killing one's parents is probably wrong. Very, very wrong. It does seem to be an oddly specific addition to this list, however.

Some scholars suggest that Paul has ordered this list in parallel with the Ten Commandments. Like the Ten Commandments, this list begins with what we would think of as offenses mostly against God (ungodly, sinful, unholy, irreligious) and then moves to those sins that we think of as being against others. In this second half of the list, we find closer correlation:

Ten Commandments

1 Timothy 1:8-11

Honor father and mother

Those who murder their father or mother

Do not commit murder

Those who murder their mother or father

Do not commit adultery

sexually immoral (homosexuals?)

Do not steal

slave traders

Do not bear false witness

liars and perjurers

Do not covet

As you can see, the parallels are imperfect and incomplete. They are, however a little better than they first appear. The Greek term which is translated "slave traders" actually refers to a much seedier element. During Biblical times, of course, slavery was a commonplace occurrence accept throughout most cultures. However, there was a sort of black market for laves that was *not* condoned. These elements would buy and sell slaves which had been kidnapped or perhaps even stolen from previous owners. What we're talking about her is what today we would call human trafficking. This notion ties the idea of stealing to the idea of slave trade.

It also connects slave trade to homosexual activity, as many of these slaves were purchased and owned for sexual purposes, and these were nearly as often male as female.

All in all, we would have to say that this is a list that tends towards extremes, giving what might have been understood as the most heinous examples of violations against the Torah. Paul seems to be exercising a campaign of shock and awe against his readers, drawing the most offensive portrait he can of those people who are in need of the Torah to set their lives back in order.

Against this backdrop, the next passage in this letter is even more powerful:

I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that he considered me trustworthy, appointing me to his service. Even though I was once a blasphemer and persecutor and violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief. The grace of the Lord was poured out on me abundantly along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.

Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners — of whom I am the worst. (1 Timothy 1:15)

Paul never forgets, nor lets his readers forget, that sin is not just the dwelling place of the pagan unbeliever. It is the starting place for each and every one of us, only escapable through the love and grace of Jesus Christ.

Summary;

In favor of traditional understanding, Paul lists homosexual behavior among a list of other extreme behaviors as being incompatible with sound doctrine for those who have received the gospel of Jesus Christ. He asserts that it is among the sorts of things that the Torah was given to convict us about.

As with other scriptures, the driving question seems to be whether the homosexuality Paul condemned has anything but a coincidental relationship to the homosexuality the church is being asked to consider today. Here, as elsewhere, homosexuality is listed among acts of violence perpetrated by one human being against another, not as a mutual act of intimacy between consenting individual in covenant.

Paul also reminds us that you don't have to be a homosexual to sin. Sin is put forth as a universal constant from which only the grace of God through Jesus Christ can possibly deliver us.

A Natural Assumption

Romans 1, in my opinion, is a key passage for anybody who is honestly grappling with what the Bible has to say about homosexuality. Romans is widely held to be Paul's magnum opus, the clearest and most complete statement of his emerging theology on the meaning of Christ and his resurrection. The book also contains Paul's most extended discussion around the topic of homosexuality, and the only discussion that appears to try to place his views on the matter into any sort of theological framework.

¹⁸ *The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people, who suppress the truth by their wickedness, ¹⁹ since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. ²⁰ 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 people are without excuse.*

²¹ *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. ²² Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools ²³ and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like a mortal human being and birds and animals and reptiles.*

²⁴ *Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. ²⁵ They exchanged the truth about God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised. Amen.*

²⁶ *Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural sexual relations for unnatural ones. ²⁷ In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed shameful acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their error.*

²⁸ *Furthermore, just as they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, so God gave them over to a depraved mind, so that they do what ought not to be done. ²⁹ 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, ³⁰ slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; ³¹ they have no understanding, no fidelity, no love, no mercy. ³² 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. (Romans 1:18-31)*

The text suffers somewhat in translation. A look at the original Greek language shows us that translators for the NIV have, in some cases, chosen harsher language than necessary. For example the “degrading” of verse 24 and “shameful” of verse 26 both translate essentially the same word, perhaps more literally translated as “dishonorable.” Not only is “dishonorable” a word less morally loaded than the words chosen by the translator,

but it is a word that opens the possibility of alternative readings. Perhaps what is being condemned here is not so much the “act” in and of itself as one’s attitude towards one’s partner. It is well documented that homosexuality, particularly among men, in the ancient world carried with it a connotation of one partner abasing the other. Leviticus 18, for example, refers to the male homosexual act as “lying with a man as with a woman.” Given the social context of the status of women in the ancient world, this will have naturally been seen as an act of humiliation.

