
Exegesis 4: Romans 1, Homosexuality and Aids

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The coming of the awful disease of AIDS has given rise to a whole variety of emotional reactions, and to public debate and concern which has only just begun. In a situation where people are confused, mistaken, angry, disgusted and afraid, the responsibility lies on Christians to speak wisely, accurately, humbly, compassionately and to bring to bear the divine perspective of the Word of God upon the issues that are raised. The passage which, perhaps, Christians think of first of all when considering this matter is Romans 1:18-32 and because of its crucial importance we need to examine it carefully.

Wrath

The main subject of this passage is the wrath of God (v.18), but at the outset we ought to note the way in which Paul introduces this subject and his purpose in doing so. His over-riding concern is the gospel which he preached, a gospel which tells how a righteousness from God is available for everyone who believes (vv.16,17). In the section we are considering (and indeed right on until 3:20) Paul paints the dark backcloth against which it was his joy and glory to preach the gospel of justification. Men and women are sinners, they are already under the heavy cloud of God's wrath which hangs impending over them, indeed which is already partially manifested both as a penalty and warning. In this situation Paul is not ashamed of the gospel but is eager to preach it, even in the degradation of Rome. Our perspective then is entirely wrong unless we see the situation depicted in Romans 1:18-32 as manifesting both the need and the opportunity for preaching the Gospel of the merciful provision of God — justification, in the place of condemnation.

In this passage the wrath of God is not simply spoken of as something which will be revealed at the last day, rather “the wrath of God **is being revealed**” — present tense; this is something which is manifested here and now. The way in which God's wrath is manifested is not in particular afflictions or punishments as such, but in his giving people over to the unrestrained expression of the sinful desires within their hearts. Three times this phrase is used “God gave them over” (*paredoken* vv.24,26,28). As Judas Iscariot gave Jesus over to the Jewish hierarchy (John 13:21) and the Jews gave Him over to Pilate and the Romans (Acts 3:13), so, in his wrath, God gives people over to the shameful lusts and depraved mind which are themselves the result of refusing the knowledge of God which they have, and suppressing the truth which they know.

This threefold repetition seems to suggest a certain progression, the more people continue in impenitency and contempt of God (v.28), so the more God

gives them over. However, it does not seem likely that Paul intended a definite order here — first a giving over to sexual impurity, second to unnatural relations, and finally to every kind of wickedness. The third section is far too diverse to suggest that; Paul is surely gathering together a whole variety of sins to illustrate the state to which a society degenerates when it is given over in this way.

Sexual Sins

However we view the progression indicated here, in the general way suggested or in more clear-cut stages, it is surprising that Paul focusses twice upon sexual sins (v.24 and then vv.26,27). Christians are sometimes accused of an over-concentration upon sexual morality to the neglect of other ethical priorities, and doubtless this charge is sometimes justified. However, this passage — and others too — do indicate a particular seriousness attributed to sexual misbehaviour and especially unnatural sexual activity. It may be we ought to note particularly the phrase “for the degrading of their bodies with one another” in v.24. The sin particularly specified for which God gave people over was idolatry — stripping God of his glory as the immortal, invisible, spiritual God and degrading him by picturing him in the likeness of animals and reptiles. It is possible that the “punishment fits the crime” here. Those who degrade God and reduce him to the level of animals are themselves given up to their sinful desires, so that they degrade their own bodies, behaving not with the dignity of human beings, but with a capitulation to instinctive desire and the promiscuity that is often the characteristic of animals.

There can surely be no doubt that Paul focusses on homosexual behaviour with particular emphasis and distaste. Two verses are devoted to this whereas he could easily have included such sins in the long list of verses 29-31, much as he does in 1 Corinthians 6:9,10. There are a number of features of Paul’s discussion which call for comment.

The words which are used by Paul here underline the attitude which he had to this type of behaviour — ‘shameful lusts’, ‘indecent acts’, ‘perversion’. There can be little argument about the essential accuracy of the translation in the first two cases, but it would be possible to question whether ‘perversion’ is too strong and too specific a translation of *plane*. The word is more usually translated ‘error’ and its basic meaning is ‘wandering’, ‘departing from the right path’. However, in this case it is referring to behaviour which is a departure from the norm, and ‘perversion’ is surely an accurate designation of behaviour which perverts the sexual act from its proper mode and its place within heterosexual marriage.

The second thing here is that Paul describes homosexual relations as ‘unnatural’. In many ways it is surprising that anyone should ever describe them differently, as it is clear both from the Bible and from the way God has made us that the normal sexual relationship is heterosexual. However it is not uncommon for people to say of homosexuals of either sex that their sexual desires and subsequent behaviour are ‘natural for them’. At one level this seems rather ridiculous, it is simply saying whatever a person feels like doing is

natural for him or her — it is natural for a kleptomaniac to steal, for a compulsive liar to lie, and so on. What Paul is saying, however, is that homosexual behaviour is not the natural expression of human sexuality, nor the natural use of the sexual organs. Because men may be ‘inflamed with lust’ for other men that in no sense makes it natural or ‘according to nature’. Rather that evidences a sinful and deviant propensity that needs the transforming power of the Holy Spirit to deal with it (8:13).