Quite apart from any translation issues, though, it is important that we take note of this word (dishonorable) because it will play a major role later in Paul’s argument.

Also, the word “unnatural” as it is used in verse 27 is unfortunate. In this case, the translation is literal and sound. The problem lies in the modern connotations around the word, especially as it is used in the context of sexuality, where it is essentially a synonym of the word “perverse.” In its broader context, however, the Greek word is not particularly morally loaded. It simply means something that goes against expectations. In fact, its *opposite* (“natural” in Greek) is most often used to refer to base animal desires.

The exact same Greek construct (*para phrasis*) is used later in Romans as a metaphor one of God’s most startling acts of grace:

*After all, if you were cut out of an olive tree that is wild by nature, and **contrary to nature** were grafted into a cultivated olive tree, how much more readily will these, the natural branches, be grafted into their own olive tree! (Romans 11:24)*

Paul is speaking here of God extending his grace to the Gentiles through the work of Jesus on the cross and emphasizing the surprising, counterintuitive nature of grace.

While translation issues may effect the general tone of the passage, though, they generally don’t impact Paul’s overall argument. He asserts that mankind strayed from what should have been an obvious and natural response to the God who revealed His nature through the shape of creation. Having rejected God, our minds become clouded and we begin to worship other things. In this case, the idolatry is probably not intended to be metaphorical. Paul is describing the descent of early humans into pagan idolatry.

Paul says that God’s response to idolatry is to give the newly formed pagan world over to strange desires and lusts. These desires eventually give way to homosexual behavior. This progression is interesting. It is often conflated all into one breath as though the whole hairball got coughed up at once, but Paul sees a logical flow between one thing and the next.

First comes a broken world picture that does not recognize and celebrate the creator. This is followed by the worship of created things over the one who created them. Out of this comes idolatry and a distorted (dishonorable) view of sex, in general, that has something to do (perhaps) with the abasement of one partner by the other. Out of this distorted view of sex comes the practice of homosexuality.

Paul is not done, of course. The “furthermore” of verse 28 reminds us that homosexuality is not the only problem with the human rejection of God. The list that follows almost certainly hits each of us at one point or another before it reaches its conclusion. The list is a reminder that this passage is not “about” homosexuality. It is, instead, about the pagan spiral into sin in response to their rejection of the creator God. Homosexuality is seen as one sign of this.

Viewing homosexuality as a “pagan” behavior is an attitude deeply embedded in our Bible, going all the way back to Genesis, perhaps even to the story of Noah and his sons (Genesis 9:18-27) in which Ham, the progenitor of the Canaanites, is cursed because of “what he had done” in the tent with his drunk, naked and uncovered father. In Genesis 19, the story of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah famously includes a threat of sexual degradation through a homosexual act. God’s response is almost certainly more about the degradation than the sex, but the story nevertheless points to homosexuality as a known feature within the pagan world which the Jewish world was expected to reject.

In Leviticus 18, homosexuality (along with a long list of other sexual acts) is forbidden to Israel in a section of the book that begins with the words: “You shall not do as they did in the land of Egypt, where you lived, or as they do in land of Canaan, to which I am bringing you.” It is perhaps telling that in the center of this list of sexual prohibitions is a single prohibition that has nothing to do with sex at all, but with idolatry: “You shall not give any of your offspring to sacrifice them to Molech...” Idolatry is the defining characteristic of paganism, and where homosexuality is mentioned in the Bible, you’ll almost always find a discussion of idolatry nearby.

Likewise, Paul here seems to view homosexuality as an outworking of that same wrongheadedness that led the pagan world into idolatry and, ultimately, into a whole world of imaginative sinfulness. I imagine that as this letter is being read aloud to the church in Rome, a chorus of “Amens” is rising to greet each sentence from that back pew of the church where all the lifelong Jews are sitting. They are celebrating (as many of us are perhaps doing even now) that Paul is finally calling out the sinful pagans and letting them know that the day of God’s wrath is at hand.

There celebration is short lived, however...

¹⁷ Now you, if you call yourself a Jew; if you rely on the law and boast in God; ¹⁸ if you know his will and approve of what is superior because you are instructed by the law; ¹⁹ if you are convinced that you are a guide for the blind, a light for those who are in the dark, ²⁰ an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of little children, because you have in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth— ²¹ you, then, who teach others, do you not teach yourself? You who preach against stealing, do you steal? ²² You who say that people should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? ²³ You who boast in the law, do you dishonor God by breaking the law? ²⁴ As it is written: “God’s name is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.” (Romans 2:17-24)

Dead silence.

That’s all I can imagine from that pew full of Jews as Paul violently turns the tables. Having outlined the wrong-headedness of pagan thinking that led to sinfulness, he now has some words for those who claim to know better. He points out the self-evident truth that the pagans hold no monopoly on sin. He suggests that, in fact, Israel has more to answer for in light of their claim to be God’s people. The real kick in the shins to his Jewish listeners is in the last two verses of the quote.

First, Paul brings back the word “dishonor,” which figured so prominently in his discussion of wrongheaded sexuality. Here, though, it is not a sexual partner that is being dishonored by pagan behavior, but God himself who is being dishonored by His own people. Paul goes on to borrow language from Isaiah and Ezekiel to say that Israel’s failure actually gives God a black eye among the nations. The overall effect of Paul’s argument is devastating: “You are worse than the pagans you are always railing on about.”

Now, perhaps, it is the Gentile former pagans who are in the Amen Corner. Paul’s intent, though is not to open an argument about which set of sins is the worst. Quite the contrary. He is seeking to level the playing field so that both parties must surrender their moral high ground:

²¹ But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. ²² This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, ²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. ²⁵ God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith. He did this to demonstrate his righteousness, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished— ²⁶ he did it to demonstrate his righteousness at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.

²⁷ Where, then, is boasting? It is excluded. Because of what law? The law that requires works? No, because of the law that requires faith. ²⁸ For we maintain that a person is justified by faith apart from the works of the law. ²⁹ Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles too? Yes, of Gentiles too, ³⁰ since there is only one God, who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through that same faith. (Romans 3:21-30)

Here is the heart of the matter. Both pagan behaviors and Jewish shortcomings find their resolution in the same way, by the same grace, through the same sacrificial offering, by the same God. It is an essential tenet of the Christian faith that every human being needs forgiveness from God, and that God extends that forgiveness to all without prejudice.

For Paul, though, this statement also serves his more immediate purpose of helping a church come to peace with one another, in spite of the fact that its factions are arriving from radically different starting places. The cross of Jesus does not “merely” suffice to cleanse us as individuals from our sins. By so doing, it also binds us to one another as corecipients of God’s unnatural saving grace through our shared faith in Jesus Christ.

Paul will spend much of the middle part of the book of Romans demonstrating to his readers that the story of scripture was *always* a story about faith and grace, in which the commandments served the important role of simultaneously marking us as people of faith and pointing demonstratively at our need for grace.

We return to Paul’s message as he begins to “wrap things up” towards the end of the book:

⁷ Give to everyone what you owe them: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor. ⁸ Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for whoever loves others has fulfilled the law. ⁹ The commandments, “You shall not commit adultery,” “You shall not murder,” “You shall not steal,” “You shall not covet,” and whatever other command there may be, are summed up in this one command: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” ¹⁰ Love does no harm to a neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law. (Romans 13:7-10)

Paul moves through the “theological” portion of Romans in the first 11 chapters. In chapter 12, he begins to offer a variety of practical suggestions in how that theology looks on the hoof. The beginning of chapter 13 includes practical advice on how to interact with appointed “authorities.” This is an interesting discussion for another time, perhaps. For the time being, we might simply point out that the language Paul uses in this early section of the chapter is more consistent with language used to speak of synagogue rulers than princes, kings and Caesars. For our purposes, we’ll pick up the conversation with a “transitional” verse in verse 7 that moves us from the discussion of respecting authorities to a much broader statement about what it means to be a follower of Jesus, whether Jew or Gentile.

Paul invites us to discharge our duties to those around us, whether they be authorities, community members, or fellow Christians. Perhaps you noted the word “honor” cropping up again in verse 7. The use of this word harkens back to his accusations towards both the pagans and the Jews in the early chapters of the book. He asserts that the one duty we can never fully come to the end of is the duty to love one another. As Paul has used the ten commandments in his diatribe against the Jews in chapter 3, he now returns to those same commandments in affirmation, telling us (much as Jesus has done in his own preaching) that these commandments, and any other valid commandments which may fall upon us, are all subsumed in the commandment to love one another.