A third aspect of Paul’s discussion which is of particular importance at the present is the consequence which he sees homosexual behaviour bringing — “and received in themselves the due penalty for their perversion”. The words are important in this place also. ‘Penalty’ *antimisthia* is rather ‘recompense’ or ‘reward’, from *misthos* meaning ‘wages, hire’ with the preposition *anti* meaning ‘in return for’, ‘in place of’, thus strengthening the idea of what is earned or deserved. The whole expression is *ten antimisthian hen edei, edei* meaning more than ‘it is fitting, appropriate’ rather ‘it is necessary’, ‘it must be’, qualifying the noun to read ‘the recompense they ought to (receive)’, expressed well in the NIV by ‘the due penalty’.

Recompense

Of what does this recompense consist? Doubtless it includes all the unhappy consequences of such activity which the persons involved experience themselves. Hendriksen lists “a guilty conscience, sleeplessness, emotional stress, depression” and these are unquestionably to be included, but we cannot exclude venereal disease, herpes, cancer, and now AIDS. Such things are not said, in themselves, to be judgements of God or expressions of his wrath. Rather they are the type of consequences which follow when God’s ways are ignored. Promiscuous behaviour and deviant behaviour because of the very close and intimate nature of the contact involved exposes those who participate to risk of infections of various sorts, particularly, of course, to the risk of infection by sexually-transmitted diseases.

The judgement and wrath of God is seen in God giving people over. When this happens people lose their sense of responsibility, of rationality and restraint. The immediate satisfaction of desire becomes the important thing; the consequences are forgotten, submerged, out of sight and out of mind. This is seen very clearly in the present publicity for men to use condoms. The argument is, people are going to have sex whatever happens therefore to save life and to prevent the spread of infection, condoms are essential. It is probably not too much to say that the last words of this chapter could be taken out of their context and applied here, “they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practise them”.

The flow of argument in this passage then is this. The wrath of God is seen in the present when God gives over responsible people who know, from the evidence of the creation, sufficient truth to humble themselves before God, but who prefer rather to follow their own wisdom and imaginings. God, as it were, says to them, “You think you can get on without me, without listening to my words, but following your own ideas? Very well, get on with it and see

where it leads you.” The judgement is to be left to our own sin-damaged thoughts and desires; the consequences are what we bring on our own heads by our foolish and irresponsible behaviour.

Abuse

Before we try and draw some conclusions it may be of some value to hazard an explanation for Paul picking out sexual depravity in the way he does. Could he not have mentioned many other sins? Doubtless he could, but it may be that he focusses on sexual sins because they abuse and degrade the most precious of human relationships that God has given to us. The way in which God chose to create the first man and the first woman, the prominence which is given in the creation story to what could be called the first marriage, the simple beauty of the narrative in Genesis 2, the remarkable words “the the LORD God ... brought her to the man”, all serve to point up the glorious gift that marriage is. And marriage is a sexual relationship: all other aspects of the marriage relationship can be and are, to some extent, shared with others, but at the heart of marriage is the personal, intimate, exclusive relationship of sexual intercourse. This lies at the heart of marriage, as a loving, joyful marriage lies at the heart of stable family life, which in turn lies at the heart of stability and good relationships in all areas of society. Sexual sin tears the pearl out of its God-given setting and makes it a plaything of swine — that is of those who appreciate neither its nature nor its purpose. Such behaviour subverts family life and introduces disruption and unhappiness throughout society. When this gift is perverted to homosexual relations or relations with animals then it becomes an abomination (Lev. 20:13,15,16) in the eyes of the Creator and an insult to his wisdom and goodness.

Implications for Today

1. The root of our moral problems is a spiritual one. It is because men suppress the truth of God and prefer their own way, even their own religion, that God gives them up. If the real root is spiritual and religious, then the ultimate solution can only be spiritual and religious also.
2. It is clearly improper simply to say that AIDS is a judgement of God on homosexual behaviour. The position is more complicated than that, both in terms of this passage and the facts of the situation. There are AIDS victims who contracted the disease from blood transfusions, others from heterosexual relations within marriage and babies are now being born with AIDS. On the other hand the AIDS virus is not passed on by lesbian relations, but that does not exclude such behaviour from the strictures of Paul.
3. Undoubtedly AIDS must be included as one part of the ‘due penalty’ which improper and unnatural relations bring in their train. To abuse God’s gifts, to depart from his ways, to repel conscience and to neglect God’s laws, always bring unhappy consequences, not just for those who do such things, but often to a far wider circle of people than that — children, parents, spouse, relatives, friends, neighbours. But this is true not just of homosexual sin, nor of sexual sin, but of all sin. The consequences of human sin are impossible to trace out in all their ramifications and it is heart-rending to consider the mountain of

misery and sorrow which humanity has built up for itself by its inexcusable disobedience to God.