Summary:

Paul's discussion of homosexuality in chapter 1 of Romans is part theological treatise and part emotional booby trap. He coaxes the traditional Jews in his audience to cheer on God's well deserved wrath against their life-long adversaries, the pagan nations. At the last minute, though, he pulls a switch worthy of the prophet Nathan's famous "Thou art the man" speech to King David. Israel is found as ambitious as her pagan neighbors when it comes to the hard work of sinning. This levels the ground for a call to unity at the foot of the cross. This call to unity is one of the primary themes of the book, perhaps even taking pride of position over the themes of justification and salvation which have occupied most of the scholarly attention around this letter.

In favor of a traditional approach to homosexuality, Paul's theology does name same sex desires and activities as something that dishonors God. Furthermore, this passage has the only reference in scripture to female homosexuality. This much broader definition and understanding of homosexuality covers much of the distance between the ancient understanding of homosexuality borrowed from Leviticus and homosexuality as it is defined and understood today.

As questions directed at the traditional understanding, we might note the order in which things fall apart, according to Paul. First comes a human failure to honor God, then a form of desire that does not honor our fellow humans, and only in consequence desires and activities directed toward members of the same sex. Is the sin a particular sex act, or is it the loss of respect for our fellow human beings? Can we, unlike the ancient readers, envision a form of homosexuality that is not inherently demeaning?

Epilogue: Romans 14 and 15

Paul has, in many ways, made his case as he closes chapter 13, but he includes one more major section in his epistle before he launches into his final, personal remarks. This is a section devoted to what is evidently a major theological split in the Roman church. His purpose in holding this discussion back for the end is an interesting question.

One might argue that this practical bit of church leadership acts as a sort of “lab” for his theology, an illustration of how his ideas all come together in a real life ministry situation. One might equally argue, though, that this is the problem which Paul has been intending to address with his letter from the outset, and that the earlier part of the letter is intended to lay the groundwork for this closing discussion. At any rate, the many threads of his theological argument come together in his discussion of this crisis in the life of the church

The main issue has to do with the relationship between two factions in the church who disagree on “eating meat” and, to an apparently lesser extent, the celebration of “special days.” The exact nature of the debate receives no further treatment. We can only guess what the true nature of the conversation might have been.

One hint comes from a very similar passage in 1 Corinthians 8, in which the meat in question is described as having been offered to idols. Perhaps the Roman church faces the same decision. Such would hardly be surprising. The pagan Roman world was rife with altars and sacrifices, and the vast majority of meat in the markets or on the tables of the church’s non-believing friends will have probably passed across a pagan altar on the way to the table. In 1 Corinthians, it is clear that many people believed that eating such meat was, in some sense, taking part in the act of pagan worship.

Whether or not this is the exact context of the disagreement in Rome is uncertain. What we do know for certain is that the two most public marks of Jewish faith in the Roman world were their particularity when it came to diet, and their celebration of “special days,” such as the Sabbath. People had died to avoid betraying these marks, martyrs to their Jewish faith in the one true God. It seems highly likely that the disagreement in Romans 14, like many of the conflicts we find in this church, has divided the church along the fault line between former pagan and former Jew. We see, also, that each side of this dispute had strongly held beliefs based on their theology of what it means to follow Jesus. In fact, if the dispute in Romans is the same as that in 1 Corinthians, it appears that Paul, himself, may have “flipped” from one side of the issue to the other. In Romans, he clearly espouses the theology of the more permissive faction, while in 1 Corinthians 10, he clearly argues the theology of the more conservative side of the debate.

I'm well aware that there is a difference between food and sex. Violations of diet are in a category apart from sexual immorality. I nevertheless wonder if some of Paul's wisdom on dealing with this crisis of theological division in the church's ranks might not find a home in our current conversation about homosexuality. Here's a synopsis of his advice to the Romans:

1. *Welcome one another.* The NIV's "accept" in verse 14:1 is a weak translation. We who would like to believe ourselves strong are not just to "put up" with people who disagree with us, but actually embrace their presence among us.
2. *Don't become the argument.* Verse 1 also invites us to lay the dispute to one side as an act of welcome. It is probably inappropriate to never discuss it at all, but it doesn't need to be our driving narrative.
3. *Don't judge or look down on those with whom you disagree.* This is hard. After all, we have worked hard for our understandings and beliefs, and it's hard to think that those understandings and beliefs are not superior. As the passage unfolds, though, we discover our refusal to judge others is not so much a favor we are doing for them as a discipline that cares for our own soul.
4. *Work hard to honor one another's conscience.* Do not engage in behaviors that might draw others into activity that their conscience might construe as sin. If your theology grants you a freedom that perhaps those around you have not discovered, don't flaunt it. There is such a thing as lovingly holding your own counsel and quietly living out your faith without offending others.