4. It is very doubtful whether it is satisfactory to make the common distinction between homosexual behaviour and homosexual orientation, as if such orientation were a non-moral matter. For example Hendriksen's comment, "A person's sexual orientation, whether heterosexual or homosexual, is not the point at issue. What matters is what a person does with his sexuality" is only true up to a point. A shameful lust is a shameful lust even if it is resisted. It is true that temptation is not sin, but it is also true that we are not sinners because we sin, we sin because we are sinners. Sin is a principle of evil and disobedience in all of us. It manifests itself in many lusts and immoderate and improper desires. Homosexual desire is a manifestation of indwelling sin and has to be seen in that light. This is not to single out the homosexual as a special case for we are all beset by innumerable lusts and evil desires, but it is to say that he, or she, like all the rest of us, cannot simply be satisfied with victory in the outward area of behaviour, but must also look for grace for the mortification and transformation of the inner life as well (Romans 8:5-9).

5. Paul could write in 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 of those whose lives were marked by the sort of sins this passage brings before us, "And that is what some of you were. But you were washed ... sanctified ... justified." We are thankful to God and encouraged by reports we hear of similar gracious deliverances in our own day.

6. The attitudes that Christians have towards those whose sins include those we have particularly considered in this chapter must be looked at with some care. It is probably best to isolate several aspects.

a) Chapter 2 verse 1 reads, "You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgement on someone else, for at whatever point you judge the other you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgement do the same things." It is very likely that Paul is here turning to the Jews who had a strong tendency to condemn the Gentiles for their immoral behaviour. The point cannot be that those who condemned others committed exactly the same outward sins to the same degree; Paul obviously has in mind 'sanctimonious persons' (Calvin) whose life-style appeared superior and who consequently felt in a position to judge and condemn. But sin is not just a matter of outward life; the roots of all sins are within us all, and sins of thought and imagination (e.g. Matt. 5:27-29) are real sins bringing the judgement of God upon us. It is, alas, perfectly possible for us to sin in the mind even as we consider these words of Paul, such is the power and deceitfulness of sin to seize the opportunity such words present (7:7-13). Our Lord's words, "Do not judge, or you will be judged" (Matt. 7:1) are directly applicable here. To make known the laws of God, and the judgements of God, is one thing; but it is another to adopt a position of moral superiority and condemn and despise others. By nature and practice we are all sinners, vile and unclean, and we must never forget this; nor that the only thing that causes us to differ from others is the sovereign grace of God.

b) It is not enough, of course, simply to avoid a harsh, condemnatory spirit; as

Christians we must always be controlled by love and compassion. It is true that some homosexuals do not want compassion, rather acceptance and approval, but even the bravado of those who flaunt their pervertedness must move us not just to righteous anger but even more to grief and sorrow. It is utter tragedy that persons made in the image of God can become as sexually debased, as vicious, callous, ruthless, selfish ... as our newspaper headlines constantly tell us is true. That it is hard, almost impossible, to love some people is true, yet we are called to nothing less than this. However two comments need to be made. *Firstly*, love does not mean we do not feel disgust, nor righteous anger, where these are appropriate. Christians should be shockable, though many of us have become almost as insensitive to violations of purity and holiness as the men of the world. *Secondly*, love is something strong, active and practical. It does not consist in mouthing benevolent-sounding sentiments, it operates hand in hand with truth, and actively seeks the highest good of others.

c) What is our attitude to the AIDS sufferer who contracted the disease through his own perversion and promiscuity? Is it not his own fault? Is he to be treated as a leper, an outcast? This must not be. Nor is it our first duty to point out the link between his disobedient life-style and its consequences. He is undoubtedly a sinner, but we are always meeting sinners. He is suffering because of his behaviour, but then so is the man seriously injured in hospital who crashed his car while he was drunk. He is a fellow human being, suffering and dying, who needs love and mercy, who desperately needs the gospel of grace. We must be ready with love, care, touch and truth.

d) Finally, and it is a fitting conclusion to this paper, we must preach the good news to all creation, not least to those who know themselves to be dying from AIDS. It is not only the wrath of God which has been revealed from heaven. The love of God has also been revealed, and more than revealed, it has come down to earth in the person of the Son of God — “grace and truth came by Jesus Christ”. We are not only ourselves debtors entirely to Love Incarnate, we are also his representatives and ambassadors in this world. So we are back where we began. Jesus came preaching the gospel (Mark 1:14), Paul served with his whole heart preaching the gospel (1:9); the world, under the wrath of God, needs above all the cleansing, renewing gospel of grace.

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